

# Muslim-Christian Dialogue

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Together, Christians and Muslims encompass nearly half of the world's population. Islam, like Christianity, has an international membership. In 60 countries Muslims comprise the majority. In another 15 nations, they comprise a substantial minority. In Europe, Islam is already the second largest religious tradition and in the early years of the next century, Muslims will surpass Jews as the second largest community in the United States and Canada. Today, only 15 percent of the Muslim world live in the Middle East.

From a pragmatic point of view, the pressing issues facing our increasingly interdependent world should stimulate all Christians to review and reconsider their understanding of Islam and relations with Muslims.

This is an attempt to reflect on the obstacles and opportunities facing contemporary Christian-Muslim relations. The story of past relations between Muslims and Christians is not a happy one for reasons that are cultural, political and economic as well as religious. These obstacles are still present and our reflections will try to highlight some of them.

## Bit of History

Through his conquests, Alexander the Great spread Greek civilization over the known Western world and across Asia to India. His attempt to bring the Middle East into his vast empire by imposing Greek culture on its peoples set the stage for tensions between Christianity and Islam when these religions came into being at a later period.

After Alexander's death in 323 B.C., internal quarreling and fighting weakened Greece and it became a Roman province in 146 B.C. The Romans were greatly influenced by Greek culture (Hellenism), and it spread throughout the Empire. When the second century saw the rise and spread of Christianity in the Middle East, the Church, too, allied itself with Greek culture, used the Greek language, and did not establish any meaningful contact with the tongues and ways of life of the ancient native cultures of the Orient. In other words, in the eastern provinces of the Roman Empire, the majority of the people led a life without Greek culture and, in the religious sphere, without Christianity.

The failure to enculturate the faith helped to prepare the way for the rise and spread of Islam. When Constantine moved his capital from Rome to Constantinople in 330 A.D., he began an era that saw the use of force to achieve uniformity in the Christian faith. Constantine's action resulted in the union of Church and state, and the interdependence of emperor and patriarch.

To complicate matters even further, the Byzantine Empire of Constantine had a great rival, the Persian Empire. The rivalry between these two great superpowers led to a series of wars, with only brief intervals of peace.

The connection between culture, religion and politics in the conflict between the east and west is an important point to keep in mind in trying to understand the career of Muhammad and the rapid expansion of Islam.

The western attempt to dominate the Middle East through the alliance of Christianity with Greek culture, and the use of force to spread Christianity explains why it was into countries mainly under Christian control that Islam experienced rapid expansion. The amazing rapidity of the Arab advance east and west was due to the cooperation of local Christians disgusted with Byzantine cruelty and oppression. Throughout the Middle East, the people, being themselves not of Greek stock, looked upon everything Greek as a hateful and foreign intrusion.

Moreover, when the Arabs came, they did not force Christians to accept Islam. On the contrary, Christians joined the Muslim army to defeat a common enemy.

Within a century, the Arabs became masters of an empire greater than that of Rome at its zenith.

### **The Crusades**

The negative Islamic view of Christianity is due not only to the Middle East's experience of Byzantine Christianity, but also to its experience of Latin Christianity through the Crusades. After the death of Pope Gregory VIII in 1085, two Popes contended for power to rule the world through the Church of Rome. When Urban II was elected Pope in France in 1088, he was in a precarious situation. His powerful rival, Clement III, resided in Rome, and was supported by the imperial army. Urban needed to make a bold move to secure the power of the papacy. In addition, he had to find a means of stopping the incessant feuds of the feudal lords and barons. Realizing that nothing unites like a common foe, he summoned a council at Clermont, and preached a holy war against the Muslims. The church was not merely able, through the Crusades, to direct the martial instincts of a feudal society; it was able to pursue the object of its own immediate policy and to attempt the universal diffusion of Christianity, even at the edge of the sword, over the whole of the known world.

Needless to say, the Crusades, like Byzantine oppression, left a trail of bitterness across relations between Christians and Muslims that remains as a living factor in the world situation to the present day.

At the height of the Middle Ages, Islamic culture vastly outshone that of the Christian West in literature, science, medicine and architecture, as is evidenced by the glory of Baghdad and Damascus, and the splendour of Spain under the Moors.

Today, however, Western culture outshines that of the world of Islam and creates a new problem for Muslims. After the discovery of America and the sea route to India in the 15th century, Europe lost to a large degree its interest in the Middle East.

By the 18th century, however, the industrial age had started in Europe, and the search for raw materials and markets saw the rise of colonialism. Europe had to expand and clashes with the Islamic world began to occur once more at the beginning of the 19th century. Europe ingested the Islamic world bite by bite. Malaya, Indonesia, Egypt and the Sudan were dominated by foreigners, North Africa and West Africa were subdued by the French, Persia was divided into British and Russian interest spheres, and all the northern tier of Islamic peoples was under Russian domination.

Muslims, used to equating their way of life with sovereignty, suddenly found themselves ruled by a tiny minority of Westerners, and Christians at that.

In 1918 the Muslim world was at its lowest point of humiliation; poor, exhausted and almost at every point subject to Christian domination; however, by the end of the Second World War the process of decolonization had gone forward with remarkable rapidity, and by 1978 the Muslim World stood before the world, aggressive and with a new confidence. They soon discovered, however, that political colonialism had been replaced by economic colonialism. Victims of a past

colonial subjugation, today they are still largely dependent on the economic, social and political interests and systems dominated by Western free enterprise. This dependence is a form of neo-colonialism which Muslims feel they have to resist.

### **Enlightenment/Awakening**

Throughout all these conflicts, Europe in general seems to have remained ignorant of the religion of Islam, except for secondhand reports full of misinformation, an ignorance accentuated by its unfamiliarity with Arabic.

Mohammed was a false prophet, often portrayed as the Anti-Christ, the beast of the Apocalypse, or the devil incarnate.

In 1649 du Ryer published his translation of the Qur'an (Koran) into French, a work which was translated into English in the same year, with a caveat:

“Good reader, the great Arabian imposter (Muhammad), now at last, after a 1,000 years, is by way of France, arrived in England, and his Alcoran... (a Brat as deformed as the parent, and as full of Heresies as his scald head was of scurf) hath learned to speak English.”

In these translations, the soaring eloquence which moves Arabs to tears or shouts of joy becomes in French, and still more in English, tasteless extravagance and bombast; the passages of wisdom and good counsel seem mere tedious platitudes, especially when this pedestrian version is set in contrast to the majestic language of the Authorized Version of the Bible.

Nevertheless, the 18th century accomplished something towards a clearer understanding of the Qur'an, because the new age of the Enlightenment saw the development of a cosmopolitanism that was willing to exert itself to understand the thoughts and ideals of alien peoples.

Almost the first Christian attempt to use a missionary method to convert the Muslims was that of St. Francis of Assisi (1182-1226) at the beginning of the 13th century. He was convinced that if the Muslims were not converted, it was because the Gospel had not been presented to them in its simplicity and beauty. At the height of the Crusades, Francis visited the Sultan of Egypt, in peace, and returned to Italy where he wrote the famous Cantic of All Creatures in phrases reminiscent of the Qur'an. Impressed by the Muslim call to prayer, he encouraged the friars to have church bells announce the Christian services.

The Dominican scholar-missionary, William of Tripoli (1220-1273), discussed with uncommon penetration those points on which Islam and Christianity are more or less in agreement. Never presenting Muhammad as a criminal imposter, he dwelt upon the praise accorded the Qur'an to God's power, mercy and justice, and noted the high honour given to the Old Testament prophets and above all to Jesus. His conclusion was that Islam has its share of right and truth and that the Muslim is not far from Christian belief.

Ricoldo de Monte Crucis (1243-1320) in his work also acknowledged the virtues of Islam. He pointed out to his fellow Christians that in many respects Muslims can offer them examples worthy of imitation. He praised the Muslims for their hospitality, their zeal for study, their charity to the poor, their spirit of unity, their respect for Jesus and the prophets, their devotion to prayer and reverence for God.

The virtues of Islam continued to impress outsiders through the centuries. For example, in the 19th century, Charles de Foucauld (1858-1916) came to understand that there is something greater and more real than the pleasures of the world when exposed in Morocco and Algeria to the virtues of Islam. Foucauld's conversion through his encounter with Muslims is one of Islam's gifts to Christianity.

Miguel Asin y Palacios, a Spanish Catholic priest, from his study of Muslim-Christian similarities in the fields of philosophy and mystical theology was the first to show how Islam and Christianity are linked together in the religious history of humankind.

However, the scholar who contributed the most to the modern Christian reappraisal of Islam was Father Louis Massignon (1883-1962). Like Foucauld, Massignon rediscovered his Catholic faith through his encounter with Islam. He was convinced that Abraham was the forefather of Judaism, Christianity and Islam, and accepted the connection of Muslims to Abraham via Ishmael.

Through Isaac and Ishmael we have two parallel lines of Abraham's descendants. The line of Abraham and Isaac leads to Jerusalem and to Jesus. The line of Abraham and Ishmael leads to Mecca and Muhammad.

In the story of Abraham it is relevant to emphasize that Abraham was neither a Jew, nor a Christian, nor a Muslim. Yet members of these three religions regard him as their spiritual ancestor. In so doing, they acknowledge that there is a true knowledge of the one God apart from that found in their own understanding of monotheism.

While Massignon was hard at work helping Christians to reevaluate their estimate of Islam, the end of the Second World War and the collapse of colonialism saw many non-Christian countries win their independence from Europe. Perhaps because Christianity was closely allied to colonialism, theologians took the opportunity to reflect on the legitimacy of the world religions generally. Many of them, notably Karl Rahner, began to see history as a whole was the general history of salvation. In defending this view, they made a distinction between general and special revelation. For them, general revelation is the means by which God has communicated and continues to communicate with humanity. The world religions are the general setting for this general revelation. The world religions are the ordinary ways of salvation for the majority of humanity and the message of their founders is revelation from God in a real sense, although incomplete. The Judaeo-Christian revelation is the special revelation which offers an extraordinary way of salvation. The distinction between general and special revelation recognizes the legitimacy of the world religions, and so of Islam, as positively desired by God in the general history of salvation.

### **A Theology of Islam**

Through consideration of the insights of Islamicists, like Massignon, and theologians of non-Christian religions, like Rahner, it is possible to see the making of a Christian theology of Islam. Such a theology should try to give a privileged place to Islam, since it is a monotheistic religion, not unrelated to the Judaeo-Christian tradition. In this way Islam could be seen as the historical mediation, granted in God's mercy, of access to grace, through Abraham, the forefather of Jews, Christians and Muslims.

Vatican II was greatly influenced by such thinking. Its "Dogmatic Constitution on the Church" made it official teaching that all religions can be instruments of salvation. In speaking of Islam in particular, the document said:

"God's plan of salvation includes those who acknowledge the Creator. In the first place among these are the Muslims who, professing to hold the faith of Abraham, along with us, adore the one and merciful God" (Lumen Gentium, 16).

Moreover, the "Declaration on the Relationship of the Church to Non-Christian Religions" assures Muslims that the Catholic Church looks upon them "with esteem." It also highlights the common beliefs of the two religions: Muslims, like Christians, "adore the one God, living and enduring, merciful and all-powerful, Maker of heaven and earth and Speaker to man." Thus the Council implicitly recognized the claim of Muslims that Islam is the fruit of a personal, divine word, and

therefore a revelation from God, and this recognition allows Christians to regard the faith of Muslims as subjectively salvific.

Pope John Paul II, in his discourse to the Catholic community in Ankara, Turkey, said unequivocally: "They have, like you, the faith of Abraham in the one, almighty, and merciful God." And in his message to the President of Pakistan, John Paul II referred to Abraham, "to whose faith Christians, Muslims and Jews eagerly link their own." And in Lisbon, he said, "And Abraham, our common forefather, teaches all—Christians, Jews and Muslims—to follow the path of mercy and love."

### **"Was Muhammad A Prophet?"**

The church thus settled the question of the legitimacy of Islam after Christianity, but provided no explicit answer to two questions: "Was Muhammad a prophet?" and "Is the Qur'an the word of God?" In attempting to make an estimate of Muhammad's prophethood, perhaps we should recall the historical background of the birth of Islam. Christianity at the time of the birth of Muhammad was oppressive. The church had failed to make provision for cultural diversity among Christians. What the church failed to do in the Middle East was Muhammad's finest achievement. He gave to the people of Arabia a divine revelation in their own language and from the lips of one of their own people. What is remarkable about this revelation is that it portrayed Jesus in a manner more in keeping with the intellectual categories and cultures of the Middle East.

The Qur'an speaks of Jesus in glowing terms. It teaches a doctrine of the sinlessness of both Jesus and Mary and acknowledges his extraordinary birth by a virgin mother. It affirms also that Jesus was able to work miracles. It recognizes him as the Messiah who will return at the end of time but denies his death and resurrection. For the Qur'an Jesus is a prophet.

However, the Qur'an rejects the doctrine of Original Sin. The Qur'an teaches that our first parents sinned, but it does not teach that their wrong choice resulted in the condemnation of every human being born into the world. It seems to Muslims completely incongruous that a merciful and compassionate God will damn all humanity to the end of time, ordaining ineradicable sin for countless children yet unborn, and then conceiving as the only means of their salvation that God's only son should suffer and be sacrificed, to atone for a sin which neither he nor they committed. For Muslims, people do sin, yet they have the opportunity to reconcile themselves to God through repentance. In the Muslim attitude to sin, we hear echoes of the story of the Prodigal Son.

In not accepting the doctrine of Original Sin, Muslims cannot accept the Christian remedy for sin—that Jesus died on the cross. In dialogue with Christians, Muslims ask: "If God did not allow Abraham to sacrifice his son, why would God permit the sacrifice of Jesus, all the more if Jesus is God's son?" The denial of the death of Jesus on the cross still leaves Muslims with a Jesus who was ready to die, a Jesus who was a perfect Muslim, that is, one who is ready to submit totally to the will of God even unto death. Muslims still see in the will to crucify Jesus a measure of the sin of the world, which is in large measure the message of the cross.

Though the Islamic view that Jesus was no more than a prophet differs from the Christian view that he was divine, Islam is one of the world religions which knows Jesus, recognizes Jesus, and venerates Jesus, to the extent that Muslims, like Christians, look forward to his second coming. Was Muhammad a prophet?

In the light of the positive values of Muslim monotheism, of the teaching of Paul that there will be authentic prophets after Jesus, of the admission of Vatican II that Islam is part of God's plan of salvation, and of its exhortation to Christians to look upon Muslims with esteem, it is no surprise that Cardinal Tarazona, President of the Spanish Bishops' Conference, in speaking to the Second

Christian-Muslim Conference in Cordoba in 1977, called on Christians to recognize that Muhammad had walked in the path of the prophets.

As for the second question concerning the status of the Qur'an, while Catholics cannot say that the Qur'an is the word of God, since for them the term refers to Christ, they can say that if Muhammad was a prophet in some sense, then the Qur'an is certainly a word of God. Such a view would be in keeping with the distinction made by Vatican II between general and special revelation.

### **Toward Mutual Understanding**

"The Declaration on the Relationship of the Church to Non-Christian Religions" concludes by proposing a two-point programme that is very important for the contemporary Muslim-Christian dialogue: one, mutual understanding, and two, collaboration, to safeguard and foster social and global values which are so closely allied to faith and religion.

Pope Paul VI did pioneer work in directing the church to a better understanding of Islam. In 1964, he instituted the Secretariat for Non-Christians, and every year since 1967, this Secretariat, through its President, sends a message on behalf of all Catholics to all Muslims of the world on the occasion of the conclusion of their one-month fast of Ramadan.

The present Pope has met more often with Muslims than any other Pope in history. In his pontificate he has addressed Muslim groups more than 40 times, and has had many private audiences with Muslim religious leaders. Worthy of special mention is John Paul II's visit to Casablanca on August 19, 1985, at the invitation of the King of Morocco, King Hassan II. There the Pope addressed 80,000 Muslim youth on those values shared in common between Christianity and Islam as the basis for collaboration "in building a new society where God is at the centre."

Many Muslim countries now see the usefulness of maintaining diplomatic relations with the Holy See, not because their governments want to become Christian, but because they are realistic enough to realize the historic place of the Catholic Church and the moral contribution which the church makes and can make to the world.

Apart from the Vatican, bishops' conferences have responded to the Council by seeking ways to promote understanding with Muslims.

Many religious congregations also make a great contribution in promoting mutual understanding between Christians and Muslims: The Missionaries of Africa run the Pontifical Institute for Arabic and Islamic Studies in Rome; The Dominicans have a commitment to this apostolate in Egypt; the work of the Little Brothers and Sisters of Jesus is well known; and the Jesuits, who run the Pontifical Gregorian University in Rome, have a working relationship with the University of Ankara in Turkey, through the exchange of professors.

John Paul II reminds us in his encyclical "Redemptoris Missio", that "each member of the faithful and all Christian communities" are called to do so as well. In accepting this responsibility, many Christians have chosen to begin with organized dialogue, such as study programmes or conferences for the community to serve as a vehicle to stimulate and encourage more interaction in daily life.

When Christians and Muslims move beyond the disturbing veil of stereotypical images and numbing prejudice through mutual understanding, the options for improving relations come more sharply into focus. Instances of this come from many countries where Christians and Muslims live together. In Pakistan, Muslim and Christian volunteers run a leprosarium. In Denmark, Muslims and Christians run a shelter for battered women. In the Philippines, Muslims and Christians have

formed organizations to care for the aged, defend squatters, provide schools and clinics in neglected areas, and run fishing cooperatives for the common good. And in Ethiopia, Christian refugee organizations work together with local Muslim groups.

Those who live in pluralistic societies often choose to begin with unstructured collaboration through the dialogue of life. This type of collaboration takes place in markets and on street corners, at times of festivals and holy days, in the course of civic or humanitarian projects, at the time of community or family crisis. It takes place as communities think about violence or economic depression; as they think about issues arising from interreligious marriage or the community's responsibility toward the elderly.

### **Collaboration in Canada**

In democracies like Western Europe, the United States and Canada, for collaboration to take place, respect for the equality of all people before God and before each other must be present. In human terms, this equality is expressed by establishing the same social, political and economic rights and privileges for all people. We in the West need to remind ourselves that Muslims in many settings do not enjoy the same rights as Christians, as in the public recognition of their religious holidays. Dietary restrictions and dress codes often pose difficulties in public schools and in job promotion. Chaplaincy programmes in prisons, hospitals and in homes for the aged do not always ensure that the religious programmes and dietary provisions are suitable to the religious practices of the prisoners and patients. Such behaviour not only undermines the cherished principle of collaboration proposed by Vatican II, but it harms the prospects for full religious freedom for Christians living as minority communities elsewhere in the world.

Christians in the United States and Canada are in a better position than Christians in Western Europe to promote mutual understanding and collaboration, since North Americans do not have as long a history of hostility toward Muslims. And Christians in Canada are in a better position than Christians in the United States, since Canada is a mosaic, not a melting pot. Because Canadians cherish pluralism and multiculturalism to the extent that we have enshrined them in the Constitution, local churches and other groups could develop a novel dialogue with our Muslim communities on equal terms within the national culture. By respecting the rights of Muslims, the Canadian church could provide an example and frame of reference for Christians and Muslims in other settings where the issues may be sometimes explosive.

There is no simple, straightforward way to move ahead positively to improve Christian-Muslim relations. But we can see more clearly than ever that we are sojourners together on the road to the future. Fortunately, there are already positive and encouraging signs. Patterns of encounter that alienate are being replaced by new patterns that seek to take into account the mistakes of the past, the needs of the present, and the realities envisioned of the future.