

Pope Benedict XVI under fire from Muslims for not doing enough to heal rift with Islam

Pope Benedict XVI's attempts to heal a rift between the Vatican and Islam appeared to have fallen on stony ground after he failed to make key compromises while in Jordan.

By Richard Spencer in Amman

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The Pope appealed for an end to divisions and violence between Muslims and Christians during an unprecedented speech at a mosque on Saturday, part of a tour that was billed as an act of reconciliation with the Muslim world.

But he did not give the apology demanded by many Muslim leaders for remarks three years ago in which he quoted a medieval text describing the Prophet Mohammed's legacy as "evil and inhuman".

Nor did he make any symbolic gestures of unity, such as praying with his Muslim hosts. He did not even remove his shoes as he entered the prayer hall of the King Hussein Mosque in the Jordanian capital Amman.

Sheikh Hamza Mansour, a Muslim Brotherhood member of the Jordanian parliament, said the Pope had so far on his tour aggravated his previous offence.

The Brotherhood has boycotted the visit, saying the Pope's previous "clarifications" about the 2006 comments were not enough.

Sheikh Hamza said he had also failed to express support towards Palestinian refugees, despite mentioning Iraqi Christians who had fled to Jordan.

"We weren't invited (to the mosque)," he said. "But if we had been we wouldn't have gone. We are still angry about his speech."

Hammam Said, the Muslim Brotherhood's leader in Jordan, said: "We want the apology to be clear, just like the insults to Islam were clear. He should acknowledge his mistakes. That's our position and the position of all Jordanians."

The Pope's tour of Jordan, Israel and West Bank has met with an ambivalent reception from both Muslims and Jews. Even some Palestinian Christians have said he should not be visiting Israel so soon after the invasion of Gaza.

The contrast with the warm reception given to an almost identical trip by his predecessor, Pope John Paul II, in 2000 is stark.

Pope Benedict's speech was carefully arranged to stress solidarity between Christianity and Islam. The King Hussein Mosque was built in memory of the father of King Abdullah, who spent his five-decade long reign acting as an intermediary between the Muslim, Christian and Jewish worlds.

When he spoke the Pope gave God the common Muslim epithets "merciful and compassionate" and said that both creeds should unite in the face of opponents of religion who "seek to silence its voice".

"The contradiction of tensions and divisions between the followers of different religious traditions, sadly, cannot be denied," he said.

"However, is it not also the case that often it is the ideological manipulation of religion, sometimes for political ends, that is the real catalyst for tension and division, and at times even violence in society?"

His words suggest he sees radical Islamism as a greater cause of conflict with Christianity than any real offence that might have been taken by his 2006 address, given to an academic audience in the university city of Regensburg in Germany.

On that occasion he cited the words of the Byzantine Emperor Manuel II Paleologus: "Show me just what Mohammed 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."

The Pope's host was Prince Ghazi, a cousin of King Abdullah and his principal religious adviser. He leads the "Common Word" group of Muslim leaders who seek to find common religious ground with Christianity.

As the Pope looked on impassively, he referred directly to the "hurt" the 2006 comments had caused to Muslims. He added: "Muslims especially appreciated the clarification by the Vatican that what was said in the Regensburg lecture did not reflect Your Holiness's own opinion."

In 2001 Pope John Paul made a gesture shown on television around the Muslim world when he stopped to pray in the Umayyad Mosque in Damascus.

Pope Benedict by contrast did not pray in the mosque yesterday. His spokesman, Father Federico Lombardi, said he had paused for a moment of silent meditation, but had not "prayed in a Christian sense".

Fr Lombardi also said that the visiting party had been prepared to remove their shoes, as is customary when entering a mosque's prayer hall, but that their hosts had laid down a mat and did not ask them to.

One of the Muslim leaders present, Yusuf Abu Hussain, the mufti of the city of Karak, said he felt that the speech had contained an "implicit" apology but would have liked to see it expressed clearly.

"The two popes cannot be compared," said Mr Abu Hussein. "The previous pope was more tolerant in terms of religion. We hope that the new pope will open up more to the Islamic world."

Today the Pope will be on safer ground when he holds a mass for Jordan's Christian community, about three per cent of the population of seven million.

Tomorrow he travels on to Israel, where he will visit the Western Wall, the Dome of the Rock and the Church of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem. He will also have to face more attacks, this time over his attitude to the Nazi past of his German homeland.

In particular, he has defended the war-time Pope Pius XII, regarded by Israel as not having done enough to protect the Jews of Europe from the Holocaust.

<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/europe/vaticancityandhollysee/5300941/Pope-Benedict-XVI-under-fire-from-Muslims-for-not-doing-enough-to-heal-rift-with-Islam.html>