

Robert Fisk: Pope will demean other religions to prove Christianity's 'superiority'

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So it's all the fault of the Pope's satraps. "Vatican advisers blamed for Pope's woes," I was informed by one headline.

"A self-imposed cone (sic) of silence surrounds Benedict." And now poor old Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, Benedict XVI, the solitary German who found himself manning an anti-aircraft gun at the end of the Second World War ("briefly" and "unwillingly", I know) has had some "harsh words" for his advisers because – according to the Vatican – he "had no idea of Bishop Williamson's views before lifting an excommunication order against him last month".

Williamson, I should add, is the disgusting British-born prelate of the Society of Saint Pius X who has said that "not a single Jew died in a gas chamber" in the Second World War. This Cambridge-educated priest says he is prepared to "re-examine" the historical evidence of the Holocaust – but, needless to say, declines to visit Auschwitz. Unsurprisingly, the Vatican has rejected Williamson's mealy-mouthed apology to those who suffered "injustice" at Nazi hands.

Now a lot of folk will go along with the line that the Holy Father is so stupid – so utterly out of touch with Planet Earth and all its Catholic children, so "cut off from the real world" (here I quote a Vatican "insider") – that he has no idea how disastrously his actions are received. Hmmm. Well, I wonder.

For was this not the same Pope who actually visited Auschwitz and – to the understandable outrage of Jewish dignitaries who were present – blamed a Nazi "gang" for the Jewish Holocaust? Before this infallible pronouncement, an awful lot of people thought that the Nazi German nation was to blame for Auschwitz, but old Joseph apparently thought it was a mafia clique in Berlin that murdered six million European Jews. And – here we go again – was this not the same ex-Cardinal Ratzinger (anti-divorce, anti-gay and anti-aircraft, as I always remind myself) who delivered a lecture at Regensburg in 2006 in which he quoted from a Byzantine text which characterised the Prophet Mohamed as evil and inhuman?

Chancellor Merkel, it was, who called up the old boy to point out that pardoning Williamson gave the impression that Holocaust denial was "permissible". The last time a German Chancellor took so serious an interest in the words of the Holy Father, of course, was more than 60 years earlier when A Hitler Esq profoundly hoped that Pope Pius XII would abide by Williamson's line on the Holocaust. That particular pope's silence is well expressed in the sinister black statue of His Holiness in St Peter's Basilica, a bespectacled cadaver that so shocked a Muslim friend of mine that she took 36 photos of the thing "because he looked so evil".

Well, there you go. But I bring all this up today because of a remarkable article by Ralph Coury, professor of history at Fairfield University, Connecticut, which appeared in the latest issue of the Institute of Race Relations' journal Race and Class. The redoubtable professor has combed his way through Benedict's Regensburg peroration, in which the Holy Father quotes the 14th-century Byzantine Emperor Manuel II Paleologus as telling a visitor to "show me just what Mohamed brought that was new, and there you will find things only evil and human". God, the good Paleologus told his interlocutor, "is not pleased by blood – and not acting reasonably is contrary to God's nature. Faith is born of the soul, not the body".

Coury's detailed critique of Benedict's mistakes – his apparent belief, for example, that there is a doctrine of jihad in the Koran – is compelling, but he has also unearthed some revealing interviews in which Ratzinger/Benedict reveals a lot more than he should have done about his own bias against Islam. "There is a very marked subordination of woman to man," he says of Islam in 1996. "There is a very tightly knit criminal law, indeed, a law regulating all areas of life, that is opposed to our modern ideas about society ... above all, Islam doesn't make any sort of concessions to enculturation (sic). Islam is Arab (sic), and anyone who becomes Islamic takes on this form of life."

In Regensburg, Benedict went on to say that Christianity took on "its historically decisive character in Europe" despite "its origins and some significant developments (sic) in the East". These few significant "developments" presumably include a Jew called Jesus and his birthplace in Bethlehem – which is at least 1,000km from Rome – along with the misadventures of numerous disciples in the Middle East, until Saint Paul headed off to Macedonia and the whole shebang mercifully became a "Western" or "occidental" religion.

Benedict's remarks on the theological significance of Israel on Roman Catholics have themselves been a little odd. "If it has significance for you, it must have significance for us," he told a Jewish leader before he was pope. "One would think that such a small people couldn't really be

important," he said of the Jews in 1993. "But I believe there is something special about this people and that the great decisions of world history are almost always connected to them somehow." This is not very comforting.

But Coury has also traced some very disturbing decisions by Benedict; his post-papal demotion, for example, of Archbishop Michael Fitzgerald, head of the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue, his distancing himself from the pro-Palestinian Angelo Cardinal Sodarò, John XXIII's secretary of state and a friend of Michel Sabbah, the Palestinian Latin Patriarch of Jerusalem; not to mention Benedict's private audience (originally kept secret) with the increasingly weird Italian journalist Oriana Fallaci – whose crackpot statements included the assertion that "Islam breeds hatred" and that Muslims "breed like rats". The details of this extraordinary papal audience with the late Ms Fallaci have never (unsurprisingly) been disclosed.

And what do I make of all this? Well, I don't think the Pope is as innocent as he seems, nor so ill-advised. He sees Christianity as a superior, "Western" religion and is prepared to demean other religions to prove it. I think he knows exactly what he is doing. I think he knows what he is saying. I used to think he was a silly old German. Now I am beginning to suspect he might be a very nasty piece of work.

<http://www.belfasttelegraph.co.uk/opinion/columnists/robert-fisk/robert-fisk-pope-will-demean-other-religions-to-prove-christianityrsquos-superiorityrsquo-14208500.html?service=Print>