

"A COMMON WORD BETWEEN US AND YOU" CONTROVERSY OVER ISLAMIC-CHRISTIAN INITIATIVE

Marcel Rebiai

In this article we will address a very topical and quite stirring issue. Islamic-Christian initiative has become highly relevant and significant in much of Christendom.

In October 2006 prominent scholars from the entire Islamic world penned an open letter¹ to Pope Benedict XVI. That letter was a response to his speech on September 12, 2006, at the University of Regensburg, Germany, where he quoted a 14th-century Byzantine emperor. While conversing with an educated Persian, this emperor had described Islam as a violent religion which brings mankind no benefit. The pope's quotation² aroused intense emotions. These erupted in outrage, anger and violence against Christians and Christian institutions within the Islamic world. In their open letter, the Islamic scholars respectfully characterized the pope and his experts as unqualified to comment. The papacy was accused of ignorance and inaccuracy in Islamic matters. Conciliatory proposals for dialogue were presented simultaneously. Reference was made to Pope Johannes Paul II, who in 1985 had told an Islamic audience in Casablanca, "We believe in the same God, the one God, the living God, the God who created the worlds and who leads his creatures to perfection. "With this statement, the pope would call on Christians and Moslems to peaceful co-existence; and since together they make up over 50% of the world's population, peace and mankind's future allegedly hinged on mutual recognition and co-operation, in spite of all their dissimilarities.

Islamic "peace offer"

In early autumn 2007, Islamic scholars lent new urgency and broader meaning to Pope Johannes Paul II's appeal for peaceful co-existence. Their call for reconciliation and peace became known as "A Common Word Between Us and You". This open letter was signed by 138 Islamic scholars under the patronage of King Abdullah of Jordan. It was directed to all Christians as a Christmas greeting. The message was published on the Internet.³ It summons Christians to take up a dialogue with Moslems for the sake of world peace and mankind's future; to advance mutual understanding, respect and recognition; and to cease fighting and enmity. It assumes that Christians, Jews and Moslems have – according to the Torah, the New Testament and the Koran – essentially the same message: All confess the one and only God, with whom nothing and no one can be associated. (This as an indication regarding Jesus, whose divine sonship is sharply rejected in Islamic theology, tradition and way of thinking.) Jews, Christians and Moslems allegedly testify to the one creator of heaven and earth, who through the prophets Moses, Jesus and Mohammed gave the central, universally binding command: You shall love God with all your strength and your neighbor as yourself. Jesus – and in his own way, Mohammed as well – reputedly preached this. In spite of their differences (such as the "minor" matter of Islam's

¹ www.acommonword.com

² "He (the Byzantine emperor Manuel II) said: 'Show me just what Mohammed brought that was new, and there you will find things only evil and inhuman, such as his command to spread by the sword the faith he preached.' The emperor goes on to explain in detail the reasons why spreading the faith through violence is something unreasonable." Quotation from the Catholic World News <http://www.cwnews.com/news/viewstory.cfm?recnum=46474>

³ www.acommonword.com

rejection of Jesus as the Son of God and savior of the world), Moslems and Christians shared the essential foundation of the double command to love and of God's unity. Therefore it was now essential to concentrate on what there is in common. Dialogue, co-operation and solidarity of the faiths should create a culture of mutual respect, acceptance and recognition, thus enabling or even guaranteeing a common ground for world peace.

The Islamic scholars' offer of re- conciliation can in fact be considered an opportunity. We should welcome every attitude of openness, in order to approach others with love and respect, listen to them and make known the Gospel. I am willing to sit down and listen to everybody, no matter what his faith or his ideology, as long as I can also unreservedly present the gospel of the crucified one. The Christian leaders' reply to the Islamic scholars would have been meaningful and justified if it had been presented as follows, "Thank you for the offer of a dialogue, which we gladly accept. Let us meet in order to present the heart of our faiths to one another with respect and dignity; let us search our scriptures while granting one another freedom of thought and belief." All men must have the basic right and freedom to study various faiths and to follow the convictions of their hearts without hindrance or exclusion; this as long as the practice of their faith does not impair or threaten others' lives. There are many crucial topics which Moslems and Christians could discuss together. The Islamic scholars' offer could have thus been accepted in a framework of mutual listening and testifying.

Obscure Christian reply

Well-known Christian theologians and leaders from many denominations reacted positively to the Islamic scholars' open letter. The official answer, "Loving God and your neighbor", was drawn up at the Yale Divinity School in America and signed by 600 theologians and leaders⁴. The paper describes love of God and our neighbor as the central common foundation of Christianity and Islam and emphasizes that the world's future depends on Christian and Moslem peaceful co-existence.

But unfortunately this paper was formulated in an unclear, misleading way; including untenable affirmations which weaken Christian convictions. With even a basic knowledge of Islamic theology and thinking, the expression, "No one can be associated with Allah who participates in his divinity", underlined repeatedly and centrally, should already have urged readers to be on guard. For Islamic theology, tradition and Moslem sensitivity, the expression "associate" (Arabic "shirq") is intended to refer almost exclusively to Jesus' divinity.

Koran verses quoted in the Islamic appeal include: *"O People of the Book! Come to common terms as between us and you: (Let us agree) that we worship none but God; that we associate no partners (as participants in his divinity) with him; that we (men) erect not, from among ourselves, lord and patrons other than Allah.' If they then turn back, say ye: 'Bear witness that we (at least) are Muslims (bowing to God's will).'" (Sura 3:64)*

"Say: 'Truly, my prayer and my service of sacrifice, my life and my death, are (all) for Allah, the lord of men in the whole World: No partner (in his reign) hath He: this am I commanded, and I am the first of those who bow to Allah's will.'" (Sura 6:162-163)

Thus the paper makes clear from the outset that the Moslem offer of reconciliation and peace is based on a foundation which recognizes Jesus Christ as a highly respected founder of a religion, even as a prophet among prophets. But it does not recognize Jesus as the God who became flesh. Whoever calls Jesus the son of God is guilty of "shirq" (= associating). This means apostasy from

⁴ http://www.yale.edu/divinity/news/071016_news_loving.shtml

the one and only god (Allah). In the Koran and in Islamic thought, the trinity is idolatry and thus blasphemy.

"In blasphemy indeed are those that say that Allah is Christ the son of Mary." (Sura 5:17)

"They do blaspheme who say: 'Allah is Christ the son of Mary.' But said Christ: 'O Children of Israel! Worship Allah, my Lord and your Lord.' Whoever joins other gods with Allah, Allah will forbid him the Garden and the Fire will be his abode." (Sura 5:72)

Making Mohammed and Jesus equal

The Christian leaders who signed the letter of reply demonstrated their willingness not only to go a second and third mile with their Islamic discussion partners, they also avoided provocative terms such as 'cross' and 'son of God'. This was what the Moslems had silently assumed and hoped for. The letter demonstrates this by comparing and equating statements of Jesus with those of Mohammed. Mohammed is clearly and unquestioningly titled a prophet and raised to the level of the Biblical prophets in their authority to proclaim God. And as if this were not enough, Mohammed is praised as the one who forgives and who loves his enemies; he is equated with Jesus in his human and ethical integrity.

In addition, the Christian letter of reply quotes a statement of Jesus in a questionable context, thus distorting its actual message. The Christians write that at the end of his life Jesus prayed for his enemies; this as if Jesus had died a natural death, old and satisfied with life. The fact was ignored that as he was hanging on the cross Jesus prayed for forgiveness for those who had not recognized who he was and had killed him. Jesus did not intercede for his enemies because he was a person of great and conciliatory character, a person who did not repay his enemies evil for evil. Ghandi and other great humans have also done this. Jesus' intercession on the cross was not primarily about the terrible things people had done to him. It was primarily a struggle for the salvation of a humanity who preferred darkness to light, who spat in God's face, who poured out its hatred of God onto his beloved son.

Suppressing the Cross

The Christians turned a blind eye to the cross because it is one of the main offences for Moslems. According to the Koran, Jesus neither died on the cross nor was he God's son who brought salvation to the world through his death and resurrection.

"They said, 'We killed Christ Jesus the son of Mary, the Apostle of Allah' – but they killed him not, nor crucified him, but rather there appeared to them another who was similar (so that they mistook him for Jesus and killed him). Those who differ therein are full of doubts, with no knowledge, but only conjecture to follow, for of a surety they killed him not. Nay, Allah raised him up unto Himself (in heaven); and Allah is exalted in Power, Wise." (Sura 4:157- 158)

It may be that Mohammed forgave people who intended evil. But making him equal with Jesus because of this can only be explained if the Christian leaders' desire for security and world peace has very massively clouded their judgment. If in a world shaken by war, terror, hatred and injustice we were not moved and inspired by the longing for peace and security, we would be lacking in compassion and understanding. I can well understand that this longing might drive us to compromise. I am familiar with the daily struggle for peace, for I have lived 20 years in close proximity to Moslems and Jews. Moslems are close to my heart because they are close to God's heart.

What is peace?

There is no one who has a greater desire for the peace of mankind than the God of the Bible. When Jesus was born the angels proclaimed, "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace to men on whom his favor rests" (Luke 2:14). God wants peace. And he brings peace into this world through his son Jesus. "For he himself is our peace" (Eph. 2:14). "And he will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace" (Is. 9: 6). "He will proclaim peace to the nations" (Zech. 9:10).

God bound true peace to the reign of his son, who lives in the hearts of those who have made him the foundation and content of their faith, life and thought. According to the gospel, peace is the person of Jesus himself. He is "the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world" (John 1:29), who overcomes hatred, war and destruction. The gospel of Jesus Christ is a message of peace and reconciliation between God and men. For God made the One who knew nothing of sin, pride or arrogance "to be sin for us" (1 Cor. 5:21) so that through him we may obtain forgiveness, reconciliation and peace. God plainly stated the way by which we humans can enter peace, "The punishment that brought us peace was upon him, and by his wounds we are healed" (Is. 53:5b).

Thus for true peace, the vicarious death of God's son on the cross is absolutely central and essential. Paul, the Orthodox Jew and Pharisee of his time, reduced his whole message to the one point, "I resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ and him crucified" (1 Cor. 2:2).

Paul, who had greater sources of knowledge than most of his compatriots, realized in humility that everything would have remained the same if Christ, the lamb of God, had not been crucified in order to take man's guilt and punishment on himself. There would be no forgiveness, no reconciliation, no peace, no new beginning, no justice, no light. Darkness, slavery and death would rule over mankind forever.

Anonymous testimony

The gospel does not differentiate between Christians, Moslems, Jews or whatever we may call them. Of everyone it is said, "There is no one righteous, not even one... All have turned away, they have together become worthless; there is no one who does good, not even one...Ruin and misery mark their ways, and the way of peace they do not know" (Rom. 3:10-17). "All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus" (Rom. 3:23-24). Only through Jesus' sacrificial death can men be saved and made fit for peace.

The crucified and risen son of God is the sole prince of peace and lord of the whole earth. There will be peace in no other name. This must be the foundation and testimony of every Christian. For Islam (and rabbinical Judaism) on the other hand, this testimony is unbearable blasphemy. Could the Islamic world live in peace and reconciliation with us if we did not push aside and ignore this testimony? Do we wish to encounter Moslems facelessly and without testimony? Will we throw away our inheritance for a pot of stew? Should we be silent regarding the central message of the cross for the sake of an opaque and misleading offer of peace? If we believe that God's grace and truth have come to us in Jesus, how can we withhold from Moslems the good news of salvation for their eternal souls? For that is where this would ultimately end.

Islamic thought demands that Christians who want a dialogue must renounce missions and evangelization. This is the condition for peace between the two religions. If Christians affirm a common basis in essential matters and goals of faith, Moslems will naturally expect Christians to acknowledge Islam's understanding of God, its claim to truth, and its necessity for mankind as equal to the gospel. This at least in Islamic areas. Fatal consequences for missions Under such

circumstances, evangelization among Moslems would no longer make sense. It would even be hypocrisy and untruthfulness, for evangelization invariably challenges the faith and world view of the person to whom the message is brought. Christian evangelization challenges people to consider God's revelation in his son Jesus Christ. Jesus is the only way which leads to the heavenly father, making every other way erroneous. Jesus is the only truth about the father, making all other confessions of faith meaningless. As the door to life, Jesus makes all other doors lead to dead ends. Jesus is the only source of life which God has given to man. For Islam (and for every other religion) this is a stumbling block, an unreasonable claim and an insult.

From the gospel's standpoint there is no leeway. Life and death, judgment and mercy, salvation and damnation are constituted solely in Jesus Christ. If we believe that the gospel is true, we must face the fact that Islam calls us unbelieving idol worshippers. *"In blasphemy indeed are those that say that Allah is Christ the son of Mary" (Sura 5:17)*. Islam's message may contain any number of spiritual and religious truths, but it is meaningless and empty in relation to man's salvation from judgment and darkness.

We must decide

We cannot avoid choosing our priorities. If we do not testify to the crucified one, it removes the offence from our midst and makes possible a conflict-free relationship to Moslems, plus a so-called peace. But it reduces the gospel to the level of an arbitrary religious culture. Or alternatively we can hold fast to the offence of the cross. Then we must accept the fact that we will remain the target of Islamic anger, rejection and enmity.

Jesus did not come primarily to end the conflicts and controversies of this world, but to save men's immortal souls and open the path to the heavenly father's home. Therefore we read, "What good will it be for a man if he gains the whole world, yet forfeits his soul?" (Matt. 16:26). As the church of Christ we must decide what our priority will be: either men's desires for temporal security and freedom from conflict. Or what matters to God, "who wants all men to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth" (1 Tim. 2:4).

Obvious contradictions

In my book "Islam, Israel and the Church" and in several articles, I have written repeatedly about Islam's self-understanding. Here I will confine myself to the question of integrity and truthfulness of the Islamic clerics' offer. If these scholars wish to recognize and respect Christianity as an equal and equivalent community of faith, in order to make possible peace and reconciliation, they will have to distance themselves from several central doctrines of the Koran. Or how will they then handle texts such as, *"In blasphemy are those that say that Allah is Christ the son of Mary" (Sura 5:17 and 72)*? We Christians really do believe that Christ is the son of Mary and the son of God, for it is written, "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God... The Word became flesh and lived for a while among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth" (John 1:1 and 14). Thus we are blasphemers according to the Koran.

Of the blasphemers, the Koran often repeats, *"Fight those who believe not in Allah nor the last day, nor hold that forbidden which hath been forbidden by Allah and his apostle, nor acknowledge the religion of truth, even if they are of the people of the book (i.e. Jews and Christians). Fight them until they submissively pay tribute (until they are totally subjugated)" (Sura 9:29)*. Sura 9:30-33 further emphasizes that those who believe that Christ is God and who have accepted him as their lord are cursed. *"The Christians call Christ the son of Allah. In this*

they but imitate what the unbelievers of old used to say. Allah's curse be on them: how they are deluded away from the truth! They take their scholars and monks to be their lords in Allah's stead, and they take as their lord Christ the son of Mary; yet they were commanded to worship but one God... Far is he from having the partners they associate with him...It is he who hath sent his apostle (Mohammed) with guidance and the religion of truth, to proclaim it over all religion, even though the pagans may detest it." In Sura 3:12 and 19 we read, "Say to those who reject faith, 'Soon will ye be vanquished and gathered together to hell – an evil bed indeed!... The (sole true) religion before God is Islam... But if any deny the signs of Allah, he is swift in calling to account."

In the face of such statements we cannot be surprised to further read, *"O ye who believe! Take not the Jews and the Christians for your friends. They are but friends to each other (but not to you). And he amongst you that turns to them is of them (but not of the fellowship of the believers). Verily Allah guideth not a people unjust" (Sura 5:51).* This summons is repeated in Sura 5:57 and other places in the Koran. There Jews and Christians are called unbelievers who received scriptures before the Moslems, but were not obedient to Mohammed's revelations and thus do not belong to the true religion of Islam. With such as these Moslems should have no friendly relationships.

Questions for the Islamic scholars

I would want to ask the Islamic scholars how they deal with these central statements of Islam. Do they believe that all those who believe that Jesus is the son of God and savior of the world are unbelievers or damned people, with whom a true Moslem may have no friendship? And more: Do they believe the Koran demands that Christians be fought and subjected to Islam's rule so that they cannot lead Moslems to fall away from Islam? Even if these Islamic scholars under the patronage of the moderate and western-oriented King Abdullah of Jordan were actually ready for religious tolerance and compromises, they would represent neither the great majority of Moslems nor the truly influential Islam. Islam cannot accept the central statement of the gospel without losing its identity; for Islam defines itself on the basis of its rejection of Christianity and Judaism.

Clever strategy

I believe that this initiative for reconciliation is not so much a matter of compromises or offers of tolerance on Islam's part, but rather a clever strategy to paralyze the Christian faith's missionary power. This encounter with Christianity is intended to weaken its influence and force it to retreat from positions which are a stumbling block for Islam. A major goal is to strengthen and promote the rights and influence of Islamic society in the West.

As Jesus' disciple I am deeply concerned that Moslems be treated with respect, friendship and love. God loves them with the same love with which he loves all others. How could we not wish them God's peace and mercy; and then witness to this through our lives? We want to respect and love Moslems as people. But to withhold the gospel from them would, from a Biblical standpoint, express the grossest lack of love. They will not find the path to God's father house except through the crucified one. This fact – if we really believe it – cannot leave us cold and indifferent. For the sake of Christ and for the sake of the salvation of 1.4 billion Moslems, I challenge all Christian leaders who are committed to the crucified one and who have signed the letter of reply to stop and think about what message they are transmitting. Naming Mohammed as a prophet in the same breath with Jesus and comparing him to Jesus brings confusion to Christianity. It also weakens the gospel's power among Moslems because it upgrades Islam, making the gospel

unnecessary for mankind.

Christians discriminated against in Islamic countries

We ought to be surprised at the enthusiasm, naivety and ease with which Christian leaders offer the hand of peace to the Islamic world, whose "official" representatives pose as reconcilers and peacemakers. In my opinion these Christians do so without even half seriously acknowledging Islam's true attitude toward Christians and Jews. In nearly all Islamic countries governments and society actually discriminate against Christians; Christians' rights are restricted, they are often mistreated, persecuted, driven away and frequently murdered because they are considered an unacceptable foreign element.

In no Islamic country where Christians are not a nominal, centuries' old minority are they allowed to live their faith openly; without threats and persecution. They are certainly forbidden to build churches and Christian institutions. In Saudi Arabia, where Islam was born, foreign Christians cannot even meet to read the Bible in their own houses behind locked doors without fear of attacks. Did we ever hear of one single church in Saudi Arabia? No non-Moslem may set foot in Mecca and Medina, Islam's holy places. Just imagine if Moslems were forbidden by religious and state law to set foot in the Vatican City or visit the Western Wall! The Islamic world would react to such discrimination with indignation and violence. For certain Christian leaders, violence against Christians in Islamic countries seems to have become a taboo topic.

The murder of missionaries in Turkey in April 2007 was dismissed as an act of extremists and swept under the carpet. In Egypt – a country of many Christians until the Islamic conquest – Christians live permanently outside recourse to the the law. Christian girls are continually kidnapped, Islamized and forced to marry Moslems. But the Egyptian government doesn't care a whit. This, in spite of the outcry of local Christians and international human rights organizations. The Islamic world vehemently calls for the rights and interests of Moslems and Islam in the western world, while seeking co-operation with the church and imploring it to make peace. But with this same vehemence they refuse any outside interference in their internal matters. They say that the Islamic world's treatment of Christians and other non-Moslems is their own business. And it is a fact that every form of questioning or criticism precipitates irritated reactions. Thus, co-operation with Christians could be concerned solely with what matters to Islam and Moslems in the West. In an Islamic-Christian coalition, Christians who believe that Moslems must be reached with the gospel would become a problem for the church. Christians who evangelize are more than an annoyance for Islam: they are doing blasphemous work among Moslems, which the Koran rates as worse than murder. *"The attempt to lead Moslems away from Islam is worse than slaughter"* (Sura 2:121).

Christian evangelization means leading Moslems to faith in Jesus Christ as the son of God and saviour of the world. The only reply to this, according to Islamic doctrine, is deadly enmity. *"Fight them on until there is no further attempt to lead Moslems away from Islam and there prevail justice and faith in Allah"* (Sura 2:193).

In addition, closing ranks between Christians and Moslems would unavoidably trigger still greater distance between the church and Israel. For to the Islamic world, Israel is a scandal in the midst of its territory. According to Islamic thought Israel can never be accepted.

Christians at the crossroad

How could Islam live with Christians in reconciliation and peace if the latter could not approach the Islamic position? Wouldn't the Christians have to prove their seriousness concerning respect,

recognition and partnership by putting the sources of annoyance and threats to Islamic honor and identity behind them: evangelization and friendship with Israel? Christians could live in peace and co-existence with Islam only by surrendering the central message of the crucified and risen son of God, which would be coupled with increasing distance from the state of Israel. As the Arab proverb says, "The enemies of my friends are my enemies, also." Expecting anything else is, in my opinion, naïve. Such a religious peace pact, aimed solely at the non-Islamic world, will increase Islam's influence and power. Christendom, on the other hand, will experience a growing loss of substance. Its message will be degraded to a religious-humanistic credo which will have nothing to offer people in their needs and godlessness.

What I describe here is not hysterical exaggeration, born of fear and Islam-phobia. It is simply my experience and knowledge of the church with which I fully identify, and with the Islamic world in whose context and controversy I have spent the last 20 years of my life. If the farmer knows the seed, he can state unequivocally what fruit it will one day produce.

As a result of the so-called peace- and reconciliation processes, Islam will present itself with great self-assurance in the Christian context. It will demand to be heard and understood. In contrast, it will be impossible for the Islamic world to give the gospel room to be heard and understood. How could Islam give room to the message of the cross which it considers a heresy?

Whoever is silent about the stumbling block of the cross and Jesus Christ's divine sonship for the sake of world peace, harmony and freedom from conflict may gain the world for a limited period, but he will lose the kingdom of God. For Jesus is the kingdom of God. "He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation" (1 Cor. 1:15). If the church and the world lose him, it means they lose everything. †

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Bible quotes from the New International Version

Koran quotes from the translation by Abdullah Yusuf Ali, adjusted to conform to the translation by Rudi Paret used in the German original version of this article.

Recommended literature:

„Hurray! We're Capitulating!“

Henryk M. Broder

<http://www.spiegel.de/international/spiegel/0,1518,462149,00.html>

The prevailing feeling among Muslims is that they are being abused by the West. What should we do about it? We might as well surrender. After all, we're already on our way.

This essay is an excerpt of Henryk M. Broder's book „Hurra, Wir Kapitulieren,“ („Hurray! We're Capitulating“) published by Wolf Jobst Siedler Verlag in 2006.

“Islam, Israel and the Church”

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Paperback, 159 pages

USA: Morning Star Publications

ISBN: 1599330911

UK: Sovereign World International

ISBN: 1-85240-453-1

Much has been written on the near East controversy, but we seldom find such an unerring, spiritual/theological/ historical analysis of the situation as in this book. Ultimately, the whole political controversy between Moslems, Jews, and Christians is a matter of just one thing: God's inheritance and election. In his knowledgeable presentation, Marcel Rebiai clears the fog in

which many westerners find themselves regarding Islam. At the same time, he conveys deep insight into the callings of Israel and the Arab people. The commission of Jesus' church is placed clearly before our eyes. Finally, Marcel Rebiai, who together with his „Community of Reconciliation,“ lives in the midst of this seat of conflict in Jerusalem, gives us a spiritual vision for the whole Near East.

The book is also available in German, French, Swedish and Hebrew. Please advise at the COR office, P.O.Box 77, CH- 8625 Gossau, Switzerland, office@gdv-cor.org