

Turkish Journalist Addresses the Pope's September 12 Lecture

Lecture by Mustafa Akyol, with a response by Dr. Terry Nichols

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Summary

Do Muslims reject the use of reason and embrace violence when it comes to religion? No, argued Turkish Muslim journalist Mustafa Akyol in a Friday afternoon lecture (April 20) in Fraser Hall on the University of Minnesota's East Bank campus. The lecture, sponsored by the MacLaurin Institute and Mars Hill Students, dealt with the response to Pope Benedict 16th's September 12, 2006 comments about Islam.

Akyol, who has been cited approvingly by commentators (such as *World* magazine's Marvin Olasky) as an articulate Islamic democratic voice, strongly criticized the violent, sometimes deadly response to the Pope's comments by elements within the Islamic community.

According to Akyol, Islam's violent expansion in the first century after the Prophet Muhammad has to be understood as a political act meant, in Islam's earliest years, to defend themselves for the purpose of survival, and, in later years, to advance Islamic rule while not forcefully converting those who come under their rule. Furthermore, he said, the violence has to be understood in its context (1300 years ago), and that in light of today's political freedoms, violence is never justified toward those ends.

Besides condemning violence in the name of Islam, Akyol emphatically asserted that the USA is freer than Saudi Arabia, the birthplace of Islam. His respondent, Dr. Terry Nichols, Chair of Theology at the University of St Thomas, agreed that Christians and Muslims are wise to acknowledge failures within both faith communities, and that such admissions are essential for much-needed dialogue.

As to the issue of Islamic attitudes toward reason and religion, Akyol convincingly showed that there is a wide range of attitudes within Islam, between, on the one hand, those who reject reason in favor of uncritically imitating the life of the prophet Muhammad, and others who favor the use of critical reason (*ijtihad*). Osama Bin Laden embodies the first tradition, as does the Wahhabi school which is supported by the Saudi government. Akyol places himself largely within the Mutazili school of Islamic interpreters, which embrace critical inquiry and reflection in Islam.

The issue of reason in religious thought was the central concern of Pope Benedict's lecture in Regensburg, Germany that aroused the fury of some Muslims. The essence of the Pope's address was that reason must be utilized in religious thought, and that Islam generally limits the use of reason. However, said Akyol, the Pope, who is not an expert on Islam, made his case by focusing on the work of 11th century Islamic interpreter Ibn Hazm. Hazm, said Akyol, is representative of Islamic interpreters (the Zahir school) who, like today's Wahhabis, deeply distrust reason and insist on unthinking imitation of Muhammad's life. The Pope simply ignored other Islamic interpreters who strongly favor the use of reason in religious matters.

In his response, Nichols noted that the Pope is not an expert on Islam, and that, unfortunately, the text of his address was never peer-reviewed by Catholic scholars who might have identified the problems with the text of his lecture and helped him to change it *before* it was given.

When questioned whether Islam utilizes the threat of violence to force conversions (contrasting this to Jesus' renunciation of violence), Akyol pointed to Quranic verses such as 10:99 and 2:256 to answer in the negative and noted that virtually all Islamic scholars today oppose forceful conversions. The more difficult question concerns the issue of *dhimmitude*, where those who live under Islamic rule but do not convert are treated differently than Muslims. Akyol argued that *dhimmitude* must be judged by the standards of the premodern context in which it was employed, and clearly implied that it is completely inappropriate in today's context.