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Two experts insist: Interreligious dialogue lives!

John L. Allen Jr. | Jan. 27, 2010 NCR Today

Recently I devoted both my ?All Things Catholic? column and an op/ed piece in *The Forward*, a national Jewish weekly, to Pope Benedict XVI?s Jan. 17 visit to the Great Synagogue in Rome. Among other things, I suggested that the pope?s speech that day reflected a broad thrust in his approach to inter-faith relations, away from specifically theological dialogue in favor of social, cultural and political cooperation.

tLike usual, those pieces drew a wide variety of responses.

In this case, however, two came from such eminences on inter-faith matters that they?re worth passing along. While quite different in focus, both agree that rumors of the death of interreligious dialogue have been greatly exaggerated.

tRabbi David Rosen is the former Chief Rabbi of Ireland (1979-85) and currently serves as the Director of the American Jewish Committee?s Department of Interreligious Affairs. A longtime veteran of Catholic/Jewish relations, he was made a Knight of St. Gregory the Great by the Vatican in 2005 ? the first Orthodox rabbi and the first Israeli citizen to receive the honor.

Rosen disputed my suggestion that Benedict is downplaying the theological dimension of Catholic/Jewish dialogue.

t?It is clear from Ratzinger?s writings that he has a special theological approach to Judaism which he has frequently distinguished from other religions (for which he insists that only a ?cultural dialogue? is possible),? Rosen wrote. ?In fact, he has actually stated to me personally that Judaism is the only other religion with which the church can have a true theological dialogue.?

tRosen appended a brief essay he wrote on the pope?s synagogue visit, which made the following argument:

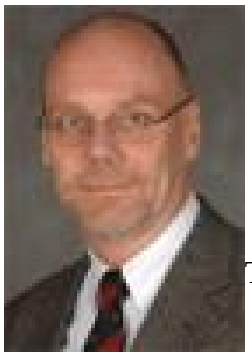
?There were a number of especially notable aspects in the pope?s address. Together with his frequent use of the designation ?People of the Covenant? to describe the Jewish community and also (notably in the context of the *Shoah*) ?the people of the covenant of Moses,? he emphasized that as opposed to any other religion, Judaism has an inherent and eternal covenantal relationship with God.?

?Furthermore, in his call to Christians to learn from traditional Jewish understanding of shared Scripture, he

categorically clarified the church?s view of the Jewish people not only as the living authentic bearer of the divine message with its own integrity, but as having profound spiritual and educational value for the church itself. Indeed, his notable quotations from Jewish sources, highlighted this.?

Rosen added that the phrase ?covenant of Moses? amounts to a reply to some in the Catholic world who contend that the language about covenant in official Catholic documents such as *Nostra Aetate* of the Second Vatican Council (1962-65) refers only to the covenant with Abraham, rather than with Moses, and therefore is not specifically concerned with the ongoing validity of Judaism.

tIn effect, Rosen?s argument is that Benedict is making important theological contributions to Jewish/Catholic relations, not just shifting the focus to joint political or cultural concerns. (On another front, Rosen also rejects any suggestion of a contrast between John Paul II and Benedict XVI on Catholic/Jewish relations, noting that many of the sources of tension under Benedict -- such as efforts to heal the schism with Catholic traditionalists -- began under John Paul.)

 The second reply came from Jesuit Fr. Daniel Madigan of Georgetown University, and formerly of the Gregorian University in Rome. A consulter to the Vatican?s Commission for Religious Relations with Muslims, Madigan is one of Catholicism?s leading experts on Islam, and he approaches the question of Benedict XVI?s inter-faith strategy through that lens.

tIn these paragraphs (drawn from a paper prepared several months ago on the pope?s contrast between ?interreligious? and ?intercultural? relations), Madigan argues that theological dialogue with Muslims is both possible and urgent.

t?Voices claiming some authority have been raised on both sides of the argument and in both communities: most recently we have the example of Benedict XVI?s letter to the right-wing Italian politician Marcello Pera?ironically enough a declared atheist whose book is entitled *Why we must call ourselves Christians!* In endorsing this rather curious book, the pope writes that a dialogue that is interreligious in the strict sense or, perhaps better, in the *narrow* sense, of that word, is impossible.?

?Like Benedict, many Muslim groups engaging in and initiating dialogue have preferred the notion of intercultural or intercivilizational dialogue. One can think of the Iranian initiative on the Dialogue of Civilizations or of Al-Azhar?s policy on the annual dialogue with the Vatican, where properly theological questions are not on the table and discussions have rather focused on peace, mutual respect, human rights, etc.?

?Perhaps there is a suspicion on the part of all these authorities that theological dialogue is a form of negotiation in which the parties gradually renounce certain of their claims in order to arrive at an agreed position. The model they have in mind may be, on the Christian side, ecumenical agreements such as the agreed statements between Lutherans and Roman Catholics on the question of justification; or on the Muslim side, consensus statements like the Amman Message of 2004, or the Makkah Appeal of 2008.?

?In a certain sense, Pope Benedict is right to be skeptical about a dialogue that is interreligious only ?in the narrow sense of the word.? There is no real ?interreligious? space, in the sense of a no-man?s-land between

religions where faith commitments are bracketed or ignored. In dialogue we speak from within our communities and commitments, and with respect for the commitments of others."

"More importantly, as Pope Paul VI wrote in 1964, ?Before speaking, we must take great care to listen not only to what people say, but more especially to what they have it in their hearts to say.? Thus dialogue is not, as some fear, the negotiation of a new hybrid religion. Rather it means taking other people seriously as believers.?

?This paper begins, then, with a conviction, born of experience, that theological dialogue between Muslims and Christians is not only possible but also, in spite of its undoubted difficulties, essential. There can be no other sound basis for the urgent political and cultural dialogues that also confront us than to take each other seriously as believers.

?Indeed, it is far too late for the Catholic Church to say that theological dialogue is not possible. At the Second Vatican Council (1962-65), both in the document *Nostra Aetate* on the Church?s attitude to believers of other traditions, and in *Lumen Gentium*, the Council?s solemn statement on the nature of Church, we have made positive theological declarations about Muslims? faith and piety?not, it should be noted, about Islam as such. We have affirmed, both at the Council and since, that God?s ?plan of salvation also includes those who acknowledge the Creator. In the first place amongst these there are the Muslims, who, professing to hold the faith of Abraham, along with us adore the one and merciful God, who on the last day will judge humanity.??

?One cannot, it seems to me, say that we adore together the one God and then say that we cannot or may not talk together about that God, or about that sense of adoration that God evokes in us. This is after all precisely what theological dialogue means.?

?I certainly acknowledge that a theological dialogue, even if it were to yield some increased measure of understanding of our differences, will not resolve all the issues that lead to tension and conflict between Muslims and Christians. Indeed it is extremely rare for theological issues to be the real cause of strife between us. Nonetheless, to speak of dialogue without including theology seems to me impossible. This is particularly important in a Western situation, where there is a tendency, or perhaps it should be called a temptation, to think of Muslims principally in social and political categories without recognizing the centrality of their religious commitments.?

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