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A Muslim visits the Vatican

AS A MUSLIM, I never dreamed of attending Mass in St. Peter's Basilica, but last week, I joined a group of 60 Bay Area clergy at the ceremony elevating Archbishop William Levada to the role of a cardinal.

The sight of the Vatican is awesome, beholding the towering marble columns topped by the statues of saints before the square where thousands of pilgrims gather. From this heart and soul of Roman Catholicism, sermons of war and peace, resurrection and redemption have been delivered to billions of Christians all over the world.

For two decades, I have worked hard to bring Catholics and Muslims together, facilitating meetings in San Francisco between Levada and Islamic leaders. Now Cardinal Levada heads the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith — the title formerly held by new Pope Benedict XVI — making him the most influential U.S. prelate in history and uniquely positioned to help foster world peace.

I was pleased that Cardinal Levada met with us several times, obliging to pose for photographs with great enthusiasm and kindness, although he was clearly exhausted. In the meantime, throughout the week, our interfaith group developed a bond of trust and friendship. Pope John Paul II was loved by Muslims immensely, and I told my fellow travelers that I want to maintain the same ties with Pope Benedict.

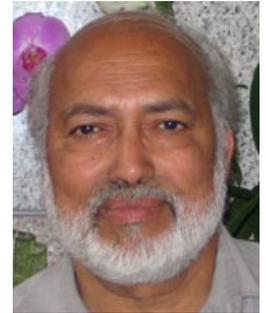
Istanbul, not Constantinople: But one member of our group, who wished to remain anonymous, expressed concerns that Pope Benedict, in contrast to his predecessor, has not shown any sign of reaching out across faiths. I optimistically responded that "Maybe he will change in time," but then I heard something else that made my heart sink: Pope Benedict has said that, " Muslim Turkey has no place in Christian Europe."

As I numbly noted that I have never heard a Vatican official say "Istanbul" — it is always "Constantinople" — my companion brought up another controversial rumor: Pope Benedict has said he wants the church to think about Christianizing India, my native country.

If these statements are true, my peace-building between religions is going to be rough. As a Muslim interfaith leader, I need to find out what the Vatican really wants and how we can resolve these thorny issues with love, compassion and forgiveness. I hope this pope and his cardinals will follow Jesus' famous saying, "Do not judge others, lest you be judged." This motto holds more wisdom now than ever before.

Bridging the gap: As we departed Italy, the awesome historical places, the Coliseum, the palaces of the Roman Empire, the art and architecture overwhelmed me — but deep in my heart, I was preoccupied with ways to dialogue with the new pope and his cardinals and work as one global community fostering religious peace and harmony. To defuse the tension between Muslims and Christians, my old friend, Cardinal Levada, has got to be that bridge.

Iftekhar Hai is president of the United Muslims of America Interfaith Alliance. He and three other local columnists take turns writing for Faith.



[Counter Argument to Iftekhar Hai's article](#)

Has the Vatican Joined the Crusade Against Islam?

**Dr. Robert D. Crane,
former National Security Advisor under Nixon Adm. Was also at URI Stanford meetings.
Has great respect for Bishop Swing and URI mission**

Posted April 7, 2006 in the American Muslim Journal

Has the Vatican Joined the Crusade Against Islam?

Distinguishing Between the "Inner" and the "Outer"

The head of interfaith relations representing the United Muslims of America, Iftekhar Hai, joined a delegation in March, 2006, from California to witness Pope Benedict XVI elevation of the Catholic archbishop from this region to the Cardinal and to the most important office in the Vatican, other than that of Pope, namely to head the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, from which Benedict XVI rose to become the Supreme Pontiff.

In his monthly column for the San Mateo County Times in April, Iftekhar expresses concerns that the new Pope shows signs of abandoning Pope John Paul II openness to Islam. His interpretation of what he learned is unnecessarily pessimistic about the future of interfaith relations. We should not expect Christianity to be something that it is not, nor to become discouraged about interfaith cooperation when it does not conform to our expectations about what it should be.

The three points about the Vatican positions on world affairs that most concern Iftekhar are:

- 1) The official policy to Christianize India, or at least to think about it
- 2) The official policy to oppose the acceptance of Turkey into the European Union; and
- 3) The continued reference to Istanbul as Constantinople, even though the residents of this city changed the name to Istanbul centuries ago in 1453.

None of these three positions are incompatible with continued cooperation between Christians and Muslims on the real issues of conscience, such as:

- 1) Economic justice, especially the wealth gap and the need for institutional reform to remove the barriers to broadening private ownership of wealth that are inherent in the present system of money and credit;
- 2) Global political justice, especially the related problem of support by triumphal Christianity and secular fundamentalism for the resort to war in order to impose political

hegemony by a single world power as part of its strategy to maintain the global status quo with all of its injustices;

3) Political and cultural self-determination, especially the problem of ethnic and religious oppression by regional empires in places like Southwest Asia (Palestine), Central Asia (Kashmir and Chechnya), East Asia (Uighur in China and the Moros in the Phillipines), and even the Americas (many examples, including the Native American nations in the United States), and

4) Many other global challenges, especially freedom of religion, gender justice, ecological justice, and pandemic disease.

The first problem that concerns Iftekhhar is the stated objective to convert his native India to Christianity. This mission is two thousand years old and is not a problem. The drive to convert both persons and peoples of other faiths is an inherent part of Christianity based on the orthodox belief that only by accepting the sacrifice of Jesus on the cross as one's personal means to salvation can anyone enter heaven. Compassion for other human beings would demand that they be converted. Given this supremely exclusivist approach to religion in orthodox Christianity, Pope Benedict XVI could not oppose those who call for the Christianization of the world.

Many Christians, and probably most, who embrace Islam do so because Islam is not exclusivist in this way, though they soon find that most Muslims are. In Islam it is none of our business who believes what. We are to teach what we believe is the truth and we have no responsibility beyond that. God gives the necessary rewards to accept Islam to whomever He wills. Allah states clearly in the Quran that it is His will that people should worship him in diverse ways as legitimate paths to sanctity (2:62). This is self-evident to most people in the world, but not to Christians, except for those few who follow their own human nature in opposition to the dogmas of the Church. We should not expect the Holy Father to reject the central tenets of organized Christianity.

The second perceived problem, namely, rejection of Turkey's bid to become officially part of Europe, is strictly a political problem. We must accept the fact that the Papacy is a political institution. The politics of religion has no counterpart in the religion of Islam, other than the absurd concept of an Islamic state espoused by Syed Qutb and other extremists who have perverted Quranic teachings from time to time (most of the time) for untold centuries (fourteen to be exact).

The various countries of Europe are trying to forge a common identity, partly in response to a half century of the American effort to control Europe as a political and economic satellite.

They are trying to create a law-based common framework to overcome the rivalries that produced two world wars, which is why they are so upset about the Neo-Conservatives

doctrine of unilateral preemption designed to eliminate the rule of law in the world.

There must be some limit to European identity, which is why the issue of admitting Eastern European countries has been so contentious. Russia is a special case, because it is an Asiatic power with a Christian religion. In my view, it can not and should never be admitted to the European community of nations. Turkey has even less reason to be admitted, because it is an Asiatic power and culturally belongs to another civilization. This has nothing to do with cooperation between Christians and Muslims.

The third perceived problem is mainly semantic. Constantinople was the center of the Christian world for many centuries while the Patriarch of Rome represented only the unruly tribes of the West. I wrote my dissertation on Christian heresy, with emphasis on the split between Rome and Constantinople and on the gradual rise of the Vatican to global supremacy among self-proclaimed Christians. Most Christians have a very insular and solipsistic view of history, so they will never abandon their historical view of West Asian history, any more than Jews will abandon theirs. Pope Benedict's reference to Istanbul as Constantinople does not mean that he wants to reimpose Christian hegemony in the Middle East (i.e., the region halfway between Europe and India), though many Christians, Jews, and secular triumphalists in the United States would like to do so.

We should be careful not to confuse the outer or externals of religion, especially the political externalities, with the spiritual essentials, the inner. In fact, the principal reason for interfaith cooperation is to help each other advance beyond the superficialities. The three problems that most concern Iftexhar Hai, who has devoted his life for two decades to interfaith understanding, are not real problems. Perhaps the real problem is when we think that they are.

God bless, Bob

Robert Dickson Crane
transcendentlaw@aol.com

312 666-7757 (Robert Crane (Islamic name Faruk ul Haq) Principal foreign policy adviser from 1963 to 1968 to President Nixon. On January 20, 1969, Nixon appointed him as Deputy Director of the National Security Council for Planning, and in September, 1981, President Ronald Reagan appointed him as U.S. Ambassador to the United Arab Emirates)

From Catholic Father (wants to stay anonymous)

Dear friend Iftexhar,

Thanks for this message and the comments from Robert Crane. I was just reading an account of the desperate defense of Constantinople from the totally unjustified assault on it in 1453 on the part of the Ottomans. I could not sleep for half the night after reading of this tragedy. Since my ancestors at that time were Venetian nobility, perhaps some of them were there

alongside Giustiniani at the gates of the city when the Janissaries began their final assault (Janissaries: soldiers kidnapped in childhood from Christian families, forcibly converted to Islam, and then psychologically formed into an elite military unit. They were trained to carry out the Sultan's wishes when he could not convince his own Turkish units to fight for him!).

We need to weep together over these terrible wars and crimes against humanity committed in the name of religion and "conquest"; we need to do collective penance and reparation for these terrible deeds. If you look closely at Turkish history, especially in the 20th century, you will see the exact opposite of penance, tears and reparation- modern Turkey is in many ways worse even than the Ottomans, who at least had an appreciation for refinement and culture.

As for the Christianization of India, since there has been a Christian community in India since the middle of the first century, one would think that such a project would be rather unlikely.

It is so sad to read of what the BJP (Hindu extremists party) people are doing to Christians of all denominations in India; the most recent disgrace is the decision in Rajasthan to throw out a community of Catholic nuns who were working in a leprosarium (they had been running the place for 50 years) - purely on political grounds. Nuns and persons afflicted with leprosy were weeping as the nuns packed to leave... And this is one of the less bloody instances.

Do you see any Catholics in Europe or the US trying to take over charitable institutions run by Muslims, Sikhs, or Hindus? The very idea is repugnant.

The Vatican has respectfully welcomed into inter-religious dialogue several Christians who had renounced their faith to join another religion: so strong is the commitment to freedom of conscience!

Well, enough strong language. We have to work hard to be see that peace is built upon real, and deep, understanding. Things have not been good for many centuries; it will take a long time to heal the wounds.

An honest assessment of the past should be a motivation to see things differently from now onwards. This is exactly what the Catholic Church has done with regard to the Jewish people, and we are now beginning to see a lively spirit of re-assessment of Christianity even among the Jews.

Little by little, this will happen more widely. I have a particular hope that it will happen in India, because as you know I have a great love for that great land where even in the midst of traffic and pollution one feels a presence of the Holy, not to mention what one senses in temples and in the solitudes of the countryside. These comments are of course just for you, in friendship and trust. Let us continue to open our hearts to the Divine Light.

In peace,
Father (wants to stay anonymous)