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Cardinal Pell on Islam and on translations

by John L. Allen Jr.

All Things Catholic

Popes only rarely lead by decree. Far more often, their example is decisive, pointing a new direction by what they do and say.

Such has been the case under Benedict XVI on Islam. There's been no Vatican edict, but everyone recognizes something has changed. It's not that Benedict created a more hawkish climate on Islam; those currents were always present, and gathered steam in the post-9/11 period. It's rather that Benedict has unleashed them.

One good example occurred in the unlikely setting of Naples, Florida, in early April, when Cardinal George Pell of Sydney, Australia, spoke on Islam to a meeting of Legatus, a group for Catholic businessmen. Pell's blunt language made global headlines, especially when he asserted, "Considered strictly on its own terms, Islam is not a tolerant religion."

Pell was in Rome this week for meetings of the Vox Clara Commission, a body of English-speaking bishops advising the Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments on liturgical translation issues. We spoke about his views on Islam, as well as briefly about the upcoming June vote of the American bishops on the proposed new translation of the Order of the Mass.

The full text of the interview can be found in the Special Documents section of NCRonline.org. Some excerpts follow.

Looking at the global scene, it would seem that disaffected Muslims drift towards political jihadism, while disaffected Christians drift towards "sects" that promise prosperity and individual fulfillment. Why do you think that is?

That's an interesting question. I suppose the first thing I would say is that I suspect those things are more a function of the societies in which Christians and Muslims live rather than the religion itself. I'd also say that Islam is a much more war-like culture than Christianity. ? The more significant factor is the presence or absence of jihad, and what that means. I've had it asserted to me is that in the relationship between the Islamic and non-Islamic world, the normal thing is a situation of tension if not war, of outright hostility. You have to declare peace. ? That's what's been alleged. A state of tension or hostility between Islam and the *dar al-Harb*, the non-Islamic world, is constant.

Is Islam without at least a notional striving towards an Islamic state conceivable?

We don't yet know. It was only after the First World War that they were encouraged, or even allowed, to live in a non-Islamic state. I think that was a development that enabled them to cope with their changed circumstances. They weren't allowed to live in non-Islamic states, and many are still encouraged not to mix with non-Muslims.

So you believe jihad is not a modern distortion of Islam, but something that arises from its internal logic?

That's the million dollar question. I don't know. It remains to be seen. To put it another way, can a good moderate Muslim be faithful to the Koran? I think it depends on who's going to win where, if there is going to be a struggle between the moderates and the extremists.

You use the subjunctive. You don't think there's such a struggle now?

Yes, I do. But I'm not sure in how many places the moderates are prevailing.

You also said there are different concepts of the human person, and you expressed the Christian concept as a unique intersection of freedom, love and intelligence. How do you understand the Muslim concept?

I'm not nearly as well informed on that side of it as I am the Christian side, but I'm happy to say something. I don't know to what extent they have a concept of conscience like we do at all. It's tied up with their understanding of the Koran, which they believe is directly the word of God as dictated by Gabriel. The pope has made this point. Whereas with our Scriptures, we recognize that there is a human author who worked under the power of the Spirit. Although I've gotten into trouble for saying this, there are errors in Scripture. Not religious errors, but misunderstandings of geography and other matters. Even when there's no separation of church and state, that makes a difference.

You're raising questions rather than proposing definitive conclusions?

Exactly. I know enough to be a nuisance. I'm continuing to read and talk with people, and I think this is a legitimate question.

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You said, "Considered on its own terms, Islam is not a tolerant religion." What did you mean?

I'd been thinking about the general historical and political record of Islam. Now you might say that for a lot of our history, we weren't particularly tolerant either. To that objection, I'd say, 'Show me where they're tolerant.'

You said that President Bush's ambition to export democracy to the Middle East is a risky business. Why?

The President of Iran was voted in by the people, and Hamas was voted in by the people. You can't guarantee that because you give everyone a vote you're going to get a reasonable regime. If you could get

democracy long enough, it would probably shake down to something reasonable. The problem is you're likely to get extremists in, and they'll just change the rules.

You spoke in passing about Muslim immigration in the West, and that we tend to think of the religious affiliation of immigrants as irrelevant. Do you think there should be restrictions on Muslim immigration in the West, along the lines suggested by Cardinal Giacomo Biffi of Bologna?

He got into all sorts of trouble for suggesting there should be limits, but he's raised a very real and interesting question that needs to be debated and discussed calmly, not in the aftermath of some atrocity when there could be a ferocious and horrendous reaction against Muslims.

Why are some forces resistant to discussing the religious dimension of immigration policy? Is it just religious indifference?

I think it's deeper than that. I think some seculars are so deeply anti-Christian, that anyone opposed to Christianity is seen as their ally. That could be one of the most spectacularly disastrous miscalculations in history.

You give a comparison between Russia and Yemen with regard to fertility rates. To put it crassly, are you worried that Muslims are out-breeding Christians?

I think that some people with a decidedly Christian point of view in Europe should be interested in the question. When John Paul II first started to talk about the 'culture of death,' I thought it was over the top, just a bit too much. But I think there's a lot of truth in it. I think it's intimately tied up with, first, the collapse of Christianity, and also the decline of hope. The presence or absence of children is substantially allied with a world view. You've only got to look at the difference in the birth rates between the red states and the blue states in the United States.

Oriana Fallaci and others warn that Europe may become an outpost of Islamic civilization. Do you think that goes too far?

I do. I don't think that's the more immediate danger at all. The greater danger is that there would be a white fascist reaction. I think both dangers are remote at the moment, but between the two, the danger of an anti-Muslim reaction is greater. I don't think Europe is going to go Muslim at all, but I would be frightened of the turmoil if things got out of hand.

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Where do things stand on the new Order of the Mass?

Basically pretty healthy. It's been approved in Australia, it's been approved in England.

There's a big vote coming up in June in the United States. Do you have any sense of what you think will happen?

I think it'll get through.

If so, are the big battles over?

Experience has taught me that it's always dangerous to claim that. Nevertheless, if it gets through, that represents a significant achievement. I think the approval by Australia and England of the Order of the Mass is also significant.

When do you expect the Order of Mass will be in use?

I'm not sure. I think that we'll probably proceed together. I don't think it will be approved country-by-country piecemeal, because the ambition is to have one Roman Missal for the English-speaking world, with possibly a few local variants. I think that's a very worthy ambition.

What if the American bishops vote to request significant changes? Would the Australians and the English take another look?

I'm not exactly sure. I suspect that there would be informal consultations, and very possibly if the changes weren't too radical the Congregation for Divine Worship would either rule or suggest some compromise. But we're talking hypothetically, because I don't know.

You've seen the recent letter from Cardinal Francis Arinze to Bishop William Skylstad in the United States, warning that any text departing from the principles of *Liturgiam Authenticam* could not be approved. What do you make of it?

It's just stating what the situation is. It's sometimes useful to be reminded of the basic verities.

The Vox Clara Commission believes the new text satisfies those principles?

Yes, very much so.

A cynic might suggest the cardinal's letter was intended to influence the upcoming vote of the U.S. bishops.

I'm sure he'd write it for some good purpose!

If this text is eventually approved, are the liturgy wars over?

I'm tempted to say that it would enormously change the balance of things, but I have no doubt there would be isolated and sporadic resistance. We have a big challenge to make the English [texts] powerful modern, appropriate and strong. We don't want to just achieve doctrinal fidelity but have clumsy English. We've got the doctrinal fidelity now. The ICEL translations are coming through beautifully on that score. But I think with some of them, a few of them, the quality is quite uneven.

Including the Order of the Mass?

No, I think the Order of the Mass is OK. I'm looking at other texts that are at a much earlier stage.

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