

Christian-Muslim Relations in North America: An Activist's Perspective

Salam al-Mariati

*Executive Director of the Muslim Public Affairs Council
Los Angeles, California*

Whereas Black-White relations were of great importance in influencing the shape of American politics in the 19th and 20th centuries, Muslim-Christian relations may well dictate discourse in many American arenas in the 21st century and beyond. Muslim-Christian dialogue, therefore, will be more critical than ever. Seeking to reinforce areas of commonality, the dialogue can be based on the common belief in the One God, in one humanity and in the shared ethical values of mercy, compassion and justice. The devil, both literal and metaphorical, is in the details, and failure of dialogue will mean failure in the fronts of both religion and politics.

The status of Muslims in America is interdependent with the status of Christians in the Muslim world. Similarly, the image of Islam in America is interdependent with the image of America in the Muslim world. While movements for nationalism, pseudo-patriotism and fundamentalism abound, it is the moderate voices of both worlds (the West and Muslim), and both religions, that will be the bridge of interdependence and mutual understanding. Dialogue tends to spiral down to the encapsulation of our social fears, contradictions, and biases, on the one hand, or to float in the clouds of platitudinous mutual complements on the other. We must find a better way to proceed.

Dialogue, therefore, will have to go beyond the debate about which view and which history is more accurate to a determination of which understanding will be of mutual benefit and will promote our commonly-grounded divine ethical values. As an example, I am asked so many hostile questions about Islam, even when I speak in churches. So many times I am asked about the evils of Wahabbism and why my organization is not more clearly condemning it. I am also asked why the oppression of women is a persistent problem and

seemingly endemic to my faith, why jihad is (apparently) such a dominant theme in Islam, and why we Muslims did not more actively condemn 9/11. In other words, I receive questions that no answer will satisfy, remarks put in question form but clearly intended as critical and even hostile comments.

Worse yet, the questions raise a more troubling problem — they are all basically inaccurate and make accusations against Muslims that have little grounding in reality. Our organization, the Muslim Public Affairs Council (MPAC), for example, publicly rejected Wahhabism before 9/11, has never accepted money from foreign governments, and has repeatedly criticized Muslim leaders and Muslim governments for the suffering of women and religious minorities in the name of Islam. MPAC has set out to disseminate accurate information about Islam and Muslims in order for Muslims to define themselves rather than be defined by misconception. MPAC has been involved in interfaith coalitions to deal with a variety of peace and justice issues, such as economic justice and opposition to war. MPAC has also worked with public officials and the media to include an American Muslim perspective so that accurate depictions of the Muslim community are offered to help address perplexing problems such as counter-terrorism, international relations and religious freedom. We believe that the kind of collective actions taken by organizations such as ours when they function as part of interfaith groups and coalitions provide one important way in which interfaith conversation and cooperation in this country can proceed.

Such work is not always easy, however, and can often reflect the complexities of interfaith issues involving public policy. Let me illustrate with some practical examples. The American Muslim community has viewed the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) with apprehension: the USCIRF is considered an instrument to serve a neo-conservative, religious right agenda. When the priorities are put on identifying concerns related to Muslim nations such as Sudan, Pakistan and Saudi Arabia, for example, and no issue is raised over what we see as very problematic conduct in places like Israel, India, the Balkans or Russia, then it seems that the USCIRF has an agenda that is not in the interest of pure religious freedom or genuine American interests.

In another case, the Egyptian Coptic Church admonished the USCIRF and zealous proponents of religious freedom for Egyptian Copts on several occasions. They warned that turning their plight in Egypt into a Christian-Muslim conflict would only inflame the situation. It would be more effective, the Church said, to deal with the problem of extremism in Egypt and determine a means to end violence that is harming all Egyptians. Their admonishment, unfortunately, went unheeded by the groups with close associations to members of the USCIRF and American image deteriorated even

further in Egypt. Clearly interfaith conversation and interaction in such highly politicized circumstances can easily lead to heightened misunderstandings, disappointments and frustration.

The religious politics of the Christian right-wing in America has often made Christian-Muslim understanding extremely difficult. Muslims in America are deeply pained when Franklin Graham, who offers Easter services every year to the Pentagon, defames Islam and its Prophet, when General Boykin lectures about his god defeating the god of Somali warlords, and Pat Robertson continuously equates Muslims with devil-worshipping, to name only a few Christian leaders who have spoken in a derogatory way about the religion of Islam. Such rhetoric and its association with the Bush Administration is placing the United States in a precarious position with respect to both national security and global standing.

The work of Christian missionaries who are determined to convert Muslims to Christianity today is increasingly encouraged by many conservative denominations and is also increasingly suspect by the host cultures to which they want to come. When missionaries are attacked in the Arab or Muslim worlds, then we, Muslim and Christian alike, must rethink the policies and the language emanating from religious arms of the U.S. government to determine new approaches that take any and all Americans out of harms way. Here is yet another area in which we need to see if the USCIRF is facilitating or impeding the goals of religious freedom.

Other Christian denominations and organizations, it must be said, have had more positive experiences with the American Muslim community. The Episcopal Church, the United Methodist Church, the National Council of Churches of Christ, the Interfaith Alliance, and the Catholic Church have engaged in constructive, albeit sometimes fractured, programs for the better understanding of the Islamic faith and the benefit of Muslim-Christian relations. The Catholic Church tends to put more specific focus on theological engagement rather than on working together on matters of social justice, but even then there is positive outcome in the interaction between Muslims and Catholics that serves to humanize both sides in this era of dehumanization by extremists.

I believe that the time has come for Muslims and Christians to get beyond the barriers to interfaith understanding that have been created by historic conflicts, and see the possibilities and opportunities for the kind of dialogue that will foster our cooperation in working together on contemporary problems, both here and abroad. It's also time to utilize our resources here in America to build Christian-Muslim relations for the betterment of our country and humanity.