

Radcliffe on multi-religious Europe

Excerpt from The Word from Rome column

John Allen

National Catholic Reporter

June 10, 2005

<http://www.nationalcatholicreporter.org/word/word061005.htm>

Dominican Fr. Timothy Radcliffe, the former Master General of the Order of Preachers and a widely noted author and lecturer, recently spoke in Bologna on the contribution of Christianity to the future of Europe. Especially since the Christian identity of Europe is a top priority for Pope Benedict, Radcliffe's reflections are timely indeed.

Radcliffe believes that a critical issue facing Europe is its capacity to bear diversity without succumbing to tribalism. Especially when it comes to religion, the question is whether Christianity can help shape a future of peace.

Radcliffe believes it can.

"Christians can bring peace to multi-religious Europe because we are able to understand the role of faith in the lives of other believers better than atheists," Radcliffe said. "In 1989, France was split by the affaire du foulard, the controversy over Muslim girls wearing headscarves to school.

It was Christian leaders who understood why it mattered to them, people like the archbishop of Marseille and the archbishop of Canterbury. We Christians could identify with the Muslims. After all, if they could not wear their foulards, then why should nuns be allowed to wear their veils in school?"

Jokingly, he added: "I believe that it is still technically illegal for religious to wear their habits in public in England, and so I am at this moment liable to be arrested!"

More deeply, Radcliffe asked how the Christian gospel can make a contribution to today's Europe. He phrased his answer in terms of Christianity's traditional aim of accompanying pilgrims towards goodness, truth and beauty.

On goodness, Radcliffe asserted that most Europeans don't respond well to moral edicts issued by the church, in part because sexual abuse scandals and other human failures have caused the church to lose credibility, in part because Europeans are allergic to any exercise of authority. Radcliffe proposed that the church recover a more Thomistic approach to morality, speaking less of rules and prohibitions, and more of virtues.

"If one thinks that being good is fundamentally about obeying rules then one will focus on individual acts," he said. ... "Virtue ethics look at the shape and unity of the whole of human life, as we make our way to God and happiness.

In part, Radcliffe argued, this is about pastoral prudence, meeting people where they are. "When the good Dominican, St. Antoninus, archbishop of Florence, asked Cosimo de Medici to ban all priests from gambling, Cosimo replied wisely, 'First things first. Shouldn't we begin by banning them from using loaded dice?' "

Further, Radcliffe argued, it should be clear from the personal witness of Christian men and women that following the moral path marked out by the church leads to real human happiness. "Nietzsche once wrote of Christ that, 'His disciples should look more redeemed,'" Radcliffe observed.

On truth, Radcliffe argued that Christianity's role in part is to keep alive confidence in human reason, in the capacity of the mind to attain truth, in an age that in some ways seems to have given up on it altogether.

In fact, Radcliffe said, there's sociological evidence that Christianity does foster a more rational approach to life.

"According to Rodney Stark, Christians are much less accepting of 'UFOs as alien visitors, of ESP, astrology, Tarot cards, seances, and Transcendental Meditation than students who said they had no religion,' " Radcliffe said. "As G.K. Chesterton said, 'A man who won't believe in God will believe in anything.' "

On beauty, Radcliffe argued that the aesthetic dimension of Christianity may be one of its most important resources in attempting to reach modern Europe.

"Every great revival of Christianity has gone with some new exploration of beauty," Radcliffe said, "from the Post-Tridentine Baroque, which I do not like much, to Wesley's hymns."

"Modern Europeans are resistant to church teaching," Radcliffe said. "Dogma is a bad word! But beauty has its own authority, an authority to which every human being responds, and an authority that in no way threatens. We need to find ways of disclosing God's beauty to our contemporaries."