

*Sense and Sensibility:  
The key to Catholic and Islamic Co-existence in the future*

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Since September 11, 2001, the world has been in the grip of the so called “War on Terror”. In declaring the war on terror in an address to the US Congress, President George W Bush said that:

"The terrorists are traitors to their own faith, trying, in effect, to hijack Islam itself...Our enemy is a radical network of terrorists, and every government that supports them. Our war on terror begins with al Qaeda, but it does not end there. It will not end until every terrorist group of global reach has been found, stopped and defeated."

Billions of dollars have been spent and will be spent in this legitimate campaign to defeat the purveyors of terror and the visiting of bloodshed and death against civilians and innocents – for that is the stock in trade of terrorists.

We don't need to doubt this – the evidence that St Thomas the Apostle required is not something we are waiting to see and touch. The examples of the work of Al Qaeda, Jemaah Islamiyah, Abu Sayyaf and others abound – the bombings in New York, London, Madrid and Bali have touched the West in particular, but we are only experiencing what Israel and some Islamic countries have been experiencing for decades.

But while the forces of good might be able to check and reverse the gains of terrorist organisations in Afghanistan, Iraq or elsewhere militarily, is a military solution the long term solution to the motivation for a false war waged by extremist Islamic organisations?

Tonight, I wish to explore the role that the Catholic Church and the Holy Father might play in encouraging a long term solution to the foundations that breed terrorism. The long term solution to countering extreme Islamists is the encouragement of pluralism and through pluralism, democracy throughout the Islamic world.

I have a particular interest in this subject. Quite obviously from the perspective of any peace loving person, we all have an interest in stopping needless death and bloodshed. But as Shadow Minister for Justice and Border Protection, I am responsible for holding the Minister with authority over the Australian Federal Police and the Australian Customs Service accountable.

Since the destruction of the World Trade Centre in New York in 2001 and the Bali Bombing in 2002, much of the growth in spending, staffing and operations of the AFP has been devoted to fighting the war on terror. The work of Customs and the Royal Australian Navy in the last ten years has been affected by the work of people smugglers and the attempts to bring people to Australia who have fled extremist Islamic regimes or countries that persecute religious minorities.

So there is a very practical reason to bring about solutions to the reasons that allow fundamentalism to flourish – we would all rather our government agencies devote their efforts to combating organised crime, or illicit drug running or stopping illegal fishing rather than fighting the dangerous and more recent crimes against the state and its people that are found in the activities of terrorists and extremists.

The Church has a central role in helping to defeat radical Islam. By promoting moderate Islamic leadership, through the promotion of dialogue, the Church can play a key part in defeating extremism. The Church itself cannot have dialogue with those that seek its (and the West's) destruction, but by giving succour to moderate Islamic leadership both religious and secular, the Church can help the one force that can defeat extremism in the Islamic world long term – their own moderate Islamic people from within the Islamic world.

The Church promotes inter-religious dialogue because it is part of her primary task of evangelisation. This is never imposed but always proposed to the world. In inter-religious dialogue it is by dialogue and proclamation that she prudently sets a course for peacemaking. There can be no peace in the world until there is peace between religions. The Church avoids all attempts toward relativism, proselytism and syncretism.

The breeding ground for radicalism is found in poverty, displacement, exclusion and ignorance. Radical leaders of all stripes find their most devoted adherents amongst those that have nothing to lose. The long term solution to these problems is economic, political and cultural.

The Church is a religious body that champions transcendent values found fully in Jesus Christ. There are of course, cultural dimensions to this Good News along with many other dimensions. These include promoting inter-religious dialogue through changing perceptions, building awareness, understanding and removing ignorance and doubts.

The openness of the Church to dialogue with the Muslim world might surprise some modern day Catholics – the Crusades have been well and truly over for centuries but to many Catholics that is the sum total of their knowledge of the Church's relationship with Islam.

There are scriptural foundations for dialogue between religions found in both the Bible and the Koran.

At Galatians Chapter 3 Verse 28 it is stated : “In Christ, there is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus”. And in the Koran Chapter 3 Verses 113-114 the following passage is found: “For of the People of the Book, there are the upright who recite God's revelations throughout the night, while prostrating themselves. They believe in God and the Last Day, bid the right and forbid the wrong and hasten to do good deeds. Those are among the righteous people. And whatever good they do, they will not be denied it.”

The Second Vatican Council published the 1965 Declaration on the Relationship of the Church to Non-Christian Religions (*Nostra Aetate*). *Nostra Aetate* conceived that other religions, including the teachings and practices of Islam, could hope for eternal salvation. It states:

“She (the Church) looks with sincere respect upon those ways of conduct and life, whose rules and teachings which, though differing in many particulars from that what she holds and sets forth, nevertheless often reflect a ray of Truth which enlightens all men...The Church therefore has this exhortation for her sons: prudently and lovingly, through dialogue and collaboration with the followers of other religions, and in witness of Christian faith and life, acknowledge, preserve, and promote the spiritual and moral goods found among these men, as well as the values in their society and culture.”

There were other statements concerning dialogue with Moslems and other religions arising out of Vatican II – the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church (*Lumen Gentium*), the Decree on the Church’s Missionary Activity (*Ad Gentes*), the Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World (*Gaudium et Spes*) – all evinced a desire for dialogue and respect between the religions of the world and *Lumen Gentium* specifically placed Moslems as the first of the non-Protestant religions.

This is of course not to say that the Church had abandoned the central thesis that: “It is through Christ’s Catholic Church alone, which is the all-embracing means of salvation, that the fullness of the means of salvation can be found”.

His Holiness, Pope Paul VI, followed these worthy epostulations with the establishment of the Vatican Secretariat for Non-Christian Religions (now called the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue). There followed many conferences and papers on interfaith dialogue over the ensuing twenty or so years.

But as with many things, it took the Holy Father, Pope John Paul II to crystallise modern thinking on this growing dialogue.

In 1986 he had published his encyclical letter on the Holy Spirit, *Dominum et Vivificantem*.

In it and later in *Redemptoris Missio*, while still asserting that salvation is offered to all but can only be truly found through Christ, he emphasised that the Holy Spirit is the unity that underpins all religions, and that there is only one Spirit dwelling in “society and history, peoples, cultures and religions”.

Later still, in the 2000 Declaration on the Unicity and Salvific Universality of Jesus Christ and the Church (*Dominus Iesus*) the Church heralded the capacity and need for interfaith dialogue. It restated the precepts of *Nostra Aetate* already quoted above and encouraged Catholics to engage in dialogue with other religions.

While at times it may not seem like it, we have a willing partner in Islam. According to moderate Muslims, the Koran specifically embraces pluralism at Chapter 2 Verse 256: “There is no compulsion in religion”. Some Moslem scholars say that God deliberately created pluralism and argue that fighting others on the basis of their religious beliefs is not permitted by Islam.

They also point to a growing civil society in many Islamic countries in modern history and the majority Muslim or even Islamic states that don't persecute minorities and live in peace with followers of many different religions. Indonesia is a good example – while there are at times outbreaks of ethnic or religiously based violence, by and large Indonesia operates successfully as a pluralistic, democratic society with an overwhelmingly Moslem population. While in India, where the population is majority Hindu, they too are able to manage a pluralistic and healthy democracy encapsulating many minority religions (the largest being Islam).

There is no doubt that where pluralism takes root in any society an adherence to democratic principles and respect for minorities is almost universally present.

According to John Esposito in his paper “Pluralism in Muslim-Christian Relations”,

“Islam emphasises both the faith and deeds of the individual and the community...Because God’s kingdom was to be based upon unity, equality, justice and peace, Muhammed taught that anyone who worked toward the establishment of a just society was considered to be in submission to God’s will”.

Esposito points out that the advocates for interfaith dialogue in Moslem communities use these teachings as a basis for a relationship with non-Muslim religions based on social justice.

The Holy Father, Pope Benedict XVI is well placed to explore the possibilities for the Catholic Church to play a central role in defeating radical Islam by supporting and building moderate Islam. In the same way as his predecessor was the key inspirational figure for the Catholics of Eastern Europe in their struggle and victory over Communism, Benedict XVI can play a similar role in rejecting relativism but encouraging a pluralism in the Islamic world that rejects extremist modes from within.

While he was a part of the work of Vatican II and (in the last twenty five years) the work of Pope John Paul II, honing and kneading Catholic faith and theology and its centrality to the Church’s relationship with other religions, it is the speech he gave at the University of Regensburg in Germany, in September 2006, so misinterpreted by the Moslem world, that ironically has given him an opportunity to expand dialogue with Islam.

In that speech, His Holiness quoted some paragraphs from a medieval text, being a dialogue between Manuel II Palaiologos, the Byzantine Emperor with “an educated Persian”. The remarks were accorded to the Pope and the import of the speech entirely misinterpreted by most of the Moslem world and some others. On the other hand Angela Merkel, Chancellor of Germany recognised the aim of the speech as:

“an invitation to dialogue between religions and the Pope spoke expressly in favour of this dialogue.”

The Vatican Secretary of State, Tarcisio Cardinal Bertone, followed by reaffirming the Pope's full support for *Nostra Aetate* and his unequivocal favour for inter-religious dialogue.

The Pope, in clarifying his speech, said:

“I wish to add that I am deeply sorry for the reactions in some countries to a few passages of my address...which were considered offensive to the sensibility of Muslims...I hope that this serves to appease hearts and clarify the true meaning of my words, which in its totality was and is an invitation to frank and sincere dialogue, with great mutual respect.”

The speech and its resultant reaction has created a renewed impetus for dialogue. Perhaps this was the Holy Spirit's intention. In any event, much has happened since that time that is encouraging.

Most recently, in June the Vatican Information Service released a communiqué arising out of the meeting in March between delegations from the Pontifical Council for Inter-religious Dialogue and the representatives of the 138 Muslim scholars who had written to the Pope in “*A Common Word Between Us and You*” in October 2007. In it the scholars and the Church agreed to the establishment of the “Catholic-Muslim Forum” which will meet for the first time in Rome in November 2008. The theme will be “Love of God, Love of Neighbour”.

The letter from 138 Muslim scholars from moderate Islam across the Middle East, Europe, Asia, Africa and North America was driven by the Royal Academy based in Jordan. It followed a similar letter written by thirty eight Muslim scholars the year before (October 2006) and not long after the University of Regensburg address which had been an attempt to respond to and build on the controversy surrounding the misinterpretation of the Pope's speech.

There are numerous examples locally of Australian Catholics and Muslims and their resultant arms being involved in interfaith activities:

- The Australian Catholic University appointed a Chair of Islam and Muslim-Christian Relations in November 2007. Dr Ismail Albayrak is the first Fethullah Gulen Chair. Named for the Turkish born scholar granted an audience with Pope John Paul II in 1998 to advance communication between religions.
- In concert with the visit of His Holiness, Benedict XVI to Australia for World Youth Day last month, Malek Fahd Islamic School in Sydney's south west billeted 350 pilgrims for their stay in a practical display of interfaith dialogue.
- The Adelaide Catholic Diocesan Ecumenical & Interfaith Commission launched MOSAIC with the 'Ayn Academy as recently as last month with the stated aim of bringing together the goodness in different faiths in order to achieve understanding in Australia. It has held a "Peace Through Faith" forum and plans more such activities in the future.

All of these letters, meetings, conferences and movements point to one thing – a shared desire to live together in peace and stability. But I hasten to add, it is moderate Islam that is seeking such a dialogue. And they must find a willing partner in the Church. Through dialogue, mutual respect and a propensity to engage genuinely and satisfactorily we give them hope and can have hope ourselves that radical Islam can be defeated. It is a shared desire to defeat extremists from all sides that must guide such a discourse.

While the radicals on the Islamic side are well known to us – Osama Bin Laden being the most prominent. Christian fundamentalists who denounce Islam as violent or demonic or who insult the Prophet Muhammed as corrupt are not representative of Church thinking on this subject. They assist those in radical Islam who hope to convince their own adherents that they are in a titanic struggle with the West and a global jihad against Christianity. Rising "Islamaphobia" plays into their hands and feeds the radicalisation of their populations. Instead we should encourage the actions of the Church and practice ourselves an engagement with the Moslem world that promotes and builds moderate Islam at the expense of extremism.



The Church has a key role to play in this most important endeavour. There is much precedent for interfaith dialogue. Its success will be pivotal to the long term defeat of the forces of radical Islam that seek to destroy our way of life and our independent faith. By boosting what is moderate in Islam we fill a vacuum that unfilled will be inimical to the future of our world.

For Catholics such as myself, it is important to note that this dialogue is being undertaken from a position of theological certainty. Our current Pope leaves no doubt about his view of the centrality of theology in the Church's message.

My colleague, Tony Abbott writing in *The Australian Magazine* on 14 June 2008, quoted the Pope from the 1960's when he wrote:

“if the Church were to accommodate herself to the world in any way that would entail a turning away from the Cross, this would not lead to a renewal of the Church but only to her death.”

*The Atlantic Monthly* of January/February 2006 posited that:

“In his (the Pope's) view, human society is always changing; civilisation is entropically prone to decline. It is the task of theologians to make the substance of the Catholic faith clear amid this continual change, not to make it relevant to their place and time.”

It is this very certainty of the role of the Church and his role in it that places Benedict XVI in a strong position for interfaith dialogue with moderate Islam. Negotiation, discussion or dialogue is much harder when parties don't know what the other party means or the beliefs for which it stands. A woolly headed approach to dialogue is bound to be unsuccessful, whereas an approach based on mutual respect but also certainty of the central beliefs of the parties is much more likely to yield positive results.

The Holy Father put it very well when he said:

“Today, a particularly insidious obstacle to the task of education is the massive presence in our society and culture of that relativism which, recognising nothing as definitive, leaves as the ultimate criterion only the self with its desires.”

I am confident that the religious leaders of the Moslem world face the same challenge and they too, look for answers as to how to meet the “dictatorship of relativism”.