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The “Shi’ite-Catholic Project”

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POPE BENEDICT’S controversial remarks on Islam during his recent lecture in Germany have stirred anger among parts of the Muslim community worldwide. Thus, a meaningful intellectual climate of dialogue that does not shun away from addressing points of difference appears to be more pressing than ever.

In several of his previous less publicized utterances on Islam, Benedict used to lament what he considered a “lack of authority among the Muslims”, by which he seemed to be referring to the difficulty of finding a dialogue partner who was acknowledged to represent Islam at large. However, already during the pontificate of Benedict’s predecessor, Pope John Paul II, Shi’as and Catholics had initiated a project of intellectual exchange that went largely unnoticed by the wider public. More significantly, in particular to the political observer, to deepen contacts to Shi’ism would indeed make sense in the light of the present crisis surrounding the unsettled future of Iraq and the controversial stand of Iran in terms of its nuclear activities.

Thinking Religious Leaders

Thinking representatives from the world’s two largest religious communities – Islam and Christianity – seem to see the need for understanding better each other’s often sharply differing positions. Former Iranian President Mohammad Khatami, for instance, said that the full text of the Pope’s Regensburg speech should be read before making any comments on its contents. “I hope that the reports in this regard are misinterpreted as such remarks are usually made by uninformed and fanatic people but my impression of the pope was rather that of an educated and patient man,” Khatami said after his return to Tehran from his much-anticipated two-week visit to the United States. This was perhaps the first balanced statement to come out of the Muslim world on the “Regensburg speech issue”.

Khatami, in particular, has a record of contributions towards Muslim-Christian understanding. Khatami displays a deep reading not only in Islam but in Western philosophy as well, and his ideas are often in contrast to those of his more conservative peers in Iran. In March 1999 he made a sensational visit to the ailing John Paul II in the Vatican – to my knowledge, the first such meeting ever between a pope and a high-ranking member of the Shi’a religious establishment. On a somewhat more spiritual note, the emotions of the moment were captured when one of the Shi’a clerics accompanying Khatami spontaneously ran to the pope and embraced him, kissing him on both cheeks. When they parted, Pope John Paul gave his blessing to his guests, saying that “it was an important, promising day”.

The Shi'a-Catholic Project

The 1999 meeting between Khatami and John Paul was not just one of those many goodwill gestures with no follow-up. It resulted in a sequence of important conferences, attended by leading authorities from both denominations, as well in the joint publication of several books. In July 2003, a joint conference took place at University of London's Heythrop College and Ampleforth Abbey. It was inspired by previous meetings between Ampleforth's Benedictine monks and the scholars of the Imam Khomeini Education and Research Institute at Qom, Iran. The meeting, attended by 12 Catholic and 13 Shi'a scholars, produced a volume on the proceedings. Exactly two years later, another four-day-long conference took place at the same place. At the same time, Catholic scholars went to visit their Shi'a counterparts in Iran.

Catholicism, too, has many points to its advantage in terms of making this dialogue with Islam a reality. Through the Vatican and its diplomatic representations, it is also present as a sovereign state in most Muslim nations, thus placing it in the unique position to "explain" or "correct" "misunderstandings" as soon as they arise, such as successfully done in the aftermath of the "Regensburg issue". Moreover, Catholicism can look back to about 2,000 years of an unbroken historical tradition, which – in the view of Rome – establishes its "teaching authority" and "authenticity".

In spite of Shi'ism being a minority among the Muslims, Shi'a scholars are usually also well-read in intellectual, philosophical and religious traditions other than Islam. Says Abbot Mark Serna, OSB, in his report on the 2005 conference, "Shi'ite Muslims are very natural dialogue partners with Roman Catholics [...]. There are many areas of mutuality: a profound contemplative and mystical tradition; veneration of saints, especially of Mary, the Mother of Jesus; notions of infallibility and authority; high emphasis on rational inquiry into matters of faith; belief and praxis; philosophical and theological study." To that one could add the similar beliefs concerning the intercession of saints and martyrs and the idea of "redemptive suffering". It should also not be forgotten that Shi'a also have a strong tradition of inter-Islamic dialogue, such as during the 1950s with Egypt's Al-Azhar University, the leading authority of Sunni Islam.

So far, the Shi'a-Catholic dialogue has resulted in the publication of two books: J. A. Bill and J. A. Williams, *Roman Catholics and Shi'i Muslims: Prayer, Passion, and Politics* (Chapel Hill, N.C.: The University of North Carolina Press, 2002) and A. O'Manony, W. Peterburs, and M. A. Shomali, eds., *Catholics and Shi'a in Dialogue: Studies in Theology and Spirituality* (London: Melisende, 2004). The book by Bill and Williams appears to be the first attempt by Western Catholics to present a comparative approach towards basic features of Shi'ism and Catholics, in terms of devotional practices as well as basic beliefs. However, it also addresses the issue of Shi'ism and politics. The second book contains the proceedings of the earlier mentioned 2003 Shi'a-Catholic encounter.

A Future?

It appears that Shi'a Islam has gone a long way since the excesses of the 1979 revolution in Iran. Today, its somewhat more open approach towards philosophy and its deep roots in mysticism are also becoming increasingly popular among Southeast Asian Muslims. Shi'a "converts" are today present in Malaysia, Singapore and Thailand, and they number several millions in Indonesia alone where they are an active part in civil society in the post-Suharto era. From researches carried out by this writer, it appears, that those "conversions" are today

to a lesser degree caused by some sort of admiration for the *political* “model of Iran”, but rather by a rediscovery of Shi’ism’s *intellectual* tradition. The Shi’a-Catholic dialogue is thus not only of relevance to those interested in purely religious matters, but could also be helpful towards diffusing some of the current tensions in the Middle East – especially in Iraq, Iran, and Lebanon, countries which can be considered the geographical centre of Shi’ism.

That Mr Khatami has lost the presidential re-elections to “hard-liner” Mr Ahmadinejad might thus not discourage those looking into the future. In the light of what is usually presented as the “increasing tension” between Islam and Christianity in many parts of the world, the Shi’a-Catholic encounter project thus assumes a particularly greater significance.

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