

In the name of Allah, Most Gracious, Most Mercy full.

September 27, 2006

His Holiness Pope Benedict XVI
Apostolic Palace
00120 Vatican City State, Europe

Your Excellency:

With warm greetings and sincere hope that your efforts in inviting people to worship God and to follow the teachings of Jesus Christ are successful, I would like to respond to your invitation for a genuine dialogue with Muslims in the aftermath of your recent speech at the Regensburg University in Munich, Germany.

The writer of this article has spent more than forty years of his life doing research in the field of Quranic studies, Islamic principles and has published books, as well. He has also benefited from the political experience and religious knowledge of a father who as the first prime minister of Iran after the Islamic revolution made a tremendous effort toward consensus building by tempering revolutionary zeal and curbing extremism. With your permission, I would like to bring to your attention a few pertinent points regarding your speech.

Your Excellency, as you are well aware, throughout history there have always been unbelievers who spoke disparagingly about all Prophets. Their attacks, at times, have even gone much further and been pointed against the very Creator of the universe. Of course, had such vehement denunciations come from knowledgeable scholars, philosophers, sociologists or other learned people, one might have wanted to reflect on such charges. I believe you would agree that emperors and political leaders of countries talk in a language that serves the vested interest of their respective systems and paraphrasing their statements (especially those of an emperor who lived in the 16th century during a contentious period between Muslims and Christians) can not solve any of today's world problems.

It seems logical then, that a genuine dialogue among the followers of different religions may be a more intelligent way to instill a spirit of cooperation in establishing world peace, mutually beneficial co-existence and cooperation in all fields that contribute to human development.

Furthermore, with the exception of Byzantine Emperor Manuel II Paleologus, there are noble characters among Europeans whose opinions regarding Islam were diametrically opposed to those of Manuel II Paleologus. For instance, Volter, who initially had anti-Islamic views, spoke very highly of Prophet Mohammed after he studied the Qur'an and developed a better understanding of Islam. Likewise, Goethe who indebted himself to the Muslim and Persian speaking poet Hafiz, a term that denotes one who has memorized the Qur'an in its entirety, said "If this is Islam, aren't we all Muslims".

Within the last few centuries, several Islamic scholars and Qur'anic researchers have come from the western world, in particular Germany. For example, Flugel and Noldeke who have praised and validated the merits of the teachings of the Prophet of Islam and have contributed greatly to the field of Qur'anic studies. Karen Armstrong, the world renowned religious scholar known for her objectivity and fairness, has stated that the expansion of Islam through the sword is the biggest lie that has been fabricated by the enemies of Islam.

In my opinion, the Qur'an which serves as the foundation and guide for Muslims, provides a very open and wide field for the exchange of opinions, cooperation and understanding of different points of view among Jews and Christians who share common principles from their respective Abrahamic tradition.

Quranic views, based on the following analysis, toward the followers of other traditions are one of tolerance, respect, compassion, peaceful and fostering of coexistence and cooperation.

1. Standards for relationships with "the People of the Book" (Jews and Christians)

- In sixteen verses, Qur'an confirms the truth of the previous scriptures and says, "To thee we sent the Scripture in truth, confirming the scripture that came before it, and guarding it in safety...." (5:48)
- The Qur'an instructs Muslims to show respect to the Holy men of previous traditions and says "amongst these are men devoted to learning and men who have renounced the world, and they are not arrogant" (5:82) The Qur'an promises Jews and Christians that "If only they had stood fast by the Law, the Gospel, and all the revelation that was sent to them from their Lord, they would have enjoyed happiness from every side....". (5:66)
- God commanded the Prophet to inform "the people of the Book" that "O People of the Book! Ye have no ground to stand upon unless ye stand fast by the Law, the Gospel, and all the revelation that has come to you from your Lord...." (5:68)
- The Qur'an negates any sense of religious superiority by declaring that heaven is not the exclusive domain of Muslims. It clearly states, " Verily, those who have attained to faith, as well as those who follow the Jewish faith, and the Christians, and the

Sabians - all who believe in God and the last day and do righteous deeds, shall have their reward with their sustainer; and no fear need they have, and neither shall they grieve”. (2:62, 5:69) Meaning they will dwell in heaven.

- God has commanded the Prophet of Islam to inform “the people of the Book” that “O People of the Book! Come to common terms as between us and you: That we worship none but Allah; that we associate no partners with him; that we erect not, from among ourselves, Lords and patrons other than Allah.” (3:64)
- In many verses, the Qur’an commands Muslims to join in fellowship with the followers of other traditions by refraining from discussing subjects that cause division and instead put the emphasis on common themes.

The Qur’an instructs Muslims to clearly declare that “We believe in Allah, and in what has been revealed to us and what was revealed to Abraham, Ishmael, Isaac, Jacob, and the Tribes, and in (the Books) given to Moses, Jesus, and the prophets, from their Lord: We make no distinction between one and another among them, and to Allah do we bow our will (in Islam)”. (3:84)

2. The Common Roots of Judaism, Christianity and Islam: The Family of Abrahamic Traditions

Your Excellency, in order that you develop a keener understanding of the respectful views of the Qur’an toward the Prophets, scriptures and the righteous followers of previous traditions, I would like to call your attention to the following statistics.

- While the Qur’an mentions Prophet Moses’ name one hundred and thirty-six times, Prophet Abraham’s name sixty-nine times and Prophet Jesus and Holy Mary’s names seventy times (collectively), it mentions the name of the Prophet of Islam who is the messenger of this religion only four times.

Do you not agree that this wide spectrum of inclusiveness and the fact that the Qur’an repeatedly reminds Muslims of the noble characters in other traditions are further signs of the peaceful nature of Islam?

- The third chapter of the Qur’an, Al-Imran (The family of Imran), is named in honor of the ancestral roots of Jesus Christ (Hannah, Holy Mary, Zachariah, John the Baptist etc.), however, there is no chapter in the Qur’an entitled Al-Mohammad (The family of Mohammad).
- The nineteenth chapter of the Qur’an, Maryam (Mary), is named after Holy Mary but there are no chapters in the Qur’an named after Fatimeh, the honorable daughter of Prophet Mohammad. Likewise, there are no chapters that are named after Prophet Mohammad’s mother or Khadija, Prophet Mohammad’s honorable wife.

- The seventeenth chapter in the Qur'an is named Bani Isra'il (The Children of Israel), however, there is no chapter in the Qur'an that is called Bani Hashim (The Children of Prophet Mohammad). This is due to the fact that Muslims consider themselves the cousins of the children of Israel (Jacob) from the Ishmael lineage.
- The overwhelming parts of some of the longest chapters of the Qur'an (Chapters two, three and five), and a big portion of some of the medium and smaller length chapters of the Qur'an are dedicated to the history of the trials and tribulations of the children of Israel.

3. The Concept of Jihad and the Expansion of Islam with the “sword”

Your speech about Islam leaves one with the impression that Islam has been forced on people with the “sword” and that the Qur'an and the Prophet have encouraged its adherents to follow such tradition. While it is true that some of the rulers who followed Prophet Mohammed, especially the Sultans of the Amawi, Abbasid and Othmani, did get engaged in expansion through military means and used the “sword” to convert people, such actions stem from human ego and the military expansionist policies of these caliphs and do not have any connection to the teachings of the Qur'an or the tradition of Prophet Mohammad. I believe that Your Excellency would agree that the behavior of the followers of any tradition do not necessarily reflect the teachings of that tradition. As the historical record shows, Judaism and Christianity have not always been practiced according to the teachings of Prophet Moses and Jesus.

The concept of jihad is one of the most important concepts of Islamic theology and one can not deny the fact that Prophet Mohammad was engaged in many wars during his Prophet-hood with the combatants of his religion and land. However, it is imperative to be cognizant of the fact that none of these battles were fought for the purpose of expansion of Islamic territory or conversion by the “sword”. In all cases, directly or indirectly, these wars were defensive in nature and were fought to stop an invading army.

Your Excellency, I believe that you would agree that up until one or two centuries ago, conversion from one religion to another was prohibited even in the so called civilized European countries. The best testimony to this human short-sightedness that has persisted in human history is the long wars between Catholics and Protestants and the emigration of some converts to the U.S.A.

In light of such historical facts, how can one expect that in the tribal society of fourteen centuries ago that was mired in jahiliya (ignorance), a Prophet who had come to rid a society of tribalism, idolatry, nepotism, and backwardness did not have to resort to use the sword to protect his life, his followers and his faith against such insurmountable odds when even in the civilized post-Renaissance Europe conversion to other religions was a life threatening endeavor?

Similar to the believers in Jesus Christ and in his mission, the believers in Mohammad preserved their faith and even strengthened it in spite of being subjugated to extreme

persecution and torture. Eventually, some of them had to immigrate to Ethiopia to save their lives and the rest fled from Mecca during the night to seek the protection from people in Medina in order to continue the practice of monotheism. Even after moving to Medina, Meccan pagans, who considered monotheism as a betrayal of their ancestral customs, continued plotting and attacking the believers in order to destroy them. It was in this extraordinary situation that the Prophet of Islam worked to preserve his faith.

It is true that Jesus Christ neither engaged in any war nor was involved with the political establishment of his time but it is also true that he did not form a community either. Otherwise, he would have shown the same vigor in protecting his community as Mohammad did.

The truth of such claim rests on the fact that Prophet Jesus validated the militaristic nature of the Old Testament by accepting it totally. Is not the case that he used force to clear the temple of the money exchangers, dove sellers and all others who had occupied the temple and had turned it to a place of business and unsavory activities? (Mathew 21)

Is it not the fact that in Mathew 10:34 Prophet Jesus tells his followers, " Do not suppose that I have come to bring peace to the earth. I did not come to bring peace, but a sword"?

Is it not the case that the flocks of that great Prophet, throughout the history, have resorted to force to implement their objectives?

Your Excellency, the expression "Holy War" which is reminiscent of the Crusades, is never referenced in the Qur'an or in the tradition of Prophet Mohammad. True, that jihad is one of the most important pillars of Islam but there is a tremendous difference between the concept of jihad in Islam that is purely defensive in nature with the way it has been abused by some of the so called Muslims or the fallacious notion that some Westerners' have.

Your Excellency, with your permission, I would like to clarify the position of the Qur'an regarding jihad and its stance on the subject of war by sharing with you some of the regulations and limitations of jihad that the Qur'an establishes for Muslims to follow.

- In general, war is forbidden in Islam. If there is a situation where injustice is being perpetrated or if the community is being invaded, then on a temporary basis permission is given to defend oneself. This principle is explained in 22:39.
- Qur'an grants permission for a war but strictly based on the following three criteria that are explained in 2:190:
 1. The war is for the cause of God. In other words, the war is not fought for expansionism, aggression, racism, nationalism or any other "isms" for that matter.
 2. The war is defensive in nature, meaning the other side initiated the war. It must also be retributive in nature and not distributive.

3. War can only be continued to repel the enemy and must be stopped immediately after the enemy retreats.

- Chapter nine is the most authoritative chapter on the concept of jihad in the Qur'an and is one that is abused by both Fundamentalist Muslims and those who allege that Islam is a violent religion. However, in verses four and seven of this chapter it is clearly stated that Muslims can only declare war with people who have broken their treaty with them or who have resorted to enmity first.

It is also emphasized in this chapter that Taqwa (awareness of God's ever presence) necessitates that believers must stay loyal to their commitments and never break them even with unbelievers.

- God recommends to the Prophet that "But if they incline to peace, incline thou to it as well, and place thy trust in God: verily, He alone is all hearing, all knowing! And should they seek but to deceive thee (by their show of peace) behold, God is enough for thee". Explanation about peace
- The Qur'an establishes that the relationship between Muslims and Non-Muslims should be based on peaceful principles and so that there is no ambiguity it clearly and unequivocally states: "Allah forbids you not, with regard to those who fight you not for (your) Faith nor drive you out of your homes, from dealing kindly and justly with them: for Allah loveth those who are just." (60:8)

The Qur'an establishes restriction in relationship between Muslims and Non-Muslims as follows, "Allah only forbids you, with regard to those who fight you for (your) Faith, and drive you out of your homes, and support (others) in driving you out, from turning to them (for friendship and protection). It is such as turn to them (in these circumstances), that do wrong". (60:9)

In short, the Islamic principles of jihad are purely defensive in nature and it is not a mechanism to settle score or revenge. While the principle of "eye for an eye" is allowed in Islam, it is always suggested that it should be tempered with fairness and compassion and better yet it is always recommended that one should forgive his/her enemies.

It is true that all of the principles of a just war that are discussed here have neither been nor will they always be followed by Muslims but this should not be used as an excuse to equate Islamic principles that are based on the Qur'an and tradition with the behavior of people who claim they are Muslim. After all, we would not judge other religions based on the performance of its followers.

Muslims have never condemned Jesus or Moses for the many worldwide wars or racial wars that have been fought under the banner of Christianity. Even though, these wars have had devastating affect on humanity, the environment and have left behind utter destructions.

4. Reason and Faith

Your Excellency, in your speech, you stated that the theological and philosophical concepts of piety in Islam are the main root cause of today's extremism and fundamentalism. Furthermore, in your analysis of the relationship between faith and reason, you criticized the principle of reasoning in Islamic thought and you extrapolated how Islam justifies terrorism and violence in the name of religion.

The writer of this article is not about to deny the fact that religions have been abused or in some cases, have not been used as the proper moral guide to combat the revengeful nature of human beings but why is it difficult to accept that the natural and logical human reaction to the immense injustice that is being perpetrated upon some of the indigenous people in many parts of the world? One can hardly argue the case that after the attack on the twin towers in New York City, the U.S.A, the only super power, reacted in a defensive manner by invading two countries, then, how is it that somehow we expect that there should be no reaction when an entire country is invaded and people are left to live in much misery, destitution and total destruction?

In reference to the discussion between faith and reason, while this may not be a subject that appeals to the general public and belongs to scholarly circles, I would like to bring your attention to a few points regarding this issue.

It is noteworthy to reflect upon the fact that the word "reason" in the Qur'an is repeated forty-nine times and that it is exactly how many times the word "light" is mentioned. Demonstrating that, it is only through reason that one finds enlightenment.

Such understating is confirmed by Imam Jaafar Sadeq, one of the most revered Muslim scholars and leaders, who said, "Reason is the means by which one should worship the all Merciful God and it is through that that Salvation is attained". The Prophet of Islam whom some depict as the man of the sword, says, "God has not bestowed a more precious blessing upon humans than reason. God will not accept worship without reflection".

Based on the teachings of Prophet Mohammad, God has established two proofs of His existence for humans: the exoteric proof which is the Prophets and the scriptures, and the other is the esoteric proof which is reason.

The Qur'an commands Muslims never to follow something that they do not have knowledge of and that they must always utilize their faculties of seeing, hearing and reasoning to discern. (17:36). The Qur'an refers to people who do not use their faculties to discern as "deaf and dumb" humans and regard them even lower than quadrupeds. (8:22)

Contrary to the claims by the critics of Islam that the transcendental verse of the Qur'an, "There is no compulsion in religion" was revealed in Mecca when Muslims were weak in number and the verse served as a concession and protective shield for the Muslim community against its enemy, the historical records shows that this verse was revealed in

Medina in the last year of Prophet Mohammad's mission when Muslims were in the zenith of their power.

You're Excellency;

In a world where military powers continue to suppress and oppress the poor and the destitute and they justify their expansionist policies in the name of fighting terrorism, curbing fundamentalism and using false propaganda to imprint an ugly and violent face of Islam on the world's collective conscience,

In a world where any vestige of morality and spirituality is being tampered more than any time in the history of humanity, thus, it is imperative that all the conscientious people, from any race and creed, come together and synergistically work for the cause of peace and social justice.

One cannot complain too much about what politicians do but it is profoundly disheartening to see those who are in a position to be contributors to peace and harmony among nations become instruments of division and hatred.

Your Excellency, Qur'an commands Muslims that, "They should not argue with the followers of earlier revelation except in a most kindly manner..." (29:46), that we believe in the same God, that we believe in all Prophets and scriptures, that we are required to treat others with fairness; furthermore, that we believe that the only Lord and absolute authority that humans must surrender to is the eternal God to whom we all will return and it is HIM that will judge our actions in this world.

With much apology if my lengthy letter has inconvenienced you and with the hope for an everlasting world peace and establishment of justice, freedom and security for all of humanity,

Sincerely;

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