Beyond tolerance: Pope Benedict XVI's fresh approach to interreligious dialogue

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In the last 2000 years, only two popes have visited mosques: John Paul II and Benedict XVI. For John Paul, while it was an extraordinary gesture, it was emblematic of his papacy. Only two years earlier, he had kissed the Quran, while visiting with a delegation of Iraqi Muslims, and in 1986, he invited religious leaders from around the world to Assisi in order to come together to pray for peace. Conversely, for Benedict, the move was uncharacteristic. Only a few months before his visit to Istanbul’s Blue Mosque, Benedict had enraged the Muslim community with his comments at Regensburg, and in 1986, Benedict, then Cardinal Ratzinger, was openly critical of the gathering at Assisi. In one of the few public disagreements between these two friends, Benedict firmly stated that Assisi could not be the model for interreligious dialogue and argued that it gave the false impression that all religions are equally valid. Given Benedict’s disapproval Assisi and then his recent visit to the Blue Mosque, how are we to interpret these seemingly contradictory actions? What is the approach to interreligious dialogue that will be taken by this new pontificate?

With his recent interfaith gesture in Turkey, it would seem that Benedict is shifting his position on interfaith relations and dialogue in order to carry on the legacy left by his predecessor. However, this position is only partially accurate. While Benedict has been heavily influenced by John Paul’s advances in interreligious dialogue, he has brought his own fresh approach to this dialogue. As Cardinal Paul Poupard, the head of the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue, has stated, “Pope Benedict XVI is carrying on the work of John Paul II with a style of his own: It’s a work of continuation, not imitation.”2 It is my contention that Benedict’s vision for interreligious dialogue contains the same elements as John Paul’s approach,

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but Benedict has chosen to emphasize reason and Christian distinctiveness rather than shared beliefs and practices. Whereas John Paul stressed what the traditions share, Benedict has opted for dialogue that confronts the differences between traditions but recognizes our common humanity.

In order to understand how Benedict differs in his approach to interreligious dialogue, we will begin by examining the work and words of John Paul concerning other religious traditions. We will see that John Paul consistently displays openness to other faiths but also asserts the uniqueness of Christianity. Then, we will examine the papacy of Benedict in order to understand how he is adopting the paradigm for dialogue that John Paul developed, while at the same time extending it and giving it his own unique stamp.

In order to comprehend John Paul’s view on dialogue, we must begin by recalling the theology of other religions that is laid out in *Nostra Aetate*, because John Paul’s understanding of the purpose, conduct, and goals of dialogue is shaped significantly by this declaration. The statement begins by acknowledging that men are united by their search for truth and goodness. Then, the Council affirms that other traditions contain “rays of truth” and avows that the Church denies “nothing that is true and holy in these religions.” In this regard, the Council encourages interreligious dialogue that promotes and preserves “the good things, spiritual and moral.” However, simultaneously, the declaration also asserts that Christianity contains the fullest expression of God’s Truth and reminds Christians that they are called to proclaim the Truth of Christ in a brotherly way, while abhorring the persecution of any peoples in the name of religion or race and working for social equality and freedom.³ In *Nostra Aetate*, we see two essential components of interreligious dialogue being outlined: openness and proclamation. While the

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³ Second Vatican Council, *Nostra Aetate*, nos. 1-2. All official church documents and papal speeches are taken from the Vatican website, unless otherwise noted. The issues that *Nostra Aetate* seeks to address are dealt with in other church documents. See also Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue, *Dialogue and Proclamation*. 
Church welcomes exchange and cooperation with other faiths, authentic dialogue means that Christians cannot dismiss Christ’s call to witness to the Truth.⁴

Throughout his papacy, John Paul’s teachings on interreligious dialogue included and revolved around the framework that Nostra Aetate sets forth. On the one hand, he explained how Christianity diverges from other traditions in its views of the world and love of Christ. He repeatedly encouraged Christians to renew their missionary efforts and evangelize the world, which is the message that he clearly delivered in his encyclical Redemptoris Missio. In the encyclical, he discusses the “urgency of missionary activity” and points out that “missionary activity is a matter for all Christians, for all dioceses and parishes, Church institutions and associations.”⁵ On the other hand, John Paul appreciated that members of religious traditions are united by their search for truth, possession of faith, and desire to bring about a just and caring world. He realized that traditions have a great deal in common and loved that several traditions share similar spiritual practices. In Crossing the Threshold of Hope, he writes, “[I]nstead of marveling at the fact that providence allows such a great variety of religions, we would be amazed at the number of common elements found within them.”⁶ For John Paul, while the differences between traditions are significant, so are the similarities.

While John Paul’s approach to interreligious dialogue contains both of these elements, openness and proclamation, it is essential to note that in his dealings with other members of other faiths John Paul tended to focus on what traditions and people have in common. He stressed these common elements wherever he traveled, particularly in his face-to-face encounters with

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⁴ This is typically referred to as the inclusivist position, which is a position that recognizes truth in other religions but considers one religion to contain the Truth. This position represents the middle ground between exclusivism, which sees no validity in other religions, and pluralism, which does not elevate one faith above any other. For more on this, see Diana Eck, Encountering God: A Spiritual Journey from Bozeman to Banaras (Boston: Beacon Press, 1993) 170-190.


people of other traditions. For example, in pointing out the similarities between Islam and Christianity in an address to Muslims in the Philippines, John Paul stated, “Dear Muslims, my brothers: I would like to add that we Christians, just like you, seek the basis and model of mercy in God himself, the God to whom your Book gives the very beautiful name of *al-Rahman*, while the Bible calls him *al-Rahum*, the Merciful One.”

Writing about this tendency of John Paul to emphasize commonality in his interactions with members of other faiths, Harold Kasimow, in his book *John Paul II and Interreligious Dialogue*, comments, “[W]hen he [John Paul II] is in meetings with people, he sees them as being created in the image of God; thus, his concern and compassion for the sublime dignity of each person comes to the fore. During such moments when he sees the faith in the hearts of human beings, he transcends any labels, such as exclusivism, inclusivism, or pluralism.”

While John Paul never overlooked differences in creeds, he always seemed to look to the people of faith behind them, who shared his common humanity.

John Paul’s emphasis on commonality is exemplified by the prominence that he gave to shared practice. In 1986, when John Paul invited religious leaders from around the world to Assisi for the inaugural World Day of Peace, he brought them there to share an experience of unity. In his remarks at the conclusion of that day, John Paul stressed the common practice that had brought them all together. He noted, “If there are many and important differences among us, there is also a common ground, whence to operate together in the solution of this dramatic challenge of our age: true peace or catastrophic war? Yes, there is the dimension of prayer, which in the very real diversity of religions tries to express communication with a Power above

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7 Qtd. in ibid., 19.
8 Ibid., 19.
all our human forces.” While he realized that differences must be respected, John Paul also recognized that those differences could not be immovable roadblocks to social change and mutual understanding, so he focused on how traditions could work, grow, and even practice together.

John Paul was the most global pope in the history of the church. He extended his hand to other traditions and invited them into dialogue, in a period where interreligious dialogue and interfaith cooperation was in its infancy. He traveled to over one hundred countries and addressed members of different traditions throughout the world. He referred the Jewish people as “our elder brothers” and encouraged tens of thousands of Muslims gathered in Morocco in 1985 to work alongside Christians to build a better world. He was not only the first pope to visit a mosque, but he also was the first pope to visit a synagogue. Perhaps because of his Polish background, his experience as an actor, or just his charismatic personality, John Paul was comfortable on the front line of interreligious dialogue and making gestures that signified unity. While he took seriously the significant differences between traditions and reinforced the Christian call to proclamation, he consistently emphasized the commonality between faiths in his speeches and dialogue.

When we examine Benedict’s approach interreligious dialogue, we see the same elements that were present in John Paul’s views. Like John Paul, Benedict also has highlighted the mutual importance of both open dialogue and proclamation. However, Benedict’s style and focus have been different. Whereas John Paul gave significant attention to the similarities in beliefs and practices between traditions, Benedict has chosen to emphasize the distinctiveness of Christianity and the importance of finding common solutions rooted in reason not doctrine. Furthermore,

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9 Qtd. in ibid., 32.
10 Qtd. in Sherwin and Kasimow, John Paul II, 147.
Benedict has been much more direct in challenging other religions, particularly Islam, concerning issues such as religious freedom and the incompatibility of religion and violence.

Benedict, like his predecessor, understands the critical importance of ongoing dialogue. Even prior to becoming pope, Benedict wrote in his book, Many Religions-One Covenant that “peace between the religions, ecumenism across the religions, is a duty imposed on all religious communities.”

Similarly, at a meeting in Cologne, Germany, Benedict told the Muslim delegation present that “interreligious dialogue and intercultural dialogue between Christians and Muslims cannot be reduced to an optional extra. It is in fact a vital necessity, on which in large measure our future depends.”

Benedict realizes that without interreligious dialogue not only are religions incapable of solving conflicts between themselves, but they are also unable to be a much needed moral light in the world.

However, Benedict is also keenly aware of the doctrinal differences that separate religious traditions, and he has refused to compromise or reinterpret Christianity in the name of dialogue. On the contrary, for both Benedict and John Paul this would not be authentic dialogue at all, because it lacks honesty and seeks tolerance through omission. Benedict makes this point clearly in Dominus Iesus, which he wrote as Prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith and delivered with the approval of John Paul. Benedict writes, “Equality, which is a presupposition of inter-religious dialogue, refers to the equal personal dignity of the parties in dialogue, not to doctrinal content, nor even less to the position of Jesus Christ — who is God himself made man — in relation to the founders of the other religions.”

While many opponents criticized this document and considered it a departure from John Paul’s attitude toward

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13 Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, Dominus Iesus, no. 22.
interreligious dialogue, it was not. It merely emphasizes the distinctiveness and truthfulness of Christianity, which was an element of John Paul’s approach but one that was overshadowed by his appeal to our commonality and interfaith gestures.

Benedict’s shift in the focus of interreligious dialogue away from commonality to distinctiveness seems to be rooted in his apprehension of the pervasive relativism in our culture. When *Dominus Iesus* was released, he stated:

> In the lively contemporary debate on the relationship between Christianity and the other religions, the idea is gaining ground that all religions are for their followers equally valid ways of salvation. This is a widespread persuasion not only in theological circles but also increasingly large sectors of public opinion, Catholic and non-Catholic, especially those most influenced by the cultural orientation prevalent in the West today, which could be called, without fear of being contradicted by the word relativism.  

In this culture of relativism, dialogue must take on a different tone. For Christians, it cannot imply that there is no objective Truth but simply equally valid truths. In his homily the day before his election to the papacy, Benedict warned, “Today, having a clear faith based on the Creed of the Church is often labeled as fundamentalism. Whereas relativism, that is, letting oneself be ‘tossed here and there, carried about by every wind of doctrine,’ seems the only attitude that can cope with modern times. We are moving toward a dictatorship of relativism which does not recognize anything as for certain and which has as its highest goal one’s own ego and one’s own desires.” In light of this threat, Benedict has chosen not to emphasize how religions are the same but how Christianity is different. Certainly, the commonalities between the faiths that John Paul highlighted have not been removed, but they have been deemphasized in this new papacy. While this may be labeled as fundamentalism, it is in the same vein as John

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14 Qtd. in Marco Bardazzi, *In the Vineyard of the Lord* (New York: Rizzoli International Publications, 2005) 92. Here, it seems that the way in which Benedict defines relativism would make it equivalent to and interchangeable with the term “pluralism.”

15 Qtd. in ibid., 127.
Paul’s repeated calls for proclamation, because it is precisely the unique Truth of Christ that mandates proclamation.

Therefore, Benedict has chosen to seek common ground for dialogue not in doctrine but in a robust conception of reason. Drawing on the classical notion of reason, Benedict understands human reason as a participation in divine reason; it is what separates us from the animals. Accordingly, there are certain moral principles of natural law that can be derived through reason and thus are accessible to all. As Benedict stated this year in his message at the World Day of Peace, “Today too, recognition and respect for natural law represents the foundation for a dialogue between the followers of the different religions and between believers and non-believers.”

By rooting dialogue in this classical understanding of reason and natural law, Benedict broadens the dialogue past simple commonalities in faith, and he provides a foundation for the common ground and fruitful dialogue that moves around doctrinal differences.

It is on this new basis for dialogue that Benedict has been willing to challenge the Church’s partners in dialogue to self-examination and to change in areas concerning basic human rights. As John Allen, the author of The Rise of Benedict XVI points out, “Pope John Paul met with Muslims more than 60 times over the course of his pontificate, and his hope was to build bridges. Pope Benedict, on the other hand, seems to believe those bridges have been built, and now it’s time to walk across them.” In walking across those bridges built by John Paul, Benedict has not hesitated to be direct and honest in expressing his concerns over the lack of respect for Christians in many Muslim countries. At his meeting in Turkey with the diplomatic corps, Benedict addressed this lack of religious freedom for Christians and reminded the ambassadors that “the Turkish Constitution recognizes every citizen’s right to freedom of

worship and freedom of conscience. The civil authorities of every democratic country are duty bound to guarantee the effective freedom of all believers and to permit them to organize freely the life of their religious communities.”

Based on his conception of reason, Benedict also openly has been critical of the violence that is being carried out in the name of religion. In his address at Regensburg, Benedict pointed out that violence and religion are incompatible, because violence is unreasonable and thus against the nature of God. He went on to argue that it is a mistake to think that any true faith in God would ever permit or endorse violence. For Benedict, this truth is accessible to everyone, because it is located at the intersection of faith and reason; it is not merely a doctrinal claim.

If religious intolerance and the false connection between religion and violence truly are to be addressed in dialogue, then Pope Benedict’s direct style seems imperative. We again have entered an era where religion is being used to justify persecution and violence. In order for dialogue to be transformative and effective in combating social injustice, then each side must not only be open to the other but also willing to consider challenging issues. Benedict appears to be pushing dialogue in this direction by raising hard questions through his appeals to universal reason.

Since John Paul’s papacy was characterized by cooperation and understanding toward other traditions, many critics have attacked Benedict for his apparent failure to embrace the same approach. While it is true that Benedict is less apt to share in public gestures of interreligious practice, after examining John Paul’s approach to interreligious dialogue, we have seen that

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18 Pope Benedict XVI, “Meeting with the Diplomatic Corps to the Republic of Turkey,” 2006.
19 Pope Benedict XVI, “Address at the University of Regensburg,” 2006.
20 George Weigel has suggested that the Church needs to be more strategic in its approach to dialogue, particularly Christian-Muslim dialogue. He argues that if dialogue is going to be effective, then a direct approach, like Benedict’s, is necessary not only to challenge fundamentalist elements within Islam but also to support more tolerant and moderate groups in the tradition, who are countering extremists. For more on this, see George Weigel, God’s Choice: Pope Benedict XVI and the Future of the Catholic Church (New York: HarpersCollins Publishers, 2005) 238-240.
Benedict’s vision for dialogue contains the same elements as his predecessor’s. The difference between the two leaders is that Benedict has chosen to emphasize Christian distinctiveness and has attempted to find commonality in reason rather than practice and doctrine. While Benedict’s style is more direct, it is not worse but merely different. Benedict still sees interreligious dialogue as a means to combat the growing challenges that our world is facing, but he realizes that in order to achieve cooperation we must remain open to both dialogue and debate. We must move beyond similarities in order to explore our faiths in such a way that brings about self-examination as well as genuine mutual understanding, rather than mere tolerance.