

Christianity and Islam in Dialogue

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It can be said that dialogue between Christianity and Islam springs from the essence of Christianity, which is the foremost religion of dialogue. God Himself in the Old Testament, as the God Creator, speaks with man (cf. Gen. 1:28; 17:1-2, Exod. 3:4-6) and reveals the uniqueness of His divine existence (cf. Deut. 6:4); and the same God, in the New Testament, in the person of the incarnated Logos of God, reveals Himself to the world (cf. John 1:14) and calls everyone to repentance (cf. Mark 1:15) and salvation (cf. John 1:13-19).

There are basic and essential differences between the religions of Christianity and Islam, which cannot be ignored, but there are also common elements which can be discussed. Subjects concerning man and the world, especially matters which deal with everyday problems, can lead in this dialogue. The existence since the 7th century A.D., of both religions in the same geographical locality, for example, in the Middle East and North Africa, can inspire mutual respect and the peaceful acceptance of the beliefs of both religions.

Christianity, through and within dialogue, aims to learn more about Islam, its teachings, its history and traditions, always in the spirit of truth, pure love and respect. Today, more than ever before, each religion feels the need to proclaim its existence and authenticity in the contemporary world. Communication and co-operation between religions make an essential contribution to the abolition of religious fanaticism, an intellectual sickness of the religious person; to friendship between nations, and towards the encouragement of the rule of the ideals of freedom and peace in the world. Our co-operation in finding solutions to the contemporary problems of mankind, will assist in our peaceful coexistence and common understanding.

The religions of Christianity and Islam are two individual fountains, from which their faithful receive the inner strength to follow their faith and grow spiritually. According to this principle, each religion claims its autonomy when confronting any theoretical or practical problems faced by their flocks.

Unfortunately, racial and religious discrimination often aggravate the minds of men and bring back the painful past. As a result, Christian and Muslim communities often have reservations about approaching one another and about the feasibility of peaceful coexistence.

Religious fanaticism can bring only new social and religious problems upon the people who are ruled by it. Religious confrontations and clashes are the result of this sick religious phenomenon. Christians and Muslims alike are obliged to turn their attention towards the future, so that they can bring about the vision of God's peace upon Earth.

But why, although these two religions have coexisted for such a long time, does the smallest political disturbance inflame religious intolerance? It is here that dialogue between Christianity and Islam can offer a great deal to mankind. Productive dialogue can help realise heavenly peace on Earth, and protect the holiness of life and man's dignity. Religions do not enforce peace, but can mark out the man of peace, and adapt his mission to the needs of his time.

Dialogue which is based, not only on theological matters, but on worldly issues, can be both hopeful and fruitful. The secularity, coldness and anonymity of society, the destruction of the environment, the lack of world justice and peace, hunger, poverty, nuclear threat etc., are issues which touch the soul of the unfortunate man of our time. The world is tired of religious wars and conflicts.

Let us not forget, that many local Churches, such as the three ancient Greek Orthodox Patriarchates of the East (Constantinople, Alexandria and Antioch), live today in the Islamic world. Orthodoxy coexists and seeks dialogue with Islam; dialogue which presupposes freedom of speech and equality between the two parties.

In Eastern Christianity one sees respect towards the religious experience of others, forbearance and mutual understanding. Basic theological faith held that the "calling" and the "desire for God" guide all men. Man, even after his Fall, had the ability to receive the divine presence. St. Paul emphasised this by saying: **"And had made of one blood all nations of men for to dwell on all the face of the earth, and had determined the times before appointed, and the bounds of their habitation; that they should seek the Lord, if haply they might feel after him, and find him, though he be not far from every one of us"** (Acts 17:26-27). Religious experiences do not represent only an insistent inner movement of man towards a higher reality, but an acceptance of the divine radiance within this world.

For the Greek Orthodox Patriarchate of Alexandria, which for thirteen centuries has lived in the friendly country of Egypt, dialogue with the Islamic world has special and vital meaning. Islam is our close neighbour and the Patriarchate is not alien to it. Alexandria, where the ancient Patriarchate was founded by St. Mark the Apostle and Evangelist, is alien neither to the West nor to the East, because it is a Greek environment from where Greek civilisation and the theological thoughts of the Fathers of the Church have been channelled. The meeting and coexistence of the second-ranking Patriarchate of Orthodox Christianity with the eastern civilisations has its roots deep in history.

For centuries, a large part of Orthodoxy lived in the Islamic world, although not always as an equal member of its society. Despite difficult times, confrontations and misunderstandings, the bonds between them were never broken. This productive spiritual communion between the Greek and Arabic world, between the Christian and Islamic civilisations, is in itself a dialogue of centuries which has enlightened and benefited the people of both East and West.

In conclusion, we must say that dialogue is necessary, and indeed, is the only acceptable way to bring our two religions closer. It is our common desire that all misunderstanding and preconceptions be put aside. We must cultivate mutual trust in order to achieve a better understanding. Dialogue is necessary if we are to overcome the past and the present of alienation, confrontation, enmity and hatred. Those who are responsible for this dialogue must make every effort to solve the prevailing problems of our world, to build a more human society characterised by justice and fraternal love.

While being fully aware of our common responsibility, Christians and Muslims are duty bound to respect absolutely each others religious beliefs and overcome antagonistic feelings. We must strive for solidarity if we are to resolve the problems facing the world, for the Earth is the common home of all nations wherein we are called to worship the One True God.