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The Pope & Islam

An Interview with Daniel Madigan, SJ

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Today, Pope Benedict XVI met with representatives from Muslim-majority countries that maintain diplomatic links with the Vatican "in order to strengthen the bonds of friendship and solidarity between the Holy See and Muslim communities throughout the world." Benedict said he hoped "to reiterate today all the esteem and the profound respect that I have for Muslim believers."

How did he get to this point? To help make sense of the pope's remarks on Islam and their aftermath, Commonweal presents an interview with Kevin Madigan, SJ, president of the Institute for the Study of Religions and Cultures at the Pontifical Gregorian University in Rome.

Nandagopal R. Menon: There is a feeling that Benedict XVI's quote from Byzantine Emperor Manuel II Palaiologos during the papal address at Regensburg on September 12 was a deliberate choice on his part.

Daniel Madigan, SJ: I cannot claim to know why the pope used that particular quote—it could easily have been omitted—but the Byzantine emperor's position was relevant to the Holy Father's larger theme: the rationality of God and the irrationality of violence. It is significant that the emperor was Greek because the pope wanted to underline the confluence of Greek philosophy and biblical faith.

Menon: Juan Cole of the University of Michigan has said that Surah 2:256 ("There is no compulsion in religion")—to which the pope made reference in his speech—is not from the Prophet's early days, as the pope asserted, but from when the Prophet was ruler of Medinah. Samir Khalil Samir, SJ, disagrees and says the pope's dates are right. Who is correct? More important, can one make sweeping statements about Islam's views on violence and religious tolerance relying solely on the Qur'an while ignoring the Hadith (commentary), the Sharia (law), and the entire history of the religion?

Madigan: The consensus of scholars, both Muslim and non-Muslim, is that Surah 2 is from the Medinah period, when Muhammad had increasing political power. However, dating Qur'anic verses and establishing their original context is always complex.

The second part of your question is more important. It seems to me essential not to lock Muslims into one particular reading of their texts and traditions. It is nonsensical to say to someone who claims that Islam is a peaceful religion that he may not believe such a thing because the Qur'an says such-and-such. She should be encouraged to believe that Islam is peaceful and held to observe that.

There is much more violence in the Bible than in the Qur'an. Here is a line from the Psalms, the backbone of Christian and Jewish daily worship: "A blessing on him who takes your babies and dashes them against the rocks!" (Ps. 137:9). We cannot deny the presence of such verses in our Scripture and worship, yet we do not think of them as defining our attitude to enemies. As for the New Testament, it is not without verses open to a violent interpretation: "Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth; I have not come to bring peace, but a sword" (Mt. 10:34).

The point of quoting these texts is not to claim that Christianity and Judaism are inherently violent religions, but to offer proof that scripture passages which apparently justify and even glorify violence do not necessarily make for a violent religion. Christians and Jews have ways of reading their scriptures that allow them to maintain their sacredness without considering large parts of them normative for behaviour or attitudes. Muslims have traditionally used similar methods of interpretation.

Menon: Would it be correct to say that, for Muslims, God is absolutely transcendent? What is the view of the Qur'an when it comes to natural theology and to reason?

Madigan: Certainly Muslim tradition has insisted on the absolute transcendence of God, yet it has done so in different ways. While some philosophers would say that God transcends good and evil, truth and falsehood, this is not the generally held approach of Muslims in practice. They hold that God is Truth and through the prophets speaks the truth. The Qur'an is full of natural theology. One of its insistent claims is that God is constantly sending down "signs" (*ayat*) that manifest all we need to know. The *ayat* that constitute God's revelation are in nature and in history, even before they come to the people as verses (also *ayat*) of Scripture. Indeed, the role of the prophetic preaching is to call the people back to the acknowledgment of a truth already expressed in the signs of nature and the history of God's dealings with humanity.

It could be said that there is no essential difference between the verses and the natural or historical signs: all are there to be comprehended by anyone who has the intelligence to reflect on them and to acknowledge their truth with faithful submission (*islam*). Many passages in the Qur'an cite natural phenomena as symbols pointing to the Creator. Historical events are also "signs" of God.

Menon: Would you say that the pope's comments are indicative of a change in the Holy See's policy towards Islam, a more hard-line, reciprocity-based approach?

Madigan: We have begun to hear much more in recent times about reciprocity as an important principle in Muslim-Christian dialogue. This seems

to me a very ambiguous development and it requires clarification. There is a world of difference between reciprocity as a condition for dialogue, and reciprocity as a hoped-for outcome of dialogue. However, that distinction tends to be blurred, not only in press reports of Vatican policy, but also among some theologians. Reciprocity is not a Christian value. Gratitude is. The teaching of Jesus (Matt. 5:39-47) could not be more explicit on this subject: we give without hope of return, and we open our tables especially to those who will not repay our hospitality (Lk 14:12-14).

There is absolutely no question of setting conditions for our dialogue with others. If we were to do so, we would be betraying our faith, not defending it. Of course, we hope that our openness and honesty will be reciprocated, but if it is not, still we persevere. Pope Paul VI taught in *Ecclesiam suam* (87) that we begin dialogue not by talking but by listening: "Before speaking, we must take great care to listen not only to what people say, but more especially to what they have it in their hearts to say." Even if we are not listened to, we continue to listen with patience, and to express our own positions with clarity.

Talk of reciprocity is common today in relation to laws, rights, and freedoms. There are many calls in Europe to restrict the rights of Muslim citizens and immigrants until full and equal rights are accorded Christians in Muslim majority countries-Saudi Arabia is the case usually cited. Some commentators have interpreted the Holy See's recent references to reciprocity as a concern and a demand for reciprocal rights as a condition of further dialogue, and an encouragement for Western governments to use Muslim citizens' rights and freedoms as leverage to achieve reforms.

Such a strategy can be reconciled neither with the gospel nor with explicit Catholic teaching about the basis of religious freedom being rooted in the dignity of each person. We must accord equal rights and freedoms to Muslims in the West, even if such recognition is not reciprocated by the governments of Muslim-majority countries. We may not repay one wrong with another. If we were serious about our concern for the fate of the oppressed, we would refuse to trade with oppressor countries-refuse, for example, to sell them arms or to buy their oil. Yet, this would require more sacrifice than most countries are prepared to make. So we propose to force the poor Muslim citizen or immigrant to pay the price. But most of these Muslims have come to live in Western countries precisely because they do not accept the laws, customs, and regimes of their own countries.

There are obvious differences of style and approach between Benedict XVI and John Paul II. Vatican observers predict that this pope will engage much more with Muslims than his predecessors in substantive dialogue about the issues between us. That may be true, and such a dialogue is urgent, for this is no time to be silent about violence and injustice. However, it cannot be undertaken without allowing Muslims to speak and answer for themselves. We cannot presume first to tell them what they believe and then to criticize them for it. In Regensburg, the pope was seen to engage not with Muslims, but with a version of Islam enunciated by a Christian locked in a struggle with Muslims. A polemical quotation unfortunately provoked polemical responses.

Menon: Do you think the pope's remarks will affect the dialogue? Will the damage be corrected by the clarifications issued by the Holy See and the personal apology of the pope?

Madigan: We have to hope that the clarifications and regrets expressed will have some effect. However, it is also important to recognize that the anger we have witnessed is not simply anger provoked by the pope's quotation. It is produced by many things and is very long-standing. There is profound anger in the Muslim world over many injustices (both actual and perceived), over the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, and from the frustration of feeling excluded, despised, and powerless against the problems endemic in their own societies. This anger is easily manipulated, and the pope's speech was only a spark.

None of this is to say that it is all the fault of non-Muslims. We are all in this globalized world together, and it will take collaboration to construct a world in which justice is more important than profit, where education and health are more precious than weapons, and where principles are more valued than oil or power. We need to recognize that the vast majority of Muslims live in what we politely call the "developing world," yet they feel that they are not developing and that no one has any interest in helping them to develop—or even letting them develop. ■

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