

THE POSSIBILITY OF DIALOGUE WITH ISLAM TODAY

I wish first to thank Fr Aniedi Okure of the Africa Faith and Justice Network and Dr Stephen Schneck, Director of the Institute of Policy Research at Catholic University for their invitation to talk to you today about dialogue with Muslims. I should also mention that I have been able to come to Washington DC since it is the Spring Break at John Carroll University where I am a visiting fellow this year.

As attention is currently focused on the Islamic State and different manifestations of violence in some way connected with that newly-formed entity, I think it is necessary to explain that I am not a sociologist or political scientist. My own academic training was in theology, and then in Arabic and Islamics, with emphasis being put on Islam as a religion. I then moved out of academic life, being first involved in the general administration of the Society of Missionaries of Africa, to which I belong, and then in the work of the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue in the Vatican. If I ended my service of the Holy See as its representative in Egypt and to the League of Arab States, this was without any formal training as a diplomat. I hope nevertheless that my experience will be of some help in speaking to you about the possibility of dialogue with Muslims.

In this talk I really wish to emphasize three elements that may help in understanding the difficulties for dialogue with certain categories of Muslims. There is first the fundamental difference in the originating experience of Christianity and Islam. Secondly there is the attraction of the Caliphate. Thirdly the understanding of Shari'a which, it is proposed, should govern society. After having considered these elements I shall come to the question of dialogue with Muslims.

A different foundational experience

Even when making abstraction of the distinctive beliefs of Christians and Muslims, it can be said that there is a great difference in the experience of Jesus and Muhammad, and thus in the foundational experience of these two religions. Both Jesus and Muhammad were called to give a message to the world, a message of conversion, and both gathered around them a group of disciples. Yet Jesus preached the Kingdom of God, a kingdom which was not of this world. His was an essentially religious message which, although it was designed to have an effect on people's behavior in this world, could be lived out within any political setting. Muhammad, for his part, preached a message which was to bring about a renewal in the Arabia of his time. His message too was essentially religious, the acknowledgement of the One God as against the prevalent polytheism, but it had a social dimension to it which was to bring about the formation of a new community bound not by blood ties or tribal loyalty, but by religion, the Umma. The Umma, perhaps more by accident than design, became at one and the same time a religious and a political community. Perhaps this needs to be explained further.

Monotheists could be found in Arabia prior to the rise of Islam. There were first of all Jewish settlements in different parts of the peninsula. There were also scattered Christians. Moreover trade provided contact with Christians on a wider scale. There would seem also to have been a monotheistic movement in Arabia, the *hanafiyya*, independent of both Jews and Christians. Muhammad brought a message in Arabic for the Arabs. He would seem to have expected that the Arabic-speaking Jews and Christians would accept his monotheistic message and join the new community. He did not want this community to be aligned either with the Jews, who were considered to be the allies of the Persian Sassanid Empire, or with the Christians, often assimilated to the Byzantines. The new religious community for Arabs, which was established in Medina but which considered the Ka'ba in Mecca as its fundamental shrine and point of reference, had to fight against the established power in Mecca in order to ensure its survival. As the leader of this community, Muhammad was at the same time, in Montgomery Watt's phrase, both a prophet and a statesman.

This is very different from Jesus who had no political role, and from the situation of his followers who likewise had no political ambitions. One could say that Christianity, at least until the time of Constantine, was in the nature of a religious opposition movement. It did not take up arms to fight for survival. So although Christianity was, as it were, taken over and used by political entities, in the first place by the Byzantines, and then afterwards by various monarchs and rulers, in essence it remains independent of any political power. Whereas Islam, from its very beginning as a separate community, has been both religious and political, and one would be tempted to say that striving to defend the community, if necessary by force of arms, is a natural component of the religion.

You will perhaps conclude that we have now reached the topic of *jihād*. A word of warning is necessary here. The term for fighting in the Qur'an is not *jihād* but *qitāl*. *Jihād* is found only three times as such in the Qur'an: Q 9:24 where we find an encouragement to "struggle in his way" i.e. in the way of God; Q 25:52 which says "So [Muhammad] do not give in to the disbelievers, but strive against them with it a great striving" (the 'it' being understood as referring to the Qur'an); and Q 60:1 "You who believe, do not take My enemies and yours as your allies...Not if you truly emigrated in order to strive for My cause and seek My good pleasure." In other words, *jihād* does not of itself mean fighting, but make an effort for God and the community, which may mean preaching the truth according to the Qur'an, or giving of one's wealth on behalf of the cause. As has been said: "not all war is jihad, and not all jihad is war"¹

The first Islamic wars were defensive, even when they took on the aspect of offense. Raiding of Meccan caravans could be considered necessary to provide resources for a community that was now excluded from the caravan trade. Resistance to the Meccan forces was normal and lasted until the Islamic community, under Muhammad, gained control of Mecca. Some of the Arab

¹ Caner Dagli, 'Jihad and the Islamic Law of War', in Prince Ghazi bin Muhammad et al. (eds), *War and Peace in Islam. The Uses and Abuses of Jihad*, Cambridge, The Islamic Texts Society, 2013, p.59.

tribes that had made alliances with Muhammad and so had become part of the Umma, felt that their allegiance to this new body was terminated when Muhammad died. The Muslim leaders, under the Caliph Abu Bakr, could not accept this, and waged against them, a war known as “the Wars of the *Ridda*, or Apostasy. This could also be recognized as a defensive war.

Jihad, in the sense of war, was engaged regularly against the neighboring Byzantines, but the wars of expansion of the Islamic community are not called jihad by Muslim historiographers, but the *Futuḥât*, or the opening up of new countries to Islam. Though the administration of the conquered lands was in Muslim hands, the population of these countries remained non-Islamic for varying periods of length.

There would seem to be within Islamic history a tendency to look back to its first period, that of the Rightly-Guided Caliphs, as the time of glory and true Islam. This has led to a number of revivalist movements. One could mention the Almoravids (*al-murâbiṭûn*) who established themselves among the Berbers near the Senegal River in the 11 Century C.E. Their leader, Ibn Tishfin, had discovered “true” Islam on pilgrimage to Mecca, had consolidated it through studies in Kairawan, and then imposed it in his home area and exported it to Andalusia, coming into conflict there with the Christians. This movement was succeeded by the Almohads (*al-muwahḥidûn*). The name is significant: they were proclaiming the strict worship of the One God, without any accretions. Their leader, Ibn Tumart (ca. 1080 – 1130), claimed to be the Mahdi, the guided one, who was bringing pure Islam. He was, we might say, preaching a reform of the reform.²

Though Islam was spread in Sub-Saharan West Africa mainly through trade, the Almoravids, characterized as “a militant Islamic movement in the southwestern Sahara”³, are credited with bringing about the conversion of the people of Ghana to Islam. Since the Muslims of Sub-Saharan Africa tended to combine the adopted religion of Islam with their traditional religious practices, jihads became a frequent occurrence. As has been said, “the dramatic point of no return in the development of Islamic militancy was when militants reintroduced the concept of *takfîr* by declaring as infidels those who had previously been considered Muslims”⁴. Mention could be made of the later jihads of Uthman dan Fodio (1755-1817), al-Hajj Umar Tal (1794-1864) and Samore Ture (ca. 1830-1900)⁵. Boko Haram could perhaps be considered of this ilk. It has been pointed out that most of the group’s leaders are from the Kanuri ethnic group. The Kanuri were the original inhabitants of Northern Nigeria, pushed into a corner by the Hausa and

² On these movements see Fred M. DONNER, “Muhammad and the Caliphate” in John L. ESPOSITO (ed.), *The Oxford History of Islam* (OHI), Oxford University Press, 1999, pp.49-52.

³ Cf. Nehemia LEVTZION, “Islam in Africa to 1800” in OHI, p.476.

⁴ *Ibid.* p.497.

⁵ For the first and for the preceding history of Islam in West Africa, see Nehemia LEVTZION, “Islam in Africa to 1800” in OHI pp.475-507. For these and also for the second two, see John Obert VOLL, “Foundations for Renewal and Reform” in OHI, pp.509-547, especially p.519 and pp. 541-3.

Fulani peoples. Boko Haram is an instrument being used in the struggle to regain their lost lands⁶.

A characteristic of these jihads or militant movements of the past is that they were localized, and so, and one would hope that this will apply also to Boko Haram, their influence was limited both in space and time. There is another movement for “pure Islam” which has had a more lasting effect, namely the Wahhabi movement. The name is derived from its founder, Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab (1703-1791), who based his doctrine of strict Islam on the teaching of the Hanbali scholar, Ibn Taymiyya. The preaching of *tawhîd*, the proclamation of the oneness of God, included for him the abolition of Sufi practices, and all worship of saints⁷. Unlike the jihad movements already mentioned, the Wahhabi movement has survived until today through its association with the Saudi family in Arabia. Its influence is widely felt.

One could say that the Wahhabi movement has benefited by the phenomenon of globalization, particularly in the realm of communications. This is also true of other militant groups. Today’s jihadists are not necessarily limited to particular localities, but are internationally interconnected and remain in connection, for the scope both of propaganda and recruitment. So we see that new groups spring up which claim affiliation to already existing groups, such as al-Qaeda or the so-called Islamic State (IS).

The attraction of the Caliphate

The mention of IS brings me to the second point I wish to develop, namely the Caliphate, since this has been declared by spokespersons for the IS.

Muhammad’s death in 632 left a problem of succession, for apparently he had left no instructions on this matter. The Shi’a Muslims do not accept this view, for they hold that Muhammad had already appointed his nearest male relative, Ali, his cousin and the husband of his daughter Fatima, to be the Imam, the leader, of the community. The role of the Imam is to be the authentic guide of the community, as guardian and interpreter of the Holy Qur’an according to which the community is to live. For the Shi’a, each Imam designates his successor who must belong to the family of the Prophet, the *ahl al-bayt*. The largest group among the Shi’a, the Ithna’ashariyya, recognize a succession of twelve Imams. They believe that the Twelfth Imam went into occultation and will return at the end of time to bring about a reign of justice.

The Sunni Muslims, on the other hand, hold that Muhammad made no provision for his succession. Therefore, on the death of the Prophet, some of the prominent members of the Muslim community got together and chose Abu Bakr to be *khalîfa*, or representative of the Prophet, for the community. Succession should therefore normally be by election, or perhaps more accurately, following the choice made by an advisory council, a *shûra*.

⁶ Cf. David Blair, writing in *The Tablet* (31 January 2015), p.5.

⁷ See John O.VOLL, « Foundations for Renewal and Reform” in OHO, pp.517-518.

We could say, then, that from the death of Muhammad onwards, Islam has been divided. Only for a short time, when Ali was chosen as the fourth Caliph, was unity restored. This period was, however, very brief, since Ali's rule was contested from the beginning.

Yet during the period of the rapid expansion of Islam, under the second caliph, Umar, and the third caliph, Uthman, the caliphate acted as a focal point of unity. It provided "the sheltering aegis and a political identity that enabled the small Islamic community to survive, along with the political and social conditions within the empire that attracted new converts to the faith"⁸. It also allowed the development of a rich new culture which reached its apogee under the Abbasids in the Baghdad of the 9th Century C.E.

Yet by the mid 10th Century the Caliphate had lost its importance – the Fatimids having established a rival caliphate – with a unified government giving way to political regionalism. "By 1258, when the Mongols executed the last Abbasid caliph, the caliphate had effectively spent itself as a physical symbol of Islam's unity and identity.... More important [for Islamic unity] were a common set of religious beliefs, an elaborate system of religious law and practice, and other elements of Islamic culture"⁹.

The caliphate, however, did not disappear altogether. The Mamluks in Egypt appointed as caliph a survivor of the Abbasids. Perhaps because they were slave rulers, they sought greater legitimacy through this appointment. Subsequently the Ottoman Sultans who governed the whole of the Middle East considered themselves to be caliphs. So it can be said that "the caliphate retained its symbolic importance as the emblem of a Muslim world order"¹⁰.

This may explain why the abolition of the caliphate in 1924 by Mustafa Kemal Attaturk was considered a catastrophe by many Muslims across the world. This is why, almost immediately, a movement started for the restoration of the Caliphate, with a conference being held in Mecca in 1926, and another in Jerusalem in 1931, though without obtaining the desired result. In 1949 the World Muslim Congress was formed in Karachi to continue the search for Islamic unity, and this movement still exists.

In fact, the worldwide Umma had broken up or been broken up into nation States. There was no longer any single authority which could unite Muslims. In 1948 the League of Arab States was formed, but although the main hall of its headquarters in Cairo displays prominently a quotation from the Qur'an – "God does not change the condition of a people until they change it themselves" (Q 13:11) – the Arab League is not technically an Islamic body, and it includes among its member States Lebanon which at the time of joining was not a Muslim majority country. The Arab League does foster cooperation among the member States in different domains, economic, social and educational, but it has not brought about political unity. It tried its

⁸ Fred M. DONNER, "Muhammad and the Caliphate" in OHI, p.60.

⁹ *Ibid.* pp.60-61.

¹⁰ Ira M. LAPIDUS, "Sultanates and Gunpowder Empires", in OHI p.354.

best to negotiate between Sunni and Shi'a in Iraq after the overthrow of Saddam Husain, but with little support and less success. Its work is in fact stymied by the rivalry that exists between different States.

It was not until 1969, and the arson attack on Al-Aqsa Mosque in Jerusalem, that the Islamic World as such formed a new forum which could be considered in a way to have replaced the caliphate. The Organization of the Islamic Conference, now known as the Organization of Islamic Cooperation, brings together a wide variety of countries where Islam is prominent, but it too finds great difficulty in achieving consensus and so promoting unified action.

This brief survey has, I would hope, shown that the caliphate has not always been a dominant factor in the life of Islam, and certainly for centuries has not functioned as a unifying political power. Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi's pronouncement that he is the Caliph has been condemned by Muslim authorities. A leading scholar, al-Qaradawi, chairman of the International Union of Muslim Scholars, has stated that "the title of Caliph can only be given by the entire Muslim nation." One wonders how this could come about, but one can conclude that a UDC, the Unilateral Declaration of the Caliphate, quite naturally does not rally all Muslims, and indeed only serves to bring about a greater fragmentation in the World of Islam.

Understanding Shari'a

The final point I wish to discuss is the concept of Shari'a according to which the life of the Umma should be regulated, and which groups such as the Takfiri Jihadists and Boko Haram claim to be applying.

The sources of Shari'a are fourfold. There is first the Qur'an, considered by Muslims to be divine revelation. There are a certain number of legislative texts in the Qur'an, but full precision on different matters is not given. As a simple example one could point to the question of *ṣalât*, ritual prayer. It could be said that the obligation of prayer is laid down in the Qur'an, but the precision that there are five obligatory daily prayers is not clearly indicated.

The Qur'an therefore needs to be supplemented as a source of legislation. This supplementary source is provided by the *sunna*, the Tradition of the Prophet, whom the Qur'an presents as a model for the believers (Q 33:21). What the Prophet said or what the Prophet did or did not do becomes the norm for Muslims generally. All this is based on reports, *hadith-s*, going back to companions of the Prophet, and in some cases to A'isha or another of his wives. Now questions can arise concerning the reliability of these reports: are they authentic or have they been fabricated? So within Islam a whole science developed with regard to the *hadith-s*, separating the sound from the unsound, the strongly attested from the weak. Though there are whole collections of sound *hadith-s*, the best known being the Sahih of Bukhari and Muslim, even these are subject to scrutiny.

A further difficulty arises when the essential point of a hadith, the point of law which it is considered to present, is transferred from its 7th Century context to the present day. Can the

responsibility of the owner of a rampaging camel for damages it has brought about be applied to motor insurance? This brings us to the third source of the Shari'a, *qiyâs*, or analogy. This, of course implies a rational appreciation which can differ from one person to another, giving rise to a variety of opinions. An opinion, a *fatwa*, is an application of the law to a particular situation. The problem arises as to who is to give such an opinion. When self-proclaimed scholars are publishing pronouncements on all kinds of questions, a sort of legal chaos can be created. So in Muslim majority countries there is usually a designated Mufti to give official opinions. In Egypt, the Mufti has a whole staff with him in the Dar al-Ifta' to answer the multiplicity of requests for pronouncements on every kind of subject.

When legal opinions are brought into harmony, then we have reached the fourth and final source of the Shari'a, namely *ijma'*, or consensus. As the consensus of the whole Islamic *umma* would be difficult to ascertain, it is thought sufficient that there should be a consensus of the leading legal scholars of the time.

Now scholars with difficulty can come to an agreement, but they can also agree to differ. Thus it is that four legal schools, the Maliki, the Hanafi, the Shafi'i and the Hanbali, have developed over time and are recognized as having authority within the Islamic legal system. To these could be added the Ja'fari school, which is that of the Ithna'ashari Shi'a. This legal variety could itself be considered as the fulfillment of a prophetic *hadîth: fî l-ikhtilâf rahma*, "In difference there is mercy".

So when it is proclaimed that Shari'a law is going to be applied, the question will arise as to which Shari'a. Who is going to decide which type of Shari'a law is to be applied, and who is to control its application, seeing that all the conditions are fulfilled before a judgment is given? The Qur'an states: "Cut off the hands of thieves, whether they are man or woman, as punishment for what they have done" (Q 5:38), but strict conditions are laid down for the application of this *hadd* punishment. The swift application of the punishment of cutting off of hands practiced in some countries is surely not according to the provisions of the Shari'a properly understood.

We can safely conclude then, at least in my opinion, that the Takfiri Jihadists who have proclaimed an Islamic State¹¹, or who have declared their allegiance to this Islamic State, where Shari'a law will be observed, under the guidance of a self-designated Caliph¹², are not upholding Islamic tradition, whatever they may say. Can there be dialogue with such people? I fear not. For these people are convinced that they hold the truth, and therefore they have no need of listening

¹¹ The Islamic State was declared on 29 June 2014. Previously this entity had been called the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) or the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS). It is known as DAESH in Arabic, from the first letters of the title in Arabic. The referenced to Iraq and Greater Syria were dropped when a call was made to Muslims worldwide to recognize the Caliph who claimed to represent all Muslims. Many Muslims object to the appellation Islamic State.

¹² I thought that Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi must be a "nom de guerre" composed of the name of the first Caliph qualified by the *nisba*, or the adjective relative to the capital of Iraq, the country in which the caliphate has been proclaimed, but according to Wikipedia Abu Bakr, whose original name was Ibrahim Awad Ibrahim al-Badri, was born in Baghdad. He apparently is called by his followers "Caliph Ibrahim".

to others. They will not listen to fellow Muslims, many of whom they consider not to be true Muslims, and even less will they speak to non-Muslims except to invite them to embrace Islam.

The possibility of Christian-Muslim dialogue

Does this mean that there can be no dialogue with Muslims? Absolutely not. I mean that it absolutely does not mean that there can be no dialogue with Muslims. The Takfiri Jihadists do not represent true Muslims, and it should not be supposed that the majority of Muslims are in agreement with them. Muslim authorities in different parts of the world have condemned the horrible acts of violence that have been perpetrated, but unfortunately their declarations are often ignored by the Western press which is always calling for Muslim voices to speak out. In fact ordinary Muslims are wearied of having to declare their distance from the Takfiri Jihadists, as if all Muslims were potential terrorists. Dialogue with Muslims has existed in the past, exists at the present time, and should continue to exist in the future.

In the final part of this paper, to show that dialogue with Muslims is possible, I would like to give some examples of the dialogue which is taking place, in particular between Christians and Muslims, but also at a multilateral level. I shall follow the fourfold typology of dialogue presented in the documents published by the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue: the dialogue of life, the dialogue of action, the dialogue of discourse and the dialogue of spiritual experience¹³.

The dialogue of life

The dialogue of life, or what I like to call harmonious living, takes place “where people strive to live in an open and neighborly spirit, sharing their joys and sorrows, their human problems and preoccupations” (DP 42a). Christians and Muslims have been living side by side for centuries in some parts of the world, for instance in the Middle East, in the Indian sub-continent, in S.E Asia or in parts of Africa, in other words, in all those regions where Islam has been long established. Elsewhere, in countries of Western Europe, here in the US and in Canada, as also in Australia, the relatively recent immigration of Muslims has created opportunities for the dialogue of life. Yet the word “strive” in the above definition needs to be emphasized, for an effort is required to establish positive relations between Christians and Muslims. It is quite easy to be content to live side by side with hardly any interaction, the minority living in a ghetto and more or less ignored by the majority. There can be too a turning against the minority, as was seen in Bosnia, or as is being experienced in some parts of the Middle East today. So steps have to be taken in order to allow people to get to know one another and to create harmony. This often takes the form of mutual visits on the occasion of feasts, such as Christmas or Id al-Fitr, the feast at the end of Ramadan. One of the first initiatives of the Vatican’s office for interreligious dialogue was to

¹³ “The Attitude of the Church toward the Followers of Other Religions: Reflections and Orientations on Dialogue and Mission” (DM), 1984, no.s 28-35; “Dialogue and Proclamation: Reflections and Orientations on Interreligious Dialogue and the Proclamation of the Gospel of Jesus Christ” (DP), 1991, no. 42. Both documents are to be found in Francesco GIOIA (ed.), *Interreligious Dialogue. The Official Teaching of the Catholic Church from the Second Vatican Council to John Paul II (1963-2005)*, Boston, Pauline Books & Media, 2006.

send a message to Muslims for Id al-Fitr, a practice that continues today. In fact, in the first year of his pontificate, Pope Francis signed this message himself. Some Muslims are promoting the program “Muslims4Lent”, joining Christians in giving up something during this period. Another way of showing interest and concern for members of the other community is by being present at significant ceremonies, such as the baptism or circumcision of a child, at weddings, or at funerals.

It is true that in many parts of the world the social climate is not conducive to good relations between Christians and Muslims. The effects of 9/11 are still being felt, producing an attitude of suspicion towards Muslims in general. On the other hand, the invasion of Iraq, the war in Afghanistan, the lack of resolution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, continue to stoke the fires of resentment of Muslims, particularly in the Arab world, towards the West. Christians, for their part, point to the violence against their fellow believers in Iraq and Syria, the recent slaughter of Coptic workers in Libya, and the continuous attacks of Boko Haram in Nigeria. Added to these there are the killings in Paris and in Copenhagen, but also the murder of Muslims in Chapel Hill. Such events lead many people to question whether there is any future for Christian-Muslim dialogue. To my mind, this violence only increases the need for dialogue. There must be a readiness to start all over again when, for one reason or another, relations have been broken.

Dialogue of action, or cooperation in the service of others

Harmonious living may lead quite naturally to actions undertaken in common. In certain countries Christians and Muslims are working together to face up to problems of society. One thinks of the involvement of Muslims in basically Christian Pro-Life movements. There are also instances of Christians and Muslims engaging together in movements advocating human rights, social reforms, or care of the environment. There have been reports from different countries of Africa of mutual assistance in villages for the construction of places of worship, Christians helping to build a mosque, and Muslims helping to build a chapel or a church. These are examples of sporadic cooperation, but there can also be a more permanent type of cooperation which deserves the name of dialogue of action. In Tunisia, for example, Christians and Muslims have collaborated to form associations dedicated to the care of the handicapped. Religions for Peace, an international body which has its secretariat in New York, has in different countries involved religious communities, including Muslims, in common action to prevent the spread of AIDS and to help the victims of this pandemic. In a number of regions of the world this organization has been instrumental in forming interreligious councils, and on occasions representatives of these councils have acted as mediators in trying to overcome sectarian conflicts.

I could mention here two initiatives promoted by the present Sheikh al-Azhar, Dr Ahmad Al-Tayyeb. The first is the Bayt al-‘A’ila, the House of the Family, a forum for religious leaders in Egypt in order to work together to counteract sectarian violence. The second is the holding of meetings for Imams and priests. The interesting feature of these meetings is that the participants

are not divided according to religion, Muslims on one side and Christians on the other, but are given work to do in pairs or clusters of imams and priests. The idea is to foster cooperation at the local level by enabling Imams and priests to get to know one another so that they may engage in common action.

It should be pointed out that such common action is truly a form of dialogue. Before undertaking a common project there needs to be serious discussion in order to come to an agreement on the aims of the project, on the means that are going to be used to achieve these aims, and on who is responsible for what. The action also needs to be monitored in order to make sure that different religious sensibilities are being taken into account.

Dialogue of discourse, or theoretical foundations

Another form of dialogue is what could be termed the dialogue of discourse. This is a form of dialogue “where specialists seek to deepen their understanding of their respective religious heritages, and to appreciate each other’s spiritual values” (DP42c). The focus here is on formal meetings. These need not be confined to strictly theological issues. Indeed the topics examined in these exchanges are often of an ethical or social nature, rather than theological in character. Themes such as justice in international trade relations, business ethics, problems of migration, media and religion, respect for the environment, questions of bioethics, have all been taken up in meetings in which the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue has been engaged, whether with the Al Albait Foundation in Jordan, or the World Islamic Call Society, based in Tripoli, Libya, or with the Iranian Centre for Cultural Dialogue. In most of these meetings the same pattern has been followed: first the position of each religion regarding the question under discussion is outlined, then a description of the actual situation is given, and finally some suggestions for joint action are formulated.

Until recently the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue had rarely engaged in dialogue with Muslims on strictly theological questions. An exception, perhaps, was the seminar on holiness held in Rome in 1984, which examined the foundations for holiness according to the two religions, and looked at examples of people recognised as saints.¹⁴ One of the effects of the lecture given by Pope Benedict XVI in Regensburg in 2006 has been the Common Word initiative, launched by a number of Muslim scholars. They called for theological dialogue. This led to a meeting in the Vatican in November 2008 where the topic was “Love of God and Love of Neighbour”. A second meeting, held at the Site of the Baptism of Jesus in Jordan, in November 2011, discussed the theme “Reason, Faith and the Human Person”. These dialogues were preceded in 2008 by meetings at Yale University, where the theological issues discussed included different understandings of the Unity of God, of Jesus Christ and his passion, and of the love of God, and in the U.K., at Lambeth Palace and Cambridge University, where the discussions turned on the understanding of scripture, shared moral values, respect for

¹⁴ The proceedings of this meeting were published in *Islamochristiana* 11(1985).

foundational figures, religious freedom and religiously motivated violence. It will be noticed that theological questions were combined with practical issues.¹⁵

The above-mentioned meetings have been at international level, but dialogues go on at the regional level also. In the USA Catholic-Muslim dialogue has been continuing for many years in three different areas of the country. Each dialogue is headed by a Catholic Bishop and a leading member of an American Islamic Organisation. In 2008 the Mid-Atlantic dialogue decided to take up the theme of religious education. The Mid-West group opted to discuss “In the public square: Muslims and Catholics on religious freedom”. Finally, the West Coast Muslim-Catholic dialogue has been exploring Stories of Abraham. A feature of these dialogues is that they usually take place over week-ends at a retreat house, and thus allow time for prayer and fellowship, as well as for intellectual exchanges.¹⁶

I would like to mention also the Building Bridges program, an Anglican initiative for dialogue with Muslims, started by Lord Carey when he was Archbishop of Canterbury. A particular feature of the Building Bridges seminars is that they include careful reading of passages from the Bible and the Qur’an. This practice has perhaps been introduced into the seminars through the influence of Professor David Ford, of Cambridge University, who is a leading participant in Scriptural Reasoning.¹⁷ Having taken part myself in one of the Building Bridges programmes, I can attest to the importance of this sharing of Scriptures, where selected passages from the Qur’an were presented by Muslim participants, and passages from the Hebrew Scriptures or the New Testament were presented by Christians. My own task was to introduce the Prologue from St John’s Gospel, and it was interesting to see how this passage, with its strong insistence on Incarnation, was respectfully listened to by the Muslims in the group.

To be complete, a reference should be made to dialogue with Muslims of the Shi’a tradition. This dialogue is being pursued in a fruitful way by the monks of the Benedictine monastery of Ampleforth in the north of England together with Heythrop College, a Jesuit institution which is a constituent college of the University of London. In September 2011 a meeting was held at Sant’Anselmo, in Rome, the headquarters of the Benedictine Order, where “Monks and Muslims” shared about their respective spiritual practices.¹⁸

¹⁵ See <http://www.acommonword.com>

¹⁶ Cf. John Borelli, “Recent Muslim-Catholic dialogue in the USA”, in Michael L. Fitzgerald and John Borelli, *Interfaith Dialogue. A Catholic View*, Maryknoll, New York, Orbis Books, 2006, pp.97-108.

¹⁷ Scriptural Reasoning is the communal practice of reading sacred scriptures, in small groups, together. Normally the passages of scripture chosen are Jewish, Christian and Muslim and are linked together by a particular issue, theme, story or image. A participant in an exercise of Scriptural Reasoning made the following comment: “It was immensely stimulating to examine the three complementary texts, each first read in its original language, and to hear resonances among the three and elsewhere in those Scriptures that each participant was most familiar with.”

¹⁸ SHOMALI Mohammad Ali & SKUDLAREK William (eds), *Monks and Muslims. Monastic and Shi’a Spirituality in Dialogue*, Collegeville, Liturgical Press, 2012, x + 164p.

The dialogue of religious experience

This last example provides a good introduction to the fourth type of dialogue. This is described as an exchange “where persons, rooted in their own religious traditions, share their spiritual riches, for instance with regard to prayer and contemplation, faith and ways of searching for God or the Absolute” (DP 42d).

Monastic Interreligious Dialogue,¹⁹ which has been organised as a special service within the Benedictine family since the mid 1970s, has naturally been concerned primarily with Buddhism of which monastic life is a strong feature, but attention has also been given to the followers of other religions, including Muslims. Islam, which gives such importance to married life, is adverse to monasticism, but in its Sufi dimension it contains rich spiritualities. It is generally with Sufi movements that the monks and nuns have been in contact.

Let me give but one example. In 1979, in Algeria, a number of religious men and women decided to help one another to live their vocation within Islamic society by a constant reference to Islamic spirituality. They would select a theme which each one would follow up personally in the Scriptures and in the Qur’an or other Islamic sources. Once or twice a year, they would come together, usually at the Trappist monastery of Notre Dame de l’Atlas, in Tibhirine, to share their findings and select another theme. Some members of the Alawi confraternity, living in Médéa, near the monastery, asked to join them, and eventually these Muslims became full members of what is known as *Ribât al-salâm* (The bond of Peace). The prior of the monastery, Fr Christian de Chergé, had studied at the Pontifical Institute for Arabic and Islamic Studies in Rome, and had been leading the community, not without some initial resistance, into deeper knowledge of and respect for the Islamic spiritual tradition. Although seven of the monks, including Fr. Christian, were kidnapped and killed, the *Ribât* has continued its activities, although not necessarily in Tibhirine.²⁰ The following are some of the themes that have nourished this spiritual adventure: Act Justly and Walk Humbly with your God; How does God invite us to Humility?; Live in a Spirit of Thanksgiving; Compassion – the Language of the Heart; Compassion extended to the Whole of Creation; Hospitality as a Fruit of Compassion; Together to Pray and Build a world of Justice and Peace. It seems to me that this is truly an example of interpreting and embodying Sacred Texts across traditions.

Conclusion

What conclusions can be drawn from these considerations? We can say first that Christian-Muslim dialogue exists, and therefore it is possible. Obviously the situation is uneven. There are places where there is very little or no interest at all in such dialogue, yet there are other places where relations with Muslim neighbours have become a normal concern for Christian communities. Meetings of religious leaders take place more frequently, and leaders are ready to make statements

¹⁹ For an account of its origins, see its on-line publication *Dilatato Corde*.

²⁰ Cf. Martin McGee, OSB, *Christian Martyrs for a Muslim People*, New York/Marwah NJ, Paulist Press, 2008.

together and to act together when occasion arises. Yet parallel to this growing cooperation, mutual suspicion has also grown, and this renders progress in dialogue more difficult.

A further difficulty lies in a lack of knowledge. When one considers populations as a whole, and not just the elite, one is struck by the reciprocal ignorance that obtains. There is indeed much ignorance in the West about Islam and much ignorance about Christianity in countries with a Muslim majority. There is therefore a constant need to educate people, conveying the true image of Islam, as many Muslims advocate, but also revealing the true nature of Christianity.

Motivations for dialogue are often more social than religious, community cohesion being considered more important than growth in religious understanding. This, in fact, opens the way for more political interference in religious relations. Governments are interested in promoting a dialogue of civilisations, or an alliance of civilisations, as a counter-measure to the threat of a clash of civilisations.

In a world of conflict we may ask what interreligious dialogue can do. It may be well to state first what it cannot do. Interreligious dialogue should not be expected to bring an immediate solution to a conflict situation. Dialogue is not a fire-brigade that can be called on to put out a conflagration. When war is raging there is usually little possibility of conducting dialogue. The necessary conditions of equality, trust, openness are generally not present. People are not inclined to listen to one another. The solution will have to come through other means, probably through political negotiations. Religious leaders may have a role to play, encouraging people to support the envisaged solution, and if they have contact with the religious leaders of the other side, this may help. They may be able to contribute to a process which will bring about a just and adequate settlement.

It should be realized, however, that interreligious dialogue is more in the nature of preventive medicine. Its aim, as has been said, is to build up good relations among people of different religions, helping them to live in peace and harmony. This is no easy task. It entails increasing mutual knowledge, overcoming prejudices, creating trust. It means strengthening bonds of friendship and collaboration to such an extent that detrimental influences coming from outside can be resisted. The ensuing harmony among people of different religious allegiances often goes unobserved. It is the conflict that makes the news, not the absence of conflict. And yet this absence of conflict is really the good news.

Where there is a history of conflict it is important that there should be a purification of memories. This means listening to the differing accounts of the same events, paying attention to both facts and perceptions, and trying to come to a common understanding. In this exercise an effort is certainly required to avoid arguing past one another, continuing along parallel lines that will never meet. There may be a need too to demythologize, so that the past is not continuously used as a weapon to arouse hatred and enmity. When the past is examined with honesty, it will usually be seen that all is not black and white. There can be wrongs on both sides. In any case,

the acknowledgement of wrongs done, of injustices, of atrocities, is an important step in any process of reconciliation. Where there is an admission of guilt, this needs to be met by a readiness to forgive. This is essential if peace is to be established among peoples that have been in conflict. It was this conviction that led Pope John Paul II to state, in one of his messages for the Day of Peace, that there can be no peace without justice, and no justice without forgiveness.²¹

Such a process is difficult. A serious effort is required to understand the other religion as it presents itself. There may often be the temptation to fasten only upon that which appears to be common, taking individual elements out of their context, neglecting the inner logic of each tradition which gives it its own specificity. While it is good to underline commonalities, there should be no fear of the differences. These differences can challenge and stimulate the followers of different traditions. True understanding will develop when people, rooted in their own tradition, open themselves up to the riches of other traditions. Such an attitude of appreciation and respect does not necessarily exclude all criticism, but this is better expressed in the form of questioning, combined with a readiness to allow questions to be asked of one's own tradition.

If history is to be re-read, if memories are to be purified, it will help if this can be a joint project. Here, as in other fields, there is a need for Christians and Muslims to work together, perhaps at times also in conjunction with people of other religions. The challenges presented by the world we live in are so great that the combined efforts of all are needed to solve them. To confront the globalization of terror there needs to be a globalization of efforts for peace.

Religions provide motivation. That is why it is important for people of different religions to tackle problems together. Yet a word of caution is needed. What is being proposed is not an alliance of religions against the rest. The spirit of dialogue has to be fostered within each individual religious tradition, among the religious traditions, and between religious people and those of a secular bent. The relationship between religion and politics is a delicate one. Perhaps the best term to use would be that of a critical dialogue. Religious leaders are not called upon to formulate concrete political measures, but rather to underline basic moral principles. They need to be able to support government measures where these are seen to contribute to the common good, but also to criticize them when human dignity is not being fully respected. Politicians seem to be realizing more and more the power of religion. They wish to harness this force, sometimes for their own ends. Care needs to be taken that religion and religious sentiment are not manipulated. For this, of course, a critical distance needs to obtain between religious leaders and political powers, and this is perhaps not always the case. This is an area where religious traditions can challenge and help one another.

Interreligious dialogue should lead to a common search for understanding, to a shared sympathy for those who are suffering and in need, to a thirst for justice for all, to forgiveness for wrong

²¹ *Insegnamenti di Giovanni Paolo II*, XXIV,2 (2001), Libreria Editrice Vatican, 2003, pp.1081-1090; English text in *Oslamochristiana* 28(2002), pp.254-258.

done, together with a readiness to acknowledge one's own wrong-doings, whether individual or collective. True religion, relayed by interreligious dialogue, does not support conflict and war, but provides the right atmosphere in which conflicts can be resolved and peace attained. This would seem to be the true way forward for Christian-Muslim dialogue.

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