

Pope Benedict's Resignation: An Islamic Response

By Shaikh Ahmad Kutty (Islamic Institute of Toronto)

On behalf of the Islamic Institute of Toronto, I would like to add my voice to that of Shaikh Mustafa Ceric, the Grand Mufti of Bosnia-Herzegovina and a world-renowned Muslim scholar, in response to the news of the resignation of Pope Benedict XVI, effective from February 28th, 2013.

Besides serving as the head of the Catholic Church, with over one billion followers, Pope Benedict XVI is also an accomplished theologian, whose devotion to the faith is undeniable. His resignation has elicited worldwide reactions from Christians, as well as others: some positive and others negative, based, as they are, on their own perceptions of his legacy. Thus, some are highly critical of his 'allegedly' conservative views, while others are praising him for his vast knowledge, humility, erudition, and dedication to his call.

As Muslims, I must say, we were deeply hurt by his negative comments on Prophet Muhammad and Islam in 2006; such statements were, indeed, most unfortunate. However, he was honest enough to apologize for his hurtful words. Furthermore, he also extended a hand towards Muslims in a spirit of goodwill and understanding. His decision to resign from his position because of the declining health is equally impressive. It should be a lesson for people of responsibilities to recognize their human limitations.

Islam and Christianity have much more in common than generally recognized. Both religions, together with Judaism, look up to the Great Prophet Abraham as their ancestor, whom the Qur'an refers to as the first Muslim (submitter) and imam (role model) for humanity. All three cousins in faith share the belief in One God, recognize His sovereignty, and stress faith and righteous life as necessary for salvation. Muslims accept Jesus as a chosen Messenger of God, whose birth to virgin Mary was a miracle and a great sign from God. The Qur'an also depicts Jesus as an ideal Muslim, who glorified God.

These commonalities aside, however, we can never gloss over the fundamental differences separating the two religions, in their concept of God and religious practices. The Qur'an, while reprimanding Christians for such errors, reiterates the fact that these criticisms are directed at the 'innovations' later introduced by the Church and hoisted upon the pristine message of Jesus. Such errors or innovations included the concept of trinity, crucifixion, and in the case of Catholics in particular, the practice of celibacy and the belief in papal infallibility.

The Qur'an also recognizes mercy and kindness as the hallmarks of those who follow Jesus, the mighty Messenger of God; based on my knowledge of Pope Benedict, he had a good share of these virtues. Al-Haqq (Truth) is one of the beautiful names of God; as such, we ought to recognize the truth and beauty wherever we find these. Hence, we can only appreciate his stated intention to dedicate the rest of his life to prayer, study, and contemplation of beauty in nature.

Muslims would also whole-heartedly endorse his warnings against the rampant materialism and consumerism that are eroding the spiritual values of humanity. We hope and pray that his successor would go beyond his predecessors in building stronger bridges between Christians and the people of other faiths.

We are witnessing tumultuous times because of the heightened tensions and hostilities driving the world further apart from one another. The immense challenges facing humanity in the wake of looming environmental disasters, as well as the stock piling of lethal weapons of mass destruction, call for concerted efforts by the saner voices; it is here that religion and spirituality can be called in to serve.

The Qur'anic call for dialogue among various religions and uniting on common terms, centering on the recognition of God's sovereignty, as well as the unity of human family, is as relevant today as ever. It is in this context that we welcome some of the excellent initiatives taken by hundreds of world renowned scholars and academics belonging to diverse religious traditions.

I single out two of them:

The first is the project of www.acommonword.com, to which a significant number of scholars and academics have been signatories; the second is the Charter of Compassion spearheaded by Karen Armstrong.

By supporting such ventures we can work together to create a more peaceful and safer world for our coming generations. This is the only practical way for us to embody the golden rule, "Love your God and love your neighbour", which, I believe, is at the heart of all religious traditions.