

Analysis: Catholics, Muslims pursue dialogue amid Mideast tension

By Tom Heneghan, Religion Editor

Bethany Beyond the Jordan, Jordan | Fri Nov 25, 2011 1:36pm EST

(Reuters) - Only five years ago, critical remarks by Pope Benedict about Islam sparked off violent protests in several Muslim countries.

Never very good, relations between the world's two largest religions sank to new lows in modern times.

This week, while protesters in the Arab world were demanding democracy and civil rights, Catholics and Muslims met along the Jordan River for frank and friendly talks about their differences and how to get beyond their misunderstandings.

The Catholic-Muslim Forum, which grew out of the tensions following Benedict's speech in the German city of Regensburg, was overshadowed by events in Egypt, Yemen and Syria. The lack of any dramatic news here reflected the progress the two sides have made since 2006.

"We have passed from formal dialogue to a dialogue between friends," Cardinal Jean-Louis Tauran, head of the Vatican's department for interfaith dialogue, said at the conference held near the Jordan River site believed to be where Jesus was baptized. "We realized that we have a common heritage,"

Recalling the strains that prompted Muslims to suggest a dialogue in 2007, Jordan's Prince Ghazi bin Muhammad bin Talal said: "Since then, despite some misunderstandings, I dare say the general Muslim-Catholic ambiance has ameliorated considerably."

The 24 Catholic and 24 Muslim religious leaders, scholars and educators meeting here debated how each religion uses reason to strengthen insight into its beliefs. Roman Catholicism has long argued that faith without reason can breed superstition while nihilism can emerge from reason without faith.

POPE'S ILL-FATED SPEECH

This was the core message of Benedict's Regensburg speech, but it was drowned out when he quoted a 14th century Byzantine emperor describing Islam as violent and irrational. Radical Islamists responded with violent protests.

After he expressed his regrets, 38 Muslim scholars wrote to the pope suggesting a meeting to discuss misreading of Islam they found in his text.

Benedict, who had long thought interfaith dialogue could blur differences between religions, did not reply. He believed discussing theology was all but impossible because they do not analyze the Koran as Christians and Jews do their scriptures.

A year later, 138 Muslim scholars issued a broader appeal to all Christian churches to discuss the commands of love of God and neighbor that both faiths shared. Led by Prince Ghazi, the group included several grand muftis as well as leading Islamic intellectuals from around the Muslim world.

This time, the Vatican reluctantly agreed and hosted the first Catholic-Muslim Forum in November 2008 in Rome.

That meeting was a watershed, allowing Catholics and Muslims to discuss theology seriously instead of simply holding a polite meeting ending with pious calls for peace and understanding.

Although he only met the Muslims at a formal session in the Vatican, Benedict was a quick learner. By May 2009, when he visited Jordan, Israel and the Palestinian territories, the pope echoed their arguments and eased the quest for common ground.

COMMON SENSE OF URGENCY

Three years after the introductory session, the second Forum on Nov 21-23 focused on the relationship between faith and reason.

Ibrahim Kalin, a Turkish philosopher who is now chief policy advisor to Turkish Prime Minister Tayyip Erdogan, explained how Islam also argues that faith must be tempered by reason.

In the main Catholic presentation, Italian philosopher Vittorio Possenti explained how Catholic teaching stresses the intrinsic value and natural rights of every human being.

"There's a common sense of the urgency and importance of this meeting, even though the context and background we're coming from are quite different," said Archbishop Kevin McDonald, the top Catholic official for interfaith dialogue in England and Wales.

The Arab Spring uprisings this year have changed the context, especially by allowing Islamist parties to operate more freely in Tunisia, Egypt and Libya.

This has also opened the door to the Salafists, radical Islamists who have attacked Egypt's Coptic Christian minority and spread fear among Christians across the Middle East,

FAITH AND THE ARAB SPRING

Aref Ali Nayed, a Libyan theologian who joined his country's revolutionaries and is now Tripoli's ambassador in the United Arab Emirates, said the role of faith in the emerging political systems highlighted the need for reasonable religion to prevail.

"It is extremely important that the massive movements we are experiencing today do not happen at the level of irrationality or mere emotion," he said.

"Such movements must be guided by the light of faith, but reasoned faith that encourages thinking and dialogue."

Strains emerged at some of the closed-door talks, especially on the issue of whether Muslims can convert to Christianity.

One Catholic noted the Church could not accept any converts in the Gulf countries but Christian foreign workers there who switched to Islam got a warm public welcome to their new faith.

Another asked why Muslims would not respect the choice made by people who sincerely wanted to convert despite all the problems they knew would come. In response, a Muslim said Islamic countries remained wary because too many conversions were forced in the past.

Some Muslims also expressed difficulty in understanding how the Catholic Church could open dialogue with other faiths after its Second Vatican Council in the 1960s after avoiding it for almost two millennia before that.

They also suggested the Catholics had given in too much to modern secularism and not protested enough against depictions of Jesus that Muslims considered blasphemous.

Still, the strength of their current ties showed when, during a break on the final day, delegates swapped jokes about religion. Bosnia's Chief Mufti Mustafa Ceric turned out to be group's stand-up comedian.

"Did you hear about the preacher and taxi driver?" the Sarajevo-based cleric asked. "When they died and came before God, He sent the preacher to hell and the taxi driver to heaven.

"When the preacher asked why, God said 'When you preached, you put people to sleep. But he used to drive his taxi so fast that he made all his passengers pray for eternal salvation'."