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# Iran struggling with 'Shi'ite messianism,' cardinal says

John L. Allen Jr. | Jun. 24, 2009 NCR Today

**Interview with Cardinal Angelo Scola of Venice**
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*tOne noteworthy recent initiative in Catholic/Muslim relations is the Oasis project, launched by Cardinal Angelo Scola of Venice in 2004. Though Oasis does not shy away from theological conversation, its accent is on understanding Islamic cultures, sometimes expressed as the ?Islam of the people? ? what in journalistic parlance might be called ?the Muslim street.? In particular, Oasis is interested in the interplay between traditional cultures and the new forces of pluralism and mixture of peoples driven by globalization. (Scola likes to use the Italian term ?meticciato?, which roughly corresponds to ?mestizo?, to convey this idea.)*

*On Monday and Tuesday of this week, June 22-23, the scientific committee that directs Oasis met in Venice to take up the subject of ?intepreting traditions in a time of blending.? In conjunction with that event, I interviewed Scola, 67, on the current state of Christian/Muslim relations.*

t*In light of current events, Scola?s comments on Iran seem especially interesting. In a nutshell, he suggested that a form of ?Shi?ite messianism,? corrupted into a political ideology, may be part of the problem in terms of Iran?s checkered relationship with the West ? but that it?s ?reversible.? He also suggested that the 1979 Iranian revolution and all that?s followed offers a useful reminder to the secularized West that history is sometimes still forged by ?theological options.?*

t*The full text of the interview follows.*

**1.tWhy the choice of ?tradition? as the theme for the annual meeting of Oasis?**

Each of us, in making daily decisions in work, in our relationships, even when we rest, starts with an interpretive hypothesis about reality that we?ve received from preceding generations ? in other words, a tradition. Oasis, as you know, wants to investigate the ?process of mixing of civilizations,? and while the actors in this mixture are single individuals, they?re all heirs of a tradition. The problem, naturally, is how these traditions relate to one another. Are we prisoners of our tradition, as multiculturalism has it? Do we have to put our traditions in parentheses in order to adhere to certain abstract universal principles? Or, with a truly revolutionary attitude, do we even have to abolish them? In reality, tradition presents itself to us as a patrimony that has to be interpreted, because it?s a fact of experience in constant evolution, which is all the more evident in a pluralistic society such as ours.

**2.tThe pope talks about ?inter-cultural? rather than ?inter-religious? dialogue. What do you think this distinction means? Does he too possibly have in mind the weight of tradition?**

I believe that the Holy Father wants to emphasize that the Christian faith, which is the child of an incarnate God, and because it?s offered to humanity as an answer to the questions of daily life, immediately becomes a culture. There?s no pure ?faith,? which then enters into relationship ?with the different cultures.? Moreover, every faith

and every religion is always subject to cultural interpretations. The relationship between faith and culture is inevitable, and circular. Just think about all the different points of view we in the West have with regard to ?the Islams.? Therefore, there simply is no inter-religious dialogue that isn?t at the same time inter-cultural.

The pope?s approach in no way intends to limit the dialogue, but rather to define it rigorously. What?s in play aren?t ?pure faiths,? but faiths as they?re culturally interpreted. That has nothing to do with relativism: The Truth is incarnate. That applies to Christianity in itself, to all the religions, and thus to inter-religious dialogue.

**3.tIn Jordan, the Holy Father proposed an ?alliance of civilizations? between Christians and Muslims. What do you think the aim of such an alliance would be?**

The pope himself gave the answer at the end of his speech at the airport in Amman: ?To grow in love for the Almighty and Merciful God, and in fraternal love for one another.? Together Christians and Muslims can offer witness to an ?expanded reason,? capable of opening itself to the dimension of the Absolute.

**4.tIn your view, what were the principal fruits of the pope?s trip to the Holy Land?**

Pope Benedict?s trip to the Holy Land was a lesson in realism. At the beginning, it looked like an ?impossible trip? because it seemed destined to make everybody unhappy. Intead, Benedict XVI inserted himself into the vast ranks of Christian pilgrims to the holy places. He walked in the footsteps of the Incarnate God, who died and rose again for the salvation of human beings. He traced the paths that throb with the suffering of the Christians who live there. In the name of the entire Catholic church, he embraced the Christian community on that edge of the Middle East, the ?lit candle that illuminates the holy places.?But this embrace ? precisely because it was performed in the name of Him who is the way of truth and life ? also included, though in diverse ways, our Jewish brothers and the Muslims who live in the land given to our father Abraham. It?s the universal and incarnate proposal of Christ that leads the Christian faith to encounter with every religion, with every vision of reality.

**5.tWhat?s your view of President Obama?s June 4 speech in Cairo?**

I?m curious to hear from participants in the Oasis meeting what effect the words of the American president had on the populations of the Middle East, especially the Christian minorities. His speech seemed to me very political. It was extremely lucid in indicating the challenges that the United States must confront, decisive in suggesting certain changes in direction, and even audacious in favoring a greater role for regional actors. Nonetheless, it seems to me that the arguments offered in support of a ?new beginning? between Muslims and the United States are fragile, and some historical readings were distorted to suit the necessities of the moment. Obama was forced to pass over some of the points of greatest friction. It was an understandable choice from a tactical point of view, but it can?t hold up for very long.

**6.tWhat are you hearing from your contacts in Iran these days? Looking down the line, it seems that Shi?a Muslims and Catholics share certain traits: A strong clerical hierarchy, a theology of sacrifice, and deep currents of popular devotion. Does this suggest that Catholicism can play an important role in a dialogue with Iran, where Shi?a Islam is dominant?**

Three accents strike me in the Shi?a tradition: the necessity of a continual actualization of revelation in certain physical persons, to the point of overcoming a too-rigid conception of divine transcendence; the lively expectation of eschatological fulfillment; and the reflection on the problem of evil. I have the impression that we?re not well informed on these points, despite the enormous work of study and analysis that?s been done by specialists in recent years. We know Shi?ites better than we know Shiism!

The Oasis network really hasn?t arrived yet in Iran, so what I know about what?s happening is what I see and

read in the mass media. I don?t doubt, however, that many people in Iran want better relations with the West. We must not forget that Persian culture has shown itself to be extraordinarily fertile and receptive.

The principal probelm, if I can put it slightly audaciously, is that Shi?ite messianism, almost unable to bear the weight of the exepectations with which is is structually bound up, has been converted over the centuries, at least in some circles, into a political ideology. We?re talking about a long process that?s not linear, which experience a brusque acceleration with the 1979 revolution. As Westerners, we were caught off guard. We had forgotten that history is also sometimes forged by ?theological options.?

In any event, all this is reversible.

**7.tOne sometimes has the impression that any step toward Muslims by the Catholic church is experienced by Jews as a step away from them, and vice-versa. How do we balance these two relationships?**

When he arrived in Paradise, Dante asked the blessed if they weren?t annoyed by one another, defensive of their goods and jealous of those touched by the others. The response was no, because with love, the more it?s shared the more it grows. That point holds true for Christians, well beyond their own limitations, also in the arc of history.

?Readiness for dialogue? is a good, and a good is always to be shared. If you?ll forgive the crude comparison, it?s not like a cake which, if I eat it, you can?t ? or if the Jews get it, the Muslims can?t have it. When dialogue isn?t a tactic, but, as Bonhöffer said, it opens the dialogue partners to ?the depths of reality,? then a step forward with Muslims not only doesn?t mean a step back in relations with other religions, but on the contrary, it acts as a stimulus.

With regard to Judaism, it?s written into the DNA of our own faith. I?ve never forgotten the words that Cardinal Henri de Lubac said to me in long-ago 1985: ?If Christianity must be inculturated, then it must inculturate into the history, which is still unfolding, of the Jewish people who are our roots.?

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