

Analyzing Benedict's prayer with Ratzinger's criteria

John L. Allen Jr. | Dec. 8, 2006 All Things Catholic

Whatever one makes of Pope Benedict XVI's shift from a "red light" to a "yellow light" on Turkey's candidacy for the European Union, it was actually not the most jarring discontinuity between Joseph Ratzinger the cardinal and Benedict the pope during the Turkey trip.

When Benedict XVI stood alongside Istanbul's chief Islamic cleric, Imam Mustafa Cagrici, in the famed Blue Mosque on Nov. 30, praying silently in the direction of Mecca, those who know Ratzinger's track record no doubt asked: What happened to the man who once worried that inter-religious prayer can mean "a concession to that relativism which negates the very meaning of truth"?

This was, after all, the same champion of Catholic identity who said of Pope John Paul II's 1986 summit of religious leaders in Assisi to pray together for peace -- or, at least, of the way that event was understood in some circles -- "This cannot be the model!"

Jesuit Fr. Tom Michel, who served in the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue from 1981 to 1994, and who was among the architects of the '86 summit, told me that he saw "no theological difference" between what happened in Assisi and Benedict's moment of prayer alongside the imam in Istanbul.

Predictably, some Catholics were scandalized. Fox News commentator Fr. Jonathan Morris, a member of the Legionaries of Christ, wrote the next day that his in-box was "full of angry letters," such as one exclaiming, "Islam is a false religion, Muhammad is a false prophet, and the Quran is anything but sacred. How dare the Pope lend credence to such heresy!" (Morris, by the way, was not necessarily endorsing that view, merely reporting it.)

We've reached an interesting moment indeed in Catholic affairs when such complaints could be hurled against the man once known as "God's Rottweiler" for his ferocious defense of the faith.

So, what gives? Was this a case of naked papal opportunism, a post-Regensburg lust for positive headlines in the Muslim world that swept aside doctrinal concerns? Has Benedict the pope "changed his spots" from Ratzinger the doctrinal czar? Or is there a sense in which what happened in Istanbul can be understood as consistent with Ratzinger's earlier positions?

To answer that question, one has to review Ratzinger's thought on prayer with followers of other religions. Probably the most complete treatment comes in his 2003 book, *Truth and Tolerance*. There, Ratzinger asserts it is "indisputable that the Assisi meetings, especially in 1986, were misinterpreted by many people." By that, he meant that in some circles Assisi promoted a "one's as good as another" view of religions which, in his view, amounts to relativism.

Nevertheless, Ratzinger goes on to say that it would be wrong to reject prayer with believers of other religions "completely and unconditionally". He distinguishes between "multi-religious" prayer, when followers of different religions pray in the same context but separately, and "inter-religious" prayer, when they pray together.

For multi-religious prayer to be acceptable, he said, two conditions have to be met:

- "Such multi-religious prayer cannot be the normal form of religious life, but can only exist as a sign in unusual situations in which, as it were, a common cry for help rises up, stirring the hearts of men, to stir also the heart of God."
- "A careful explanation of what happens here and what does not happen is most important [it] must make clear that there is no such thing as a common concept of God or belief in God. What is happening must be so clear in itself, and to the world, that it does not become a demonstration of that relativism through which it would nullify its own significance."

As for inter-religious prayer, Ratzinger expressed strong doubt that it's even theologically possible.

In the first place, he said, we would have to have the same concept of God -- "any confusion of a personal and an impersonal understanding, of God and the gods, must be excluded." Second, there would have to be agreement on the content of prayer, and here Ratzinger suggested the Lord's Prayer as a model. Finally, the whole thing would have to be arranged so as to make a "relativistic misinterpretation" impossible.

As pope, Benedict XVI returned to these concerns in a message he sent commemorating the 20th anniversary of John Paul II's 1986 summit in Assisi.

"It's important not to forget the attention that was given [in 1986] to ensuring that an inter-religious meeting not lend itself to syncretistic interpretations, founded on a relativistic conception," Benedict said. "It's obligatory to avoid inopportune confusions. When we come together for prayer for peace, the prayer must unfold according to the distinct paths that pertain to the various religions."

It's an interesting thought exercise to ask if Benedict understood his moment of prayer alongside the imam in the Blue Mosque as an instance of "multi-religious" or "inter-religious" prayer, as he defined the terms in 2003. Given his doubts about the latter, one presumes he saw it as a "multi-religious" act, meaning separate prayer in the same context. It was obviously not "separate" in a physical or temporal sense, yet because it was non-verbal, each man could pray according to the distinctive beliefs of his own creed.

Certainly, the visit to the Blue Mosque would fit Benedict's criterion of an "unusual situation." This was, after all, only the second time a pope has entered a mosque, and hence is hardly likely to become "the normal form of religious life."

Yet if this was "multi-religious prayer" according to Ratzinger's standards, where, one might fairly ask, was the "careful explanation" which Ratzinger said must always be part and parcel of such events?

The lone comment offered by Benedict XVI at the end of his visit was, "Thank you for this moment of prayer." The only additional statement from a Vatican official came from Cardinal Walter Kasper, president of the Pontifical Council for Christian Unity, who accompanied Benedict to Turkey, and who spoke to Italy's Sky TG24 immediately after the stop at the mosque.

"It was a recollection, a meditation, but this can be done. If it was a prayer, at least it was not an official prayer, it was not a public prayer, because this can't be done," Kasper said.

With all due respect to Kasper, widely recognized as one of the best theological minds in the church, it's a bit of a stretch to say that something carried live on TV across much of the world was not "public." (Perhaps what he meant is that this was not a liturgical act recognized by the church, as opposed to a private moment of devotion, however public that private moment actually was).

The pope discussed his visit to the mosque at greater length during his Dec. 6 general audience in Rome, describing it as an "initially unexpected" and "very meaningful" gesture that Divine Providence had allowed him to undertake. He characterized what happened as "a few moments of recollection in that place of prayer," and suggested that he had addressed himself "to the one Lord of Heaven and Earth, the merciful Father of all humanity," deliberately using imagery that Muslims could share. He said he hoped the act would lead "all believers to recognize themselves as creatures," and said that it was "a witness to true fraternity."

There was no caveat about relativism, no theological commentary on the limits of such "witnesses to true fraternity."

Why the explanatory vacuum? The answer, at least implicitly, seems to be the following: This pope is his own gloss.

In other words, precisely because this was Joseph Ratzinger, it is difficult to imagine that the prayer at the Blue Mosque, at least on his side, had anything to do with a relativistic approach to religious belief. It was unnecessary to slap a warning label on the event saying, "Syncretism is hazardous to your faith," because the mere presence of Ratzinger communicated in a flash all the doctrinal caveats that form part of his understanding of such events, including his criticism of the 1986 Assisi summit.

Had this been another senior Catholic official -- Cardinal Roger Etchegaray, for example, or Archbishop Michael Fitzgerald, both known for more irenic views on Islam and other religions generally -- fierce debate might have been unleashed about the theological meaning of the prayer, and one can imagine the Vatican issuing a "clarification" spelling out all the qualifications.

Yet this wasn't Etchegaray or Fitzgerald. It was, instead, the very man who identified a "dictatorship of relativism" as the central challenge facing the church one day before his election to the papacy.

None of this is to suggest that the prayer didn't come as a surprise, given Ratzinger's background. (In fact, prior to the pope's own comment exiting the mosque, the press corps traveling with him had been locked in fierce debate over whether to characterize what had happened as "prayer" or "meditation.") But it was precisely that background which, one imagines, emboldened Benedict to accept the invitation to pray, assuming that it would be seen in the context of the totality of his life and thought.

If only Nixon could go to China, in other words, perhaps only Benedict could pray in the Blue Mosque -- at least without explaining it to death.

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