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BENEDICT XVI AND INTERRELIGIOUS DIALOGUE

The Case of Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations*

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A systematic presentation of Joseph Ratzinger-Benedict XVI's theology of interreligious dialogue is very much work in progress. Nevertheless, it is possible to identify certain important ideas and lines of thought. The purpose of this article is to present some of these ideas by examining the particular case of Christian relations with the followers of Islam, which is the world's second largest religion in terms of number of adherents. It does so by presenting the thought of Joseph Ratzinger-Benedict XVI on Islam and on Christian-Muslim relations in order to reflect on whether and how such contributes to the progress of present-day engagement of Catholics, and Christians in general, with Islam.

Benedict XVI is both a theologian and Pope, and these two aspects have to be taken into account to appreciate the continuity between his theology (more developed in the pre-pontificate years) and praxis (in his time as Pope). The task is complex as it requires the exploration of different questions: What is Benedict's theology of Islam? What does the theologian say *about* Islam and Muslims? What does he say

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to Islam and *to* Muslims? What underlies his praxis of encounter with Muslims? What do his gestures and actions reveal of his understanding (theology) of Islam and of Christian-Muslim relations?

As a theologian, Benedict has not written systematically about Islam and, therefore, a reconstruction of his theology of Islam can only be attempted by putting together ideas found in different theological writings on various other subjects. The task involves an exploration of his wide spectrum of writings and a sufficient grasp of his theology, especially his ecclesiology, as well as familiarity with the sources that influence his thought. Neither has Benedict XVI as Pope written any document or delivered any speech specifically on Islam or Christian-Muslim relations. The task therefore will also include an analysis of various kinds of statements, examples of which are his addresses to ambassadors of Muslim Countries, to Muslim representatives during his apostolic journeys, and his messages for the world day of peace. His actions and gestures towards Muslims should also be made the object of reflection in the attempt to identify underlying meanings and theology, although this is is beyond the scope of this paper.

Benedict XVI: A Modern Pope

Benedict XVI belongs to a distinctive form of papacy the roots of which can be traced back to the beginning of the 20th century, and its contours have become increasingly clear until Vatican II, but it has eventually taken shape in the post-Vatican II pontificates. To appreciate Benedict XVI and his approach to interreligious dialogue in depth, it is important to understand the features of the modern papacy and the theological—especially ecclesiological—framework in which it operates.

As I consider Benedict XVI next to Paul VI and John Paul II in order to identify the specific characteristics of the modern papacy, two major aspects emerge.

First, modern popes are aware that the community they lead has global dimensions. They speak and act in the awareness that the

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Catholic Church is present everywhere, in virtually all political, social and religious situations, and is bound to engage in dialogue with all particular contexts and with the world (cf. Paul VI, *Ecclesiam Suam,* 1964; Second Vatican Council, *Gaudium et Spes,* 1965).[1] They also understand that their role is significant not just for the Catholic Church but for all Christians, and feel the responsibility to protect and encourage each of them in all kinds of situations.

Second, modern popes have a strong sense of the Church's responsibility for humanity, that the Catholic Church exists for the salvation of the world understood as integral, and feel directly responsible for all humanity and its persons.[2]

This twofold awareness is manifested through a new style of presence of the Church in the socio-political sphere, articulated through various aspects:

a. the importance the Holy See attaches to diplomatic relations with an increasing number of political realities (states, institutions);[3]
b. the popes' personal contact with people through apostolic journeys and the use of mass media;
c. their outreach to other faith communities, both from other Christian denominations and from other religions, through words as well as important symbolic actions;
d. resistance to the anti-religious element of contemporary culture and politics;

[1]Cf. Jean-Pierre Torrell, "Paul VI et l'ecclesiologie de *Lumen Gentium*," in Rodolfo Rossi, ed., *Paolo VI e i Problemi Ecclesiologici al Concilio. Colloquio internazionale di studio* (Roma: Edizioni Studium, 1989), 144–186.

[2]On the influence of personalism on Paul VI, cf. for example Giorgio Campanini, "G.B. Montini e J. Maritain," in Rodolfo Rossi, ed., *Montini Journet Maritain: une famille d'esprit. Jourées d'étude* (Roma: Edizioni Studium, 2000), 225–237.

[3]Cf. Peter G. Kent & John F. Pollard, eds., *Papal Diplomacy in the Modern Age* (West Port: Praeger Publishers, 1994).

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e. broader theological perspectives embracing cultures, ideologies and religions;
f. special attention to human dignity and rights (Vatican II, *Dignitatis Humanae,* 1965);
g. awareness of the significance of their role in society and in politics in view of the fulfilment of their mission.

The modern papacy reflects Vatican II theological and pastoral openness to the world, i.e., the reality outside the Church, but also sees itself in continuity with a transformation of the papacy which began with the historical events at the end of the 19th century, when the loss of political power forced the Holy See to understand itself differently and reshape itself.[4] It is a twofold continuity: they are in continuity with Vatican II because the Council stands in fundamental continuity within the development of Catholic Tradition. This is evident in the fact that Paul, John Paul and Benedict constantly refer to Vatican II as well as to the teaching of their 20th century predecessors (the social teaching provides a very clear example).[5]

Since his first message of April 22, 2005, Benedict XVI placed himself squarely in the line of his two modern predecessors and announced the priorities of his pontificate. The unity of the Church would be his primary concern in order to make the Church a more effective and credible servant of humanity; interreligious dialogue was also mentioned. Benedict XVI's engagement with the religions can be understood within the framework of the modern papacy's self-understanding vis-à-vis humanity and the Church's responsibility and mission in the world. It is also important to notice how the theology of Benedict XVI is being reshaped by his responsibility as pope in the modern world.

[4]It is possible to trace the origins of political theology back to the pontificate of Pius VI vis-à-vis the French revolution and Napoleon.

[5]Another example is the concern of the pre-Vatican II papacy on war and peace (i.e., Benedict XV and Pius XII). Cf. John F. Pollard, *The Unknown Pope: Benedict XV (1914–1922) and the Pursuit of Peace* (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1999).

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Benedict XVI and Islam

a) Islam within the framework of Ratzinger's theology of religions

Ratzinger's initial encounter with Islam takes place on the path of fundamental theological reflection. In his attempt to articulate the Christian faith in order to present it as clearly as possible, Ratzinger at some point focused on the place of Christianity within the development of the religious history of humanity. It was, he says, when teaching philosophy of religion and history of religions that he encountered the reality of world religions. The driving question of his enquiry is therefore whether Christianity has a unique role to play within the broad history of the religious development of humanity, which includes all possible expressions of the *homo religiosus* as they have come to be articulated in the various systems of belief and practice, which are commonly called religions. What, in other words, is the decisive contribution of Christianity to the religious development of humanity and how is it related to the religions?

Because it is on this path that the theologian encounters Islam, it is important to consider his broader theological framework in order to understand his ideas on Islam expressed in fragments here and there.

The above mentioned "driving question" reveals a distinctive characteristic of Benedict XVI, the theologian and pastor—the remarkable similarity of his theological method with the Church Fathers' style of theologizing. The Fathers' central concern was the correct and clear articulation of the faith, aimed at making Christianity understandable to the hearers and enabling them to embrace it. Their attempts to account theologically for the existence of other religious ways emerged basically as a consequence of their "practical" missionary concern. The same is true for Benedict XVI—his focus is the articulation of Christian faith that is faithful to the sources: Revelation and Tradition.

Another important feature of Ratzinger's theological method is that he shows a consistent inclination to identify and engage with

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the universal behind the particular—the archetypes—although without losing sight of the particular. This means that vis-à-vis one particular religious tradition, like Islam, Ratzinger's theological reflection 1) will begin with the broader context of the non-Christian religions; 2) will locate the particular religion in that context; and 3) draw conclusions. If the disadvantage is that he does not formulate a theology of Islam, the advantage is that his reflections apply to the broader spectrum of religions as well.

In seeking to understand Benedict XVI's thought on Islam, we begin with the question of what is the place of Islam within the historical development of the religious spirit of humanity. The main source in this regard is a paper that Ratzinger wrote in 1964, which is to date the most comprehensive articulation of his theology of religions. Ratzinger re-presented the paper basically unaltered, although prefaced by a new introduction, in 2004, showing that his basic theology of religions has remained consistent over several decades.[6] The paper dates back to the time when a very lively debate was ongoing within Catholic theology with regard to the religions. Jacques Dupuis has summed up the positions of the debate in *Towards a Christian Theology of Religious Pluralism*, and identified two major clusters: on the one hand what he calls fulfillment theories, represented by theologians like Jean Daniélou and Henry de Lubac, and on the other hand those theologies that acknowledge the hidden presence of the mystery of Christ in the religions, most notably represented by Karl Rahner.[7] Ratzinger

[6]Cf. Joseph Ratzinger, "The Unity and Diversity of Religions: The Place of Christianity in the History of Religions," in Herbert Vorgrimler, ed., *Gott in Welt: Festgabe für Karl Rahner zum 60 Geburtstag* (Freiburg: Herder, 1964), 287–305. Published in English in Joseph Ratzinger, *Truth and Tolerance: Christian Belief and World Religions* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2004), 15–44.

[7]Cf. Jacques Dupuis, *Towards a Christian Theology of Religious Pluralism* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 2001), 130–157; Jean Daniélou, *The Lord of History: Reflections on the Inner Meaning of History* (London: Longmans, 1958), 107–121 (Chapter 8: "The History of Religions and the History of Salvation"); Jean Daniélou, "Christianity and the Non-Christian Religions," in Jean Daniélou, ed., *Introduction to the*

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manifests his disinclination towards Rahner's concept of the Christian grace hiddenly operative in the religions and is closer to Daniélou's approach. For Daniélou and others, the religions do have a positive value in the history of salvation and in God's salvific plan, which consists in their being a preparation for the human spirit to receive the grace that comes with the Judeo-Christian revelation.[8] In this sense they belong to a "prehistory of salvation," to be understood obviously not in chronological sense but in theological terms. Concretely we might say that for Daniélou, although the religion of Islam appears after Christianity, and although it is rooted in the content of the Old Testament, Islam represents a "regression" to a vertical relationship with God, with the loss of the sense of God's action in history, and therefore it is a return to the prehistory of salvation, which is to be fulfilled in Christ.[9]

A methodological premise precedes Ratzinger's argument. He observes that most theologies of religions are "limited," having been constructed on two assumptions that are arbitrary (Ratzinger's later critique includes Race's threefold classification of theologies in

Great Religions (Notre Dame: Fides, 1964), 7–28; Jean Daniélou, *The Advent of Salvation* (London: Sheed and Ward, 1950); Jean Daniélou, *The Holy Pagans of the Old Testament* (London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1957); Henri de Lubac, *The Church: Paradox and Mystery* (Shannon, Ireland: Ecclesia Press, 1969), 68–95 (Chapter 4: "The Pagan Religions and the Fathers of the Church"); Henri de Lubac, "Mysticism and Mystery," in *Theological Fragments* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1989); Henri de Lubac, "Preface," in A. Ravier, *La mystique et les mystiques* (Paris: Desclee de Brouwer, 1965); Karl Rahner, "Thoughts on the Possibility of Belief Today," *Theological Investigations* V (Baltimore: Helicon Press/London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1966), 2–22; Karl Rahner, "Christianity and the Non-Christian Religions," *Theological Investigations* V (Baltimore: Helicon Press/London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1966), 113–134.

[8]Cf. Daniélou, "Christianity and the Non-Christian Religions."

[9]Cf. Daniélou, "Christianity and the Non-Christian Religions."

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exclusivism, inclusivism and pluralism).[10] First is the assumption that with regard to the reality of religious pluralism, the crucial question for Christian theology is that of the salvation of non-Christians (the soteriological dimension). The second arbitrary assumption is a corollary to the first: because religions are looked at from the perspective of whether and how their adherents are saved or not, then they are treated not in themselves, respecting the particularity of each, but "in bulk," as a homogeneous reality ultimately characterized by the same basic dynamics and properties. A theology of religion that begins and ends with the question of salvation deals not with the real religions but with an abstract generalization, whereby there would be no difference when talking about Sikhism or Islam, for example.[11]

Ratzinger considers this as an arbitrary self-limitation of theology and proposes a different way of proceeding that consists in a "phenomenological investigation" of the spectrum of the known religions in order to identify at least certain basic types of religion ("basic alternatives"), and making these the object of "philosophical and theological reflections and verdicts."[12]

At the end of his lengthy phenomenological investigation of the religious history of humanity, Ratzinger identifies three stages of development. The first is the stage of the natural religions based on the perception of the Transcendent/God in the dynamics of the cosmos and of human life. This stage then develops into the second stage of mythical religions, when the initial experience of the transcendent is

[10]Cf. Joseph Ratzinger, "Variations on the Theme of Faith, Religion and Culture," in Joseph Ratzinger, *Truth and Tolerance: Christian Belief and World Religions* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2004), 80–85. Cf. Alan Race, *Christians and Religious Pluralism: Patterns in the Christian Theology of Religions* (London: SCM Press, 1983); Alan Race, *Interfaith Encounter: The Twin Tracks of Theology and Dialogue* (London: SCM, 2001).

[11]Cf. Ratzinger, "The Unity and Diversity of Religions," 17; also 53.

[12]Ratzinger, "The Unity and Diversity of Religions," 18.

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articulated in mythical stories. The third stage is inaugurated by the going-beyond the mystical religions and is a complex stage as it has occurred in three different possible ways: a) through evolution into mystical religion, b) through the revolution of monotheism and finally c) through reason/enlightenment.[13] The two forms of development that remain under the category of religion are therefore the mystical and the monotheistic and it is here that Ratzinger's argument is most relevant to our focus on Islam. The kind of monotheism he refers to here is in fact the very specific form of monotheism typical of the Judeo-Christian revelation and, by derivation, of Islam, and not just any religion that believes in one God (like the kind that can be found among the Indian religions).[14]

Ratzinger's comparison between the mystical type and the monotheistic type helps to understand in what way Judaism-Christianity-Islam are as a whole to be seen as the "true" development of the religious history of humanity.

In the first place, the monotheistic development happens by revolution and not be evolution. It is occasioned by the intervention of the Transcendent into history, which establishes a personal relationship with the believer. As a result, the life of the believer is transformed and given a new sense of purpose. The initial "cosmic" experience of God through creation and through myth is profoundly reshaped by such intervention. There is continuity but also a radical newness in this kind of monotheism.

The second characteristic of monotheism is that the goal of ultimate unity with God is made possible by God's initiative. The main actor as well as the centre of the relationship is therefore God and not the person, and knowledge of God is not obtained by the person via paths of purification but offered by God. In the

[13]Cf. Ratzinger, "The Unity and Diversity of Religions," 27–28.

[14]Cf. Ratzinger, "The Unity and Diversity of Religions," 34–35.

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monotheistic revolution the person is of course not simply passive, but becomes active as he/she responds to God's initiative.[15]

Thirdly and most importantly, the goal of religion is—like for the mystical religions—union with God, but it happens in such a way that the interpersonal relationship and the particular identities are conserved: God and person become one but their unity is that of an irreducible "I and thou" relationship.[16]

Finally, the God that enters history makes people actors in the history of salvation as they are: that is why the Bible has no need to hide the dark side of the patriarchs and prophets and the limitations of Jesus' disciples.[17] It means that salvation is always God's gift and accessible to all, not just to the few who have attained some superior level of knowledge or purification. While in the mystic religion there is a first-hand religion that belongs to the initiated, and a second-hand religion which is for the many (so that the latter can access the divine exclusively through the experience of the former), in the monotheistic development "only God deals at first-hand" and all "without exception are dealing at second hand," including those who are appointed leaders of the people.[18]

It is possible to detect the influence of de Lubac underlying Ratzinger's implicit assumption that the monotheistic development is more "advanced" than the way of mysticism because it is more in tune with God's authentic nature (according to Christian Revelation).[19] Alongside Christianity and Judaism, Islam belongs to the monotheistic

[15]Cf. Ratzinger, "The Unity and Diversity of Religions," 36.

[16]Cf. Ratzinger, "The Unity and Diversity of Religions," 45–47. Cf. Martin Buber, *I and Thou*, trans. Ronald Gregor Smith (Edinburgh: Clark, 1959, c1958).

[17]Cf. Ratzinger, "The Unity and Diversity of Religions," 40–41.

[18]Cf. Ratzinger, "The Unity and Diversity of Religions," 43–45.

[19]Cf. Henri de Lubac, "Preface," in A. Ravier, ed., *La mystique et les mystiques* (Paris: Desclée de Brouwer, 1965), 7–39; de Lubac, "Mysticism and Mystery,"

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development of religion and therefore, albeit with the necessary distinctions and reservations, the relationship between Christianity and Islam is, for example, qualitatively different from the relationship between Christianity and Buddhism or that between Islam and any of the currents of Hinduism. It is a special relationship from the historical as well as the theological point of view.

When Ratzinger speaks about Judaism and Islam, therefore, he does so with the assumption that there is a fundamental relationship among them and Christianity that is "essential" because they belong to the same basic type of religion. Any distinction, difference, and comparison is to be understood against this background. As a distinctive form within the monotheistic turn, Islam possesses all the above characteristics.

Indeed, Ratzinger acknowledges the positive value of all the religious history of humanity on account of the common humanity of all: "we are all part of a single history that is in many different fashions on the way towards God." However, in this history Christianity holds a unique place, and close to Christianity one necessarily encounters Judaism first, and Islam.[20]

b) Islam in Ratzinger's writings

Probably Ratzinger's most substantial treatment of Islam is to be found in his 1996 interview with Peter Seewald.[21]

Ratzinger's first observation is that it is difficult to identify Islam as a uniform reality on account of its lack of a central authority recognized by all Muslims. "No one can speak for Islam as a whole" because Islam exists in many varieties (besides the schism between

35–69 (French original: *Théologies d'Occasion* [Paris: Desclée, 1984]). See also Henri de Lubac, *Aspects of Buddhism* (London, New York: Sheed and Ward, 1953).

[20]Cf. Ratzinger, "The Unity and Diversity of Religions," 44.

[21]Cf. Joseph Ratzinger, *Salt of the Earth: The Church at the End of the Millennium: An Interview With Peter Seewald* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1997), 244–246.

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Sunni and Shi'a) which refer to different mutually independent religious authorities.[22] As a consequence, "dialogue with Islam" is an abstraction and in effect it is only possible to engage in dialogue with certain specific Muslim groups or individuals.

Secondly, in order to understand better the complexity of Islam, it is necessary to acknowledge the existence of a "noble" Islam but also of a kind of "extremist, terrorist Islam" which cannot be identified with Islam as a whole.[23] Pope Benedict has often emphasized that it is the noble Islam that the Church considers as a potential partner in the dialogue.

A third point is that in Islam the interrelationship between society, politics and religion is completely different from Christianity. At its heart, Islam "does not have the separation between the political and the religious sphere that Christianity has had from the beginning." In effect, the Qur'an is a "total religious law" which defines all political and social life: "Sharia shapes society from beginning to end."[24] This implies that Muslims can only fit temporarily in a system that is not totally Islamic because Islam is in essence oriented towards the establishment of such a system. Its absolute claim is ultimately incompatible with the idea of a plural society in which all religious expressions have the same normative value. The provision of *dhimma* is a clear illustration: Islam accepts a multireligious society which includes only the religions mentioned in the Qur'an (Judaism, Christianity and Zoroastranism), and only as long as the overarching framework in which other faiths are tolerated and often respected is Islamic. Benedict observes that if Islam accepted as definitive a situation different from this, it would be an "alienation from itself."[25] According to Benedict

[22]Cf. Ratzinger, *Salt of the Earth*, 244.

[23]Cf. Ratzinger, *Salt of the Earth*, 244.

[24]Ratzinger, *Salt of the Earth*, 244.

[25]Ratzinger, *Salt of the Earth*, 244.

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then, Islam "is not simply a denomination that can be included in the free realm of a pluralistic society."[26] When this fact is overlooked, Islam is defined by projecting on it the Christian model of the interaction between religion and politics and is not recognised as it is.[27]

Fourth, in the recent past, Islam has been experiencing a worldwide consolidation, which for Ratzinger is due to two factors. The first is external, namely the financial power that the Arab countries have attained which makes possible the establishment of mosques and Muslim cultural institutes everywhere, with a significant increase in propaganda. The second factor is that Islam is experiencing a new self-consciousness which has been growing with the decline of the influence of Christianity in civilizations with Christian foundations that began in the 1960s. This has coincided with a great moral crisis of the Western world—which is seen as the Christian World—in which Muslims have clearly seen a crisis, almost the failure, of Christianity as a religion. According to Ratzinger, "this is the feeling today of the Muslim world: the Western Countries are no longer capable of preaching a message of morality but have only know-how to offer the world. The Christian religion has abdicated; it really no longer exists as a religion; the Christians no longer have a morality or faith."[28] Islam manifests its "inner power" in the conviction that it is the religion that holds its ground and has a message to offer to the world (Benedict has spoken of "a new intensity about wanting to live Islam [that] has awakened"), and Christianity must naturally come to terms with this inner power.[29]

[26]Ratzinger, *Salt of the Earth*, 244.

[27]Cf. Ratzinger, *Salt of the Earth*, 245.

[28]Ratzinger, *Salt of the Earth*, 245.

[29]Cf. Ratzinger, *Salt of the Earth*, 246.

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In a more recent interview with the same author, Pope Benedict XVI has offered some additional notes on Islam.[30] These new fragments of reflection came three years after Benedict's controversial Regensburg lecture, a crucial event in his relationship with Islam, and touch on aspects closely related to the lecture.[31]

Benedict remarks that with the controversy that followed his Regensburg address, it emerged clearly that "Islam needs to clarify two questions in regard to public dialogue, that is the question concerning its relation to violence and its relation to reason."[32] In this regard, it was remarkable that "now there was within Islam itself a realization of the duty and the need to clarify these questions, which has since led to an internal reflection among Muslim scholars, a reflection that has in turn become a theme of dialogue with the Church."[33] This realization has found concrete expression in the document *A Common Word* which Benedict considers of great importance because it is an interpretation of Islam by Muslim authorities seeking a certain consensus among themselves "that immediately placed it in dialogue with Christianity."[34]

Christians and Muslims ultimately have two things in common: first, "both defend major religious values—i.e. faith in God and obedience to God"; second, they face the same challenge of modernity and both "need to situate ourselves correctly" in it. In this regard, "at issue are questions such as: What is tolerance? How are truth and

[30]Cf. Benedict XVI, *Light of the World: The Pope, the Church and the Signs of the Times: A Conversation with Peter Seewald* (San Francisco: Ignatius, 2010), 97–101.

[31]Cf. Benedict XVI, "Faith, Reason and the University: Memories and Reflections," University of Regensburg (September 12, 2006), http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/benedict_xvi/speeches/2006/september/documents/hf_ben-xvi_spe_20060912_university-regensburg_en.html (accessed June 2011).

[32]Benedict XVI, *Light of the World*, 98.

[33]Benedict XVI, *Light of the World*, 98.

[34]Benedict XVI, *Light of the World*, 98–99.

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tolerance related? The question of whether tolerance includes the right to change religions also emerges. It is hard for the Islamic partners to accept this. Their argument is that once someone has come to the truth, he can no longer turn back."[35]

Benedict XVI believes that the really important contrast shaping the present historical situation is not between Christianity and Islam but that between radical secularism and the question of God "in its various forms." Christianity and Islam find themselves on the same side, facing the same challenge.[36] Nevertheless, the reality is that relationships between Christians and Muslims in the world range from "tolerant and good coexistence" to "intolerance and aggression." There is a lot of work for Christians and Muslims to do and for Benedict this consists in living out "the grandeur of our faith and to embody it in a vital way, while … trying to understand the heritage of others. The important thing is to discover what we have in common and, wherever possible, to perform a common service in this world."[37]

Because Islam is diverse, situations vary. In places where Islam has "monocultural dominance, where its traditions and its cultural and political identity are uncontested," it tends to understand itself as a corrective to the Western world, "as the defender … of religion against atheism and secularism."[38] In situations like this, "the sense for truth then can narrow down to the point of becoming intolerance, thus making the coexistence with Christians very difficult."[39] But this is of course only part of the larger picture, and it is important for the Church to "remain in close contact with all the currents within Islam that are open to and capable of dialogue so as to give a change

[35]Benedict XVI, *Light of the World*, 99.

[36]Cf. Benedict XVI, *Light of the World*, 100.

[37]Benedict XVI, *Light of the World*, 100.

[38]Benedict XVI, *Light of the World*, 101.

[39]Benedict XVI, *Light of the World*, 101.

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of mentality a chance to happen," even in cases in which Muslims associate their claim to truth with violence.[40]

According to Samir Kahil Samir,[41] Benedict XVI has "profoundly understood the ambiguity in which contemporary Islam is being debated and its struggle to find a place in modern society. At the same time he is proposing a way for Islam to work towards coexistence globally and with the religions … based on rationality and on a vision of man and human nature which comes before any ideology or religion."[42] The stark difference between Islamic and Christian understanding of the relationship between religion and society derives from the nature of Islamic revelation: because the Qur'an is dictated to Muhammad, "not inspired, then there is very little room for interpretation."[43]

In a brief interview on July 24, 2005, Benedict XVI stated that "Islam suffers from ambiguity vis-à-vis violence"; justifying it in some cases, however, "we must always strive to find the better elements."[44] Benedict is aware that many Muslims reject the use of violence justified

[40]Cf. Benedict XVI, *Light of the World*, 101.

[41]Fr. Samir Khalil Samir, S.J., is an Islamic scholar and founder of the CEDRAC (Centre de documentation et de recherches arabes chrétiennes) which was established in 1986; in 1996 it became part of the Université Saint-Joseph, Beirut-Ashrafieh, Lebanon.

[42]Samir Khalil Samir, "When Civilizations Meet: How Joseph Ratzinger Sees Islam," *Asia News* (April 26, 2006). Cf. Samir Khalil Samir, "Violence et non-violence dans le Coran et l'Islam," *Proche-Orient Chretien* 55 (2005): 359–394. See also the work of Michel Cuypers, especially "Is a Non-Violent Interpretation of the Qur'an Possible?," in Anthony O'Mahony & John Flannery, eds., *The Catholic Church in the Contemporary Middle East: Studies for the Synod for the Middle East* (London: Melisende, 2010), 317–329.

[43]Samir Khalil Samir, "When Civilizations Meet: How Joseph Ratzinger Sees Islam."

[44]Interview after the Sunday Angelus, Val d'Aosta (July 24 2005). During the Angelus on that day, Benedict deplored recent terrorist attacks in various

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by religion (cf. Cologne 2005). For Christians and these Muslims, terrorism is a shared concern and together they have a common duty to eliminate its causes, a difficult but not impossible task which consists in "eliminating from the hearts any trace of rancour; resisting every form of intolerance and opposing every manifestation of violence."[45]

The Regensburg lecture produced contrasting outcomes.[46] On one hand, it triggered anger and violent reactions on the part of Muslims in various parts of the world; on the other, it provided the opportunity to begin a serious engagement between the Catholic Church and a section of the World Islamic community that is yielding positive results.[47] The controversy was sparked by Benedict's quotation of a statement by the Emperor Manuel Paleologus III about the violent nature of the message of Muhammad. In their immediate reactions, not a few missed the point that the lecture was not on Islam but on the role of reason and the necessity for modern reason to allow itself to be purified by faith in order to fulfill its true purpose, i.e., the

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countries, including the London bombing of July 7, 2005; journalists asked him about Islam soon after.

[45]Benedict XVI, *Address at the Meeting with Representatives of some Muslim Communities*, Cologne (August 20, 2005).

[46]Cf. Benedict XVI, "Faith, Reason and the University."

[47]The Open Letter to Benedict XVI by a group of thirty-eight scholars, the first attempt to engage the Pontiff in a serious critique, was followed by the document "A Common Word," initially signed by 138 Muslim scholars and leaders worldwide and addressed to Pope Benedict XVI and all Christian leaders, and which led to various responses, including the establishment of the Catholic-Muslim Forum under the auspices of the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue. Cf. Allamah Abd Allah bin Mahfuz bin Bayyah, et. al., "Open Letter to His Holiness Pope Benedict XVI" (October 12, 2006), *Islamica Magazine* 18 (2006); Sultan Muhammadu Sa'ad Ababakar, et. al., *A Common Word Between Us and You* (October 13, 2007), http://www.acommonword.com (accessed June 2011). Cf. "Catholic-Muslim Forum to Further Dialogue," *Zenit* (March 5, 2008), http://www.zenit.org/article-21979?l=english (accessed June 2011).

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service to humanity. In this context, Islam was mentioned as part of a larger discussion, as an example of what happens to faith that is not balanced by reason. Benedict did in fact acknowledge that Christianity as well has often fallen into the same error. His point was that true religion cannot justify violence because violence is against reason and, because God is reasonable, therefore violence cannot be God's will. The point is that Christianity and Islam make incompatible truth claims about the nature of God which Christian-Muslim dialogue must address in its inception in order to be authentic.[48] The lecture poses a crucial theological challenge for Islam, namely whether God is to be understood as pure will or as reasonable.[49] The question is crucial because when God is understood as pure will, on account of his being above all else ("absolutely transcendent"), including reason, then it is easy to justify unreasonable actions (violence) on the basis of obedience to God's will. This concept of God is very different from the Christian concept of God, and if this is the God of Islam, then Christians and Muslims do not worship the same God.[50] Such a notion of God has obvious moral consequences, as it can legitimate the idea that suicide bombers are not practicing violence but virtue because they are acting—as it is claimed—with the intention of doing God's will.[51] In examining its own truth claim, Islam must address the question: "Is this violence an aberration that is inconsistent with genuine Islam (as it would be an aberration inconsistent with genuine Christianity)? Or is it justifiable on the basis of Islam's image of God as absolutely

[48]Cf. Joseph Fessio, "Is Dialogue With Islam Possible? Some Reflections on Pope Benedict XVI's Address at the University of Regensburg" (September 18, 2006), http://www.ignatiusinsight.com/features2006/jfessio_reflections_sept06.asp (accessed June 2011).

[49]Cf. James V. Schall, *The Regensburg Lecture* (South Bend, Indiana: St Augustine Press, 2007).

[50]Cf. Schall, *The Regensburg Lecture*, 45–46.

[51]Cf. Schall, *The Regensburg Lecture*, 48–49.

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transcending all human categories, even that of rationality?"[52] For Benedict XVI, a more urgent conversation has to occur within Islam before more and deeper Christian-Muslim engagement can take place. Contemporary Islam has to reflect on itself in the context of the present world and articulate its authentic teaching unambiguously so that the manipulation of the religion to justify violence may be prevented, and Islam may be seen as a force in the service of the genuine development of humanity.[53] In the context of a much broader reflection on the relationship between reason and religion, Benedict's point about Islam is an open question about how Islam understands its own claim to truth.[54] This is the perspective from which Benedict wishes to engage in serious dialogue with other believers and with Muslims in particular. He is for a dialogue that goes to the heart of the faith and seeks to understand the Truth.

c) Benedict XVI and Christian-Muslim relations

An overview of statements by Benedict XVI as Pope can help to identify the major traits of his understanding Christian-Muslim dialogue. These elements emerge always within reflections occasioned by specific circumstances almost always given in the presence of Muslims and addressed to them in the context of actual encounters. Benedict strongly believes that authentic interreligious dialogue is the "fruit of the very core of faith," because faith in God, who has created humanity and loves each person and wants love to be the dominant

[52]Joseph Fessio, "Is Dialogue With Islam Possible?"

[53]Mark Brumley, "Benedict Takes the Next Step with Islam" (September 21, 2006), http://www.ignatiusinsight.com/features2006/mbrumley_b16islam_sept06.asp (accessed June 2011).

[54]Cf. Schall, *The Regensburg Lecture*, 51–52.

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force in the world, implies the encounter among the believers, which is therefore a "requirement of faith itself."[55]

Benedict XVI did not say much about interreligious dialogue in his first papal address, limiting himself only to assure the followers of other faiths of his commitment to it, in continuity with John Paul II.[56] However, five days after his election, Pope Benedict had a special meeting with the representatives of other Christian Churches and communities and of other religions. In that context, in which incidentally he explicitly expressed his gratitude for the presence of Muslims in particular, he gave his first "definition" of interreligious dialogue. He stated his commitment to interreligious dialogue understood as "building bridges of friendship" with other believers aimed at "seeking the true good for every person and society as a whole."[57] Peace is an essential dimension of the true good, and is at the same time God's gift as well as a duty for all people and especially for those who call themselves believers. For this reason, Benedict XVI believes that all "efforts to come together and foster dialogue are a valuable contribution to building peace of solid foundations."[58] This first definition of interreligious dialogue has remained the motif behind Benedict's subsequent encounters and exchanges with the followers of other religions.

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[55]Cf. Benedict XVI, *Interview during the Flight from the Holy Land to Rome*, Pilgrimage to the Holy Land (May 8–15, 2009; interview dated May 15, 2009).

[56]Cf. Benedict XVI, *First Message at the End of the Eucharistic Concelebration with the Members of the College of Cardinals*, Vatican City (April 20, 2005).

[57]Benedict XVI, *Address to the Delegates of Other Churches and Ecclesial Communities and of Other Religious Traditions*, Vatican City (April 25, 2005). Cf. Benedict XVI, *Message for the Celebration of the World Day of Peace* (January 1, 2011), where he states that interreligious dialogue is "an important means of cooperating with all religious communities for the common good."

[58]Benedict XVI, *Address* (April 25 2005).

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Benedict's mention of the "true good" already contained the theme of the truth and interreligious dialogue which he has developed extensively since. For him, an essential aspect of authentic dialogue is the "common pursuit of truth," which implies the respect of identities and excludes both syncretistic and relativistic tendencies.[59]

These are general observations which apply to all Catholic interreligious engagement, including that with Muslims. However, with regard to Christian-Muslim dialogue in particular, Benedict's thought is characterized by certain specific points.

1) The theological-anthropological foundations of Christian-Muslim relations

The first basis for Christian-Muslim dialogue is theological, and consists in two fundamental tenets shared by Christians and Muslims. First, the belief that humanity has in God the Creator its common origin and destiny.[60] Second, the fact that both Christians and Muslims "trace their ancestry to Abraham," although they do so "according to their respective traditions.[61]

Historically, Islam was born in a context marked by the presence of Judaism and the various forms of Christianity, and "these circumstances are reflected in the Koranic tradition," so that the three religions have much in common, especially on two points: their origins and the faith in the one God. This is for Benedict a sufficiently

[59]Cf. Benedict XVI, *Message for the Celebration of the World Day of Peace*, 138.

[60]Cf. Second Vatican Council, *Declaration on the Relation of the Church to non-Christian Religions* (Nostra Aetate), No. 1 (October 28, 1965).

[61]Benedict XVI, *Address at the Meeting with the President of the Religious Affairs Directorate*, Apostolic Journey to Turkey (Ankara: November 28–December 1, 2006; address dated November 28, 2006).

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strong foundation for genuine Christian-Muslim dialogue and for Christian-Jewish-Muslim dialogue as well.[62]

The theological foundation of Christian-Muslim dialogue is to be found in the common source of the respective faiths, which is (for Jews, Christians and Muslims alike) "God's irruptive call … heard in the midst of man's ordinary daily existence."[63] Because they begin with the irruption of the Eternal into history, the religious experiences of Jews, Christians and Muslims share a common dynamic, whereby "attuned to the voice of God, like Abraham, we respond to his call and set out seeking the fulfilment of his promises, striving to obey his will, forging a path in our particular culture."[64] There is therefore a "fundamental unity" between Christians and Muslims (and Jews) which is based on a shared experience of God's self-revelation, although this is understood and articulated in different ways.[65]

The common faith of Christians and Muslims in the one God constitutes a certain essential "unity," visible in their "mutual respect and solidarity," and is fully realized when authentic mutual dialogue and engagement take place.[66] Despite their different theologies, Christians and Muslims "worship and must worship" the one God who created and is concerned for every single human being. "Mutual respect and solidarity" between Christians and Muslims is the visible sign that "we consider ourselves members of … the one family that

[62]Benedict XVI, *Interview during the Flight to the Holy Land*, Pilgrimage to the Holy Land (May 8–15, 2009; interview dated May 8, 2009).

[63]Benedict XVI, *Address at the Meeting with Organizations for Interreligious Dialogue*, Auditorium of Notre Dame Center, Jerusalem (Pilgrimage to the Holy Land [May 8–15, 2009; address dated May 11, 2009]).

[64]Benedict XVI, *Address at the Meeting with Organizations for Interreligious Dialogue*.

[65]Benedict XVI, *Address at the Meeting with Organizations for Interreligious Dialogue*.

[66]Benedict XVI, *Address to the Participants in the Seminar Organized by the "Catholic-Muslim Forum,"* Vatican City (November 6, 2008).

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God has loved and gathered together from the creation of the world to the end of human history."[67]

2) The theological-anthropological foundation of Christian-Muslim relations

From belief in the Creator God, a specific theological anthropology follows whose central mark is the dignity of human persons on account of the sacred character of human life, which is a tenet of the faith of both Christians and Muslims.[68] Christians and Muslims believe in the unity among people grounded in the "perfect oneness and universality" of God who created all men and women in his image and likeness and created them in order to draw them into his divine life and be one in him. This means that division and conflict among people contradict human nature and God's will, even more so do division and conflict among believers.[69]

Recognition of the centrality of the human person constitutes the anthropological foundation of the dialogue between Christians and Muslims. This makes mutual understanding possible and constitutes an antidote and a solution to conflict.[70] Conflict is often generated not

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[67]Benedict XVI, *Address to the Participants in the Seminar Organized by the "Catholic-Muslim Forum."*

[68]Cf. Benedict XVI, *Address at the Meeting with Representatives of some Muslim Communities.* Cf. also Benedict XVI, *Address at the Meeting with the President of the Religious Affairs Directorate*, where Benedict explains that the basis of mutual respect, esteem, and cooperation in the service of peace for all (which is "the desire of all true believers") is that Christians and Muslims, in their respective religions, "point to the truth of the sacred character and dignity of the person."

[69]Benedict XVI, *Address Delivered during the Courtesy Visit to the President of the State of Israel*, Presidential Palace, Jerusalem (Pilgrimage to the Holy Land [May 8–15, 2009; address dated May 11, 2009]).

[70]Pope Benedict XVI, *Address at the Meeting with Representatives of some Muslim Communities.*

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only by misunderstanding but also and above all by the ideological manipulation of religion. This is the case of the kind terrorism that justifies violence in the name of God, "as if fighting and killing the enemy could be pleasing to him."[71] In the present context, these forms of terrorism claim to be Islamic. According to Benedict, this kind of Islam is not the "noble Islam" which treasures all human life as sacred, but a distorted version that contradicts the foundation of the faith of Islam and of Christianity as well. It is therefore "a perverse and cruel choice" because it "shows contempt for the sacred right to life and undermines the very foundation of all civil coexistence."[72]

On the contrary, putting the person in the centre "neutralizes the disruptive power of ideologies," and becomes the common foundation for joint opposition to all violence and religious intolerance. To be true believers, Muslims and Christians must submit to the will of the Creator, and this implies that human life must be respected in all its rights and particularly its religious freedom. It is by recognizing the centrality of the human person and by working for the respect of all human life that "Christians and Muslims manifest their obedience to the Creator, who wishes all people to live in the dignity that he bestowed on them."[73] In the general audience of August 24, 2005 in Rome, when summarizing his message to the Muslim representatives in Cologne, Benedict expressed his "hope that fanaticism and violence will be uprooted" and that Christians and Muslims "will always be able

[71]Pope Benedict XVI, *Address at the Meeting with Representatives of some Muslim Communities*.

[72]Pope Benedict XVI, *Address at the Meeting with Representatives of some Muslim Communities*.

[73]Benedict XVI, *Address to the Ambassadors of Countries with a Muslim Majority and to the Representatives of Muslim Communities in Italy*, Castel Gandolfo (September 25, 2006).

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to work together to defend human [rights and] dignity and protect the fundamental rights of men and women."[74]

As a necessary implication of the shared foundations of their respective faiths, it is the responsibility of Christians and Muslims to oppose all forms of intolerance and manifestations of violence. Religious leaders have the even greater responsibility to ensure that the respective faithful understand this.[75] By defining the theological-anthropological foundation of Christian-Muslim dialogue, Benedict has also identified the criterion to discern true Christianity and true Islam from their possible distortions.

3) Religious freedom: necessary precondition and priority for Christian-Muslim dialogue

Religious freedom is for Benedict XVI the first among the universal human rights because it corresponds to the deepest nature of the human person—"his relation with his Creator."[76] By recognizing and owning the principle of religious freedom, which is an "essential principle of the modern state," Vatican II has "recovered the deepest patrimony of the Church."[77] Commitment to advancing religious freedom in the world is part of the Church's mission. This applies to Islam as well, on account of the shared faith in God. This is an important element of continuity with John Paul II.

In the contemporary world, religious freedom is being violated in two ways. The first is in countries where religious minorities are

[74]Benedict XVI, *General Audience*, Vatican City (August 24, 2004).

[75]Cf. Benedict XVI, *Address to the Ambassadors of Countries with a Muslim Majority and to the Representatives of Muslim Communities in Italy.*

[76]Cf. Benedict XVI, *Address to the Members of the Diplomatic Corps*, Vatican City (January 10, 2011).

[77]Cf. Benedict XVI, *Address to the Roman Curia Offering His Christmas Greetings*, Vatican City (December 22, 2005).

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not permitted to express their faith publicly and are persecuted on its account, as in the case of Christians within certain political domains that define themselves as Islamic. On his arrival in Jordan at the beginning of his pilgrimage to the Holy Land in May 2009, Benedict took the opportunity to reiterate the importance and necessity of religious freedom by acknowledging the freedom of the Catholic community in that country.[78]

Second, religious freedom is also, and more subtly, being violated where religion is marginalized because it is seen as irrelevant or even destabilizing for modern society. This violation of religious freedom is evident in the "banning of religious feasts and symbols under the guise of respect for the members of other religions," and ultimately constitutes an attack not only on the fundamental right of religious freedom of all believers but also on the cultural roots of many nations.[79]

Freedom of religion, "institutionally guaranteed and effectively respected in practice," is the "necessary condition" that enables Christians and Muslims to be true believers, to contribute to the building of society, and is therefore the precondition for their authentic mutual dialogue.[80]

In the path of Christian-Muslim relations, and on the basis of common theological and anthropological foundations, the defence of religious freedom "is a permanent imperative" and the respect for minorities a sign of "true civilization."[81]

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[78]Cf. Benedict XVI, *Welcoming Ceremony Address*, Queen Alia International Airport of Amman (Pilgrimage to the Holy Land [May 8–15, 2009; address dated May 8, 2009]).

[79]Cf. Benedict XVI, *Address to the Members of the Diplomatic Corps*.

[80]Cf. Benedict XVI, *Address at the Meeting with the President of the Religious Affairs Directorate*.

[81]Cf. Benedict XVI, *Address at the Meeting with Representatives of some Muslim Communities*.

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4) The common vocation of Christians and Muslims (and Jews)

The shared religious experience of Jews, Christians and Muslims imposes on them a common vocation to proclaim that experience clearly and to witness to the God that is the source of their faiths.[82] Benedict sees Jerusalem, where the three faiths meet each other, as a very important symbol of that common vocation, which consists in three aspects:

1. bear witness to the peaceful coexistence desired by all who worship God,
2. manifest God's plan for the unity of all humanity revealed to Abraham, and
3. reveal the true nature of the human person that is to be a seeker of God.[83]

As far as Christians and Muslims in particular are concerned, Benedict points out some concrete implications of these three aspects, defining what he sees as their common task.

First, in the contemporary world marked by relativism and which too often excludes the "transcendence and universality of reason," men and women of today expect from Christians and Muslims "an eloquent witness to show all people the value of the religious dimension of life."[84] Christians and Muslims together can and must offer today's society "a credible response to … the question of the meaning and purpose of life."[85] Their task is to work together to help society open itself to the transcendent so as to give God its rightful place in the life

[82]Benedict XVI, *Address at the Meeting with Organizations for Interreligious Dialogue.*

[83]Cf. Benedict XVI, *Address Delivered during the Courtesy Visit to the President of the State of Israel.*

[84]Benedict XVI, *Address to the Ambassadors of Countries with a Muslim Majority and to the Representatives of Muslim Communities in Italy.*

[85]Benedict XVI, *Address at the Meeting with the President of the Religious Affairs Directorate.*

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of humanity.[86] In so doing, they fulfill their most important service to humanity, that is, to contribute to "the fulfilment of man's noblest aspirations, in search of God and in search of happiness."[87] Together, Christians and Muslims can proclaim that God exists and can be encountered, that he is Creator of all, including us, and that he calls all people to live according to his "design for the world." Benedict insists that our common task is to offer this truth to all so that it may illumine morality and empower reason to go beyond its self-imposed empirical limitations.[88] Concretely, Benedict suggests that we are called to create spaces "where God's voice can be heard anew, where his truth can be discovered within the universality of reason, where every individual, regardless of dwelling, or ethnic group, or political hue, or religious belief, can be respected as a person, as a fellow human being."[89]

This shared mission of witness of faith becomes increasingly urgent in the contemporary context where it is quite a common opinion that religion disrupts society because it is a source of conflict. It is the shared task of Christians and Muslims

> to strive to be known and recognized as worshippers of God faithful to prayer, eager to uphold and live by the Almighty's decrees, merciful and compassionate, consistent in bearing witness to all that is true and good, and ever mindful of the common origin and dignity of all human persons, who remain at the apex of God's creative design for the world and for history.[90]

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[86]Cf. Benedict XVI, *Address at the Meeting with the President of the Religious Affairs Directorate*.

[87]Benedict XVI, *Address to the Diplomatic Corps to the Republic of Turkey*, Apostolic Nunciature of Ankara (Apostolic Journey to Turkey [November 28–December 1, 2006; address dated November 28, 2006]).

[88]Benedict XVI, *Address at the Meeting with Organizations for Interreligious Dialogue*.

[89]Benedict XVI, *Address at the Meeting with Organizations for Interreligious Dialogue*.

[90]Benedict XVI, *Address to Muslim Religious Leaders, Members of the Diplomatic Corps and Rectors of Universities in Jordan,* Mosque al-Hussein bin Talal, Amman (Pilgrimage to the Holy Land [May 8–15, 2009; address dated May 9, 2009]).

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Christians and Muslims are faced by a common challenge: to prove that our respective religions—and therefore their mutual dialogue—are credible by showing clearly that Christianity and Islam carry a "message of harmony and mutual understanding" that is incompatible with any form of violence.[91]

By being "true to their principles and beliefs," Christians and Muslims must show the world that the cause of conflict is not religion but the ideological manipulation of religion, which is the true source of religious extremism and terrorism.[92]

Second, Christians and Muslims share the vocation to serve humanity through peace-building, opposition to violence and intolerance, and the promotion of reconciliation and solidarity. They are "to build bridges and find ways of peaceful coexistence," rejecting, on the basis of their common belief in God, "the destructive power of hatred and prejudice, which kills men's souls before killing their bodies."[93] According to Benedict, "fidelity to the one God, the Creator, the Most High leads to recognition that human beings are fundamentally interrelated" on account of the common origin of their existence and their common destiny. Because Christian and Muslim believers are aware that all human persons are "imprinted with the indelible image of the divine," they are called to promote reconciliation and human solidarity.[94]

Third, Christians and Muslims are called to cooperate in the promotion of human dignity. They seek what is just and right and must encourage political leaders to do the same, protecting human

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[91]Cf. Benedict XVI, *Address to the Participants in the Seminar Organized by the "Catholic-Muslim Forum."*

[92]Cf. Benedict XVI, *Address to Muslim Religious Leaders, Members of the Diplomatic Corps and Rectors of Universities in Jordan.*

[93]Cf. Benedict XVI, *Homily*, Mount of Precipice, Nazareth (May 14, 2009).

[94]Cf. Benedict XVI, *Address during the Courtesy Visit to the Gran Mufti*, Mount of the Temple, Jerusalem (Pilgrimage to the Holy Land [May 8–15, 2009; address dated May 12, 2009]).

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dignity and human rights, particularly freedom of religion, especially for minorities.[95]

5) The content and the activities of Christian-Muslim dialogue

The purpose of Christian-Muslim dialogue and relationships is in large measure to enable their adherents to fulfill the shared vocation that ensues from their respective faiths. At a practical level, Benedict XVI suggests that Christian-Muslim dialogue and engagement should focus on specific goals and activities.

a. The first aim of Christian-Muslim dialogue is a serious theological exchange aimed at recognizing and developing their spiritual bonds.[96]
b. The second aim is the common search for the truth. Benedict sees a "possibility of unity" in the authentic believer's search for "something beyond," which is also a necessary precondition to interfaith engagement. In the presence of genuine common commitment to search for the truth, differences gradually cease to be insurmountable barriers. The secret of successful Christian-Muslim dialogue (and of all interreligious dialogue) is a personal authentic growth in one's faith.[97] Truth claims are not an obstacle to interfaith engagement because they are constitutive of authentic religious belief. They follow from the fact that "the one who believes is the one who seeks the truth and lives by it." The differences between Jews, Christians and Muslims should not hinder their efforts to witness to the

[95]Cf. Benedict XVI, *Address to Muslim Religious Leaders, Members of the Diplomatic Corps and Rectors of Universities in Jordan*.

[96]Cf. Benedict XVI, *Address at the Meeting with the President of the Religious Affairs Directorate*.

[97]Cf. Benedict XVI, *Address at the Meeting with Organizations for Interreligious Dialogue*.

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power of the truth.[98] For the believer, search for the Truth and search for God are one, and the aim of Christian-Muslim dialogue should be a "wholehearted, united search for God."[99] For this reason, Christians and Muslims in dialogue encourage "one another in the ways of God."[100]

c. The goal of Christian-Muslim dialogue is also to cultivate "the vast potential of human reason" "in the context of faith and truth." This is crucial because "when human reason allows itself to be purified by faith," it is not weakened but becomes stronger and able to pursue its purpose, which is to serve humanity. This means that "genuine adherence to religion—far from narrowing our minds—widens the horizons of human understanding," contrasts "the excesses of the unbridled ego" that absolutises the finite and excludes the infinite, "ensures that freedom is exercised hand in hand with truth," and enriches culture with its insights on "what is true, good and beautiful."[101]

d. On the occasion of his courtesy visit to the Gran Mufti of Jerusalem, Benedict has offered both a program as well as elements of a spirituality for Christian-Muslim dialogue. He did so by suggesting ways in which it may advance:

    1. through theological exploration of "how the Oneness of God is inextricably tied to the unity of the human family";

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[98]Cf. Benedict XVI, *Address at the Meeting with Organizations for Interreligious Dialogue*.

[99]Cf. Benedict XVI, *Address Delivered during the Courtesy Visit to the President of the State of Israel.*

[100]Cf. Benedict XVI, *Address at the Meeting with Organizations for Interreligious Dialogue*.

[101]Cf. Benedict XVI, *Address to Muslim Religious Leaders, Members of the Diplomatic Corps and Rectors of Universities in Jordan.*

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2. as they engage in dialogue while submitting to his loving plan for creation;
3. through the study of God's law inscribed in the cosmos and in the human heart;
4. reflecting on God's self-revelation;
5. while keeping "their gaze fixed" on God's absolute goodness which is also "reflected in the face of others";
6. "bearing witness to the One God by generously serving one another" in a "spirit of harmony and cooperation."[102]

6) The qualities and virtues of Christian-Muslim dialogue

For Benedict, authentic dialogue between Christians and Muslims must be characterized by certain traits:

a. There must be sincerity in terms of intentions as well as in terms of content.
b. It must be based on "more authentic" mutual knowledge.
c. There is joy in the recognition of common religious values.
d. It requires loyalty in respecting differences.[103]
e. Faith in the one God requires believers "to strive constantly for righteousness, while imitating his forgiveness," which are "intrinsically oriented" towards the peace and harmony of humanity.[104]

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[102]Benedict XVI, *Address during the Courtesy Visit to the Gran Mufti.*

[103]With regard to these four points, cf. Benedict XVI, *Address to the Ambassadors of Countries with a Muslim Majority and to the Representatives of Muslim Communities in Italy;* cf. also his *Address at the Meeting with the President of the Religious Affairs Directorate*, and his *Address to H.E. Mr. Ahmed Hamid Elfaki Hamid, Ambassador of Sudan to the Holy See*, Vatican City (June 1, 2007).

[104]Cf. Benedict XVI, *Address during the Courtesy Visit to the Gran Mufti.*

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7) The intercultural dimension of Christian-Muslim dialogue and of interreligious dialogue in general

Benedict seems to introduce a subtle distinction within the notion of Christian-Muslim dialogue, between dialogue of religions and dialogue of cultures.[105] He suggests that the barriers between Jews, Christians and Muslims often arise from cultural difference and not from the level of religion, and that acknowledging this fact can make the task of unity easier.[106] It is therefore necessary that as Christians and Muslims engage in dialogue, they remain constantly aware of the mutual influences of religion and culture which often operate at deeper levels.

Does Benedict XVI Contribute Anything to Christian-Muslim Dialogue?

Benedict XVI does not contribute a systematic theological reflection on Islam, but takes on fully the theological interpretation of Islam offered in *Lumen Gentium* 16 and in *Nostra Aetate*. He finds in Vatican II sufficiently firm foundation for authentic Christian-Muslim engagement. His approach to Islam is guided by the more general principle enunciated in *Nostra Aetate* about the fundamental task and attitude of every Catholic (and Christian) towards other faiths: Benedict seeks indeed to "recognise, preserve and promote" what is true and holy in Islam (*Nostra Aetate* 2) and develops it in dialogue with his particular understanding of the place of Islam in the history of religions and in relation to Christianity.

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[105]Benedict XVI has spoken of interreligious and intercultural dialogue in his *Address at the Meeting with Representatives of some Muslim Communities*, and of dialogue among religions and cultures in his *Address to the Ambassadors of Countries with a Muslim Majority and to the Representatives of Muslim Communities in Italy*.

[106]Cf. Benedict XVI, *Address at the Meeting with Organizations for Interreligious Dialogue*.

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Faithful to his own theological methodology, Benedict does not become entangled with the question of the salvation of Muslims because that has also been answered by Vatican II and by the subsequent teaching of the Church: they are saved "in ways known to God" (*Gaudium et Spes* 22), those who live according to the dictates of their conscience and to what is true and holy in their religious traditions.

Benedict, however, is indeed contributing to the progress of Christian-Muslim dialogue in various ways by:

1. taking Islam seriously and trying to understand it in its complexity and reality, and from within, examining the essence of Islam and of its truth claims;
2. encouraging both Christians and Muslims to take interreligious dialogue seriously. Christian-Muslim engagement is not simply a convenient option, and even more so in the context of contemporary tensions, but is an intrinsic demand of believers' shared vocation—which based on their belief in the One God—to serve humanity.
3. exhorting both Christians and Muslims in taking their faith seriously. When Benedict challenges Islam to clarify its own notion of God and its own truth claims, Benedict does nothing different from what he does when challenging Christians to deepen their understanding of the Christian faith and life.
4. telling Muslims that they must take responsibility for the "distorted Islam" of "bad Muslims" and remove all ambiguities so that only the "noble Islam" may emerge in the world.
5. challenging Muslims to take responsibility for humanity as an implication of their faith.

In so doing, Benedict is challenging Islam to articulate its own theology of interreligious dialogue; that is, to find in the Islamic faith the foundations for constructive engagement with Christianity as well as with other believers. This is no little challenge considering the fact that Islam has a clear basic theological understanding of Christianity as a distortion of the true religion which is corrected and completed

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by God's revelation to Mohammad. However, the challenge comes with a little help, subtly but most probably not unintentionally, in that Benedict XVI has ultimately identified the possible foundations of an Islamic theology of Christian-Muslim relations, one on which Muslims themselves can build.

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