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What's next for Christian-Muslim relations?

by John L. Allen Jr.

All Things Catholic

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As part of the research for the *NCR* cover story this week, I interviewed Jesuit Fr. Daniel Madigan, rector of the Institute for the Study of Religions and Cultures at the Pontifical Gregorian University in Rome, and himself an expert on Islam.

I confess to a personal bias in thinking Madigan's comments are worthy of note, since he's a personal friend as well as, in a sense, my pastor. When I'm in Rome I attend Mass at the Oratory of St. Francis Xavier del Caravita, where Madigan's skill as a homilist is well-known.

Nevertheless, Madigan is in regular contact with a cross-section of figures in the Islamic world, and is one of the church's most credible voices on the Christian-Muslim relationship. He's also a consultant to the Pontifical Council for Inter-religious Dialogue.

Excerpts from our conversation:

Where does the Christian-Muslim relationship go from here?

The fundamental problem is that you can't have a conversation with 'Islam,' just like you can't have a conversation with 'Christianity.' You have to choose some people with particular points of view, particular roles, and listen to what they have to say. You can't have a conversation with an Islam as described by

someone who was engaged in a defensive battle at the time, as was the case with the Byzantine emperor in the 14th century. It's no use staging a dialogue in the 21st century on the basis of perceptions formed six centuries ago.

The key is to sit down with individual Muslims and ask, 'Where do you stand? How do you justify that? What can I expect from you?' We can't tell them what we think they believe, and then criticize what we think they believe.

What about the issue of reciprocity, meaning the demand that Islamic governments show the same regard for religious minorities that Muslim minorities receive in the West?

To impose this as a condition for dialogue is not a Christian position. The message of the New Testament begins with grace, with God's gratuity towards humanity, which we hope is transforming. It's the same thing in the Christian approach to dialogue. We must be ready to listen, to discuss. We have to make it clear that we're going to be there, even if you're not taking notice. We hope that will gradually transform the other.

How can Benedict make his challenge to Muslims on issues such as reciprocity constructive?

We've got to be for human rights across the board. It's not just protecting the rights of our people, and withholding the rights of yours until you take care of ours. Some people think this way, but it's completely un-Christian. It should be clear that we're as concerned for the human rights of Muslims in Sudan or Hindus in Sri Lanka as we are for Christians in Rwanda or the Congo or anywhere else.

There has been some progress on the reciprocity front. New churches are being built, for example, in various parts of the Persian Gulf, such as Kuwait and Qatar. There's a moment of opportunity here. Saudi Arabia is of course a different matter. Even here, we have to be careful about the reciprocity line. Muslims can argue that the Arabian Peninsula is for them what the Vatican is for us, so that if we want churches in Saudi Arabia, there should be a mosque in the Vatican, not just in Rome.

What else?

The big problem is the identification between Christianity and the West. Christianity is not the same thing as the West.

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It's ironic that many Muslim critics have associated Benedict with Bush, given the Vatican's opposition to the Iraq war.

In fact, I think that's part of why the reaction has been so strong. For many Muslims the Vatican was sort of their last ally in the West. They tend to think, if it's gone, what's left? So there has been a much stronger sense of disappointment.

What's the future hold?

I hope that we won't just settle back to where things were before. Cardinal [Tarcisio] Bertone has said that this would be an opportune time to re-launch the Pontifical Council for Inter-religious Dialogue, which would be helpful.

I suspect that the visit of former Iranian President Mohammed Khatami to the pope in October will be important. We're having a conference at the Gregorian which Khatami will attend, and this may be an opportunity to see where things stand.

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