

4 October 2006

**AS POPE DISCOURSE SOARS SKY HIGH....**

## **BOARD OF WORLD RELIGIOUS LEADERS SPEAK OUT ON *THAT* SPEECH**

As the question of dialogue with Pope Benedict rises to the evocative heights of hijacked planes, Elijah's Board of World Religious Leaders releases an official response today to the divisive speech that set off three weeks of poor publicity for the new Papacy.

The board, which is part of the global Elijah Interfaith Institute and boasts more than forty pre-eminent leaders from the Buddhist, Christian, Hindu, Jewish and Muslim faiths from fifteen countries, hopes to calm the feud in the run up to the Pope's upcoming visit to Turkey and set a framework for constructive dialogue between all faiths. The significant points in its response to the Pope speech are (actual text on next page):

- There is a need for all religious leaders to re-examine polemical works (such as the mediaeval text in question), which are inherently exclusive and unfavourable to 'the other,' and say whether the claims in them should be upheld, rejected or reframed in the light of the prevailing need for dignity and respect in inter-group relations
- All religious leaders and adherents today have the responsibility to reframe their communications in accordance with core values and contemporary global realities
- The controversy is an aberration in the culture of strong communications between the faiths. Sound bites are taken out of context and take on a life of their own, and all religious leaders and scholars need to be more mindful of the change in the media and communications environment
- Engaging in polemics is the way in which religious communities have avoided the kind of self-criticism and rationality that the Pope highlighted as necessary for fruitful inter-faith dialogue. Religious communities need to engage one another in ways that are more appropriate for religious communities. Careful and full listening and mutually respectful dialogue are the only way of moving forward and the only remedy to violent reactions

The statement represents part of the 'Response' initiative, in which Elijah's Board of World Religious Leaders along with scholars of the Elijah Interfaith Academy, respond to crises and contemporary issues about the role and relevance of faith in society. In an earlier statement, responding to the controversy surrounding the 'Da Vinci Code' film and the Muslim cartoon dispute, the board said 'a critical investigation of religion and its institutions has to be undertaken with the same care and concern for accuracy and respect that is applied to the critical discussion of any other institution or domain of knowledge.' <Ends> (425 words)

**Interviews are available with many of the world religious leaders. For all media enquiries, please contact Simon Cohen, Managing Director of global tolerance:**

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Notes to editors:

- The Elijah Interfaith Institute’s range of contacts and networks include a board of world religious leaders, an extensive network of engaged scholars, academic partnership with leading universities, and membership in UNESCO educational and administrative networks. The Board of World Religious Leaders facilitates and advances the work of the Interfaith Academy. Consisting of pre-eminent religious leaders, the Board determines the Academy's multi-annual program of research and collaboration, nominates scholars to the Academy, receives and disseminates its proceedings and endorses its work. Further information on [www.elijahinterfaith.org](http://www.elijahinterfaith.org)
- Signatories of the above statement are currently: **<names, positions and countries>**

Zenkei Blanche Hartman  
Rishi Prabhakar  
Karma Lekshe Tsomo  
Rabbi David Rosen  
Bishop Hilarion  
Metropolitan Nikitas Lulias  
Archbishop Boutros Mouallem  
Bishop Lenart Koskinen  
Chief Rabbi Michael Melchior  
The Most Rev. Frank T. Griswold  
Sheikh Muhammad Nur Abdullah

- The full text of the response to the Da Vinci Code and cartoon [response](#)

**Full text of the statement by  
Elijah’s Board of World Religious Leaders**

The recent academic lecture of Pope Benedict in which he cited a fourteenth century text articulating an uncomplimentary view of Islam has led to widespread protests and has brought to light once again the fragility of relations between different religious groups. The Elijah Board of World Religious Leaders, with the help of scholars of the Elijah Interfaith Academy, wishes to make the following observations and to point to some lessons that may be drawn from recent events.

1. The text quoted by Pope Benedict is drawn from a polemical work. Christianity and Islam have a rich library of polemical works, in which the other tradition is portrayed in an unfavorable way, as a false religion. These works are usually not primarily written for the others, but for the author’s own community, to show that they have answers for the challenges the other poses. Polemics are ways of defending the truth-claims of one’s own religion against the perceived challenges of the other. This often results in not considering the claims of the other seriously, or even distorting them. Such polemical literature is also representative of historical relations between other religious traditions, including Judaism in its relations with Christianity and Islam, as well as between Eastern religions. The library of polemical works continues to feed our view of other religions, sometimes explicitly and sometimes in more academic ways that do not intend to adopt polemical views, but nevertheless perpetuate them. The body of our polemical literature cannot be ignored as we seek to advance in interfaith relations. Taking stock of our past and of how we view the other must lead to examination of our polemical literatures. We must seek to understand them against their historical background and to find a way of articulating how the views expressed in them should be upheld, rejected or reframed, in light of the broad and prevailing awareness that dignity and respect must characterize inter-group relations in the present. Citations from polemical literature must accordingly be handled with the

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appropriate awareness of the nature of this literature and of how we conceive our own views of other religions.

2. Contemporary relations between religious groups can never be fully divorced from historical relations. However, religious leaders and adherents today have the responsibility to reframe our communications and relationships in accordance with our core values and contemporary global realities. All our traditions have chapters that may be regretted from the standpoint of our present understanding of religious ideals. All our traditions or individuals within them have treated members of other faiths with violence at one point or another, and have had great difficulty negotiating religious vision with political and military power. Some of our traditions have taken stock of dark moments in their past and offered apologies; others are still struggling with these issues. We all seek to move beyond certain moments in our past and to frame interreligious relations in a new way. In particular, we all seek to guide the adherents of our religion to a religious worldview and to a practice that minimizes violence and seeks to resolve tensions and misunderstandings in a non-violent way.

3. The present crisis is to a large extent an aberration in the culture of communications that is characteristic of religion. Even in the heat of dispute and polemic, representatives of different religions have listened to the argument of others and offered counter arguments accordingly. While the present crisis highlights a theme taken from polemical literature, it does so in a culture of communications informed by mass media. Sound bites are taken out of context and take on a life of their own. Instead of attention to what is said and seeking the appropriate response, statements take on a life of their own in the media, and generate responses that in turn draw on the same media as a means of inter-group communication. We urge religious leaders and scholars to be mindful of the change in the environment of communications. The media related implications of statements cannot be ignored and must be taken into account. At the same time, we urge religious communities to engage one another in ways that are more appropriate for religious communities. Engaging in polemics is the way in which religious communities have avoided the kind of self-criticism and rationality which the Pope highlighted as necessary for fruitful interfaith dialogue. Careful and full listening and mutually respectful dialogue are the only way of moving forward and the only remedy to violent reactions.

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