

## Seeking dialogue with 'Islam of the people'

John L. Allen Jr. | May. 23, 2008 All Things Catholic

Though the parallel shouldn't be pushed too far, in some ways Christian/Muslim relations today might be compared to where things stood with personal computers back in the early 1980s. Everybody knew PCs were the future, but they wouldn't change the world until a simple, appealing, and reasonably standard way of making them work emerged.

Then Apple released the Macintosh in 1984, followed by Microsoft's first version of Windows a year later. Overnight, personal computing went from a hobby to a necessity, and we woke up in the digital age.

In a similar fashion, everybody knows today that dialogue with Islam is critical to the future. The "market," however, has not yet settled on a clear model for how it ought to work - who we should be talking to, what we should be talking about, and what we should expect from those conversations. Until that happens, Christian/Muslim relations will remain a bit like the early days of computing ? the rarefied pursuit of experts typing in strings of DOS commands to run even simple operations.

So, is there a potential "Windows" of Christian/Muslim relations out there?

One intriguing candidate is the "Oasis" project of Cardinal Angelo Scola of Venice, an attempt to foster a global network of contacts among Christians and Muslims, attaching special importance to the voices and experiences of Christians who live in majority Muslim nations across the Middle East, Asia and Africa. While Oasis sponsors academic conferences and a journal, it's also devoted to giving voice to real-life experiences of ordinary people, not just intellectual experts and the professional artisans of dialogue.

In light of the fact that Scola, 66, is widely considered a rising star in Catholicism, his patronage alone makes Oasis worth watching.

Launched in September 2004, Oasis is also sponsored by four other cardinals: Philippe Barbarin of Lyon, France; Josip Bozanic of Zagreb, Croatia; Péter Erdő of Esztergom-Budapest, Hungary; and Christoph Schönborn of Vienna, Austria. None are identified with what one might consider "soft" positions on Catholic teaching or practice. That distinguishes Oasis from some other initiatives, which bring the avant-garde of different traditions into conversation, but not the mainstream. Among other things, Christian leaders who gravitate around Oasis are often willing to challenge Muslims on issues of reciprocity and religious freedom more forcefully than one sometimes finds in other inter-religious forums.

Scola has said that his aim is not primarily to reach out to "moderate Muslims," but rather to "popular Islam," meaning ordinary believers deeply attached to Islamic traditions who nevertheless do not subscribe to radical forms of *jihad*.

In June, the "scientific committee" of Oasis will meet in Amman, Jordan. The theme is "the relationship between truth and freedom," with specific attention to freedom of conscience and religion, and how the value of religious freedom can be reconciled with respect for the religious tradition of a given people.

Information about Oasis can be found here: [http://www.cisro.it/pages/home\\_en.html](http://www.cisro.it/pages/home_en.html) [1]

I recently had the chance to talk with Scola about Oasis and the Amman meeting. The following are excerpts from our exchange.

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Your meeting in Jordan will focus on two values, religious freedom and the traditional identity of a given people. The tension between those two values seems steadily more acute in today's world. In your view, what are the basic principles for striking the right balance?

This is a problem typical of our globalized society. We're seeing an unprecedented encounter of people, cultures and religions, which is what I have in mind when I use the phrase *meticciato di civiltà* - a "hybridization of civilisations." It's a historical process currently underway, and its results are by no means certain. There are blendings that work, and blendings that don't.

The critical point is this: What happens to our identity as a people if a significant bloc begins to call it into question, either because they belong to another religion or because they convert? In some majority Muslim nations, a certain degree of diversity can be tolerated for those who are born into another religion, but the feeling is that the identity of the country would be threatened if those who are born Muslims had the possibility of converting. It's interesting to note the choice frequently presented to these converts: if you want to leave Islam, you also have to leave the country. The assumption seems to be that the personal dimension of faith interests us up to a point, but we want to avoid the 'scandal' of a public gesture.

On the other hand, the modern liberal state is equally unprepared for this question, because it regards only the individual as an interlocutor, and thus thinks solely in terms of individual rights. It's far more difficult to consider the social implications of individual choices. In the end, this leaves many people unprepared for change and disconcerted by it. We see this clearly on the issue of immigration, where it's as if many people today are saying: 'What's happening? You told us that it was all a question of the individual ideas of immigrants, and everyone is free to think whatever they believe. All of a sudden, however, these individuals have become a foreign body, and we don't recognize them anymore.'

If we want to overcome this impasse, the solution, it seems to me, must be sought in the recognition of a good that's also at the basis of every difference, which is the good of relationship. We have to emphasize our common

humanity, and to do that, we need to expand the scope of both reason and freedom.

### **How does the issue of 'reciprocity' enter into the discussion?**

In majority Muslim nations, [Christians] certainly don't want to put the dominant social tradition, the social fabric, at risk. To be clear, we [in Europe] ask for the same respect for our traditions from those who arrive to live among us.

Respect for the identity of a given community, however, shouldn't be invoked to violate the human freedoms of single persons. In the end, what's the point of compelling people to remain in a religion in which they no longer believe? Is explicitly walking away truly more damaging to the community than a false profession of belief? This is the kind of frank discussion we hope to have with our Muslim interlocutors.

### **Why the choice of Amman? Do you believe that Jordan has something to teach us on the question of religious freedom and traditional identity?**

Jordan is a country that's 97 percent Muslim, but where the Christian minority faces a situation that, despite some shadows, is without a doubt basically positive, especially compared to other parts of the region. It's a country that's fairly poor in terms of natural resources, yet it has a higher standard of living compared to several of its neighbors which are theoretically more endowed with natural wealth. In many ways, therefore, it's a living example of what the Middle East could be, if the logic of recrimination were abandoned and the path to modernization were opened. In this regard, the support that various members of the Royal Family are giving to dialogue among Muslims, as well as Christian-Muslim dialogue, is universally recognized and appreciated.

### **In the Middle East today, there's great fear for the Christian future, above all in the Holy Land. Do you see any signs of hope?**

The situation is certainly very difficult. Despite that, every time that I have the chance to meet with our Christian brothers in the Middle East, for example during our Oasis meetings, I'm struck by their tenacity and their willness to keep going. In various editions of our magazine, we've amply documented the notable exodus of Christians [from the Middle East], but we don't want to surrender to the logic of lament or regret. The local bishops have repeatedly affirmed that a Christian who doesn't understand the special role providence has assigned to him or her, being born and growing up in a prevalently Muslim environment, is potentially a Christian who will emigrate. We want to do our part to build up such an understanding.

### **Oasis has a 'preferential option' for Islam. Today's threats to religious liberty, however, go well beyond the borders of the Islamic world. There are serious problems, for example, in India and China. Is there a risk that in the West, religious freedom has come to be seen almost exclusively as an 'Islamic problem,' thus contributing to the idea of a 'clash of civilizations'?**

Certainly religious freedom - which is a fundamental value, and can't be reduced simply to liberty of cult - must be defended everywhere, and therefore not just in majority Muslim nations. At the same time, it's true that

religious freedom represents an important unsolved dilemma in the relationship between Islam and modernity. For this reason, I believe it has to be faced in an urgent way by Muslims themselves.

**You're committed to dialogue with Islam. In particular, you've said in various ways that your interest is not so much 'moderate Islam,' but 'traditional Islam.' How is this effort to build bridges with traditional Islam going?**

I think it's too early to start drawing conclusions. In any event, our option is rather for the Islam of the people, which can't be understood exclusively in terms of the category of 'moderate Islam.' The term 'Islam of the people' simply designates as clearly as possible with whom we're trying to speak. Moderate Muslims have the possibility of exercising influence only if, and to the extent that, they accurately interpret (and perhaps stimulate an evolution in) the sense of the faith held by common people, meaning the grassroots religiosity that really sustains the life of populations facing situations that are often very difficult. Anyone who's spent even a little time in the Middle East understands this.

**Oasis has been around now for almost five years. What fruits do you see so far?**

The most beautiful fruit is the gradual construction of a community that embraces Christians from West and East who have intense ties, even though of widely varying sorts, with Muslims. Our hope is that this community will continue to mature.

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One key question in building relationships with Islam is where Christians ought to put their emphasis. Should moderate Muslim intellectuals in the West be a priority, in hopes of fostering a reformed version of Islam in Europe and America that could influence the rest of the world? Or is this perhaps a waste of time, since the voices that count in the Islamic "street" are not to be found in the corridors of the Sorbonne or Harvard?

One way of phrasing the question is this: Should Christians be taking greater heed of Muslim voices such as Mohammed Arkoun?

Arkoun, 80, is a native Algerian who studied at the Sorbonne, and later went to teach at his alma mater in addition to Princeton, UCLA, Temple, the Wissenschaftskolleg in Berlin and the University of Amsterdam. Arkoun is today a senior research fellow with the Institute of Ismaili Studies in London. His work has won a wide following; in 1996, for example, he was inducted into the French Légion d'honneur.

Arkoun's dream is to recover a spirit of critical philosophical inquiry in Islam, which he believes flowered from the 8th to the 13th century and was then squelched. His 2002 book *The Unthought in Contemporary Islamic Thought* argues that contemporary Islamic societies are held hostage to two forms of censorship: one imposed "from above," by authoritarian regimes, and another "from below," by public opinion driven by a quasi-fundamentalist *ulema*, or body of Muslim clergy.

I met Arkoun at a recent symposium of Western intellectuals in Lugano, Switzerland, sponsored by the Balzan Foundation. His commitment to Western critical reason is so thorough that he even shares some secular European prejudices about American religiosity. He asserts, for example, that there's no "sociological and cultural" difference between televangelists in the States and the sort of religious rhetoric one hears from imams on Al-Jazeera.

Arkoun also argues that Benedict XVI has made a strategic mistake by asking for a deeper reflection upon reason and faith, yet without sufficient attention to the Western Muslim scholars most committed to precisely this enterprise.

The following are excerpts from my May 17 conversation with Arkoun.

### **What do you make of Benedict XVI's approach to Islam?**

Pope Benedict has said that an intimate relationship between reason and faith does not exist in Islamic elaboration and expressions. This statement, historically speaking, is not true. If we consider the period from the 8th century to the 13th century, it is simply not true. ? [But] after the death of the philosopher Averroes in 1198, philosophy disappeared in Islamic thought. ? To that extent the pope was right, but he didn't mention this history.

The fact is today, when one speaks with Muslims, they don't have any idea about this history. ? Muslims are totally cut off from their own tradition. ? I cannot imagine the name of a Muslim today who could have a true theological debate on the level at which the pope can carry out the debate. For me, this is a battle inside Islam. We must make Muslims understand that they are cut off from their own history. Therefore, they have no right to simply rebel against what the pope has said. There is a part of truth in what he says, and I recognize that.

### **There are now plans for a Catholic/Muslim forum, with its first meeting in November in Rome, in response to a letter to the pope last October from 138 Muslim scholars. Will this be helpful?**

There are just a few scholars among that group of 138, and I don't know any historians of thought among them. It's the wrong procedure. [The pope] has made his outreach mostly to officials. He has not shown any interest in Muslims who attach importance to thinking.

### **But when the pope meets representatives from other faiths, he typically tries to meet the most authoritative exponents possible of the mainstream of those traditions. He doesn't meet Anglican scholars, for example, he meets the Archbishop of Canterbury.**

I'm not saying that he shouldn't meet imams and those who have authority in Islam to speak to the people. He should meet his colleagues, so to speak, who are doing the same things for Muslims. What I'm saying is that he should not address himself just to officials, and neglect the real intellectual work that has to be done.

? [The pope should] create a kind of space of debate, instead of all these so-called 'interreligious dialogues' that have been going on since the Second Vatican Council. I've participated in so many of them, and I can tell you that they're absolutely nothing. It's gossip. There's no intellectual input in it. There is no respect for scholarship in it. A huge scholarship has already been produced devoted to the question of faith and reason. All this is put aside and we ignore it. We just congratulate one another, saying, 'I respect your faith, and you respect mine.' This is nonsense.

**The problem the Vatican faces is that they want to dialogue with people who authentically represent the mainstream of other religions.**

OK, but they've been doing that for 50 years since the Second Vatican Council. What's been accomplished? Where is the progress? There is a total gap between those official dialogues and the civil society. In the civil society, there is also politics. It's not just religion. In terms of political trends, we see that there is a sort of bargain between the regimes and the *ulema* [Note: the body of Muslim clergy]. I have to look at that, to respect the reality. When you have scholars with you, then you open a space for debate. Muslim scholars, including those from the West, will come, and they have a voice.

Today, we have no visibility. People imagine that there are no scholars in Islam, no thinkers. They think we have only those *ulema* who speak on television, and who are invited to the Vatican to meet with the pope.

**You seem to be saying that the problem is the lack of a public space in Islam for critical debate. Surely it's not the pope's job to create it? Isn't that something Muslims have to do for themselves?**

Yes, but the pope took the initiative. He received a group of ambassadors, for example, to issue an apology after his Regensburg lecture. Why can't he meet with at least ten scholars who would have a voice? I would be happy to be there, and I would tell him everything that I'm telling you now.

You have to add a scholarly conversation, and it's urgent to do so, because this has a future. The other side has no future. We are not going to stay like this for centuries. Where is the future for humanity? It is certainly not the dogmatic religion or the purist expression of religion, even in the United States. In the United States, there is a populist expression of religion exactly as we have it in Egypt, or in India, or in Pakistan. There's no difference sociologically or culturally between the discourse of the American televangelists and the discourse given through Al-Jazeera. If you respect that kind of faith and you want to promote this, it's a mistake. It's not working for the future, and it's not working for the young generation. Remember that 60 percent of the population in Muslim countries is under 30. To whom are you speaking?

**Your sense is that even in places such as Egypt, young Muslims are hungry for a different way of expressing their faith?**

Of course. When I give a lecture, the turnout is enormous. The interest of people is very strong. Also the older generations are happy, they feel they can breathe. People applauded when I said after this affair with the pope [Pope Benedict's 2006, lecture at the University of Regensburg] that Muslims should not go to the street

demonstrating against him, but they should run to the libraries. They should know what has happened to Islamic thought after the 13th century. People are happy to hear it. Sadly, the pope has not opened any kind of space to allow this voice to be heard.

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