

Islam: friend or foe?

Pope John Paul II and Crown Prince Hassan of Jordan have acted to avert a religious war. First in a series by Muriel Mirak-Weissbach.

On Jan. 19, His Royal Highness Crown Prince Hassan Bin Talal was scheduled to give a speech to the Friedrich Ebert Foundation in Bonn, Germany on the subject of current developments in Jordan. Instead, to the surprise of his audience, he delivered an address on "Islam and Europe," in which he elaborated a call for the integration of Europe's 6 million Muslims into contemporary society. Three weeks later, Pope John Paul II visited the Republic of Sudan, and, to the consternation of many, met both privately and officially in public with President Omar Hassan Ahmed Al-Bashir. Instead of openly criticizing the government for its alleged persecutions of Christian communities, His Holiness focussed his remarks on the importance of dialogue, stating, in one speech addressed to the religious leaders, that he was "happy to know that here in Sudan good ecumenical relations exist and that there are many instances of cooperation."

The two interventions, though different in immediate purpose and scope, have contributed to redefining the "Islamic debate" in an attempt to defuse the trend towards confrontation, and redirect energies toward dialogue. Increasingly since the 1991 Gulf war, the contours of a geopolitical strategy have emerged, whereby the Muslim peoples stretching from the Mediterranean to the Pacific, have been labelled the "new enemy," assigned to fill the adversary role formerly played by the Soviet Union, this time, in conflict with the "North."

Breaking Sudan's isolation

A favorite target of journalistic hysteria whipped up against the "fundamentalist threat" has been Sudan, its government accused of deploying Iranian money and men in a war of religious extermination against Christians in the south. Thus, John Paul II's visit and his decision to meet the Sudanese President constituted a bold step. And, regardless of loud media complaints of "legitimizing a fundamentalist tyrant," the pope's gesture has effectively broken the political isolation into which the Sudanese government had been thrust by the international community. It was warmly welcomed by the Sudanese government; General Bashir greeted John Paul II as a "pilgrim of peace" and announced that the nation's internal problems were on the way to speedy solution. The people of Sudan as well, both Christian and

Muslim, turned out in the hundreds of thousands for a mass, celebrated in Arabic, in the Green Square, usually used for military parades.

Most important, the pope's intervention challenged the rules of the game of geopolitics, which makes use of contrived ethnic or religious conflict, and redefined the parameters of social relations from a higher, moral standpoint. Vatican spokesman Joaquín Navarro Valls characterized the pope's approach as an "exceptional operation."

In his address to President Bashir, the pope referred back to his January address to the Vatican diplomatic corps, in which he expressed the hope that the civil war in Sudan would be overcome. "Your Excellency, this is the hope which I renew here today. It is a hope born of confidence, for peace is always possible. Man is a rational being endowed with intelligence and will, and therefore he is capable of finding just solutions to situations of conflict, no matter how long they have been going on and now matter how intricate the motives which caused them. Efforts to restore harmony depend on the parties involved being willing and determined to implement the condition required for peace. But where constructive action does not follow declarations of principle, violence can become uncontrollable."

To underline that his remarks were not limited to Sudan, he added, "A noteworthy example in Europe is the conflict in the Balkans; in Asia, Cambodia and the Middle East; in Africa, the tragic situation of Liberia." Continuing to elaborate the premises for peaceful coexistence between different religious communities, he said:

"The church approaches this question from an eminently moral and humanitarian point of view. Two fundamental principles underlie the universal obligation to understand and respect the variety and richness of other peoples, societies, cultures and religions. First, the inalienable dignity of every human person, irrespective of racial, ethnic, cultural or national origin or religious belief, means that when people coalesce in groups, they have a right to enjoy a collective identity. Thus, minorities within a country have the right to exist, with their own language, culture, and traditions, and the state is morally obliged to leave room for their identity and self-expression. Secondly, the fundamental unity of the human race, which takes its origin from God the Creator of

all, requires that no group should consider itself superior to another. It likewise requires that integration should be built on effective solidarity and freedom from discrimination. Consequently, the state has a duty to respect and defend the differences existing among its citizens, and to permit their diversity to serve the common good.”

From this standpoint, in an address to the leaders of the religious denominations, he said: “Here in Sudan, I cannot fail to emphasize once more the Catholic Church’s high regard for the followers of Islam. Sudanese Catholics recognize that their Muslim neighbors prize the moral life, and worship the One God, Almighty and Merciful—especially through prayer, almsgiving and fasting. They appreciate the fact that you revere Jesus and his Mother Mary. . . . They acknowledge that there are very solid reasons for greater mutual understanding, and they are eager to work with you in order to restore peace and prosperity to the nation. I hope that this meeting will contribute to a new era of constructive dialogue and goodwill.”

At the conclusion of his visit, he launched a call to the tens of thousands gathered to participate in the mass: “I greet the entire Muslim community. An important purpose of my visit is to appeal for a new relationship between Christians and Muslims in this land.”

Muslim danger seen as artificial

The remarks made by Crown Prince Hassan can be seen, in a certain sense, as complementary to those articulated by the pope. While John Paul II was speaking as the highest representative of the Christian minority in a Muslim land, Prince Hassan was addressing the condition of the Muslim minority within predominantly Christian Europe. Attempting to define the direction for dialogue, the crown prince made several considerations of a historical nature, aimed at debunking common misconceptions about Islam and Muslims.

First, he stated bluntly that “a number of politicians and academics regard the presence of Muslim communities in European societies as something of an aberration . . . at best . . . as a social and cultural anomaly . . . at worst . . . as a threat capable of undermining the political order.” Characterizing these perceptions as “part and parcel of the accumulated baggage of history,” he reviewed the historical relationship between Islam and Europe, from the early phase, when “Islam posed a problem for Europeans, both as a religion and as a world power,” through the establishment of Islamic presence in Spain and southern Italy, and the later Muslim rule set up by the Ottoman Empire in the Balkans. In addition to these developments toward creating Muslim communities in Europe, the “expansion of European power to Muslim lands over the last two centuries has also affected the situation” and migration routes to Europe were determined largely by colonial relations. The post-World War II economic reconstruction and expansion of Europe drew in further num-

bers of Muslims, laborers from the former colonies, who settled and brought up families.

Coming to the situation today, the crown prince seemed intent on defusing fears of “fundamentalism” and the “Islamic bomb.” Of the “purveyors of doomsday scenarios” who say the bomb is already deployable in Muslim Kazakhstan, he said: “The purpose of this appears to be the portrayal of Islam and its adherents as a danger to world security, mirroring medieval depictions of Islam as a ‘shadow-self’ of Christianity.” In other words, Prince Hassan pointed to the artificial nature of the “Islamic danger” being broadcast in the West. And he correctly added that such propaganda has only fueled tensions: “The result has been to intensify Muslim indignation: For at a time when 80% of the world’s refugees are Muslim, it seems inappropriate at best to portray Islam as a major threat to world security.”

The parameters of integration of multi-religious communities are not defined here as the pope dealt with them in Sudan, in terms of moral principles, but rather from a pragmatic standpoint; nonetheless, certain basic points cohere with the principles articulated by John Paul II. “The integration of Muslim communities can . . . take place only on the basis of their acknowledgment of the prevailing rule of law. . . . It is incumbent on Muslims to utilize all means of legal protection afforded them under European laws to ensure their freedom of religious belief without impinging on the rights of others.” Concretely, the crown prince proposed that the European Convention on Human Rights be incorporated “into the national laws of all European states” in the interests of protecting the fundamental right to religious belief.

More important than specific points, however, is the general tenor of the speech, which is one of optimism, particularly regarding the fruits of interreligious cooperation. Quoting from a German physicist, he concluded: “‘In the history of human thinking the most fruitful developments frequently take place at those points where two different lines of thought meet. These lines may have their roots in quite different parts of human culture, in different times or different cultural environments or different religious traditions. Hence, if they actually meet . . . then one may hope that new and convincing developments will be able to grow.’ ”

The papal intervention into Muslim Sudan and the remarks by Crown Prince Hassan are responses to one of the gravest dangers—that of a generalized war, disguised as “religious warfare”—of our century. The only efficient means of averting such catastrophe is to forge a dialogue among the great religious cultures, which aims not only to protect and defend each culture, but to develop the richness of such diversity to serve the common good. How, concretely, this ecumenical process can unfold—not pragmatically, but as a principled dialogue flowing from shared universal principles, like those named by John Paul II—will be the subject of the next article of this series.