

LIVING AS A COMMUNITY WITH ISLAM*

– CONCERNS, CHALLENGES AND PROMISES –

Christians and Muslims have co-existed for centuries in different geo-political contexts and under changing circumstances. This co-existence has taken multiple shapes, generating coherence and tension, harmony and conflict. A realistic assessment of the present predicament of these relations is imperative. We must go beyond cosmetic approaches and clichés to discern the core issues and emerging challenges.

SALIENT FEATURES OF CHRISTIAN-MUSLIM RELATIONS

Looking at the present landscape of Christian-Muslim relations, it is important to identify four inter-related trends:

a) *Ambiguous perception of religion*

In the course of history religion has frequently been misused creating division and conflict. Christianity and Islam have not been exempt from this tendency. Some believe that religion has a public role to play, while others feel that it should be a private affair. For some, religion provides the basis for political governance and ideological orientation, while others believe that it has been hijacked by a political agenda; hence, while some people believe that ‘de-politicization’ of religion and ‘de-religionization’ of politics are imperative, others believe that there should be no demarcation line between religion, nation and state. Because of these opposing perceptions, religion has become a source of conflict in societies. The concrete implications of these contradictory images of religion are identifiable in many areas of society life.

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Referring to this present predicament of religion, Charles Kimball reminds us that "several best-selling books have agreed forcefully that religion is the problem"¹. In my view, religion is not the problem. It was made part of the problem. The very vocation of religion as a moral authority is to seek solutions to problems that we face in the world today. In order to fulfill its vocation, the two dimensions of religion, namely, as a God-given truth and as a human response, need to be distinguished. Tension between the "other-worldly" and "this-worldly" manifestations of religion, and the incompatibility between the teachings and practice of religion need to be reconciled. Both absolutizing and relativizing religion may have negative consequences. Can we break these misperceptions and ambiguities and articulate the true image of religion? Christianity and Islam have rich resources to engage in such a process.

b) *Misconception about Islam and Christianity*

In spite of the significant growth of Muslim-Christian dialogue and relations, Muslims and Christians continue to misconstrue each other's religion. Generally speaking, Islam is portrayed by the West as a source of hatred, fundamentalism and violence. Deep in the consciousness of many Muslims, Western Christianity is the cause of moral decay, and is identified with the Crusades, colonialism, and secularism.

These memories and images pertaining to Islam and Christianity have generated a crisis of confidence. Furthermore, manipulation of religious symbols, slogans and banners to promote non-religious agendas has deepened the intolerance. Therefore, allegations, stereotypes and prejudices must be seriously addressed, and collective memories must be purified. This is an extremely urgent task facing Christian-Muslim dialogue.

c) *Collision of values*

Religion is not only faith in a transcendent reality, it is also a value system that governs human life and provides the basis for self-understanding. Rooted in belief systems, values are perceived as forces of cohesion and integration in societies. They may also become forces of destabilization and tension when used for ideological,

¹ C. Kimball, *When Religion Becomes Evil*, New York, 2008 p. VIII.

nationalistic and political ends. Values carry with them memories and thus condition attitudes and determine relations. Exclusive religious claims lead to exclusive expressions of values, which in turn lead to intolerance.

A number of incidents that have occurred in the last decade in different parts of the world, along with their ensuing reactions and counter reactions, point to a deepening malaise in Christian-Muslim relations: exclusive and reductionist attitudes towards each other provoke tension; values conditioned by extremist religious claims and ideologies expose societies to confrontation; even indirect remarks "in the name of freedom of speech" spark outright rage; and the fear of an "evil other", whether identified by a name, country or religion, creates distrust and divides people.

What is happening is not a "clash of civilizations"² or "clash of fundamentalisms"³. It is a clash of values⁴, deeply rooted in our belief systems and stirred by bitter memories. Differences imprison us in mutual fear unless we transcend them to discover our common eco-center. Bitter memories deepen the divide unless they are healed through a transformative process. Rather than opting to confront each other, we must strive together to pull down the wall of ignorance, arrogance and suspicion. Dialogue should challenge us to accept each other the way we are.

d) *Self-contained or interactive self-understanding?*

Identity is sustained by values and religious beliefs. Faithfulness to identity implies strong attachment to values and religious beliefs. Globalization has destroyed the fences that used to protect this specific identity and, in its place, has produced its own identity. As a result, we see two contradictory reactions: one is characterized by the defining of one's self-understanding in opposition to the other; the other, which is proactive, is marked by creative openness and dynamic interaction with the other. The first way of being is labeled today as radicalism or fundamentalism; it rejects the other. The second way of being is labeled as moderate and tolerant; it accepts the other.

² S. Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order*, New York, 1996.

³ T. Ali, *The Clash of Fundamentalisms: Crusades, Jihads and Modernity*, London, 2002.

⁴ Aram I, *For a Church Beyond Its Walls*, Antelias, 2007, p. 272.

These two ways of self-understanding are in collision in many societies. This collision is identifiable both in intra-religious and inter-religious contexts. Dogmatic approaches, ossified thinking and frozen attitudes will only enhance alienation. Islam and Christianity are called to redefine their self-understanding, as well as the way they understand each other in a new world context.

A serious and frank Christian-Muslim dialogue cannot ignore these trends and tendencies outlined above. The prevailing misperceptions, ambiguities, polarizations, tensions and collision, hijacked and sharpened by politico-ideological agendas and geopolitical strategies, can be transformed only through a shared life in community (ayysh-el-moushtarak). I believe that for both Christians and Muslims, living-in-community must become the real objective of their dialogue. On the way towards this common goal, there are problems and challenges. Neither the "war on terror" nor self-alienation is the right path to follow. We must not deal with symptoms, but with deeply rooted wounds, through a careful diagnosis and in the spirit of mutual respect and trust.

LIVING TOGETHER AS COMMUNITY: A CRITICAL URGENCY

"Dialogue stems from a profound recognition of the mutuality of our common life"⁵. Mutuality builds community and community presupposes and imposes mutuality. Indeed, living together as community is a human necessity. Growing awareness towards common interests, concerns and destiny in a globalized world gave an acute urgency to living together. Because of their common roots and a long history of cohabitation, Christians and Muslims have further reasons to share a common life together.

For centuries, Christians and Muslims in the Middle East have lived as co-citizens sharing a common history. Together they have developed Arab nationalism and have fought against Ottoman-Turkish hegemony, Western colonialism and Zionism. Yet, they have not been able to transform cohabitation into a wider community. Nation-building has acquired predominance over community building.

In Western societies, Muslim migrants have established their own communities, preserving their own values, religious beliefs, traditions and language. These

⁵ S.J. Samartha (ed.) *Dialogue Between Men of Living Faiths*, Geneva, 1971, p. 20.

communities have remained self-contained on the fringes of society life, and have not been integrated into the total fabric of society. Integration remains an acute problem in Europe.

Community building with Islam is a great challenge and an urgent necessity. Community building must take pace on the basis of equal rights and obligations, as well as full and active participation in all aspects of society life, including decision-making. In this context there are conflictive issues and crucial questions which require frank discussion and a comprehensive scrutiny. Our divergences must be neither concealed nor absolutized, neither ignored nor dramatized. We must spell out converging as well as diverging points and identify concrete areas of tension. These two monotheistic faiths are not monolithic. Therefore, generalizations must be avoided; contextualization is the right way of assessing and organizing Christian-Muslim dialogue and relations. In my view, these are the most divisive issues to be treated in Christian-Muslim dialogue.

a) ***Inter-complementarity of faith and reason.***

Christianity and Islam recognize the specific place and role of revelation and reason in their belief systems. They have however different perspectives as to the interconnectedness of the cognitive and transcendental dimensions of faith. God's revelation is perceived by Islam as absolute. Muslims believe that the Qur'an is literally the word of God and as such is immutable. This is not the way many Christians consider the Bible, which contains the revelation of God. Being written by divinely inspired people the Bible needs interpretation. These quiet different perceptions as to the nature and the scope of infallibility of these two sacred books have concrete implications on almost all aspects of the life and practice of these faiths.

The ethos of Islamic thought, action and life is theological. Islam has even, in a sense, "theologized" reason and has not developed a rationalistic tradition⁶. Rationality is at the heart of the ethos of Christianity. Even spirituality and mysticism have given way to rationality, especially in Western Christianity.

⁶ H. Bashiriyeh, "A Critical Examination of Reason in Western and Islamic philosophies: The Limits of Dialogue between Islam and the West", *Dialogue*, Spring 2001 N. 3, pp. 89-90.

Both rationalization and de-rationalization of faith is full of dangers. Calling into question the certitude of truth may threaten the foundation of religion. Governing human life by transcendental truth claims may question the credibility and relevance of religion. Reason has a role in the human search for truth. But when reason overwhelms the faith, then reason becomes an instrument of evil. When the imperatives of faith are considered beyond the purview of rational discourse, then faith becomes exposed to the ambiguities and polarizations of the world.

Christianity and Islam hold that their beliefs are not simply human constructs, but that they have a transcendent source. They believe that reason and faith are partners rather than rivals. Criticizing the "exaggerated rationalism" and "extreme fideism", the papal encyclical *Fides et Ratio* (2001) has emphasized the necessity of reconciliation between faith and reason. In a recent open letter to the Pope a group of Muslim scholars stated that "there are two extremes which the Islamic intellectual tradition has generally managed to avoid: one is to make the analytical mind the ultimate arbiter of truth and the other is to deny the power of human understanding to address ultimate questions"⁷. The relation of faith and reason is a critical area of deeper investigation.

b) *Islamic law (Shariah) and human rights*

Majority-minority relations either in a predominantly Muslim or Christian country raises basic concerns and questions.

The Islamic society is governed by Islamic law (*Shariah*), which through rules, laws, values, criteria, ethics, worship and practices outlines the way of life that Muslims are supposed to follow individually and collectively. *Shariah* also includes a system of jurisprudence (*fiqh*). *Shariah* is considered by Christians to be a system of governance, which creates socio-political marginalization and threatens religious freedom. Originally meant to safeguard the rights of Christians in a country of Muslim majority, *Dhimmi* too is perceived by Christians as denoting a category of second-class citizenship.

Perception and implementation of Islamic law has different connotations and implications in Muslim countries. When *dhimmi* was introduced the concept of

⁷ <http://www.ammanmessage.com>

citizenship did not exist. Today, there is a new system of governance based on citizenship. For some Muslims the problem is that citizenship is not applied and respected as ensuring equality between people belonging to the same country. The discriminatory policies at home of some countries, such as Turkey, contradict their teachings of tolerance abroad⁸. Some Muslim countries are democratic in form but dictatorial in essence and Muslims and Christians are equally affected by it.

According to many Christian scholars, contradiction between *Shariah* and basic human rights is evident⁹: hence, this matter needs in-depth discussion. There are voices in Islam that emphasize the necessity of accommodating the basic principles of human rights to the Muslim context. For example, the recent open letter of Muslim scholars stressed the importance of "freedom of religion". This ambiguity and fear need to be addressed by Muslim leaders¹⁰.

In the West, because they believe that many public laws are incompatible with Sharia law, Muslim communities feel isolated. For Muslims the culture of being a minority is a new reality. Because *Sharia* is a law to rule Muslims wherever they are a majority, in lands where they are a minority, a new understanding of *Sharia* is necessary. Recently, some voices have also raised the question of establishing a special jurisprudence for Muslim communities in order to seek that new understanding. In order to ensure a just basis for a pluralist society as well as to enhance integration and encourage participation in Europe, some believe that plurality of legal systems may be applied within one society having at the same time one basic law to all.

⁸ In 1993 the UN declared the "International Declaration of Minority Rights" emphasizing that the protection of minority rights in a country is no longer an internal affair but a matter of international concern. In Muslim world this was considered a sort of pretext for the Western powers to interfere in the internal affairs of a Muslim country.

⁹ In 1948 when the UN proclaimed the International Declaration of Human Rights and in 1989 the International Declaration of Children's Rights, several Muslim countries expressed their reservation in respect to some articles considering them conflicting with Islamic Sharia.

¹⁰ M.M. Ayoub, "Islam and Pluralism", *Dialogue*, spring 2001, N.3, p. 107. These issues have been treated by Muslim and Christian scholars within the framework of a consultation organized by WCC's office on Interreligious Relations in 1995. See T. Mitri (ed.), *Religion, Law and Society*, Geneva, 1995.

These are complex issues, which require on-going discussion. Reciprocity will significantly help Christians and Muslims to seek consensus on conflictive issues, to reconcile dilemmas and to build community. Our common humanity, common history and destiny will remain mere concepts if they are not supported by the crucial urgency of living together as community. Often religion fails to provide shared values than human rights and hampers participation and integration. Therefore, without jeopardizing the specificity and integrity of religious belief systems, promoting a culture of human rights is a vital necessity and a common responsibility, and must be considered one of foci of Christian-Muslim dialogue¹¹.

c) *Responding to secularism*

Christianity and Islam affirm that human life cannot be understood without reference to the Transcendence, but they respond to this common challenge differently. Secularism is generally understood by many Muslims as anti-religious, a source of evil and rejection of God. Generally Christians avoid making a sharp dichotomy between secularization and Christianity and opt for a critical dialogue. Muslims resist secularism and Christians resist political Islam as an ideology and a system of governance. Both faiths affirm that governance must be sustained by ethical values.

Islam does not make a separation between temporal power and religious power. According to Islam, temporal authority needs religious legitimacy. For Christians a religious state cannot function democratically in a plural society, and separation of religion from state does not mean separation of religion from society. In the West religion is perceived as a private affair; while in Islam all aspects of human life are conditioned by religion. Western secularism stresses the individualistic understanding of a human being, a view that is challenged by Islam.

The reaction of the Muslim world to secularism has been articulated in different ways: self-isolation to protect religious identity; going-back to the original roots of Islam

¹¹ Dr. Muhammad Sammak, a prominent Muslim scholar with a rich experience in Christian-Muslim dialogue, in a recent lecture on "Human Dignity: An Islamic Perspective", says: "Human rights and minority rights pose fundamental challenges that face the normalization of relations between Islam and the West during the post-Cold War period" (See <http://www.almustaqbal.com.lb>).

(radicalism); and the Islamic revival movement. Expressed in different forms, this movement aims to apply *Shariah* law, develop a socio-economic and political system based on *Shariah* law, defend Muslim identity according to Islamic principles and promote Islamic moral and spiritual values¹². There are significant differences among Muslims in respect to perception, methodology and implementation of these objectives. For some, progress and modernity are considered to be criteria for being a moderate Muslim. However, openness, shown particularly by some oil-rich Muslim countries, are not appreciated by conservative circles. There is also a growing trend in Islam to be receptive to modernity, but with an Islamic core.

In the West, the aggressive growth of secularism and uncritical openness to secular values have generated among Christians a forceful "return" of religion to public life as well as the emergence of spiritual-charismatic movements, some of them with syncretistic tendencies.

The clash between the sacred and secular, the spiritual and material and Theocentric and anthropocentric approaches is identifiable in many aspects and spheres of society life. This concern is commonly shared by Christianity and Islam. Therefore, responding to secularism in a more effective way must occupy a prominent place on the agenda of Christian-Muslim dialogue.

d) *Mission: conversion, witness or co-habitation ?*

Christianity and Islam are both missionary religions; they have an eschatological vision and claims for absolute truth and universality. Although missionary outreach is an essential dimension of Islam, it leaves the space to coexist with others within the framework of *dhimmi*. Christianity considers mission as *Missio Dei*; hence, it cannot surrender its missionary vocation and compromise on this fundamental affirmation of Christian faith. These competitive claims may lead to confrontation if they are not discussed seriously and seen in the right perspective.

We have always affirmed that plurality of religious traditions is "both the result of the manifold ways in which God has related to peoples and nations, as well as a

¹² W. Saif, "Human Rights and Islamic Revivalism" in *Religion, Law and Society*, pp 121-122.

manifestation of the richness and diversity of human response to God's gracious gift"¹³. Respecting others' identity, claims and conviction does not mean compromising our own. Exclusive claims and uncompromising attitudes must not be opposed with confrontational spirit. We should approach this extremely sensitive issue proactively.

Both religions have painful memories in this respect. Christianity has always made clear the distinction between witness and proselytism. Witness to the Christ-event is the essential vocation of a Christian under all circumstances. We have also stated on many occasions that Christ may encounter us in the faith of our neighbor and that the Holy Spirit may lead us to discern the divine presence in the faith of others. We have recognized that Christ may use us to transform the other. He may also use the other to teach and transform us¹⁴. Therefore, how can we develop a Logos-centered, not church-centered, theology of mission that embraces the 'other' without jeopardizing the "otherness" of the other? I believe that both faiths can engage in a creative interaction on the basis of their common affirmation that mission belongs to God, and that their intention is neither Christianization nor Islamization but transformation of the world and humanisation of humanity.

FROM CO-EXISTING TO LIVING TOGETHER

In my judgment, living together in community must take the center stage of Christian-Muslim dialogue. Both faiths have common values and resources that promote life-in-community. The solid foundation of such a community is laid in a local context. Indeed, Christians and Muslims can build a shared life that encompasses and transcends differences at the local level:

a) *By moving from isolation to integration*

A community defines its self-understanding either in relation or in opposition to the other. Religion is regarded as an enemy of integration since its value system is uncompromising. Often religious identity generates isolation and threatens national unity.

¹³ "*Religious Plurality and Christian Self-understanding*," (a study document of WCC) p. 4.

¹⁴ See "*Religious Plurality*"; Aram I, *For a Church*, pp. 95-121. Cf. also the conferences of the Commission of World Mission and Evangelism (CWME).

In the globalized world the other¹⁵ is no more a distant or undisclosed reality; he or she is our neighbour. Unconditional love of neighbour and hospitality towards the stranger are essential features of the two faiths (Mark, 12: 29-31; Quran 3rd Sura)¹⁶. We must therefore build a quality of relationship with our neighbour that enhances a deeper and holistic self-understanding and a greater understanding of the other, and which leads us from estrangement to a common life together.

A society is composed of multiple identities. Co-existence of these identities remains a potential source of conflict when they are not integrated into a coherent whole. Community building presupposes a quality of integration that provides equal opportunity, ensures diversity and enhances mutual acceptance. Ethnic, political and cultural factors and considerations establish demarcation lines; religions with their common values must become bridges of interaction. A harmonious interaction between religious identity and national loyalty is crucial. This is the most effective way of arriving at integration.

b) *By moving from exclusion to participation*

When minorities are considered as outsiders, there is no community. When in a society there is a center and a periphery, there is no community. When there is lack of mutual trust, there is no community. Rejection leads to isolation and isolation breeds hate and violence. Alienation or marginalization leads to radicalization. Community means full participation; it means inter-connectedness and inter-dependence, underpinned by mutual understanding and trust.

Religion protects identity and promotes security. In situations where identity is threatened and participation denied, religious loyalties are enforced. Such situations

¹⁵ The concept of "other" is crucial in inter-religious dialogue. The otherness of the other is a source of enrichment. The more we take a distance from ourselves and discover the other, the more we discover ourselves. To identify commonalities in respect to the concept of "other", it is worth reading the following Jewish, Christian and Muslim perspectives: J. Sacks, *The Dignity of Difference: How to Avoid the Clash of Civilizations*, London, 2002; Aram I, *For a Church*, pp. 108-112, 253-285; M. Sammak, "Human Dignity".

¹⁶ The recent letter of Muslim scholars, "A Common Word Between Us and You" has emphasized the crucial importance of neighbourhood as a basic value. The idea of hospitality has been spelled out as a common value in "Religious Plurality".

develop insecurity, isolation and hate. Hence, full and active participation of all members of a society, irrespective of their color or religion, in all aspects of society life, including decision-making, must be ensured. Where there is participation, values interact and identities are integrated to build a community of reconciled diversities.

c) *By moving from reaction to interaction*

Religions used to define and protect themselves by reacting to the other. The interdependent world imposes new paradigms, new criteria of self-understanding. Indeed, a genuine self-understanding implies engaging in creative dialogue with the other, and moving from a self-centered to an interactive self-understanding. Identity based on exclusive claims threatens the other and generates alienation. Identity defined exclusively in religious terms becomes a source of tension. Openness, dialogue and interaction do not create vulnerability; rather, they test the credibility and relevance of identity, and help community building.

We must create open spaces where dynamic interaction may take place. Creative interaction of perspectives, concerns and expectations will undoubtedly challenge and help us to move towards building a common life together on solid ground. We must endeavour together with our Muslim neighbors to consolidate our commonalties, which ensure wholeness and integrity, and preserve our diversities, which enrich community.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

The ecumenical movement has always emphasized the "urgency" of dialogue¹⁷. The present world, in which walls are destroyed, distances are reduced and the other has become neighbor, has created a new quality and form of dialogue: dialogue of life. We are all engaged, in one way or another, in dialogue of life. The ecumenical movement has also emphasized the "uniqueness" of Christian-Muslim dialogue. This is true for historical, theological and geo-political reasons. Wrestling with ontological and metaphysical questions is not a priority for Christian-Muslim dialogue. In a world

¹⁷ *Striving Together in Dialogue: A Muslim-Christian Call to Reflection and Action*, Geneva, 2001, pp. 2, 13

marked by confrontation and polarization, the top and urgent priority is how we should live together as a community.

We should not impose our values on each other; we must strengthen our common values, respect our differences and together strive for a common life in community. Unrealistic expectations and aggressive reactions, unrespectful attitudes and arrogant behaviour will only produce alienation and distrust. Learning from each other and sharing our concerns will help us to grow together towards a harmonious life together¹⁸.

In my response to the Islamic letter of "A Common Word Between Us and You", I said: "Relationship, reciprocity and accountability build community. Sharing life together implies building community. Human beings cannot live without community. As an expression of love towards God and towards neighbor, community building has been central to both Muslim and Christian teachings and ways of life. We firmly believe, as we have stated on different occasions in ecumenical meetings, that a strong commitment to living together would help us to destroy the walls of prejudice, reassert that each religion has integrity, and generate mutual accountability and common responsibility". I believe that "we must accept and respect the way we are, by suspending our desire to emphasize differences and committing ourselves to becoming communities of living together with the fear of God and not with the fear of one another"¹⁹.

In conclusion, I want to make a few suggestions for the future work of WCC.

1.- Religious plurality and Christian self-understanding must remain a major item on the agenda of the ecumenical movement. Issues related to this area need to be tackled with interdisciplinary in approach and holistic in perspective. Insights and experiences

¹⁸ The growing openness of the Muslim world towards West is, indeed, a positive step forward. In this context the initiatives taken by the Muslim countries of the Middle East and Asia must be warmly welcomed. In this regard I want to make three observations: 1) These initiatives need to be more organized in terms of agenda, methodology and representation. 2) They must not become one-time event but a continuous process with a clear focus and objective. 3) A particular attention need to be given to the churches in the Middle East because of their centuries of co-existence with Islam.

¹⁹ <http://www.acommonword.com>

gained through the studies of "Gospel and Culture" and "Christian Anthropology" must be taken into consideration in this process.

2.- The ecumenical movement has a rich history of Christian-Muslim dialogue. A critical evaluation of the Christian-Muslim common journey is imperative at this time, as we seek new ways of living and working together in a new world context.

3.- The agenda of Christian-Muslim dialogue must be more focused, touching issues that pertain to the life of people. The concepts of "broader community" and "holistic mission", as well as "global ethics" based on shared values are critical areas which require deeper scrutiny and further discussion. In this context we must make us of the rich debate that Faith and Order and CWME had in the last two decades.

4.- Finally, the process that the WCC started with the Critical Moment Conference (2005) and the Christian-Muslim Conference (2002) must continue with renewed pace. As a global ecumenical fellowship, the World Council of Churches is called to play a leading role in Christian-Muslim dialogue, engaging in working relationship with Muslim Centres and Institutions, which enjoy a high degree of representation.

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