

Pope Benedict and Western Christendom's jihad: "Better the Sultan's turban than the Cardinal's hat"

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Apart from the sinister decision to launch an attack on Islam at this moment in history when the supreme question of war or peace hangs in the balance, there is a rather bizarre aspect to this whole affair viz. the curious decision to quote a Byzantine emperor's views on Islam.

Byzantium had experienced first hand the brutality of the western crusaders who, goaded on by Catholic priests in 1203 had sacked the city in one of the greatest atrocities in history, magnified several-fold by the immense cultural and intellectual loss in what was one of the great centres of world civilization. This shocking act of delinquency way surpassed the sacking of Rome by the Goths or the, relatively humane, subsequent sacking of Byzantium by the Turks. Here is how it was recorded by one Byzantine historian:

"No one was without a share in the grief. In the alleys, in the streets, in the temples, complaints, weeping, lamentations, grief, the groaning of men, the shrieks of women, wounds, rape, captivity, the separation of those most closely united. Nobles wandered about ignominiously, those of venerable age in tears, the rich in poverty. Thus it was in the streets, on the corners, in the temple, in the dens, for no place remained unassailed or defended the suppliants. All places everywhere were filled full of all kinds of crime. Oh, immortal God, how great the afflictions of the men, how great the distress!"

The Byzantine historian Nicetas Koniates wrote: "even the Muslims are human and well-disposed, reported to[compared to] those people who carry the cross of Christ on the shoulders"

Manuel II Paleologos (the emperor who Benedict quoted) had reason to fear the Muslims since Byzantium was perpetually on the verge of falling to them, as indeed it did in 1453. But even in the midst of that final siege one of the city's last great statesmen was heard to say "Better the Sultan's turban than the cardinal's hat"

In fact the destruction or a least fatal weakening of the Byzantine Empire was the main outcome of the crusades whose nominal goal was the reconquest of the Holy Land. It was rather as if today's war against Islam was really an oblique attempt to undermine Europe and Russia in accordance with the perennial goals of British foreign policy as outlined by Mackinder i.e. that Europe and Eurasia should forever be divided. (That may very well be the case. Arguably, the turn towards Iraq only came when the campaign to destabilise Serbia and then Russia reached an impasse and even the submissive Yeltsin threatened to use nuclear weapons to defend Russia.) Certainly, with regard to the deep animosity between

Western Christendom and the Orthodox world, history has repeated itself and under NATO's occupation of Kosovo we have seen again the destruction of beautiful Byzantine churches by Tony and Bill's favourite terrorists, the KLA.

Thank you, Your Holiness, for reminding us, unconsciously, of things you would rather keep forgotten, Western Christendom's jihad against its religious foes culminating in the destruction of the beautiful city of Byzantium, echoed nearly a thousand years later in the destruction of Kosovo's churches.

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