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Who Speaks for Islam?

Regensburg again.

By John F. Cullinan

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Text  

Where's the rest of it? That's what one is left wondering after several readings of a curious statement issued yesterday by a curious assortment of Muslim scholars, religious leaders, and government functionaries.

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The statement's timing is rather easier to grasp than its substance or purpose. It is being released the day before the first anniversary of the Open Letter to His Holiness Pope Benedict XVI signed by 38 Muslim scholars in response to the Holy Father's lecture at Regensburg exactly one month earlier. The Open Letter was meant as a rebuttal and corrective to perceived flaws in Benedict's understanding of Islam as expressed in Regensburg (both texts are analyzed here and here on *National Review Online*) and is therefore structured as a reasonably specific and responsive argument.

That is decidedly not the case with yesterday's Open Letter and Call from Muslim Religious Leaders, subtitled A Common Word Between Us and You (the latter drawing from the Quranic verse 3.64). This statement is addressed not only to Benedict, but also to two dozen named Christian religious leaders, as well as unnamed "Leaders of Christian Churches everywhere." But it utterly lacks the focus provided by Benedict's letter and is therefore limited to generalities about undoubted parallels in Islam and Christianity concerning the Two Great Commandments: love of God and love of neighbor.

It is certainly true and readily demonstrable that these two precepts figure prominently in Christian and Muslim scripture. But that only takes one so far, especially if as here uncomfortable scriptural passages inconsistent with the main argument are simply ignored. Consider, for instance, the notorious Sword Verse:

Fight those who do not believe in God and the Last Day and do not forbid what God and his Messenger have forbidden — such men as practice not the religion of truth, being of those who have been given the Book [i.e., Christians and Jews] — until they pay the tribute out of hand and have been humbled (9:29).

How exactly one reconciles this passage with the more irenic ones the authors commend is a question left unasked and unanswered. Yet that is precisely the question arising from the authors' doom-laden vision of the consequences of interreligious conflict:

Finding common ground between Muslims and Christians is not simply a matter of polite ecumenical [sic] dialogue between selected religious leaders. ... If Christians and Muslims are not at peace, the world cannot be at peace. With the terrible weaponry of the modern world; with Muslims and Christians intertwined everywhere as never before, no side can unilaterally win a conflict between more than half of the world's inhabitants. Thus our common future is at stake. The very survival of the world itself is perhaps at stake.

Whether or not this is the case is debatable; but debate requires at a minimum some basis in fact to avoid getting lost in abstractions and platitudes. In this case, naming a single instance of religiously motivated conflict — like the 9/11 attacks — would have focused the dialogue and made possible the exchange of views that the authors claim to seek. Unfortunately, the sole

instance where the authors rise above proof-texting and approach this level of concreteness and specificity appears in this ominous proviso:

As Muslims, we say to Christians that we are not against them and that Islam is not against them – so long as they do not wage war against Muslims *on account of their religion*, oppress them and drive them out of their homes...(emphasis added).

Where exactly do Christians as such — or Western states — “wage war against Muslims on account of their religion”? Unless the authors are willing to be more forthcoming, a useful exchange of views must await another day.

This overall lack of substance is made more apparent by the statement’s elaborate formal trappings (footnotes with Roman numerals!) and the fanfare manufactured for its release. In fact, these features only call attention to the statement’s omissions and inaccuracies. For instance, the second named addressee – Bartholomew I, the Ecumenical Patriarch – is not addressed properly as such, presumably because the Turkish government has long sought to prevent the patriarch from using his historic title (dating from the fourth century) on the specious ground that the term ecumenical implies universality, which is unacceptable for nationalistic reasons. (According to the Turkish government — why exactly is it their business, anyway? — the figure whom all Eastern Orthodox Christians regard as first among equals is merely a local pastor of 2,500 souls.) Similarly, the addressees include the Assyrian patriarch but *not* his Chaldean counterpart, whose much larger flock shares the same perils in Iraq today. And it’s useful to point out that the World Council of Churches, whose general secretary is named, is not itself a church.

But it is the hype attending the statement’s release that contrasts most jarringly with its overall pointlessness. According to

yesterday's London *Times*, it "will be rolled out around the world in a series of press conferences beginning in Jordan."

The *Times* itself took advantage of a pre-lease leak to frame this headline: "Pope told 'survival of world' at stake if Muslims and Christians do not make peace." Similarly, the *BBC*: "Muslim scholars reach out to Pope." And the statement has its own website, activated Wednesday, encouraging readers to identify their religion, nationality and age while endorsing the statement.

As with last year's Open Letter, Thursday's raises the question, "Who speaks for Islam?" More than half of the 138 signatories are present or former government functionaries. What's more, the signatories range from grand muftis to an assistant professor at a small American college to the director general of the Jordanian Muslim Brotherhood. Also included is the head of CAIR, the deservedly controversial American lobbying group. This may seem a collection of apples and oranges, but what all signatories have in common is that they are very much establishment figures (see this valuable Hudson Institute [study](#)). As such, they occupy a very different position from the statement's named addressees, who have little or no influence on government policy (like Pope Shenouda III, head of Egypt's beleaguered Coptic community).

Expect to hear much more about this statement in the coming days, even if it's just a case of an elephant giving birth to a mouse.

– *John F. Cullinan, an adjunct fellow at the Hudson Institute's [Center for Religious Freedom](#), is writing a book on the present plight of Christian and other religious minorities in the Muslim Middle East.*

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