

Was the Pope wicked, as well as wrong?

Christian commentators seem to be falling over each other at the moment in a mad scramble to convict Islam of being a 'religion of the sword' that has gained its converts — and there are an awful lot of them — only at the point of a length of steel. The religion's founder, Muhammad, is alleged to have instructed his followers to spread the faith by violent means. Islam is impeached for being an inherently aggressive and belligerent belief system and accused of having brutality at its ideological core.

Contrasted with this, of course, are the angelic Christians who believe only in peace and love and turning the other cheek. (Tell that to the Muslim citizens of Jerusalem during the Crusades; or the Moors and Jews of Spain after the *Reconquista*; or the many victims of the Thirty Years War; or the Aztecs and the Incas; or almost every inhabitant of the Americas, Africa and Asia during the European colonial expansion, which lasted over 400 years.)

First out of the blocks in the latest race to dis Islam was *il Papa*, Benedict XVI, pontificating about how Islam is based on 'spreading faith through violence'. This, mind you, from the leader of the religious organisation that sponsored the Inquisition; that burned innocent women alive as witches; that supported, and benefited from the support of, every second violent and oppressive ruler from the Roman Empire through to the right-wing dictators of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries; that has frequently promoted anti-Semitism and routinely opposed most of the major advances in human rights over the ages. The words 'pot' and 'kettle' spring readily to mind.

Not to be outdone by the Catholics, the Anglicans then joined the fray with a two-page piece in the *Weekend Australian*, 'Islam: Creed of the sword' (23–24 September 2006, p17) by leading Anglican theologian Dr Mark Durie. His article, while biased, is actually a bit more conciliatory than its title and the material surrounding it suggest — I suspect he was ill-served by the Murdoch press subeditors.

Even avowed atheist Peter Faris QC, *Crikey's* (www.crikey.com.au) resident expert on anything that takes his fancy, has felt compelled to strike a blow or two against the dastardly Muslims:

The Pope's propositions must be these: (1) The Koran states that there is no compulsion in religion; (2) Contrary to the Koran's teaching, the Prophet Mohammed commanded (and in fact did) spread the religion of Islam by the sword; (3) This involved 'violent conversion'...In my opinion, all Pope Benedict's historical allegations are correct...

There are two things wrong with the concerted attempt being made to show Islam in the worst possible light: firstly, if peace is the aim, it is strategically stupid; secondly, and more importantly, the allegations are just plain wrong.

Strategic stupidity or Machiavellian subtlety?

In everyday life, if one is confronted with a possibly threatening person, is it sensible to say to them: 'I can see you are inherently violent. All you can do is act violently. It's your nature.'? It seems to me that this approach would only increase the likelihood of their being violent.

Even if you believed the above statements were true, wouldn't it be a better strategy to say: 'I see that, despite appearances, at your core you are a peaceful, caring, well-intentioned person. I'm sure we can reach an understanding and live peacefully with one another.'?

By the same token, why go out of one's way to paint Islam and its founder as irretrievably violent? Whatever the truth of the matter, is it sensible to try to convince Muslims that violence is an intrinsic part of the Muslim religion? Is it sensible to insist that in the *Qur'an* 'you will find things only evil and inhuman' (quoted with approval by Pope Benedict)? Is it sensible to try to tell Muslims that Muhammad

commanded them 'to spread by the sword the faith he preached' (ditto)? Is it sensible to argue that 'it is self-evident that some Koranic [sic] verses encourage violence' (Durie)? Or to claim that the *Qur'an* says that 'war against non-Muslims could be waged more or less at any time and in any place to extend the dominance of Islam' (ditto)?

By convincing Muslims that theirs is a religion that relies on the sword, aren't you encouraging them to do just that? Doesn't it play into the hands of just those people we want to discourage — the small minority of the world's 1.3 billion Muslims who mistakenly try to find justification for their violent tendencies in their religion?

If peace is your aim, wouldn't it be a smarter strategy to draw attention to the fact that learned Muslims around the world interpret the *Qur'an* as a creed of peace and justice; to point out that the image of the barbarian infidel with a sword in one hand and the Holy Book in the other was a figment of Christian propaganda; and to emphasise that Muhammad's declaration that 'there is no compulsion in religion' was perhaps the first proclamation of religious tolerance in history? Rather than trying to validate the minority of Muslim extremists who flourish on distortions of Muhammad's message, wouldn't we be better advised to throw our weight behind the vast majority of his believers who take his message of tolerance and reason seriously?

Looking at the big picture, the world will little note nor long remember the opinions of Faris and Durie (although the latter did cause a small ripple in the backwater of Australia), but the Pope is a different kettle of fish. Occupying the position he does, his words have powerful repercussions, and these ones understandably caused outrage in the Muslim world.

Why did he do it? The most charitable explanation is that he was naive and didn't know what he was doing. However in the light of his much-vaunted intelligence, his previous history of antagonism towards all religions other than his own, and the studied deliberation of most of his actions, it is hard not to draw the conclusion that the Pope knew exactly what he was doing.

What was that? On this interpretation, he was deliberately trying to stir up a confrontation with Islam; to reinvigorate the old furphy about the 'creed of the sword'; to throw his weight behind George Bush Junior's crusade against Islam; and to strike another blow in what he sees as a battle to the death between his 'one true religion' and the still-growing threat from the East. The picture he paints of rational Catholicism in a heroic struggle against violent irrational Islam dovetails neatly into the Wash-

ington neo-cons' 'clash of civilisations' scenario and gives comfort to the American neo-colonial adventures in the Middle East. It is instructive that the Pope hasn't actually taken back his words or apologised, just regretted the violence they seem to have caused. Crocodile tears?

If attacking Islam is indeed what the Pope is doing, he must be seen as someone who promotes religious conflict and therefore as an extremely wicked person; and, because of his position, perhaps as a greater threat to world peace than Osama bin Laden.

Misinterpreting Islam

The Pope's assertion that Islam grew by 'spreading the faith through violence' is not just stupid or Machiavellian, according to your view; it is also just plain wrong. It is based on a 600-year-old critique of Islam by the besieged Emperor Manuel II of the crumbling Byzantine Empire — hardly an objective interpreter, as he was engaged at the time in propagandising to drum up support from the West to combat the Turkish threat to what was left of his empire. It is hard to fathom why the Pope should even bother to consult this outdated and biased document, when there are plenty of contemporary and more objective accounts of Islam now available in the West. (We particularly recommend *No God but God* by Reza Aslan, Arrow Books, 2006.)

After trying to establish Manuel's credentials as a knowledgeable commentator on the *Qur'an*, the Pope cut to the chase:

[T]he emperor touches on the theme of the jihad (holy war)...he turns to his interlocutor [a 'learned Persian'] somewhat brusquely with the central question on the relationship between religion and violence in general, in these words:

'Show me just what Mohammed 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.'

Many uninformed Westerners will not find this claim in the least bit problematic, saturated as they are in anti-Islamic propaganda that goes back to the time of the Crusades. They may find a bit extreme the suggestion that 'things only evil and inhuman' are to be found in the Prophet's teachings — surely there is some good there as well — but they will accept without question the claim that Muhammad commanded his followers 'to spread by the sword the faith he preached'. It is a central theme of all European engagement with the Orient.

Such people may be surprised to learn that the word 'sword' does not appear once in the *Qur'an*.

However it does appear in the Christian Bible over 400 times (many more times more than the word 'peace'), including a number of times in the New Testament. It is true that one of the verses of the *Qur'an* has sometimes been called the 'Sword Verse' because it has been used by a few bellicose Muslims to try to justify their aggression, but it was not called this by Muhammad.

Current attempts to depict Islam as 'the creed of the sword' are part of a long history of usually deliberate and invariably biased Western misinterpretations of Islamic thought and religion. Unfortunately, these distorted views have sometimes been reinforced by the pronouncements of a small number of aggressive Muslims, such as Osama bin Laden, who have tried to find justification in the *Qur'an* for their bellicose activities, just as Christians tried to find biblical justification for the burning of 'witches' in the Middle Ages, and try to find biblical justification for the ostracising of homosexuality today.

The *Qur'an* itself is pretty unequivocal:

2:256 Let there be no compulsion in religion.
Wilt thou then compel mankind,
against their will, to believe?
No soul can believe,
except by the Will of God...

One leading contemporary Islamic commentator sums up the situation thus:

...all Islamic jurists, without any exception, hold that forcible conversion is under all circumstances null and void, and that any attempt at coercing a non-believer (in Islam) to accept the faith of Islam is a grievous sin: a verdict which disposes of the widespread fallacy that Islam places before the unbelievers the alternative of 'conversion or the sword'.

Muhammed Asad, *The Message of the Qur'an*,
footnote 249

But this is not just a Muslim view. The West's most perceptive historian of religion and a former Catholic nun, Karen Armstrong, who has clearly bothered to examine the evidence, reinforces the point:

After Muhammed's death, Jews and Christians were never required to convert to Islam but were allowed to practice their religion freely in the Islamic empire. Later, Zoroastrians, Hindus, Buddhists and Sikhs were also counted among the People of the Book. It has never been a problem for Muslims to co-exist with people of other religions. The Islamic Empire was able to play host to Christians and Jews for centuries; but Western Europe has found it almost impossible to tolerate Muslims and Jews in Christian territory.

Muhammed: A Biography of the Prophet

The clearest counter-example to the Pope's polemic is the most populous Muslim country in the world, right on our metaphorical doorstep. Not one Muslim army, wielding a sword or any other weapon, ever invaded Indonesia. The Pope is certainly wrong to quote Manuel without qualification and seemingly with approval, and it is entirely understandable that Muslims would be upset by his allegations.

Furthermore, contrary to the Pope's claim, the word 'jihad' does not mean 'holy war'. The concept of 'holy war' was invented by the Christians at the time of the Crusades. 'Jihad' means 'struggle'. In the *Qur'an*, this struggle ranges from the internal struggle against temptation to struggle against external enemies. Again, in the latter case, the *Qur'an* is very clear: such struggle is only justified on two grounds; against those who attack first, and to help the oppressed. For example:

2:190 Fight in the cause of God
those who fight you,
but do not be an aggressor
for God loveth not aggressors

Again:

9:12 And if they break their promises
after making a treaty with you
and taunt you for your faith
then fight the leaders of unbelief —
for their oaths are nothing to them —
and thus restrain them.

9:13 Will you not fight people
who break their promises
and plotted to drive out the Messenger
and attacked you first.

And with respect to the oppressed:

4:75 And why should you not
fight in the cause of God
and of those who are weak
and ill-treated and oppressed —
men, women and children...

Other verses that discuss struggle must be read in this context.

Mark Durie in his *Australian* article tries to reject the universality of verses such as the above in order to present some of these other verses about struggle in a bad light and out of the proper context. He unearths some Muslims who have argued that verses revealed later in time may cancel out or 'abrogate' earlier verses. However most authorities reject this contested idea. The *Qur'an* must be seen as a unified whole, and the whole point of *not* arranging the *Suras* (chapters) of the *Qur'an* in the order in which they were revealed was precisely to prevent such time-dependent interpretations.

Rationalism and Islam

Why should rationalists and atheists be defending Islam in this way?

In the first place, rationalists have an enduring hatred of prejudice and a love for truth and always want to consider the evidence before jumping to conclusions. And the truth is that Islam as a religion has always had a great respect for reason and argument and science. In fact many aspects of European thought were borrowed or stolen from the Arabs. And it has always been tolerant of other faiths, in a way that Christianity has not been.

In his now notorious address, the Pope tried to beat up the confluence of Christian theology and Greek philosophy, to the extent that he almost seemed to be claiming that they are identical. However as Paul and others Hellenised what started out as a Jewish sect, the main idea they took from the Greeks was not reason, but the notion that a mortal man or woman could be or become a god. In the Greek tradition this

was not uncommon, for example in the mythical cases of Heracles and of Psyche, and in the actual self-aggrandisement of Alexander the Great. But it was anathema to the Jews, and was rightly rejected 600 years later by Muhammad. The Prophet also rejected the corollary to this — the unintelligible theory of the 'Trinity' — and insisted on the unity of the divine. In this respect, and in a number of others, Islam was, as Muhammad claimed, an improvement on Christianity.

Rationalists believe that rationalism is a further improvement again, on Islam, and that by rejecting the idea of god altogether we come to a view of the universe aligned even more closely with the evidence and in even greater accord with reason than the views any theistic religion can provide. But we don't want to fight the Muslims. We want to sit down with them and share our ideas and probably agree to differ. Not pick fights all the time like the wicked Pope.

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Sixth World Atheist Conference

Venue: Atheist Centre, Vijayawada, India, 5-7 January 2007

THEME: THE NECESSITY OF ATHEISM

The Sixth World Atheist Conference will be yet another milestone in the onward march of atheism, humanism and rationalism. Atheists, freethinkers, humanists, rationalists and social-change workers from different continents will be participating. Previous World Atheist Conferences have been held in 1972, 1980, 1983, 1986, 1996 and 2005.

Participants will come from India, Switzerland, Norway, Germany, New Zealand, Finland, the UK, America, Asia and Australia, and will include representatives from the Indian government; International Humanist and Ethical Union; NZ Rationalists; Finnish, UK and Norwegian humanists; German Free-thinker Association; and Indian Atheist Centre.

Registration costs US\$150, and includes simple accommodation and food at the Atheist Centre; hotel accommodation is also available. Registration for Non-Participating Delegates, who cannot attend the conference personally but would like to show solidarity with the cause, costs US\$75; conference material and the Souvenir will be forwarded. The Atheist Centre is dependent on public donations and support, so any donations are welcome. Cheques can be made out to 'Atheist Centre', payable at Vijayawada, India.

Vijayawada is a city with a population of one million, in the state of Andhra Pradesh. It is an important railway junction in South India, and has an airport. The nearest international airports are at Hyderabad and Chennai. For further details, see <www.vijayawada.com>.

The Atheist Centre was founded by Gora (1902-1975) and Mrs Saraswathi Gora (1902-2006) in 1940. Since then it has been at the forefront of secular social work and social change in India, promoting atheism as a positive way of life. The Indian government released a postage stamp of Gora in 2002, recognising him as an outstanding social reformer and an atheist. The Atheist Centre has published *Atheist*, an English monthly, since 1969.

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