

## Islamic – Christian Dialogue

It gives me great joy to be present here in the city of *Il Poverello*, the poor and holy man of Assisi who left us, among other things, the beautiful prayer “Lord, make me an instrument of your peace”.

One of the best ways of promoting peace is to reach out to the other with an open heart, with love and a desire to understand the other. Unless we reach out to one other, we will remain confined to our own little worlds, prisoners of our own prejudices and misunderstandings. It was therefore thirty years ago that the great Pope John Paul II showed us the way by inviting all religious leaders to come together to pray for peace in this city of peace.

Coming from an Islamic country, Pakistan, I am happy to say that the idea of Muslim-Christian dialogue has been gaining ground over the past few years. In spite of increasing attacks by extremists groups like the *Talibān* and *Daish* – with their own distorted interpretation of Islam – Muslims and Christians alike have come to understand that this is not the real face of Islam. Our government, with the help of the Army, is tracking down the terrorist groups and destroying their hide-outs.

I am glad to say that many initiatives for promoting Muslim-Christian dialogue have sprung up in recent years, particularly among NGOs. Even the government of Pakistan, through its Ministry of Religious Affairs, has started using the word ‘inter-religious dialogue’ and encourages such interaction. Last month, a delegation of the *Jamāt-e-Islāmi*, the largest Islamic political party of Pakistan, came to meet me in Karachi. They came to express their thanks and appreciation for what Pope Francis had said on 31<sup>st</sup> July on his return flight from Poland. In reply to a journalist’s question he said: “*I don’t speak of Islamic violence because . . . I believe that it is not right to identify Islam with violence. It is not right and it is not true . . .*” The Muslim delegation praised the Pope and said that such words, coming from a world religious leader like Pope Francis, have great importance in dispelling misunderstandings about Islam and will pave the way for dialogue and understanding.

Such appreciation from a leading Islamic political party is heartening indeed. It gives us hope and opens the door to further dialogue and understanding with Islam. Yet the fact remains that there still remain certain difficulties on the road to dialogue:

- Most Muslims perceive the Western world (Europe and the USA) as made up of Christian countries. Therefore anything that these countries do (especially the USA) is perceived as “Christian”. Thus, the attack on Iraq followed by the attack on Afghanistan is perceived as Christians attacking Muslim countries. It is for this reason that many Muslim *imams* preach that the Crusades had never ended; they say that they have taken on a different form and continue even today. For example the NATO forces in Afghanistan are often referred to as “Crusaders”.

Related to this is the fact that many Muslim countries were under Western colonial powers before they gained independence after the Second World War. Thus, it is unfortunate that Christians in these countries are perceived as having a connection with the West or, worse still, as being agents of the former Colonial powers.

- Another difficulty is that, unlike the Catholic Church, Islam does not have a hierarchical structure; there is no central authority in Islam. While great centres of Islamic learning, like Al Azhar University in Cairo, or the Grand Mufti of a country, have great authority and respect, their statements are not binding on all Muslims throughout the world. This leaves many extremist and fanatic Islamic groups that remain fixed in a perception that the Western world is Christian and is continuing the Crusades; hence the need for *jihād*. The need for dialogue therefore does not arise. All Western influences, even democracy, must be opposed as contrary to, or detrimental to, Islam.

Unless this negative thinking which spreads hatred is neutralized, or at least mitigated, it will remain a big obstacle for dialogue and understanding between Islam and Christianity.

- Another point that difficulty in entering into the spirit of dialogue is the Islamic concept of *jihād* or holy war. Many Muslim scholars interpret *jihād* as a spiritual or moral struggle against any evil, while others still understand it as a war to be waged against the enemies of Islam that they perceive in the world today. In Pakistan, there are Islamic groups who insist that Muslim school children should be taught about *jihād* to strengthen them and make them warriors for the faith. Instead of dialogue with other religions, *da’wa* is more important. There is no place for dialogue. *Da’wa* is the duty of every Muslim to invite the other to accept the faith.

I say these things with due respect to my many Muslim friends who do not feel themselves bound by such ideas and have moved beyond to an understanding of Islam as a religion of peace and brotherhood of all humankind. Such is the thinking of our great *Sūfī* saints and poets, the Muslim mystics whose preaching was based on peace, love and brotherhood.

The days of the Crusades are long over. In the world of today, the official teaching of the Church is quite clear about how we are to act in our own times. The document of Vatican II, *Nostra Aetate*, No. 3, has this to say: "*Upon the Muslims, the Church looks with esteem . . . Although in the course of centuries many quarrels and hostilities have arisen between Christians and Muslims, this sacred Synod urges all to forget the past and to strive sincerely for mutual understanding. On behalf of all mankind, let them make common cause of safeguarding and fostering social justice, moral values, peace and freedom*".

In Pakistan, over fifty years ago a Christian Study Centre was established to promote understanding and dialogue between Muslims and Christians. It organizes inter-faith meetings and encourages research and studies in this area. It has a quarterly journal called *Al Mushir* and research scholars are welcome to use the library and even to stay at the centre for research.

Pope John Paul II, followed by Pope Benedict XVI and now Pope Francis have all shown us the way to follow. It is the way of Jesus Christ who said: "Blessed are the peace-makers ...". Let us listen to the voice of St. Francis who prayed: "lord, make me an instrument of your peace." Let us resolve to be, *Inshallah*, instruments of peace and love! *Alhamdolillah!*

+ Joseph F.S. Coutts  
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