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Pondering Islam and its discontents

John L. Allen Jr. | Nov. 5, 2010 All Things Catholic

While Americans were preoccupied with midterm elections, the besieged Christians of Iraq faced yet another threat to their survival -- survival of the literal sort, not merely political. The blow came with an attack on a Syrian Catholic church in Baghdad, Our Lady of Salvation, which was seized by Al-Qaeda terrorists during Sunday Mass. A police raid left an estimated 57 dead and more than 60 wounded.

A radical Islamist web site linked to Al-Qaeda said the church had been targeted as a "dirty den of idolatry," apparently in reprisal for the refusal of the Coptic church in Egypt to hand over two wives of Coptic priests believed by radicals to have converted to Islam. The web site proclaimed that "all the churches and Christian organizations and their leaders are a legitimate target for the mujahedeen."

As fate would have it, I was in Cleveland last night speaking at Notre Dame College's Abrahamic Center on "Vatican Interfaith Relations with Islam and Judaism." I'll summarize here what I said -- not because it offers any magic wand for preventing the kind of bloodshed we saw in Baghdad, but because the tragedy illustrates anew the urgency of deep and creative thinking about Christian/Muslim tensions.

My thesis was the following: The last decade has witnessed a historic shift from Judaism to Islam as the paradigmatic interfaith relationship of the Catholic Church.

That's not to say Judaism has become unimportant, or that Catholics won't continue to work on the relationship. Islam, however, has become the primary interfaith concern. Not only is Islam where the bulk of the church's time and treasure is being invested, it's the new template for all of Catholicism's relationships with other religions.

The Shift to Islam

Four factors have driven that shift.

First is simple arithmetic. There are 1.6 billion Muslims and 2.3 billion Christians in the world, which adds up to 55 percent of the human population. For good or ill, the relationship is destined to be a driver of global history. Second, the terrorist attacks of 9/11, and subsequent outbreaks of Muslim radicalism such as the assault on Our Lady of Salvation, have made Islam a burning preoccupation for the entire world.

Third, Pope Benedict XVI's speech at Regensburg, Germany, in September 2006 unleashed massive new energies in Catholic/Muslim relations. The speech triggered a firestorm in the Islamic world, because Benedict began by citing a 14th century Byzantine emperor to the effect that "Muhammad brought things only evil and inhuman, such as his command to spread by the sword the faith he preached." Yet it also galvanized thoughtful voices on both sides of the relationship -- most notably, it produced "A Common Word," an initiative of 138 Muslim scholars, representing all the schools of Islam, acting together for the first time to outline common ground between Christians and Muslims.

Fourth, the demographic transition in Catholicism from the West to the Southern hemisphere is producing a new generation of leaders from Africa, Asia and Latin America, where Judaism generally does not have a large sociological footprint. This Southern cohort didn't live through the Holocaust, and they generally don't feel historical responsibility for it -- seeing it as a Western, not a Christian, atrocity. Relations with Islam, however, are a front-burner priority, since many of these southern Catholics live cheek by jowl with large Muslim communities.

Four Implications

There are four key implications of this shift from Judaism to Islam, not merely for how Catholics engage those two religions, but for all the church's interfaith relationships.

1. Intercultural, not Interreligious, Dialogue

Pope Benedict is notoriously skeptical of interreligious dialogue, on the grounds that it can imply a surrender of identity on both sides. He prefers what he calls "intercultural" dialogue, meaning joint efforts to defend shared social, cultural and political values -- especially vis-à-vis what Benedict has memorably described as a "dictatorship of relativism" in the West.

In practice, that means that rather than debating doctrine, Christians and Muslims should work together on matters such as the right to life, care for the poor, multilateralism in foreign affairs, and a robust role for religion in public affairs. That's what Benedict had in mind when he proposed an "Alliance of Civilizations" between Christianity and Islam during a May 2009 speech in Amman, Jordan.

The primary aim of inter-cultural dialogue is practical cooperation, not doctrinal reform. Islam is a natural vehicle for that approach, because Muslim religious leaders often share Benedict's concerns about watering down their identity.

What would an "Alliance of Civilizations" look like on the ground? For one thing, it suggests that the natural home of a European Muslim middle class could be political parties that defend traditional morality and encourage believers to bring their faith into the public square. To some extent this future is now in Germany, where, as ironic as it may sound, a small but growing number of Muslims are becoming Christian Democrats. Or consider the Philippines, where one of the country's main political parties is known as the "Christian Muslim Democrats," a fusion of center-right parties of both Christian and Muslim inspiration.

Benedict's trip to Africa in March 2009 offered a classic example of what intercultural dialogue looks like in practice. When the pope asserted that condoms are not the solution to the AIDS crisis, it triggered blowback in Europe but striking displays of support from Muslim leaders in Africa. For instance, Sheikh Mohama Oussani Waziri, the deputy imam of Cameroon's national mosque, told *NCR* his only regret was that Benedict had not waited until arriving in the country to make his statement, so they could have delivered it together.

Intercultural dialogue also dovetails with what I've described as the "evangelical" thrust in Catholicism today, premised on a strong defense of traditional Catholic thought, speech and practice. In an era of identity concerns within Catholicism, theological innovation is not the order of the day, but efforts to defend shared values resonate well.

2. Support for "Healthy Secularism"

During Benedict XVI's Sept. 2008 trip to France, he endorsed what French President Nicolas Sarkozy has dubbed "positive *laïcité*" -- a French term for which there is no exact English equivalent, though the usual

translation is "secularism." The basic idea is that religious freedom and church/state separation are positive things, as long as they mean freedom for, rather than freedom from, religion.

The emergence of Islam as the church's central interfaith preoccupation has turbo-charged support for "healthy secularism."

Proof can be found in the Middle East. Squeezed between two religiously defined behemoths, Israel and the Muslim states which surround it, the tiny Christian minority has no future if fundamentalism prevails. Their dream is to lead a democratic revolution in the region. That outlook reflects a basic law of religious life: secularism always looks better to minorities who would be the big losers in a theocracy.

Momentum towards healthy secularism in Catholic thought has implications well beyond the Middle East.

In both Europe and the States these days, there's considerable debate about the political role of the church. Critics, including many Catholics, sometimes argue that bishops are "too political." Americans, for instance, are still chewing over the role the U.S. bishops played in the health care reform debate.

If there is a force in Catholicism capable of balancing the scales, it's likely to be the relationship with Islam, and the perceived need on the Catholic side to offer a credible model of the separation of religion and politics. That points to a keen irony: The specter of shariah might do more to give Catholic leaders pause about blurring church/state lines than a whole legion of liberal Western theologians.

3. Beyond 'tea and cookies' dialogue

Today's core issue for the Vatican in dialogue with Muslims these days is "reciprocity" -- a bit of Vatican code for religious freedom. The idea is that if Muslim immigrants to the West can claim the benefit of religious freedom and the rule of law, then religious minorities in the 50 or so Muslim majority countries in the world, as well as sub-regions of other nations where Muslims dominate (such as the northern states of Nigeria), should get the same deal.

The classic example usually cited by Christians is Saudi Arabia. The Qur'an is considered the national constitution, and public expression of any religion other than Islam (more specifically, Wahhabi Islam) is prohibited. The ban is enforced by the Mutaween, or religious police.

Today there are an estimated three to four million Christians in Saudi Arabia, most of them "guest workers" in the oil business or in domestic and service industries. According to official Vatican data there are 1.25 million Catholics in the country, the second largest Catholic population in the Middle East after Lebanon. Those numbers help explain why reciprocity has become the cornerstone of the church's agenda for Christian/Muslim dialogue.

That emphasis on reciprocity is like a tremor, signaling a shift in the tectonic plates of Catholic psychology.

As long as Judaism was the paradigm for inter-faith relationships, Catholic thinking often began and ended with repentance. Because the relationship with Judaism unfolded in the shadow of the Holocaust, and centuries of Christian anti-Semitism, the natural Catholic instinct was for an examination of conscience -- how the theology and the praxis of the church went wrong, and how it needed to be reformed in order to be more tolerant of other faiths.

With Islam as the paradigm, however, Catholics are more inclined to push back. To reverse the classic Biblical image, Catholics are learning to see not only the mote in their own eye, but the beam in the other's -- to object to the lack of religious freedom, the crisis of authority, and the rise of extremism in some Islamic societies. Most

Catholics would think it obscene, for example, to engage any Muslim leader these days without at least mentioning the mounting attacks on Christians in Iraq.

To put all this into a sound-bite, the church's approach to interreligious dialogue is moving beyond the tea-and-cookies stage, where the point is simply to be polite to one another. Today a more balanced form of engagement is emerging, which promises more substantive, but also more potentially combustible, conversations.

4. A preferential option for the Shi'ites

Shi'a Islam represents only about twenty percent of the global Muslim population (the vast majority of Muslims are Sunnis), but Shi'ites make up 75 percent of the population in the critically important Persian Gulf region, which produces 30 percent of the world's oil supply. There's a "Shi'a arc" stretching from Lebanon on the Mediterranean coast to the former Soviet republics of Central Asia, with Iran at its core.

Experts today talk about a "Shi'a surge" within Islam. Conversions to Shi'a are occurring in places such as Egypt and Syria. Forces driving the trend include Iranian-sponsored missionary activity; the fact that Iraq has emerged as the first Arab state led by Shi'ites; and the rising star of Hezbollah in light of its success in the July-August 2006 war with Israel, coupled with the appeal of its charismatic leader, Hasan Nasrallah.

In the 21st century, the Shi'a branch of Islam is likely to become the primary object of Catholic efforts to engage the Muslim world.

Sunnis, in many ways, are the Protestants of Islam -- congregationalist, lay-led, devoted to scripture alone. They even have some of the same problems. Without a strong center of authority, Protestantism in the West sometimes struggles to stand up to secularism; Sunnis, who often lack credible "official" leadership, sometimes have a hard time discrediting radicalism.

In intriguing ways, Shi'ites are much more "Catholic." There's a strong emphasis on clerical authority; an approach to the Qur'an accenting both scripture and tradition; a deep mystical streak; devotion to a holy family (in the case of Shi'ites, the blood relatives of Muhammad) and to saints (the Twelve Imams); a theology of sacrifice and atonement; holy days, pilgrimages, and healing shrines; intercessory prayer; and strongly emotional forms of popular devotion.

Though the comparison is hardly exact, a study of Islam offers clues to a great historical counter-factual: What might Christianity look like if Catholicism had failed to hold the line in southern Europe in the 16th century, and had become the minority Christian tradition?

Catholicism is the only Western form of Christianity with a presence in traditionally Shi'a cultures, such as the Maronite Catholics in Lebanon, Syrian and Chaldean Catholics in Iraq, and Armenian and Chaldean Catholics in Iran. Catholics can engage Shi'ites in a way that Western ambassadors and United Nations officials never can -- not only on a political and humanitarian level, but from within shared spiritual and religious commitments.

Final Thought

In sketching these implications, I've tried to stay on a descriptive rather than prescriptive level -- presenting what's actually happening, rather than passing judgment on it. If there's an "ought" to be deduced from this series of "is" statements, it's simply that Islam matters.

The relationship with Islam demands the best efforts of the whole Catholic church, not simply a narrow caste of dialogue experts. It has to penetrate beyond conversation with the Islamic "moderates", who, as Cardinal Angelo Scola of Venice has pointed out, tend to represent an intellectual avant-garde. Catholics need to reach

out to what Scola calls "traditionalist" Islam -- the overwhelming majority of faithful Muslims who aren't looking for some post-modern hermeneutic on their faith, but who also want to live in peace.

If you don't believe that deserves to be a towering Catholic priority, go ask the people of Our Lady of Salvation in Baghdad.

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A note to "All Things Catholic" readers in the Cleveland, Youngstown, Erie, New Castle, and Pittsburgh areas: I'll be at the Villa Maria Education & Spirituality Center in Villa Maria, Pennsylvania, on Nov. 11 for a day-long presentation on two hugely important trends from my book *The Future Church*: Evangelical Catholicism, and expanding lay roles.

Information can be found here at **vmesc-adult.blogspot.com/2009/08/john-allen-future-church.html , or by calling 724.964.8886.**

Even if you've heard me talk about the book in other venues, we're going to focus in depth on these two trends in a way I've never done before, and I'd love to have you join the conversation.

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