

Benedict's misreading: Baffled by the Regensburg speech

by [David Burrell](#) in the [May 15, 2007](#) issue

Having been a student of Islamic philosophy and teacher of Islam for a quarter century, I was baffled by the skewed presentation of Islam that Pope Benedict XVI offered in his speech at Regensburg, Germany, in September 2006. As a student paper, it would have failed for lack of organization.

One cannot use remarks that a 14th-century Byzantine emperor made about the place of violence as opposed to reason in Islam—remarks made in the face of Constantinople's imminent demise—to illustrate (by contrast) a general thesis about the way Christianity (and not Islam) has relied on reason as developed in the Hellenic world. The tutor would say: you have too much going on here; moreover, any attempt to illustrate something difficult by something yet more obscure (to one's readers) violates one of the rules of rhetoric developed in the Hellenic age.

Furthermore, whenever we employ a complex example to make a quick illustration, both are bound to suffer: the example will misrepresent the reality at stake and inevitably fail to illustrate what we want it to.

That is exactly what happened. The fault lies with the writer and not with those who took umbrage, for in this case the writer transgressed one of the rules—that of sound rhetorical composition—of that reason which he intended to promote.

Let us forbear asking why an intelligent person in a very public role could make so egregious a blunder, for that would enter into speculation about motives, which always proves fruitless. One can ask about the thinking of his guides, however, as announced in the text itself and as intimated in a pronouncement by one of them, Samir Khalil Samir, S.J., titled "When Civilizations Meet: How Joseph Ratzinger Sees Islam."

Besides drawing on the work of Samir, the address made use of the work of Roger Arnaldez, a distinguished French Islamicist who did his dissertation on an Islamic

thinker who opposed the rationalist current of thought, Ibn Hazm of Cordova. Hazm is taken by the pope to represent *the* view of Islam on matters regarding divine and human freedom. Yet the pope must know, as Arnaldez certainly did, that there is no one “view of Islam” on this recondite matter.

In fact, what Westerners often misinterpret as “Islamic fatalism” may well reflect a profound faith-statement: that the world as God creates it is the one given to us to accept as “the best.” And not in the abstract sense of “the best possible world” which we can conceive, but in the existential sense that we can always praise God for whatever befalls us—a profoundly arresting feature of Muslim practice.

Arnaldez’s mature work, *Three Messengers for One God* (which a group of us translated for University of Notre Dame Press), illustrates the way in which Jewish, Christian and Muslim thought and practice can converge at the interior level of spiritual appropriation.

Western scholarship over the past quarter century has shown us how medieval syntheses like the *Summa Theologiae* of Thomas Aquinas relied on prior explorations by Jewish and Islamic thinkers. And it is significant that such scholarly discoveries were made not in western Europe but in places like the Dominican Institute of Oriental Studies in Cairo. For a more trenchant view of these matters, one can consult Remi Brague’s celebrated study, published in English as *Eccentric Europe*. Amid recent discussions about the role of Christianity in Europe’s foundation, Brague reminds us that whatever one might claim as “European” had its origins elsewhere—beginning in Judaism and continuing with medieval philosophical debts to Islam, and much more. Indeed, Christian thinkers profited from Islamic philosophical tradition in the West a few centuries prior to military confrontations between Turks and Byzantium, which had not fared so well itself at the hands of Western forces during the Crusades. So much for the unilateral picture of Muslim power conveyed to us by the pope’s citation of the comment of a Byzantine emperor (as collected in a work of Theodore Khoury).

In fact, there is nary a hint of interfaith exchange in the pope’s depiction of Islam and the West and no self-critical grasp of the face that “the West” presented to Islam over the centuries.

Samir has done pioneering work in Arabic Christian literature, yet his recent contribution to this debate, in which he reveals his proximity to the pope, seems to emerge from a level of binary (or oppositional) thinking which belies his scholarly

credentials. In fact, while his essay title speaks of “civilizations meeting,” his text is replete with confrontations. And with some egregious misconceptions.

Citing a seminar with Pope Benedict at Castel Gandolfo in 2005, Samir notes how the pope “insisted on . . . the profound diversity between Islam and Christianity, . . . from a theological point of view, taking into account the Islamic conception of revelation: the Koran ‘descended’ upon Mohammad, it is not ‘inspired’ to Mohammad. For this reason, a Muslim does not think himself authorized to interpret the Koran, but is tied to this text which emerged in Arabia in the seventh century.”

Samir concludes: “The absolute nature of the Koran makes dialogue all the more difficult, because there is very little room for interpretation, if at all.” He seems quite oblivious of the rich tradition of commentary on the Qur’an, which parallels that of Judaism on the Bible. However our respective traditions may differ on the provenance of Bible or of Qur’an, Islam’s view of the divine origin of the Qur’an never prohibited, but fostered, commentaries on the Holy Book in each succeeding epoch of its history.

An even more egregious and dangerous assertion occurs toward the end of Samir’s comments celebrating the pope’s views on Islam, in which he praises the pope for not “falling into the trap [of asking] forgiveness for the Crusades, colonialism, missionaries, cartoons, etc. . . . because he knows that his words could be used not for building dialogue, but for destroying it.” Here, of course, we are not hearing the pope but Samir, and in full stride: “This is the experience we have of the Muslim world: all such gestures, which are very generous and profoundly spiritual, to ask for forgiveness for historical events of the past, are exploited and are presented by Muslims as a settling of accounts; here, they say, you recognize it even yourself: you’re guilty. Such gestures never spark any kind of reciprocity.” Little qualification here; “our” initiatives have been spiritual and generous; theirs, contentious. Implicitly the “we” would be Christian Arabs with whom Samir identifies; on the other side is “the Muslim world.” No meeting here.

What leads me to suspect Samir is a counselor of the pope in matters Islamic? His enthusiastic encomium at the end: “I really like this pope, his balance, his clearness. He makes no compromise: he continues to underline the need to announce the gospel in the name of rationality.” Yet Samir himself can easily skirt “rationality” by creating inaccurate historical descriptions of Qur’an traditions or of Christian-Muslim encounters.

And in doing so, he traduces his own scholarly norms to grease the wheels of chauvinistic boosters like George Weigel, who in a column syndicated in Catholic newspapers contrasted a demonic image of Islam with an angelic depiction of Christian history. Commentators of his ilk have never been deterred by historical accuracy.

As a retired diplomat turned Melchite priest reminded me, when the Muslims came into the Byzantine Empire from Arabia early on, they were far more impressed by the imperial polity, which they quickly sought to mimic, than by the spirituality of these whom they conquered. Perhaps the pope would be better advised to focus on the witness we give (or fail to give) to Muslims than on our touted achievements. (Catholics who might take umbrage at this critique of our pope should note that I have submitted his text—not his person—to the scrutiny of reason as he recommends it, a reason with origins in Socrates' searing self-criticism.)