



VATICAN-ISLAM

Benedict XVI's improbable dialogue with 138 Muslim scholars

by Samir Khalil Samir, sj

Vatican representatives and Muslim thinkers will meet in Rome next March to hammer out a few guidelines for dialogue between Christians and Muslims. There is a risk of hollowness or falsity if the dialogue addresses theology alone, and not the concrete problems of the two communities.

Beirut (AsiaNews) - The masterful lecture by the pope in Regensburg, so widely criticised by much of the Muslim (and also Western) world, is producing positive results in the very domain of dialogue with the Muslim world. Following the address in Regensburg (September 12, 2006), 38 Muslim scholars sent an initial letter in response (October 13, 2006), and a year later a second letter (signed by 138 scholars, whose number has since grown to 216) in an effort to find common ground of collaboration between Christians and Muslims.

In his turn, last November 19 Benedict XVI responded to the letter of the 138, opening the way to possible collaboration in various areas. A few weeks ago (December 12, 2007), in a letter to Cardinal Bertone, Jordanian prince Ghazi bin Muhammad bin Talal agreed to lay the groundwork for collaboration: between February and March, personalities of the Vatican curia and of the Islamic world will meet in Rome to establish the procedures and subject matter of this dialogue. But it's possible that all this work will go right down the drain. It seems to me, in fact, that the Muslim personalities who are in contact with the pope want to dodge fundamental and concrete questions, like human rights, reciprocity, violence, etc, to ensconce themselves in an improbable theological dialogue "on the soul and God". Let's take a closer look at the problems that have emerged.

1. The Letter of the 138: "A Common Word between Us and You"

The letter of the 138 is full of goodwill: the Islamic scholars say they want to look "at what unites" Islam, Christianity, and the other religions. They have even made an effort to express themselves in "Christian" terms, saying that the heart of religion is "loving God and neighbour". Islam does not express itself in this manner. This is an expression of the Old Testament, resumed by Jesus in a more realistic, concrete, and universal sense in the parable of the good Samaritan (Luke 10:23-37). Jesus says two important things: first of all, he ranks the first commandment as "equal" to the second (and this was not so clear even in the Old Testament); in the second place, he clarifies who the neighbour is - he is not the one "closest to me" (as expressed by the Muslim intellectuals in the Arabic version of their letter, using the word *jâr*, close), but the one to whom I make myself

"neighbour". The Gospel, in fact, overturns the question of the scribe ("who is my neighbour?") and asks who behaved as a "neighbour" to the dying man. The neighbour is therefore every human person, including one's enemy, as the Samaritan was for the Jews.

In the Gospel one often finds parables in which Jesus overturns common values: the Pharisee and the tax collector, the pagans with respect to the Jews, the child with respect to the adult.

The greatest danger of the letter of the 138 is in *its silences*, in what it *does not address*: there is no reference, for example, to the problems of the international community in regard to the Muslim community, or to the real problems within the Muslim community. The Ummah finds itself at a very delicate point, in a phase of widespread extremism and radicalism among a significant segment of Muslims, which is a form of exclusivity: those who do not think as we do are our enemies. This is evident every day in the Muslim press, and we see violence and attacks in Iraq, Iran, Pakistan, Afghanistan, among Sunni and Shi'ite Muslims, or against Christians or Jews, or simply against tolerant Muslims . . . and they do exist!

The danger for Islam is not violence: this is present all over the world and in all religions and ideologies. The danger is that of justifying all this *through religion*. Even certain forms of violence against women and their rights are justified using the Qur'an. For example, I know a Muslim woman who cannot get a divorce, because divorce is the husband's right; she can only ask for the favour of being repudiated by him. He, on the basis of the Qur'an, can also remarry (up to four wives) and make a new life for himself, but the woman, who lives apart, does not have this right. She, a young wife, complained to me because "there is no justice". These situations, in which one uses the Qur'an or sharia law to exclude the other, are frequent.

II. The pope's response: four areas of collaboration

In the reply from the pontiff - sent through Cardinal Tarcisio Bertone, Vatican secretary of state - Benedict XVI expresses "deep appreciation" for the positive spirit that inspired the letter of the 138, and for the appeal for joint action to promote peace in the world.

Having said this, the pope suggests seeking what the two sides have in common. But the elements are not identical. First of all, he makes an annotation: they should seek what they have in common "Without ignoring or downplaying our differences". This means that for the pope, there are differences between the two communities that must be taken into account, not hidden: we can be brothers and different, brothers who disagree. This is a golden rule in the area of religion and dogma.

In the letter of the 138, it is suggested that what is held "in common" is faith in one God. The Islamic thinkers cite the Qur'an itself when they say "Come to a common word between us and you", which requires that nothing be placed alongside of God. But this is addressed to Christians, who place Jesus Christ next to God.

For the pope, the "things in common" exist, but differences exist as well, and these must be kept in mind. The pope lists three of these "common things":

- belief in the one God, the provident Creator;
- God, the universal Judge "who at the end of time will deal with each person according to his or her actions"[\[1\]](#);
- we are called "to commit ourselves totally to him and to obey his sacred will"[\[2\]](#).

The pope then proposes a concrete application: the formation of a dialogue group that would seek common ground. This terrain must be found on a number of levels:

a) The first is that of identifying values capable of guaranteeing "mutual respect, solidarity and peace". "Respect" here also means that there are differences that must be guaranteed and welcomed. For example, a Muslim can say to a Christian: I do not agree with what you believe, that Jesus has a human and divine nature. You Christians are polytheists, because you place other gods, your Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit, beside the one God. I say: let us seek to live in mutual respect. You have the full right to say that the Islamic conception excludes the Trinity, the divine-humanity. But leave me the right to say, for example, that Mohammed was not sent by God. I can acknowledge that he was a great personality on the human and political level, a social and spiritual reformer, that he also brought negative contributions, but not that he was a prophet. Do I have the right to say that, or not? As you have the right to say that you do not believe in the divinity of Christ - and in this you are consistent in your faith - we, too, have the right to say what we think about Mohammed[\[3\]](#). In short, there is no such thing as a "taboo" topic, but there are only taboo means and methods, because these are violent and disrespectful.

b) The other level is that of human life as "sacred". This ethical dimension embraces a very wide field, which ranges from the rejection of abortion to the natural end of human life. But it also includes non-violence, which is one of the noblest forms of respect for human life. And it also means love for all the works of human culture and progress: for equality among men, for human rights - a respect for life and for what helps it to emerge and flourish. In his address to the Roman curia on December 22, 2006, the pope said: "one must welcome the true conquests of the Enlightenment, human rights and especially the freedom of faith and its practice, and recognize these also as being essential elements for the authenticity of religion". For Benedict XVI, "the content of the dialogue between Christians and Muslims will be at this time especially one of meeting each other in this commitment to find the right solutions". And together with Muslims, to work "to oppose

violence and for the synergy between faith and reason, between religion and freedom". The foundation is "the dignity of every human person", expressed by human rights.

At this point, the pope suggests four topics to the 138:

- 1) *Human rights*. This is the first foundation of dialogue;
- 2) *Objective knowledge of the religion of the other*. This means knowing the other for who he defines himself to be. The Christian must know Islam for what the Qur'an and modern Muslims define it to be; the Muslim must know Christianity through the Gospels and the teaching of the Church[4]. Objective knowledge is fundamental for a real relationship.
- 3) *Sharing of religious experience*. This element has not been emphasized until now. Religious experience is more than knowledge. It recognises that even if the other's dogma is not my own, he can enrich me from a human and spiritual point of view. A few days ago, while flying from Beirut to Paris, I had a chance to talk for three hours with a young African woman returning from Mecca, where she had been on pilgrimage. It was a beautiful and profound conversation. And it helped us to appreciate, but also to correct, the image that we have of each other[5].
- 4) *A commitment to educating the young*. If we do not prepare the young to live out this reciprocal respect today, tomorrow we may find ourselves still in conflict with among ourselves.

This ends our look at the pope's letter: brief, but very dense, a sign of his profound reflection.

III. The reply to the pope from Ghazi Ibn Talal: only theological dialogue

The reply of the 138, signed by Ghazi Ibn Talal, prince of Jordan, is dated December 12, 2007. After a few introductory remarks, the letter says that they accept the idea of dialogue, and that in March they will send some of their representatives to specify the organisational and procedural details.

But then (in the fifth paragraph of the text) they propose a distinction between intrinsic and extrinsic, and explain: "By 'intrinsic' I mean that which refers to our own souls and their inner make-up, and by 'extrinsic' I mean that which refers to the world and thus to

society". They propose starting on the basis of the letter that they wrote, "A Common Word Between Us and You", and concentrating on "the unicity of God and the twofold commandment of love of God and neighbor". Everything else belongs to the extrinsic dimension, including social concerns.

Honestly, I find this distinction weak and even un-Islamic. Because if "intrinsic" is the soul and "extrinsic" is the world and society, then the Qur'an speaks a great deal of "extrinsic" things, and very little of "intrinsic" things. The Qur'an talks about the world, commerce, life in society, war, marriage, etc., but it says very little about the soul and one's relationship with God. But above all, the Qur'an never makes this distinction. On the contrary; the problem of Islam is precisely that of not making any sort of distinction between these two levels. Why in the world do the 138 want to address only "intrinsic" things? I think they're afraid of confronting the complete reality of the two religions.

Ghazi's reply continues: "It is on this common intellectual and spiritual basis, then, that we understand that we are to pursue, God Willing, a dialogue in the three general topics of dialogue Your Eminence wisely mentioned in your letter: (1) 'Effective respect for the dignity of every human person'; (2) 'Objective knowledge of the religion of the other' through 'sharing of religious experience', and (3) 'A common commitment to promoting mutual respect and acceptance among the younger generation'"[6].

The prince continues with an exhortation to dialogue, citing a conference organised by the Community of Sant'Egidio.

And finally, they distance themselves from "some recent pronouncements emerging from the Vatican and from Vatican advisors – which cannot have escaped the notice of Your Eminence – as regards the very principle of theological dialogue". I think that the persons to whom they are referring are Cardinal Tauran (and perhaps Fr Christian W. Troll and myself), who have expressed our reservations about the possibility of theological dialogue between Christians and Muslims.

The prince himself says that he maintains as "inherently" impossible "complete theological agreement between Christians and Muslims", but that in spite of this he wants dialogue on this level, "whether we wish to call [it] 'theological' or 'spiritual' or something else - for the sake of the common good and towards the good of the whole world, God Willing".

The prince thus reaffirms his commitment to collaboration on the theological and spiritual level. And there is an ambiguity here: Islam, more than Christianity, blends the theological with the political, and even with the military. And here they claim to speak only of the theological. In all probability, there is some theologian behind Ghazi's thought. I think of an interview with professor Aref Ali Nayed, conducted by Catholic News Service last October 31 and reprinted by "Islamica Magazine" - in the interview, he stated, "Many Muslim theologians are not just interested in mere ethical dialogue . . . If dialogue is to be serious, it must be theologically and spiritually deep".

A few months ago, he also affirmed that his conception of dialogue "excludes everything that is not theological and spiritual". But honestly, this distinction cannot be made: the human and social consequences of theological positions cannot be avoided.

IV. Conclusion

To sum up, then, we must say that some important good results for dialogue are beginning to appear. And it must be recalled that everything began from Regensburg, from that masterful lecture that seemed to have destroyed any basis for dialogue, but instead revived it.

The address in Regensburg was built upon the reign of reason as the foundation of dialogue. This presupposes all of the adaptation of the religions in the face of Enlightenment principles, but without impoverishing reason. In short, the foundation of everything is not religion, but the human reason that is common to all human beings^[7].

The Regensburg address begins from precisely this problem: how can a common foundation be found for humanity and the religions, including Islam?

In the modern state, the common foundation is expressed with the universal declaration of human rights, of freedom of religion, etc . . . In dialogue between Christians and Muslims, too, these must be taken as the basis of dialogue; otherwise we will achieve nothing. In the past, many Muslim theologians have rejected the universal declaration of human rights, and have drafted an "Islamic" declaration, accusing the "universal" one of being only "Western". But this denies that there can be universality, and therefore denies that we can have common principles. This is the foundation of the conflict between the Islamic world and the West, or the rest of the world.

Kofi Annan, when he was invited once by the Organisation of Islamic Countries to open a conference, stated clearly that there cannot be "Islamic", "African", "Christian", or "Buddhist" declarations of human rights. Either the declaration is universal, or it cannot exist.

But the letter of Prince Ghazi seems to say, instead, that human rights are not important, and are only a political question. Only theological dialogue is of interest. But what good does it do to talk about the one God, if I do not recognise that man has an absolute dignity in the image of God? That freedom of conscience is sacred, that the believer has no more rights than the non-believer, that man has no more rights than woman, etc?

It must be affirmed that man comes before religion: respecting man comes before respect for religion. This is the Christian approach.

I would not like for some theologians, finding themselves in difficulty over the affirmation of the dignity of every man, to look for a way of escape in theological dialogue. This method risks producing nothing but falsehood. But this is a problem that also exists within Islam itself. Until this has based everything upon the human person and reinterpreted the faith in the light of human rights, it will never be modern.

In the two Islamic declarations on human rights, it is repeatedly affirmed that Islam admits human rights, "as long as these conform to the law". To an unsuspecting person who reads the English translation, this may seem to be just fine. The point is that for the English translation "law", the Arab versions say "conform to sharia". This means that the "Islamic" human rights risk re-proposing the usual injustices and violence: apostasy, blasphemy, stoning, injustice toward women and children, etc[8].

Of course, interreligious dialogue cannot focus only upon human rights, but neither can it act as if there were not a serious problem precisely in this regard.

Let me conclude by citing a passage from the letter of Saint James (2:14-26), although it is a bit long. In this context it seems fairly important to me, both for the question in verse 19 and because it gives the example of "Abraham, the friend of God" (*Khalil Allah*, as we say in Arabic), who is so respected by the Muslims:

What good is it, my brothers, if someone says he has faith but does not have works? Can that faith save him? If a brother or sister has nothing to wear and has no food for the day, and one of you says to them, "Go in peace, keep warm, and eat well," but you do not give them the necessities of the body, what good is it? So also faith of itself, if it does not have works, is dead.

Indeed someone might say, "You have faith and I have works." Demonstrate your faith to me without works, and I will demonstrate my faith to you from my works. You believe that God is one. You do well. Even the demons believe that and tremble. Do you want proof, you ignoramus, that faith without works is useless? Was not Abraham our father justified by works when he offered his son Isaac upon the altar? You see that faith was active along with his works, and faith was completed by the works. Thus the scripture was fulfilled that says, "Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness," and he was called "the friend of God." See how a person is justified by works and not by faith alone. And in the same way, was not Rahab the harlot also justified by works when she welcomed the messengers and sent them out by a different route? For just as a body without a spirit is dead, so also faith without works is dead.

Notes

[1] That we will be judged on our actions, on facts, is an idea common to Christians and Muslims. The Qur'an speaks of "those who believe in God and in the Last Day and who do good deeds" (2:62, 5:69). But this means that there is an ethical code that could also

be held in common. Constructing a common ethics would be very important. Similar things have happened in the past. At the UN conference in Cairo on population and development, in 1994, the Vatican voted with the Islamic countries. Various ambassadors criticised the Holy See because it sided with the fundamentalists. In reality, on questions of the right to life, Christians and Muslims come together. The astonishment comes only from the secularised West, which has created a relativist ethics, leaving what is good and evil to the individual's subjective decision. This point requires urgent and extensive work.

[2] The Muslim is perfectly comfortable hearing this, because for him obedience is the structure of life, it is abandonment to the will of God, *islâm*. And for the Christian, too, dedication to God (and to men) is a great ideal. But the discussion of this point needs to be expanded and clarified: what does it mean that we are called "to dedicate ourselves completely"? For an Islamic extremist, dedicating oneself to God also means killing, strapping on a bomb, blowing oneself up. Here, too, there appears a difference between Christians and Muslims, and it demands attention: non-violence is a spiritual choice, not a political one.

[3] We Christians living in the Arab world suffer greatly in this regard, because we are not permitted to say what we really think. Often the Muslims ask us for "an exchange of favours": we believe that Jesus was a prophet, so you should believe that Mohammed was a prophet.

[4] In this mutual objective knowledge, the Muslims run the greater risk. Since Islam came after Christianity, and since there are references to Jesus, Mary, and Christians in the Qur'an, very often Muslims do not make an effort to understand Christianity for what Christians understand it to be, but content themselves with what the Qur'an says about it. But the only way for Christians to discover Islam is by reading the Qur'an.

[5] This means that we can share our religious sensibilities without renouncing our principles. Prayer together can also be considered. Many times in the past the criticism has been made of Ratzinger that he had a negative view of the meetings in Assisi, where since 1986 religious personalities have met together to pray. The controversy that has erupted so many times is whether persons of different religions should pray together. The position of the then-cardinal Ratzinger was that it was necessary to avoid anything that might suggest confusion or syncretism. But praying together, as the pope did in the mosque in Istanbul, is the height of respect and dialogue.

[6] It should be noted that the recipients of the letter did not realise that the points cited by the pope are four, and not three: the sharing of religious experience, in the pope's text, is a third point.

[7] 10th-century Islamic thought had very clear ideas about this, and it respected a foundation common to all men. Later the Islamic world increasingly closed itself off, even against the rationalist Muslims (like Averroes).

[8] It is worth asking how much impact the letter of the 138 has had. Among experts, there has been increasing agreement: the 138 signatories have grown to 216. But in the population, nothing has happened. I have seen just a few articles in Arabic, in the Arab and Islamic newspapers. None of these analysed the content of the letter of the 138. Some of them gave nothing but the news itself, others recounted only that Christians and Muslims wanted to meet to discuss faith in the one God. It therefore cannot be said that this letter has moved the Islamic world.