

RESPECT FOR OTHERS

January 15, 2015

This talk will be only obliquely related to anything specifically monastic, but it might shed some light on matters that are very much in the news these days. I will at least begin with something monastic, the first part of St. Benedict's chapter on receiving guests. Right after saying that they should be received as we would receive Christ himself, he goes on to write: "Proper honor must be shown to all, especially to those who share our faith and to pilgrims." Even though Benedict asks for special consideration for fellow Christians, it's clear that he wants honor or respect shown to *all* persons, and this, of course, is a theme that has been prominent in the teaching of all recent popes. As just one recent example, in his Apostolic Letter for the Year of Consecrated Life, Pope Francis said the following: "We cannot forget that the phenomenon of monasticism and of other expressions of religious fraternity is present in all the great religions.... I trust that the Year of Consecrated Life will be an opportunity to review the progress made, to make consecrated persons aware of this dialogue, and to consider what further steps can be taken toward greater mutual understanding and greater cooperation in the many common areas of service to human life" (III.4).

Let's compare this now with what has been going on in Paris of late, and what conclusions we might draw from those events for our own lives. On the one hand, we would surely condemn unequivocally the murders of the staff persons at that satirical magazine. The only proper response to the kind of irreverent satire regularly found in that magazine would be not to buy it and also to do what one reasonably can to foster respect toward the adherents of any other religion. And make no mistake, the target of that publication's dark humor was never merely Islam. From news reports that have come out in the last day or two, I learned that its editors have, among other things, published cartoons depicting the prophet Muhammad in pornographic poses, nuns masturbating, a black cabinet minister as a monkey, and the three

persons of the [Holy] Trinity locked in a homosexual orgy. The magazine is, in other words, an almost perfect example of the kind of secularism that has made France one of the most irreligious countries on earth, what a friend of mine has called “a secular desert.” That magazine’s lead editorial yesterday said that the staffers only laughed when the bells of the cathedral of Notre Dame were rung in honor of their murdered comrades. The editorial went on in these words: “The millions of anonymous people, all the institutions, all the world leaders, all the politicians, all the intellectual and media figures, all the religious dignitaries who proclaimed this week that ‘I am Charlie’ also need to know that [this phrase] means, ‘I am secularism.’”

I agree with all those who say that those staffers have the right to publish their cartoons and that silencing them would be contrary to the right of free speech that all of us enjoy—after all, that magazine has never advocated violence—but we should be clear that its overall tone of blatant secularism does absolutely nothing to build up a society of peace and mutual respect. Far more in accord with our own values, as Benedictines and as Catholics, is something the Muslim foreign minister of Iran said in response to the murders, namely, that the world would be a better place if everyone respected the beliefs and opinions of others. In his words: “We believe that [holy things] need to be respected ... and unless we learn to respect one another, it will be very difficult in a world of different views and different cultures and civilizations. We won’t be able to engage in a serious dialogue if we start disrespecting each other’s values ... [W]e would have a much safer ... world if we were to engage in serious dialogue, serious debate about our differences. And then we will find out that what binds us together is far greater than what divides us.”¹

None of this is to say that there should be no satirical magazines or newspapers, but there is a difference between good-natured joking and ridicule. As the Catholic scholar Phyllis Zagano

recently wrote, “Bullets are never the answer, but neither is ridicule. It is one thing to produce satire of a political or religious leader. It is quite another thing to defame or defile the sacred.”²

To help our own community come to a better understanding of what currently is surely the most controversial religion on earth, Islam, I plan to have a couple guest speakers on some Thursday evenings this semester. On the second Tuesday of February a friend from my CUA days, a Muslim ayatollah who has a doctoral degree from the University of Qom in Iran, will speak to us about a trip he will soon be making to his native land and to Iraq in order to promote understanding among people of different faiths in those two countries. Then, later in the spring I hope to have Professor Pim Valkenberg speak about a remarkable Turkish Muslim, Fethullah Gülen, about whom Pim has recently published a book.

It’s certainly true that one often doesn’t see immediate, tangible results from getting to know (or know about) persons from other religious traditions, but there is no doubt that sincere attempts to promote such understanding can have very positive repercussions. As you probably know, Pope Francis has just visited Sri Lanka, a country that is largely Buddhist, but with a significant number of Hindus, Muslims, and Christians. His own openness to persons of other faiths, going far back to his years in Argentina, has clearly done a lot of good in Sri Lanka. One Buddhist leader in that country had this to say when asked about the pope’s visit: “I attended high school at St. Ursula's Convent in Badulla and I was raised to respect all religions, cultures and ethnic groups. Even my parents, who are Buddhist like me, taught me the same. If we wish to live in peace and harmony in our country, then we have to work together - we members of different religions and ethnic groups. Jesus taught us to love our neighbor like ourselves.... We Sri Lankans have to think as a single nationality, regardless of ethnicity, faith or caste. “ And a Muslim leader in that country said: “We love this pope too, because he was able to be critical

and to take the necessary steps to solve some scandals [in his own church]. In doing so, he showed that even the Church can undergo social transformation. This is a good lesson for all of us – our [own] political and religious leaders should follow his example.”³

The tides of secularism and ridicule are strong in our country, though probably not as strong as in France, but none of this should surprise us who are so familiar with Jesus’ frequent warnings about what kind of reception his followers would often face. But he also promised to be with us till the end of the world, which gives us the confidence really to mean the words we will soon be singing at the end of the first of the Compline psalms: “I will lie down in peace and sleep comes at once, for you alone, Lord, make me dwell in safety.”

1 Mohammad Javad Zarif, quoted by Carol Morello, "Protests Alarm Iranian Official," *The Washington Post*, January 15, 2015.

2 Phyllis Zagano, "Charlie Hebdo – The Misanthropes," online at <http://www.indcatholicnews.com/news.php?viewStory=26477> (accessed Jan. 15, 2015).

3 "Buddhists and Muslims learn from Francis to be a united people," *Asia News*, January 15, 2015, online at <http://www.cathnewsusa.com/2015/01/buddhists-muslims-learn-francis-united-people/?newsletter=1> (accessed Jan. 15, 2015).