

Imam speaks of Christian-Muslim peace

John L. Allen Jr. | Mar. 19, 2009

Yaoundè, Cameroon

When Pope Benedict XVI met 22 Muslim leaders from across Cameroon this morning, Sheikh Ibrahim Moussa, the Imam of Yaoundè's Grand Mosque, spoke for the Islamic delegation. That speech was written by Moussa's highly regarded deputy imam, Sheikh Mohama Oussani Waziri, who sat down with NCR afterwards to discuss the meeting with the pope and the broader state of Christian/Muslim relations in Africa. We met in Waziri's home in the "briqueteri" neighborhood of Yaoundè, so named because it once housed a large brick factory during the French colonial period. It's now a predominantly Muslim area; as we spoke, the sound of the muezzin calling people to prayer floated through the air.

Waziri proposed Cameroon as a "pilot country" for a different kind of Muslim/Christian relationship, reflecting what he called a "softer" version of Islam found in much of Africa, as opposed to the "extremist" currents more common in the Middle East and the Arab world. In that context, Waziri explicitly rejected attempts to impose shariah, or Islamic law, through the power of the state. He voiced agreement with Pope Benedict XVI that Christians and Muslims can collaborate in defense of shared values; for example, Waziri said that Muslims would have gladly joined the pope in his recent statement about condoms, perhaps deflecting some of the international criticism the pope has drawn. Waziri also asserted that Christians and Muslims are not competitors in a scramble for African converts; in fact, he said, they both face the same headache on that front, which is the explosion of new "sects" of both Christian and Muslim origins, which are currently challenging more established forms of both faiths.

The full text of NCR's conversation with Waziri follows.

What is the significance of the meeting this morning?

Islam has a long tradition of welcome, which is also part of African culture, so it's an excellent thing that we had an opportunity to express our welcome to the pope. The pope has come to Cameroon for peace, which is also a value we share. It's a very good thing for Africa to bring us together in a common voice in favor of peace. Africa is passing through a very difficult moment in terms of its economic, social, and political life, so this common witness has enormous value.

Benedict XVI has not always been seen as a friend to Islam. Three years ago, he angered many Muslims with a speech in which he quoted a Byzantine emperor saying very negative things about Muhammad. Do you believe that Muslims have forgiven the pope?

Certainly when this happened, many Muslims were shocked, and there was anger, even in Cameroon. I actually went down to the local jail to meet some young Muslims there, to explain what had happened, in order to cut short any potential reaction. Of course, we have to take account of the differences between the two popes. John Paul II was perhaps a bit more diplomatic, and here he was known as a great friend of Africa. Benedict XVI is more conservative, concerned with a strong defense of Christian orthodoxy. Muslims may therefore not feel the same immediate connection that they did with John Paul, which sometimes makes it more difficult for Muslims

to truly understand what the current pope is trying to say. As we looked into it, however, it became clear that the quotation cited by the pope had been taken out of context, and that the pope himself did not supply the proper context. Once that was done, the affair looked very different.

In any event, the reaction [to the pope's address] had less to do with him than a general expression of frustration in some parts of the Muslim community, especially in the Middle East, about the well-known political problems of that region. By now, I believe that we have largely put the episode of the pope's speech behind us, and are ready to focus on what we can do together to be a force for peace and understanding.

The pope said in his address this morning that "genuine religion" rejects all forms of violence and totalitarianism. Do you agree?

All mainstream figures are in agreement on that, though there's a small minority that rejects it. Every religious tradition has its extremists, who tend to exploit fear and thus encourage divisions – both within their own tradition, and between traditions.

The pope also talked about the need for Christians and Muslims to work together in society and politics to defend shared values. Do you agree, and what are those shared values?

Absolutely, Muslims and Christians can and should collaborate much more in these areas. The Qur'an calls people to develop the human condition, which is an aim the two faiths share.

I think it would be helpful if we can distinguish between two regional expressions of Islam. There's the Islam of the Middle East, which is often more prone to extremism, and the Islam of Africa, which in general is "softer" – with the exception of Nigeria, where it has become bound up with political disputes.

To date, it's been the Islam of the Middle East which has tended to loom largest in Muslim/Christian relations. I think we need a "pilot country" in Africa to illustrate the possibilities for a different kind of relationship. I say this not just because I'm a Cameroonian, but I do believe Cameroon could be that pilot country. We live in peace together here, and that gives us the possibility to work together in pursuit of real peace for the broader society – the kind of peace which is not just the absence of war, but also involves the fight against hunger, poverty, and other injustices which prevent too many people from being truly free. I helped to found an inter-religious dialogue group here for precisely that reason.

Can you be concrete about the kind of things Christians and Muslims can do together?

As an example of a social issue, take the pope's statement about condoms. That statement could have been made in unison with Muslims, and had that been done, it probably would have generated less criticism internationally. Homosexuality is another example. We share the same beliefs, and we could make common statements that would carry more weight. That's probably especially true in Cameroon, because President Biya, whatever you may want to say about him, is nevertheless a genuine believer, and he pays attention to what the religions say. More broadly, we could engage global issues together – the need to revise financial systems, to rethink how capitalism works, and so on. In all these areas, our positions will be more influential if we express them together.

Some might be skeptical about the possibilities for that collaboration, since Christians and Muslims could be regarded as competitors for converts in Africa. Is that how you see it?

On the contrary, I think we both have the same problem, which is the proliferation of sects in Africa. This is a problem for the Roman Catholic Church, and also for the established forms of Islam. On the Christian side, one sees the growth of the Seventh Day Adventists, the Pentecostals, and all these African-initiated churches

supported by America which promise magical healings, prosperity, and so on. On the Muslim side, there are Shi'ites and the Druze who are coming into Africa. In that sense, we're in the same both. I'm struck by the fact that when Monsignor Bakot [Archbishop Simon-Victor Tonyé Bakot of Yaoundè] comes to visit the Grand Imam here, he always refers to him as "my father." We are definitely not rivals, but brothers. We are both shaped by traditional African culture, which tells us that it's wrong to argue over religious matters. In African culture, religion is God's property ? it doesn't belong to us, so neither of us can own it.

That's a beautiful theory, but it doesn't always fit the facts. In Nigeria, for example, violent Christian-Muslim clashes have followed attempts to impose shariah (Islamic law) in some northern states where Muslims are a majority. Do you support the imposition of shariah in areas where Muslims form a majority?

As a theological matter, shariah in the sense in which you're describing it doesn't exist. I speak now as someone who has studied Islamic law in Egypt and Syria, working on a Ph.D. in the subject. In Islamic teaching, shariah can never be imposed. Accepting it has to be an act of your own will. The Qur'an is very clear on this point: there must be no obligation in Islam. I practice this even in my own family, as a father with several children. I encourage my children to pray, but I never force them. If my wife refuses to pray, I don't beat her or try to compel her. I have to exercise patience.

Look around at this neighborhood. You see Christians and Muslims living together, and nothing is imposed on anyone. What we need is not to impose the laws of one faith or another, but rather to have greater respect for one another. For example, a Christian coming into a Muslim area should try not to dress in ways that might offend people.

To be clear, you are against attempts to enforce shariah through the civil law, even when Muslims are in the majority?

It must never be imposed, never.

So what happened in those Nigerian states was wrong?

Of course. That was about politics and power, not religion. Muslims themselves were divided. Take the case of Safiya Huseini, the lady who was sentenced to death by stoning for adultery in Nigeria. The local sheikhs were contradicting one another about what should be done.

Here in Cameroon, this neighborhood is probably 90 percent Muslim, but nobody feels constrained or that anything is imposed on them. We try to show respect for one another, and that's enough.

In May, Pope Benedict XVI will be visiting majority Muslim areas for only the second time, stopping in Jordan and the Palestinian Territories in addition to Israel. What would you hope for from that visit?

It's well-known that the tensions in the Middle East, meaning the Israeli/Palestinian problem, complicate the broader relationships among Muslims, Christians and Jews. That problem has to be solved. I believe the Muslim world is expecting the pope to make a clear statement, to the effect that the Palestinians and the Israelis should each have their own states with Jerusalem as the capital of both. If he does that, it will be wonderful. Muslims are expecting such a statement.

What else could the pope do to advance Christian/Muslim relations?

Speaking as an African, we are dealing with enormous challenges concerning the family, poverty, disease, and many other problems. What often prevents us from meeting these challenges is a lack of leadership. Too many

states suffer from corruption and a lack of good government. Both Christians and Muslims have the same concerns around these issues. If the pope could join us in insisting that the money which has been looted and stolen from our countries must return, that would be an enormous help.

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