

Shifting plates in Rome and Tehran; Francis in Brazil; and St. John Paul

John L. Allen Jr. | Jun. 21, 2013 All Things Catholic

Thirty-five years ago, Iran and the Vatican seemed on parallel paths. The election of John Paul II in October 1978 signaled a new Catholic assertiveness, ending a time of introspection following the Second Vatican Council, while three months later, the triumphant return of Ayatollah Khomeini amid the Iranian Revolution unleashed a similar revival across the Shiite world.

The \$64,000 question today is whether we're witnessing another shifting of the historical plates in Rome and Tehran, this one toward the moderates.

Given the way Shia Islam pervades Iranian life, it shouldn't be surprising that Iran sometimes seems to mimic developments in Catholicism. Author Vali Nasr ticks off several parallels between the two faiths in his 2006 book *The Shia Revival*, in which he argues that Sunnis are the Muslim Protestants and Shiites, the Catholics. They include:

- Both Shia and Catholicism place a strong emphasis on clerical authority.
- Both understand revelation in terms of scripture and tradition.
- Both harbor a deep mystical streak, including devotion to a holy family (for Shiites, the blood relatives of Muhammad) and to saints (the Twelve Imams).
- Both have a theology of sacrifice and atonement.
- Both foster holy days, pilgrimages, healing shrines and strongly emotional forms of popular devotion.

Without in any sense suggesting that John Paul and Khomeini were mirror images of one another, it's clear in retrospect that their rise signaled a decisive victory for defenders of tradition against modernizers, a trend that has since taken hold in many other religious settings. In academic circles, they also helped lay to rest the "secularization theory," which held that the long-term decline of religion was inevitable.

Today, there's another arresting juxtaposition, though we don't yet know if it will have similarly massive consequences.

In March, in a surprise result, a pragmatic moderate from Argentina was elected to the papacy. Three months later, just like 35 years ago, the Iranians followed suit, tapping another pragmatic moderate cleric, the former nuclear negotiator Hassan Rohani, as their new president. Both men were swiftly labeled "reformers," and both have raised fevered expectations of change.

Naturally, the comparison is inexact. For one thing, being president of Iran does not make Rohani the supreme Shiite authority. It's a political gig, and a limited one at that, given the preponderance of power lodged with Iran's Supreme Leader. For another, what it means to be a "moderate" in Catholic terms can be very different from what the term connotes to Iranians and to most Shiites.

Even allowing for those nuances, the déjà vu is striking.

Both with Francis and Rohani, it's not yet clear whether the new bosses represent a major shift on substance, but their tonality is obviously different. Simply by smiling and coming off as mild-mannered, both men seem to have given the institutions they lead a new lease on life.

Italians, as ever the most attentive observers of all things papal, have been especially struck by the similarities. *Corriere della Sera* noted that Rohani opened his press conference Monday with a simple "Good morning," calling it a "virtually Franciscan" gesture -- a reference to how Italians have been charmed by Francis opening public events with a hearty "*Buon giorno*" or "*Buona sera*."

Both leaders also face similar challenges.

Internally, progressives in their own fold probably want too much from them, while conservatives fear they'll provide it. Those dynamics potentially leave each new leader without a natural base of support. Externally, both hope to improve relations with an estranged "other" -- the United States in the case of Iran and the secular world for Francis. It's not yet clear whether either will be able to move fast enough or far enough to pull it off or what sort of reception they'll find on the other side.

Potentially, there's a great deal at stake in how this plays out.

Back in the late 1970s, the defining struggle within the great religious traditions was between liberals and conservatives. Today, that divide still may be relevant at the grass roots but not really at the leadership level, where the conservatives have largely prevailed almost everywhere except mainline Protestantism.

The dominant impulse today is a robustly evangelical insistence that orthodoxy must be the filter for evaluating modernity, not the other way around.

The contest that matters now, therefore, is within this evangelical camp. It pits cultural warriors, meaning people who believe in drawing lines in the sand, against upholders of "affirmative orthodoxy," meaning believers who accent what their tradition supports more than what it opposes and who prefer détente to discord. The usual secular term for the affirmative orthodoxy instinct is "moderate."

If the culture warriors prevail, we're likely in for a long spell of conflict, whether it's between Islam and the West, faith and culture or whatever the fault lines may be. If the moderates gain the upper hand, things might break toward a spirit of "good fences make good neighbors" -- no watering down of religious commitment, but openness to constructive engagement.

Only time will tell if the twin surprises in Rome and in Tehran signal a turning point. In the meantime, when Rohani makes his first state visit to Rome and drops in on Francis, the two should have plenty to discuss.

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In recent days, Brazil has been rocked by some of the most serious street protests since the end of its military dictatorship in 1985. They reflect popular anger over lavish expenditures in the run-up to the World Cup next year and the 2016 Olympics, while costs of public services escalate and education and health care languish. Brazilians are also ticked off about perceived political corruption.

As it happens, the next major global event in Brazil, which opens in exactly a month, isn't an athletic competition but Catholicism's cross between a Guadalupe festival and Lollapalooza: World Youth Day. At least a million high-octane Catholic youth will flood Rio de Janeiro, potentially running headlong into a brewing

storm.

That coincidence invests Francis' first overseas trip with additional peril, but also additional promise.

On the one hand, organizers are naturally concerned that World Youth Day could be swept up in the tumult. Although the protests have been largely peaceful, there has been scattered violence. Molotov cocktails were hurled and cars set ablaze, and there's also been looting and confrontations with police, who responded with tear gas, rubber bullets and pepper spray.

On background, WYD organizers say they've fielded anxious inquiries about the situation from parents, youth leaders, bishops, priests and media around the world. It's not clear if those worries may impact attendance, but there's concern in the air.

On Wednesday, Archbishop Orani João Tempesta of Rio de Janeiro went on Vatican Radio to try to calm the fears. He said he'd spoken to public authorities, insisting that "all agree" the protests "shouldn't affect World Youth Day."

Tempesta went out of his way to praise the uprising, saying "these young people are taking to the streets with the desire to build a better civilization: a new world, freer, more honest, with education and health for all."

"The pilgrims coming to Rio share these desires," he said, "but with Christ in their heart."

In part, the comments may be an attempt to persuade protestors not to take out their frustrations on the next obvious target. Yet looked at another way, the upheaval also presents Francis with a genuine opportunity to make a difference.

He'll arrive carrying strong street credibility. Argentina's poor celebrate him as the "pope of the slums," reflecting his legendary concern for the country's *villas miserias*, or "villas of misery." That reputation will follow him to Brazil, where he's scheduled to visit Rio's Manguinhos slum. Famously, Francis has committed himself to fostering a "poor church for the poor" and has spoken out forcefully against "savage capitalism."

Of course, he's also the first Latin American pope, a point of pride that won't be lost even on Brazilians otherwise inclined to rage against the machine.

The pope's mere presence could open a period of calm. Beyond that, he may be uniquely positioned to applaud the protestors' intentions while imploring them to channel their frustrations in a constructive fashion. He could also use his sessions with Brazil's political leaders to act as a mediator, showing support while prodding them toward dialogue and reform.

By the time it's all said and done, Francis could ride into the sunset as the man who helped save Brazil from itself. For a first outing, that wouldn't be too bad.

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Speaking of John Paul II, this big news out of Rome this week was [a report](#) [1] that a second miracle attributed to his intercession has been approved by the Vatican's theological consultants, potentially paving the way for his canonization as early as October.

If so, it would set a new land speed record for sainthood, just eight years from start to finish.

I've done a fair bit of media on the story, and generally the question comes up of whether there's been enough time to critically examine John Paul's record, especially his handling of the child sexual abuse scandals. Critics

have argued that the process should be slowed down or put on hold, charging that the church may come to regret the rush.

Without trying to settle that debate, I'll repeat here the point I usually make when the question comes up.

Officially speaking, the choice to canonize someone who held a leadership role -- whether it's a pope, a politician, a businessperson or whatever -- does not mean the church is ratifying every policy decision he or she ever made. When Pope Pius IX was beatified in 2000, for instance, the Vatican insisted it was not an endorsement of his kidnapping a Jewish child, forcing the Jews of Rome back into their ghetto, and refusing to acknowledge the new Italian state.

Instead, canonization represents a judgment that whatever failures or misjudgments the person may have committed, he or she still led a holy life. In terms of the theology of sainthood, it's entirely possible to say John Paul dropped the ball but is still worthy of canonization -- not because of his record on the abuse scandals, but in spite of it.

To state the obvious, if the standard were perfect human judgment, no one would ever get a halo.

Whether that will wash in the court of public opinion remains to be seen. It's at least worth saying, however, that in terms of Catholic teaching, a canonization is not tantamount to a "gag order" shutting down hard questions about the saint's legacy.

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