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November 30th, 2007

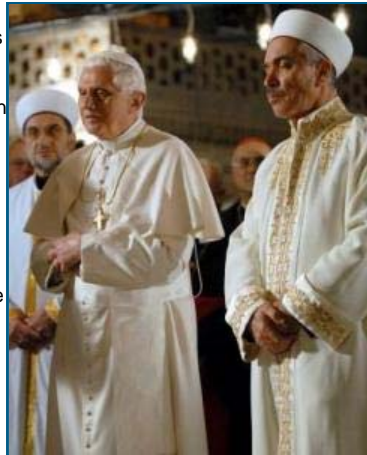
Vatican green light clears way for Christian-Muslim dialogue

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Posted by: [Tom Heneghan](#)

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The [Vatican announcement](#) welcoming the [appeal by 138 Muslim scholars](#) opens the way to a broad and deep dialogue between Christianity and Islam. The Roman Catholic Church — with more than half the world's 2 billion Christians — could have scuttled the whole thing if it had said “no, thanks.” That first hurdle is now out of the way, but it's going to be a long and slow process before we see results. Although it goes against the instincts of a wire service reporter to say it, that's not such a bad thing. Taking time to discuss differences and clear up misunderstandings has got to help relations.



In fact, even this “Waiting for Benedict” phase has been quite active. On my recent trip to Rome, I heard quite a few Catholics — cardinals and Islam experts — [speaking positively](#) about the idea. But I don't want to give the impression that only the Vatican counts here. There have been interesting developments among Protestants and Muslims in recent days.

On the Christian side, four [Yale Divinity School professors](#) drew up a positive response to [A Common Word](#). About 300 mostly Protestant theologians and religious leaders have signed the statement (published in the Nov. 18 [New York Times](#)), ranging from professors at divinity schools, several leading evangelical figures and a few Catholics and Orthodox. The full list of signatories [is here](#).

Last Monday in Abu Dhabi, Sheikh al-Habib Ali al-Jifri, Director of the Tabah Foundation in Abu Dhabi, [thanked the Yale group](#) in the name of the 138 Muslim signatories. Egypt's Grand Mufti Ali Gomaa also sent a [statement of support](#). There have been other comments as well — the Common Word website is [keeping track](#)



of them as they come in.

Cynics might say that talk is cheap. Since dialogues among religious leaders have a tendency to stall after the “getting-to-know-you” phase, that has to be expected. But we haven't seen Christians and Muslims talking this much — and so positively — in a long time. As Paris Cardinal André Vingt-Trois pointed out last week, *“I remember a few years ago how we regretted that there weren't any Muslim leaders who could take a public position, for example against terrorism.”*

That said, this initiative now goes into the long haul. Given some of the Catholic objections that have been mentioned (for this, see the long analysis by Sandro Magister's on his informative site [www.chiesa](#)), there is a lot to talk about — and



disagree about — if they really get down to discussing the serious theological differences between them. But there's an optimism surrounding this initiative. The Catholic Bishop of Arabia [Paul Hinder](#), based in Abu Dhabi, expressed some [Catholic concerns](#) about the dialogue two weeks ago. But he made clear to the Abu Dhabi daily [al-Ithad](#) on Thursday that he did not think this was a deal-breaker.



“Saying that dialogue is difficult or will take time does not mean that it is impossible,” he said. *“I personally do not believe that the situation is such. Rather, I believe that dialogue is possible.”*

If these scholars are going to talk about the misunderstandings between Christians and Muslims, what do you think they should discuss? Do you think a dialogue among these people can really make a change in day-to-day relations between Christians and Muslims?

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