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Navigating difficult waters: Vatican and Islam

Pope Benedict tasked with promoting Christianity and religious tolerance



Arturo Mari / AP

Pope Benedict XVI speaks with members of a Muslim delegation from the United States during an open-air general audience in St. Peter's Square on March 1.

ANALYSIS

By [Stephen Weeke](#)

NBC News Producer
NBC News
updated 11:22 a.m. PT, Thurs., March. 9, 2006



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ROME — The long reign of Pope John Paul II was marked by the dominant conflict of the age, the "Cold War," a 40-year nuclear standoff between the West and the Soviet Bloc.

But that conflict ended in John Paul's own lifetime, and the world that Pope Benedict XVI inherited is engulfed in a different, and in some ways more frightening, vortex of unpredictable violence, one that is sometimes characterized as showdown between Christianity and Islam.

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Benedict, the former hard-line Cardinal Ratzinger, now has the formidable task of promoting religious tolerance in an volatile time of violence fueled by Islamic extremism.

Path set by John Paul

Pope John Paul was well aware of the increasing extremism in Islamic fundamentalism, and despite his well-publicized efforts to improve ties with the Jewish people by seeking forgiveness for their historical mistreatment at Christian hands, he also put a lot of effort and emphasis on the importance of Islamic relations.

During his year 2000 "Holy Year" pilgrimages to biblical places, John Paul was the first pope to ever enter a mosque, in Damascus, Syria.



Massimo Sambucetti / REUTERS

Pope John Paul II arrives at the Omayyad Mosque, seen in the background, in Damascus, Syria, May 6, 2001. It was the first time a pope sets foot in a mosque.

John Paul reached out several times to religious and political leaders in the Arab and Muslim world to open and maintain dialogue, especially in places where Christian minorities were being discriminated or persecuted.

Because of these efforts he wasn't caught flat-footed by the attacks of Sept. 11, 2001. He was shocked to be sure, like everyone else was, but he knew the dangerous playing field that spawned that aberration.

Pope Benedict coming from a different place

Benedict comes to this

confrontation from a much different place.

Just like Karol Wojtyla's views were colored by his Polish nationalism, so are Joseph Ratzinger's. As an elderly German, he has lived long enough to have experienced a lot of European history first hand.

Benedict is renowned for his intelligence, and he presents his ideas in such clear and logical steps that his brilliance becomes obvious to anyone paying attention to his speeches. But his greatest strength is also a weakness because it colors his physical presence and demeanor as well.

He comes across as a man whose every gesture and mannerism is carefully thought out ahead of time, and strictly controlled.

In the cultural stereotyping that is part of life in modern Europe, he's viewed by other nationalities as being "very Germanic," with the expected traits of being highly ordered, disciplined, rigid and authoritative.

In his former role as Cardinal Ratzinger, he made a statement about Turkey that still haunts him now that he has taken over his new role as pope.

When asked about Turkey's effort to join the European Union by the French newspaper Le Figaro, he answered, "Turkey always represented another continent during history, always in contrast with Europe." In the widely reported interview, he went on to say that he was opposed to Turkey entering the EU "on the grounds that it is a Muslim nation."

The former Cardinal Ratzinger seemed to see the entry of Turkey into the EU as a threat to the Christian tradition inherent in Western Europe.

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The Turks were very angered by the comments and carried that resentment over with an initial objection to a papal visit to the country last fall. Private talks have smoothed things over and now the trip is back on again.

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