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Pope Benedict's damage control

John L. Allen Jr. | Sep. 29, 2006 All Things Catholic

Time Is Running Out! *NCR* is moving its e-mail lists to a new user-authenticated system. To continue to receive e-mail alerts for this column, you must re-subscribe before Oct. 12. Follow this link: **Sign-up Page**[1]. The new system will help you and us control spam.

Benedict XVI's carefully choreographed Sept. 25 meeting with ambassadors from 22 Muslim nations accredited to the Holy See (only Sudan was absent), along with representatives from Italy's tiny but growing Muslim community, was designed to turn a corner on the controversies following his Sept. 12 comments on Islam in Regensburg, Germany.

The encounter was carried live both on CNN and its counterpart in the Arab world, Al-Jazeerah.

It seems to have been partially successful. The ambassadors applauded as the pope entered the room, and beamed as he moved down the reception line afterwards. Later, several Muslim participants told the media that they believe the dialogue is "back on track."

"Today begins a new phase," said Abdellah Redouane, secretary general of the Islamic Cultural Center of Rome.

"We overcame the tensions of recent days, and now we must intensify initiatives, on the part of both Christians and Muslims, that favor dialogue among the two great religions, which is important for the serenity of the entire world," Redouane said.

Not everyone, of course, was ready to forgive and forget.

Just 24 hours later, the 56-nation Organization of the Islamic Conference, meeting in New York on the margins of a session of the United Nations, adopted a resolution calling upon Benedict "to retract or to correct" his Sept. 12 comments. In Egypt, officials of the Al-Azhar mosque and university threw cold water upon the idea of inviting Benedict XVI to deliver a lecture, and a spokesperson told Italian media that the pope's comments to date "are not the clear apology that Al-Azhar has requested, but merely a way of placating [Muslim] anger."

Nevertheless, the wide popular outrage across the Muslim world seems to be ebbing, and many commentators have said it's time to move on. The question now is, move on to what?

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Those looking for clues would do well to read Benedict's Sept. 25 address carefully. The pope referred to Vatican II twice and John Paul II twice, an obvious way of signaling that he has no intention of "turning back the clock" on five decades of progress in Christian-Muslim relations.

Yet it's also instructive that his lone citation of John Paul II invoked the question of reciprocity, which is Vatican argot for the demand that Christians and other minorities in Muslim nations should enjoy the same religious freedom that Muslims have in the West.

Benedict pointedly quoted John Paul II's 1985 address to Muslim youth in Casablanca: "Respect and dialogue require reciprocity in all spheres, especially in that which concerns basic freedoms, more particularly religious freedom."

I've written an extensive story on the reciprocity question, based on interviews with scores of Muslim and Christian experts, which will appear in Oct. 13 edition of the *National Catholic Reporter*. Suffice it to say that most observers on both sides seemed to agree that if Benedict wants to push this issue constructively, six points are important:

- Humbly acknowledge that Christians have had, and in some places continue to have, their own struggles with religious freedom;
- Don't make reciprocity seem like special pleading for Christians, but rather a principled stand in favor of freedom for all religions;
- Be clear that this is not a crusade against Islam, since there are other nations, such as Hindu-dominated India and Buddhist-dominated Sri Lanka, where religious freedom is also a serious issue;
- Recall areas where Catholics and Muslims are natural allies, such as resistance to secularization;
- Speak directly to the Muslim governments which are responsible for repressive policies, not just to clerics and theologians in abstract theological language;
- Present religious freedom as part of a broader message about civil and political liberties across the board.

Readers interested in the details will want to see the *NCR* story.

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Now that the dust has begun to settle on Islamic reaction to Benedict's lecture at Regensburg, other aspects of his message that day may begin to come into view - a welcome development, given that the bulk of the lecture was devoted to the relationship between faith and reason, having nothing in particular to do with Islam.

One critical reaction comes from Richard Gaillardetz, the Murray/Bacik Professor of Catholic Studies at the University of Toledo. Gaillardetz writes:

> *Most commentators have overlooked a provocative claim in his address that articulates a fundamental - and to my view quite troubling - element of Pope Benedict's theological vision. ? The pope makes the assertion that because Greek influence can already be seen in the Old Testament, and because the New Testament was written in Greek, Christianity is inextricably tied to the "Greek spirit." He rejects out of hand the process of "de-hellenization," the history of which he maps out in three stages. His historical schematization of that process is, I believe, sweeping and simplistic, but that is an argument for another day.*
>
> Particularly disconcerting is his account of the third stage of the process, in which many scholars have differentiated between the inherent revelatory and salvific significance of Jesus of Nazareth,

and the ways in which the Christ event was quickly inculturated in a Hellenistic milieu. He describes this approach as "coarse and lacking in precision." He then suggests that the early adoption of a Greco-Roman world view is an essential and providential development in the history of Christianity. This assertion constitutes a huge theological leap that is in no way substantiated through careful theological argumentation. Nowhere does he justify why this moment of Hellenistic inculturation transcends the realm of historical contingency to enter into divine providence. In the pope's encomium to the "Greek spirit" one almost forgets that the Word became flesh as a Galilean Jew and not a citizen of Athens!

The pope's views on this topic are of great consequence for the larger church. I recently read through three volumes of groundbreaking documentation regarding the work of the Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences produced over the past three decades. That reading, accompanied by my recent visit to East Asia, has reinforced in me a wonderful appreciation for "the new way of being church" that so many Asian leaders have celebrated. I had a similar experience regarding the birth of an authentically African Christianity emerging on that continent. Much of what is developing theologically in those two regions is undercut by the pope's insistence on the normativity of a Greek philosophical articulation of the faith. The pope clearly believes that the intellectual and cultural synthesis that was achieved in Europe over the course of two millennia is normative for the rest of the church. Such a view leaves little room for substantive processes of local inculturation.

In the wake of Vatican II, Karl Rahner famously claimed that the most important contribution of the council was the fact that it had gently set aside that missiological mentality which saw the church essentially as a "Western European export firm" and began to move toward becoming a genuine world church (Weltkirche). The pope's recent address articulated a central feature of his ecclesiological vision, a vision far closer to the European export firm than the world church that Rahner believed was a-borning.

I am grateful for much that this new papacy has brought us: a more measured wielding of papal authority, a more modest public papal profile, a greater theological depth in papal reflections. But now, at a time when our church is bursting with new vitality and fresh insight in places like Africa, we have a pope who seems incapable of breaking out of his European intellectual milieu.

Whatever one makes of Gaillardetz's analysis - and he would be the first to recognize the need for further discussion - it illustrates the sort of reflection on the heart of the Regensburg address one hopes will now emerge.

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