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Pope Benedict, Islam, and the European Death Wish

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Besides oil, the most successful export from the Islamic world appears to be outrage. And for people supposedly so confident in their exclusive possession of the complete truth (capital "T" truth as we used to call it in graduate school), many Muslims certainly are touchy and defensive.

So Pope Benedict XVI's lecture at the University of Regensburg on September 12 now joins a litany of other ginned up slights that apparently illustrate just how deeply the West hates Islam. What is astounding is that the West takes this seriously, and allows the Muslim outrage industry to frame the debate, even to the extent of internalizing the Islamic conceit that the Regensburg speech was all about them. It wasn't. The Regensburg speech was largely about Europe; in fact, the papacy of Benedict XVI is turning out to be all about Europe.

It started with the name. Cardinal Ratzinger chose to name himself as pope after two famous Benedicts, one successful, one markedly less so, in shaping the destiny and direction of European civilization. The first, St. Benedict, established the monastic tradition that helped define Europe for over a millennium, not just in regard to religion, but also in regard to culture, art, politics, even economics. The second, Pope Benedict XV, tried valiantly, but ultimately unsuccessfully, to stop the major European powers from destroying themselves, as a well as a generation of young men, during World War I.

It was the first time that a pope had had to try to save modern Europe from the very philosophies that the European mind had accepted as new normative foundations to replace Christianity, itself. In the case of World War I, it was a kind of hyper-nationalism, but throughout the rest of the Twentieth Century, there would be other dangerous European philosophies claiming to possess the complete explanation of human existence that Christianity had supposedly failed to achieve. Europe was almost destroyed in the middle of the Twentieth Century by the ideology of race, genetics, and blood (this was Pope Pius XXII's challenge). Then Europe was physically divided for decades, based upon the ideology of class struggle (this was Pope John Paul II's challenge).

Benedict surely understands that Nazism and communism were ailments of the European mind. As he put it in his Regensburg address, this was the triumph of reason above religious faith, and it so twisted European thinking that a kind of religious faith developed in these conceptions of reason, a faith that justified the worst acts of barbarity the world had ever seen.

Benedict understands the challenge he faces. First, Europe lost its faith in the Christian balance between faith and reason. Next, Europe lost its faith in reason without faith. This is the continent that Benedict inherited, a postmodern wasteland. It is defined by a profound loss of future-thinking, perhaps best exemplified by birth rates now falling to about half of what is needed just to maintain current population, as well as by an absurd sensitivity to offending the "other" by making any truth-claims whatsoever.

Thus we have the spectacle of one of the world's most prestigious opera houses, Berlin's Deutsche Oper, canceling a production of one of Mozart's operas because there is a scene in which the severed head of Mohammed is rolled onto the stage (who knew?), along with the heads of Poseidon, Buddha, and Jesus.

Europe is now filling with Muslims because Europeans will not have children. And the West is now censoring itself according to Muslim sensibilities. Benedict surely understands that the fate of Europe again hangs in the balance, this time with the potential of the self-imposition of Islamic Sharia law. This will be the triumph of faith over reason, the rejection of reason as an affront to an all-powerful god, unless Benedict somehow manages to convince Europeans to

embrace their own heritage. There is no one in the world even attempting to do so; perhaps that is why he will continue to be so easily misunderstood.