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Notre Dame invites Catholics and Muslims to sift secularism

John L. Allen Jr. | Dec. 6, 2010

Kroc Institute director Scott Appleby introduces Grand Mufti Sheikh Ali Gomaa of Egypt via video conference during a discussion and lecture to launch the research initiative "Contending Modernities" in New York Nov. 18. (Photos by University of Notre Dame/Matt Cashore)

NEW YORK -- The University of Notre Dame has launched a major new initiative called ?Contending Modernities: Catholic, Muslim and Secular,? described as a scholarly effort to bring the best minds in both traditions to bear on the collision between faith and reason in the contemporary world.

The initiative offers yet another confirmation that outreach to Islam has become the top interfaith priority of the Catholic church, both in its official structures and at the grass roots.

In the recent book *Light of the World: The Pope, the Church, and the Signs of the Times*, released a few days after the Notre Dame initiative was unveiled (see Page 18), Pope Benedict XVI argues that Christian-Muslim relations in the early 21st century should pivot on the common challenge of situating themselves vis-à-vis secular modernity.

As it turns out, the University of Notre Dame in Indiana is already fully on board with that bit of papal diagnosis.

Prominent Notre Dame historian Scott Appleby is the director of the ?Contending Modernities? project. At a Nov. 18 launch, Appleby said that Catholics and Muslims share several traits that make them a natural focus for research.

?Both are global, mission-driven communities,? Appleby said. ?Both exhibit breathtaking diversity.?

Holy Cross Fr. John Jenkins, president of Notre Dame, observed that Catholics and Muslims together encompass ?nearly half the world?s population,? and said that they can contribute to addressing problems such as ?poverty, disease, conflict and corruption.?

Notre Dame unveiled the project in New York, taking advantage of a massive Notre Dame presence in the Big Apple in conjunction with the Fighting Irish?s Nov. 20 football game against Army in Yankee Stadium.

Sheikh Ali Gomaa, the grand mufti of Egypt, told the New York launch that both Catholics and Muslims ?must confront modernity with the intellectual resources of our traditions and heritage.?

An aide delivered Gomaa?s address in English, and Gomaa later spoke live via an Internet hookup. Gomaa heads Egypt?s Dar Al-Ifta institute, billed as ?the world?s leading authority on Islamic legal interpretation.? Its claim to fame is that it issues some 3,500 fatwas, or pieces of legal analysis, every day.

Gomaa said that too often, the experience of modernity is understood exclusively through a European prism. In fact, he argued, Islamic societies such as Egypt prove that ?it?s possible to be modern and also authentic to religious traditions.?

The next day, the launch offered a model of what joint Muslim-Catholic reflection on modernity might look like, with a panel session on ?Women, Family and Society in Islam and Catholicism.?

Ingrid Mattson, a scholar at Hartford Seminary in Connecticut and the first female president of the Islamic Society of North America, warned that the common threat posed by secularism may cause important differences between Catholics and Muslims to be glossed over.

For example, Mattson cited a U.N. conference on family planning in Cairo in the mid-1990s, when the Vatican and some Islamic states joined forces to oppose liberal policies on ?reproductive rights.?

In fact, Mattson said, ?birth control was permitted in medieval Islam, and still is,? yet Muslim spokespersons tended to defer to the Vatican even on contraception out of alarm over ?the modern assault on religion generally.?

Notre Dame theologian and law professor Cathleen Kaveny, a Catholic, sketched three tensions in Catholicism with regard to women:

- The idea that all humans are created in the image of God and equal in dignity, versus the notion that differences between men and women encoded in creation must be respected.
- The Vatican sees the secular West as overemphasizing nurture at the expense of nature, while many feminists believe that some gender differences ascribed to nature amount to ?a disguise for ingrained pillars of sexism.?
- The Vatican advocates ?complementarity,? meaning that men and women complete one another, but many feminists ?worry that in practice, talking about complementarity means submission.?

Given those tensions, Kaveny said, many women remain wary of the late John Paul II?s claim to be a ?feminist pope.?

Shahla Haeri of Boston University, the granddaughter of an Iranian ayatollah, said that with some tweaking, the same tensions can be found in Islam.

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Information on the ?Contending Modernities? project can be found at blogs.nd.edu/contendingmodernities [1].

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[1] http://blogs.nd.edu/contendingmodernities/