



A Christian Statesman

by Jonathan Aitken

A PAPAL JOURNEY, even to the most secular of countries, sure gets people talking, thinking, and arguing about religion. My on-the-spot research for this column began in Scotland on the day Benedict XVI arrived for the first state visit of a pope to Britain since the Reformation.

As I watched his Popemobile progress through the streets of Edinburgh, the noises off included Protestant troublemakers in the crowd chanting “down with old red socks” and “Nope to the pope,” while Richard Dawkins on the radio was advising His Holiness, “Go home to your tin pot Mussolini-concocted principality and don’t come back.” But aside from such occasional rudeness, the general public’s response to the pope was increasingly receptive. He made a deep impact with a series of challenging speeches delivered against the setting of Britain’s most historic buildings yet aimed at a far wider international audience.

The most thoughtful discussions on and off the media were focused on the questions Benedict himself had been asking in his pre-visit writings and

lectures: Can a society survive for long without some kind of religious base? When a nation loses faith in God, can it sustain faith in itself? Does Britain or Europe as a whole have faith in itself anymore?

There are two elephants in the room when these issues are talked about: Islamic extremists and aggressive secularists. Both groups are causing growing problems in Europe, not only to the health of the Church but also to the governance of the state.

Whether they are moderate or extreme, the 20 million or so European Muslims are strong in their faith because of their conviction that Islam provides a valid spiritual foundation to their lives. When he was still Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, the pope gave a 2004 lecture to the Italian senate in which he contrasted the vigor of Islam with the weakness of European Christianity. As Europe has largely abandoned its spiritual roots, he warned, “Europe seems hollow as if it were paralyzed by a failure of its circulatory system.”

Benedict confronted this hollowness by challenging the secularists. Don’t marginalize religion



was his central theme. Speaking more as a Christian statesman than a Catholic pontiff, he urged a rekindling of the dialogue between church and civil society and warned: “There are worrying signs of a failure to appreciate not only the rights of believers to freedom of conscience and freedom of religion but also the legitimate role of religion in the public square.”

This was a wake-up call that did not fall on deaf ears. For the pope’s intellectual yet steely presentation struck a deep chord. “He has a point,” was a common reaction among the vast audience of viewers and listeners.

The point that made the most impact was Benedict’s view that “secular extremism” is erasing from Western culture the old values of tolerant and traditional religion. In their place is emerging a new value system of intolerant political correctness. These values are confined to a narrow spectrum of liberal-approved beliefs. Anyone whose views fall outside this spectrum on issues ranging from gay couples’ adoption rights to faith-lite Christmas carol services finds themselves and their opinions getting marginalized or even demonized. Many thoughtful people are becoming worried about this. Perhaps it needed papal leadership to put the issue high on the agenda of the public square—something many politically correct church leaders and opinion formers have notably failed to do.

Although the second elephant in the room—Islamist extremism—was not explicitly raised in the pontiff’s speeches, it hit headlines in the middle of the visit when six men of North African origin were arrested by Scotland Yard’s anti-terrorist squad in connection with an alleged assassination plot against the pope. Although the suspects were later released, the episode acted as another wake-up call. It raised this discussion point: at a time when followers of Islam seem to be so fervent, and in some cases fanatical about their faith, why has the Christian community become so lethargic and laid back about its spiritual heritage?

Benedict XVI tackled this question obliquely yet so effectively that even the skeptical media could scarce forbear to cheer him on. “Pope’s Battle to Save Christmas” was the front-page headline of Britain’s leading tabloid daily as it reported him saying: “There are those who argue that the public celebration of festivals such as Christmas should be discouraged, in the questionable belief that it might somehow offend those of other religions or none.”

On this particular topic the pope was pushing at an open door of simmering public discontent over the activities of atheist and agnostic campaigners who have tried to rename Christmas “Winterval” and other such absurdities. Muslims by and large give no support to those who try to impose such emasculation of Christian traditions in the cause of multifaith uniformity. The pope picked up on this by saying in one of his speeches that multiculturalism in a society need not pose a threat to Christian values. Rather, it can offer an opportunity to restore faith, with Muslims, Jews, and Christians becoming allies in “bearing witness for faith” against those with no faith.

THE CROWDS THAT TURNED OUT to hear Benedict’s speeches were younger and larger than anticipated. Far from drowning in allegations of abuse as the media had predicted, the pope’s tour of Britain was a tour de force. This was because Benedict came, saw, and conquered the agenda he had set. Although he carried out a full ceremonial program of open-air masses, prayer vigils, and the beatification of John Henry Newman, this was not a papal visit dominated by preaching or proselytizing. Instead it was primarily an initiative of humble yet highly effective dialogue between spiritual leadership and civil authority.

For Benedict seemed to be accepting that in today’s secular world of politics and government, the Catholic Church is going to have to settle for influence rather than power, exercising the role of what he called “a creative minority.” Nevertheless it will be an influential and countercultural minority that challenges the idols of our age and inspires its followers to lead better and more moral lives in the service of communities, families, and God.

This was a papal message that showed up the shallowness of the secularist campaigners and subtly restored religion to the agenda of public discourse. The effects of this visit will take time to evaluate. But to judge from the initial impact, it may just have marked a turning of the tide in what Matthew Arnold called “the melancholy long withdrawing roar” of the sea of faith in Europe. 

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