Reasoning together: What makes for genuine dialogue?

by Carol Zaleski in the October 31, 2006 issue

Now that the dust has settled from *l'affaire Regensburg*, it's a good time to think about what makes for genuine interfaith dialogue. One thing is clear: the reactions to Pope Benedict XVI's address, as reported by the media, allowed little scope for dialogue. People took sides with tedious predictability. Self-righteousness, bad manners and exploitation of irrational resentments were for too many the order of the day. With interfaith relations so bedeviled, one imagines the devil clapping his hands with glee over the opportunities to manipulate our fears and pervert our ideals. One longs for the real, earnest conversation that Jews, Christians and Muslims of intelligence and good will would wish to see prosper and the Father of Lies would wish to see fail.

The mudslinging has to stop, of course, but excessive deference vitiates dialogue as surely as belligerence shuts it down. Real dialogue asks sincere questions, searching out the self-understanding of others and—having established a climate of trust—moves beyond diplomacy to cordial debate. Real dialogue is intellectually challenging. This, I take it, was the central import of the pope's Regensburg address: not to inflame suspicions, but to raise the dialogue with secular modernity and with other religions to a higher level, drawing upon the full intellectual and spiritual resources of our traditions.

Hence Pope Benedict's quarrel with the attempt to "dehellenize" faith. It may be said of all three Abrahamic faiths that they are households of which the scriptures form only the foundation for successive stages of commentary and reflection. We children of Abraham are also children of Plato and Aristotle, and though we live on manna from the desert we enrich our diet with manuals from the library. It was providential, maintains the pontiff, that Judaism and Christianity took their classical form under the influence of Hellenistic cultures; for it was in this milieu that Western religion acquired its common philosophical language for exploring the mysteries of and making explicit the reasons for our faith. We need that common language

whenever mistrust of reason gets in the way of mutual understanding. In particular, we need that common language in order to make a case for democracy and human rights, for it is difficult to defend universal rights if one rejects universal reason. Thus it is that out of the vast array of positions on the question “What has Athens to do with Jerusalem?” Pope Benedict advocates confidence in the harmony of faith and philosophical reason, such as one finds embodied by Ibn Sina (Avicenna) and Ibn Rushd (Averroës), Maimonides, Thomas Aquinas and other giants from the classical period of Jewish, Christian and Islamic philosophy.

Dialogue takes myriad forms, however. There is the dialogue of diplomacy, as polite and insipid as the menu at an embassy reception, its function largely ceremonial. There is the dialogue of scholarship, which, when not driven by postmodern postcolonialist slogans, labors slowly in the cause of historic truth, counteracting sweeping claims about the triumphs and victimizations of the past. There is the daily dialogue of multiethnic neighborhoods like suburban Hamtramck, Michigan, whose Polish, Yemeni, Bosnian and Bangladeshi residents must work out their commonweal at schools, city council meetings and shopping malls. There is the dialogue of charity, like that of the saintly scholar Louis Massignon and the scholarly saint Charles de Foucauld, who in different ways offered their lives as an intercessory substitution (*badaliya*) for their North African Muslim neighbors.

Some years ago I participated in a small Jewish-Christian-Muslim gathering with no agenda other than to read aloud selections from beloved masterpieces like Judah ha-Levi’s poems of longing for Jerusalem, Dante’s *Divine Comedy* and Farid al-Din ‘Attar’s *Conference of the Birds*—works in which philosophical reason scintillates with poetic imagination. It was an amazing and humbling experience. While giving us a glimpse into the universe of each faith, it also heightened our awareness of profound differences. Some expected to uncover a *sophia perennis* transcending dogmatic disagreements; but no one, after hearing Dante’s adoration of the Trinity at the end of the *Paradiso*, could think this doctrine a matter of mere words. As Dorothy Sayers put it, the dogma is the drama. A Muslim in the group said he only now understood why it was important to argue against the Christian understanding of a “Three-Person’d God”; a Christian said she only now understood why she had to defend it. And so our mutual appreciation society turned into something more lively; we cheerfully debated the nature of prophecy, puzzled over the quixotic rationalism of Ramon Llull and disputed the role of images in prayer. We marveled at the Islamic, Jewish and Christian achievements of the “Golden Age” in medieval

Andalusia, while admitting that it was very likely not a perfect utopia of tolerant coexistence.

Oddly enough, Judah ha-Levi’s lament, “My heart is in the east, and I in the utter west,” struck a chord for all of us. Far from Jerusalem, or embattled within Jerusalem, all children of Abraham know the meaning of exile. We know that misunderstanding, suspicion and violence are the marks of our estranged condition, and that every form of dialogue that can serve as a countervailing force should be nurtured. Eventually, one hopes, as trust deepens and dialogue matures, so too will the ability to take a stand, to bear witness to one’s faith, to offer and demand accountability. What good arguments will we have then, what joyful tournaments of poetry and reason!