

VITAL Theology

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John Paul II Opened Door to Many Religions But Vatican Also Set Limits on Interfaith Relations

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The late Pope John Paul II is widely credited with forging dramatically improved relations with Jews by apologizing for the Holocaust, but he also created a surprising new alliance with Muslims on the subject of birth control and paved the way for future advances with Buddhists and Hindus, said scholars interviewed by *Vital Theology*.

However, John Paul II also enforced strict boundaries on interreligious relations, and when a Jesuit theologian crossed those boundaries, he was ousted from his position at Weston Jesuit School of Theology in Massachusetts. Father Roger Haight's censure by the Vatican earlier this year was protested by the Catholic Theological Society of America.

'Utterly Stellar'

"The opening of the Islamic world by John Paul II was every bit as spectacular as the opening to the Jews," said David Burrell, Hesburgh Professor in Theology and Philosophy at the University of Notre Dame.

"The visit to Syria (in 2001) and especially the visit to the Grand Mosque in Damascus was stellar, utterly stellar," said Burrell, a member of the Holy Cross order. "The Grand Mosque has a kind of panache for the Muslim people not unlike Notre Dame in Paris" does for Roman Catholics.

"I think it's very important to recognize that the late pope was an actor and he was a charismatic leader," said Burrell, speaking from the Tantur Ecumenical Institute in Jerusalem. "The pope's visit to that mosque was one more symbolic breakthrough."

The Vatican did not always manage the follow-up to grand gestures too well, Burrell admitted, but in the case of Islam it was

handled "extremely well."

That task fell to Cardinal Francis Arinze, who was then episcopal director of the Vatican Congregation for Interreligious Dialogue. Arinze was assisted by the very capable Father Michael Fitzgerald, a member of a missionary order from Africa dubbed the "White Fathers" for their white garb. Fitzgerald followed up with substance, holding seminars and other meetings with Muslims in Cairo, Rome and other venues, said Burrell.



Sohail Hashmi

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Bridging Differences

While church operatives had been working behind the scenes for years to improve Catholic-Muslim relations, the pope's 2000 meeting with the grand mufti of Jerusalem was visible proof of his efforts to bridge the differences between Christianity and Islam, said Sohail Hashmi, associate professor of international relations at Mount Holyoke College in South Hadley, Mass.

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John Paul II reached out to Muslims in ways no previous pope had attempted. He passed a major litmus test with Arabs by speaking out for the rights of Palestinians. By receiving Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat on numerous occasions, he further cemented his strong relationship with Muslims. The pope also sought to distance himself from the legacy of the Crusades and the church's role in inciting the crusaders to march on the Holy Land.

"He went beyond tolerance," said Hashmi. "It was really a call to common action and in many ways that resonated with Muslims."

Verse 548 of the Quran encourages diverse religions to work together for humanity and discourages dissension between religious communities, he noted.

"There was, in the inner circle, a sense that theologians who go too far by Vatican standards would be questioned."

"What I really admired about Pope John Paul II is that he never contented himself to talk about the least common denominator that united the monotheistic faiths," said Hashmi. "He talked about the ways they could go beyond what is shared ... to contribute positively together to the future of humanity."

The pope positioned himself as a person who cared for ordinary Muslims as well as their religious leaders. When he visited Jerusalem in 2000, he made a point to include a stop at the Haifa refugee camp, which is in a thoroughly Muslim environment.

The pope was attracted by what Burrell described as "a palpable sense of the presence of God in the faith of what we would call ordinary Muslim people."

The pope was a person of great faith and he could recognize that faith in others, even when it was a faith of a different kind "because the God is the same, of course," said Burrell.

Surprising Alliance

Hashmi describes a defining instance of Muslim-Catholic cooperation that occurred during the 1994 United Nations International Conference on Population and Development.

"I was puzzled why there was such a strong alliance between Muslim religious leaders and the Vatican, given the strong differences in the teachings on contraception," said Hashmi.

Because Prophet Muhammad approved of contraception, it has never been a moral or theological issue in Islam. But John Paul's Vatican continued to hold the line against birth control some 1,400 years later.

However, in recent years, Muslim religious leaders became convinced that

unfettered access to birth control leads to promiscuity among young people. That was enough to align them with the pope's delegates on the key issue of population control, said Hashmi.

The pope's stand on maintaining the integrity of the family and his opposition to population regulation, birth control and abortion all found favor among Muslim religious leaders.

During the current intifida, the Vatican joined the fray when Christians were denied access to religious sites in Bethlehem. But those who criticize the pope for failing to do more to bring lasting peace to the Middle East are off target, said Hashmi.

"The Vatican has been very assiduous not to interpose itself between the United States and the Middle Eastern parties in the conflict because, I think, it realizes that it can offer its good offices (only) in a limited sort of way," said Hashmi.

"The United States is the only party left that can directly put pressure on both the Arabs and the Israelis to make concessions," said Hashmi. "The Vatican doesn't enjoy that status."

Work of the Church

The pope viewed development of mutual respect between Christianity and other religions to be an essential part of the work of the church, said Francis X. Clooney, a Boston College theology professor who has focused his career on the religions of India.

The pope visited India on more than one occasion, but nothing substantial developed from those trips, said Clooney, a Jesuit priest.

"I don't think you can point to his writings and say that he cultivated an understanding of Hinduism or Buddhism," said Clooney. In fact, the pope's 1994 book, *Crossing the Threshold to Hope*, annoyed Buddhists by describing Buddhism as a nihilistic religion without a positive view of the world.

"There were protests in Sri Lanka saying the pope clearly didn't understand Buddhism and that's probably true," said Clooney. "He didn't have the opportunity to study Hinduism or Buddhism deeply."

Still, Christians who are committed to working more closely with Buddhists or Hindus can take inspiration from advancements that the pope fostered in relations with Jews and Muslims.

John Paul II took heat from some conservative Catholics for treating people of other faiths as equals when, in Assisi, Italy, in 1986, he called together leaders from a dozen faiths to pray for peace.

"I think his point was that these are religious leaders and we don't have to be entirely in competition," said Clooney. Instead, the pope sought promises to work together for peace.

"That's a great symbolic moment in Assisi where he chose to move forward," said Clooney.

In 2000, the pope irritated Hindus with a statement on evangelism. By his

reckoning, the first millennium was for evangelizing Europe, the second millennium was for evangelizing the Americas and the emphasis in the third millennium would be Asia.

Local Hindu leaders took that as a sign that there was going to be a new effort to convert Hindus. That was not the point of the statement, said Clooney, but the pope declined to back away from it.

“There were protests in Sri Lanka saying the pope clearly didn’t understand Buddhism and that’s probably true.”

“I think he was insisting that part of being Christian was to witness to the truth of Christ and to preach the gospel,” said Clooney. “But I’m not sure his relationships with the people of Asia ever got to the point of explaining what all of that meant.”

Papal encyclicals continued to emphasize the need for both evangelism and dialogue.

“I think you can honestly say that the pope, in his letters and his attitudes, exemplified the way to (work together with Hindus and Buddhists) in terms of fostering dialogue, fostering mutual respect and keeping a sense of Christian identity.”

Now, Clooney added, Pope Benedict XVI and the churches in Asia need to build on that in meaningful ways with Hinduism, Buddhism and other religions. “This pope was not doing the work for Asians, but I think he was creating an environment in which they can do it.”

Theological Boundaries

Although he will be remembered and admired for the ways he reached out to people of other faiths, the pope was criticized in some quarters for the way he enforced boundaries for theologians involved in interreligious scholarship.

“There was, in the inner circle, a sense that theologians who go too far

by Vatican standards would be questioned,” said Clooney.

On the other hand, “it would be totally misrepresenting to say the pope was oppressing the church or there was a climate of fear,” he said. “But clearly there were cases where what he meant by interreligious dialogue and interreligious respect didn’t go as far as some people would think it should go.”

The most famous case of Vatican scrutiny of interreligious scholarship involved the Belgian theologian Jacques Dupuis. A Jesuit, he studied in India from 1948 to 1984, when he was called to Rome to teach at the Gregorian University.

His fascination with the religious traditions of Asia led to a new theological approach that John L. Allen Jr. of the *National Catholic Reporter* described as “one that strove to uphold traditional Catholic doctrine about the uniqueness of the salvation won by Christ, while at the same time acknowledging that other religions play a positive role in God’s plan for humanity.”

That work led to Dupuis’s groundbreaking 1997 book, *Toward a Christian Theology of Religious Pluralism*.

A year later, he was notified that an investigation had been launched by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, an office under the command of then Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger. The investigation lasted more than 32 months and ended with a “notification” in January 2001.

“He was silenced, not allowed to teach while they investigated his work,” said Boston College’s Clooney. “In the end, all they really said was there are certain ambiguities which could be misunderstood by some people—which is pretty vague—and then they let him off.”

Dupuis died in December 2004.



Francis X. Clooney

Haight Silenced

More recently, another Jesuit priest, Roger Haight, was silenced from teaching at Weston Jesuit University after publication of his book, *Jesus: Symbol of God*.

After a five-year investigation, the Vatican’s doctrinal congregation said in a notification dated Dec. 13, 2004, that it had found “serious doctrinal errors” in his work and forbade him to teach as a Catholic theologian. The notice became public in February 2005.

“I was puzzled why there was such a strong alliance between Muslim religious leaders and the Vatican, given the strong differences in the teachings on contraception.”

“One of the issues they criticized him on was that he was pushing the view that just as Jesus is the savior for Christians, you have to admit that there are other saving figures for people of other religions,” said Clooney.

In 2000, the doctrinal congregation under Ratzinger’s supervision issued a declaration, *Dominus Iesus* (“The Lord Jesus”), reiterating church teaching that Jesus Christ is the one savior of all and warning against any theories that would contradict or undermine that teaching.

On Feb. 8, 2005, the Catholic News Service noted:

“At the start of his book, Father Haight expresses the conviction that in the postmodern era, with its pervasive

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consciousness of pluralism, "Christianity in the 21st century must confront new problems and issues that will generate genuinely new understandings and behavior patterns in and by the churches ... But at the same time Christianity, in this case in its theology and Christology, must remain faithful to its originating revelation and consistent tradition."

The notification said Haight's assertion that Catholic theology must be "in dialogue" with the modern world leads him to downplay central teachings of the church.

Further, CNS noted, "The congregation also criticized Father Haight's assertion that 'because of modern pluralistic consciousness,' one cannot continue to affirm that Christianity is a superior religion or that Christ is the centerpiece of God's plan for salvation.' "

Haight now lectures at nondenominational Union Theological Seminary in New York City.

The board of the Catholic Theological Society of America issued a statement declaring that

Haight's book, *Jesus: Symbol of God*, "has done a great service in framing crucial questions that need to be addressed today" and that Haight has welcomed critique of his work.

The society, of which Haight is a former president, held an open forum on his book in 2002.

"Ironically, rather than promote greater criticism of the book, the Congregation's intervention will most likely discourage debates over the book, effectively stifling further criticism and undermining our ability as Catholic theologians to openly critique our colleague," the board's statement said. ◀

David Burrell is author of *Faith and Freedom: An Interfaith Perspective* and of *Freedom and Creation in Three Traditions*.

Sohail Hashmi is editor of *Islamic Political Ethics: Civil Society, Pluralism, and Confrontation*.

Francis X. Clooney is author of *Divine Mother, Blessed Mother: Hindu Goddesses and the Virgin Mary* and of *Hindu God, Christian God: How Reason Helps to Break Down the Boundaries between Religions*.

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