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In Open Letter, Muslims Seek Cooperation With Christians as a Step Toward Peace

By NEIL MacFARQUHAR

Scores of Muslim clerics, theologians and academics issued an open letter yesterday to all Christian leaders saying the two religions need to work more closely together, given that they share the basic principles of worshiping one God and loving thy neighbor.

In sweeping terms, the letter notes that 55 percent of the world's population is either Christian or Muslim, "making the relationship between these two religious communities the most important factor in contributing to meaningful peace around the world."

The letter is being seen as an effort to tackle the strained relations between the two faiths as well as to address the widespread perception in the West that moderate Muslims are mute about violence. The letter notably lacks signatures from key figures in the puritanical Wahhabi sect of Islam prevalent in Saudi Arabia. The sect's emphasis on shunning non-Muslims is often considered a root of violence toward the West.

But experts consider the letter an important step toward getting moderates on both sides to overcome a tradition of hostility.

"You have to start somewhere, and you are not going to start with harmony on either side," said R. Scott Appleby, a religious historian at the [University of Notre Dame](#) and an expert on Roman Catholic-Islamic relations. "Among the Muslim and Christian peoples of the world, the middle-level leaders are hungry for movement in this direction because people are losing their lives every day in its absence."

The letter, issued to mark the end of the holy month of Ramadan this week, is in part another response from the Muslim world to a speech made by [Pope Benedict XVI](#) in his hometown, Regensburg, Germany, in September 2006, in which he suggested that Islam is a religion of violence. He later issued a rare personal apology for offending Muslims.

The pope is the first of some 25 Christian figures addressed specifically in the 29-page letter, titled "A Common Word Between Us and You."

The letter quotes the Koran and the Bible, particularly the New Testament, to illustrate how their basic principles mirror each other. It says the Prophet Muhammad's stance was perhaps inspired by the Bible.

The letter notes that there are differences between the religions and that Islam teaches its faithful to resist those who attack them, but it concludes that the world's two largest faiths should compete only "in righteousness and good works."

Among the 138 signatories were senior theologians from around the world, including Sheik Ali Gomaa, the grand mufti of Egypt and hence the top Sunni Muslim figure there, as well as about a dozen other grand muftis. Ayatollah Mostafa Mohaghegh Damad, a Shiite Muslim from Iran, also signed.

The consensus was put together mostly by the Royal Aal al-Bayt Institute for Islamic Thought in Jordan, founded by Prince Hassan bin Talal. Scholars said that the emphasis on Koranic texts made possible the tricky business of getting signatories from a wide range of sects.

"Terrorists don't have the right to speak for Islam, that is the point that is urgent for the Muslim world to get across," said Timothy Winter, a lecturer in Islam at [Cambridge University](#) and a convert to the faith who was among the signatories. The letter is an effort to overcome the difficulty of finding one voice to speak for Islam because of its diffuse hierarchy, Mr. Winter said.

The letter was welcomed by various leaders and institutions, including the Baptist World Alliance and the Most Rev. Rowan Williams, archbishop of Canterbury. There was no immediate reaction from the [Vatican](#). Pope Benedict recently re-established an office for interfaith dialogue that he had shuttered, but his emphasis has been on concrete actions like protecting Christian minorities in Muslim lands.

Some analysts see the letter as being addressed as much to Muslims as Christians, although the chances of it influencing radicals is considered slim. Radicals often interpret “love thy neighbor” as help thy neighbor find Islam, said Prof. Muqtedar Khan, director of Islamic Studies at the [University of Delaware](#).

In addition, politics, not theology, shape anti-Western attitudes among Muslims, Professor Khan said. “They have a problem with the occupation of Iraq, with the Israeli treatment of the [Palestinians](#); it’s not about Christianity.”

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