

Benedict on interreligious dialogue: How religions talk with each other

John L. Allen Jr. | Nov. 28, 2008 All Things Catholic

Any literary scholar will tell you that the key to interpreting a text is identifying its genre. It's a point clearly applicable to news this week that Pope Benedict XVI has said that "interreligious dialogue, in the strict sense of the term, is not possible" -- a statement which, at face value, would seem to undercut 50 years of official dialogues with other faiths sponsored by the Catholic church, not to mention the theological vision of *Nostrae Aetate*, the document of the Second Vatican Council (1962-65) on relations with non-Christian religions.

Among other things, the Vatican actually has its own Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue, whose personnel may be surprised to learn that their work, according to the boss, is a logical non-starter.

Faced with such a puzzling declaration, the first thing to ask is, "What was its genre?"

For the record, Benedict's line came as part of a brief letter to an old friend, Italian senator and philosopher Marcello Pera, which serves as the introduction to Pera's new book, *Why We Must Call Ourselves Christians*. It went on sale Tuesday from the Italian publisher Mondadori. (In 2004, Pera and then-Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger coauthored a book about Europe titled *Without Roots*; Pera is perhaps the leading example of a peculiar phenomenon on the cultural right in today's Europe, a self-professed atheist who nevertheless supports a revival of the Christian identity of the Old Continent on the grounds that it's the only way to defend Europe's humanistic values.)

In other words, the literary genre for the pope's line is basically advertising copy. The letter was intended to generate a market for Pera's book, and at that level, it has been an undeniable success. The book has elicited news coverage and editorial comment around the world, because Benedict said something juicy on its behalf.

(By the way, Joseph Ratzinger is hardly a novice at this sort of thing. Back in 1993, he penned a 27-line preface to the book *Reform of the Roman Liturgy* by Monsignor Klaus Gamber, which among other things called for turning altars back around. In support of Gamber's analysis, Ratzinger wrote that post-Vatican II innovations in the liturgy had resulted in "a banal on-the-spot product." In that instance too, Ratzinger's punchy intro created an audience for a book that otherwise might have languished in obscurity.)

The obvious corollary is that a bit of literary PR is probably not the best place to go for a developed version of the pope's attitude towards anything, especially a complex subject such as dialogue with other faiths. Jesuit Fr. Federico Lombardi, the Vatican spokesperson, more or less conceded the point, saying that the pope's comments were intended "to draw interest to Pera's book," not to call into question the many on-going dialogues sponsored by the Vatican with other religions.

Granted, therefore, that it would be a mistake to put too much weight on the pope's line, what sense ought we to make of it?

Here's the full version of what Benedict XVI wrote, in a letter styled as a reaction to Pera's book:

"You explain with great clarity that an interreligious dialogue, in the strict sense of the term, is not possible, while you urge intercultural dialogue that develops the cultural consequences of the religious option which lies beneath [a given culture]. While a true dialogue is not possible about this basic option without putting one's own faith into parentheses, it's important, in public exchange, to explore the cultural consequences of these religious options. Here, dialogue and mutual correction and enrichment are both possible and necessary."

Put in sound-bite fashion, the pope's line boils down to this: interreligious dialogue no, intercultural dialogue yes.

To be clear, this is not a judgment on whether religions should be talking to each other, but rather what they should be talking about. In the pope's mind, the point of inter-faith exchange is not to seek a lowest-common-denominator shared theology, but rather to find ways that cultures shaped by strong religious commitments can nevertheless live in mutual respect.

Phrased that way, his comment to Pera is consistent with the approach to inter-faith relations Benedict has taken since his election to the papacy. By naming Cardinal Jean-Louis Tauran as President of the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue, for example, Benedict opted for a professional diplomat over a theologian -- the idea being that he wanted to reorient inter-faith exchange away from speculative theology, and towards more concrete questions of co-existence and cooperation.

Islam is probably where one sees the difference most clearly. Benedict is committed to the relationship; that was the spirit of his November 2006 trip to Turkey, and it was also obvious from his remarks on Nov. 6 to the new "Catholic/Muslim Forum," a vehicle for dialogue launched in the wake of Islamic reaction to the pope's September 2006 lecture at the University of Regensburg.

On Nov. 6, Benedict expressed hope that "the reflections and positive developments which emerge from Muslim-Christian dialogue are not limited to a small group of experts and scholars, but are passed on as a precious legacy to be placed at the service of all, to bear fruit in the way we live each day." These are clearly not the sentiments of a pope who wants to shut down inter-faith exchange.

Yet Benedict does not understand the relationship with Islam in terms of theological exploration: how the Qur'an, for example, might inform new approaches to Christology. Rather, he's focused on more practical questions, above all what the Vatican calls "reciprocity." The question is, if Islamic immigrants in the West can claim the protection of the rule of law and of religious freedom, shouldn't religious minorities in majority Islamic states get the same deal? The equal-and-opposite form of that question in the West, especially Europe, is how Western societies can express respect for religious diversity without cutting themselves off from their Christian roots.

More broadly, Benedict wants to emphasize how the world's religions can collaborate in defense of common values, beginning with a robust public role for religious believers and extending into efforts on behalf of greater peace and justice. On that score, Benedict believes in a two-way exchange; that was the point of his reference to "mutual correction and enrichment" in his letter to Pera.

That said, it's still a perfectly fair question to ask whether the pope might find a less ambivalent way of making his point -- one that's not demoralizing for the church's experts on interreligious dialogue, and that doesn't send the wrong signal to the outside world about the church's commitment to good working relationships with other religions.

Here I suspect the European context is crucial. For Americans, "interreligious dialogue" seems an almost unquestionable good; it conjures up images of rabbis, pastors and imams standing shoulder-to-shoulder after 9/11, for example, rejecting religious justifications for violence.

For many Europeans, however, the term "interreligious dialogue" has come to be understood in the context of "multiculturalism," meaning an ideology of tolerance for cultural diversity, with no one culture predominating. In today's Europe, "multiculturalism" is seen by its critics essentially as code language for the construction of a post-Christian society in which various lifestyle options sit side-by-side on a sort of cultural smorgasbord, with the state officially neutral among them.

At least to some European ears, the phrase "interreligious dialogue" thus implies throwing in the towel on Europe's Christian roots. Benedict XVI shares an aversion to that prospect with Pera -- who, in his new book, argues that Western liberalism shorn of its basis in Christian values inevitably collapses under its own weight.

"The choice for Christianity," Pera writes, "has produced the best results. That choice has great advantages, also in the arena of public ethics. It doesn't separate morality from truth, it doesn't confuse moral autonomy with free individual choice, it doesn't treat individuals -- born or unborn -- as things, it doesn't transform every desire into a right, and it doesn't confine reason to the limits of science."

It's the defense of that set of transcendent values Benedict had in mind by calling interreligious dialogue "impossible" in the strict sense.

Of course, a pope is supposed to be a universal pastor, not a European cultural critic, and one might legitimately wonder if the rest of the world ought to be expected to automatically situate his declarations in the context of European cultural debate. Despite the Vatican's insistence that Benedict is not "Euro-centric," this week's episode offers a reminder that those declarations sometimes ring hollow.

On the other hand, if you're Marcello Pera, riding a wave of free publicity for your new book, you're probably grateful that at least in this one instance, the pope didn't choose a more delicate way of expressing himself. To paraphrase the argot of American politics, "It's the genre, stupid!"

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