

Reagan v. Freud, science v. religion, population and Islam

John L. Allen Jr. | Jul. 8, 2011 | All Things Catholic

There's much to be learned from detective stories, including that the solution to any mystery usually lies in finding the right question to ask. At the moment, a gripping Vatican mystery centers on the Congregation for Religious, and here's a nominee for the right question: Is Ronald Reagan or Sigmund Freud the better template for Benedict XVI's management style?

Obviously, a bit of background is in order.

When Reagan took over the White House in January 1981, he insisted that "Personnel is policy." He meant that an administration's direction is determined by who holds its key jobs, so there can be no casual choices. Freud, on the other hand, is supposed to have said, "Sometimes a cigar is just a cigar." Applied to governance, it suggests that not every personnel move has to be the Rosetta stone. Sometimes it's just about who happens to be on the bench.

What makes this relevant vis-à-vis the Congregation for Religious -- technically, the "Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life" -- is that it has undergone a fairly stunning sea change in leadership over the last twelve months, begging the question of whether that metamorphosis is the result of chance or choice.

The new regime is composed of Brazilian Archbishop João Bráz de Aviz, appointed in January as prefect, and American Archbishop Joseph Tobin, tapped five months earlier as the secretary, or second-in-command. They replaced a team led by Slovenian Cardinal Franc Rodé, named during the twilight of the John Paul years in 2004.

Now 76, Rodé famously was a hero to some and a *bête noire* for others. He repeatedly decried a "crisis" in religious life fueled by what he saw as disobedience, moral relativism, and the inroads of secularism. The Apostolic Visitation of American sisters was launched under Rodé, and he strove to insulate the Legionaries of Christ from fallout produced by damaging revelations about their founder, partly because he found their traditional approach to the disciplines of religious life inspiring.

The difference between then and now is unmistakable. In crude political terms, both Bráz and Tobin come off as more centrist; stylistically, both men see themselves as listeners and reconcilers rather than lightning rods.

Tobin's background is in the mainstream of religious life following the Second Vatican Council (1962-65). Temperamentally and theologically, he reflects the ethos of that world: practical, self-critical, strikingly unclerical, and sensitive to questions of gender and power. Among other things, he's gone out of his way to acknowledge the "hurt" caused by the investigation of American sisters and to send signals of rapprochement.

For his part, Bráz is a devotee of the Focolare movement, which friends say has left at least three deep imprints on his personality: A spirituality of unity, a commitment to dialogue, and a comfort level with strong women. (Founded by Italian lay woman Chiara Lubich, Focolare is the only Catholic movement whose statutes require

the president to be a woman.)

Recently the prestigious Italian journal *30 Giorni* (?30 Days?) carried an interview with Bráz, in which he proclaimed that ?We've started to listen again.? He also offered a largely positive evaluation of Liberation Theology in Latin America, expressed admiration for progressive Catholic heroes such as the late Archbishops Oscar Romero of El Salvador and Hélder Câmara of Brazil, and revealed that as Archbishop of Brasilia he pulled his seminarians out of facilities operated by the Legionaries of Christ over concerns about ?a lack of trust in personal freedom.?

Whatever one makes of that, Franc Rodé he?s certainly not.

The \$64,000 question is: To what extent is this shift intentional? Did Benedict XVI actually mean to change course, or is the new tone more a byproduct of a simple need to fill slots?

At present, the evidence seems mixed.

There?s little doubt that Tobin was a personal choice, and that the pope had at least some sense of what he was getting. During the twelve years Tobin led his order, he got to know then-Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger at the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, usually in the context of discussing the latest Redemptorist theologian in trouble. (The order?s specialty is moral theology, always a prescription for heartburn.)

By most accounts, Ratzinger was impressed. When the position of secretary became vacant in late 2009, insiders say that Rodé prepared a list of candidates and submitted it to the Secretariat of State. The answer was, ?The pope wants Tobin.?

With Bráz, the case for chaos theory -- unforeseen changes resulting from small steps far away -- seems stronger. He didn?t have any real Vatican experience, and he doesn?t hail from the circle of intimates from which Benedict has plucked other top aides. In an interview with me shortly after his nomination, Bráz identified a fairly mundane logic for his appointment: ?I think I was chosen in part because the Holy Father wants a Brazilian in the Vatican, since at the moment there?s no other Brazilian holding a senior position.?

Given that, it may be premature to settle the debate between Reagan and Freud. Perhaps only with time, as Benedict XVI is forced to decide whether to back up his new team or to distance himself from it, will the extent to which he intended the direction Bráz and Tobin are setting become clear.

In that light, what happens in and around the Congregation for Religious in the days to come may have echoes well beyond the boundaries of religious life. They just might prove, so to speak, a ?hermeneutic key? to understanding Benedict?s entire papacy.

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If somebody were to die and leave me king of all media -- a deeply improbable development, but still -- one of my first edicts would be to install Phillip Sloan of the University of Notre Dame as a go-to guy on matters of science and religion.

Press coverage notoriously loves to pit blowhards against one another, and, alas, there are plenty of people happy to bloviate on cue. Sloan, however, is emblematic of a much more thoughtful approach.

He?s been part of Notre Dame?s Program of Liberal Studies since 1974, teaching the history and philosophy of science. He?s also served as an advisor on scientific matters to the U.S. bishops, and to the ?Science, Theology and the Ontological Quest? project of the Vatican?s Pontifical Council for Culture. (Arguably, the fact that the legendarily egg-headed Cardinal Gianfranco Ravasi finds Sloan worth attending, all by itself, is certification

enough of his intellectual chops.)

Sloan's knack for cutting to the heart of an issue was on display again recently during a week-long "Workshop on Adult and Non-embryonic Stem Cell Research" on the Notre Dame campus. I'll write about the conference itself in a print piece for *NCR*, but here I want to summarize Sloan's argument -- which wasn't directly concerned with the stem cell debate so much as its philosophical underpinnings.

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Sloan said that the most serious challenge today to a theistic view of the world comes not from the theory of evolution, but from the biological sciences, and what he calls its "molecular vision" -- a new form of determinism, seeing organic life in terms of discrete elements akin to hardware and software that can be understood, and manipulated, apart from the whole.

This molecular vision, Sloan suggested, was forged by three mammoth chapters of 20th century history -- World War II, the rise of computing, and breakthroughs in genetics. Together, he said, they shape the metaphors that now dominate the life sciences.

In his paper for the Notre Dame event, Sloan wrote: "A new language, borrowed often from wartime work -- terms like "code," "micro-systems," "information," "feedback," and "cybernetics" -- entered biology. We also find new analogies used to describe and explain organisms from a physicalistic and deterministic perspective: "Self-guided missiles" and "cybernetic machines.""

During the same period, Sloan said, the discipline of biology moved out of small laboratories and became "the enormous enterprise we see today, carried out at the great research medical hospitals and institutes "working in close relationship with biotechnology companies and pharmaceutical firms." Although Sloan doesn't spell it out, that transition obviously created a strong commercial incentive for seeing organic life in terms of morally meaningless "biological materials" which can be bought and sold.

The net result, Sloan says, has been the rise of a "reductionist and analytical biology," which too often misses the forest for the trees. This tacit worldview, Sloan says, has displaced a "richer" view of human life that once reigned in biology, which saw life in terms of systems and purpose, and which was therefore more congenial to religious ethics.

At the popular level, this "molecular" vision has triumphed, Sloan said, in large part because it seems to work: "It has given us our great drugs, gene therapies, and is currently being pursued at the atomic level with the development of nanobiotechnology."

The upshot would seem to be unrelenting, and basically irresolvable, conflict between "molecular" science and "teleological" ethics. Yet the good news, according to Sloan, is that the molecular vision today is actually breaking down, and not because of religious jeremiads but due to developments within the sciences themselves.

Here's the relevant section of his talk:

These issues have been forced onto the table by the failure of reductive methodologies to solve the empirical problems of developmental biology, gene regulation, metabolic organization, and even evolutionary change.

One striking example has been the stunning revelation from the Human Genome Project that humans do not have millions of identifiable genes that might support a strong causal genotype-phenotype story. Instead, the number is of the order of 30,000 identifiable sequences of the human DNA molecule, and the

number may be even less. Many of these structural genes are identical to those in even lower organisms such as the roundworm and fruitfly.

The complex ways in which this limited number of identifiable structural genes come to be expressed in development necessarily has forced attention to higher-level issues of gene regulation and control processes. Any functional notion of a "gene" cannot be just the specification of the DNA structure, but it must include notions of regulation, feedback, multiple synthetic pathways, and chain of biochemical events that lie between DNA and protein and eventually the structures that form the organism.

As a result, Sloan said, biologists today are once again being compelled to think in terms of the whole, of overarching structures and internal direction. To use the classic categories of Aristotelian thought, formal and final causes are coming back into fashion -- offering a glimmer of hope, he said, for "reconnecting is and ought."

Sloan's point was that this is where science and religion should meet: Not on the picket line or on "Crossfire," but rather on the research frontier, where the need for more holistic accounts of life is becoming steadily clearer.

He then delivers the payoff for the debate over stem cells.

"From this perspective," Sloan said, "we might see in the small ball of cells not simply biological material, but an entity that can ultimately become like us, worthy of being considered an end and not only a means."

Whatever one makes of all that, it's a point of view not often found in venues such as "Real Time with Bill Maher" or "Fox and Friends." Guest bookers of the world, take note.

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"Vatican Insider," the new Internet portal operated by *La Stampa* in Italy, has already distinguished itself as a valuable source of news and commentary on the global Catholic scene. Two items from the past week are especially interesting.

First, Giacomo Galeazzi has an interview with Ettore Gotti Tedeschi, president of the Vatican Bank, about a recent projection by the United Nations that the global population should cross the seven billion mark on Oct. 31. Prior to his Vatican gig, Gotti Tedeschi, a layman, was one of Italy's foremost economists, and he argues that population growth is good for business: "The countries with the highest rates of economic growth and savings are those with the largest populations," he says.

In a nutshell, Gotti Tedeschi predicts a bleak economic future for the West, especially Europe, because of its low fertility rate and rapidly aging population. In that demographic context, he says, debt rises, the working age population contracts, productive activity is shifted elsewhere, and taxes go up. (In Italy, where the birth rate remains well below replacement level, taxes have shot up from 25 to 50 percent of GDP in the last thirty years.)

Gotti Tedeschi actually asserts that low fertility is behind the global fiscal meltdown that began in 2008: "The real cause of the current economic crisis does not stem from the greed of the banking system nor corrupt governments," he says, "but from the demographic collapse that has struck progressive countries since the 1970s."

Meanwhile, Gotti Tedeschi says, nations with large populations are posting robust economic gains, with China and India being the most obvious examples. A vast pool of savings in China, created by a massive working age population, has allowed it to underwrite the public debt of the United States, while at the same time creating a quasi-colonial footprint in regions of the world with valuable raw materials. (Of course, these days China's one-child policy is creating its own demographic headaches; rapid aging has led some wonks to suggest that China

may be the first nation in history to get old before it gets rich.)

From a Catholic angle, what's interesting about the Gotti Tedeschi interview is that it reflects a shift in the conceptual repertoire of the pro-life movement over the past couple of decades. As recently as John Paul II's 1995 encyclical *Evangelium Vitae*, the arguments against contraception and abortion, and in favor of marriage and the family, were largely pitched on moral grounds and phrased in terms of natural law.

With the emergence of the "new demography" in the last twenty years -- projecting short-term growth but long-term contraction in the global population, coupled with turbulence in the West caused by an exploding elderly population without a commensurate number of young workers -- the picture has changed. There's a growing sense among pro-life leaders that demographic trends offer empirical confirmation of their position.

In that light, it's interesting that the Vatican's main commentary on the UN population report so far has come not from a moralist, but a banker. Perhaps it's a harbinger of things to come: In the future, the most effective pro-life spokespersons won't be theologians or preachers, but economists, finance gurus, and pension fund managers.

Second, "Vatican Insider" has confirmed that Prince Ghazi bin Muhammad of Jordan will participate in the interreligious summit Pope Benedict XVI intends to host in Assisi on Oct. 27, commemorating the famous assembly convened by John Paul II in 1986 to pray for peace. Ghazi is a lead actor on the global Islamic stage, and his presence should ensure that the October event will have a high profile.

Everyone remembers the firestorm that Benedict XVI's September 2006 speech in Regensburg caused in Muslim circles, but what's often less appreciated is the progress in Catholic/Muslim relations that's occurred post-Regensburg. Ghazi has been an important force in that regard.

In 2006, Ghazi wrote to Benedict responding to his Regensburg address -- not in polemical fashion, but explaining how he sees the relationship between faith and reason in Islam. In 2007, the Royal al-Bayt Institute for Islamic Thought in Amman, directed by Ghazi, put together "A Common Word," a document signed by 138 leading Muslim thinkers and clerics laying out a theological basis for relations with Christianity.

In turn, Pope Benedict's 2009 trip to Jordan was the platform for the pontiff's most important address on relations with Islam. In Amman, Benedict proposed a grand "Alliance of Civilizations," the heart of which was the idea that Christians and Muslims are natural allies in resisting hyper-secularism and the exile of religion from public life. Benedict XVI visited the al-Husseini bin Talal Mosque in Amman, where he was welcomed by Ghazi -- who gave, by most accounts, one of the most impressive speeches of the trip.

As the "Vatican Insider" piece notes, there is an obvious political subtext to Ghazi's budding friendship with the pope.

The Hashemite royal family in Jordan has long seen itself as a rival to the Saudis for leadership in the Islamic world, and styling its Crown Prince as the premier Muslim interlocutor of the figure perceived in the Muslim street as the CEO of global Christianity serves that agenda. Moreover, the Jordanian dynasty is striving to insulate itself from the winds of democratic change blowing across the Middle East, and striking a moderate stance in relations with the West may help.

As the proud sponsor of the world's oldest diplomatic corps, the Vatican is hardly naïve about the political dimension of what Ghazi is up to. That awareness, however, will not prevent the Vatican from rolling out the red carpet for him in October, perhaps on the basis of this logic: Why shouldn't intra-Muslim politics actually favor dialogue for once, rather than always cutting against it?

[John L. Allen Jr. is NCR senior correspondent. His e-mail address is jallen@ncronline.org.]

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