

What Benedict means by 'Christian tradition'

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Editor's Note: John Allen provided daily coverage of Pope Benedict XVI's Nov. 28-Dec. 1 visit to Turkey, which can be found under the [Daily News and Updates](#)[1] section of this web page.

In the wake of Benedict XVI's first visit to a majority Muslim state, some analysts found themselves struggling to put together two elements of his message in Turkey that, at first glance, seem difficult to reconcile.

On the one hand, Benedict missed no opportunity to express esteem, respect, and brotherhood with Muslims. This was a "kindler, gentler" Benedict with respect to the now-famous Regensburg address of Sept. 12, which touched off massive protests by effectively equating Islam with violence.

Yet at the same time, Benedict also repeatedly returned to a more familiar theme -- the defense of Europe's Christian traditions and values. This became most explicit in the Common Declaration that Pope Benedict and the Patriarch of Constantinople, Bartholomew I, signed on Nov. 30.

"In Europe, while remaining open to other religions and their cultural contributions, we must unite our efforts to preserve Christian roots, traditions and values, to ensure respect for history, and thus to contribute to the European culture of the future and to the quality of human relations at every level," the two Christian leaders said.

When the two men appeared together on the balcony of the Phanar, linking arms and offering a sort of victory salute to the crowd, one could forgive a casual observer for perceiving a pan-Christian alliance designed, at least in part, to preserve Europe as a "Christians first" zone.

"He can't have it both ways," one colleague in the press corps said to me.

Grasping how these two points -- fraternal relations with Muslims and the preservation of Europe's Christian identity -- are not opposed, at least as far as Benedict XVI is concerned, requires understanding what he means by "Christian tradition."

He is not talking about a return to Christendom, meaning collapsing the distinction between church and state. In a meeting with the president of Italy in June 2005, for example, Benedict endorsed "a healthy secularity of the state," meaning separation between civil and religious spheres, "without excluding those ethical references that find their ultimate basis in religion."

Hence he does not seek a Christian version of shariah, which would enshrine the Code of Canon Law as the civil law of the land.

Moreover, Benedict does not have in mind consigning Muslims or other religious minorities to second-class citizenship. He has consistently supported religious freedom for Muslims in Europe; when the German state of Baden-Wuerttemberg passed a law in 2004 banning female Muslim teachers from wearing headscarves, for example, then-Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger came out in opposition.

What he does appear to mean by "Christian tradition" is two-fold.

First, he wants Europe to be shaped by its religious heritage and by the values of its religious communities, in contrast to forms of secularism that would deny any public role to religious believers. The European Parliament's decision in 2004 to reject Italian politician Rocco Buttiglione as Commissioner of Justice because he accepts Catholic doctrine on homosexuality and abortion, despite his vow not to impose those beliefs in civil law, offers an example of the point.

Second, the pope wants to defend the bundle of traditional moral values associated with Christian teaching, such as the family, human life, sexual morality, social justice and peace. In that sense, when Benedict talks about the "Christian tradition" of Europe, the alternative he has in mind is not so much Islam as the Socialist government in Spain of Prime Minister José Luis Rodr'guez Zapatero -- which, in fairly short order, has moved towards liberalized positions on gay marriage, abortion, and divorce.

Though it may seem surprising, Benedict XVI's conviction seems to be that Muslims ought to be encouraged, rather than threatened, by his call to defend Europe's Christian roots. Ultimately, what it implies is the right of religious believers to shape culture, and the importance of moral and spiritual wisdom -- values which, the pope believes, serious Muslims ought to share.

Indeed, then-Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger once said that the thing that really disturbs Muslims is not Westerners thoroughly committed to the Christian faith, but Westerners who are disdainful of religion in general.

None of this is to suggest that defending the Christian roots of Europe is a project that will ever set easily with some Muslims, especially those who dream of seeing Europe one day as an outpost of Islamic civilization. Obviously, Benedict XVI believes there's a truth in Christianity that surpasses that of other faiths. He was, after all, the architect of the August 6, 2000, Vatican declaration *Dominus Iesus*, which held that objectively speaking non-Christians are in a "gravely deficient situation."

Benedict would not want to see Islam become the majority religious option in Europe, and he would rejoice to the extent that Christianity recovers its missionary zeal.

Yet he does not want walls or holy wars, and his hope appears to be that a rejuvenated Christianity and a reformed Islam can join forces on one side of the real "clash of civilizations" that he sees in the world -- not between Islam and the West, but between belief and unbelief.

In their Common Declaration, Benedict and Bartholomew warned against "the increase of secularization, relativism, even nihilism, especially in the Western world." The language echoed then-Cardinal Ratzinger's famous denunciation of a "dictatorship of relativism" in his last public address before being elected pope.

Relativism, not Islam, is Benedict's real bogeyman, and it explains why he believes he can "square the circle" by preaching Christian identity and openness to Muslims at the same time. Whatever their differences, Christians and Muslims believe in God, in public morality, and in truth, and in the pope's mind that's the basis for real dialogue.

Whether Muslims will buy it, of course, is another question -- though the generally positive response to

Benedict in Turkey suggests it's not as implausible a hypothesis as it might seem.

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