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These two Islamic movements bear watching

John L. Allen Jr. | Jun. 22, 2007 All Things Catholic

The case for despair these days in Christian/Muslim relations is depressingly easy to make. June isn't even over, but so far this month has seen the following anti-Christian incidents in majority Muslim areas:

- Hamas gunmen torched and looted a Catholic church in Gaza along with a nearby Rosary Sisters School. The parish priest, Fr. Manuel Musalam, said that every cross had been destroyed and every Bible burnt, in addition to the school's computers and other equipment being destroyed. A Hamas leader in Gaza has warned Christians to "get ready" for Islamic rule, stating that "missionary activity" will no longer be tolerated, and those suspected of trying to convert Muslims will be "harshly punished." The consumption of alcohol will be prohibited, and Christian women will be expected to cover themselves in public.
- Chaldean Fr. Ragheed Ganni, 34, the pastor of Holy Spirit Church in the Nur district of Mosul, Iraq, and subdeacons Basman Yousef Daoud, Ghasan Bidawid, and Wadid Hanna, were forced out of their car, and then shot and killed, outside the church after celebrating Mass on Saturday, June 2.
- A mob of enraged Muslims in Egypt set out to stone the home of a Coptic Christian family, after a teenager from the family accidentally ran into a Muslim girl while riding his bicycle. Violence broke out in the streets until the police restored order.
- The third Italian Catholic priest in the Mindanao area of the Philippines to be kidnapped in the last 10 years, Fr. Giancarlo Bossi, a member of the Pontifical Institute for Foreign Missions, was hauled away from his parish by armed militants linked to the Moro Islamic Liberation Front, a group that has waged a bloody war for the independence of Mindanao since 1978.

The fact that not one of these incidents has been front-page news in the West is a sad reminder that such experiences have become so routine for Christians in various parts of the world as to be essentially unremarkable.

As in any crisis, however, there's a danger of selective perception. Atrocities and bloodshed always loom larger than quiet harmony. Without minimizing the threat posed by Islamic radicalism, or the urgency of a more aggressive response both from moderate Muslims and from Western governments in defense of religious freedom, it's worth pointing out that the outrages listed above do not constitute the whole story of what's happening within the Islamic world.

Like Christianity, the 19th, 20th and early 21st centuries have been the historical period in which Islam has struggled with its response to modernity. One such response is "Islamism," an attempt to return to a "pure" Islam based on the *shariah*, and to impose it by force if necessary. Another has been a wholesale embrace of Western-style modernization, the most prominent example of which is Kemal Atatürk's secularism in Turkey.

Yet another alternative, albeit one with a much lower media profile, is what scholars call "neo-Sufism," which amounts to an attempt to blend the best elements of modernity with fidelity to basic Islamic values. This movement attracts less attention because it doesn't produce fireworks, but it's a significant presence within Islam, and some experts believe it may be the best way out of the present crisis.

At one level, "neo-Sufism" can simply refer to a revival of interest in Sufi spiritual and mystical practices. In Indonesia, for example, reports indicate that a growing number of young university students and affluent housewives are attracted to Sufi prayer services, especially Thursday night gatherings when followers sing the 99 names of God. Since liturgical music is frowned upon in Sunni Islam, such forms of devotion are experienced as liberating by many Muslims. In that sense, neo-Sufism is largely a way of drawing upon the legacy of Sufism without all its trappings, such as Masters and closely-knit brotherhoods.

Neo-Sufism as an organized social force, however, might be defined as a competitor to Islamism, with the crucial difference being that radicals want to seize political power, while neo-Sufis want to change people's souls.

Perhaps the most widespread forms of neo-Sufism have arisen in Turkey, under the inspiration of Said Nursi in the early 20th century, and later his disciple, Fethullah Gülen. Both men were opposed to the secularization of Atatürk, but neither did they want a repressive theocracy. Both felt the Islamic contribution to the social order should come not from the imposition of *shariah*, but a values-driven transformation. Neither is a "Sufi" in the sense of belonging to a brotherhood, but both represent a revitalization of Sufi instincts in the contemporary Islamic world.

Nursi is best known as the author of the *Risale-i Nur*, the "Message of Light," a 6,000-page commentary on the Qu'ran. He rejected political and military solutions to the crisis posed by secularism, instead concentrating on Qu'ranic study in light of the natural sciences. Nursi argued that the time of the "jihad of the sword" was over, and that now is the era of the "jihad of the word," meaning a reasoned attempt to propose Islam as a basis for a reconciliation of science and modern institutions with religious faith and morality.

During the era of the World Wars, Nursi advised his students to shun military service, a position that repeatedly brought him under suspicion by Atatürk's government. As early as 1911, Nursi argued that Muslims and "pious Christians" should make common cause in defending a moral and spiritual vision of human life against the momentary illusions of consumer culture.

This made Nursi a champion of inter-faith dialogue well ahead of his time. He defended the rights of Armenians and Greeks in Turkey, a deeply unpopular stance, and reached out to many Christian leaders. In 1950, for example, he sent a collection of his works to Pope Pius XII in Rome, and in 1953 he met with Patriarch Athenagoras of Constantinople (Istanbul). When he died in 1960, the Turkish government was so concerned that his grave might become a pilgrimage site that he had Nursi's body disinterred, and to this day no one knows where it lies. A conservative estimate for the size of his "Nurcu movement" today is five to six million, with some claiming as many as nine million.

Like Nursi, Fethullah Gülen believes in an Islam that is faithful to its traditions but open to the best of modernity. He has denounced terrorism, insisting that "Islamic terrorism" is a contradiction in terms, and has not sought the public enforcement of *shariah*. In contrast with Nursi, however, Gülen's emphasis is on social transformation based on Islamic values. Gülen particularly stresses education, though the schools he's founded are not "Islamic" in the strict sense, but secular institutions of high quality grounded in basic religious values.

His "Gülen movement," has become a mini-empire, today said to be worth $25 billion. It has its own TV stations, a news agency, a bank, 35 newspapers and magazines in various languages, unions, student associations, and more than 600 schools (including several in the United States, concentrated in New Jersey and Texas) and six universities in 75 countries on five continents, including Virginia International University in Fairfax, Virginia.

Gülen is also a strong believer in inter-faith dialogue, and met Pope John Paul II in 1998. His movement runs interreligious centers around the world, including the Interfaith Dialog Center in Patterson, New Jersey. In 1999, Gülen moved to the United States after Turkish officials indicted him for allegedly plotting to subvert Turkey's secular state. He was acquitted in 2006, and his movement continues to grow.

How significant a force within Islam are these movements? A 2005 conference on the Gülen movement at Rice University estimated his following at six million. If so, the adherents of Nursi and Gülen together could number as many as 15 million people, which would represent a block larger than some global religions. The total Jewish population in the world in 2006, for example, was estimated at 14 million.

Overall, the statistical analysis of David B. Barrett of Regent University puts the number of Sufis in the world at 237 million, roughly 20 percent of the Muslim population -- bearing in mind that many Sufis regard themselves as either Sunnis or Shi'ites, so in some cases Sufis may be counted twice.

Some Catholic observers believe the various expressions of Sufism have kept alive something essential in Islam. Stratford Caldecott has argued that Sufism preserved the relationship between will and intellect within Islam -- or, to use Pope Benedict's preferred terms, faith and reason -- because it identifies God with transcendent beauty. While God is always "free," Sufis nevertheless believe that God does not act in ways that are unfitting or ugly -- and thus God is not pure will, arbitrary and irrational, and neither should those who walk the ways of God sunder themselves from the demands of reason.

Jesuit Fr. Thomas Michel, a former Vatican official and an expert on Islam, claims that movements such as those launched by Nursi and Gülen "point the direction the worldwide Islamic community is heading far more accurately than do the increasingly isolated circles of those who are involved in terrorist fringe organizations."

While the evidence of June 2007 makes that conclusion something less than a slam dunk, one prays that Michel is right.

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Several readers have asked when the paperback edition of my book on Opus Dei would be available. It's now on the market, and can be ordered here: Opus Dei: An Objective Look Behind the Myths and Reality of the Most Controversial Force in the Catholic Church (Paperback) [1].

Regular readers will have noticed that I haven't posted any daily stories for a while. During June and July, I am working on my new book, *Megatrends in Catholicism*, the manuscript of which is due at Doubleday in September. For that reason, I'm concentrating on the book. I will return to regular daily coverage at the beginning of August.

Editor's Note: *Religion news junkies can stay current by reading the Daily News Feed[2] on NCRcafe.org. Reports from news wires and correspondents appear daily there. It's not John Allen, but it is good reading.*

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