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Pope Francis in the Holy Land

Michael Sean Winters | May. 23, 2014 Distinctly Catholic

The Holy Father arrives in the Holy Land today. It is difficult to imagine an apostolic trip that will be more loaded with symbolism, as we witnessed in the visits of Francis? predecessors to Jerusalem and its environs. Who can forget the image of Pope Paul VI walking through the Damascus Gate in Jerusalem or standing by the windswept shore of the Sea of Galilee? Or of St. Pope John Paul II praying at the Western Wall? Or of Pope Emeritus Benedict at Yad Vashem? Pope Francis will add to that litany of memorable moments and memories in a land already filled with both.

The Holy Land today is also loaded with more bitter memories and not just memories. The seemingly intractable political situation will not be resolved with symbolic gestures. In an interview published at Vatican Insider [1], Rabbi David Rosen was asked, ?Do Israelis see the fact that he comes with a Jew and Muslim as a sign that peace is possible between the followers of the three great monotheistic religions also in this Holy Land?? He replied simply, ?No.?

Yet, the pope?s decision to travel in the company of a rabbi and an imam, both old friends of his, is not mere symbolism. It may not yield a return to the peace negotiations, but it shows the people on both sides of the border that friendship and respect are possible across religious divisions, and that religious divisions are not the entire story of Catholic relations with Jews and Muslims. In the U.S., we take it for granted that one can be friends with a Jewish neighbor or a Muslim co-worker, but in many parts of the world, this comes as news. Traveling with his friends is a master stroke from a master of the profound and telling gesture.

The fact that the pope will be accompanied by a Jewish and Muslim religious leader also makes a related but different point: The problems between the Israelis and the Palestinians are not religious problems but political ones. How often is the strife between Israel and the Palestinians listed as Exhibit A in the argument that religion only causes conflict and division? The roots of strife in the Holy Land have never had much to do with religion except in the imaginings of the uninformed.

Zionism was not a religious movement. When Chaim Weizmann met with Lord Balfour and Prime Minister David Lloyd George in the second decade of the twentieth century, to urge on them what would become the Balfour Declaration, it was Balfour and Lloyd George who found inspiration in the Hebrew Scriptures, not Weizmann. The Jewish state was, and is, a secular state, founded by European socialists. The history of Israel in the Hebrew Scriptures was, for them, a national history, not a story of salvation.

Jews and Arabs had lived side by side in relative peace for centuries throughout must of the Mediterranean world. There were large Jewish communities in Cairo and Baghdad and elsewhere, indeed, Jews were the largest ethnic group in Baghdad until their expulsion in the 1950s. That and other expulsions were not the result of religious fervor. Arab autocrats realized that there was political benefit in making the Jews a scapegoat for repressive political regimes and woeful economic development. All should have reservoirs of sympathy for those Palestinian Arabs displaced during the 1948 war, and later, but we should also have reservoirs of sympathy for those Jews who were uprooted from their homes and forced to flee to Israel as one Arab regime after another expelled them.

There is element properly termed religious in the otherwise political mess that is today?s Mideast: the Ultra-

Orthodox in Israel. They seem to be the only ones protesting the Holy Father?s visit. Rabbi Rosen, in that same interview with Vatican Insider, called them ?ridiculous? and ?a small bunch of Christianophobes.? They are worried that the Israeli government will transfer control of the Cenacle, where Christians believe Jesus held the Last Supper, to Christian control. The Ultra-Orthodox are an anomaly in Israel. They were deeply opposed to Zionism from its earliest beginnings. They rose to some measure of political power in recent Israeli parliaments because the center-right coalitions led by Likud needed their few votes in order to form a government. The Ultra-Orthodox extracted exemptions from Likud for their participation in the government, most of which allowed the Ultra-Orthodox followers to exempt themselves from the norms of Israeli society. This produced a backlash and the Ultra-Orthodox, as Rabbi Rosen?s comments make clear, are much disliked in contemporary Israeli society. It should not surprise that when religious leaders become too explicitly involved in politics, they will make political enemies. There is a lesson in that for the USCCB, no?

So, if the strife in the Holy Land is not rooted in religion, will the Holy Father?s trip have any political consequences? Will it help encourage a return to negotiations? Does Secretary of State John Kerry have a stake in the success of this trip? In the near term, it is foolish to expect that one, short visit will change the political landscape and tilt the adversaries toward peace. But, often in the life of people and of peoples, the idea must precede the fact, people must be able to imagine a more peaceful existence in order to take the difficult steps necessary to achieve it. In this sense, the Holy Father?s visit may remind people on both sides of the divisions that there is a better way, that war is not a foregone conclusion.

There is also an ecumenical aspect to the Holy Father?s visit. He will be meeting with the Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew and both men will be joined in the Church of the Holy Sepulcher by the Armenian Patriarch: The three men?s followers are usually fighting over the limited real estate with the ancient basilica. I am not a student of ecumenical relations but there is one aspect of this show of mutual respect that has very precise contemporary relevance for the Catholic Church: The Orthodox have a different tradition for dealing with divorced and remarried members of their communion. I hope that this meeting of the Holy Father and the Ecumenical Patriarch will stop some of Cardinal Walter Kasper?s critics from insisting, as Fr. Gerald Murray recently insisted [2] that, ?The idea that the Church should recognize a pseudo-marriage as an expression of God?s mercy is a contradiction of the Gospel.? It may be the case that Cardinal Kasper?s suggestion for taking a different pastoral approach to the divorced and remarried is a contradiction of our Western traditions, but it cannot be the case that it is a ?contradiction of the Gospel,? unless we are willing to say that the Eastern Orthodox have contradicted the Gospel. Kasper?s ideas may be wrong-headed pastorally, they may undervalue the significance of our Western tradition, they may invite a deep conflict between theologians and canonists and among theologians and canonists, but his ideas do not contradict the Gospel.

The Ecumenical Patriarch does not have real juice anymore. He makes his home in Istanbul, overseeing a small if ancient church. The Russian Orthodox Church is the real player and that Church has been severely compromised by its many deals with the devil of state power over the years, most recently allowing themselves to be seen as allies of Tsar Putin. The future of ecumenical relations, then, appear about as dim as the prospects for Mideast peace.

This somewhat dour statement of my expectations for the Holy Father?s trip is not the whole story. We never know entirely what God has in store and however much we read and try to understand our human situations and conundrums, God sometimes gives us a big surprise. He certainly, via the College of Cardinals, gave the Latin Church a surprise last year in the election of Pope Francis. Perhaps, in the next few days, via Pope Francis, God will give us another surprise. We look across the landscape of the world and se do not see much in the way of peace or stability: A coup in Thailand, political strife in Egypt, terror in Yemen and Afghanistan and Somalia and Nigeria, human poverty most everywhere, environmental degradation aplenty. Yet, here is this man, Pope Francis, who has captured the imagination of the world. Whatever one thinks of his governance of the Church and the curia to date, his ability to renew a sense of hope in an often hopeless world is a great grace. Let us pray

that this grace bears fruit this weekend, and every weekend, in the Holy Land, and in every land.

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[1] http://vaticaninsider.lastampa.it/en/inquiries-and-interviews/detail/articolo/34269/
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