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Cardinal signals firm Vatican stance with Muslims

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By Tom Heneghan, Religion Editor
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PARIS (Reuters) - The top Vatican official for Islam has praised a novel Muslim call for dialogue but said real theological debate with them was difficult as they saw the Koran as the literal word of God and would not discuss it in depth.

Cardinal Jean-Louis Tauran, in an interview on Friday with the French Catholic daily La Croix, also said Christians would have to discuss curbs on building churches in the Islamic world in the dialogue advocated by 138 Muslim scholars in the appeal.

His interview, coming after mostly positive comments by other Catholic Islam experts, signaled the world's largest Christian church wanted a serious dialogue with Muslims that did not avoid some fundamental issues dividing the religions.

"Muslims do not accept that one can discuss the Koran in depth, because they say it was written by dictation from God," Tauran said. "With such an absolute interpretation, it is difficult to discuss the contents of faith."

The fact that Muslims can build mosques in Europe while many Islamic states limit or ban church building cannot be ignored, he said. "In a dialogue among believers, it is fundamental to say what is good for one is good for the other," he said.

The appeal last week by 138 scholars representing a large majority of Islamic views invited Christian leaders to a dialogue based on their common belief that love of God and neighbor is the cornerstone of their religions.

It was unprecedented because Islam has no central authority to speak for all believers, especially not the silent minority that does not agree with radicals whose preaching of jihad and rejection of other faiths often dominates the headlines.

CATHOLIC RESPONSE IS KEY

The appeal was addressed to all leading Christian churches. Anglican, Lutheran and evangelical leaders and the World Council of Churches have all welcomed it.

But the reaction of the Roman Catholic Church, which makes up more than half of the world's two billion Christians, is key to any coordinated Christian response to the Muslim appeal.

Tauran praised the appeal as "an eloquent example of a dialogue of spiritualities" that showed good will by quoting not the Koran only -- as Muslims usually do -- but also the Bible.

The appeal avoided major differences such as the roles of Jesus and Mohammad, but Tauran brought up one about the Koran.

Muslims revere the Koran as the literal word of God while most Christian theologians -- and some Muslim intellectuals -- say sacred scriptures are the work of divinely inspired humans and can be challenged and reinterpreted.

Pope Benedict is a key figure because his Regensburg speech last year implying Islam was violent and irrational sparked bloody protests in the Muslim world and prompted the Muslim scholars to unite to seek better inter-faith understanding.

Tauran hinted Benedict might use a major inter-faith meeting in Naples on Sunday to respond to the appeal. "The pope will be there at the start and will certainly say something," he told La Croix without elaborating.

Father Samir Khalil Samir, an Egyptian Jesuit and leading Catholic expert on Islam, welcomed the appeal as reflecting a broad consensus among Sunnis and Shi'ites and showing a real understanding of Christianity by its signatories.

"With time, this document could create an opening and a greater convergence," he wrote on the AsiaNews website.

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