

## WorldWatch March-April 2004

by David C. Grabbe

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### The Vatican's Islam Dilemma

The Catholic Church can no longer ignore the growing influence and cultural disturbance of Islam, the fastest growing religion in the world, particularly in areas where Catholicism has traditionally been the dominant religious factor—such as Europe and the United States. In Britain, for example, 930,000 Muslims attend a place of worship at least weekly. While this does not yet compare with the 1.5 million Catholic churchgoers, it has already outstripped Anglican attendance of 916,000. In traditionally Catholic France, current birthrates indicate that in 25 years France may have a Muslim majority. Even now, many demographers estimate that as much as 20-30% of the population under 25 is Muslim. As Muslim culture begins to push more forcefully into many historically Catholic cultures, the Vatican feels constrained to respond.

The Vatican is not in a position to take this entity head-on, nor does it seem likely to try. Rather, the Roman Catholic Church has historically utilized syncretistic assimilation of potential threats instead of blatant annihilation. Though Islam and Roman Catholicism are not going to meld into one religion anytime soon, quite a few highly visible overtures by the Catholic Church indicate an increasingly aggressive "ecumenism":

» In late December 2003, Cardinal Jean-Louis Tauran, the recently retired Vatican foreign minister, criticized Muslim countries for treating Christians as "second-class citizens." He told the French Catholic daily *La Croix* that Christianity and Islam faced "an enormous task" of learning to live together in mutual tolerance.

» According to the ZENIT News Agency, the rector of the shrine of Fatima in Portugal, Monsignor Luciano Gomes Paulo Guerra, contends that the Fatima apparitions were exhortations to ecumenical dialogue. He claims that the apparition of Mary knew that her choice of the site in Portugal would one day be understood as a deliberate association with the daughter of the Islamic prophet Mohammed—whose name was *Fatima*.

» John J. Schmitt, associate professor of theology at Marquette University, writes in the *National Catholic Reporter* that reconciliation between the Catholic Church and Jews began with the Second Vatican Council, but up to this point, "there is no major text that asserts the essential ties among Judaism, Christianity and Islam." He highlights the fact that even the current Catechism of the Catholic Church seems to rank Islam lower than Judaism as an "Abrahamic faith." Currently, Catholic-Jewish relations are handled by the Council for Promoting Christian Unity, while Catholic-Muslim relations are dealt with through the Council for Interreligious Dialogue.

» In mid-January, the Vatican hosted an interfaith "Concert of Reconciliation" to "promote the commitment for a peaceful coexistence among all the children of Abraham." The presentation was centered on composer John Harbison's choral *Abraham*, and was attended by about 7,000 people, including Israel's two chief rabbis, Rome's Imam, and the secretary general of the World Islamic Call Society.

» John Paul II has been the first Pope to visit a synagogue and to step into a mosque. He is a staunch defender of the notion that the three "Abrahamic faiths" worship the same God, albeit through different "revelations."

These recent events highlight the curious dance in which Islam and Catholicism are involved. It is too soon to tell where this will end, but it is noteworthy that the Roman Catholic Church has survived for nearly two millennia by changing its shape while still holding to the creed of being the *universal* church.

### **European Religious Revival?**

Uwe Siemon-Netto, religious editor for United Press International, believes that "the Old World may be slowly shifting away from its doctrinaire secularism." Writing in *The National Interest*, Siemon-Netto sees a number of "signs—faint and uncertain though they may now be—of a revival" of Christianity in Europe, most of which has long been thought of as "the great plain of irreligion." He points to the "astonishingly lively debate" over the issue of including the words "God" and "Christianity" in the European Union's constitution—a debate which ultimately failed to achieve its goal, but which nevertheless demonstrated that there is yet a religious zeal. On November 13, 2003, an "impressive group of 22 European leaders," past and present, criticized the "narrowly 'secularist' vision of European societies" as "a danger both for the country's democratic life and cohesion, and for the full development of the European project."

However, this frontal—and, it turned out, potent—assault on French and German secularism is not the only evidence of revivalism. Siemon-Netto also cites the "huge interest in new Bible translations"; the popularity of "adult catechism classes in France"; the growth of evangelicalism in France, where "every ninth day a new evangelical congregation is born"; the "massive" number of lay people taking courses in the prestigious *Institut Catholique* seminary in Paris; the shift of many Protestant seminarians from "political causes back to orthodox theology"; and the increasing large number of lay people "taking over pastoral functions in the absence of a sufficient number of priests." Very slowly, an environment conducive to the appearance of the False Prophet may be forming in Europe.