

The Christian conundrum

Relativists confuse Muslims. But then so do evangelicals. And both are unacceptable to even liberal Islam. So how to solve this contemporary and pressing problem of achieving mutual respect and tolerance? The answer lies in the hands of conservative Christians

MUSLIMS OFTEN find Christians a puzzle. Now of course there are many different types of Christians and Muslims but, although generalisations are very difficult, the dialogue is still dominated by liberal Christians (mainly Protestants, but some Catholics) and representatives of Islamic organizations. Perhaps because the majority of Christians they encounter in interfaith circles are liberals, Muslims often leave the dialogue with more questions than answers.

First, they don't understand the liberal Christian capacity to belong to the Church, yet deny significant parts of the creeds. For example, it always comes as a shock to Muslims to discover that while every "observant" Muslim believes in the Virgin Birth of Jesus, half of the Christians do not. To see faith as a journey or narrative that enables one to have problems with parts of the official Christian drama seems, to many Muslims, to lack integrity. Second, they are puzzled by the lack of demands that Christianity seems to make. For many liberal Protestants their faith is literally limited to one hour on Sunday. When they ask about daily devotions or fasting, many liberal Christians confess that these practices have disappeared. Given such a dialogue with Muslims is frequently interrupted by ritual prayers, or by the demands of Ramadan, Islamic devotional practice is very conspicuous, while the Christian devotional practice seems almost invisible.

Now these Muslims do know that there are other types of Christians. They have heard of evangelicals, and they also hear from their Christian dialogue partners that these Christians are inflexible, intolerant, and in the business of conversion. Given that many Muslims resent the history of the Christian missionary enterprise, which often ran in parallel with colonialism, they find it easy to agree that such Christians are a problem. The net result is that Christianity appears to Muslims as kind but devotionally undemanding or deeply intolerant yet demanding. Both are unattractive and puzzling.

Christian perceptions of Islam are also confused. Again personal encounters reassure Christians that there are lots of good, peace-loving Muslims, but they also suspect that there are plenty of Muslims who are extremists. You don't have to delve far to discover the liberal Christian flirting with such talk as "they need an Enlightenment" or "they treat their women badly" or "they need to discover a critical approach to the Quran" or – at least here in the United States from where I am writing – "separation between religion and state is an essential basis for a tolerant society". That you can be modern and still believe in the infallibility of the Quran, or feel that there are problems with the secular state, is an absurdity for many dialogue-orientated Christians.

One reason, then, why the Christian-Muslim dialogue has made such limited progress

is that these perceptions are so pervasive. Often Christians do not help the dialogue by assuming the pluralist hypothesis as advocated by John Hick. Hick argues that all religions are equal and valid responses to the Real. In so doing, the Real becomes an entity about which we know nothing. After all, to accommodate Buddhism, we cannot even be sure that God is personal. The claims that Jesus is the Incarnation of God, or that the Quran is an infallible and final revelation, are also treated as inappropriate imperialism. The hard work of grappling with diversity and understanding difference is evaded.

So standing back from this muddle, are there any hopeful signs? And what exactly is now needed in this historic moment?

The most hopeful sign is there are plenty of contemporary Islamic movements deeply committed to non-violence. Despite the widespread perception to the contrary, I have listened to countless Muslim leaders condemn unequivocally terrorism and violence. Christians need to set the record straight: there is no intrinsic link between Islam and terrorism. More should be made of Abdul Ghaffar Khan (1890-1988), who founded an Islamic non-violent movement in 1929 called the *Khuda-I-Khidmatgar* (servants of God), which had over 100,000 followers in Pathan (the northern part of British India). He is a little known Muslim Gandhi, who was treated exceptionally badly by the British. He taught that non-violence was a Quranic obligation. Then there is Bediuzzaman Said Nursi (1877-1960) who created a movement in Turkey that, today, has nine million followers worldwide. He insisted that Muslims are called to a *jihad* of the word, and to resort to violence, he argued, shows a lack of self-confidence in the truth of Islam. Now it is not just Christians who ignore the non-violent strands of Islam, but many Muslims. For Christians to encourage an intra-Muslim conversation about the diversity of Islam could be a useful service in these times.

In terms of analysis and understanding at this moment, then there are three priorities. First, Christians need to understand that Islam is not about to mirror the Christian trajectory, which involves both a Reformation and Enlightenment. Although there are progressive and secular Muslims, these are a minority. (In the Islamic world, the word “secular” normally means “non-observant” rather than being shaped by post-Enlightenment thought; there are very few atheists in Muslim countries.) The vast majority of Muslims are not questioning the authority or nature of the Quran. granted you may ask questions about whether a sura (a chapter) is written in Mecca or Medina. And granted also that there is a lively and important debate about which verses are just local (that is, applied primarily to the time of the Prophet) or have universal application. But none of this is moving towards a “higher critical” view of the Quran. And it is a grave mistake for Christians to believe that such movement is the way forward. Increasingly I suspect it is the European higher critical Christianity that is the sociological aberration (and I say this with regret because I am part of it.) The rest of the world will embrace globalisation and modernity and still affirm traditional faith forms. Dialogue will have to cope with rigorous belief, rather than hope for the world to become populated with Hick-style pluralists.

Second, there are many Muslims and many groups which are deeply disturbed by trends in the West and do feel that these trends are incompatible with Islam. At a

dialogue in Pakistan in January 2004, I listened to Dr Israr Ahmed explain why democracy is incompatible with Islam, and how the life of the Prophet demonstrates that violent overthrow of democratic governments is both likely and necessary, so that an Islamic state can emerge. In such an Islamic state, all non-Muslims are forbidden to vote and the genders must be completely segregated. Where perhaps Dr Ahmed is extreme and there is a growing literature by Muslims explaining how Islam and democracy are compatible, there remain plenty of other Muslims who see the West as a challenge, rather than a model. These Islamist groups require both conversation (yes, there is a battle of ideas) and, at certain times, an imaginative policing response. Third, the political conversation in the West needs to include a wider spectrum of positions. Many Muslims in the West trust Aljazeera over the BBC. It is a different perspective, which sees the Palestinians as being treated exceptionally badly and lots of innocent civilians dying in Iraq from Allied activity. For some Muslims, it does look like the West is trying to destroy Islam. In countries such as Pakistan and Indonesia, I was amazed to discover the sheer number of Muslims who don't believe that Bin Laden was responsible for the 9/11 attacks. Instead they believe that Bush and the neo-Cons of the United States arranged it all.

Finally, a Muslim dialogue with evangelicals and traditional Catholics is desperately needed. With liberal Protestants being numerically insignificant, such a dialogue between the conservative Christians (across all the major denominations) and the observant Muslims is the one that matters, for Muslims need to find forms of Christianity that are clearly demanding, yet equally committed to coexistence. The goal of such a dialogue is not mutual celebration or love, but respect and toleration. Is there a role for all those liberal Catholics (and Protestants) who have led the way in the dialogue thus far? I think there is. We need to facilitate the conversation. We need to be the bridge builders who bring the conservative Catholics together with the observant Muslims. It is our spirit of generosity that makes us inclined to support conversation. We will have to overcome our propensity to denigrate our conservative cohorts. But a real liberalism can do that. Our generosity needs to extend beyond the "like-minded" and include advocates of much more traditional forms of Christianity. The goal is that a little bit of liberal generosity will shape the worldview of our conservative friends.

There are many dialogues that can help this agenda progress. The Jesuit theologian Dr Thomas Michel SJ has done exceptional work. More than a fifth of the student body at my own institution – Hartford Seminary – is Muslim, not only from the US, but also from Indonesia, Pakistan and Turkey. These students are learning about Islam alongside evangelicals, liberals and Catholics. The Focolare movement in the United States has linked up with the American Society of Muslims to explore the nature of love. In the southern Philippines Mucard (the Muslim-Christian Agency of Rural Development) has worked in 120 villages. And so I could go on.

There is hope, but there is much more that needs to be done. This needs to become a much greater priority for both Christians and Muslims.

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