

Pope apologizes for offending Muslims: Says words of Byzantine ruler do not reflect own views

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Under pressure for days to apologize for his remarks about Islam, Pope Benedict XVI said in a public appearance September 17 that he was “deeply sorry” that his use of a 14th-century quotation critical of the prophet Muhammad had provoked outrage in the Muslim world.

Benedict said his reference to words of a Byzantine ruler, who spoke of “evil and inhuman” teachings of Islam’s revered prophet, in “no way” reflected his own thinking. The pope said his remarks on Islam at Germany’s University of Regensburg September 12 were meant as “an invitation to frank and sincere dialogue, with great mutual respect.”

The controversial quotation, taken from Manuel II Paleogus, was that Muhammad had introduced “things only evil and inhuman, such as his command to spread by the sword the faith he preached.”

Benedict is scheduled to travel to Turkey in late November. That country’s top Islamic cleric, Ali Bardakoglu, had described Benedict’s remarks as “extraordinarily worrying, saddening and unfortunate” but later said he welcomed the pope’s apology.

Turkey’s foreign minister, Abdullah Gul, signaled that the pope’s visit was still scheduled, despite the reaction in many parts of the Muslim world. Likewise, Orthodox Patriarch Bartholomeos I told a group of French religious affairs journalists in his Istanbul offices that he was confident that Turkey would host the Roman Catholic pontiff even if “fanatical groups hold demonstrations.”

Political observers say that Turkey would stand to lose ground in its effort to join the European Union if it did not welcome the pope. The ecumenical patriarch is a

longstanding supporter of Turkey's entry into the EU, whereas before becoming pope Benedict had made known his opposition to the inclusion of Turkey, expressing concern about diminished Christian influence in Europe.

The Italian press speculated about how much the scholarly Benedict, 79, who usually writes his own speeches, is aware of the geopolitical sensitivities of his words.

Both Catholic and Protestant officials have been concerned that free speech not be squashed in the face of threats of violence from extremist voices claiming to speak for Islam. In Budapest, a European Protestant leader told journalists that the use of "historical quotations" was not helpful, but also said that people must be allowed to raise critical questions about Islam.

"I expect from Muslims that they respect the basic values of our coexistence," said Thomas Wipf, the new president of the Community of Protestant Churches in Europe, who also heads the Federation of Swiss Protestant Churches.

Palestinian churches in the West Bank and Gaza came under attack on the weekend after the pope's address. A group calling itself the Islamic Organization of the Swords of Righteousness claimed responsibility for unleashing a volley of gunfire at the oldest church in Gaza City.

Fire-bombs were tossed at a half-dozen churches in Gaza and the West Bank. The head of the Hamas-led Palestinian government, Ismail Haniyeh, denounced the attacks on Christian churches in the Palestinian territories. -*Ecumenical News International, Religion News Service*