



Getting Real about Christian-Muslim Dialogue*

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DURING 1993, I HAD OCCASION TO SIT IN THE AUDIENCE AT TWO CHRISTIAN-Muslim dialogues in Chicago and to attend a pair of similar sessions at the "Parliament of World Religions."¹ The sponsors on each occasion were different, as were the speakers, but what was said was alarmingly similar.

Interfaith dialogues, until recently, typically occurred only between Christians and Jews. And their urgency derived from the impact of the Holocaust on the Christian conscience, with the horror of the realization that what had happened to the Jews of Europe was partially a consequence of a long-entrenched anti-Semitism

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¹The first "dialogue" was in April, 1993, at the American Islamic College; the second, in May, 1993, at the Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago and organized by the Committee of the Religious Dialogue (Lawrence, Kansas). The Parliament was in August of the same year.

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The author of this essay suggests that interfaith dialogue between Muslims and Christians must be much more honest regarding factual realities when mutual hurts are shared, and much more sensitive to the internal diversities of both Muslim and Christian lived religion. In a message that was first delivered in the Rockefeller Chapel, University of Chicago, in November, 1995, Professor Naim puts forward a possible agenda for such dialogue.

among too many Christians. Such dialogues tended to be between those who saw themselves as victims of unspeakable crimes and those who saw themselves, in some sense, as parties to the crimes. Surprisingly, the same modes of thought seemed to govern the Christian-Muslim dialogues that I witnessed.

The Christians usually began by denouncing the crusades, the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century colonial expansions into Islamic lands, and the more recent Cold War policies of the United States against various nationalist movements in the "Third World." They readily identified themselves with "the west" and its history, only to castigate all western protagonists and proponents, past and present. Their Muslim counterparts began in the same vein. They denounced the crusades and argued that the same crusading spirit worked equally behind the colonial expansion and the unquestioning American support of Israel against the Palestinians. These were the crucial moments, they argued, when the "west" (Christianity) encountered the "east" (Islam) and behaved shamefully. The listeners nodded in agreement. One Muslim speaker mentioned the expulsion of the Moors from Spain as another such moment, and all heads were further lowered in sorrow and shame.

Amazingly, no one asked how the Moors arrived in Spain in the first place, or what had brought Muslims to the land of the Testaments. It was as if there had been no imperial expansion of Islam, no Arab conquests of Syria, North Africa, and Spain. I'm not denying the horrors of the *Reconquista* and the crusades. I merely wish to point out the absurdity of denying any agency to the Muslims themselves. Islamic history unfolded as a series of conquests. This is not to say that Islam spread only by the sword or that Christians and Muslims should argue over who shed less blood. It is simply to acknowledge that the sword was very much present in the story of Islam's expansion, too.

When this acknowledgment is not made, interfaith dialogue soon turns into an incoherent comparison of Islam, a faith without history, and Christianity, a history without faith. More, the inordinate emphasis in such dialogues on the scriptural and juristic aspects of religion, with the simultaneous neglect of the experiential and salvific, turns the two faiths into two ideologies, of which one seems to control all of history while the other appears to have no agency at all — one standing for a body of aggressors, the other for a cohort of victims. By the same token, the dialogues manage to suppress the plurality of Islam — its many regional forms, the differing ways it adapted itself to local conditions and traditions. A rich and variegated religion is presented in such dialogues as a homogeneous, featureless whole.

There is such a thing as Islam, of course; but there are many Islams as well. There is one Islam in the sense that there is one revealed book and one Prophet to whom it was revealed. There are many Islams in the sense that there are many different traditions of interpreting that book and understanding the Prophet. The lived Islam of a peasant in Bangladesh is similar to but not identical with that of his counterpart in Algeria, as is the Islam of a middle class professional in Karachi and his counterpart in Indonesia. In each instance, the differences as well as the simi-

larities are greatly cherished. These differences, however, found no mention in the dialogues I witnessed. They were not present in the remarks of the Muslims and formed no part of the understanding that the Christians sought.

This elision of Islamic differences has dangers not merely for the Christians engaged in dialogue, but for the Muslims as well. The Christians never scrutinized a repeated Muslim claim that what made Islam unique was that it was a totality, a complete system that covered each and every aspect of human life. That such a claim has a dangerous edge went unnoticed. Both for Muslims in self-proclaimed Islamic countries and for Muslims in such non-Islamic nations as India, Islam was said to be a total religion—which easily transposes into the demand that every Muslim be a total Muslim, a Muslim entirely in terms of the person making that demand. Any suggestion of diversity, any opposition to that proclaimed totality then becomes ruthlessly punishable. It takes very little to turn a dream of totality into a totalitarian nightmare.

These lapses, I believe, happened because the Christians engaged in the dialogues neglected to remember their own struggle to allow the existence of a plurality of Christian sects. That didn't happen overnight; it took centuries and cost much innocent blood. A structurally stable peace of that kind has not yet come about in the world of Islam. Ecumenism is not a familiar term among Muslim theologians and mosque leaders. That does not mean that diverse, ordinary Muslims have not lived in peace with each other. They have. But it has been an uneasy peace that unscrupulous religious leaders are able to destroy only too easily, as they have, for example, in Pakistan.

The interfaith dialogues I witnessed took place in America, within the dynamics of a secular polity. And yet the protagonists in these dialogues displayed a curious and selective ambivalence toward that polity. One only heard that secularism is good for America but not for Pakistan or Egypt, because Pakistan and Egypt are Muslim countries with majorities and Muslims are required by their religion to establish an Islamic state. But what of those Muslims in Pakistan, Egypt, Algeria, Sudan, Iran, Malaysia, Bangladesh, Afghanistan—all over the world—who would rather live within a polity that allows every religion, and every sect within a religion, to freely pursue their matters of faith within a context of equality and reciprocity? Are they not good enough Muslims, even in the eyes of American Christians?²

The Christians who initiated these dialogues may have gained some understanding of contemporary Islamic politics. But if their aim was to get an insight into the lived religion of the Muslims, they should have brought to these dialogues

²A related point: I wonder why the American Christians did not invite as participants in these dialogues some Christians from the so-called Muslim countries? Was it mere parochialism or was it due to some misguided concern about the sensibilities of their Muslim guests? The seriousness of this lapse on their part became evident to me when a Muslim speaker described Sudan as "the best, the only true Islamic country" (in a panel on "Treatment of Minorities," no less!). No one challenged him. No one asked about Sudanese Christians and what has been happening to them for at least a decade, not to mention the execution of Sheikh Mahmoud Taha, the eminent Muslim thinker, for his liberal views.

their own lived religion. At none of the meetings that I attended did the Christians highlight any of the issues that are currently so problematic a part of their lives as Christians—issues related to homosexuality, women’s rights, prayer in schools, abortion. Or the three great issues of the recent past: ecumenism, race, anti-Semitism.

The Muslims were not inclined to raise such issues, either. And when they did, it was only to dismiss them with a scriptural quotation. Overwhelmingly, they used these occasions as opportunities to tell their story of grievances and hurts, placing their remarks precisely and entirely in recent history—in a narrative of defeat and loss, neglect, denial, and victimhood.

I am not blind to the brutality inflicted on Bosnian Muslims, the ferocity displayed against the Iraqis, or the unremitting injustice done to the Palestinians. But is that all there is to being a Muslim at this time? Should I not also shed a few tears for those who are victimized in the name of Islam—the Christians in Egypt and Sudan, the Ahmadis in Pakistan, the Bahais in Iran? The instances may not compare in magnitude with what was done to Bosnian Muslims, but shouldn’t I at least note the horribly similar impulse behind them? As I denounce the abandonment of Bosnia by the western powers, shouldn’t I also point to their equally shameful abandonment of the Kurds—who are also Muslims—to the mercy of three so-called Muslim states: Iraq, Turkey, and Iran? Not raising that issue, I remain blind to the systemic question the two cases share: How do modern nation-states go about forming and preserving themselves?

Most importantly, the Muslim narrative of hurts not only posits an immediate colonial past of utter decline and passivity but also implies a pre-colonial period of pristine Islamic glory. Both descriptions are not merely false, but also harmful; invoking them only distorts any effort to think through our shared future. A selective memory of caliphs and kings cannot help us much in working towards a world that is not simply pluralistic but also democratic.

The goal of an interfaith dialogue between Christians and Muslims should certainly not be the position taken in a Qurānic verse that was invoked by one Muslim: “To you your way, to me mine” (109:6). That verse is explicitly addressed to *kāfirs*, “the Unbelievers.” Christians are not *kāfirs*, perhaps not even in the sight of the most absolutist Muslim. More, in its full context, the verse is a statement of an absolute parting of ways, which, of course, cannot be the aim of any dialogue—any more than a dialogue can be for the sake of a victory for one of the participants. But neither should some compromise or syncretism be its goal.³ The only dialogues that we should deem fruitful must either clarify something that was obscure in our own thought, or at least make a little bit opaque what we had earlier thought patently clear.

Judaism and Christianity are religions explicitly affirmed in the Qur’ān, but the Qur’ān explicitly commands Muslims to “judge between [Christians and Jews]

³For an excellent discussion of some of these issues, see Paul Griffith, “Why We Need Interreligious Polemics,” *First Things* 44 (June/July 1994) 31-37.

in the light of what has been revealed by God, and do not follow their whims, and beware of them lest they lead you away from the guidance sent down to you by God" (5:49) – which would seem to rule out any kind of dialogue. The Qur'ān, however, elsewhere seems to invite dialogue when it enjoins Muslims to say to Christians and Jews, "O people of the Book, let us come to an agreement on that which is common between us, that we worship no one but God, and make none His compeer, and that none of us take any other for lord apart from God" (3:64). The Qur'ān also clearly places Muslims, Christians, and Jews on an equal footing to the extent they are capable of performing deeds that are good in the sight of God. "To each of you We have given a law and a way and a pattern of life. If God had pleased He could surely have made you one people [professing one faith]. But He wished to try and test you by that which He gave you. So try to excel in good deed. To Him will you all return in the end, when He will tell you of what you were at variance" (5:48).

How we can differently worship one God; what makes a given deed good or bad; and how these critical issues play out in the lives of ordinary Muslims, Christians, and Jews, at different times and in different places – some understanding of these matters is the worthy goal of an interfaith dialogue. It is by no means an easy goal. But we may hope to get somewhere close to it if we – Christians and Muslims – pursue that goal in the spirit Wolfhart Pannenberg advised (quoting 1 Cor 13:9-12): "While the truth of God's revelation is indeed ultimate, our understanding of that truth is always provisional and will remain so until the end of history."⁴ ⊕

⁴Wolfhart Pannenberg, "The Uncertainly Christian West: Ambiguous Past, Uncertain Future," *First Things* 48 (December, 1994) 19.