

The Muddled Catholic-Muslim “Dialogue”

by Robert Reilly

The Women of Eger by Bertalan Székely

In 2013, the Faith and Reason Institute (parent institution of *The Catholic Thing*), along with the Westminster Institute, published a monograph that I wrote on *The Prospects and Perils of Catholic-Muslim Dia-*

logue. In it, I examined a decade and a half of efforts by the three regional bishops’ conferences to engage in such dialogue. The results were not encouraging.

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The problems are several: like most Americans, the bishops know almost nothing about Islam. Therefore, they don’t understand the context in which their Muslim interlocutors are speaking. As a result, they engage in mirror imaging, i.e., understanding the Muslims as the good bishops understand themselves. A big mistake.

San Diego Bishop Robert W. McElroy recently provided an example at the University of San Diego’s Joan B.

Kroc Institute for Peace and Justice. The Catholic News Service headlined the event: “Bishop challenges Catholics to combat ‘ugly tide of anti-Islamic bigotry.’” The bishop said Catholics must speak out against “distortions of Muslim theology and teaching on society and the state.”

What might these distortions be? Apparently, that we should view with repugnance the “repeated falsehoods” that Islam is inherently violent, that Muslims seek to supplant the U.S. Constitution with sharia law, and that Muslim immigration threatens “the cultural identity of the American people.”

Bishop McElroy’s dialogue partner for the evening was Sayyid Syeed, a leader of the Islamic Society of North America (ISNA), whose name was familiar to me because he has been a fixture in the Midwest Catholic-Muslim dialogues. Perhaps the bishop was unacquainted with the pedigree of ISNA, which was spawned by the

Muslim Brotherhood, the premier world organization for the reestablishment of the caliphate – whose purpose is the establishment of sharia.

But you don’t have to take my word for it.

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Dr. Muzammil Siddiqi, also a frequent dialogue partner with the bishops and past president of ISNA, had this to say in the newspaper *Pakistan Link*: “We must not forget that Allah’s rules have to be established in all lands, and all our efforts should lead to that direction.” In 2001, he wrote, “Once more people accept Islam, insha’allah, this will lead to the implementation of Sharia in all areas.”

Dr. Zuhdi Jasser, founder of the American Islamic Forum for Democracy, reports that, at the 1995 annual convention, the keynote speaker at the ISNA conference, Imam Siraj Wahhaj, called for the replacement of the U.S. Constitution with the Quran. It is no wonder that Dr. Jasser laments what he calls the “unfortunate relationship between Catholic leadership and ISNA.” (Obviously, Dr. Jasser would not make a good dialogue partner.)

While acknowledging the terrible situation of Christians in the Middle East, Bishop McElroy apparently praised Islam’s respect for “the peoples of the Book.” In this, he was eagerly seconded by his dialogue partner, Mr. Syeed, who, according to CNS, said that the first millennium was marked by positive relations between Christianity and Islam, but that all changed in the millennium that followed, which included the Crusades.

This is an interesting perspective on history.

By A.D. 650, Muslims ruled Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, Palestine, and Egypt – all of which had been Christian lands whose inhabitants were demoted to the subject status of *dhimmis*. Less than a century later, Islam had spread to North Africa and Spain – all within the first millennium of “positive relations.” In none of these places did Muslims arrive peacefully.

I suggest that the bishops put Bat Ye’or’s book, *The Decline of Eastern Christianity under Islam: From Jihad to Dhimmitude*, on their reading list so they can speak accurately about Islam’s respect for “the peoples of the Book” in the first millennium and afterwards. From this history, is it unreasonable to consider that there is something “inherently violent” in Islam?

Mr. Syeed went on to say that, in the second millennium, “the two faiths divided the world into a ‘house of Islam’ and a ‘house of Christianity.’” Actually, the division was made well before that by Islam, which created the distinction between the *dar al-islam* and *dar al-harb*, with the Christian world being described as the “house of war.”

But perhaps this distinction is superannuated? Somewhat around the time of Bishop McElroy’s speech, in a Friday sermon in Edmonton, Alberta, Imam Shaban Sherif Mady declared, “Look forward to it, because the Prophet Muhammad said that Rome would be conquered! It will be conquered. Constantinople was conquered. Rome is the Vatican, the very heart of the Christian state.”

Now who is misunderstanding Islam here, the imam or the bishop? (I leave out Mr. Syeed because he could hardly deny that Mohammed said this.)

In other words, the San Diego Peace Institute event provides a microcosm for what generally goes wrong in Catholic-Muslim dialogue as conducted by the bishops’ conferences. None of the many Muslim intellectual reformers with whom I have worked over the years has ever been invited to such a dialogue. For the most part, only Islamist organizations need apply.

This helps legitimate the Muslim Brotherhood clones and sidelines the real voices of Muslim reform. Also, because they usually get the substance wrong, these “dialogues” end up spreading misunderstandings rather than overcoming them.

Since Muslims couldn’t care less what Catholics say about Islam, the only ones who get confused by these “dialogues” are Catholics themselves. I suggest, as a motto for the USCCB’s new national dialogue, the saying of Benedict XVI that “truth makes consensus possible,” and, concomitantly, nonsense makes it impossible.

According to a CNS report from last week, Bishop McElroy said that the anger dominating the current political climate is a sign of disenfranchisement and the feeling of not being listened to by the elites.

Bishop McElroy is one of the elites. Is he listening? ✠

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Robert Reilly is the author of The Closing of the Muslim Mind, Director of the Westminster Institute, participated in Operation Iraqi Freedom in 2003 as Senior Advisor to the Iraqi Ministry of information, and served in the White House as a Special Assistant to the President (1983-1985). He is also a member of the board of the Middle East Media Research Institute.

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