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Religious Leaders Welcome Saudi Proposal

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NEW YORK -- Several Jewish, Christian and Muslim leaders reacted warmly to a proposal for dialogue among the religions by King Abdullah of Saudi Arabia, welcoming the overture from the leader of the strict Muslim country as a major development in interfaith relations.

Specifics of the initiative, including whether Israelis could take part, remained unclear -- leading some to caution against too much optimism. Abdullah's proposal comes at a time of stalled peace negotiations and heightened Middle East tension. It also comes amid Muslim anger over cartoons published in Europe seen as insulting the Prophet Muhammad and in the wake of the pope's controversial baptism of a prominent Muslim convert.

But Abdullah said Saudi Arabia's top clerics gave him a green light -- crucial in a society that bans non-Muslim religious services. Saudi Arabia, which follows a severe interpretation of Islam known as Wahhabism, is also home to Islam's two holiest shrines in Mecca and Medina.

"The idea is to ask representatives of all monotheistic religions to sit together with their brothers in faith and sincerity to all religions as we all believe in the same God," the king said Monday night in Riyadh at a seminar on "Culture and the Respect of Religions."

The king's call -- the first of its kind by an Arab leader -- was described as a "dramatic and important development" by Rabbi Eric Yoffie, president of the Union for Reform Judaism, the largest branch of American Judaism.

The Rev. James Loughran, director of the Catholic New York-based Graymoor Ecumenical & Interreligious Institute, also welcomed the proposal, saying he was "elated."

Muhammad al-Zulfa, a member of the Saudi Consultative Council -- an appointed body that acts like a parliament -- said it was "a message to all extremists: Stop using religion."

It was long overdue, said Michael Cromartie, chairman of the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom, which monitors religious freedom globally and makes policy recommendations.

"I don't care who you put in the room -- the fact they're having the conversation can only help," he said. "It's a courageous thing for the king to do. One should not expect Utopia, but it's a start to have an open and free dialogue in a country with a reputation for religious oppression."

How the dialogue could impact the Israeli-Palestinian peace process is far from clear. Saudi Arabia and all other Arab nations except Egypt and Jordan do not have diplomatic relations with Israel and generally shun unofficial contacts.

"My cautionary note would be, 'Let's see what he really means,'" said Lawrence Schiffman, chairman of New York University's Department of Hebrew and Judaic Studies. "We need more details."

Abdullah said he planned to hold conferences to get the opinion of Muslims from other parts of the world, and then meetings with "our brothers" in Christianity and Judaism "so we can agree on something that guarantees the preservation of humanity against those who tamper with ethics, family systems and honesty."

Abdullah framed his appeal in strictly religious and ethical terms, aimed at addressing the weakening of the family, increasing atheism and "a lack of ethics, loyalty, and sincerity for our religions and humanity."

A Saudi official with knowledge of the proposal said it was not intended to have a regional political angle, saying "the initiative is not aimed at the Middle East but at the whole world." The official spoke on condition of anonymity because of the sensitivity of the issue.

But Abdullah, considered a reformer in Saudi politics, has in the past proposed peace deals with Israel, saying his country and other Arab nations are willing to recognize the Jewish state as long as it gives up land to Palestinians.

Abdullah even met with Pope Benedict XVI in November, the first encounter between a pontiff and reigning Saudi king. Benedict has stressed common family and moral values as a way to bridge differences and build relationships with other religions.

But Benedict has also upset many Muslims.

Most recently, the pope on Easter baptized Muslim convert Magdi Allam, an Egyptian-born journalist who has denounced Islam. Aref Ali Nayed, director of the Royal Islamic Strategic Studies Center in Amman, Jordan, criticized what he called "the Vatican's deliberate and

provocative act of baptizing Allam on such a special occasion and in such a spectacular way."

In an audiotape released last week, al-Qaida leader Osama bin Laden accused Benedict of playing a "large and lengthy role" in what he called a "new Crusade" against Islam. Bin Laden also warned of a "severe" reaction for Europe's publication of the Muhammad cartoons.

Some analysts suggested the king's initiative was the culmination of increased dialogue among world religious leaders since the Sept. 11 attacks. The majority of the hijackers involved in the attacks were Saudis, and bin Laden himself hails from the country.

John Esposito, founding director of the Prince Alwaleed bin Talal Center for Muslim-Christian Understanding at Georgetown University in Washington, said that the Saudi religious establishment has been very active in post-Sept. 11 interfaith dialogue, but to have this kind of appeal from the king is particularly significant.

Still, it was not clear whether Abdullah's call would be followed by steps in the kingdom to relax the ban on non-Muslim worship services, as well as symbols from other religions, such as crosses and Bibles.

Religious practice is so restricted in Saudi Arabia that even certain Muslim sects, such as Sufis and Shiites, face discrimination, while conversion by a Muslim to another religion is punishable by death.

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