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GEORGE WEIGEL COLUMN

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Adult interreligious dialogue

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Father Christian Troll, a German Jesuit, is one of the Catholic Church's leading students of Islam and a key figure in the Catholic-Islamic dialogue launched by Pope Benedict XVI's September 2006 Regensburg Lecture. Speaking recently at Cambridge University, Father Troll laid out a series of questions that must be faced in any serious conversation between Catholics and Muslims:

1. Liberation through conversion and repentance: Can Catholics and Muslims speak frankly about such "abiding realities" of the human condition as "forgetfulness of God and rebellion against him, or oppression in the sense of exceeding the appropriate limits of behavior in dealing with others, while violating their essential human rights?" Is instruction in the dual commandment of love of God and love of neighbor sufficient to overcome the human propensity for wickedness toward the "other"? Or is something more required—that is, do Christians and Muslims "share an awareness of our need to be liberated by God into the freedom of His gift of love?" Are we agreed that we must all repent of the times when coercion has been used to advance the cause of God? Is self-criticism part of the spiritual self-awareness of both Christians and Muslims?
2. Faith and Reason: Is it possible for Catholics and Muslims to study their sacred texts with piety and "critical rigor"? Is it possible to create a "critical Christian-Muslim scholarship marked by the will to understand out of love?" Does the application of modern scholarly methods to analysis of the origins and character of ancient texts involve a betrayal of faith?
3. Human Rights: Do we agree that God himself has inscribed human rights "into the nature of man"? Are we agreed that "human rights and divine rights cannot be played off one against the other"? If what we mean by "human rights" is the recognition and protection of the "minimal conditions" under which "the human dignity...due to the human person as creature of God" is protected, then can we agree that "to recognize and respect human rights is nothing but obedience to the will of

God”? Is the protection of human rights thus a fulfillment of the dual commandment of love of God and love of neighbor? If “Islam” means “submission to the will of God,” and if respect for the dignity of the human person is of the will of God, then does Islam by its very nature require Muslims to recognize basic human rights? (And if that is not the case, why isn’t it?)

4. Religious Freedom: Doesn’t love of neighbor require, as a religious obligation (and not merely a practical political accommodation), respect and legal protection for the religious convictions of others, so long as those convictions do not compromise the common good? Do Muslims agree that that principle holds even if Muslims regard what the “other” believes is false? Can we agree that the institutional separation of religious and political authority is good for the state (because it prevents the state from sacralizing itself) and for religion (because it prevents the misuse of religion for political purposes and creates social space for faith and the workings of conscience)? Christians now recognize that the attempt to create “Christian states” was a failure that involved “great costs on all sides.” Are Muslims prepared to recognize that the attempt to create “Islamic states” will likely lead to the same bad results, for both justice and faith?
5. Violence and Reciprocity: Can Islam understand its faith in such a way that Muslims reject violence in the name of God, not only in terms of a cleansing of conscience about the past but as a commitment to the future? Can this commitment extend to those who leave the House of Islam for other faiths? The Koran teaches that no one may be forced to believe; can Muslims agree that that principle “only comes to fruition if it guarantees the freedom also to abandon the faith, to understand it differently, or even to despise it”? As Father Troll asks, “Am I right to think that it is only God’s affair to judge the weight of such matters?” That is interreligious dialogue for adults.

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