

Making amends: A forum for dialogue and resolving conflicts

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A slip of the tongue or an off-the-cuff remark is one thing; words used in a carefully prepared speech to a university audience are another. So one has to wonder what Pope Benedict XVI was thinking when he dredged up the comment of an obscure 14th-century Byzantine emperor who accused the Prophet Muhammad of “things only evil and inhuman.” The quotation, which set off a firestorm in much of the Islamic world, was part of a speech in which the pope was trying to make a case for the use of reason—rather than force and violence—in religion.

The pope is highly trained in academic theology, but he is no longer an academic who has the luxury of coolly laying out issues for debate among the world’s two largest religions. He is spiritual leader and spokesperson for the largest body of Christians in the world. To many non-Christians, he speaks for all Christians. As he has probably learned, he has to choose his words very carefully.

In the aftermath of the pope’s faux pas, some in the West complained about a double standard: When leaders in the Muslim world make outrageous comments—like denials of the Holocaust—they are met with critical articles on the op-ed page. When a Western leader makes a scholarly comment critical of Islam, the Muslim world erupts in violent protest. While there may be some truth to this observation, Christian leaders still must take responsibility for their words—which means imagining how they are likely to be heard.

In subsequent statements and actions, the pope has sought to make amends. However, his stated regrets have been not for the comment itself but for the fact that it caused offense. And he got mixed reviews for a recent gathering to which he invited representatives of more than 20 Islamic countries. One Islamic leader said after this meeting that the pope expressed profound respect for Islam, but another complained that the event was a monologue by the pope about the need for dialogue.

One measure of whether the pope's apology is real is whether he proceeds to engage Muslim leaders in genuine dialogue, thereby heeding his own directive to "approach the sacred things of others with respect." Benedict could use his mistake as the occasion for a major initiative with Muslims.

John Danforth, former Republican senator and U.S. ambassador to the United Nations, recently suggested that given the religious nature of much international conflict, a forum should be created in which leaders of the world's religions could work together to address pressing issues. The pope could use his position to help launch such a forum, not only for the sake of dialogue but for the sake of resolving ongoing conflicts.