

Local Muslim professor among faith leaders to meet pope

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One of the more interesting events on Pope Benedict XVI's schedule on his recent visit to the United States was an interreligious gathering in Washington, D.C. I was honored to join other Muslim scholars from across the country, as well as members of the Jewish, Hindu and Buddhist communities and members of other religions, for this groundbreaking event.

The materials for the "Peace Our Hope" meeting all carried the image of Edward Hicks' painting **"Peaceable Kingdom,"** which depicts the beautiful hope of Isaiah 11:6-9: "The wolf shall live with the lamb," and all of the accompanying imagery of peace and harmony in Creation. This image appears in Islamic tradition as well.

Pope Benedict XVI's visit was undoubtedly one of the most important national events of the year. Throughout his visit, his meetings with administrators and church leaders were interspersed with huge outdoor masses welcoming thousands of worshippers. None of this is unusual for a papal visit. What was new and exciting, however, was the pope's inclusion of an interreligious gathering in his schedule. This demonstrated, I believe, a new openness to dialogue on the part of this pope.

Of the approximately 150 other participants at the gathering, 25 of us were Muslim. In the wake of the pope's negative remarks about Islam and its prophet at Regensburg University in Germany in 2006, some Muslims felt trepidation about what to expect at the meeting. Any anxiety was quickly alleviated, however, by the pope's humility and openness, which impressed us all.

Not a dynamic or sensational speaker, and with a thick German accent often difficult to understand, Benedict XVI was impressive solely on the basis of his message. He emphasized the importance of finding more space for religion in the life of the society -- that religious freedom is a part of human freedom. It seems to me that while his predecessor, John Paul II, struggled against Communism, Pope Benedict XVI is struggling against a modern secularism that denigrates religion.

In his speech, the pope quoted Franklin D. Roosevelt, saying, "No greater thing could come to our land today than a revival of the spirit of faith." He suggested that one of the goals of dialogue between adherents of different religions was to establish a foundation for discussion of essential questions such as "What is the origin and destiny of humankind?," "What are good and evil?," and "What awaits us at the end of our earthly existence?"

According to the pope, it is only by addressing these "deeper questions" that we can ensure the peace and security of the human family. "We are living in an age," he said, "when these questions are too often marginalized. Yet they can never be erased from the human heart. Throughout history, men and women have striven to articulate their restlessness with the passing world."

It is clear to me that, while the pope is deeply knowledgeable about Western thought and Catholic

tradition, he is not overly familiar with other religions. He was warm and welcoming to us all, particularly the Jewish participants, to whom he extended a special greeting in honor of their Passover celebration this week. It appears that he is willing to be a part of interreligious dialogue insofar as it does not contradict the main tenets of his faith.

This is particularly good news for Muslims, who share many common traditions with Catholicism, including a special reverence for Jesus and his mother, Mary. Muslims were honored to hear an expression of our own tradition in the pope's final words to us: "Peace upon you all."

After a young Jewish man presented a menorah to the pope, it was a great pleasure for Muslims to see the pope receive a beautiful Islamic calligraphy containing verse 24:35 from the Koran. Samam Hussein, a young Muslim woman wearing a head scarf, was chosen to present this gift, which the pope received with great enthusiasm.

The verse reads in Arabic: "God is the Light of the heavens and the earth; a likeness of His light is as a niche in which is a lamp, the lamp is in a glass, [and] the glass is as it were a brightly shining star, lit from a blessed olive-tree, neither eastern nor western, the oil whereof almost gives light though fire touch it not -- light upon light -- God guides to His light whom He pleases, and God sets forth parables for men, and God is Cognizant of all things."

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