



Written by on May 8, 2009

Papal Visit to Jordan Prompts Diverse Muslim Response

The pope was met at Amman's Queen Alia airport by King Abdullah II and his wife Queen Rania, who extended the Christian religious leader a warm welcome. Both the king and queen are Sunni Muslims and quite Westernized. Abdullah attended prep schools in England and the United States, as well as the Royal Military Academy Sandhurst in Britain. He also completed graduate studies at Georgetown University in Washington. Rania earned a degree from the American University in Cairo, and after her graduation, worked at Citibank and Apple Computer in Amman.



AFP reported that hundreds of Christians, many wearing T-shirts bearing the portraits of the king and the pope, gathered at the airport to welcome Benedict. Jordan's elite royal guard and army forces were posted along the road to the airport, which is about 18 miles south of the capital. There are about 200,000 Christians in Jordan — including Catholics, Protestants, and Orthodox — out of a total population of about six million.

"My visit to Jordan gives me a welcome opportunity to speak of my deep respect for the Muslim community, and to pay tribute to the leadership shown by his majesty the king in promoting a better understanding of the virtues proclaimed by Islam," Benedict was quoted by AP shortly after landing in Amman.

The Jordanian King responded by praising the pope and said the world must reject "ambitious ideologies of division."

"We welcome your commitment to dispel the misconceptions and divisions that have harmed relations between Christians and Muslims," said Abdullah.

The pope's itinerary in Jordan included a stop at the Regina Pacis center for the handicapped, followed by a visit with the Jordanian royal family at the Al Hussein palace. During his time in Jordan, the pope was scheduled to visit Mount Nebo, from which Moses saw the Promised Land from a distance. He was to celebrate a Mass for an expected 30,000 worshippers at the international stadium in Amman and will also visit Bethany Beyond the Jordan, the site of the baptism of Jesus by John the Baptist.

The Al Jazeera news network cited a Jordanian government that it is "taking the visit very seriously to reach its economic objectives for the year and to present itself as a model for inter-faith co-existence and peace in the region."

Though he was cordially received by the Hashemite royal family (who trace their ancestry to the prophet Muhammad), Benedict's visit was vehemently protested by other Muslims. Jordan's hard-line Muslim Brotherhood said shortly before the pope arrived that its members would boycott his visit because he had not issued a public apology as they demanded for statements he made concerning Islam during a September 12, 2006 speech in Regensburg, Bavaria.



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During the speech, made at the University of Regensburg, where he had previously been a professor, Benedict quoted a passage written by the Byzantine emperor Manuel II Paleologus in 1391, making clear that they were the Emperor's words, not his own. The part of the passage that many Muslims found offensive was: "Show me just what Muhammad 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."

During his lecture, the pope characterized the Emperor's words as being of a "startling brusqueness, a brusqueness which leaves us astounded."

However, what Benedict intended as a simple illustration in a lecture intended for scholarly ears was taken out of context and broadcast across the Muslim world, producing strong and immediate outrage. The pope was even burned in effigy in Basra, Iraq.

Al-Qaeda and the Mujahideen Shura Council threatened Benedict and all of Christianity in a joint statement: "You and the West are doomed as you can see from the defeat in Iraq, Afghanistan, Chechnya, and elsewhere.... We will break up the cross, spill the liquor and impose the jizya tax, then the only thing acceptable is a conversion [to Islam] or [being killed by] the sword.... God enable us to slit their throats, and make their money and descendants the bounty of the Mujahideen."

On September 17, 2006, before his regular weekly Sunday Angelus prayer, Pope Benedict made the following statement:

At this time, I wish also to add that I am deeply sorry for the reactions in some countries to a few passages of my address at the University of Regensburg, which were considered offensive to the sensibility of Muslims. These in fact were a quotation from a medieval text, which do not in any way express my personal thought. Yesterday, the Cardinal Secretary of State published a statement in this regard in which he explained the true meaning of my words. I hope that this serves to appease hearts and to clarify the true meaning of my address, which in its totality was and is an invitation to frank and sincere dialogue, with great mutual respect.

On October 12, 2006, 100 respected Muslim scholars and clerics published an Open Letter to the Pope. The 38 signers to the letter declared that they accepted the pope's "personal expression of sorrow and assurance that the controversial quote did not reflect his personal opinion." They also responded to some of the main issues raised in the pope's lecture about the relationship between Christianity and Islam.

The dialogue indicated that many moderate Muslims had accepted the Pope's explanation, but Islam is by no means a unified faith. (For that matter, neither is Christianity, where divisions also exist.) Therefore, reactions from some Islamic segments in Jordan to the pope's visit cannot be construed as being representative of every Muslim.

Zaki Bani Rusheid, head of the Islamic Action Front, the political arm of the Muslim Brotherhood, the country's largest mainstream Islamist party, told Reuters: "The present Vatican pope is the one who issued severe insults to Islam and did not offer any apology to the Muslims."

Reuters quoted another Islamist figure, Jamil Abu Baker, who said: "Ignoring Muslim sentiments will only block the healing of wounds his statements caused."

And the outlawed, radical Hizb ut-Tahrir Party urged Jordanian authorities to withdraw their invitation to the pope: "All Muslims should raise their voices high to say that any one who insults our Prophet is not welcome on this land in any way."



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Given the present instability in the Middle East, as fighting continues in Iraq, Afghanistan, and Pakistan, it is hardly surprising that a visit by a prominent Christian religious leader in an overwhelmingly Muslim country has generated some heated controversy. But peaceful dialogue between the pope and the king surely inspires greater hope for eventual peace in the Middle East than a never-ending series of terrorist attacks and military invasions.

Photo: AP Images



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