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How to avoid the steamroller of cultural 'hybridization'

John L. Allen Jr. | Jan. 18, 2007 All Things Catholic

Given that the 2008 American presidential campaign is now in full swing, with the formation of exploratory committees and announcements-of-intent-to-announce, perhaps it's not too early to begin thinking about the next papal election either.

(Okay, I confess: In reality, it almost certainly is too early. Benedict XVI is in fine health and has dropped no hints about resigning, and between now and whenever the next conclave actually happens, a thousand and one variables will probably reshape the calculus. But why should that spoil our fun?)

Traditionally, one element in the profile of a *papabile*, meaning a contender for the papacy, is travel. You look for a cardinal who has moved around the world a bit, and therefore has a sense of the global situation, not just his own particular corner. As with all such handicapping tips, this one is hardly infallible; Cardinal Albino Luciani of Venice, for example, had taken just one trip outside Italy in his entire life prior to being elected as John Paul I in 1978. Nevertheless, when a cardinal starts building up frequent flyer miles, especially speaking in high profile forums on hot-button topics, it's worth paying attention.

Thus we come to Cardinal Angelo Scola of Venice and his visit this week to the United States, including a session at the United Nations, to discuss dialogue among Christians, Muslims and Jews.

Scola, 65, a gregarious and highly erudite former university rector, was on the East Coast Tuesday and Wednesday, Jan. 16 and 17, to promote *Oasis*, a journal he launched in 2004 on inter-faith dialogue. Originally, it was a response to requests from Catholic bishops in Arab and other Islamic cultures for Christian literature in the local languages. (*Oasis* is published in four bilingual editions -- English-Arabic, English-Urdu, French-Arabic, and Italian-Arabic.) Scola, however, wanted the journal to be more than a *Reader's Digest*-style distillation of Christian texts; he wanted it to become a motor for dialogue in its own right.

In a nutshell, Scola's thesis is that we're living through a historically unprecedented "hybridization of cultures," and religions can either be steamrolled by that process or reflect critically upon it. Last year, Scola presented the journal both at a session with the United Nations Educational and Scientific Organization in Paris, as well as in Cairo, where participants met with the rector of the Al-Azhar University, one of the most authoritative institutions in the Islamic world.

On Tuesday, Scola took part in a conference at the John Paul II Cultural Center in Washington, D.C., under the title "The primordial relationship between God and the human person in Catholicism and Islam," which brought together 10 Catholic thinkers and 10 Muslim theologians. On Wednesday, Scola brought his act to the United Nations, with a panel discussion in the Dag Hammarskjöld Library featuring Seyyed Hossein Nasr, an Iranian scholar at George Washington University; Rabbi Israel Singer, Chairman of the Policy Council for the World Jewish Congress; and Carl Anderson, Supreme Knight of the Knights of Columbus. Anderson is vice-president

of the John Paul II Institute for Studies on Marriage and the Family in Washington, which is affiliated with the Lateran University in Rome, where Scola once served as rector.

The irony of prominent religious leaders speaking at the United Nations, an institution often derided by critics as a citadel of secularism, did not escape notice. Singer expressed the wistful desire that the United Nations organize a "conclave" to select Scola as Secretary General, saying the cardinal has a track record of fostering dialogue -- "something they're trying to do here, mostly to little avail."

The event was co-hosted by Archbishop Celestino Migliore, the Permanent Observer of the Holy See to the United Nations, who often jokes that the United Nations is his "parish." (In many ways, he's not kidding. I ran into Migliore at a reception in a bar inside the General Assembly building; he told me in passing that two years ago, he had been called to that very room to deliver the last rites to a U.N. employee who had committed suicide. He also said he's sometimes been asked to hear confessions in the hallways.)

My news story on the panel discussion can be found here: Warnings about 'jaws of Hell,' hope for revolution at U.N. panel [1]. Suffice it to say that perspectives ran the gamut from near-despair to strong optimism.

In terms of Scola's future, splashy events like his stop at the United Nations add to his reputation for gravitas. He's associated with the international theological journal *Communio*, and once published a book-length interview with the late Swiss theologian Hans Urs von Balthasar. Scola's specialty is theological anthropology, and like many intellectuals, he sometimes struggles to speak in simple declarative sentences. Consider this example, from my interview with him on Wednesday: "In order to make sense of an object, to 'intentionalize' it, I have to step outside of myself and direct myself to 'being,' to something that calls me and asks something of me." That aside, he has an impressive mind, and in pastoral settings he's witty and approachable.

Scola comes out of the Communion and Liberation movement, founded in Italy in 1954 by Fr. Luigi Guissani. Today the controversies that once surrounded Communion and Liberation, perceived as a conservative alternative to other constituencies in the church, have largely ebbed, yet vestigial memories endure. I recall standing on a Roman rooftop during the days before the conclave, speaking with a senior figure from another prominent Italian movement when Scola's name came up as a potential pope. This person's response was near-apocalyptic: "We would be destroyed!" Whether that's really the case is not the point -- it speaks to antique perceptions that Scola's past could make him a divisive figure. (The election of Joseph Ratzinger, however, should serve as a warning that perceptions of divisiveness do not necessarily drive behavior in conclaves).

Scola's visit to the United Nations was co-sponsored by the Crossroads Cultural Center of New York, which is connected to the Communion and Liberation movement, and many *cielini* are part of Scola's informal international network.

Here are some excerpts from my Jan. 17 interview with Scola, held on the sidelines of his appearance at the United Nations.

What came out of your session in Washington?

For me, the interesting thing is that this was the first time I've had the occasion for an organic exchange with Muslims directly on the contents of the faith, and not just on social, political, economic concerns, issues of human rights, and so on. We were able to talk about what creation means for them and for us, what the gamble of liberty and its relationship to the truth is for them and for us. Obviously, our differences are very strong, but the spirit of the dialogue was truly serene, objective. What's interesting is not so much to seek a convergence between the two faiths, as it is to understand one another. I believe we're just at the beginning of this dialogue, even if in a certain sense we have centuries of tradition behind our shoulders. Therefore, we need to know one another. I was struck by the fact that yesterday evening the room was full, with at least 300 people, drawn from

various milieus in Washington.

Benedict XVI's lecture in Regensburg, and everything that followed from it, was obviously a watershed in the Catholic/Muslim relationship. What do you think the church learned from Regensburg?

I think that the dialogue grows when we learn reciprocally from one another. The Regensburg lecture, in terms of its content, had a prophetic force which the pope's trip to Turkey revealed. The Turkey trip demonstrated what the true and deep intent of the Holy Father actually was; it spelled out, in concrete, the formidable reflection he offered in Regensburg on the relationship among faith, reason, and religion. This is the point, because these three things are never held together. We speak of religion, of reason, or the relationship between reason and faith, but we never put the three things together. However, these three things are always interwoven, always interlaced. You can never separate them, even someone who says he or she is an atheist. I can't even know this object [pointing to the tape recorder] except for faith. Not 'faith' as a form of belief, but 'faith' as a fact. In order to make sense of this object, to 'intentionalize' it, I have to step outside of myself and direct myself to 'being,' to something that calls me and asks something of me. Thus, reason and faith are always in play, always situated within a weft of relationships with a religious implication -- either in the form of a great religion with more than a billion followers, or a phenomenon limited to the four, five or six persons that someone actually knows. Even if someone thinks that God doesn't exist, or that religion is simply a game of power and money, or that 'God' is created in the image of men, that person is 'religious' too, because none of us can avoid the constitutive question.

Last night and tonight, there are also Jews on the panel. Do you think it's important that our relationship with Jews and Muslims develop as a three-way exchange?

In my opinion, it has to be done by giving value to the great principle in our tradition of 'difference in unity.' There is no such thing, speaking abstractly, as a 'trialogue.' Obviously, we have in common with the Jews an enormously powerful set of roots, which remains very contemporary. Of course, I'm talking now about inter-religious dialogue. Dialogue with civil society, as well as the dialogue between states, are different subjects. There are common elements in all three, but we've got to keep them separate, with distinct content. It's quite clear that we have the need for a direct exchange with the Jewish world. It's equally true, of course, that a direct exchange with the Muslim world is important for us. I believe, however, there are times and events in which we can come together. For example, we held such an event last year in Cairo for *Oasis*, and today my friends here in New York, with Rabbi Singer, made plans for a meeting in New York in 2008, to which we want to invite representatives of Al-Azhar. I believe that my duty as a man of the church, in the area of inter-religious dialogue, is to try to develop this intrinsic connection among religion, reason and faith as a positive element of 'background.' This is so precisely because so often the connection among religions is used as a structure of conflict. We want to demonstrate through direct personal witness that we are capable of talking to each other, listening to each other, knowing one another and staying together. This can also furnish a contribution to dialogue at other levels. For example, a theme I'd like to develop tonight, but which would obviously require more time, is how human rights, in their abstract universality, might be accompanied, especially in the Islamic/Muslim world, by the concrete universality of religion. Today, we speak of 'human rights' taking as our point of departure a sort of an abstract a priori, an abstract conception of the person and of society, on the basis of which we deduce certain axioms. But in many Muslim circles, this doesn't work.

Why not?

Because they say this is not their universality. That explains why there are so many states that have never signed the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. It's not an accident. Why? There's a level of abstraction [in the charter] that the concrete universal of religion, if properly understood, can complement. Thus, the three-way dialogue [among Jews, Muslims and Christians] can help this situation. For example, I noticed that yesterday

evening, speaking on the topic of religious liberty, which is obviously among the most sensitive subjects in our relationship, we can slowly make some progress. In sum, I think we need to see elemental human experience as our point of departure, which we all have in common. I keep coming back to this.

You've talked about the "hybridization of cultures" going on today. Isn't there a risk of syncretism implied -- what the pope has called a 'dictatorship of relativism'?

In the first place, for me it's decisive that we be aware that we're speaking of this hybridization, this 'cross-breeding,' as a fact that's taking place. It's not an idea or a hypothesis. There are more than 200 million immigrants at this moment in the world, and scholars who study this phenomenon say there are two billion people who face the possibility, or perhaps the necessity, of immigration in the coming years. This is a historic process without precedent. We have to enter into this process and accompany it. Obviously, the risk of syncretism is very strong. For my part, I believe we can overcome this risk on two conditions. The first is to be well aware that any process of 'mixing' is always one of great suffering, as the elemental experience of mixing of races demonstrates. People suffer in their own skin this reality; in English, the pejorative term 'bastard' expresses the fact. In a sense, we have to 'purify' this process. The second condition is to always have the courage to depart from the elementary experience of the human person, holding on to the great principle of difference in unity. It's clear that I can't play around with religious syncretism, but I can't avoid certain facts. Ten years ago in Italy, the problem of Islam didn't exist. Now it does. This risk of confusion, which leads some Christians to say 'one religion is as good as another,' is here to stay. So we have to confront it critically, with the principle of unity in difference. The key word, I think, is 'witness.' We have to run the risk, but with awareness of what we're doing.

Speaking of the risk of syncretism, many people were surprised by the pope's moment of prayer in the Blue Mosque in Istanbul. How should we understand what happened?

First of all, the two prayed in silence. Therefore, we could say, each man prayed in the consciousness that it's the one God who guides us, each addressed God in the silence of his heart, looking to the fullness of the horizon of truth which each felt. There was no confusion, no risk of syncretism.

Was this an exceptional thing, or could it be a model for inter-religious prayer?

Whenever the pope does something like that, there's always a lesson in it. The problem is with interpretation.

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