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Catholics, Muslims open landmark talks at Vatican

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By Tom Heneghan, Religion Editor

VATICAN CITY (Reuters) - Senior Vatican and Islamic scholars launched their first Catholic-Muslim Forum on Tuesday to improve relations between the world's two largest faiths by discussing what unites and divides them.

The three-day meeting comes two years after Pope Benedict angered the Muslim world with a speech implying Islam was violent and irrational. In response, 138 Muslim scholars invited Christian churches to a new dialogue to foster mutual respect through a better understanding of each other's beliefs.

In their manifesto, "A Common Word," the Muslims argued that both faiths shared the core principles of love of God and neighbor. The talks focus on what this means for the religions and how it can foster harmony between them.

The meeting, including an audience with Pope Benedict, is the group's third conference with Christians after talks with United States Protestants in July and Anglicans last month.

Delegation leaders Cardinal Jean-Louis Tauran and Bosnian Grand Mufti Mustafa Ceric opened the session with a moment of silence so delegations, each comprising 28 members and advisers, could say their own prayers for its success.

"It was a very cordial atmosphere," one delegate said.

Tauran, head of the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue, told the French Catholic daily *La Croix* on Monday that the Forum "represents a new chapter in a long history" of often strained relations.

He said discussing theology was difficult because of different understandings of God. The closed meeting started with a Catholic official spelling out the Christian teaching that humans can only approach God through Jesus Christ.

Muslim theologian Seyyed Hossein Nasr responded that such a view excluded non-Christians from salvation and suggested ways to see Islamic parallels to Christian views of God's love.

Delegates said the discussion that followed was friendly and respectful, not a clash of opinions. "We need to speak openly so we get to know each other," said one Muslim delegate.

NEW URGENCY

Christianity is the world's largest religion with 2 billion followers, just over half of them Catholic. Islam is next with 1.3 billion believers.

Saudi King Abdullah visits the United Nations next week to promote a parallel interfaith dialogue he launched last summer.

These and other meetings reflect a new urgency among Muslims since the September 11 attacks, the "clash of civilizations" theory and Pope Benedict's Regensburg speech showed a widening gap between the two faiths.

The Vatican was at first cool to the Common Word initiative, arguing that talks among theologians had little meaning if they did not lead to greater respect for religious liberty in Muslim countries, where some Christian minorities face oppression.

"We can only have a real dialogue if all believers have equal rights everywhere, which is not the case in some Muslim countries," said one Catholic delegate who requested anonymity.

The agenda reflects the different views. Tuesday's talks centered on theological issues proposed by the Muslims, Wednesday's meeting will focus on religious freedom issues the Vatican wants to raise.

The Vatican delegation includes bishops from minority Christian communities in Iraq, Syria and Pakistan. Among the Muslims are Sunnis and Shi'ites from around the world and converts from the United States, Canada and Britain.

There are three Catholic and two Muslim women participating.

The delegations will have an audience with Pope Benedict on Thursday and hold a public discussion that afternoon, the only session open to the media.

The Forum is due to meet every two years, alternately in Rome and in a Muslim country.

(Editing by Tim Pearce)

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