

Christian-Muslim Dialogue: Goals and Obstacles

Mahmoud Ayoub

Temple University

Philadelphia, Pennsylvania

Background

Christianity may have come to Arabia with St. Paul when he retired to the desert east of the Jordan River for several mysterious years. From the Syrian Desert, Christianity was carried into South Arabia, perhaps by wandering monks, where it played a significant role in the rise of a rich civilization. From there, Christianity came to Northern Arabia, where it helped prepare the moral and spiritual grounds for Islam.

From its inception, Islam grew in an environment permeated with Eastern Christian spiritual and moral values. It is likely that it was to this spiritual heritage of Eastern Christianity that the Prophet Muhammad referred when he declared: "I sense the breath of the All-merciful (*nafas al-rabman*) from the Yaman." The breath of the All-merciful is the divine spirit of holiness which Jesus manifested as the victorious savior over demonic powers. Thus, the Christianity that the Qurʾān extols is not the official Christianity of Rome and Byzantium with its elaborate theology, but the popular piety of desert monks who carried on the work of healing and purification that Christ began during his earthly sojourn.

The Qurʾān speaks tenderly of the spirituality of the humble monks and learned priests of the Christians, "... for there are among them monks and learned priests, and they are not proud." (Q. 5:82). The Qurʾānic passage just cited goes on to make two significant assertions, which can still serve as a good motivation for constructive dialogue between the two faith communities. The first is that the Christians are the nearest people in amity to the Muslims. The second is that Christian monks and learned priests recognize the truth when they hear it and shed tears of humble gratitude for God's guidance. Furthermore, like the people of faith among the Muslims, these humble monks and learned priests covet God's grace and pray that they be accounted among the witnesses to God's oneness and guidance to the truth. Therefore, dialogue between them ought to be a dynamic and creative engagement among friends,

not enemies, to which the Qurʾān (3:64) invites the people of the Book. Even when the Qurʾān reproaches the Christians for their deification of Jesus, it considers this to be extremism (*ghuluww*) in their religion, rather than outright *kufr*, or rejection of faith. It then affirms, as the Christians do, the absolute truth that “God is One.” (Q. 4:171).

There is, however, another side to this positive Qurʾānic view of the Christians and particularly with regard to their status in the Islamic state. The Qurʾān is not only a book of moral and pious precepts, but is also the primary source of the sacred law (*shariʿah*) of God, which must guide the Muslim ummah and regulate its relations to other faith communities. The Qurʾān did not legislate the *jizyah* pole tax for the people of the book in return for protection or exemption from military service alone, nor was it simply meant to buy Jewish and Christian subjects security and safe conduct in *dar al-islam*, as many Muslims have apologetically argued. Rather it was to humble them because of their lack of faith in God, failure to follow the true religion and failure to consider unlawful what God and His Messenger had made unlawful. Either the veracity of these accusations must be deemed impossible for anyone but God alone to judge, or the verse is meant to punish the people of the Book only because they refuse to embrace Islam.

I believe that this difficult verse of the Qurʾān (9:29) presents an ideal of faith and piety that only God can judge. But on a practical level, it seeks to regulate the socio-political and economic relations of Jewish and Christian subjects to the Islamic state. This is the reason why the *jizyah* law that this verse legislates was for a long time legally considered and applied by Muslim jurists and rulers alike, with little attention to its moral and theological implications. Since, however, the verse in question cannot be implemented in contemporary Muslim nation states, where citizenship rather than religious affiliation is supposed to determine the equal rights and responsibilities of all citizens, it has been employed as an effective anti-Christian polemical tool by Islamist ideologues. Be that as it may, the language of this verse rendered the Qurʾānic attitude to the people of the Book, and particularly the Christians, an ambivalent one, to say the least. This set the stage for an even greater ambivalence in subsequent Muslim history, and hence to the conflicts and hostilities that have tainted Christian-Muslim relations forever after.

Immediate and Long-Term Goals

Christianity and Islam are both universal faiths meant not for any particular race or ethnicity, but for all of humanity. This important principle encapsulates the goals and opportunities for constructive dialogue as well as the obstacles that make it difficult, if not virtually impossible to achieve. Both traditions recognize God’s love for all of humankind and His providential

acts in human history, but both claim to be God's final message of salvation and eternal bliss for the world. Thus, in spite of the call for tolerance and respect towards the people of the Book, which the Qur'ān frequently makes, Muslims have generally condemned Christians as polytheists. Since Islam came after Christianity and challenged some of its fundamental doctrines, Christians have likewise often condemned Islam as a religion inspired by the devil and Muslims as barbaric people without any moral or spiritual values.

The most urgent goal toward which both communities ought to strive is therefore the mutual acceptance of the legitimacy and authenticity of the religious tradition of the other as a divinely inspired faith. This fundamental requirement for honest and constructive dialogue remains an ideal hope, not a reality. This is because the most that Muslim-Christian dialogue has so far been able to achieve is the formal recognition of the common Abrahamic ancestry of the two faiths, and hence their historical and theological kinship. This is not to deny the immense significance of this recognition as a positive step towards a true existential acceptance of the faith of the other, but more is needed if dialogue is to progress beyond mere formal courtesy or polite indifference.

Despite its urgency, the need for mutual recognition and acceptance is a long-term goal which should always guide our efforts towards fruitful spiritual, moral, theological and social dialogue. Mutual acceptance must not stop at recognizing, and even accepting, the existence of the other as a fellow human being and a good neighbor. Rather, Muslims and Christians must accept each other as friends and partners in the quest for social and political justice, theological harmony and spiritual progress on the way to God, who is their ultimate goal.

This noble effort demands the genuine and sincere respect of the faith of the other, including their beliefs, ethical principles, social values and political aspirations. This ought to be the second goal of Christian-Muslim dialogue. Within this framework of mutual respect and acceptance, interreligious dialogue can develop into a genuine and creative intercultural dialogue. In fact, without meaningful intercultural dialogue, mutual understanding and respect are not possible.

A third goal is the acceptance by both Christians and Muslims of the other as an equal partner — and not an opponent — in dialogue. This equality should be equality in humanity and dignity, and equality in the claim for religious authenticity. In all its aspects, this implies the admission by the faithful of both communities that both Christianity and Islam have in themselves the moral and spiritual resources to guide their followers to the way of salvation.

Christ taught us all to seek the truth, and that the truth shall set us free. The Qurʾān teaches that the truth is God. Therefore, freedom in the truth is freedom in God, which is the freedom of faith. Within this freedom in God, Muslims and Christians can and should freely share their faith experiences with one another, but without making this an occasion for *daʿwah* or mission.

Another important goal is to let the two traditions speak for themselves, that is to represent themselves in dialogue. This means for Christians and Muslims not to engage in dialogical activities on the basis of what they think they know or understand of what the religion of the other is all about. In other words, they should not remake the other in their own image, as a pre-condition for acceptance. Rather, they should listen and learn before they venture into the sacred precincts of each other's faith.

More practically speaking, Muslims must not seek to explain Christianity solely on the basis of what the Qurʾān and subsequent Islamic tradition have said about it, but should seek to understand Christianity from its own sources and on its own terms. Similarly, Christians must not interpret Islam, especially its sacred scripture, in accordance with their own understanding of the divine economy of salvation, however enlightened and universally attractive such a divine schema may be, but should take seriously the Islamic worldview and its divine plan for the attainment of forgiveness, salvation and bliss in the hereafter.

A final goal is to strive for absolute fairness and objectivity in drawing any comparisons between the two traditions. Several guidelines must be strictly observed in this regard. The first is that the ideals of the two traditions should be compared with ideals and the realities with realities. Secondly, all attempts at scoring points for one tradition over the other by contrasting the good things in it with the bad things in the other must be strictly avoided. Rather, the good should be compared with the good and the bad with the bad. Conversely, the misbehavior of the followers of one tradition at any given point of its history must not be covered up or excused by wrongly imputing similar behavior to the followers of the other. Nor should such misbehavior be dismissed or excused on the grounds of human sinfulness or frailty.

Thirdly, the scriptures or traditions of one religion should not be used as criteria to judge the truth or errors of the other. Islam and Christianity have their distinct worldviews which must guide and inform Muslim-Christian dialogue on all levels.

Types of Dialogue

Christianity and Islam are two world religions whose adherents comprise over half of the world's population. While the *oikomene*, or Christian realm, and *dar al-islam*, Muslim realm, were limited historically to specific

geographical areas of the world, both houses have geographically and politically long since disappeared. Now the sphere or abode of Islam is the homes and hearts of the people of the ummah. Similarly, the house of the Christian faith is the church, the hearts and minds of its members.

Millions of Muslims are now citizens of Western Christian countries and many Muslim countries have an equal number of Christian citizens. In the West in particular, Islam is no longer the religion of strangers, but the religion of next-door neighbors. Muslims share with Christians the neighborhood, school, workplace, hospital ward and even burial ground. They share all the moral and social problems as well as the amenities of modern urban living. They also share the sacred space of their houses of worship — the churches and mosques, where meaningful and sustained dialogue is nurtured.

The most concrete, widespread and basic type of dialogue is the dialogue of life. It is the dialogue of concerned neighbors with their adjacent churches and mosques, who work together and live on the same street. This type of dialogue is concerned with issues of social justice, pollution problems, teenage children in mixed public schools with their problems of sex and drugs and a host of other issues. Here the common Abrahamic prophetic moral and spiritual heritage can help the children of all three families of Abraham to come together to face the problems of the modern world. Through their synagogues, churches and mosques they should strive together for the common good of society.

The dialogue of life is the active concern of citizens with the problems of life together in one free and democratic country. One of the most important changes in the Muslim ummah is the rise of the nation-state. The modern state has both strengthened the bond of faith and also fragmented the ummah. Thanks to the nation-state model, the ummah can now, more than ever before, transcend all ethnic, cultural, geographical and national boundaries. Moreover, where Muslims live as minorities in developed Western countries, they are far more free to experiment with new ideas and actions than their confreres in their countries of origin. Thus, they can help the ummah find its rightful place in the modern world.

A second type of dialogue is the dialogue of beliefs, theological doctrines and philosophical ideas. This type tends to be restricted to the academy. It is often technical and abstract. For these and other reasons, it is often avoided. It is nonetheless vitally important, as it engages the minds and hearts of the people of faith of both traditions in their common search for the truth.

Another type of dialogue may be euphemistically called the dialogue of witnessing to one's faith. It, however, often becomes an invitation to conversion through methods of *da'wah* and mission. Here the name dialogue

is used to cover up a non-dialogical agenda. However well-intentioned participants in such dialogue may be, their ultimate aim is not to understand and accept the other, but to absorb and assimilate them.

A final type is what I wish to call the dialogue of faith. It uses the ideas and methods of the second type, but on a deeper and more personal level. Its aim is to deepen the faith of Muslim and Christian women and men by sharing the personal faith of the other. The ultimate purpose of this dialogue is to create a fellowship of faith among the followers of Islam and Christianity. This goal may be achieved by sharing one's faith with the other through worship, spiritual exercises and the existential struggle in God. The Qur'ān promises those who strive in God that He will guide them to His ways. His ways are the "ways of peace." (Q. 29:69 and Q. 5:16)

Insurmountable Obstacles?

It was observed above that all that Muslim-Christian dialogue has so far achieved is the recognition of the Abrahamic roots of the faith of the two communities. This recognition has, since the last quarter of the twentieth century, led to genuine appreciation of the commitment of Muslims to their faith by many liberal Christians and equal admiration of Christian charity and openness by liberal Muslims. It may be thus argued that Christians have come to accept Muslims as people of faith, but are not so far able to accept Islam as an authentic post-Christian religious tradition. Muslims have conversely from the beginning accepted Christianity as a revealed faith, but have been unable to accept the Christians and their faith in the triune God, the Church as a source of guidance and the books of the New Testament as authentic scriptures.

Here the problem lies in our inability to accept each other's faiths on their own terms. Muslims have acknowledged an Islamized Christianity and Christians have often Christianized Islam. Thus, with all good intentions, both communities have sought to negate, or at least neutralize the individuality and integrity of the faith of the other in order to find room for it in their own tradition and worldview.

The main obstacle to true Christian-Muslim dialogue on both sides is, I believe, their unwillingness to truly admit that God's love and providence extend equally to all human beings, regardless of religious identity. This is tantamount to denying that God could and in fact did reveal His will in Hebrew, Greek, Arabic, and in every sacred language of the world. Therefore, the ultimate goal of all interfaith dialogue ought to be the ability of all women and men of faith to listen to and obey the voice of God as it speaks to all communities through their own faith-traditions and humbly listen to the same voice speaking to each individual through her own faith-tradition.

To everyone of you We have appointed a way and a course to follow, for had God so willed, He would have made you all one single community. Rather He would test you by means of that which He had bestowed upon you, who of you is of better deeds. Vie therefore with one another in works of righteousness. For, to God shall be your return and He will inform you of all that in which you had differed. (Q. 5:48)

Beloved, we are God's children now; it does not yet appear what we shall be, but we know that when he appears we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is. (1 John 3: 2)