

Benedict's blunder: Ground rules for Muslim-Christian conversation

by [Edward McGlynn Gaffney](#) in the [October 31, 2006](#) issue

I have been involved for 25 years in fruitful conversation with Muslims, and I have read the Qur'an and a lot of literature about Islam. But I confess that Emperor Manuel II Paleologus (Paleologus meaning *Old Word*) was not on my mind before Pope Benedict XVI launched his entry into the newsrooms of the world. At a lecture at the University of Regensburg in Germany the pope quoted an unlikely source for interreligious understanding—a portion of a 14th-century text in which the emperor (whom the pope describes as “erudite”) wrote: “Show me just what Muhammad brought that was new and there you will find things only evil and inhuman, such as his command to spread by the sword the faith he preached.”

It is important to locate the context of this quote. In 1391 the territory that Manuel II governed was minuscule, and he was desperate about the imminent collapse of his “empire.” His fears of the fall of Byzantium were realized. In 1453, the founder of the Ottoman Empire, Muhammed II, conquered the city founded by Emperor Constantine and made it his capital. Constantinople became Istanbul, and Hagia Sophia became a mosque. The rise of the Ottomans entailed the killing and dispossession of Christians.

Did the pope cite Emperor Old Word because he was grieving the loss of Constantinople as a major Christian center? If so, then one may hope that the pope will take advantage of his trip to Istanbul to do something that Paul VI did not do when he visited Ecumenical Patriarch Athenagoras I in 1964: Benedict could issue to Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomeos I a formal apology on behalf of the West for the Fourth Crusade, whose marauding soldiers never reached Jerusalem but turned their full forces on Constantinople, savagely sacking the city in 1204. If Benedict XVI does this, there will be tears of joy among Eastern Orthodox Christians.

But let us assume for a moment that the pope cited Emperor Old Word because he meant to initiate—however inartfully—a candid conversation with believers and

nonbelievers about faith and reason and about religion and violence in the modern world. These themes were the core of his lecture at Regensburg.

The pope's repudiation of religiously motivated violence requires another, broader contextualization of the passage from Manuel II. The year 1391 is at the midpoint of Christian violence against Jews and Muslims in the West, which included the expulsion of Jews from England on Tisha B'Av in 1290, the expulsion of Jews from France in 1306, the reconquest of Spain from the Moors in Spain and the expulsion of Jews from Spain in 1492 and from Portugal in 1497. Is it too much to ask the pope to recall these events with sorrow and to express on behalf of the church sincere repentance to the descendants of those who were so viciously displaced and exiled by our ancestors? Another moment to weep with those who weep.

We should also be clear on the context of dialogues such as the one cited by the pope between Emperor Old Word and an unnamed Persian scholar. Staged dialogues between Catholic princes or Dominican theologians and various Jewish or Muslim scholars rarely, if ever, advanced the state of mutual respect or deepened understanding of the other. The purpose of the "conversation" was to demonstrate publicly the superiority of the Catholic position. Paleologus, the presumed scribe of the dialogue, unsurprisingly recalls the points he scored much better than the contributions of the Persian scholar. Is it any wonder that for centuries Jews and Muslims have been leery of such dialogues?

In the days after the speech, Benedict several times distanced himself from the words of the emperor that caused offense, noting that they "were a quotation from a medieval text, which do not in any way express my personal thought." The pope also expressed the hope that his apology "serves to appease hearts and to clarify the true meaning of my address, which in its totality was and is an invitation to frank and sincere dialogue, with great mutual respect." He stated that "in no way did I wish to make my own the words of the medieval emperor. I wished to explain that not religion and violence, but religion and reason, go together." And he reassured his listeners of his "profound respect for world religions and for Muslims."

If Muslims are the best judges of the adequacy of this apology, the jury is still out. The Muslim Public Affairs Council in the U.S. and the Muslim Brotherhood of Britain both read the pope's words as an apology and promptly expressed gratitude for what he did. In Ankara, the Turkish foreign minister announced that the pope's trip to Turkey is still on. Other Muslims, such as the Muslim Brotherhood in Cairo, are

looking for more. There are no abstract limits to the dynamics of repairing relationships. For all I know, more actions may be forthcoming from the pope, especially if his Muslim critics initiate the next step in the process by prompt repudiation of recent Muslim violence against Christians. Several Muslim voices—including that of MPAC, the American Task Force on Palestine and Muslim leaders in Palestine —have in fact done precisely that, but they are not the ones who are saying the pope must do more.

Some Catholics insist that the pope has not made an apology at all and should not do so. This view underscores the rest of the pope's words after he said "I am deeply sorry" and construes them to mean something like: "I am sorry that you inattentive folks are so agitated about what I said, but I am not withdrawing a single iota of subscript." This reading is ungenerous. It overlooks the explicit and personal clarification by the pope that he emphatically disagrees with the denigration of Islam reflected in the words of the emperor.

The pope did not grovel, nor should he. A mea culpa should not be ostentatious. But as pope he has the responsibility as a pastor to teach all of us, believer and nonbeliever, that when we make a mistake, it is best to admit it promptly. Why would people inside the church want to take that achievement away from him?

The Regensburg lecture and the responses to it can stir discussion among Christians about our own responsibility to persons who are not members of our own faith. From years of ecumenical and interreligious dialogue, I have learned three things: that no subject of profound concern to one partner in dialogue should be a taboo subject, that the most likely way of fostering frank conversation about difficult matters is to communicate to our dialogue partners an empathic understanding of their fears and concerns, and that both sides have a duty to be honest about the wrongs committed by their own community in the past.

There should be no doubt, for example, that at this moment in world history Muslims and non-Muslims need deeper awareness of one another's attitude toward violence. When Muslims today think of violence, they remember the atrocities of Bosnia, the bombing of Baghdad and the recent assault upon the civilian population and infrastructure of Lebanon.

Catholics are in a good position to identify with this sort of pain inflicted upon Muslims. When these attacks occurred, they were all promptly criticized by the

pope, local Catholic conferences and alert Catholic laity. It cannot be otherwise in a community that lives by the teaching of Vatican II: “Any act of war aimed indiscriminately at the destruction of entire cities or of extensive areas along with their population is a crime against God and man himself. It merits unequivocal and unhesitating condemnation.”

Bringing up the past can be dicey, but also important in getting to general attitudes. Vulnerability is probably the best way to probe the lessons of history. For example, I am prepared to acknowledge—as did Pope John Paul II—the wrongs committed in the Crusades against Jews, Eastern Orthodox Christians and Muslims by Christian princes and soldiers at the invitation of popes. When conversing with Muslims, I refresh my memory about gross excesses committed by Christians against Muslims, in part because that’s what they remember vividly, but in greater part because that’s what I tend to forget.

To establish empathy with the victims of violence is in my experience the only way to get to clarity or common ground about general principles. Empathy reduces defensiveness. Finger-pointing assures the descent of dialogue into useless pursuits of who started what—a strategy I have never known to work either in interpersonal relationships or in group relationships with more complicated communal memories.

To return to the recent war in Lebanon: once a Muslim appreciates that a Christian partner in dialogue really cares about Muslim civilians who suffered in the attacks on their homes and on the infrastructure of civilian life, that Muslim can also appreciate the Christian’s concern about Hezbollah’s use of Katyusha rockets to target Israeli and Palestinian civilians in Haifa and Nazareth and other places in Galilee.

This point might lead, in turn, to frank assessment of the historical use of force by Jews, Christians and Muslims in various periods of our sad histories, and—dare I hope?—to repentance for excesses and abuses. Consensus of this sort might even evoke a conversation about methods of interpretation of sacred texts. Jews, Christians and Muslims should not and will not delete from their sacred texts passages that describe violence. But the process of ecumenical and interreligious dialogue that Pope Benedict XVI has repeatedly endorsed may cause participants to question whether any canonical story of violence—such as the conquest narratives in Joshua and Judges, or functionally equivalent texts in the history of Islam—may legitimately be claimed to offer a religious warrant for continued violence in today’s world.

All the better for this conversation, of course, if Muslim dialogue partners bring to the table a deep memory of Muslim philosophers such as al-Farabi, Averroës and Avicenna, each of whom attended in various ways to the profound connection between faith and reason, the central point of the pope's lecture. One can hope that with the pope's personal mea culpa for the offense caused by his use of a text he clearly does not agree with, Emperor Old Word will be allowed to recede into the obscurity he richly deserves. More important, one can hope that all of us in the Abrahamic traditions—Jews, Christians and Muslims—can embrace the hopeful word offered by Pope Benedict in his lecture at Regensburg: faith and reason are coordinates; religion and violence are contradictions.