

When Civilizations Meet: How Joseph Ratzinger Sees Islam by Samir Khalil Samir, S.J.

The author of this essay is an Egyptian Jesuit who is very familiar with both the pope and the Muslim religion. This essay was first published in Asia News, reproduced here with permission.

Benedict XVI is probably one of the few figures to have profoundly understood the ambiguity in which contemporary Islam is being debated and its struggle to find a place in modern society. At the same time, he is proposing a way for Islam to work toward coexistence globally and with religions, based not on religious dialogue, but on dialogue between cultures and civilizations based on rationality and on a vision of man and human nature which comes before any ideology or religion. This choice to wager on cultural dialogue explains his decision to absorb the Pontifical Council for Inter-religious Dialogue into the larger Pontifical Council for Culture.

While the pope is asking Islam for dialogue based on culture, human rights, the refusal of violence, he is asking the West, at the same time, to go back to a vision of human nature and rationality in which the religious dimension is not excluded. In this way – and perhaps only in this way – a clash of civilizations can be avoided, transforming it instead into a dialogue between civilizations.

Islamic totalitarianism differs from Christianity

To understand Benedict XVI's thinking on Islamic religion, we must go over its evolution. A truly essential document is found in his book written in 1996, when he was still cardinal, together with Peter Seewald, entitled "The Salt of the Earth", in which he makes certain considerations and highlights various differences between Islam and Christian religion and the West.

First of all, he shows that there is no orthodoxy in Islam, because there is no one authority, no common doctrinal magisterium. This makes dialogue difficult: when we engage in dialogue, it is not "with Islam", but with groups.

But the key point that he tackles is that of shari'a. He points out that:

"the Koran is a total religious law, which regulates the whole of political and social life and insists that the whole order of life be Islamic. Shari'a shapes society from beginning to end. In this sense, it can exploit such freedoms as our constitutions give, but it cannot be its final goal to say: Yes, now we too are a body with rights, now we are present [in society] just like

the Catholics and the Protestants. In such a situation, [Islam] would not achieve a status consistent with its inner nature; it would be in alienation from itself”.

This alienation could be resolved only through the total Islamization of society. When for example an Islamic finds himself in a Western society, he can benefit from or exploit certain elements, but he can never identify himself with the non-Muslim citizen, because he does not find himself in a Muslim society.

Thus cardinal Ratzinger saw clearly an essential difficulty of socio-political relations with the Muslim world, which comes from the totalizing conception of Islamic religion, which is profoundly different from Christianity. For this reason, he insists in saying that we cannot try to project onto Islam the Christian vision of the relationship between politics and religion. This would be very difficult: Islam is a religion totally different from Christianity and Western society and this makes does not make coexistence easy.

In a closed-door seminar, held at Castel Gandolfo, September 1-2, 2005, the pope insisted on and stressed this same idea: the profound diversity between Islam and Christianity. On this occasion, he started from a theological point of view, taking into account the Islamic conception of revelation: the Koran “descended” upon Mohammad, it is not “inspired” to Mohammad. For this reason, a Muslim does not think himself authorized to interpret the Koran, but is tied to this text which emerged in Arabia in the 7th century. This brings to the same conclusions as before: the absolute nature of the Koran makes dialogue all the more difficult, because there is very little room for interpretation, if at all.

As we can see, his thinking as cardinal extends into his vision as pontiff, which highlights the profound differences between Islam and Christianity.

On July 24, during his stay in the Italian Aosta Valley region, he was asked if Islam can be described as a religion of peace, to which he replied “I would not speak in generic terms, certainly Islam contains elements which are in favour of peace, as it contains other elements.” Even if not explicitly, Benedict XVI suggests that Islam suffers from ambiguity vis-à-vis violence, justifying it in various cases. And he added: “We must always strive to find the better elements.” Another person asked him then if terrorist attacks can be considered anti-Christian. His reply is clear-cut: “No, generally the intention seems to be much more general and not directed precisely at Christianity.”

Dialogue between cultures is more fruitful than inter-religious dialogue

On August 20 in Cologne, pope Benedict XVI has his first big encounter with representatives of Muslim communities. In a relatively long speech, he says:

“I am certain that I echo your own thoughts when I bring up one of our concerns as we notice the spread of terrorism.”

I like the way he involves Muslims here, telling them that we have the same concern. He then goes on to say: “I know that many of you have firmly rejected, also publicly, in particular any connection between your faith and terrorism and have condemned it.”

Further on, he says: “Terrorism of any kind is a perverse and cruel [a word that he repeats 3 times] choice which shows contempt for the sacred right to life and undermines the very foundations of all civil coexistence.” Then, again, he involves the Islamic world:

“If together we can succeed in eliminating from hearts any trace of rancour, in resisting every form of intolerance and in opposing every manifestation of violence, we will turn back the wave of cruel fanaticism that endangers the lives of so many people and hinders progress towards world peace. The task is difficult but not impossible and the believer can accomplish this.”

I liked very much the way he stressed “eliminating from hearts any trace of rancour”: Benedict XVI has understood that one of the causes of terrorism is this sentiment of rancour. And further on:

“Dear friends, I am profoundly convinced that we must not yield to the negative pressures in our midst, but must affirm the values of mutual respect, solidarity and peace.” And also:

“There is plenty of scope for us to act together in the service of fundamental moral values. The dignity of the person and the defence of the rights which that dignity confers must represent the goal of every social endeavour and of every effort to bring it to fruition.”

And here we find a crucial sentence:

“This message is conveyed to us unmistakably by the quiet but clear voice of conscience. Only through recognition of the centrality of the person can a common basis for understanding be found, one which enables us to move beyond cultural conflicts and which neutralizes the disruptive power of ideologies.”

Thus, even before religion, there is the voice of conscience and we must all fight for moral values, for the dignity of the person, the defence of rights.

Therefore, for Benedict XVI, dialogue must be based on the centrality of the person, which overrides both cultural and ideological contrasts. And I think that, getting under ideologies, religions can also be understood. This is one of the pillars of the pope’s vision: it also explains why he united the Council for Inter-Religious Dialogue and the Council for Culture, surprising everyone. This choice derives from a profound vision and is not, as the press would have it, to “get rid” of archbishop Michael Fitzgerald, who deserves much recognition. That may have been part of it, but it was not the purpose.

The essential idea is that dialogue with Islam and with other religions cannot be essentially a theological or religious dialogue, except in the broad terms of moral values; it must instead be a dialogue of cultures and civilizations.

It is worth recalling that already as far back as 1999, Cardinal Ratzinger took part in an encounter with Prince Hassan of Jordan, Metropolitan Damaskinos of Geneva, Prince Sadruddin Aga Khan, deceased in 2003, and the Grand Rabbi of France René Samuel Sirat. Muslims, Jews and Christians were invited by a foundation for inter-religious and inter-cultural dialogue to create among them a pole for cultural dialogue.

This step towards cultural dialogue is of extreme importance. In any kind of dialogue that takes place with the Muslim world, as soon as talk begins on religious topics, discussion turns to the Palestinians, Israel, Iraq, Afghanistan, in other words all the questions of political and cultural conflict. An exquisitely theological discussion is never possible with Islam: one cannot speak of the Trinity, of Incarnation, etc. Once in Cordoba, in 1977, a conference was held on the notion of prophecy. After having dealt with the prophetic character of Christ as seen by Muslims, a Christian made a presentation on the prophetic character of Mohammad from the Christian point of view and dared to say that the Church cannot recognize him as prophet; at the most, it could define him as such but only in a generic sense, just as one

says that Marx is “prophet” of modern times. The conclusion? This question became the topic of conversation for the following three days, pre-empting the original conference.

The discussions with the Muslim world that I have found most fruitful have been those in which interdisciplinary and intercultural questions were discussed. I have taken part various times, at the invitation of Muslims, in inter-religious meetings in various parts of the Muslim world: talk was always on the encounter of religions and civilizations, or cultures.

Two weeks ago, in Isfahan, Iran, the title was “Meeting of civilizations and religions.” Next September 19, at Rome’s Pontifical Gregorian University, there will be a conference organized by the Iranian Ministry of Culture along with Italian authorities, and this too will be on the encounter between cultures, and will include the participation of former Iranian president Khatami.

The pope has understood this important aspect: discussions on theology can take place only among a few, but now is certainly not the time between Islam and Christianity. Instead, it is a question of tackling the question of coexistence in the concrete terms of politics, economy, history, culture, customs.

Rationality and faith

Another fact seems to me important. In an exchange that took place on October 25, 2004, between Italian historian, Ernesto Galli della Loggia, and the then cardinal Ratzinger, the latter, at a certain point, recalled the “seeds of the Word” and underscored the importance of rationality in Christian faith, seen by Church Fathers as the fulfilment of the search for truth found in philosophy. Galli della Loggia thus said: “Your hope which is identical to faith, brings with it a logos and this logos can become an apologia, a reply that can be communicated to others,” to everyone.

Cardinal Ratzinger replied:

“We do not want to create an empire of power, but we have something that can be communicated and towards which an expectation of our reason tends. It is communicable because it belongs to our shared human nature and there is a duty to communicate on the part of those who have found a treasure of truth and love. Rationality was therefore a postulate and condition of Christianity, which remains a European legacy for comparing ourselves peacefully and positively, with Islam and also the great Asian religions.”

Therefore, for the pope, dialogue is at this level, i.e. founded on reason. He then went on to add:

“This rationality becomes dangerous and destructive for the human creature if it becomes positivist [and here he critiques the West], which reduces the great values of our being to subjectivity [to relativism] and thus becomes an amputation of the human creature. We do not wish to impose on anyone a faith that can only be freely accepted, but as a vivifying force of the rationality of Europe, it belongs to our identity.”

Then comes the essential part:

“It has been said that we must not speak of God in the European constitution, because we must not offend Muslims and the faithful of other religions. The opposite is true: what offends Muslims and the faithful of other religions is not talking about God or our Christian roots, but rather the disdain for God and the sacred, that separates us from other cultures and does

not create the opportunity for encounter, but expresses the arrogance of diminished, reduced reason, which provokes fundamentalist reactions.”

Benedict XVI admires in Islam the certainty based on faith, which contrasts with the West where everything is relativized; and he admires in Islam the sense of the sacred, which instead seems to have disappeared in the West. He has understood that a Muslim is not offended by the crucifix, by religious symbols: this is actually a laicist polemic that strives to eliminate the religious from society. Muslims are not offended by religious symbols, but by secularized culture, by the fact that God and the values that they associate with God are absent from this civilization.

This is also my experience, when I chat every once in a while with Muslims who live in Italy. They tell me: this country offers everything, we can live as we like, but unfortunately there are no “principles” (this is the word they use). This is felt very much by the pope, who says: let’s go back to human nature, based on rationality, on conscience, which gives an idea of human rights; on the other hand, let’s not reduce rationality to something which is impoverished, but let’s integrate the religious in rationality; the religious is part of rationality.

In this, I think that Benedict XVI has stated more exactly the vision of John Paul II. For the previous pope, dialogue with Islam needed to be open to collaboration on everything, even in prayer. Benedict is aiming at more essential points: theology is not what counts, at least not in this stage of history; what counts is the fact that Islam is the religion that is developing more and is becoming more and more a danger for the West and the world. The danger is not in Islam in general, but in a certain vision of Islam that does never openly renounces violence and generates terrorism, fanaticism.

On the other hand, he does not want to reduce Islam to a social-political phenomenon. The Pope has profoundly understood the ambiguity of Islam, which is both one and the other, which at times plays on one or the other front. And his proposal is that, if we want to find a common basis, we must get out of religious dialogue to give humanistic foundations to this dialogue, because only these are universal and shared by all human beings. Humanism is a universal factor; faiths can be factors of clash and division.

Yes to reciprocity, no to “do-goodism”

The pope’s position never falls into the justification of terrorism and violence. Sometimes, even when it comes to Church figures, people slip into a generic kind of relativism: after all, there’s violence in all religions, even among Christians; or, violence is justified as a reply to other violence... No, this Pope has never made allusions of this kind.

But, on the other hand, he has never fallen into the behaviour found in certain Christian circles in the West marked by “do-goodism” and by guilt complexes. Recently, some Muslims have asked that the Pope ask forgiveness for the Crusades, colonialism, missionaries, cartoons, etc. He is not falling in this trap, because he knows that his words could be used not for building dialogue, but for destroying it. This is the experience that we have of the Muslim world: all such gestures, which are very generous and profoundly spiritual, to ask for forgiveness for historical events of the past, are exploited and are presented by Muslims as a settling of accounts: here, they say, you recognize it even yourself: you’re guilty. Such gestures never spark any kind of reciprocity.

At this point, it is worth recalling the Pope’s address to the Moroccan Ambassador, February 20, 2006, when he alluded to “respect for the convictions and religious practices of others so that, in a reciprocal manner, the exercise of freely-chosen religion is truly assured to all in all societies.” These are two small but very important affirmations on the reciprocity of religious

freedoms rights between Western and Islamic countries and on the freedom to change religion, something which is prohibited in Islam. The nice thing is that the pope dared to say them: in the political and Church world, people are often afraid to mention such things. It's enough to take note of the silence that reigns when it comes to the religious freedom violations that exist in Saudi Arabia.

I really like this pope, his balance, his clearness. He makes no compromise: he continues to underline the need to announce the Gospel in the name of rationality and therefore he does not let himself be influenced by those who fear and speak out against would-be proselytism. The pope asks always for guarantees that Christian faith can be "proposed" and that it can be "freely chosen."

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