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Pope Francis' outreach to atheists not as controversial as it seems

David Gibson Religion News Service | Sep. 13, 2013 The Francis Chronicles

Pope Francis? friendly letter to atheists, published this week by Italy?s *La Repubblica* newspaper, has been cheered by Catholics who welcomed another sign of the pontiff?s new openness to the world beyond the Vatican walls.

But it has also prompted some gnashing of teeth among others, who are reacting to headlines about the pope?s letter like this one in the British newspaper *The Independent*:

?Pope Francis assures atheists: You don?t have to believe in God to go to heaven?

As David Brody of the Christian Broadcasting Network tweeted: ?Say what? Catholics please explain this ... Evangelicals are NOT kosher with this...?

First off, Brody and others shouldn?t be deceived by a headline. The pope?s letter itself makes clear that he is talking about forgiveness (and dialogue) more than salvation -- and that?s hardly so controversial.

As Robert Mickens, Vatican correspondent for the London-based Catholic journal *The Tablet*, said in that same story: ?Francis is still a conservative ... But what this is all about is him seeking to have a more meaningful dialogue with the world.?

That sort of open-handed approach toward nonbelievers and others has been characteristic of this pope since the first days after he took office in March, as he greeted the media and made a special point of respecting the consciences of non-Catholics and those who have no religious belief.

Another point: The debate over who will be saved and who will not is and will remain a lively one in the Catholic church, but it is not that new, relatively speaking.

As the late Cardinal Avery Dulles wrote, the main break came in the middle of the 20th century, when some theologians -- and the church -- started downplaying the age-old anathema ?extra Ecclesiam nulla salus? -- that ?there is no salvation outside the church,? meaning the church of Rome.

Since then, Catholic thinkers have been trying to come up with new formulas to give people a sense of who will be saved, and who will not.

The 20th-century German theologian Karl Rahner, a Jesuit like Francis and Dulles, elaborated the notion of ?the anonymous Christian,? that is that people who have never heard of Christ (or Christianity) but live and strive in accordance with Gospel values can be saved.

The idea was to explain how those who, through no fault of their own, could be spared by a merciful God even if they did not know the Jesus of Christian tradition.

Rahner was often at odds with his fellow German theologian Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger (later Pope Benedict

XVI), but even Ratzinger himself in 2000 issued an authoritative document, *Dominus Iesus*, that proposed a modified form of Rahner?s concept that men and women of goodwill could be saved.

Both as a cardinal and as pope, Ratzinger also frequently made common cause with nonbelievers, for example co-authoring a book with the atheist and Italian politician Marcello Pera that praised Christian values. Benedict?s request, he said, was that earnest nonbelievers ?act as if God exists.?

That phrase was in fact part of Francis? first encyclical, *Lumen Fidei*, or ?The Light of Faith,? which was started by Benedict and later finished by his successor. In it the two popes write:

> Because faith is a way, it also has to do with the lives of those men and women who, though not believers, nonetheless desire to believe and continue to seek. To the extent that they are sincerely open to love and set out with whatever light they can find, they are already, even without knowing it, on the path leading to faith. They strive to act as if God existed...

Even more controversial was the thought of another recent Catholic thinker, the Swiss theologian Hans Urs von Balthasar, who is famous for arguing that Christians can hope (though can?t be certain) that hell is empty and all are in fact saved.

Disputes about von Balthasar?s theology continue, but in 1988 Pope John Paul II honored the theologian -- a few days after his death -- by making him a cardinal.

Francis is hardly the only one. New York Cardinal Timothy Dolan also pointed to this view of God?s unlimited grace in his sit-down this month with Comedy Central?s Stephen Colbert, himself a Catholic.

?If even atheists are redeemed by Christ, why have I been going to Mass every Sunday?? Colbert asked Dolan with a false indignation that mirrored the real questions many in his audience had about comments Francis made about nonbelievers last May.

Dolan?s response: ?Look, you don?t go to Mass to win heaven. You go to ask God for help to get you there. You go to Mass to thank him for being such a great God that he wants you to spend eternity with him. That?s why you go to Mass. You don?t go to win heaven, because you can?t earn it -- it?s a gift. He wants to give it to all of us.?

The issues, like Francis? words, are loaded and can be controversial. Ironically, what the pope, and the Catholic church, are emphasizing is the priority of God?s limitless grace rather than salvation by one?s own effort -- something Protestants might cheer.

Evangelical theologian Scot McKnight said everyone should step back and take a breath. ?I?m confident ... he?s not disagreeing with church dogma,? said McKnight, who teaches at Northern Seminary outside Chicago. ?They are unguarded statements needing more nuance.?

To be sure, there remain significant differences between Catholic views of salvation and the various Protestant conceptions about who is saved and when, and if a Christian is guaranteed a ticket to paradise.

But this most recent episode may not be as divisive as some think.

Instead, the worried observers could have mistaken Francis? pastoral gesture as an effort to dilute the gospel rather than what he really intended -- an evangelical outreach intended to bring nonbelievers closer to Christ, not to introduce relativism into the church.

[Sarah Pulliam Bailey contributed to this report.]

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