

Interfaith Dialogue: Are Islam and Christianity on a Collision Course?

By Ejaz Akram

*An interview with **John Esposito**, world-renowned professor of Islamic Studies, on the relationship between Islam and Christianity.*

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Ejaz (E): Islam and Christianity are two of the great religions of the world. What, in your opinion, ought to be the nature of the dialogue between them? What should be the objectives of such a dialogue, and how must one find different ways and means of promoting such a dialogue?

John Esposito (JE): I think at some level the dialogue has been going on throughout Muslim-Christian history. In the 20th century, you have a significant dialogue going on between groups like the World Council of Churches, National Council of Churches, and the Muslims. And more recently, Catholicism has a major operation regarding this.

A common objective of dialogue is to start with our common interests, to better understand what we share in common as believers, as children of Abraham, and appreciate our distinctive differences. It is important that all come to dialogue with a sense of self-confidence; this lessens the tendency to be defensive or apologetic. When we encounter each other as neighbors, co-workers, citizens, concerned about common social issues, and parents with shared concerns about our children, we establish a climate of mutual respect.

I have probably been involved in Muslim-Christian dialogue for about 25 years. I think significant momentum has [occurred], the most during the last 10 years. What happened before was good, but things are taking a better turn now. The first dialogue I was invited to was about 25 years ago. The organizers had trouble getting a Muslim participant, so they asked me to represent the Muslim position.

Today, you don't have that problem. You have many Muslims who are not only visible, we also have a fair number of academic appointments.

In 1972, if somebody told me to give him a list of five prominent imams in the United States, I would have to think about it. The only people with significance at that time were Seyyed Hossein Nasr, Ismail Farouqi, and Fazalur Rahman. Well, all that's changed. I think what is significant today is the demographic change. Unlike 1972, most Americans knew next to nothing about Islam, and in most cities there were only a few mosques, which were mostly hidden. Today, it's a different situation.

E: What do you think are the reasons for this change?

JE: First, like I said, the Muslim population in the United States and Europe is so significant size-wise that it makes the need of having a dialogue even more pressing. Second, having the dialogue globally will be constructive. It may be helpful in overcoming the negative image the West has bestowed upon Islam, which we [only] see in the form of events such as the Iranian Revolution, hijackings, and the World Trade Center bombing.

E: So, what was the outcome of that 1972 dialogue?

JE: Well, I locked horns with the Catholic priest, and I basically pressed him on the whole issue of the militancy and aggressiveness of Christianity from very early on--from the Crusades to the Inquisition to European colonialism. He said, "It has nothing to do with the religion. It was the state and the empires that did it." Despite all that antagonism, it turned out to be useful, because through that dialogue, I helped clear many such misconceptions. However, from today's standpoint, it was a very small and low-key event.

E: Was it more theological or political in orientation?

JE: It was actually theological, but it kept on becoming political. Inevitably, such dialogues become political. If you are having such a dialogue, and one of the participants portrays Islam in terms of jihad and offensive warfare, it would become political. For those Christians who feel that Muslims have a greater propensity to aggression, this dialogue was an eye-opener.

I personally think that the most effective departure point is not people sitting down and talking theology. It is more important to engage and encounter each other in their jobs and neighborhoods, because I think that the object of dialogue is to arrive at mutual respect and understanding. There are very few of us who are trained in both religious traditions that can deal with this subject theologically.

E: This brings me to my next question. When it comes to the average man, he may or may not know his own faith, let alone the other's faith. He may only have an allegiance to his own way of life and not enough need or want to understand the other's faith. Like in the case of a position held by some Muslims and Catholics: They "know" they are right, therefore the other must be wrong! Discussing these things at an intellectual level is one thing, but at the level of the neighborhood, how can they resolve these positions?

JE: The first step of the dialogue is that people should encounter each other with respect and honor over a sustained period of time, and then out of that can come some interest for each other. If there is someone who has become a neighbor or a friend, it is very easy to introduce him or her to one's faith by giving him or her something to read, or a video that explains your faith. However, I must be blunt about a very important fact: When you want to speak to an audience or you teach anybody, give someone a book that is engaging. Don't give them something that is boring and dull. Second, you give them something that is in their language. By language, I don't mean here just a text they can read. It should be written by someone who understands that language and discourse in its proper cultural context. You want to give them something more recent, which addresses their problems in their present socio-cultural environment.

Some Muslim friends asked me to speak to a workshop for da'wah. The first thing I said was that you don't do da'wah by slapping someone across the face. This amounts to saying to someone that your society is decadent because of your religion! Your kids are getting pregnant, your youth is into drugs and hedonism, and let me tell you that Islam is the solution. This is like slapping someone across the face. If you do that to Christians or people of other faiths, they are naturally going to be defensive. And of course, they will then refer to the World Trade Center bombing, which will offend Muslims. The Christian then might say that all the accusations that you made toward Christians don't have anything to do with Christianity. That's where the danger is. A lot of people compare their ideals to someone else's realities.

The down side, ironically, is that as people rub together more and more, they can also feel threatened. The majority community suddenly feels that there are all these strange and foreign people. They know that they are Muslims, but their way of life is alien to them. When the Muslims move into a new community, on one hand they want the jobs and to live in the neighborhood, but

they also want to preserve their identity, for the sake of which they sometimes withdraw. This is a mistake. Instead, when Muslims move in, shouldn't they invite their neighbor to their house for dinner and feel that they are part of the community?

E: Do you think that pluralism can solve this problem?

JE: The real challenge in the 21st century as I see it is the issue of pluralism. Not pluralism as watering down one's faith, but pluralism as: "I have my faith and it's very important for me, you have your faith and I am sure it is important to you ... we also have differences, but we also have to recognize where we have similarities, and by using those similarities we have to learn to live with the differences."

Muslims in America, like Roman Catholics, came here with an impression that not only do I have the true faith, but I have the ONE true faith, and if I am right, you are wrong. However, Muslims, like Roman Catholics, are a minority. One of the things you have to realize as a minority is the need to respect the majority. The Muslim community, compared with Roman Catholics, is the new kid on the block.

E: This brings me to my last question. Muslims believe in Jesus as a messiah and Christians as "people of the book." But Christians believe in the doctrine of no salvation outside of Christianity. How do you think that affects their relationship?

JE: That position was held longest in early Christianity and Roman Catholicism, before the Protestant Reformation. Earlier in this century, when I was a young man, there was a Jesuit priest in the Boston area who resurrected that position and was ultimately excommunicated from the church. He started his own group and then came back to the church; nonetheless, just for holding that position he was excommunicated. The same goes for Muslims if they believe that only Muslims will be saved. This would be a totally un-Qur'anic position. In some Muslim areas, this is a very popularly held position.

I went to South Africa for a talk on civil society. After my keynote address, a prominent scholar who spoke next praised the presentation and my work in general. Then he stunned some in the audience by stating: "Professor Esposito, that was a brilliant talk, but I must be honest. At the end of the day you are still a Kafir (non-believer), and you are going to hell." Half the audience, knowing his real intention, laughed. The other looked nervous. His purpose was to challenge those who don't follow Islam's respect for people of the book. Regardless of what a person believes, says, or does, they simply consign all non-Muslims to hell.

E: He really said that?

JE: Oh, yes! He was actually using that occasion to make his own position firm about this issue. He knew the tension between some of the liberal thinkers and the conservatives, and he exploited that opportunity.

E: But how did he know that you are not a Muslim?

JE: Well, people either know or they just presume that I am not a Muslim. That raises another question. Who is a Muslim and who determines who is a Muslim? I am not trying to be cute about that, but as I have gotten older, I have come to a point that when people ask me this question, I tell them that this is a private thing between me and my God. This is just like asking me about my marriage relationship.