

The deathbed friendship between a bishop and an atheist

John L. Allen Jr. | Aug. 24, 2007 All Things Catholic

Conventional wisdom has it, "There are no atheists in foxholes." In truth, atheists can be found even in foxholes, but often they're atheists whose deepest yearning is to be wrong.

In just that spirit, among people who believe that Western civilization today is locked in mortal combat with radical Islam, there's a growing contingent of what we might call "Christian atheists," meaning non-believers nonetheless committed to a strong defense of Christian culture. In this quirky galaxy, no star burned brighter than that of the provocative Italian writer Oriana Fallaci until her death in September 2006.

Fallaci's credentials as a non-believer were never in doubt. She once defined Christianity as "a beautiful fable," and wrote: "I'm tired of having to repeat, in writing and also orally, that I'm an atheist. In addition to being a secularist, I'm also profoundly anti-clerical. Priests don't sit well with me, just as they didn't with the anarchists of Lugano." (That's a reference to a city on the Swiss-Italian border where 19th century anarchists were chased out because of their opposition to the ultra-Catholic Hapsburg Empire.)

Many conservative Christians nonetheless regard Fallaci as a hero, a veneration clearly on display Tuesday in Rimini, Italy, where the annual "Meeting" sponsored by the Catholic movement Communion and Liberation ends tomorrow. One of the most popular sessions was devoted to Fallaci, and it featured the man whom she asked to be at her side as she died: Bishop Rino Fisichella, rector of the Lateran University in Rome, and an intimate of Pope Benedict XVI.

Their improbable friendship illustrates an important current percolating in contemporary Western culture, a budding détente between institutional Christianity and some of its sharpest Enlightenment-inspired critics, motivated by a deep sense of shared peril.

In part on the strength of her mega-best seller *La rabbia e l'orgoglio* (*The Rage and the Pride*), Fallaci became the leading voice of Western protest against militant Islam. Together with British writer Bat Ye'or, she popularized the term "Eurabia" to describe what she saw as a creeping Islamicization of Europe, transforming the continent from the cradle of Christian civilization into an outpost of the Arab world.

A colleague of Fallaci and a fellow non-believer, Italian journalist Vittorio Feltri, summed up their position during the Tuesday panel: "All of us have been shaped by a Christian culture. Facing a threat from the outside, and we all know where it comes from, we have to rally around our culture, which is the culture of Christianity,

even if in the end we can't bring ourselves to believe in God, except perhaps, every now and then, at night. This was Fallaci's argument, and I share it from the first word to the very last."

A degree of affinity between Fallaci and the cultural positions of the Catholic church actually predates today's frisson over Islam. In the 1970s, during a bitter referendum campaign in Italy which eventually legalized abortion, Fallaci wrote her famous work *Lettera a un bambino non mai nato* (*Letter to a Child Never Born*). She had found herself pregnant, decided to keep the child, and then lost it. The book is regarded by some as one of the most eloquent reflections on maternity and the gift of life ever written, and it brought Fallaci to the attention of a new German bishop and fellow intellectual, Joseph Ratzinger.

In late August 2005, Pope Benedict XVI met with Fallaci at his summer residence at Castel Gandolfo, granting what was in effect her dying wish, since by that stage Fallaci was already debilitated by the cancer that killed her a year later.

On Tuesday, Fisichella recounted the story of his friendship with Fallaci, which began in the final years of her life after she wrote a letter praising an interview he had given on Islam and religious freedom to the Italian paper *Corriere della Sera*. Towards the end, Fisichella said, the two would talk on the phone sometimes three or four times a day. (Fallaci was in New York, where she had lived for decades, undergoing treatment at the Sloan Kettering Cancer Center.)

Fisichella said that despite Fallaci's atheism and anti-clericalism, he saw signs of vestigial Christianity.

Fallaci returned to Italy in her final days because, she said, she didn't want to die in exile. She asked Fisichella to help arrange a room for her in Florence where she could look out at the famous dome of Brunelleschi atop the Cathedral of Santa Maria del Fiore. She also requested a CD with the sound of church bells to play softly in the background.

It was Fallaci's desire, Fisichella said, that on the day of her funeral, the bells of the cathedral would ring out. It wasn't easy to arrange, Fisichella said. Though he didn't elaborate, it's well known that some Catholics objected to bestowing such an honor upon a professed atheist, while others argued that it would be seen as an endorsement of her stridently anti-Islamic views. Nonetheless, Fisichella said, he managed to pull it off.

"With a great deal of difficulty, due to various polemics, it happened that when her coffin left the clinic to go to the cemetery, the bells of the Cathedral of Florence pealed for Oriana Fallaci," he said, to thunderous applause from the crowd in Rimini.

It's worth quoting Fisichella at length about his final experiences with Fallaci.

"I held her hand the day before she died, as I had promised, a hand by then reduced to just skin and bones. I also gave her a blessing. I did so consciously, because Oriana Fallaci was baptized. She was a Christian. I did it because Oriana Fallaci made her first Communion, because she was confirmed. I did it because many times Oriana Fallaci told me how, with her father, taught to do so by her father, she read the Bible of Douay. She knew all the illustrations of her Douay Bible, which she decided to leave to me. I did so because many times during the last weeks of her life, when it

was just the two of us by her bed and she was suffering enormously, she would look at me, raise her eyes to Heaven, and say, 'If you exist, why don't you let me live?' She didn't say, 'Don't make me suffer,' but rather, 'Let me live.' I did it because Oriana Fallaci loved life, and because the God of Christians is the God of life. I did it because, even though Oriana Fallaci said that she didn't believe, she had great hope.

"During those days, a phrase came into my mind from the posthumously published book of Ignazio Silone called Severina. The protagonist is a sister who had left the convent, who is now dying from a wound she received during a protest. At a certain point, one of the sisters from the convent comes to her deathbed and takes her hand, saying, 'Severina, Severina, tell me that you believe!' Severina looks at her and says, 'No, but I hope.' I believe we Christians have a great responsibility to talk about our faith with the language of hope. Quite often, people won't understand us when we talk about the content of our faith. But without doubt, people of today can understand when we talk about hope, if we talk about the mystery of our existence and the meaning of our lives ?

"I held Oriana Fallaci's hand as a priest, as a bishop, asking the Lord to look upon her with great mercy, if for no other reason than that she suffered so greatly, because she was so alone, and because in her last years, radically and with deep conviction, she defended the idea that this country belongs to the West. She defended like few others the profoundly Christian roots of the civilization to which we all belong, including the faith that, let's not forget, God forever offers to us as a great gift. We have to remember this woman for what she did, for what she said and wrote. She was a great woman, a great Italian, who deserves to be viewed with respect, and who now belongs to the history books."

Fisichella drew a sustained standing ovation.

Whatever one makes of Fallaci's views on Islam or anything else, this deathbed friendship between a bishop and an atheist is a remarkable story. Among other things, it illustrates a perverse but seemingly ironclad law of human life: Sometimes the perception of a common threat can dissolve differences and open hearts to a degree that otherwise would have been difficult to imagine.

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By all accounts, Fallaci was an earthquake of a human being. She was a perfectionist when it came to her work, Feltri said, often agonizing long into the night over single commas. She could also erupt at her closest friends and colleagues, and was never one to shrink from a fight, even with people she otherwise admired.

An occasional target of her scorn was Pope John Paul II, whom she regarded as naïve and weak regarding the Islamic threat. Once, when John Paul had devoted an Angelus address to urging hospitality for Muslim immigrants in Europe, Fallaci shot back acerbically: "Your Holiness, why don't you take them into the Vatican? On the condition, of course, that they don't smear the Sistine Chapel with shit ..."

During the Rimini session, Italian journalist Renato Farina revealed another, more personal reason why Fallaci had a beef with the late pope.

When *Lettera a un bambino non mai nato* appeared in the 1970s, it was an enormous worldwide success. Among the many places it was reprinted was the weekly newspaper of the Archdiocese of Krakow, Poland, led by then-Cardinal Karol Wojtyla, who would become John Paul II. When Fallaci wrote to the archdiocese to request payment, Wojtyla told his secretary, Fr. Stanislaw Dziwiesz, who is today himself the Cardinal of Krakow, to write back informing Fallaci that because Poland was a Communist country it wasn't customary to pay copyright fees.

"After that, she decided Wojtyla was a bad guy," Farina laughed. "A great figure, but a bad guy."

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For those readers who can follow spoken Italian, a video of the session on Fallaci from Rimini is available on-line at <http://mediacenter.corriere.it/MediaCenter/action/player?uuid=16b9109e-50cb-11dc-8a4a-0003ba99c53b>[1]

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