Interreligious Dialogue:  
Contrasting Approaches of John Paul II & Benedict XVI

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Abstract

If the Pontificate of John Paul II demonstrated an openness to religious pluralism and enthusiasm for interreligious dialogue, has this era now passed? Certainly, under the papacy of Benedict XVI, new questions are being asked about the relationship of the Catholic Church to other “ecclesial communities” let alone to other religions. There are particular questions being asked about the place and even possibility of interreligious dialogue. What are we to make of this? On the one hand, it is arguable that little has changed at the doctrinal-theological level. On the other hand, there appears to be significant change at the level of symbol and rhetoric.
Introduction
It will be useful to discuss some of the theological, practical and political issues that frame the current debate about the Catholic Church’s understanding of, and commitment to, interreligious dialogue in light of perceived changes under the Pontificate of Benedict XVI. This will involve some analysis of Pope Benedict’s words and actions in relation to those of his predecessor, Pope John Paul II. Issues raised include: the very possibility of interreligious dialogue; the relationship between religion and culture; and the apparent conflict between proclamation and dialogue. Despite the contrasting approaches of John Paul and Benedict, interreligious dialogue retains a central place in the Church’s self-understanding for both pontificates.

John Paul II and Benedict XVI: Points of Commonality and Difference
John Paul II and Benedict XVI are the only two popes in history who have visited mosques; and, with the likely single exception of St Peter, the only two to have visited synagogues.¹ Likewise, both popes created new ground by visiting Jerusalem and praying at the Western Wall.² If nothing else, this demonstrates a significant dimension of continuity in terms of ongoing papal commitment to dialogue with Jews and Muslims. Similar examples could be given in relation to dialogue with other faith traditions. For one blogger on an anti-Catholic website, the similarities are so profound that Benedict XVI is called “the papal clone of John Paul II”.³

¹ John Paul II made the first historic visit to the synagogue in Rome (1986); to date, Benedict XVI has visited synagogues in Cologne (2005), New York (2008) and Rome (2010). John Paul made the first papal visit to a mosque in Damascus (2001); to date, Benedict has visited mosques in Istanbul (2006) and Amman, Jordan (2009).
² These visits occurred in 2000 (John Paul) and 2009 (Benedict) respectively.
This is an opinion unlikely to be shared by some Catholic theologians and practitioners of interreligious dialogue who are mindful of the present Pope’s former role as Prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith cautioning against syncretism and relativism, and calling certain theologians to task including the celebrated cases of Tissa Balasuriya, Jacques Dupuis and, under the present pontificate, Peter Phan. Moreover, it is noted, on becoming pope, the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue was demoted (albeit temporarily) to a sub-dicastery under the Pontifical Council for Culture; and former PCIRD head, Archbishop Michael Fitzgerald, was ‘relieved’ of his position. However, lest we get carried away with these and other examples, such as the Regensburg Address to which I will return, they need to be interpreted in accordance with the church’s now well-established commitment to dialogue with other ecclesial, cultural and religious traditions. Such commitment, along with its theoretical and practical expressions, cannot avoid theological reflection and scrutiny. In the Catholic Church, this necessarily involves a legitimate role for the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith – while admitting there is always room for debate as to the manner or appropriateness of such involvement.

So, part of the difference of approach of John Paul and Benedict relates to the latter’s former Vatican role. But this does not explain the whole story. We are also dealing with two vastly different personalities. John Paul established warm and open relationships with people of many faiths; he became a personal friend of the Dali Lama; he comfortably acclaimed Jews, Christians and Muslims as all “children of

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Abraham”; he referred to Jews as “our elder brothers in faith”; he reached out to Indigenous peoples of many lands, including our own, seeking forgiveness and reconciliation.6 This was a pope very much at ease strutting the world stage, reaching out to people of all faith traditions and establishing connections that were often profound and long-lasting. He had no difficulty in taking the initiative to enable religious and spiritual leaders from across the globe to meet at Assisi on two occasions in a spirit of fasting, silence and prayer for world peace.7

In reference to the first Assisi meeting, we also see points of divergence between John Paul and the then Cardinal Ratzinger who was reported saying Assisi is not a model for interreligious dialogue. The reason: it gives the false impression that all religions are equal.8 In saying this, the future Pope Benedict was obviously not siding with Cardinal Lefebvre who found the Assisi meeting an act of apostasy.9 Nonetheless, it demonstrates that there are, indeed, differences of approach to the meeting of religions between John Paul and Benedict. Admitting that both are theologians and

6 See, for example, his memorable address to Indigenous Australian people, Alice Springs, 29 November 1986; reprinted in Australasian Catholic Record 83/3 (July 2006), 259-263.
9 When Lefebvre went into schism in 1988, his stated reasons were to protect Catholicism from the perfidies of Vatican II and “the spirit of Assisi”. See http://www.sspxasia.com/Documents/Archbishop-Lefebvre/Episcopal-Consecration.htm [Accessed 5 July 2010].

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intellectuals in their own right, John Paul was more alive to the power of symbol than his successor who is decidedly more – well how do you say it? – Germanic! There is also difference in understanding as to the possibilities and objectives of interreligious dialogue. Such differences are something more than rhetoric even if, as I will argue, there is more continuity than discontinuity between them.

John Paul’s concern was to build bridges. He did this in what is sometimes considered outlandish ways, such as the kissing of the Quran.\(^\text{10}\) For the bloggers out there, there are a number of web-sites that specifically address the question as to why the Pope did this.\(^\text{11}\) And you will be most entertained and very surprised at some of the reasons given including the idea that Pope John Paul agreed that all religions are the same! This is, of course, quite contrary to his understanding – and, needless to say, to Benedict’s. Nonetheless, the distinctiveness of their theological approaches to dialogue deserves our attention – and explains why I am prepared to wager a bet that Benedict will not be found kissing the Quran!

\(^{10}\) Although a private audience with Iraqi Muslims (both Shi’a and Sunni), the event is attested to by Chaldean Catholic Patriarch, Raphael I, who was also present: "At the end of the audience the Pope bowed to the Muslim holy book, the Qu’ran, presented to him by the delegation, and he kissed it as a sign of respect. The photo of that gesture has been shown repeatedly on Iraqi television and it demonstrates that the Pope is not only aware of the suffering of the Iraqi people, he has also great respect for Islam." See web-site: http://www.traditioninaction.org/RevolutionPhotos/A055rcKoran.htm [Accessed 5 July 2010]

\(^{11}\) See, for example: http://romancatholicblog.typepad.com/roman_catholic_blog/2006/05/why_did_pope_jo.html [Accessed 5 July 2010]
Both John Paul and Benedict appeal to *Nostra Aetate* and other Vatican II documents as providing the foundational framework for Christian dialogue with other traditions. Whereas Christianity contains the fullest expression of divine truth, and calls on Christians to proclaim that truth to the world, other traditions contain "elements which are true and good" (*LG*, 16), "precious things, both religious and human" (*GS*, 92), "seeds of contemplation" (*AG*, 18), "elements of truth and grace" (*AG*, 9), "seeds of the Word" (*AG*, 11; 15), and "rays of that truth which illumines all humankind" (*NA*, 2). Consequently, the Council encourages Christians to "enter with prudence and charity into dialogues (*colloquia*) and collaboration with members of other religions" in order to overcome divisions, foster friendly relations, achieve mutual understanding and to work creatively for peace, liberty, social justice and moral values (*NA*, 2f.). Dialogue has an added dimension, namely, that Christians may "learn of the riches which a generous God has distributed among the nations" (*AG* 11).

John Paul develops a theological understanding in which the Holy Spirit is the pivotal agent for dialogue among the religions. In his very first encyclical, he spoke of the “one Spirit of truth” uniting all religions.\(^\text{12}\) In his missionary encyclical, *Redemptoris Missio*, he notes the Holy Spirit is to be found not only invisibly in the hearts and minds of individuals (as Vatican II had asserted) but also visibly in their religious traditions.\(^\text{13}\) Later, in a General Audience, he develops this idea of the Spirit’s role in other religions in a more explicit way:

\(^\text{12}\) *Redemptor Hominis* (1979), no. 6. Also see his encyclical, *Dominum et Vivificantem* (1986), on the presence and activity of the Holy Spirit in the world beyond the Church.

\(^\text{13}\) "The Spirit's presence and activity affect not only individuals but also society and history, peoples, cultures and religions." *Redemptoris Missio* (1990), no. 28. All official church documents and papal speeches are taken from the Vatican web-site, [http://www.vatican.va/](http://www.vatican.va/) [Accessed 5 July 2010].
Every quest of the human spirit for truth and goodness, and in the last analysis for God, is inspired by the Holy Spirit. The various religions arose from this primordial human openness to God. At their origins we often find founders who, with the help of God’s Spirit, achieved a deeper religious experience. Handed on to others, this experience took form in the doctrines, rites and precepts of the various religions.14

Moreover, he goes on to say (quoting from Dialogue & Proclamation) that it is in “the sincere practice of what is good in their own religious traditions” that the members of other religions respond positively to God’s saving invitation.15

Without ignoring that salvation is received only through Jesus Christ – “even while they do not recognize or acknowledge him as their Saviour” – John Paul acknowledges the positive value and Spirit-filled presence of other religions’ beliefs and practices.

John Paul does not downplay the differences between religions. Nor does he retreat from proclaiming Christ’s universal role in salvation and explicating the need for the church and all Christians to announce Jesus Christ to the world. However, by centring his theology on the Holy Spirit as the principle of unity among all peoples and religions, he stresses those aspects we hold in common. “We Christians,” he says to Muslims in the Philippines, “just like you, seek the basis and model of mercy in God himself”.16 Elsewhere he states that while we might marvel the great variety of religions, we should be more “amazed at the number of common elements found within them.”17 This pope’s enthusiasm for interreligious dialogue demonstrates his

15 See Dialogue and Proclamation, no. 29.
17 John Paul II, Crossing the Threshold of Hope, cited Gross, 5.
capacity for what Panikkar calls “intra-religious dialogue”, that is, the capacity to celebrate and deepen his own Christian-Catholic faith in the context of shared spiritual experience with religious others. This is the “mystery of unity” he discovered at Assisi.

Benedict’s reticence to endorse an Assisi-like gathering of spiritual leaders from across the traditions should not be seen in terms of opposition to dialogue. He states that “peace among the religions, ecumenism across the religions, is a duty imposed on all religious communities.” Moreover, he acknowledges in an address to Muslims at Cologne, Germany, that “interreligious dialogue and intercultural dialogue between Christians and Muslims cannot be reduced to an optional extra. It is in fact a vital necessity.” However, whereas John Paul emphasises commonality among religious faiths, without denying differences of beliefs, Benedict is more keenly aware of doctrinal distinctions that separate the religions. For him, the common ground between religions on which dialogue depends is neither doctrine nor religious experience as such, but the dictates of reason. His now infamous Regensburg address was, in fact, an attempt to outline such a rationale.

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20 Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, Many Religions—One Covenant (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1999), 94.
Despite the unfortunate use of a Byzantine emperor’s less than complimentary remarks about the Prophet Mohammed, the central thrust of this address was not the critique of Islam (except in the general sense of insisting on the incompatibility of religion and violence), but the critique of contemporary secular culture in the West.\(^\text{22}\) The pope’s analysis stresses how the separation of faith and reason, beginning with the Reformation, continuing through the Enlightenment, and now evident in the West’s all too easy embrace of pluralism and relativism, is a rejection of the ‘decisive link’ between Christian faith and Greek philosophy. This convergence, he argues, “created Europe and remains the foundation of what can rightly be called Europe”. While some may argue this represents a nostalgia for a Europe that no longer exists, for Benedict it provides a particular if somewhat Eurocentric basis upon which Christian dialogue with other religions can be fruitful: “It is to this great logos, to this breadth of reason, that we invite our partners in the dialogue of cultures”.

Benedict’s predilection to speak of “dialogue of cultures” rather than “dialogue of religions” is forcibly expressed in his preface to a recent book entitled, *Why We Should Call Ourselves Christians*.\(^\text{23}\) According to the pope, the book explains why “interreligious dialogue in the strict sense of the word is not possible . . . without putting one’s faith in parentheses”. What is possible is “intercultural dialogue which deepens the cultural consequences of basic religious ideas”. However we interpret these remarks, it is clear the pope understands dialogue between Christians and others as an encounter (or even confrontation) of the *logos* of the Christian West with those whose beliefs

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express alternative rationalities. The emphasis is on robust exchange of ideas, guided by the light of reason, focusing on what he calls “the cultural consequences of fundamental religious choices”. So, for example, violence and religion can be shown to be incompatible because violence is opposed to reason and the natural law; it is therefore opposed to the nature of God and religious culture. This raises pertinent, concrete questions for any culture or faith tradition that permits, let alone endorses, violence.

So, for John Paul, interreligious dialogue gives primacy to the role of the Spirit who is the ultimate source of truth and unity among all traditions. The emphasis here is on shared religious experience or what he calls the “dialogue of salvation”. Such dialogue is first and foremost a meeting of persons in faith, hope and love. While it assumes a deep fidelity to one’s own tradition, it also requires true humility. It privileges symbol and gesture, poetry and song, silence and prayer, empathy and hospitality. By contrast, Benedict’s form of dialogue – whether it is between religions or cultures – gives primacy to the logos and the role of reason. In Panikkar’s terms, the emphasis is on dialectics – which “pursues truth by trusting the order of things, the value of reason and weighty arguments” – rather than his understanding of dialogue which “seeks truth by trusting the other”. Or, again, “dialectics is the optimism of reason; dialogue is the optimism of the heart”. Both approaches to interreligious dialogue have their

25 See Panikkar, The Intra-Religious Dialogue, 65-71,
26 See Catherine Cornille, The Impossibility of Interreligious Dialogue (New York: Crossroad, 2008), where some of these aspects of dialogue are discussed.
place and are, ultimately, complementary. However, by itself, argumentative discourse is inadequate for the task of building bridges across the religious divide.

**Conclusion**

Interestingly, John Allen suggests that John Paul’s task was one of ‘building bridges’, whereas Benedict “seems to believe those bridges have been built, and now it’s time to walk across them.”

The Regensburg experience seems to suggest this to be a rather over-optimistic reading. On the other hand, from a Christian perspective, one has to admire the manner in which Benedict’s approach enables him to ask the hard questions, such as the plight of Christians in Muslim-majority countries. So, we find ourselves at the crossroads in terms of the future of dialogue from a Christian-Catholic perspective. Should our emphasis be on building dialogical bridges through shared faith-experiences or entering into reasoned discourse on practical matters of our distinctive religious traditions?

Whatever our answer to that question, it should be clear that both approaches to interreligious dialogue are necessary. From the latter perspective of Pope Francis, there appears to be more emphasis on the building of dialogical bridges in the spirit of John Paul, and yet he also warns of the dangers of “syncretism and relativism” in the spirit of Benedict. It should be remembered that both Benedict and Francis continued John Paul’s initiative of gathering representatives of multi-religious traditions at Assisi to

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29 From the Address by Pope Francis at the Assisi World Day of Peace, 20th Sept. 1916.
celebrate peace and reconciliation among those traditions.\textsuperscript{30} So, even though the symbols, styles and rhetoric of addressing the importance of interreligious dialogue vary, there is ultimately no question of the importance which all three pontificates – John Paul II, Benedict XVI and Francis – give to this now recognised integral aspect of the Church’s mission.

\textbf{Note:} This previously unpublished paper was presented by Gerard Hall at the Conference of Australian Catholic Theological Association in 2010 under the title “Where do we Stand? The Catholic Church and Interreligious Dialogue”. The paper has subsequently been re-edited and re-titled “Interreligious Dialogue: Contrasting Approaches of John Paul II & Benedict VI”. A final paragraph has been added to insert the approach of Pope Francis. [GH 09/09/2018].

\textsuperscript{30} These World Days of Peace Meetings at Assisi occurred under Benedict on 27\textsuperscript{th} October 2011 and under Francis on 20\textsuperscript{th} September 2016.