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Catholicism and Islam: Points of Convergence and Divergence, Encounter and Cooperation

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I. Main Lecture

An ancient Middle Eastern story tells of a traveler in a desert who, at a certain point, notices in the distance a horrible and violent monster that is making its way toward him. Obviously the traveler is frightened. As the monster gets closer, the traveler, being able to see him more clearly, notices that it is not a monster but a man—an ugly man, but a man nonetheless. After awhile, the traveler begins to see him better and realizes in the end that the man is not that ugly at all. Finally, when he looks into the man's eyes, he recognizes him as his brother.

In our day, many Christians and Muslims happen to meet each other as in that desert night where the human silhouette is completely distorted. Muslims look at Christians as the monsters of the crusades described in their history books, but above all, they view and fear the secularized Western world of Christians as going adrift. Christians, on the other hand, see in Muslims the threatening monster of religious intolerance that seems to render them indisposed to the cultural and juridical values that shape our Western societies. The insidious desert in which we walk, and the deceiving night which has fallen indiscriminately upon all—Christians and Muslims, the Western and Islamic worlds—are not new phenomena. Rather, their roots go back to an ancient history marked by long periods of incomprehension, rivalry and, at times, very violent oppression, yet interspersed with intervals—although truly limited in time and space—of peaceful coexistence and mutual cooperation at all levels. Deep roots are anchored in traditions, cultures and religions, which no doubt are different, at times even divergent, and contain elements that seem quite incompatible and mutually unacceptable or intolerable. The insidiousness of the desert and the deception of the night are also very modern phenomena. In the last century they have been exacerbated, and they continue to be nurtured by erroneous ethnic, intercultural, and international relationships marked by reciprocal challenges, arrogance, and oppression.

When speaking about points of convergence between Christians and Muslims, three specific reasons are generally cited: all are children of Abraham, both groups are monotheistic, and both are a religion gifted with a sacred book. I believe that these three aspects offer us good elements with which to affirm important convergences, and they are capable of motivating collaborative encounters among individuals and communities at both the local and international levels. At the same time, they also just as clearly denote divergences that need to be recognized and adequately presented and that should be respected as basic differences of religious identity, but that should never be distorted or misrepresented in order to foster rivalry, conflict and hatred.

Islam certainly cannot be identified with Arab history and culture. Nonetheless, it is a fact that it grew out of that geographical, cultural and linguistic environment. According to tradition, Arabs are descendants of Ishmael, the first

son Abraham had with Hagar the Egyptian. For this reason, Muslims take pleasure in considering themselves descendants of Abraham. Speaking to young Muslims in Morocco, back on August 19, 1985, Pope John Paul II stated, “Christians and Muslims, we have many things in common, as believers and as human beings. . . . For us, Abraham is a very model of faith in God, of submission to his will and of confidence in his goodness.”¹ The expression has much value in the context of Arab culture. Wael Farouq, professor of Arabic at the American University in Cairo, affirms that “the most important tree in the desert is the tree of genealogy. Every tribe is a tree and man in the desert defines himself as a branch of the tree . . . The branch cannot have life without the tree, nor the tree without roots or the stable foundation in time . . . Man is therefore man only by reason of his genealogy.”² Christians find in the Gospel a precise idea from Jesus on this question. Jesus never contested nor diminished the importance of the kinship with Abraham, but He also surpassed it. One day, while speaking with fellow Jews who boasted in being children of Abraham, Jesus said, “Do not presume to say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our father.’ For I tell you, God can raise up children to Abraham from these very stones.”³ Faith, and the works inspired by it, constitute being children of God and hence children of Abraham.

Nostra Aetate, the declaration of the Second Vatican Council on the relationship between the Church and non-Christian religions, clarifies the convergence between Christianity and Islam in one relevant sentence without obfuscating the conspicuous differences: “They do not acknowledge Jesus as God.” The Vatican II text says,

The Church regards with esteem also the Moslems. They adore the one God, living and subsisting in Himself; merciful and all-powerful, the Creator of heaven and earth, who has spoken to men; they take pains to submit wholeheartedly to even His inscrutable decrees, just as Abraham, with whom the faith of Islam takes pleasure in linking itself, submitted to God. Though they do not acknowledge Jesus as God, they revere Him as a prophet. They also honor Mary, His virgin Mother; at times they even call on her with devotion. In addition, they await the day of judgment when God will render their deserts to all those who have been raised up from the dead. Finally, they value the moral life and worship God especially through prayer, almsgiving and fasting.⁴

We do believe—Christians and Muslims—in the one God, the living God, the God who created the world, and this is a powerful common ground on which to build together “true holiness in obedience and worship to God.”⁵ At the same time, the different way we consider and attempt to live out the unity and transcendence of God is full of consequences in our daily lives, as well as in our approach to coexistence and to social and political organization.

Finally, we also have in common the fact that both our religions are of the book. The Bible and the Koran are, respectively, our sacred books, our

Magna Carta. The similarities found in the two books offer starting points and a basis for achieving, together, personal holiness and the common good of society. The difference—to mention only one, the fundamental one—between the book dictated by God to the Prophet Mohammed and the book revealed and inspired by God throughout the history of God with man, gives rise to a different vision of the relationship between the believer and human society with God.

It is important to keep in mind these points of convergence and divergence. They are not only important but essential for whoever views religion as a basic component that informs the individual and his social life. They are essential for the believer who through his religiosity intends first of all to worship God and to express individually and socially his fulfilling dependence on God. They are important for those who study the place and role of religion in society. “No world peace without religious peace,” was the effective slogan launched years ago by Hans Küng, who in his recent monumental work *Islam: Past, Present and Future* goes on to say, “No peace among the nations without peace among the religions. No peace among the religions without dialogue between the religions. No dialogue between the religions without investigation of the foundations of the religions.”⁶

A year before being elected to the throne of Peter, Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, in a conference commemorating the sixtieth anniversary of the landing of Allied troops in Normandy, referred to Küng’s statement. “Modifying a statement of Hans Küng, I would say that without true peace between reason and faith there cannot be peace at the world level, because without peace between reason and religion, the very sources of morals and the rule of law dry out.” In the same conference, he mentioned some pathologies of religion, as well as of reason, that undermine our efforts in building peaceful coexistence. In his first message for the World Day of Peace, on January 1, 2006, he dealt with two of these pathologies: religious fundamentalism and nihilism.

Looked at closely [said the Pope, they] share an erroneous relationship to truth: the nihilist denies the very existence of truth, while the fundamentalist claims to be able to impose it by force. Despite their different origins and cultural backgrounds, both show a dangerous contempt for human beings and human life, and ultimately for God himself. Indeed, this shared tragic outcome results from a distortion of the full truth about God: nihilism denies God’s existence and his provident presence in history, while fanatical fundamentalism disfigures his loving and merciful countenance, replacing him with idols made in its own image.⁷

Similarly, during World Youth Day 2005, he said to the representatives of the Islamic communities in Germany, “Only through recognition of the centrality of the person can a common basis for understanding be found, one which enables us to move beyond cultural conflicts and which neutralizes the disruptive power of ideologies.”⁸

In Regensburg a little more than a year ago, Pope Benedict XVI called on Christians, Muslims and secularists together to promote a peaceful coexistence and cooperation. As a condition for such a fruitful encounter, he mentioned the respect for others' faith and the use of reason in conjunction with revelation—reason which purifies faith from any irrational justification of violence, and faith that purifies reason from the tyranny of relativism. Two months later, meeting with the President of the Religious Affairs Directorate in Turkey, he said,

Christians and Muslims, following their respective religions, point to the truth of the sacred character and dignity of the person. This is the basis of our mutual respect and esteem, this is the basis for cooperation in the service of peace between nations and peoples, the dearest wish of all believers and all people of good will. . . . Freedom of religion, institutionally guaranteed and effectively respected in practice, both for individuals and communities, constitutes for all believers the necessary condition for their loyal contribution to the building up of society, in an attitude of authentic service, especially towards the most vulnerable and the very poor.⁹

The tone for a dialogue that involves the respective religious foundations, as well as their translation and expression on the cultural, social and international level, has been set and taken to heart by a growing number of people of good will. All this augurs well for the relations between Christians and Muslims and for their contribution to world peace.

Soon after the Pope's lecture in Regensburg, thirty-eight Muslim religious leaders and academics from different countries and schools of thought wrote an open letter to the Pope in which they illustrated the basic tenets of Islam with a view to reaching a mutual understanding. Within months, some sixty more members and representatives of Muslim associations co-signed this same message. That letter, while expressing agreement on some points contained in the Regensburg lecture and disagreement on others, also hinted at the possibility of finding common ground in the love of God and neighbor. Love of God and neighbor is precisely the theme of a *second* open letter released less than two months ago and this time signed by 138 Muslim religious scholars and leaders. The intent of this letter, entitled "A Common Word Between Us and You," is to outline "the most solid theological foundation possible" for the understanding and cooperation between Muslims and Christians. Indeed, the letter is addressed in general to the leaders of the Christian churches and more specifically to Pope Benedict XVI, Bartholomew I (the ecumenical patriarch of Constantinople), the heads of nineteen other Orthodox churches, the Anglican archbishop of Canterbury, the leaders of the federations and alliances of Lutheran, Reformed, Methodist and Baptist churches, and to the secretary-general of the World Council of Churches. With the passing of days and weeks, the number of co-

signers increases, and as of now, this number is around 150. The message draws attention and interest within both the Christian community and the Muslim community.

I would like to cite a passage from an interview that Libyan theologian Aref Ali Nayed, the chief spokesperson on behalf of the open letter, gave recently to Catholic News Service. He said,

The dialogue, or rather, set of dialogues, we hope "A Common Word" will initiate are multifaceted, multilayered, multidisciplinary, and multilateral. It is more a set or matrix of polyphonic discourses that are united through their exclusive focus: Loving worship of the One God, and Love of our neighbors. The matrix includes theological, spiritual, scriptural, juridical, and ethical discourses. It is to be conducted in cooperation with a broad range of partners from all active Christian Churches and denominations including the Catholic, Protestant (both traditional and evangelical), and the Orthodox communities. The discourses will be with Church leaders, centers of theological studies, spiritual communities, scriptural reasoning and reading groups, and grassroots organizations. We are very much encouraged by the fact that positive responses have already come in abundance from such a multiplicity of nodes of Christian communal life including top Christian leaders, and the world's top Theology, Divinity, and Islamic Studies centers.¹⁰

From all this it follows that if Christians and Muslims want to find common ground to build together a livable society of peace and collaboration, they have a basis in common: some religious elements, but in particular they have to start from their own common "submission to [God], who is the source and judge of all that is good, [and] the sense that the other is one's equal."¹¹

All of the world's major religions have the Golden Rule among their ethical and moral foundations. Every religion, then, should motivate and substantiate this Golden Rule with its proper spiritual patrimony. Jesus taught his disciples to "treat others the way you would have them treat you."¹² A hadith, which is an oral tradition relating to the words and deeds of the Prophet Mohammed, states, "No one of you is a believer until he wishes for his brother that which he desires for himself." Both Christianity and Islam, when speaking of mutual love, use the terms "your brother" and "your neighbor." Jesus indicated clearly that the word "brother" goes beyond kinship ties, ethnic background, or even religious affiliation. When He wanted to explain the significance of the word "neighbor," He told the parable of the Good Samaritan, a Samaritan who came to the help of a Jew. There was no good blood between Samaritans and Jews—in fact there existed hostility and prejudice—and yet a Samaritan made himself "neighbor" to a Jew.

I do not have the expertise to speak on the breadth of the terms "brother" and "neighbor" in the sacred texts of Islam. "A Common Word" mentions the two terms but does not give details. However, this will be a fundamental

point for dialogue on principles and on daily living and coexistence. In fact, if Christians and Muslims together rediscover the profundity and fruitfulness of the messages that their respective texts contain on the topic of the love of God and neighbor—a neighbor who embraces humanity in all its components, without exception and discrimination—we will assist in shedding light on and good will toward resolving many questions concerning reciprocal respect and collaboration for peace.

On this particular background, I think it is important to mention some of the most delicate, but also effective, components of this dialogue. First of all, the real obstacle to religious peaceful coexistence and cooperation too often comes not from believers' claims of having the truth, of representing a religion and faith in the true God, but from their approach to this conviction—an approach that becomes exclusive in terms of relations and that can even choose force and violence in order to fight, submit or exclude those who do not embrace the same truth. Having a precise identity, and not concealing it, is an asset for dialogue. Dialogue is possible and fruitful only among those who know and love their own identity. Peter the Apostle, writing to the early Christian community in Asia Minor exhorted that “should anyone ask you the reason for this hope of yours, be ever ready to reply, but speak gently and respectfully.”¹³

My second remark refers to the particular climate which has triggered a renewed interest in Christian-Islamic dialogue, namely the spread of terrorism. It is not enough for any religion to say, “We have nothing to do with extremists, with fundamentalists” or “Extremists do not speak for our respective religion.” Indeed extremists and fundamentalists do make reference to the same sacred texts; they even dare to portray themselves as the faithful interpreters and keepers of those texts. Instead, we must engage those who try to justify their unjustifiable acts of violence and multiform violations of human rights by using those same texts. We must proclaim loudly and clearly that those texts do not lend themselves to readings which lead to violence. Those who truly want to engage in fruitful dialogue cannot leave anyone in their respective communities go unchallenged on such a point.

This task may seem somewhat easier for the Roman Catholic Church. It will take too long to list the firm and forceful appeals made by both Pope John Paul II and Pope Benedict XVI, in their statements, that no one can presume to kill or disrespect human beings in the name of God. The same appeal is being upheld and propagated by leaders of the different local Catholic communities. Muslims, on the other hand, do not have a single central authority, although they do have religious leaders. In Cologne, Pope Benedict XVI appealed to them by saying, “You guide Muslim believers and train them in the Islamic faith. Teaching is the vehicle through which ideas and convictions are transmitted. Words are highly influential in the education of the mind.”¹⁴ The letter “A Common Word Between Us and You” was generally viewed, for all intents and purposes, as an

agreed-upon statement backed by the highest number of Muslim religious leaders ever reached.

Moreover, I think that a serious and productive dialogue cannot avoid another basic issue. We must be able to say that the God in whom we believe is consistent in maintaining and asking us to hold on to the conviction that all human life is sacred and endowed with an inherent dignity—without exception. Otherwise, we would keep the door open to loopholes, to exceptions which belittle our common belief and frustrate our efforts towards coexistence and cooperation. Certainly, in order to make the love of God and love of neighbor our “common word,” we are called to deepen our dialogue and our daily experience so as to make the content and the extension of the word “love” truly common and also mutually understood, shared and experienced. The moment we anchor love to its divine source—which I think is the correct approach for getting our dialogue fruitfully underway—we are in the presence of not only a divine commandment but also an example given by God. Hence, our dialogue goes far beyond the principles of natural ethics and becomes theologically and spiritually grounded. In any case, love entails the recognition that the sacredness of life and human dignity apply universally, without exception or discrimination, to every human being, every people, and every society.

This is a much broader issue than an item specific to the Christian-Islamic encounter. The question of recognizing universal rights in view of cultural diversity has resurfaced. Some maintain that all rights are culturally relative; others claim that universal rights are just instruments of a given cultural imperialism. Some believe that the gulf between those two positions cannot be bridged. The principal framers of the Universal Declaration on Human Rights worked from the premise that certain values are so fundamental that they can find support in the moral and philosophical traditions of all cultures. For that reason, such universal principles or basic human rights are undeniable. At their essential core they must be universally recognized and be operative *erga omnes*. To maintain the idea that basic rights are universal, however, does not require one to reject a legitimate pluralism in their implementation. Quite the contrary—pluralism is the only way to move beyond a sterile relativism-imperialism debate. The framework fashioned by the drafters of the Universal Declaration is flexible enough to allow for differences in emphasis and implementation but not so malleable as to permit any basic human right to be completely eclipsed or unnecessarily subordinated for the sake of other rights.

Every year the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue addresses a message to Muslims on the occasion of the feast of *Id al-Fitr*. This year the text developed some considerations on the universal right to religious freedom. A couple of weeks ago, the previously mentioned Aref Ali Nayed replied with a Muslim message of thanks for the Vatican's message at the end of Ramadan. I would like to quote some of his promising remarks.

The complex issues of balancing human rights, human duties, and communal integrity and wellbeing are in need of urgent studies and discussions. Accumulated and normative juridical rulings, from different ages and different circumstances, must be addressed, engaged, and updated. Such a task demands tremendous work and fresh juridical striving by all concerned. Dialogue is key to this important work as well. However, these issues are faced by all religious traditions, and there is an urgent need, for all of us, to reconcile revelation-based affirmations of rights and duties with the more recent, but popular, affirmation that come from the notions and vocabularies of the French Revolution and British Liberal teachings. Indeed, we are all called upon to retrieve, rehabilitate, and rearticulate the true compassionate teachings of our traditions regarding the divinely ordained value of human personhood and its associated rights, duties, and freedoms. We need to work on these issues with not only religious colleagues, but also with philosophers and jurists who invoke 'natural' grounds for personhood and rights.¹⁵

I suppose I was invited to speak this evening on the topic of Catholicism and Islam because of my role at the United Nations. People in New York like to refer to the UN, half seriously and half jokingly, as Turtle Bay. Turtle Bay is the name of the actual bay that was filled in to become the site of the United Nations headquarters. I would like to think that this nickname is purely coincidental, but sometimes work at the UN does move at a turtle's pace! However, in point of actual fact, the United Nations hosts many civil servants who have at heart a culture of peace and the peaceful coexistence, and fruitful collaboration, of billions of people from diverse cultures, traditions, and religions. It is from this perspective, namely the UN approach to the place and role of religions in society, that I would like to add some concluding comments relating to our theme.

First of all, it has been noted that cultural fragmentation is a human and historical phenomenon that dates as far back as the biblical account of the Tower of Babel. Nevertheless, for a number of reasons and events, it is particularly evident today. The air that one breathes daily at the United Nations is often polluted with national interests that impede not only decisions on challenges and current priorities—such as security, peace or development—but at times also decisions on smaller things. There is an ever growing opinion, even if it is difficult to accept, that the climate of distrust, fear and threat that exists between “the West and the Rest”—as Roger Scruton puts it in his insightful book by the same title—is due more to non-existent relations or to the reluctant will to understand beyond the proper cultural or religious schemes, than to any real and seemingly insurmountable cultural or religious differences. It is due to wrong patterns of relations based mainly on arrogance, challenges, and reciprocal malfeasance but also to literature, interpretations and experience of respective cultural and religious codices that are exclusive rather than inclusive.

For years religion was taboo at the United Nations. As a matter of fact, the UN Charter does not mention religion other than with the technical expression “respect for human rights and for fundamental freedoms for all without distinction as to race, sex, language, or religion.”¹⁶ Its goals are peace and well-being for all, attained by means of cooperation and international law. However, suddenly within the past two years, religion has erupted on the scene at the UN. We speak often of encounter, or even of dialogue, among religions and civilizations. The UN specifically dedicated the year 2001 to dialogue among civilizations. Two years ago, at the initiative of Turkey and Spain, the UN launched a new formula: the Alliance of Civilizations. In the meantime, Pakistan, the Philippines and other countries recently set up a tripartite forum on interreligious dialogue and cooperation for peace. I think we have to make sure that we make good use of this new interest.

By this I mean that religion has the greatest potential for being a part of the solution when it is treated as such. The slightest manipulation for other interests would result in a messier state of world affairs. What we would do well to do, I think, is threefold. First, we must allow, or even encourage, religion and religions to join the wide spectrum of peace builders and agents for peaceful coexistence. Religions are better understood as part of the solution than as part of the problem, because they have the role and the power to sustain hope and to promote engagement and/or action for the common good, not only now but into the future.

Second, we allow them and encourage them to give this important contribution on their own terms. Raymond Helmick, S.J., who teaches conflict resolution at Boston College, wrote an interesting study entitled “Does Religion Fuel or Heal in Conflicts?”¹⁷ I found it interesting because he gets to the very core of the problem. It is not that religion has too often proven a negative factor—though this is true—but rather that one ought not look to religion for purposes other than its own. In other words, religious leaders and believers have an important contribution to make to the process of conflict prevention and resolution, not in the specific terms of mediation, resolution, or prevention (as these are intended in the international juridical instruments) but in their own terms. “Their own terms” stands for what we call the Golden Rule—do unto others what you would like done unto you. This is the precondition of every encounter, of every type of dialogue and cooperation, and it stems from recognizing and promoting the human dignity of every human being, independent from his or her religious affiliation. I think that the dialogue we have to establish with the Islamic community is not a matter of reconciling our theological tenets. Rather, it is a matter of agreeing on the human dignity of every person, created in the image and likeness of God, which greatly precedes one's religious affiliation. From this point forward, we can talk to each other and cooperate for the common good.

Finally, we have to be very careful to avoid undue and dangerous interference. In fact, there is a particular type of interreligious dialogue where

religious representatives and their constituents engage in discussion on the theological and spiritual tenets of their respective religions and exchange positive experiences with a view to promoting mutual understanding and respect among all. This type of interreligious dialogue requires that it be conducted in a full climate of faith and in a spirit of dependence on God that is characteristic of many religious beliefs. In a word, it must be engaged in by believers whose primary interest is fomenting good personal and communal relations with God, followed by international coexistence. Since this type of interreligious dialogue does not appear to be part of the charter of any international organization, it is therefore better left to religious experts and appropriate representatives of religions.

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1. Pope John Paul II, "Address of His Holiness John Paul II to Young Muslims" (August 19, 1985), no. 1.
 2. Wael Farouq, "Alle radici della ragione araba," *Dio salvi la regione* (Siena: Edizioni Cantagalli, 2007).
 3. Mt. 3:9.
 4. Second Vatican Council, *Nostra Aetate* (October 28, 1965), no. 3.
 5. Pope John Paul II, "Address of Pope John Paul II to the Participants in the Colloquium on *Holiness in Christianity and Islam*" (May 9, 1985).
 6. Hans Küng, *Islam: Past, Present, and Future*, trans. John Bowden (Oxford: Oneworld Publications, 2007), xxv.
 7. Pope Benedict XVI, "Message of His Holiness Pope Benedict XVI for the Celebration of the World Day of Peace" (January 1, 2006), no. 10.
 8. Pope Benedict XVI, address presented at a meeting with Muslim representatives on the occasion of the 20th World Youth Day (Cologne, August 20, 2005).
 9. Pope Benedict XVI, address presented at a meeting with the president of the Religious Affairs Directorate in Turkey (Ankara, November 28, 2006).
 10. Aref Ali Nayed, "Aref Ali Nayed Interview with Catholic News Service," interview by Cindy Wooden (*Islamica Magazine*, 2007), <http://www.islamicamagazine.com/Common-Word/CNS-interview.html>.
 11. Pope Benedict XVI, "Address of His Holiness Benedict XVI to Members of the International Theological Commission" (October 5, 2007).
 12. Mt. 7:12.
 13. 1 Pt 3:15–16.
 14. Pope Benedict XVI, address presented at a meeting with Muslim representatives on the occasion of the 20th World Youth Day (Cologne, August 20, 2005).
 15. Aref Ali Nayed, letter, *Islamica Magazine* Issue 20.
 16. Charter of the United Nations, article 1, paragraph 3.
 17. Raymond Helmick, "Does Religion Fuel or Heal in Conflict?" in *Forgiveness and Reconciliation: Religion, Public Policy, and Conflict Transformation*, ed. Raymond Helmick and Rodney Peterson (Philadelphia: Templeton Foundation Press, 2001).

II. Question & Response

You mentioned that the United Nations was not the place to discuss interfaith dialogue, because diplomacy gets involved and then it is not as easy to get done. But when Islam does not have a central governing body like Catholicism does, with the Holy See and the Pope, what is the way to reach out to Islam as a whole religion or to influence all of its constituents and members of the faith?

Well, this is an interesting question. You know that Pope Benedict received King Abdullah of Saudi Arabia a week ago and this was a historic meeting. In a way, Saudi Arabia considers itself—and I may use very improper words and expressions because I am not an expert on this—as a kind of sacred land because they have Mecca and so on, and because the king is also a defender of the faith. In fact, in the past we had already a couple of contacts with Saudi Arabia—the prince, the brother of the king, and the foreign minister went to the Vatican to see the Pope a couple of times—but it was so important to have now the king doing that because it is kind of recognition. I mean, after all of the fuss and uproar that followed the lecture in Regensburg, the dialogue has been kind of revitalized. And this is, for sure, a good sign.

But there are many forums where we have already been conducting this theological dialogue and spiritual dialogue. For example, the Holy See some forty years ago created the Council for Interreligious Dialogue, with a section for dialogue with the Muslim world. I served one year in Cairo, and I remember that we had frequent relation with Al-Azhar University. Al-Azhar is one of the most significant universities, because there they form many of the "preachers" for the Islamic faith. So, we do have forums where we meet. As another example, you may remember that there were three interreligious prayer meetings in Assisi: in 1986, in 1993, and in 2002 (soon after 9/11). The Pope invited all the religious leaders there to pray. Of course, everybody has his own way of praying and addressing his God, but the focus was to get together to pray for peace. Every time, the condition was this: come if you are ready to bring with you your community, not the thousands or millions of believers, but if your community is ready to follow you whenever you say "No!" to violence and "Yes!" to peace.

Here in the United States, there are also good initiatives and forums that have gone on for some twenty years now, of good relations with other non-Christian religions and in particular with the Muslims. So, for the theological and the spiritual dialogue, we do not need the UN. We need the UN for another type of dialogue, and for that type of dialogue we are quite well-equipped. It is the good will that has to be a little bit encouraged!

Your Excellency, do you foresee or anticipate a formal response by the Vatican to this open letter that has been sent by the 138? And if so, will this response be made

accessible to the world, say through the internet as “A Common Word” has been? Or do you see it as being an ecumenical effort on the part of all Christians?

Well, your question contains already my answer, because you are very precise! You use two verbs: do you “foresee” or do you “anticipate”? I foresee, but I cannot anticipate!

Being in contact with the cardinal who is the head of the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue, I can foresee some kind of reply. A reaction—a reply—will be prepared and will be given, I think, very soon. But you know, we already have many, many reactions from different representatives of the Catholic Church and other Christian churches. Being an “open letter,” it does not require a specific letter from anybody. It requires an “open” reply, a kind of mass movement that reacts. This is what I think is starting to happen, though with many hesitations. Many people are cautious, because they see all the names, and they say, “How can this man, who has done this or said that, co-sign such a letter?” Well, you know, we are not unaware of the problems, but we are ready to put forward a great deal of trust. Without that, we cannot start, and we need to start and to dialogue in an effective manner.

Your Excellency, you mentioned that deepening our dialogue in a daily experience is really important for this entire picture. What does that look like for us, especially for students at a university of faith like Notre Dame, who are not really participating in or active in diplomacy but who are still very much part of this society and the Church in general?

You know, blogs, op-eds, essays, books and studies are mushrooming, and this is good, but usually their authors reason at a high level, and they tend to mention only issues and problems. But then if you look at the people, if you look, for example, at the minorities of Muslims that emigrated to Europe, you can see that many of them are having positive experiences. The mass media tell us when there is something that goes wrong or when there are difficulties, and they magnify all this. They almost never tell us of the positive things.

There are communities, many communities, of Muslims in Europe that are coping quite well with a culture that is totally different. Their problem is the secularization of the culture, which is also *our* problem. We—Catholics, Christians—also have that problem with secularization, with when we not only separate politics and religion or state and church, which is in a way good, but when we separate society from God and we completely eliminate God. This is a big problem for us also. So, the problem is not so much how to cope with new situations and traditions, but rather how to deal with religion in public. Is religion something that we have to exclusively nurture in our heart in private life? Or, does religion have any right—or more correctly, do believers have rights, because human rights are human, and they belong to believers not to things or institutions like religions—have they a right to express themselves or to participate in the democratic debate?

Practice gives us many, many good examples. For example, let’s take the problem of the Balkans, the war in Serbia and Bosnia-Herzegovina. For years, the Islamic community and the Christian community were used to getting along quite well; for decades and centuries they were good friends. They had no major problems. The problems came when certain groups wanted to have the “great Serbia” and the “great Croatia” or a Muslim state. They started propaganda, and the propaganda was: “Look, you Christians. Your neighbor there is Muslim. He is so ugly that one day he will rape your wife; he will rape your daughters or your sisters.” The same thing happened from the other side, too. They created such a fear, such a distrust, and such a hatred that did not exist before. We now have to recover that older lifestyle, and this is something that happens in practice. Of course, we need intellectual investigation, no doubt, because we have to clarify many things, but we also have to rely a lot on this daily dialogue that is made of coexistence and of mutual understanding. This is something that is happening.

The question I’d like to ask is based on the attempt, Your Excellency, to divide the roles of government from the role of religion and interreligious dialogue. In the kind of ordinary experience and the behavior of nations and the states, those tasks are often deeply intermingled. The United States, for example, presents itself—or misrepresents itself—as a Christian nation. That division of labor that you would like to see, where the UN confines itself to social problems and assigns interreligious dialogue to religious groups, how would you bring that sort of distinction to bear on the way nations present themselves?

Two years ago at the UN, we finalized a four-year-long debate on human cloning. There were two groups: one group that was for therapeutic cloning based on using embryos and another one that was for therapeutic cloning based on using adult stem cells. So, we belonged to this second group. At some point, we were the only mission that prepared a paper and circulated it among others. In the other group, there were some countries, European countries, that for some reason did not want to challenge the Holy See publicly, and so they asked the ambassador of an Asian country to do the job. He started by saying, “Mr. Chairman . . .” and for fifteen minutes he went on. “How can you allow religious people to come here and present religious arguments . . .” and on and on and on.

I had registered and was on the list of speakers for afterwards. I waited my turn, I said what I had to say, and then at the end I said “Mr. Chairman, we just heard this ambassador’s speech. Would you please ask our colleague to point to one single line of that document where a religious argument is being put forward and used?” And I added, “Because this document was prepared by my delegation, I know that there is no religious argument. There are arguments taken from ‘right reasoning.’” Immediately that ambassador raised his hand and said, “Mr. Chairman, we just heard speak of ‘right reason’. What is ‘reason’? Is it not

another Western concept?” For me, this was one of the most revealing moments and experiences I had at the UN.

It gave me a certain impression. We are convinced that we are not there to speak in religious terms, to quote the Gospel; because we speak in front of Muslims, of Buddhists, and of people who do not have any religion, we cannot go there and quote the gospels. However, we think that we can get close to the message of the Gospel through what we call “right reasoning.” This is what, usually, people do. But at the same time—and earlier I spoke of the great cultural fermentation that we have at the UN, and this is an example—he said, “What is ‘reason?’” Not only two thousand years ago did someone say “What is truth?” We still ask “What is reason?”

The Most Reverend Celestino Migliore is a native of Cuneo, in the Piedmont region of Italy. He was ordained a priest on June 25, 1977 and holds a Masters Degree in Theology from the Center for Theological Studies in Fossano, Italy as well as a Doctorate in Canon Law from the Pontifical Lateran University. In 1980, he joined the Holy See's diplomatic service after graduating from the Pontifical Academy for Ecclesiastical Diplomacy.

Archbishop Migliore has had an extensive and distinguished career in the Vatican's diplomatic service. His first assignment for the Holy See was to Angola, where he served from 1980 to 1984 as attaché and second secretary to the Apostolic Delegation. In 1984 he was assigned to the Apostolic Nunciature in the United States, where he also served as Alternate Observer to the Organization of American States. Four years later, in 1988, Archbishop Migliore was appointed to the Apostolic Nunciature in Egypt. He remained there a year and was then assigned as Counselor to the Apostolic Nunciature in Warsaw, Poland.

Archbishop Migliore remained at his post in Poland until April 14, 1992, when he was appointed Special Envoy, with the role of Permanent Observer of the Holy See, to the Council of Europe in Strasbourg, France. He held this appointment until late 1995. From December 1995 to October of 2002 he then served at the Vatican as Under-secretary of the Section for Relations with States of the Secretariat of State. During his term as under-secretary, he was in charge of fostering relations with countries that did not yet have formal relations with the Vatican. As a result, he led delegations in China, Vietnam, and North Korea, traveling as Head of Delegation of the Holy See to the capital cities of Beijing, Hanoi, and P'yongyang.

While stationed in Rome, Archbishop Migliore led the Delegation of the Holy See to numerous United Nations conferences, including the Conference on Illicit Trade in Small Arms and Light Weapons in All Its Aspects, which was held July 9–20, 2001 in New York City. He also represented the Vatican at a number of other conferences, symposia, and panels held throughout Europe on issues related to the World Trade Organization, the Economic Commission for Europe, the European Union, and the Middle East. In addition to this extensive diplomatic traveling, the archbishop taught Ecclesiastical Diplomacy as a Visiting Professor at the Pontifical Lateran University.

On October 30, 2002 His Holiness Pope John Paul II nominated the archbishop as Apostolic Nuncio and Permanent Observer of the Holy See to the United Nations. He is the fourth person to head the Apostolic Nunciature in New York, following Monsignor Giovannetti, Cardinal Cheli, and Cardinal Martino into this important role. Archbishop Migliore also currently serves as the Titular Archbishop of Canosa, Italy.

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