

# Pope Benedict: A chapter of accidents

May 14th 2009

From *The Economist* print edition

The pope's visit to the Holy Land adds another public-relations disaster to the string that already exists. Why should this be?



TO UNDERSTAND the personal baggage that Pope Benedict XVI brought to the Holy Land this week, it is worth looking at his most accessible book, "Jesus of Nazareth", published two years ago. With a mixture of intense piety and arcane scholarship, he reflects on the Jewish origins of Christianity's dogmas and rites in a way that shows deep interest in the religion of ancient Israel—yet total conviction that the older faith's true meaning is to be found only in Christ. Both in its rigour and in its devotion, the pope's writing reflects the enclosed places in which he has spent most of his 82 years. First, the formal atmosphere of German academia, where charisma is a dirty word; and then the upper echelons of the Vatican, a world whose ethos, reasoning and vocabulary are utterly remote from the lives of most lay Catholics, let alone everyone else.

No surprise, then, that he lacked the street sense to send the right signals on a trip to the front line: the Middle Eastern confrontation zone of the three monotheistic faiths, Christianity, Islam and Judaism, a region that tests the skills of the savviest statesman. In the event, he deeply upset his Israeli hosts, and to a much milder extent his Palestinian ones too, both mainly through sins of omission.

On his arrival in Israel, Benedict spoke some of the words that Israelis were waiting to hear. He honoured the memory of the 6m Jewish victims of the Holocaust, noting that: "Sadly, anti-Semitism continues to rear its ugly head in many parts of the world. This is totally unacceptable." The trouble came when he made his more publicised speech at the Yad Vashem Holocaust shrine a few hours later. In this he spoke only of "millions" of Jewish victims, not of "six million", an omission that had the effect of reopening the barely closed controversy over the pope's readmission into the church, four months ago, of a British bishop, Richard Williamson, who denies the extent of the Holocaust.

The pope then made things worse for himself by speaking of the "tragedy of the *Shoah* [Hebrew for the Holocaust]" without attributing blame. This led to Israelis raking over his own early life as a soldier in the *Wehrmacht* and before that as an (unwilling) member of the Hitler-Jugend. And yet another mistake: the pope used the word "killed" rather than "murdered".

This close parsing of what was essentially a compassionate speech, full of well-chosen Old Testament associations and passages from Lamentations, will seem casuistic to most. But the near-unanimous verdict in Israel was bitter disappointment. The pope had managed to rile, not to reconcile. Right-wing and religious politicians who had stayed away from the ceremonies crowded. Even steadfast interfaith activists criticised the lack of sensitivity evinced in the speech.

A tactful statement the next day at the Western Wall might have improved matters. But the pope made do with a barely audible prayer in Latin and a petition on paper, which he slipped between the stones, asking: "God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, hear the cry of the afflicted, the fearful, the bereft; send your peace upon this Holy Land, upon the Middle East, upon the entire human family." This, though unexceptionable, was seen as yet again avoiding the painful essence of Holocaust expiation and was compared unfavourably with Pope John Paul II's prayer in March 2000 at the same spot.

Islamic clerics escorted the pope to the Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem (shown above), to Bethlehem and to Nazareth. But others expressed disappointment that he did not apologise for a lecture given in 2006 which included a damning quotation about Muslims. They also complained that Gaza was excluded from the itinerary. Sheikh Taysir Tamimi, the chief Islamic justice, interrupted an interfaith discourse with a passionately political speech.

On the whole, however, the pope's words to the Palestinians avoided pitfalls. Addressing the Muslim majority as well as the dwindling Christian minority (since the creation of Israel, the number of Christians in the Palestinian territories has fallen from 15-20% of the Palestinian population to less than 1.5%), he said: "I know how much you have suffered and continue to suffer as a result of the turmoil that has afflicted this land for decades." He added that the Vatican "supports the right of your people to a sovereign Palestinian homeland in the land of your forefathers, secure and at peace with its neighbours, within internationally recognised borders." He then appealed to the young not to allow "the loss of life and the destruction that you have witnessed to arouse bitterness or resentment in your hearts. Have the courage to resist any temptation you may feel to resort to acts of violence or terrorism."

**Where the faithful roam**  
Countries with the largest Roman Catholic populations, 2005

Country	Catholic population, m	As % of total population
Brazil	140.1	75.0
Mexico	93.2	89.4
United States	67.9	22.7
Philippines	66.6	78.8
Italy	55.8	95.2
France	44.6	73.2
Colombia	41.3	91.8
Spain	40.2	92.6
Poland	35.0	91.6
Argentina	34.8	89.7
Congo	27.8	47.4

Source: World Christian Database

Finely weighted words that reflect the best of Vatican diplomacy, honed over centuries. Why then does Pope Benedict, supposedly served by specialists, slip up so often and so badly?

## Les trois gaffes

If the beliefs and disciplines of the Catholic faith were merely a private concern to the world's 1.2 billion baptised Catholics, the pontiff's remoteness from life's realities might not be of great consequence. But no global faith is an island. The Vatican is a powerful actor in world affairs, one that can affect the likelihood of a "clash of civilisations". So it matters that the frequency with which this accident-prone pope causes offence is accelerating.

In France, aggressively secular but steeped in Catholicism, churchgoers refer with a shudder to 2009 as the year of *les trois gaffes*. The pope's three blunders were the rehabilitation of the Holocaust-denying bishop; a statement, en route to Africa, that condoms were no help against AIDS; and the church's heartless reaction to the nine-year-old Brazilian girl who had an abortion after being raped by her stepfather. The Archbishop of Recife declared that everybody involved in procuring the abortion (the girl's mother, the doctors) was excommunicated.

In all three cases, the story was not quite as simple as the headlines suggested. When the excommunication of Bishop Williamson was lifted, the Vatican did not know he had recently said there were no gas chambers, and that no more than 300,000 Jews had died; as soon as it learnt of his views, they were condemned unequivocally. Defenders of the pope have argued that his words on AIDS were quoted out of context, and that he was alluding to some respectable academic research that in Africa anti-AIDS policies based solely on condom distribution have been counter-productive. And horror over the church's attitude towards the raped child was slightly appeased when Archbishop Rino Fisichella, head of the Pontifical Academy for Life, admitted that talk of excommunication had been "insensitive, incomprehensible and lacking mercy".

Even so, all this is a far cry from the hopes expressed by many when Benedict was enthroned in 2005. It was felt that after the charismatic, globe-trotting John Paul, it was time for a pope who would concentrate on sprucing up the church itself, particularly in its European heartland. The scholarly German appeared to be the ideal choice to shore up an ancient ideal of a Christian, humanist Europe against the challenges posed by secularism.

Relations with the Muslims were not among his priorities. Indeed, the new pontiff was known to be sceptical of the value of that inter-religious dialogue dear to the heart of his predecessor. It was thus ironic that Benedict should have first run into trouble with the *faux pas* that his Islamic hosts were still worrying about this week. In a lecture at the University of Regensburg in 2006, he quoted (though without endorsing) a Byzantine ruler who said that Muhammad brought "things only evil and inhuman, such as his command to spread by the sword the faith he preached."

That lecture, which triggered riots and cost lives in several parts of the world, won him quiet admirers in some new quarters, ranging from the American neoconservative right to a sprinkling of European intellectuals. "The reaction to Regensburg, in which people died, proved his point: that Islam is a violent religion," declared a Vatican official close to the pope's thinking.

Others within the Vatican argue that the lecture was a "necessary provocation" that succeeded in eliciting a more considered Muslim response,

including a proposal from Islamic scholars and clerics for a theological dialogue known as the “common word”. Yet many supporters of that dialogue, including members of the Jordanian royal family, were passionate for Christian-Muslim amity long before any “provocation” from the Vatican.

## Saying the unsayable

To his defenders, Benedict is a rare, politically incorrect voice in a world cowed by intellectual conformity. “It is not so much that what he says is controversial, but that people find it painful to hear,” said a conservative Catholic layman in Rome. Others see his most controversial pronouncements, and in particular the outcry over his attitude to condoms, in a quite different light: as evidence of the vast gap that has developed between the leadership of the Catholic church and modern society.

Neither view excuses the giving of avoidable offence. In 2007 Benedict cleared the way for wider use of the old, Tridentine Latin mass. The rite he encouraged includes a prayer on Good Friday that calls for the conversion of the Jews. This is entirely consistent with the views of the man who signed off on the Vatican’s 2000 declaration, “Dominus Iesus”, which states that “to consider the Church as [merely] one way of salvation alongside those constituted by the other religions” is “contrary to the faith”. But nobody in the Vatican appeared to notice, or care, that the reinstated prayer contained a reference to the “blindness” of the Jews. It was removed the following year. But why had it not been deleted in advance?

AP



An African sceptic

The revival of the Tridentine mass was emblematic of another increasingly evident aspect of Benedict’s papacy: his progressive reversal of the changes that followed the Second Vatican Council of 1962-65. This policy, say his critics, is polarising his church, though more so in the rich West than in the developing world where Catholicism continues to grow (but not necessarily in the way that the pope wants; see [article](#)).

Another frequently voiced complaint is that he has failed to get a grip on the Roman Curia, the central administration of the church. The symptoms of this were particularly evident at the height of the Williamson affair, which a German cardinal, Walter Kasper, blamed on “misunderstandings and management errors” in the papal bureaucracy. Officials, he said, had “spoken too little to each other, and have not checked where problems might arise.”

In an apparent effort to introduce new ideas into the Vatican, Benedict has appointed several non-European and/or pastoral bishops to senior posts. The most important job a pope has to fill is that of the secretary of state, who is roughly equivalent to a prime minister. Benedict’s choice was unquestionably ground-breaking. Cardinal Tarcisio Bertone is almost alone among his predecessors, going back 300 years, in never having been schooled at the Accademia Ecclesiastica, the Vatican’s college for diplomats.

Indeed, diplomacy is not the bluff, 74-year-old cardinal’s strong point. A member of the Salesian order, whose particular mission is to work with the young, he is quintessentially a pastoral cleric rather than a church bureaucrat. That might have recommended him for the task of overhauling an administrative machine that John Paul barely touched. But, say insiders, Cardinal Bertone has failed to create a base from which to launch reforms and strikes an increasingly beleaguered figure, unable to impose his will on the Curia.

The papal bureaucracy has two obvious weaknesses. The first is that it is a gerontocracy. Its departmental bosses have crushing workloads. Yet many are well past normal retirement age. The other shortcoming is a lack of consultation in an administration which has nothing equivalent to a cabinet. Decisions are referred upwards to the secretary of state, and from him to the pope. Under John Paul the Curia acquired a string of new “pontifical councils”, quasi-ministries that deal with everything from health workers to canon law. Many observers had expected that Benedict would reduce their number. He has not and, with similar inertia, has kept in office seven cardinals who, having passed their 75th birthdays, are due for retirement.

Liberals and conservatives alike agree that John Paul's talents distracted attention from the fact that the Curia had failed to adapt to a fast-changing world. Nowhere is that more obvious than in the corners of it that interact with the media. The late pope, who once dreamed of becoming an actor, needed much less support in this area than his retiring successor. Yet Benedict has reduced still further the scant resources assigned to external communications. His spokesman, Father Federico Lombardi, also has responsibility for the Vatican's radio and television services—and, unlike his predecessor in the office, does not have direct access to the pope.

That alone exposes Benedict to the sort of controversies that are in danger of becoming the hallmark of his papacy. But the risk is increased by the fact that, unlike John Paul, he writes most of his own speeches and, say insiders, often does not show them to anyone before delivery.

## A hermit manqué

His Regensburg address was circulated in the Vatican and to some of its associated institutions, where it duly raised eyebrows among officials and scholars. But it appears that none of them had a channel through which to express their misgivings to the pope. As for Father Lombardi, he is understood to have tried in Germany to make a last-minute attempt to warn Benedict of the possible consequences. According to a well-informed source in Rome, he was told His Holiness was sleeping, and could not be woken.

The pope is not oblivious to the damage the Holy See's image has suffered, and is said by officials to be planning changes in the Vatican's media operations. He is clearly dismayed by the rifts that have opened up with other religions, and has gone some way to repairing them. But what is less clear is whether this most unworldly of pontiffs hopes, or wants, to placate those who object to his intense traditionalism, or whether he is willing, or able, to rally his bureaucracy.

Before setting off for the Holy Land, he offered what may have been a glimpse of the view that he has of himself and the burden he has been asked to take up. His previous high-profile engagement was a visit to the earthquake-stricken Abruzzo region of central Italy. As expected, he visited the shattered basilica where one of his predecessors, Celestine V, is buried. But, as was not expected, he took with him one of his most treasured possessions—his pallium, the woollen band he received when he was invested as pope—and left it behind on Celestine's tomb.

Like Benedict, Celestine was an intensely spiritual figure, a hermit, dragged from his refuge in the mountains in 1294 to be given charge of a troubled Catholic church in the hope that he could regenerate it. Like Benedict, he was criticised for lacking administrative talent. And after five months, he resigned. There must now be moments when Pope Benedict looks back with understanding at the plight and flight of his saintly predecessor.

[http://www.economist.com/world/international/displaystory.cfm?story\\_id=13652095](http://www.economist.com/world/international/displaystory.cfm?story_id=13652095)