

Dos and Don'ts for the Pope while he is in Turkey

I know the Pope is aware that his impending visit to Turkey will be greeted with ample gratitude by the Christian minority there. He should also be aware that rest of the world in general and Muslims all across the globe will be watching him intently with somewhat justified trepidation, lest he should open his mouth and utter another infamy about Islam and its prophet once again. Even though he is reported to be excellently multilingual, I still hope that the esteemed Papal Council at the Vatican has coached him enough on semantics and made sure that out of his sheer pedagogical impulse, the Pope does not whisk out a piece of paper with another irrelevant quote from yet another fourteenth century Christian emperor or even worse, from a twenty-first century sitting president!

Never mind the external secular exuberance displayed by the Turkish elites, majority of intellectuals and peasant – affluent and poor alike, know their religion, its teachings and its demands very well. Not only that: they practice them everyday in their lives. Hence, being a state guest of a nation that was once looked upon with awe, envy and admiration by one and all due to its purely Islamic heritage, he should also refrain from lecturing them about Islam.

In his speeches and discussions while he is in Turkey, he should try to suppress his strong urge to imply that Islam “spread by sword” while Christianity “appeals, instead, to reason and logic.” Why? Because not only this is incorrect, it is also outright stupid, should it in particular come from a person of Papal stature. Why? Because both Judaism and Christianity – in that order - came before Islam. Hence, thinking that Qur'an did not teach Muslims about Jews and Christians and left these two nations and their prophets to be discovered by Muslims themselves, is a grossly erratic assumption and simply pathetic. In fact,

Children of Israel (the Jews) are mentioned in as many as 50 (out of 114) chapters in Qur'an! The process of the miraculous birth of Jesus (Peace be upon him and his virgin mother Mary) is also narrated immaculately in Qur'an and runs like a mesmerizing PBS documentary!! And now, to the infamous question of inquisitorial proselytizing, or in Pope's diction: spread of Islam by sword and violence. How about that? The Qur'an even specifies the manner in which Islam is to be presented and invited to. It should be “with wisdom and beautiful preaching; and persuade them in ways that are the best and most gracious” (16:125). Not by the sword or by rattling sabers.

How so? Because throughout His revelation (Qur'an) God exhorts Muslims to perfect their actions – both worldly and spiritual – by way of logical reasoning. And that is precisely the meaning of ‘There is no compulsion in religion’ and not what the Pope tried so hard to give his jurisprudence on and earned the thunderous ire instead. Unlike others who need to resort to Salman Rushdie's ‘Satanic Verses’ or turn to the O'Rielly Factor on Fox channel to know Muslims and understand Islam ‘better’, Muslims learn about Christianity and Judaism and their followers at all levels (100 through 800) directly from Qur'an. And yet, they do not hurl any profanity either towards these two storied religions or their prophets. Nor do they ever quote any Abbasid or Ottoman or Mogul emperor defaming these two divine religions or reviling their prophets. Because, none ever did, no matter how corrupt and imbecile some of them might have been!

Pope should also know that negating other faiths and reviling their prophets is a heinous crime in Islam. Does the Holy Quran prevent rebuking or reviling other faiths and peoples? Yes and very emphatically. “Reville not those unto whom they pray beside Allah lest they

wrongfully revile Allah through ignorance” (6:108). I’m surprised that the Pope did not find an instructive parallel in the Bible. Here is what Muslims are instructed through Qur’an: “Those who deny Allah and His Messengers and wish to separate between Allah and His Messengers saying: ‘we believe in some but reject others and wish to take a course midway’ they are in truth unbelievers and for unbelievers, We have prepared a humiliating punishment” (4:150, 151). And, “to those who believe in Allah and His Messengers and make no distinction between any of the Messengers, We shall soon give their rewards” (4:152). “Those who believe. Those who follow the Jewish and the Sabians and the Christians, any who believe in Allah and the Last Day, and work righteousness, on them shall be no fear, nor shall they grieve” (5:69).

So apology or no apology, I do expect to see him set the records straight on the question of ‘sword’ and ‘violence’ – which according to his last intellectual speech, were used to persuade people to turn to Islam. It turns out that the word ‘sword’ (saif) is not mentioned even once in the entire Qur’an. So, where does this myth come from? With respect to the Pope, it is in Bible. “And ye shall chase your enemies and they shall fall before you by the sword” (Leviticus XXVI, 7). “Let the praises of God be in their mouth, and a two-edged sword in their hands to be avenged of the heathen, and to rebuke the people” (Psalm CXLIX, 6-8).

The Papacy must also remember well its relations with the Eastern Orthodox Church. The “insane hatreds between the so-called Christians had placed all the cards in the hands of the Muslims” (‘The Last Centuries’ From the Muslim Empire to the Renaissance of Europe 1145-1452, by Sir John Glubb). In 1182 the Papal legate was beheaded by a sword and his head tied to the tail of a dog, which was chased through the streets of Constantinople. The Fourth Crusade brought the Latins (Roman Catholic Church) against the Byzantines (Eastern Orthodox Church).

The crusaders launched an attack on Constantinople and it fell. In the words of the contemporary Byzantine historian Nicetes, “To the sound of trumpets and waving their drawn swords, the Latin began to plunder the houses and the churches. I do not know how to tell of the iniquities committed by these scoundrels... they smashed the altar of Santa Sophia and divided the fragments between them. They violated all the women. The whole city was nothing but despair, tears, crying and groans.”

Now, as the persona who epitomizes Christianity on the face of this earth, I would expect him to own some of this savagery by his own brethren in faith from the past and come clean in front of the Turkish people. That might soften the oft-publicized tough stand taken in the light of his recent utterance by the masses of otherwise considerate and mild temperate.

I don’t fancy him confiding to the Turks why he is so vehemently opposed to the entry of their country in the EU. I wouldn’t expect him to bare his soul and show his heart bleeding and moaning at what is happening in Gaza or West Bank or what happened in Lebanon a few months ago. I don’t expect him to wonder aloud as to why there was no insurgency, no sectarian clashes between Sunnis and Shi’as and no all-out civil war until the coalition forces went into Iraq. I don’t imagine him saying that the on-going bloodshed in Iraq would stop if the invaders, occupiers and plunderers leave the country they went into on false and flimsy pretenses, immediately and unconditionally. Now, does Christianity or does it not appeal to reason and logic?

So, you see, if I were the Pope, I’d simply keep my mouth shut, have a good time in Ankara, marvel at Muezzin’s call for prayers from lofty minarets of Süleymaniye Mosque in Istanbul and come back to the fortress of safety without creating any new uproar in the Islamic world. A lot is riding on your shoulder, sire! Now, get going and, Godspeed, Pope.