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Church/state relations, Vatican smiles, and Libya

John L. Allen Jr. | Jun. 3, 2011 All Things Catholic

Lucas Davenport is a fictional detective who's the hero of John Sandford's "Prey" series. (He's also, by the way, a lapsed believer but still Catholic to the core, whose best friend and dispenser of psychological insight is a nun.) Davenport has this rule of thumb for working a case: You're starting to get a handle on things if you can make an accurate prediction.

On that note, here are three predictions about what the rise of the global South in Catholicism will mean for church/state relations in the 21st century:

- The towering social justice priority for the Catholic church in this century will be the fight against corruption.
- Clashes with the state will be most intense precisely in those locations where Catholicism has the greatest moral authority.
- As leaders from the global South set the tone in Catholicism, the church will play a more unabashedly political role, and be less hamstrung by Western notions of church/state separation.

Two recent vignettes from Africa illustrate the points.

The first comes from Uganda, where if nothing else, you've at least got to admire the chutzpah of President Yoweri Museveni. Other strongmen try to disguise their efforts to muzzle dissent, but in a recent rant before a coalition of religious leaders, Museveni freely acknowledged using cash to buy off his critics, and essentially asked: So what?

Museveni, 67, has been running the show since 1986, with some undeniable accomplishments on his résumé. On his watch, Uganda has dramatically brought down infection rates of HIV/AIDS, and a program of privatization and restructuring has led to impressive economic growth. Yet like many leaders who stick around too long, Museveni is drawing mounting criticism for undemocratic and authoritarian rule; last February, his re-election to a fourth term was disputed both by the local opposition and by an observer team from the European Union.

Religious leaders in Uganda, including Anglicans, Catholics and Muslims, have been at the forefront of the press for democratic reform. (Uganda, by the way, is destined be a Catholic powerhouse in the 21st century. By 2050, estimates are that Uganda will have a Catholic population of 56 million, putting it in sixth place on the list of largest Catholic countries in the world.)

As a result, although Museveni remains a darling of some Christian fundamentalists in the West for his deeply conservative positions on issues such as homosexuality, his relations with other religious denominations have become strained. In mid-May, for instance, two Catholic priests in northern Uganda announced they had refused to answer a government summons on charges of "incitement," saying they were being harassed because of their

criticism of the regime.

Thus it was that Museveni used his April 29 speech to the Inter-Religious Council of Uganda to read the riot act.

Museveni defended himself against charges of bribery, arguing that even in the villages someone who dances well gets paid for the effort, so there's nothing wrong with him handing out "brown envelopes" of cash along the campaign trail.

Calling those financial gifts "corruption," he said, is "an insult ? and although I am a Christian, I don't want to be insulted." He demanded that the religious leaders take the word "corruption" out of their statement on the recent election.

Museveni also blasted churches in Uganda for taking support from the secular West rather than relying on his patronage.

"Why should religious leaders go to get donations from homosexuals in Europe, when I am here as President of Uganda?" Museveni said.

"If I gave a vehicle to a bishop or sheik, is it a personal vehicle or a pastoral vehicle?" he asked. "I can use my discretion to contribute to the church, because by contributing to the church, you are contributing to the community."

After Museveni's speech, the leadership of the Inter-Religious Council politely indicated that it will continue to work for "sustainable peace, democracy and reconciliation", which is basically code for saying they won't back off.

The other African episode comes out of Kenya, where Cardinal John Njue of Nairobi testily said on Tuesday that the Catholic church "will not be cowed" by critics, but will instead continue raising its voice on matters of pastoral concern.

The context was a May 24 statement from the Kenyan bishops insisting that in appointing a new national Chief Justice and Deputy Chief Justice, moral character should count as much as academic credentials and a commitment to judicial reform.

That statement triggered fierce debate, with some commentators suggesting that Njue and the Catholic church are hostile to the nominee for Chief Justice, Willy Mutunga, because he's a Muslim. It's a matter of record that the bishops are ambivalent about the new Kenya constitution, which recognizes the authority of Islamic Kadhi Courts to deal with marriage and inheritance among the country's Muslim minority. Some Catholic leaders see that as the "tip of the spear" for imposing *shariah* law in Islamic regions.

One Kenyan politician accused the Catholic church of engaging in "hate speech and intolerance" by suggesting that a Muslim can't pass the test for moral character. (Apparently the fact that Mutunga wears an ear stud is also in the mix; Archbishop Peter Kairo of Nyeri reportedly has said that doing so is "un-African.")

Others, however, have applauded the Kenyan bishops for insisting that personal integrity must be a factor in choices for public office, arguing that there's no way out of the corruption quagmire until that happens.

Whatever one makes of the fracas, it demonstrates the unabashedly political role that religious leaders often play in non-Western cultures.

With that background, let's return to the three predictions.

First, church/state tensions in Europe and North America tend to flare up around the culture wars -- "life issues" such as abortion and homosexuality, and the place of religion in public life. Outside the West, where there's usually a stronger social consensus in favor of a traditional sexual ethic, church/state battles mostly turn on other issues.

That's especially the case with regard to the key social justice priority of the Catholic church across much of the developing world: The struggle against corruption.

That priority tends to surprise some Western Catholics, who assume that matters such as inequitable trading relationships, war and the arms trade, or the environment would be the big-ticket items. Yet according to the United Nations, corruption across the developing world siphons off some $1.6 trillion annually, more than all foreign aid combined. Many analysts believe affluent nations could meet the U.N. Millennium Goals, throw open their markets, eliminate subsidies, and pay the Tobin Tax in full, but it would make little difference if the resulting transfers of wealth simply end up in the pockets of corrupt political and business elites.

As a result, battling corruption -- including the effort to raise a new generation of ethically sensitive leaders, more interested in the common good than in lining their own pockets and those of their cronies, kin and tribe -- tends to be job number one.

(Just to illustrate the limits of such generalizations, however, it's worth noting that the most protracted church/state battle in Asia is unfolding in the Philippines, and it does run up against the culture wars. It pivots on a "reproductive health bill" promoting birth control. At one point the Catholic Bishops Conference of the Philippines threatened to excommunicate President Benigno Aquino if he supported the measure.)

Second, despite the fact that secularization is not really a grass-roots phenomenon outside the West, and therefore religion still has a fairly powerful hold on non-Western societies, that doesn't mean that the Catholic church or other religious groups can necessarily count on strong support from the state.

On the contrary, precisely because religious leaders in these cultures still generally possess tremendous moral authority, they're often perceived as threats by the powers that be. The rise of the global South, therefore, probably augurs more church/state conflict, not less.

Third, the shift to the South also implies a stronger and more directly political role for the Catholic church across a wide range of issues.

In non-Western nations, religious bodies are often the only meaningful expressions of civil society -- the only zones of life where protest can take shape, and where concern for the common good can be articulated. Across the global South, Catholic leaders play a directly political role that might be considered excessive by Western standards of church/state separation. To take just one example, when the war-torn West African nation of Sierre Leone needed someone to head its National Election Commission, it turned to a former Sister of St. Joseph of Cluny and a devout Catholic activist, Christiana Thorpe.

As a result, whatever squeamishness Western Catholics might sometimes feel about "interference" in civil politics is likely to be trumped by this more assertive, muscular spirit in the South.

Vis-à-vis church/state relations in the 21st century, therefore, it's probably a good idea to make sure the church's tray tables are in a full, upright and locked position, because the skies are likely to be bumpy.

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The Vatican has about 33 million new reasons to smile this week. That's because on Wednesday, Italian

prosecutors decided to unfreeze roughly $33 million in assets belonging to the Institute for the Works of Religion, better known as the Vatican Bank, which had been sequestered last year as part of a money-laundering investigation.

Two officials of the Vatican Bank technically remain the targets of a criminal probe related to the transfer of that money without adequate disclosure of its sender or motive, though most observers do not expect charges to be filed.

Prosecutors said they were releasing the assets because the Vatican has taken steps to comply with international standards of transparency, including the creation of a new financial watchdog in the Vatican with the authority to inspect the books of each department and to punish irregularities.

Here's an English translation of the statement released late Wednesday by Jesuit Fr. Federico Lombardi, the Vatican spokesperson.

"The Holy See appreciates the revocation of the sequestration of the funds of the Institute for the Works of Religion, ordered by the Roman authorities, because it confirms the correctness with which the IOR wants to operate and the seriousness of the commitment of the Holy See to adhering fully to international standards for preventing and combating illegal activity in the financial arena. Among other things, the Holy See has constituted an 'Authority for Financial Information,' giving it the necessary professional capacities and adequate powers in order to carry forward this process with determination and coherence."

* * *

Among other things, being part of a global family of faith implies taking seriously the concerns of Catholics in other parts of the world -- not necessarily endorsing them uncritically, but always listening carefully.

That's a point with special relevance at the moment in Libya, where a NATO-led bombing campaign continues to unfold with the aim of dislodging the regime of Muammar Gaddafi.

Bishop Giovanni Martinelli, an Italian Franciscan who's served since 1985 as the Apostolic Vicar of Tripoli and hence the leader of the country's tiny Catholic community, has been an outspoken critic of the NATO incursion from the beginning. Repeatedly, Martinelli has argued that Christians enjoy a sort of rough tolerance under Gaddafi, and has warned that things could get significantly worse under whatever force might take over. He's also charged that the NATO bombing is putting innocent civilians at risk.

Not everyone shares that line. Quietly, some critics, both in Libya and in Rome, say that Martinelli is either too close to Gaddafi, or that he's simply been around too long to imagine anything other than the status quo.

Be that as it may, Martinelli is nevertheless the church's point man on the ground, and hence it's at least worth pondering what he has to say. On Thursday, Martinelli spoke out again after an overnight raid hit Tripoli's southern suburbs, reportedly causing damage to civilian structures.

"Bombs are becoming our Calvary," Martinelli said. "In order to destroy Gaddafi, NATO is killing dozens of innocent people."

"NATO remains loyal to its bombs," Martinelli said. "Why aren't other venues tried? It appears no one wants a peaceful solution to the conflict."

"The future is uncertain," he said. "The only strength that is left is faith to understand the mystery of this suffering."

As a footnote, in some reporting Martinelli has been described as the Vatican's representative in Libya. That's true only in the sense that every local bishop is a papal appointee, but one can't automatically assume that everything a local bishop says necessarily reflects the Vatican's diplomatic line.

On Libya, Pope Benedict XVI has repeatedly called for a cease-fire, but Vatican diplomats stress that those calls have been carefully linked to the need for negotiations and dialogue -- suggesting that the onus is not simply on NATO to change course, but also on Gaddafi.

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