

# Scholars troubled by remarks on Muslim dialogue

VATICAN CITY - After 138 Muslim scholars wrote to top Christian leaders highlighting shared religious values as a basis for working together for peace and understanding, a Vatican official raised questions about the possibilities for dialogue with Muslims.

Cardinal Jean-Louis Tauran, the longtime Vatican diplomat who became president of the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue in September, has said the Vatican would respond formally to the Muslim scholars. But he raised concerns among the Muslim signers when he told a French Catholic newspaper he was not sure “theological dialogue” was possible with Muslims.

The newspaper, La Croix, asked the cardinal if theological dialogue was possible with members of other religions.

“With some religions, yes,” he said. “But with Islam, no, not at this time. Muslims do not accept the possibility of discussing the Quran, because it is written, they say, as dictated by God.

“With such a strict interpretation, it is difficult to discuss the content of faith,” he said in the interview published Oct. 18.

Aref Ali Nayed, one of the original signers of the letter and senior adviser to the Cambridge Interfaith Program at Britain’s Cambridge University divinity faculty, told Catholic News Service, “Cardinal Tauran’s statement to La Croix was very disappointing indeed.”

Nayed, who has taught at the Pontifical Institute for Arabic and Islamic Studies in Rome, said the cardinal’s comment “deeply discouraged Muslim scholars and annoyed many Muslim believers at the grass-roots level.”

“Rather than unilaterally declaring the impossibility of theological dialogue with Muslims, Cardinal Tauran would have been wiser to ask Muslim scholars themselves

as to what kind of dialogue they feel is possible, from their point of view,” Nayed said in a written response to questions.

He said Muslim scholars always have been “aware of the fact that the activities of interpretation, understanding and exegesis of God’s eternal discourse” are human activities that must be renewed in every age.

“Solemn belief in the eternity and divine authorship of the Quran never prevented Muslim scholars from dealing with it historically and linguistically,” he said. “On the contrary, belief in the revelatory truth of the Quran was the very motivation for spending lifetimes in close scholarly study of God’s discourse.”

Obviously, there is a difference between theological and ethical dialogue, Nayed said, but people who believe their faith provides “the ultimate fount and ground for righteous living” are not acting as believers when they separate the two.

Institutions like the United Nations already provide a forum for a purely secular ethical dialogue, he said.

“If religious, revelation-based communities are to truly contribute to humanity, their dialogue must be ultimately theologically and spiritually grounded,” Nayed said. “If dialogue is to be serious, it must be theologically and spiritually deep.”

Jesuit Father Daniel A. Madigan, international visiting fellow at the Woodstock Theological Institute at Georgetown University in Washington, told CNS that many Christians misunderstand how Muslims view the Quran, leading to a widespread prejudice that assumes “Muslims are unwilling or incapable of interpreting the Quran.”

The truth is that “there is a very extensive Muslim literature of Quran interpretation, both traditional and contemporary,” said Father Madigan, who serves as a consultant to the commission for relations with Muslims at the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue.

“Any act of reading is an act of interpretation: Some Muslims read the Quran as warranting violence, while others do not interpret it that way,” he said. “Some think it requires the seclusion of women; many others disagree.

“The fact that there are different interpretations is a starting point for dialogue,” Father Madigan said.

“At a time when a substantial group of Muslim scholars of widely varying persuasions is trying publicly to promote a theological dialogue with Christians, it seems imprudent to rule out the very possibility of such an engagement,” he said.

The Jesuit said the basis for theological dialogue with Muslims was affirmed by the Second Vatican Council in its document on relations with other religions and in the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, which said Christians and Muslims “adore the one, merciful God.”

Abdal Hakim Murad Winter, another of the original signers of the letter to Christian leaders, told Catholic News Service, “Infallibility is an occasion for dialogue, not an obstacle.”

In a written response to questions, Murad Winter, director of Britain’s Muslim Academic Trust and imam of the mosque in Cambridge, England, said, “For Muslims, the Quran is the integral, infallible word of God; traditional Christians believe something no less ambitious about Christ,” namely, that Jesus Christ is the word of God.

The fact that Christians and Muslims each have sincere beliefs does not mean that they cannot be “theologically challenged by others,” he said.

Murad Winter said it would be difficult for any devout believer to insist on separating theological dialogue from dialogue on social or ethical issues.

“True theology can never exist independently of its application in the world,” he said. “Monotheism is ethical through and through.”

“There will be no shared position on social issues such as abortion, artificial contraception and euthanasia unless the theologies that generate the ethical discourse on each side have been fully acknowledged,” he said.

The Muslims involved in writing the letter have launched a Web site – [www.acommonword.com](http://www.acommonword.com) – to promote its study among Christians and Muslims.

The staff of the Pontifical Institute for Arabic and Islamic Studies published a letter of appreciation on the site Oct. 25, praising the breadth of Muslim views reflected in the letter and its commitment to understanding Christians as they understand themselves.

Among the innovations the pontifical institute's staff noted was "a new and creative attitude relative to the Quranic text and that of the prophetic tradition," particularly highlighting a positive view of Christians and Jews.