

Worldwide Hate Speech Laws?

Muslims and Christians together.

by Nina Shea

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Two international meetings to promote interfaith harmony were held in the last two weeks, one in New York and one in Rome. The former, called by King Abdullah of Saudi Arabia under the auspices of the United Nations, drew some 20 heads of state to discuss a "Culture of Peace." The latter brought together Muslim and Catholic scholars at the Vatican in the latest session of the dialogue called A Common Word. Both gatherings underscored the gulf between us. At both, all parties spoke for peace and tolerance, but they often meant different things.

As President Bush made clear in his remarks at the U.N. meeting, tolerance is understood in the West as respect for religious freedom. For the Muslim leaders in New York, tolerance means respect for religion itself, particularly Islam. As the astute Turkish political observer Ziya Meral pointed out, if Muslim leaders really wanted tolerance for different religious viewpoints, they would be holding similar discussions within their own societies. But no such discussions are going on.

Especially since 9/11, Islam has been publicly scrutinized, criticized, and sometimes ridiculed in the West to an extent never seen (or permitted) in Muslim lands. Many Muslims feel deeply offended by this, as well as troubled by the violent responses the criticism has sometimes drawn from Muslims--riots, death threats, even murders. Their leaders' solution is to try to halt the cycle by demanding an end to criticism of Islam, even in private speech.

For the past decade, the Saudi-based Organization of the Islamic Conference (OIC) has pushed the U.N. to adopt a universal ban on defaming Islam. This measure would aim to curb the freedom not only of Danish cartoonists but also of scholars, writers, dissidents, religious reformers, human rights activists, and anyone at all anywhere in the world who criticizes Islam. This is already the effect of the domestic laws against apostasy and blasphemy that exist in Saudi Arabia, Iran, Pakistan, Egypt, and other states of the Islamic Conference.

Inside Saudi Arabia, there is, of course, a complete absence of religious freedom. All churches are banned, and apostates can be put to the sword (though in practice they more often suffer long prison terms). So the Saudi king's initiative might be seen in the West merely as a brazen public relations ploy. From the OIC perspective, however, the Saudi quest for religious understanding is more purposeful. The king, as the defender of the faith, has come to strike a deal with the West: Suppress criticism of Islam and you will be spared retaliatory violence.

King Abdullah is building momentum for a new U.N.-decreed protection of religions from defamation or criticism, and he wants Western support. This is not inconceivable. Already Canada, the Netherlands, France,

and Italy, without real debate, have taken tentative steps to deploy defamation, hate-speech, and even long-dormant blasphemy laws.

A Common Word is a more nuanced, sophisticated effort and holds greater promise of leading to peaceful coexistence, if only in the very long run. It too was initiated by Muslim leaders stirred by perceived criticisms of Islam, specifically Pope Benedict's 2006 Regensburg speech.

At last week's session, each side was represented by 29 religious leaders and scholars. The Vatican's team included converts from Islam and bishops from Muslim states where Christians are persecuted. One participant told me, after hearing "horrible stories of suffering and abuse," that he was convinced "the Vatican won't sell out the Catholic minorities for public expediency."

The final document produced by the Rome gathering contains 15 principles, including respect for individual choice in matters of conscience and religion and "the right of individuals and communities to practice their religion in private and in public." It also urged that sacred founding figures and symbols of religions "not be subject to any form of mockery or ridicule."

The sacred texts of each faith were invoked to support the theme of the dialogue, originally proposed by Muslim leaders: love of God, love of neighbor. If open discussion of these texts is permitted in Muslim societies, it may be useful. The pope emphasized that promoting "a deep mutual knowledge cannot be limited to the small circle of the dialogue forum, but rather should gradually be extended to all peoples, so that day after day, in cities and towns, an attitude of mutual respect is developed."

Just how daunting a task this is was demonstrated recently in Morocco, when a magazine inspired by A Common Word was banned for publishing a discussion of commonalities between Christianity and Islam, an approach deemed religiously offensive. The Vatican has not silenced its own critique of Islam, nor will it drop its support for the strategy of seeking common ground in the face of opposition from some Muslim quarters. The next session is scheduled to take place in a Muslim country in two years.

As Pope Benedict commented afterwards, "A long path has been traveled, and there is still a long way to go." A very long way, indeed.

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