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Cardinal Avery Dulles on Islam

by John L. Allen Jr.

All Things Catholic

Christianity's original experts on Islam were neither impartial scholars nor specialists in inter-faith dialogue, but rough-and-tumble medieval apologists - that is to say, writers from the 7th through the 14th centuries whose aim, in no uncertain terms, was to show why Christianity is right and Islam is wrong.

This grab-bag of colorful ecclesiastical characters includes John Damascene, Theodore Abu Qurrah (a Melchite bishop in the 9th century who wrote treatises against the Muslims in Arabic), Peter the Venerable, Raymond Martini, Raymond Lull, Ricoldus de Monte Croce, Dionysius the Carthusian, Cardinal Juan Torquemada, Cardinal Nicholas of Cusa, and even the Florentine reformer Savonarola (of "bonfire of the vanities" fame).

At first blush, their work might seem an unpromising vein to tap as Pope Benedict XVI tries to pick up the pieces following his controversial Sept. 12 comments on Islam. Yet whatever their limitations, the medieval apologists represent the first sustained Christian attempt to grapple with the challenges posed by Islam, based on knowledge of Arabic and the Koran, which was a project largely forgotten by the dawn of the modern period.

Cardinal Avery Dulles, a Jesuit widely considered one of America's premier Catholic theologians, believes a study of this history - both its strengths and its weaknesses - can offer useful insights for Muslim/Christian relations today.

On Oct. 2, I sat down with Dulles, still going strong at 88, in his office at Fordham University in the Bronx.

Back in 1971, Dulles published a unique survey titled *A History of Apologetics* (revised in 2005). It reviews medieval Christian writing on Islam, which often doesn't make for very edifying reading. Most apologists were fairly crude in their critique, deriding the way Islam had "spread by the sword" and even lampooning Mohammed's multiple wives or his earthy description of the afterlife. The title of one essay by Torquemada says it all: "Against the Principal Errors of the Miscreant Mohammed."

Yet in the same breath, this apologetic tradition can also exude a surprising sophistication.

Nicholas of Cusa, for example, produced "Sifting the Koran" in the 15th century, which argues that the Koran may profitably be used as an introduction to the gospel, and praises the human and religious virtues of Muslims. Peter the Venerable wrote in the 12th century that in addressing Muslims, Christians should proceed "not as our people often do, by arms, but by words; not by force, but by reason; not in hatred, but in love."

Dulles expressed the central error of the apologetic effort this way: "Western theologians were viewing the Muslim faith through Western eyes, and failing to meet it as a living religion."

The following are excerpts from my interview with Dulles.

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What can we learn from the medieval apologists?

For one thing, they made a serious effort to understand the literature of Islam, usually in the original language. They were pretty frank in their criticism, but at the same time they tried to be fair as they understood it, and to base what they wrote on actual Islamic texts. ? There was some very interesting work done, from John of Damascus through Peter the Venerable and later, which hasn't really been repeated. Much of this was hostile, due to the situation in ancient Turkey and later in Spain. Yet it's also worth recalling that for centuries, Christians lived quite freely under Muslim rule, practiced their faith, held high office, and were close to the sovereigns. They had a civil, if not warm, relationship with Muslims in the Near East.

One big question is whether problems with pluralism in Islamic nations are due to historical, cultural and political factors, or something intrinsic to Islam. You seem to be saying that a rough sort of religious freedom was once the norm -- can that be done again?

I think it would be possible to do it again. I certainly hope so, because it's important that it be done again. We have to do everything we can to encourage that. We also have to remember our own history.

What do you mean?

Christianity was pretty violent itself in the early Middle Ages, into the late Middle Ages. It really wasn't until the experience of the Wars of Religion that we began to appreciate that it's not wise to try to use the sword to spread one's own religion, in part because others will also use their swords to advance their religion. This history is part of what brought religion into disrepute in the Enlightenment. In some ways, we're still paying a price for this history of hostility -- between the Orthodox and Western Christians,

Protestants and Catholics, and between Christians and both Jews and Muslims. John Paul II did everything he could to atone for that history, and to separate himself from it.

In your book, you said one failure of the medieval apologists was that they didn't approach Islam as a living religion. What did you mean?

Their writing was largely based on books they had read, rather than actual contact with Muslims. This was especially true in the later period, when you had people in France and England who were writing about Islam but who really didn't have any contact at all with Muslim communities. So for them Islam was largely an abstraction, without much complexity.

Some would say that this tendency to approach Islam almost exclusively from its texts, not as a living religion, is true of Benedict XVI as well. Is that fair?

Probably, yes. Of course, it's often not very easy to have dialogue with some Muslims. They generally consider dialogue a sign of weakness, to admit that they might have something to learn. They will confront you with the teaching of Islam, but they won't engage in what we would consider dialogue. Often they won't even show up at meetings.

Isn't there a related problem, in that some of the Muslims who do show up at dialogue meetings aren't representative of mainstream Islam?

Yes, that can be a problem. I remember back in 1968, there was a Christian/Muslim meeting at Woodstock that I attended. [Note: From 1966 to 1973, Dulles served as a consultant to the Papal Secretariat for Dialogue with Non-Believers]. One of the Muslims had obviously read a lot of Kant, and the whole thing struck me as a little phony. He had studied in the West, and clearly didn't represent the Muslim tradition in a normative way. That happens fairly often in these sessions. It's going to take time for real dialogue to develop -- there's an internal process that has to happen.

To return to Pope Benedict, would it be helpful if he put himself in contact more thoroughly with Islam as a living religion, meeting with representative Muslim leaders?

Certainly, it would be helpful, and it's definitely worth trying. I'm sure he would love to do that. I believe the thinking around the Vatican these days is that the dialogue with Islam should start with things like ecology, poverty, these sorts of common human problems, before we get to more sensitive theological questions. This is part of Benedict's emphasis on reason. His approach seems to be, let's go as far as reason can take us before we get to these other issues.

Aside from the controversy over the remarks on Islam, what did you make of the Regensburg lecture?

I thought it was a very impressive address. The pope went amazingly far in laying out the principles of tolerance. It seems to me that he's read a lot of de Tocqueville, that he likes the American system on these matters and is trying to apply it to Europe. The idea is that there's a generic Christianity which is part of the culture. It's not enforced by the government, but it has social influence because it's the dominant popular religion, while still allowing for diversity. One finds this sort of generic Biblical religion in the founding documents of the United States. All this made the old European struggles to have either a Protestant or a Catholic government unnecessary, because it doesn't make so much difference who the ruler is. There is no automatic "transfer" from the state to the society of an official creed, but the basic Jewish and Christian values of Biblical religion form the bedrock of the culture. I think the Holy Father

likes this model, which was expressed in the decree on religious freedom at the Second Vatican Council.

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