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Courageous Witness?

THE DIPLOMACY OF INTERRELIGIOUS DIALOGUE—TWO VIEWS

Robert P. Imbelli

Few areas in contemporary Catholic theology are as challenging and important as interreligious dialogue. One of the leading American voices in that conversation is that of Fr. James Fredericks of Loyola Marymount University. He is uncommonly knowledgeable and balanced. His recent *Commonweal* article “No Easy Answers: The Necessary Challenge of Interreligious Dialogue” (January 15) conveys, by its very title as well as its content, the qualities that commend him to the careful attention of colleagues.

There is much in Fredericks’s article that I agree with, in particular the concluding “practical suggestions.” I would especially highlight his drawing upon Pope John Paul II’s appeal to “the virtue of solidarity” as a moral imperative, especially in a globalized world. And I very much concur with Fredericks that such solidarity does not imply “shallow agreement on general matters.” Nor does it preclude “dialogue and opposition,” for, as he admits, “In some important respects the religions of the world are radically incompatible.”

What follows, then, are not so much disagreements as comments and qualifications. I place them under two headings: rhetorical and theological (though the line between these is flexible).

The article initially deploys a rhetorical strategy that contrasts the approach to interreligious dialogue of Pope Benedict XVI with that of Pope John Paul II. The implication is that Benedict shows less sensitivity in this regard than did his predecessor. So, for example, Fredericks raises the issue of the baptism of the Muslim-born Magdi Allam, a vocal critic of Islam, during the 2008 Easter Vigil celebration in St. Peter’s Basilica. “Given how volatile an issue apostasy is for some Muslims,” Fredericks asks forthrightly, “one wonders: Could not this catechumen have been baptized without fanfare at his local parish?” And he adds: “This isn’t the first time that Benedict’s approach to interreligious relations has lacked diplomatic tact.”

Let me offer a somewhat different reading of the event. Fredericks’s phrase, “a volatile issue,” seems an understatement. For some Muslims “apostasy” warrants a death sentence. In fact, Allam has been under constant police protection both before and after his baptism. So Benedict’s (and presumably Allam’s) “lack of diplomatic tact” might, alternatively, be judged an act of courageous witness.

That witness is not only to freedom in choosing one’s own religion. It also bespeaks Benedict’s firm conviction that there is no place for coercion in a religion that acts in accord with reason (*logos*)—the theme of his Regensburg address. Fredericks appears to read this appeal to “logos” as “Eurocentric”

and suggests that other beliefs may be shaped by “alternative rationalities or even by revelations that are untouched by reason.” But is that the case? Is it only a Western conviction that coercion in religion is irrational (not that the West has always abided by that conviction), or is it a universal truth?

To Fredericks’s credit, toward the end of the article the rhetorical contrast fades as he cites the view of a Buddhist nun. He writes: “She is eager to challenge and deepen her practice of the *dharma* by means of a dialogue with Christians. She will not pray, however; prayer is not part of her Buddhist practice.” I think her stance represents a decidedly Ratzingerian approach to interreligious dialogue!

My second comment concerns the theological underpinning of the article. Fredericks appeals to a theology of the Holy Spirit to support the validity and necessity of interreligious dialogue for Catholics. “This theology of the Holy Spirit was the foundation of John Paul’s deep commitment to interreligious dialogue.” And he rightly invokes John Paul’s path-breaking 1990 encyclical *Redemptoris missio*.

Yet I found the article somewhat one-sided in its reading of the encyclical. A distinctive characteristic of John Paul’s magisterium is the inseparability of the work of Christ and the Spirit, precisely in the face of efforts to sunder them. To quote but one significant passage: “[The Spirit] is therefore not an alternative to Christ, nor does he fill a sort of void sometimes suggested as existing between Christ and the Logos. Whatever the Spirit brings about in human hearts and in the history of peoples, in cultures and religions, serves as a preparation for the gospel and can only be understood in relation to Christ, the Word who took flesh by the power of the Spirit ‘so that as perfectly human he would save all human beings and sum up all things’” (RM, 29, with concluding quote from *Gaudium et spes*, 45).

One glimpses the perhaps inadvertent tendency to rely unilaterally on the role of the Holy Spirit in interreligious dialogue in the quotation from *Lumen gentium* that concludes the article. Fredericks invokes Vatican II’s “vision of the church” as “like a sacrament or as a sign and instrument” of “the unity of the whole human race.” Omitted from the quote, however, is the crucial “in Christ.”

Thus, among the challenges confronting Catholic theology as it addresses the pressing issue of interreligious dialogue is that of elaborating a fully Trinitarian theological foundation. Doing so would echo the rule of faith, already articulated by St. Irenaeus in the second century: God ever works with his “two hands”—the Son and the Spirit.

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James Fredericks responds:

I thank Fr. Robert P. Imbelli for his gracious words and careful reading of my essay. Of course, he is quite correct in pointing out that Pope John Paul II's theology of the Holy Spirit implies incorporation in Christ. In my article, I mentioned that aspect of the pope's teaching in the quotation from *Gaudium et spes* 22 before going on to emphasize the ecclesial dimensions of John Paul's contribution. The pope observed in *Redemptoris missio* that those who follow other religious paths can enjoy "a mysterious relationship with the church," even though they are not Christians in any formal sense. Without denying the Christological aspect, I believe that emphasizing the ecclesial dimension is helpful in recognizing John Paul's notion of solidarity as the proper goal of interreligious dialogue.

A more substantive disagreement has to do with the pastoral propriety of the way in which Mr. Magdi Allam was baptized. I do not look on this baptism as an example of "courageous witness." Some years ago, at a meeting of Catholics and Buddhists I attended, a participant identified himself as a "former Catholic" who had recently converted to Buddhism. He then launched into a diatribe about the wounds of his oppressive upbringing, his liberation from a callous institution, and the

irrationality of Christian doctrine. The other Buddhists were deeply embarrassed by this behavior and concerned for their Catholic friends. Taking refuge in the Buddha should not be an opportunity to gut-punch your former coreligionists. This stunt provides a lesson on the virtues and vices appropriate for interreligious dialogue today. Diplomacy in the effort to preserve interreligious friendships that reach across great expanses of doctrinal and cultural differences is virtuous. Taunting Muslims, as Allam did after his baptism, is vicious. He should have been baptized in his local parish where, presumably, he was a catechumen and is now a communicant. Imbelli and I are quite in agreement on the importance of John Paul's understanding of solidarity as the proper goal of interreligious dialogue. Achieving this solidarity will require not only theological discernment but also considerable pastoral skills. In this matter, let there be both dialogue and disagreement among Catholics.

I also want to respond to Imbelli's final comment regarding the need for discerning a "fully Trinitarian theological foundation" for interreligious dialogue. In making that comment, I presume he means that John Paul's theology of the Holy Spirit, for all its many virtues, is inadequate as a basis for the pastoral and theological complexities of interreligious dialogue. I agree. I suspect Pope Benedict does as well, although the present pope and I may disagree about the implications. John Paul II articulated a theology of other religions that was fully adequate to the theological demands of Christian doctrine. That is a sizable achievement but should not be mistaken as providing a theological foundation for interreligious dialogue. I say this despite the fact that his theology of the Holy Spirit motivated John Paul to give such impressive leadership in this area during his long pontificate. In my essay, I illustrated that shortcoming by referring to a Buddhist nun who is happy to meet with Christian friends like myself for dialogue, but is clear that John Paul's theology of religions is an impediment to my understanding of Buddhism. The reverse is the case as well. She believes that my karma has led me to be born a Christian and that in some future rebirth, I might hope to be reborn as a Buddhist. She also understands that this Buddhist theology of my Christian faith does not serve as a foundation for her dialogue with me. In Imbelli's view, the nun exemplifies "a decidedly Ratzingerian approach to interreligious dialogue." Imbelli is correct, although she would look on the baptism of Allam as "unskillful." John Paul II has given us the most adequate Christian theology of religions. I fear that Imbelli's call for a Trinitarian foundation for interreligious dialogue will lead to yet more talking to ourselves about the theology of religions already articulated by John Paul. Too often we do this as an alternative to the theologically untidy practice of interreligious dialogue. I suspect that Pope Benedict sees the problem. The importance of the solidarity of religions in this pontificate, however, remains an open question. ■

Rev. James Fredericks teaches comparative theology at Loyola Marymount University in Los Angeles.