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Comments on Pope's Speech at the University of Regensburg

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1 - His Holiness Pope Benedict XVI delivered on 12 September 2006 a speech at the University of Regensburg, which he ended by a call to dialogue on the issues he raised. These comments deal briefly with these issues: first, the question of 'violent conversion' of which Islam seems to stand accused, and second, the question of faith and rationality, which also seems to be an issue with Islam.

The question of "violent conversion"

2 -I intend to deal with this under two headings: (a) evidence of history and (b) textual evidence. However, before discussing these two aspects, there is the important question of credibility which has to be addressed. In his sermon on 17th September, His Holiness, realizing the reaction to his lecture and the quotations from Emperor Emanuel II, said "*[t]hese in fact were a quotation from a Medieval text, which do not in any way express my personal thought*". If that is the case, what then were the quotations intended to serve? As an academic, His Holiness would be fully aware that quotations, normally, serve one of two purposes: they may support an argument submitted by the author, or may call for special discussion either to explain or criticize. If the quotations by His Holiness do not express his personal thought, he, as an academic of standing, should have distanced himself from them in his lecture, or avoided them altogether. He did neither; on the contrary: His Holiness tended to give, at least, implicit support to the quotation by referring immediately to verse 256 of sura 2 of the Quran which reads "*There is no compulsion in religion,*" with the comment "*it is one of the suras of the early period, when Mohammad was still powerless and under threat*". First this sura was not of the early period, but was revealed in Al-Medina when the Prophet was secure and powerful. Secondly, this remark, coupled with the Pope's remarks that followed "*[b]ut naturally the emperor also knew the instructions, developed later and recorded in the Qur'an, concerning holy war*" may lead to the conclusion that His Holiness has given more than implicit support to the quotation. Therefore, one cannot easily accept that the Pope, *at the time of writing his lecture*, was not inclined to share the view of the Emperor. Of course, the Pope is entitled to reconsider his opinion, but then other questions are likely to arise. _

a-Evidence of history

3- Does historical evidence support a claim that Islam supports or advocates "violent conversion"? I cannot but assume that His Holiness had exercised his academic skills of research when he decided to lecture on this subject, as indicated by taking a fourteenth century text as his starting point. Based on this assumption, it would be sufficient only to hint on some historical facts which might alert him for further reflection. .

4- His Holiness must be fully aware of the existence of Christian churches and of Christians, in very large numbers, in many Moslem countries, particularly those countries of the Middle East which, since the advent of Islam and the demise of the Byzantine Empire, came under Arab Muslim rule since the seventh century A.D. These countries include the Arab Muslim Palestine, Jordan, Lebanon, Syria, Iraq and Egypt. Christianity, in these countries was well established before the coming of Islam and Muslim rule. Had Islam been a religion which advocated “violent conversion” or had *jihad* been decreed or used for that purpose, neither Christian Churches nor Christianity would have remained in existence in these countries from the seventh century A.D. to the present day, i.e. for more than fourteen centuries. I am sure His Holiness is aware, no doubt, of the existence of a Catholic Bishop of Jerusalem, and that the Catholic Church came to the Muslim Middle East with the Crusades. Nevertheless, the Catholic Church, its followers and Bishop were not violently converted to Islam, after recovery of Muslim rule, despite their affiliation with the Papacy that, at the time, had waged the Crusades against the Muslims. I am also sure that he is aware of the existence of the Coptic Church in Egypt and of His Holiness, the Pope of that Church. Would they have continued to exist for centuries under Muslim rule if Islam is a religion which believed in or advocated “violent conversion” or used *jihad* as an instrument of conversion? He must also be aware that it took more than three hundred years for many of the inhabitants of these countries to convert to Islam. Those who did not make that choice have remained Christian, with their churches, popes and clergy to the present day. History also tells us that the Christians of these countries have welcomed Muslim rule to liberate them from the tyranny of the Christian Byzantine emperors, and that the Arab Christian tribes joined the Muslim armies against the Persian Empire for the same reason; that the Christians of Palestine joined their Muslim compatriots in defending the country and its holy places during the Crusades, and that the Christians of the Middle East are in the heart of Arab struggle for liberation, renaissance and advancement, and have contributed, and still contribute, considerably to Arab Muslim civilization, which they rightly consider their own.

5 - His Holiness, as an academic, must be aware of the circumstances and conditions of the entry of Jerusalem under Muslim rule in 637 A.D. In short, the Archbishop of Jerusalem insisted that he would surrender the City only to the Muslim Caliph himself. Although the Archbishop was in no condition to make such a demand, since the Byzantine army had already been totally defeated, the Moslem commander did not storm the city, which any other commander would, most likely have done, or had *jihad* been an instrument of “violent conversion”; instead he passed on the demand to the Caliph, Omar ibn Al-Khattab. Omar was the second Caliph and was a very close Companion and adviser of the Prophet before the Prophet’s death, and was fully conversant with his teachings and the teachings of Islam. The Caliph obliged, and traveled all the way to Jerusalem, where he signed a covenant with the Archbishop, which is still preserved in the archives of the church. I beg His Holiness to ask for a copy, if such a copy is not to be found in the library of the Vatican, and to judge for himself whether there is an equivalent to it, in tolerance, respect for and protection of the religious faith of others, in the whole history of religion, and whether, again in the history of mankind, past or present, an equivalent to the response of the Muslim Caliph. It was this covenant which secured the continued existence and Muslim protection of churches and Christianity in the Muslim world. His Holiness must also be aware that, during that visit to Jerusalem and meeting with its Archbishop, the time of Muslim prayer came while the Caliph was in the Church of the Holy Sepulchre. The Archbishop invited the Caliph to pray in the Church. The Caliph refused, because, he said, future Muslim generations might say ‘Omar prayed here, and may decide to build a mosque’. To protect the church from such a possibility, he went out of the Church and prayed at a distance from its precincts, in a location where now stands a small mosque called the Mosque of Omar. Omar, or indeed his commander, had the golden opportunity to take over the holiest church of Christianity and to put an end to its presence in the Holy Land; but he did not; instead he undertook to provide full recognition and protection. Unfortunately, the wisdom and rationality of that Caliph and his action, seem to have been missed by His Holiness in his speech with his reference to “violent conversion”. While on the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, His Holiness must be aware that the keys to this most revered

church have been entrusted, by agreement between all Christian sects, including of course the Catholic Church, to two Muslim families in Jerusalem who, for centuries to the present day, daily open and close the gates of the Church for Christian worshippers. The other two great churches of Christianity, the Church of the Nativity and the Church of Ascension, have received the same respect, and have stood protected by Muslims and Muslim rulers throughout Muslim rule of Jerusalem. Even the most unholy Crusades, with the bloodshed of Muslims in the thousands in the city of Jerusalem, did not change this Muslim attitude. There was no revenge when Saladin recovered the City, in his *jihad* to defend Muslim lands, either against Christians or their holy places, although the crusaders, followers of the papacy of those days and its teachings, had converted the Muslim great Mosque, Al-Aqsa, into stables for their horses. The Crusades were not used as an excuse or justification to enforce total conversion to Islam.

6 - This is the evidence of history in the Middle East. His Holiness must have studied Muslim history in Spain. Here again, there was no “violent conversion” to Islam. On the contrary, following the precedent set by Omar in Jerusalem and elsewhere under Muslim rule, Christianity was not eradicated or oppressed. Conversion to Islam, by those who had converted, took place in the course of seven centuries of Muslim rule. Many kept their Christian faith, and churches and archbishops, bishops, monasteries and nunneries continued their religious and other duties within their communities. Spain, under Arab Muslim rule, was the only part of Europe which was enjoying peaceful and productive co-existence and cooperation for full seven centuries between the three communities, Muslims, Christians and Jews, and was the only beacon of enlightenment in the whole of continent. The Jews, who were persecuted in other parts of Europe, had their golden age under Muslim rule in Spain. The curious thing, which is worth contemplating, is that, while this was the situation in Spain, the Catholic Church and Christian rulers were engaged in wars and persecution of other Christians and of Jews in the rest of Europe. As His Holiness undoubtedly knows, this heritage of tolerance in Spain was soon to be followed, after the Reconquista, under Catholic Spanish kings, by the Spanish Inquisition, with its atrocities and violent conversion of Muslims and Jews to Christianity. In the whole history of religion there has never been an episode to match the Spanish Inquisition, which carried out its “Catholicization” mission with violent zeal with the full approval of the papacy of the time.

7- In our own times, there was the uproar of protest in all Muslim countries, as well as elsewhere, against the Taliban’s plans to destroy the Buddha statues in Afghanistan. Missions went out from all Muslim countries, with leading clergy, to try to prevent this action. Unfortunately, these missions failed. However, one must recall that these statues preceded the coming of Islam to Afghanistan, and, after Islam, they remained untouched and continued as Buddhist shrines for the pilgrims, followers of the Buddha. Muslim rulers did not destroy them or prevent pilgrimage to them, and, as is well-known, the Taliban regime, when it existed, was recognized only by two Muslim states. Muslim armies reached India, but there was no “violent conversion”. Muslim armies did not reach south-east Asia, where one finds now the largest single Muslim community in Indonesia. Was that “violent conversion” through *jihad*? The thousands who are today converting to Islam, are they subject to “violent conversion” through *jihad* or otherwise?

8 – This is the evidence of history, and it becomes more compelling if one recalls that, for centuries, the Muslim state was a superpower of its time, and could have forced all those under its jurisdiction to convert. That was the practice before Islam. Islam changed all that, and introduced the concept of co-existence and freedom of religious belief. Only recently, after the Second World War, did some European states subscribe to this concept, although a number of European states still refuse to give official recognition to Islam as a religion. Religious tolerance, even between European Christian sects, came only after religious wars had reaped havoc for generations, and only after secularism took roots. Multi-religious communities were unknown in Europe until the second half of the twentieth century, whereas Islam recognized and protected these communities within its borders from the day of its appearance on the world scene in the seventh

century.

9 - It would be too much to assume that His Holiness or, for that matter, Emperor Emanuel II, quoted by the Pope, could have been totally ignorant of this history.

Textual evidence

10- The quotation by His Holiness from the Emperor's dialogue which set out the reasons why spreading the faith through violence is something unreasonable, is consistent only with the history of Islam, and since, as His Holiness said in his lecture, the Emperor chose not to record the response of the Persian scholar with whom he had his dialogue, one is entitled to suspect that the Emperor, had made the response of that scholar his own because he found it rational. The Persian scholar could not have given a different answer. At the time when the Emperor has written his dialogue in early 14th century, the incorporation of Greek rationality into Christianity was still centuries ahead, the hellenization process referred to by the Pope, which came with the Enlightenment, had not yet arrived. Consequently it is rather difficult to believe that the ideas of tolerance and rationality attributed by the Emperor to himself were his, or can be taken as representing the views of the Papacy in the fourteenth century. However, there is no doubt that they represented the Quranic way of inviting people to Islam: "*Call thou to the way of thy Lord with wisdom and good admonition, and dispute with them in the better way. Surely thy Lord knows very well those who have gone astray from His way, and He knows very well those who are guided.*" (The Koran Interpreted, translated with an introduction by Arthur J Arberry, Sura 16:125, emphasis provided)". "*Dispute not with the People of the Book save in the fairer manner, except for those of them that do wrong; and say, 'We believe in what has been sent down to us; and what has been sent down to you; our God and your God is One, and to Him we have surrendered.'*" (Arberry, op. cit. Sura 29:46, emphasis provided). This is not a call to "violent conversion". And since His Holiness assumed in his lecture that the Emperor was aware of verses of the Quran other than "*There is no compulsion in religion*" would it be unreasonable to assume that he was aware of these verses as well and had taken their content as his own, perhaps in the hope of awaking his contemporaries to the importance of this attitude?

11- His Holiness quoted the Quranic principle that "*There is no compulsion in religion*" and commented that that was when Mohammad "*was still powerless and under threat*". As noted earlier, Sura 2 of the Quran was revealed while the Prophet was secure and powerful in Al-Madina, and not when he was "powerless and under threat". This principle declared while the Prophet was secure and powerful had reiterated the same principle when he was powerless and under threat. The Quran is consistent in its proclamation of religious freedom. An early Meccan sura, when the Prophet was powerless and under threat, declared "*Say: O ye that reject faith...to you be your way (religion) and to me mine*" (sura 109). In sura 10: 99, another Meccan, "*if it had been thy Lord's Will, they would all have believed, - All who are on earth! Wilt thou then compel mankind, Against their will to believe!*" (emphasis added). In sura 39;14-15: "*Say: God I serve, making my religion His sincerely; so serve what you will apart from Him*". Examples can be multiplied to show the consistency of this principle, which is entirely independent of the strength or weakness of a Muslim or Muslim ruler. There is unanimity among Muslim jurists that conversion under coercion is invalid, unless the convert remains on Islam after the coercion has ceased. Repeatedly, the Quran reminds the Prophet that he is only a warner, a messenger, and to leave it to the unbeliever to believe or reject the message. There is consistency between principle and practice in this matter, and the allegation that Islam proclaims or accepts "violent conversion" is totally unfounded.

12- Now as to *jihad*, which has been interpreted as an instrument of “violent conversion”. Firstly, the evidence of history outlined above refutes this allegation. Secondly, there are rules for textual interpretation: The first rule is that when there is an express provision, one is not allowed to depart from it through an interpretation. The second rule is that if there is a rule dealing with one subject, it is that rule that is applied, and not a different rule on a different subject. The rules governing conversion have been outlined in previous paragraphs, which repeatedly emphasise freedom of religious choice and give no recognition to conversion under compulsion or coercion. *Jihad*, in Islam, is an entirely different subject and is decreed only for specific situations, which, as has been shown, do not include conversion. “*And fight in the way of God with those who fight with you, but aggress not: God loves not the aggressors*” (Sura 2:190). This is the basic rule in *jihad*, self-defence, and Muslim jurists are unanimous in the prohibition of aggressive wars. This is not the place to discuss how far Muslim rulers have complied with this basic rule, but, if their have been violations, the responsibility rests with the violator and not with religion. In all events, as history tells us, Muslim wars were never used to achieve “violent conversion.”_

Faith and reason

13 – His Holiness’s reminder that the “*profound*” encounter between Greek enlightenment and Christian faith “*was decisive for the birth and spread of Christianity*” is very instructive. “*This inner rapprochement between Biblical faith and Greek philosophical inquiry,*” His Holiness said, “*was an event of decisive importance not only from the standpoint of the history of religions, but also from that of world history.*” He later on pointed out that “[t]he thesis that the critically purified Greek heritage forms an integral part of Christian faith” is encountering a call for de-hellenization. According to His Holiness, we have now to read “*logos*” for “*Word*”; in this way the purified Greek heritage of rationality will become an integral component of the Christian faith. The difficulty, of course, is that the opening words of John’s Gospel are “*In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God and the Word was God.*” One cannot but suspect a healthy beginning of doctrinal revision, which, I submit, will most likely be enriched by dialogue with Islam.

14- Greek enlightenment is characterized as reason and rationality, as distinguished from Christianity, which is the faith. The attempt, which His Holiness decries, to de-hellenize Christianity would, accordingly, leave it as a faith only, deprived of the element of rationality. His Holiness’s insistence on the retention of the component of rationality is most welcome for more than one reason. The first is that rationality provides one of the common grounds necessary for any responsible meaningful dialogue. The second, as we shall see later, this element is readily acceptable to Muslims in particular. The third is that it may contribute to a change of attitude towards the nature of God and to a revision of interpretations of some aspects of both the New and the Old Testament. It may, for instance, call into consideration much of the Deuteronomy in the Old Testament; in particular where it is reported that God has commanded total destruction and killing of all men, women and even children of conquered territory, leaving only cattle, or the undertaking by God that no Jewish man, woman or cattle will be barren or suffer from sickness. Surely, all of this must be contrary to the nature of God and to rationality, but, unfortunately, seems to be still acceptable and practiced.

15 – As for Islam and reason, one cannot but recall that the basis of European Enlightenment, referred to by His Holiness, were the works of the Muslim Andalusian philosopher, Ibn Rushd (Averroes) (1126-1198 A.D.), whose books were put to the flame by order of the Catholic Popes of the time, in their attempt to bury the Enlightenment. (His books were also the victim, in a similar manner, of jealous Muslim theologians, before they had aroused the anger of the Popes at the time of the Enlightenment). Ibn Rushd represents the culmination of the encounter between Muslim philosophy and Greek philosophy, an encounter which engaged Muslim philosophers, theologians and jurists throughout most of the 11th and 12th centuries, prior to its transmission by the Arabs to Europe. More than seventy schools of thought resulted from this encounter,

from absolute rationalism to utter resignation to Sufism. It is not within the remit of proper scholarship to reduce all that intellectual ferment, which is still going on, to a reference to a solitary thinker, such as Ibn Hazm, who represents only one trend. What about the Mu'tazilites who have given the study of the nature of God probably the deepest ever made? What about Muslim Sufis and Sufism, which provided an entirely different, but uplifting, approach? Ibn Hazm is a minor figure in Muslim philosophical thought to be singled out as a reference.

16 - Ibn Rushd specifically wrote about the harmonization between faith and "wisdom", a term applied by Muslim philosophers when referring to mature Greek philosophy. For him, this harmonization presented no particular problem, and would not be a component added to the faith, but a component already in the faith, because the Quran itself commands Muslims, in innumerable verses, "to contemplate", "to think", "to consider", "to observe", to search for and acquire knowledge, as the proper way to faith. It frequently called upon man to use his "mind". The whole universe, the laws that govern it, and every creation, man, animal, plant, and natural phenomenon, rain, lightening, thunder, wind, movement of the stars, everything is made the subject of contemplation through reason: and the Quran itself is not an exception. The Quran frequently raise the question: can't they see? Can't they think? Can't they ponder? This is a commandment addressed to every person, and not to Muslims alone, because every person is responsible for his belief. He must make up his mind. That is why there is no clergy in Islam. There are those who may be learned, and their opinion may be sought, but ultimately every individual has to make his own decision and face the responsibility for it. The search for knowledge is thus raised to the level of a continuous religious obligation. This commandment, because of the frequency of its repetition, amounts to a pillar of proper faith for those who can comply with it. "*Seek knowledge from the cradle to the grave*", "*Seek knowledge even from (as far away as) China*", the Prophet is reported to have ordered; and it was the impetus created by these commandments that produced the Arab Muslim civilization and opened the door for the urge to know other civilizations and interact with them.

17 - The first revealed verses of the Quran started with a command and a challenge to reason and rationality: "*Recite (read) in the name of thy Lord who created, created man of a blood-clot. Recite (read) and thy Lord is the most generous, who taught by the pen, taught man that he knew not*" (sura 96:1-5). These opening verses of the revelation did not call man only to read, the means of acquiring knowledge, but also challenged him to think of creation in general, of which the creation of man as a close example, and set the "pen" as the source of knowledge, and a declaration that God will teach man what he did not know, provided man decides to seek knowledge. This opening is significant: it is not a declaration of a religious doctrine, as one might expect, but a commandment to acquire knowledge and contemplate, not in a vacuum, but first in the real world, visible, observable, calling for understanding, which, properly applied, would lead to belief. This situation of contemplation and reasoning before the revelation of religious doctrine, has inspired the Muslim philosopher, Ibn Tufail, to write his philosophical treatise in the form of a story entitled '*Haye Ibn Yaqdhan*', in which a boy left alone on an island arrived rationally at the recognition of the existence of God and his nature. In answer to the question of the Byzantine Emperor to the Persian scholar about the new things brought by Islam, one can say that this emphasis on rationality is one of such matters, probably mentioned by the Persian scholar, but not recorded by the Emperor. new matters brought by Islam to religion

18 – Because of the important role attributed to reason, the Quran rejected the use of miracles, frequently asked for by the unbelievers, to establish the truth of Mohammad's message. Repeatedly, the challenge to Mohammad was made and rejected in the Quran: "*They say, Why have signs not been sent down upon him from his Lord? Say : The signs are only with God, and I am only a plain warner. What, is it not sufficient for*

them that we have sent down upon thee the Book that is recited to them. Surely in that is a mercy and a reminder to a people who believe.” (Sra 29: 50-51). With the coming of Islam, the emphasis is on reason as the way to faith, and observance, contemplation, reasoning and acquisition of knowledge, as commanded by the Book revealed to humankind, are its instruments. *“Say, the corrupt and the good are not equal, though the abundance of the corrupt please thee. So fear God O men possessed of minds, haply so you will prosper”* (sura 5:103, emphasis provided). Some Muslims are prone to attribute some miracles to the Prophet. Such apparently pious attempts are not within the spirit or letter of Islam. As can be seen from the above verse, the Quran is Mohammad’s miracle, which, itself, is made the subject of calls for contemplation: *“A book We have sent down to thee, Blessed, that men possessed of minds may ponder its signs and so remember”* (Sra 38:29). *“What, do they not ponder the Quran? Or is it that there are locks upon their hearts?”* (sura 47:24, emphasis provided).

19 – Again, because of insistence on reason, the Quran rejected adherence to older or inherited beliefs simply because they were the beliefs of ancestors. No authority is given to them unless they are supported by reason. This is, of course, in harmony with the call for constant contemplation and use of reason. A thing does not become authoritative simply because of the passage of time, regardless of its intrinsic merit. This argument is condemned in many suras; for example *“And when it is said to them (the unbelievers) come now to what God has sent down and the Messenger, they say ‘enough for us is what we found our fathers doing’ What, even if their fathers had knowledge of naught and were not guided?”* (sura 5:107).

20 – Again in order to set examples for reasoning, the Quran adopted the system of dialogue to convince unbelievers of the message of Islam. Both sides of the argument are presented, and it is left to the reader to come to his conclusion. The examples run far and wide, with almost every known faith or ideology, but the example given in the previous paragraph is sufficient to show this consistent approach in dealing with the views of others, and, as stated earlier, Muslims are commanded to argue in the best manner, and certainly not aggressively

Conclusion

21 – It is most unfortunate that His Holiness should have chosen a starting point for the discussion of such important issues, quotations which, even without much contemplation, were obviously biased and prejudiced. An emperor whose capital was under siege could not be expected to be charitable or objective. Nevertheless, the issues His Holiness has raised are important and deserve deep and frank discussion, particularly at a time when, as it seems, there are those who are interested in waging new religious wars, whatever the term or pretext used. Religious wars in the past have produced so much misery to all, and the best way to resolve differences of ideas is dialogue. Armies have never succeeded in killing, imposing or refuting ideas. Only rational dialogue, with good will on all sides, is the way to understanding, fruitful co-existence and mutual respect. We all worship the same and the one and only God, and it will a great failure of humanity if we miss the essence of His Will for all. The question is: has humankind matured to undertake this task? One hopes so.

May peace be upon all.

27th September 2006