

issues frequently for 25 years. In a highly visible event in Oct. 1986, the pope invited many religious leaders to Assisi for a World Day of Prayer for Peace. The pope's inclusivist theology was clearly visible when he spoke to a gathering of the Roman curia following the event:

The fact that we came together in Assisi to pray, to fast and to walk in silence—and this, in support of peace which is always so fragile and threatened, perhaps today more than ever—has been, as it were, a clear sign of the profound unity of those who seek in religion spiritual and transcendent values that respond to the great questions of the human heart, despite concrete divisions . . . The Day of Assisi, showing the Catholic Church holding hands of brother Christians, and showing us all joining hands with the brothers of other religions, was a visible expression of these statements of the Second Vatican Council. With this day, and by means of it, we have succeeded, by the grace of God, in realizing this conviction of ours, inculcated by the Council, about the unity of the origin and goal of the human family, and about the meaning and value of non-Christian religions—without the least shadow of confusion or syncretism.¹

And when John Paul II refers positively to the Second Vatican Council, he refers to a document that speaks of a former enemy like this: “The Church also has high regard for Muslims. They worship God, who is one, living and subsistent, merciful and almighty . . . They strive to submit themselves without reserve to the hidden decrees of God, just as Abraham submitted himself to God's plan. . . ; they await the day of judgment and the reward of God following the resurrection from the dead. For this reason, they highly esteem an upright life and worship God, especially by way of prayer, alms—deeds and fasting.”² John Paul II was the first pope ever to set foot in an Islamic mosque.

Establishment and Reach of the Papacy

How did Pope John Paul II become the single most (temporally) powerful spiritual leader of the past 27 years? Suffice to say the position we now call the Papacy emerged over time from the primacy of St. Peter, of whom Christ said “and on this rock I will build my church.”³ Peter was said to have traveled to Rome, where he became its first Bishop and was later martyred. On this basis latter Bishops of Rome asserted their station as higher than other Bishops and Patriarchs of the ancient Christian world. And since Rome was the seat of the Roman Empire, the Bishop's influence grew more powerful than the patriarchs of Alexandria, Antioch, Jerusalem, and Byzantium (Istanbul).

Until the eleventh century, the Bishop of Rome was recognized as “first among equals” among what is now called the Orthodox Christian community. After the schism of 1054, Central and Western Europe continued to follow the One Holy Catholic and Apostolic Church. And while Martin Luther's 16th century protests did not originally seek divorce from the Pontiff, they quickly led to the Protestant Reformation and the complete rejection of Papal authority. But thanks to the colonial pursuits of the Spanish and Portuguese during the same

time period, Catholicism spread throughout the world, becoming the most widespread single religion (thus reflecting its name: catholic actually means universal).

The disagreement between Protestantism and Catholicism, however, is a religious one, not one of faith. That is to say, the Christian Faith is anchored in the teachings of Christ; anchored in love, compassion, forgiveness and faith. These are common to all religions but central to Protestantism and Catholicism, just as unity, oneness and service to humanity are found in other religions but central to the Bahá'í Faith. Though `Abdu'l-Bahá praised the changes effected by Luther's theses,⁴ the Reformation that split the church has resulted in misunderstanding and strife, which are fundamentally contrary to the spirit of religion. For this, patience and forbearance are needed. For this, believers must anchor themselves in the essence of religion and see past their differences, must treat others the way they wish to be treated and love God with all their heart. When immediate concerns, however important, trump unity and virtuous behavior, schism is the result.

The Papacy and Beyond

`Abdu'l-Bahá, Christian scholars and historians agree that many popes have failed to embody the beauty of Christ's religion. Throughout his talks and tablets, `Abdu'l-Bahá has drawn attention to several ways that the dictates of Christ and those of the papacy have not always aligned.⁵ In this connection, he warns us to guard against materialism:

Let us compare the lives of some of the Popes with the religion of Christ. Christ, hungry and without shelter, ate herbs in the wilderness, and was unwilling to hurt the feelings of anyone. The Pope sits in a carriage covered with gold and passes his time in the utmost splendor, amidst such pleasures and luxuries, such riches and adoration, as kings have never had.⁶

Moreover, many popes were the source of discord, led corrupt lives and were the cause of much bloodshed through their sponsor of war. Pope John Paul II, however, bucked many of these trends and people loved him for it. He followed John Paul I's precedent by declining an elaborate coronation and refusing to wear the traditional Papal Tiara. As mentioned, he was a staunch critic of the tendency of Western material culture to veil the soul's personal relationship with God, a stark departure from the heedless excesses of his forbears.

John Paul II may have been the most scientifically aware Pope in history. In 1984, he cleared an ancient grievance against Galileo, who in 1604 dared to agree with Copernicus that the earth revolved around the sun. John Paul II also continued Pius XII's policy of accepting that evolution is not inherently anti-Christian⁷ and officially recognizes the validity of the Big Bang theory.⁸ The Pope's stance on the need for constructive dialogue between science and religion should sound familiar to Bahá'í's. On several occasions, he officially apologized for much of the violence and mayhem committed in the Church's name throughout the past two millennia.

In all, one can see that the spirit of Christ lives on in the hearts of His believers and leaders, which is reason to hope for the future. `Abdu'l-Bahá once said it would be a wonderful thing if all of us were truly Christian, when he redefined the meaning of the word in a letter to a friend:

Thou didst begin thy letter with a blessed phrase, saying: 'I am a Christian.' O would that all were truly Christian! It is easy to be a Christian on the tongue, but hard to be a true one. Today some five hundred million souls are Christian, but the real Christian is very rare: he is that soul from whose comely face there shineth the splendour of Christ, and who showeth forth the perfections of the Kingdom; this is a matter of great moment, for to be a Christian is to embody every excellence there is. I hope that thou, too, shalt become a true Christian. Praise thou God that at last, through the divine teachings, thou hast obtained both sight and insight to the highest degree, and hast become firmly rooted in certitude and faith. It is my hope that others as well will achieve illumined eyes and hearing ears, and attain to everlasting life: that these many rivers, each flowing along in diverse and separated beds, will find their way back to the circumambient sea, and merge together and rise up in a single wave of surging oneness; that the unity of truth, through the power of God, will make these illusory differences to vanish away. This is the one essential: for if unity be gained, all other problems will disappear of themselves.⁹

The Pope's words and deeds, good and bad, should not be forgotten. The Christian spirit he embodied is one of forgiveness, brotherhood and love. The world gathers to celebrate the life of John Paul II because from his seat of power he worked to bridge the gaps that divide religious communities. In death, many people from different faith communities have come together to share in their respect and grief for the Pope. Let us hope that in life we may do the same.

Notes:

1 When Religion Becomes Evil p204

2 ibid.

3 Matthew 16:18

4 `Abdu'l-Bahá, The Secret of Divine Civilization pp41–42

5 Some Answered Questions p136

6 ibid. p166

7 Mark Brumley, Evolution and the Pope

8 John Paul II, Our knowledge of God and nature: physics, philosophy and theology, L'Osservatore Romano, 11/14/1988.

9 Writings of `Abdu'l-Bahá, Selection 15

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