



Christian-Muslim Dialogue; A Necessity of the Day

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The purpose of this paper is to outline certain aspects of religious interaction, especially in relation to the interaction of Christians with the Muslim communities in the socio-political environment of the day. For much of the non-Muslim world, especially for the predominantly Christian countries, Islam and Muslims today embody the dark-side in the world. Thinking of Muslims reminds one of the dominant images from mass media these days of scary men with huge beards, holding guns, shouting angrily over something. Before one starts or increases one's interaction with these 'strange' and 'dangerous' people it is important to be clear on some basic issues and dynamics.

In psychology we talk about the deep need within a person to give some form to the dark-side, to create the 'other' outside of oneself. This image or person one can then project onto and it can therefore embody aspects of being that one finds grotesque and repulsive. This often becomes the face of the enemy. Creating an enemy, the 'bad guys' out there, is usually a need for an individual and also for groups. This embodiment of everything bad and sinful and evil takes on very concrete form in most religions as well. This need also becomes very crucial in the political-intelligence-military nexus. After the breakup of the USSR, many people who are familiar with these concepts used to wonder who would represent this side in the world. China was one candidate and the Muslim world another. It seems like China has been put on hold for now. Fanatic groups within the Muslim world, no matter how small a minority they were at the time, provided a perfect embodiment of the enemy. And these groups became the face of Islam for the Western world. They fulfill a deep need within the political-intelligence-military nexus in the West.

The typical image of a Muslim being scary, angry and dangerous looking is primarily reinforced through mass media. These media, in a commercial and competitive world cannot afford to show boring faces of the vast majority of the Muslim world. The fanatics, even if a small minority, present exciting and sensational images that the media loves.

This all is not to say that these fanatic groups are a creation of the Western politics and media. They have existed in small numbers for a long time within Muslims societies, maybe slightly more organized than fanatics groups that can be found in almost any other society in the world. The only exception perhaps was Afghanistan where initially with the help of the USA, in order to cast out the 'godless communists' of the USSR, there was a large number of Muslims trained in militancy, thanks to all the financial support from the West, in neighboring countries. In Pakistan, where I come from, the fundamentalist groups never ever had any significant political power. When the right-wing Hindu party BJP formed a government in India people thought that there would be a reactionary support for the religious parties in Pakistan but it did not happen. Now however, we have religious parties in power in two of the four provinces in the country, thanks mostly to the great war on terror. Those who waged the war on terror almost



worked as the recruitment agents for the fanatic groups in Muslim countries. They represent two sides of the same coin that support each other. They feed off of each other. In perfect collusion, they need the 'other' to justify their own existence and to grow. The numbers of those supporting Muslim fanatic groups seems to be on the rise in most Muslim countries, not because people like what they stand for but because they are the chosen enemies of the enemy, i.e. the USA and its allies. Muslims are often resentful of the USA, mostly for its foreign policies, and the fanatic groups, the chosen 'others' of the USA, use that to gain support.

In this scenario of growing extremes, there are still the middle-of-the-road Muslims, still a vast majority, who suffer the most. They are the ones who feel constantly under attack, not because they are fanatics but because they are Muslims. They feel it because the media would always make it a point to mention the religion of a criminal who happens to be involved in some extreme act if he is a Muslim. And they feel it because the authorities see them with suspicion just because they are Muslims. Maybe its getting better now but African Americans, used to talk about always feeling that they needed to prove to every policeman that they were not criminals, even if, for example, they were in a rich neighborhood, driving a fancy car... especially if they were driving a fancy car in a rich neighborhood. In psychology we recognize the pattern where if we keep addressing a certain aspect of someone's personality, it is that aspect that starts to respond more and more. If the society keeps seeing every Muslim as a violent terrorist it helps to bring out the terrorist in them. I know every time I try to enter the USA I am pulled out for special interrogation and then I spend a few hours feeling like I terrorist and I remember having to consciously tell myself last time that I am a peace activist and do not want this anger or hatred in my heart as a reaction to this treatment. But I have known too many Muslim teenagers who over time start responding with 'fine, we'll show you'. It is important not to help push the middle-of-the-road Muslims towards the fanatic side by lumping them all together because of their association to the same religion. They are suffering enough fearing their teenage sons and daughters giving in to extremism and reactionary groups.

It is these moderate Muslims, especially in the predominantly Christian countries that the Christians need to start interacting with more. It however has to be done with sensitivity. Sensitivity has to be there in any interaction across religious boundaries but with the Muslim population these days, it is specially needed as they are being criticized and targeted from all directions. This creates a sense of insecurity and hypersensitivity that leads to hanging out with their own kind and being closed to the 'outsiders'. One therefore needs to keep in mind what happens to an individual or a community when it is attacked from all directions.

There is another kind of self-reflection that would be useful in facilitating interaction with Muslims given that they are in a state of hypersensitivity at the time. In general, often when I talk to a religious group about another, I get a distinct feeling that in the questions they ask about the other religion and religious group, there is a need not so much to understand the other but to explore areas within the other that seem to be their weaknesses. So the Muslims would start to question the concept of trinity and the Christians would start by asking questions about the place of women in Islam and why



some of them wear that 'strange headgear'. The underlying, perhaps unconscious, purpose behind these questions is not to connect with the other better but to find faults with them and their faith, even though there are millions who claim that the faith makes sense to them and perhaps exactly because there are millions who claim that it makes sense to them. There is a need to keep reaffirming that ours is the best faith. Most religions, especially the Abrahamic ones, have this need to feel that we are not only true but are the only and the best truth, bigger and better than all others. Out of this need we cannot help but keep our focus on what we think are the problem areas of the other. If we set that need aside, we would find the tremendous similarities and a very wide common ground between Islam and Christianity. As we explore the other religion and interact with people from that religion it is very important to be clear of our motives, of the 'why?'

I often tell people not to worry about the theological and other dogmatic details in the beginning. It is perhaps much more important to connect on the personal, very human level. Once the personal lives start to open up, within those there is a lived sense of the religion that has its internal logic that is hard to understand from the outside. That personal connection, and that understanding through such a connection, is what is critically missing at this time.

Having said that, let me give a few of the basics of Islam and Sufism—the mystical side of Islam—in any case. One of the basic articles of Faith in Islam is the second Kalima which goes "I bear witness to there being no God but Allah, who is one and indivisible, and I bear witness to Mohammad being his man and his prophet". Allah, a proper noun for God, has its root in al-illah, meaning '*the* God'. This was a term for God who contains in His Being everything that is Divine and Holy. Also of interest is the emphasis on Mohammad being an *man* and a prophet of God. The emphasis on 'man' has to do with no companionship in the Being of God. Jesus, who is actually mentioned much more than Mohammad in the Quran, is believed to be one of the main prophets of God and not his son. Mary is the most frequently mentioned woman in the Quran with one of the longest chapters of the Quran named after her.

The Muslim belief is that while the message of God was sent to every nation in the world (so other religions are recognized as originally from the same God), with time this message underwent change and so there was a need to send other prophets. When the Quran was revealed it got written as it was being revealed and it now exists all over the Muslim world in exactly the same form. Muslims take a lot of pride in that. There is also almost the same prayer format that is used in any part of the Muslim world. This means that when millions of Muslims stand together at Mecca in what is the biggest pilgrimage in the world, they are able to stand side by side and pray together in one language. The main point of oneness of course is in the person of God, as already mentioned.

The mystical side of Islam, Sufism, is about having a direct experience of either witnessing God or experiencing Him within oneself. The direct link to God without intermediaries is common to all Muslims though. There is no organized institution like



the church in Islam. The regular, everyday prayer can be prayed by one person alone and does not require an assembly or a mosque. It is thus hard to clearly separate out the mystical side of the religion. This is even more difficult as there is no monasticism in any of the mainstream Sufi developments, anywhere in the world. Sufism requires people to experience the Divine while they stay within the turmoil of everyday life. Much of Sufism is based on a belief that since God is everywhere we have access to Him within ourselves and not necessarily in the heavens. The idea is not uncommon in other mystical traditions and so Rumi, one of the most loved Thirteenth century Sufi poet said something like, 'I met a Christian monk walking on my path; we do the same work, I told him; we suffer the same'. Having no monasticism, the basic mystical ideas of Sufism, in general, are very much integrated into the everyday life of Muslims. There is however a newer, more formalistic streak, mostly anti mystical, that is gaining more and more strength, especially in the socio-political realities of the day.

It needs to be acknowledged that there is obviously no chance of eliminating Islam, through the war on terror or whatever. The results of trying to do that only increase the levels of frustration, insecurity and therefore fanaticism. There is also no chance of converting all the Muslims into Christianity or another faith. In fact in these times of heightened sensitivity, I would say that it is unnecessary to even try to convert them. Even if one is converted, the other 99 would feel bitter and angry. The goal needs to be to start linking up, in non-threatening ways, with respect and equality, in the spirit of pluralism. We have to watch out as the true spirit of pluralism does not come easy to those belonging to the Abrahamic faiths. I often have this dialogue with groups of Muslims who are being very open and say they are really trying to only understand the other religion without judging it. The judgment still shows up in extremely deep-rooted ways. Meeting as equals means not having the feeling of having a truth that is after all, in the final analysis, the *real thing*. This feeling is so close to the heart of the two religions that suspending it is not easy. But then real dialogue cannot happen without suspending that superior, holier-than-thou attitude. This has to be a requirement from both sides, but I ask Christians to take the first step in this as given the socio-political situation they have comparatively less reasons to feel insecure and because they stand on relatively solid ground. And the focus needs to remain not on the spicy differences but on the huge similarities, at least to start with. These meetings have to take place on level ground with open arms and much more importantly, with open hearts!