

POPE BASHED FOR BAPTISM

Days after Pope Benedict XVI baptized a Muslim-born journalist during the Vatican's Easter Vigil, the pontiff was still being hammered for doing so. Among the seven adults that were baptized during the vigil was Magdi Allam, an outspoken critic of Islamic extremism. Because of Allam's previous writings and criticisms of his former faith, his conversion set off a firestorm. We railed these critics for blowing this situation out of proportion.

The following is a sample of the attacks that the Holy Father received:

- "I cannot understand the Vatican's motivation. Why with preparations for dialogue underway...would the pope revive antagonism this way." [Sheila Musaji, founding editor, *The American Muslim*]
- "What amazes me is the high profile the Vatican has given this conversion. Why couldn't he have done this at a local parish?" [Yaha Sergio Tahe Pallavicini, VP of the Italian Islamic Religious Community]
- "The problem lies in the vindictive atmosphere surrounding the conversion ceremony." [Palestinian journalist Khalid Amayreh]
- The baptism was a "deliberate and provocative act...made into a triumphalist tool for scoring points." [Aref Ali Nayed, head of Jordan's Royal Islamic Strategic Studies Centre]
- "A new provocation for the Islamic world." [Mohamed Yatim, commentator for the Moroccan daily *Attajdid*]
- "The Vatican's act seems unnecessarily incendiary and irresponsible." [*Calgary Herald* editorial]
- "The problem is that he was baptised by the Pope in public

and in front of satellite TV cameras. This is a hostile act against Islam... We were looking for a different approach from the Pope after his anti-Islam remarks two years ago. But the Pope's baptism of a person who was known for his enmity to Islam and the Qur'an made us stick to our previous decision to suspend the IUMS relationship with the Vatican." [Sheikh Yousuf al-Qaradawi, head of the International Union of Muslim Scholars]

This kind of incredibly defensive rhetoric underscored the need for Muslims to embrace religious liberty. Hundreds of people convert to Catholicism, Protestantism and Judaism every day, and no one blinks an eye. Why then was this conversion the target of such spirited attacks by the pope's critics?

We issued a news release addressing this issue and gave credit to the *Jerusalem Post* for its spot-on analysis of the controversy: "Allam was not a practicing Muslim, was educated in a Catholic school as a teenager, has been married for years to an Italian Catholic, and credits Pope Benedict for having influenced his decision...[and] he has been living under police protection for years, primarily because of his criticism of Islamic terrorism and defense of Israel—which, of course, is the real story here."