

DIALOGUE: GOALS, HISTORY AND CHALLENGES

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I

Dialogue: Goals and Motives

What is dialogue?

Dialogue, as the dictionary defines, means a ‘conversation between two or more persons, especially of a formal or imaginary nature, an exchange of views in the hope of ultimately reaching agreement.’(1)

Dialogue has also been referred to as ‘consultation’, ‘conversation’, ‘meeting’, ‘exchange of views’, ‘encounter’ etc. In other words, it is a means of communication which expects a reciprocal response. Today, the term ‘dialogue’ provides an ‘umbrella’ for all those meanings and understandings.

The definition of dialogue also varies from person to person and the geographical areas they come from; the experience of past and present encounters also plays a significant role in the understanding of dialogue.

But what is the purpose of dialogue? A meaningful dialogue is only possible when people have a deep conviction that their faith has something to offer to the wider society in which they live. Inter-faith dialogue is not based on a model of negotiation between parties who have conflicting interests and claims; rather it sees its role as a process of mutual empowerment for the faiths involved. It is about engagement in public concerns and the joint pursuit of social justice, human dignity and constructive action on behalf of the common good of all citizens.

It has been said that dialogue with other faiths is ‘a waste of time’ - and especially so with Christians. They ‘are trying to reduce the impact of *da'wah*’ by involving Muslims in dialogue. Let us be very clear that *da'wah* is about ‘communication’ and ‘invitation’ to Islam, and not about conversion. Dialogue, on the other hand, is about talking with, and not simply talking about, people of other faiths, beliefs and persuasions. The reality is that the differences of religions are the plan of God, and it is going to remain so forever. The human burden is to connect with the others in dignity and with respect.

Over the last sixty years or so many people and organizations have entered into dialogue with various motives – these are two examples:

- (a) **Dialogue as human concern:** Muslims viewed increasing Western influence in Muslim countries, both political and social, as a vehicle of ‘corruption’ ‘evil’, and of ‘moral decadence’. In such circumstances the call for dialogue by the Churches, especially from the West, was a significant one. The Muslims saw the

Churches as an ally in their struggle against materialism and socialism on the one hand, and injustice of any kind, particularly against the Palestinians, on the other. They saw the dialogue between the two faith communities as a dialogue of 'common cause'. In Bhamdoun, Lebanon, from 22-27 April 1954 a convocation was held between the Christians and Muslims. This convocation, as expected, was dominated by the participants' concerns about the tightening grip of materialism and the growing influence of socialism. Western-educated Muslims and the *Ulama* all participated enthusiastically. The creation of the State of Israel, in 1948, resulted in the displacement of hundreds of thousands of Palestinians. A large number of these took refuge in neighbouring countries such as Jordan, Syria and in Lebanon, and the Bahamdoun Convocation was bound to reflect these concerns. Muslim participants hoped that through such convocations they would be able to win the hearts and minds of the Western churches, if not Western governments. As there were a significant number of Christians amongst these refugees, they hoped that Western churches would be willing to co-operate with Muslims on this issue.

Issues such as education, human rights, the environment, etc. dominated later dialogue, and still play a crucial role in relations between the two communities.

(b) Dialogue as a missionary concern: After World War II the Christian mission arguably became much more introspective. The WCC was instrumental in organizing intra-Christian debate about dialogue with people of other faiths. But the significant development that I would like to highlight is the Roman Catholic Church's approach to the duty of mission, largely be found in the Church's documents like *Lumen Gentium* (Light of the Nations), *Nostra Aetate* (In Our Times) and *Evangelii Nutiandi* (Evangelism of the Modern World) as well as in the Pope's various Encyclicals, particularly *Redemptoris Missio* (On the Permanent Validity of Church's Missionary Mandate). These documents were produced against the background of increasing secularization and the Church's urgent need to readjust itself to the new post-war world. Essentially, the Church was self-consciously aware of its perception amongst the people of other faiths, particularly amongst the Jews. It wanted to dissociate itself with its perceived past and was keen to start a new chapter of mission renewal, as well as forging better relations with people of other faiths.

These documents suggested that the Church wanted to address its relationship with other faiths in an open and frank manner. They signalled that a closer relationship was desirable, and that in the process the Church was willing to forget the past and urge others to do the same. Furthermore, in this new relationship the Church did not want to lose sight of the centrality of Jesus and the Church, and its own missionary obligation. The Church would see others from its own standpoint and as far as other faiths were concerned, Pope John Paul VI stated that each: 'contains sparks of light within itself which must neither be despised nor quenched, even though they are insufficient for giving clear vision.' (2) The Pope makes it clear that the Christians should not forget to 'declare openly ... that there is but one true religion, the religion of Christianity...' (3).

The problem the Church encountered though, was how to reconcile dialogue and mission. The increasing expectations that dialogue generated in the 1970s gave the impression that the Church and its mission would largely be one of 'involvement in the world'. Some members began to state clearly that the '[n]on-Christians do not need membership in the visible Church in order to be saved; they do not need the Church to arrive at a deeper awareness of the saving mystery by which they are continually embraced.' (4). On the other hand, the Church was under constant pressure both from within and from outside to clarify its position regarding mission and dialogue. Finally, in 1991, the Pope's Encyclical, *Redemptoris Missio*, stated clearly that dialogue is 'a part of the Church's evangelizing mission. Understood as a method and means of mutual knowledge and enrichment, dialogue is not in opposition to the mission *Ad Gentis* [The Universal Sacrament of Salvation]; indeed it has special links with that mission and is one of its expressions ... the Church sees no conflict between proclaiming Christ and enjoying inter-religious dialogue. Instead she feels the need to link the two in the context of her mission *Ad Genetics*.' (5).

On the other hand Muslims too saw the need for dialogue as means of *dawah*. In this they saw the forum to clarify the misconceptions about Islam and highlight some Muslim grievances. Dialogue as a human concern more or less disappeared.

There are different types of dialogue that have been conducted over the years, but for me the most important dialogue is the *bi-lateral dialogue*. The success of any interfaith dialogue depends upon how the two partners in that dialogue have progressed on issues that they have confronted in the past, and that still reverberate in their relationship. For example, in a multi-lateral dialogue Jews, Christians, Muslims, Hindus and Sikhs may come together to understand each other or to have a collective approach to face a commonly perceived challenge; but this does not address the issue of memory. Sikhs and Muslims in dialogue, for example, may have a different starting point of relationship based on their memory. The Sikhs' memory of the Mughal rulers and their treatment of Sikh gurus has had a lasting impact on their perception of Muslims, whereas the Muslim memory of Sikhs is perhaps largely shaped by the partition of India in 1947, and the role Sikhs played in that history. We can extend this to each partner in relation to other faiths in dialogue. To me this idea of memory is a serious one, and needs to be addressed bi-laterally. I also believe that there is a need to have *theological dialogue*; the word theology I am using generically. Today any training of an Imam or a Priest in isolation from other faiths is an incomplete training. In this inter-connected world it is imperative that the training of future leadership must include the understanding of others and the 'otherness of the other'.

Finally, it is important that in dialogue one has to know how to enter into someone else's world of faith. It requires immense sensitivity, trust and integrity. People participating in dialogue, whether bi-lateral or multi-lateral, have to be aware of the fact that there is always a third party present in dialogue and that is the 'secular'. The secular is the agenda setter. Whether one likes it or not, the terms of even religious agendas are largely influenced by the secular. The religious discourse, within and between religions, has to respond to the events and narratives imposed on it.

II

Interfaith Work: a Historical Perspective

In an interfaith history, particularly in the European area of history, it is important to recognise that the discussion about understanding about others began from within Christianity, and within European socio-political circumstances. The **Peace of Augsburg** (1555) was a landmark event that provided a shape and resolved direction to intra-Christian rivalries. According to this treaty the existence of both Catholicism and Lutheranism (excluding Calvinism) in Germany was accepted. But the condition was that in each land, subjects should follow the religion of their ruler (*cuius regio eius religio*). Those who disagreed with the settlement were allowed to leave, sell their property and migrate to other places. Another significant landmark treaty that shaped the religious face of Europe and settled a long-fought battle known as the Thirty Years War was the **Peace of Westphalia** (1648). The principle of Augsburg was accepted as the basis of religious settlement. A full protection was granted (with a few exceptions) to all religious minorities already established in a given territory by 1 January 1624. This treaty also recognised Calvinists within the new settlement. Despite several papal condemnations of this treaty, it remained the fundamental religious law of Europe until the 19th Century. In England with the **Bill of Rights** and the **Toleration Act** of 1689, Parliament granted freedom of association and worship to all Protestants. The Acts of Parliament of 1854 and 1856 were education acts, and lower degrees at Oxford and Cambridge were opened to members of any religion or none at all, but even then the teaching of them was restricted to members of the Church of England.

Apart from these significant treaties and acts in Europe, there were some significant theologians who also shaped and contributed in moulding the European understanding of other faiths and world views. One such important theologian was **Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768 – 1834)**. He began to explore the idea that all religions contain divine truth, but they reflect different stages of spiritual development. For him the inward feeling which is the human response to the ultimate is the prime basis of the understanding of others. Feeling is the basis of religion, which is polluted in the forms of the historical religions. The most highly developed form of religious experience is exemplified in Christianity. **Rudolf Otto (1869 – 1937)** on the other hand, developed the idea that all religions have a common essence, and that is the *Holy*. He founded an Interreligious League in 1920 to foster spirituality and morals through cooperation among believers of various faiths. **Karl Rahner (1904 – 1984)** developed a concept of ‘anonymous Christians’. His important thesis is: When does ‘absolute religion’ begin in a person’s life? Does it begin at christening or only when one becomes aware of the ‘absolute religion’? However, the question of *when* one becomes aware of the ‘absolute religion’ remains unanswered. Since that *when* is not known, Christians do not confront others simply because they are non-Christians but because they are ‘anonymous

Christians'. **Louis Massignon (1883 – 1964)** identified Muslims as the 'sons of Ishmael'. He emphasised that instead of 'looking at Islam from outside and violently attacking it, one must place himself, by a kind of Copernican somersault, at the very center of Islam, where this spark of truth lives from which all the rest is invisibly and mysteriously sustained.' These are but a few examples that shaped the future Christian theology and attitude to other faiths.

After presenting these examples, I would now like to highlight some of the institutional development (6) that shaped interfaith work and its direction. The interfaith organizations, and their history and institutional growth, are rooted in time and context. For example, the development of **the Parliament of World's Religions** actually started its journey when the US Congress decided that Chicago should be the venue for the World Exposition marking Christopher Columbus' arrival in America in 1492. The other factor in the minds of the organizers was the growing tendency to celebrate material wealth, scientific discoveries and command over the sea. But at the same time, suspicion of religions in general, and Christianity in particular, was also an instrumental factor in bringing religions closer together to face challenges. This paradoxical arrangement, building the hope of a friendly conference of believers in different faiths, was successful; however it received the cold shoulder from various Churches, including the Archbishop of Canterbury, and also from the Sultan of Turkey.

The rationalism and the liberal religious traditions mediated by the Unitarians formed **the International Association for Religious Freedom**. The awareness of persecuted minorities raised the issue of their conscience of liberalism vis-à-vis the established Churches' traditional beliefs. 'The International Council of Unitarian and other Liberal Religious Thinkers and Workers' founded in 1900 was the precursor of the IARF. The name has gone through several incarnations, but it attracted several religions of non-Christian and non-Western origins. Groups such as Brahmao Samaj and the Japan Free Religious Association joined the IARF. The central ethos and the motivating factors of the organization remained the peoples' personal experiences that they brought with them.

Sir Francis Younghusband was assigned a mission to Tibet by Viceroy of India Lord Curzon in 1903. On his completion of the mission in Lhasa he had a vision where he perceived that *joy* was the grounding and crown of all religions, and this idea of joy, for him, was perhaps more fundamental than the concept of love. This idea he carried for many years, and strove to bring people of all faiths to share his vision and experience. He sought to encourage human fellowship. Eventually in 1936 **the World Congress of Faiths** was established. The WCF brought together several faiths and gave birth to new organizations and several new initiatives, particularly in the UK, but it also provided a module of faiths working together without synchronizing their own faiths.

The World Conference on Religion and Peace came into existence against the backdrop of the Cold War, where the possibility of a nuclear war was not an imaginary one. Although the WCRP was established in 1970 in Kyoto, the work had begun in 1966. There was a movement to bring together people of different faiths to consider the relation of 'religion to peace' and to find 'parallel moral principles and seek approximate

guidelines.’ One of the objectives was to find ways and means that would affect government policies in relation to war and peace. In its several years of existence, the WCRP encouraged people, especially religious leaders, to make informed comment on socio-political issues. Relatively speaking the organization was able to motivate young people to participate in its vision initiatives.

III

Challenges of Interfaith Work

First, interfaith activity amongst Muslims, and also amongst other faiths, is seen as synchronism, a compromise of one’s valued faith. It is seen in some quarters with suspicion that this is another method of the Christian mission. Whatever the pros and cons of interfaith, it is imperative upon Muslims to engage with other faiths. Here is an example of why a Muslim must engage with Christians in a European or North American society. Here first and foremost attention needs to be given to the perception of religion itself. As far as Europe or North America is concerned, its perception of religion has been moulded by the Christian interpretation of faith. Historically and culturally, Christianity has played a significant role. Now the role of religion – the acceptance and rejection of faith in society – is judged according to the Christian perception of religion. The Muslim assertion of faith, in public and in private life, is measured on the criteria provided by Christianity. Therefore, there is an urgent need to enter into a dialogue with that perception of religion. This means entering into debate with European society’s perception of faith and religion. Christianity is a pillar of European society, one that has provided the ‘soul of Europe’ over many years. Here, a Muslim is asked to take Christianity seriously, both in its history and thought. Once this aspect becomes important for Muslims then the engagement between Christians and Muslims will be a dialogue of ‘equals’. It does not mean that the dialogue between the two communities should now cease until we reach some kind of equality.

Second, in Europe and in America Muslims are trying to develop *madrassas* or religious seminaries in order to prepare *ulama* who could address the contemporary issues that Muslims are facing by living in the West. They are modelling such institutions on existing seminaries such as Al-Azhar in Cairo and *dar al-Uloom* in Deoband, India. These seminaries are popular among Muslims and are in great demand too. Once these newly trained *ulama* or religious scholars acquire a place and a reputation of being good *khatib*, they create a role for themselves in Muslim society, and wield a great deal of influence in the community. This influential group is almost unaware of dialogue developments between Christians and Muslims; or even if they are, they are aware of the polemical history of engagement with Christianity. Invariably, they do not see the necessity for such dialogue, as they see this as a mechanism that will only help reduce *iman* (faith) and compromise their own religion. This situation perhaps stems from the

fact that they are not taught about other faiths and traditions as much as they should be. It is interesting to note that in the Islamic tradition an *alim* or a *mufti* is required to have some basic knowledge, and needs to have an awareness of the ‘custom’ (*urf*) and ‘practice’ (*adat*) of the people where he lives and works. Any religious opinion must carry the weight of these facts. In Europe or in North America I am not aware of any *madrassa* which is in the business of training *ulama* that is teaching even the basic concepts and ideas about Judaeo-Christian traditions, which are an important component of the West. What is now needed is the introduction of the intellectual and cultural trends of Western society into Muslim seminaries’ syllabi. This in my view, in the long run, will create an atmosphere of understanding and trust. However, Muslims have to be on guard when tracking what an Islamic view, for example, of Christianity and Judaism is. Nonetheless, the syllabus should accommodate views and beliefs as understood by the followers of relevant faiths, and these should not be tampered with.

Third, as far as communication is concerned today, the world has become a very small place, and the internet has opened up a new world which to many people was hitherto inaccessible. It has enabled the human race to go beyond boundaries and barricades and to approach far-off peoples from their own homes. While people should rejoice in this new-found freedom, the internet nonetheless has its darker side. The vicious cycle of polemics has resurfaced violently. A number of religious sites are using provocative language in their attack on other faiths. An interfaith dialogue may now mean to expose the ‘weaknesses’ of other faiths. An ‘Answering Christianity’ website generates the ‘Answering Islam’ site or the ‘Answer to Answering Islam’ site. Such resurfacing of polemics is not good news for people who want to build a new relationship on the basis of mutual trust and engagement with respect. The path of dialogue has now to overcome yet another hurdle.

Fourth, in an interfaith relationship we think we know the other person’s belief and values. Largely this thought is based upon the fact that we have lived together so long and shared our joyous moments as well as our grief together. But is this enough? I have my own experience of working and living together with other faiths and cultures. Our nicety sometimes deceives us. Hindus and Muslims, for example, lived and shared their lives together. We call our elders ‘uncles’ and ‘aunties’ but somehow we do not talk about our faith openly just in case we offend them. However, we inherit a view of the ‘other’ based upon what we hear and believe, and that view becomes the authentic image of the other person. This unexplored perception becomes a huge problem at the time of communal tensions. Our perceived view of the other becomes a dominant factor at a time of crisis. In another of my experiences, a group of Jews, Christians and Muslims met regularly over a decade, and after 9/11 the group decided to produce a joint self-reflective statement that would challenge our own faith communities as well as offer a statement of intent based on our past experiences. We thought we knew each other, we thought we knew what the other person meant. But it took another two years to agree upon a shared statement. It was a hard lesson in dialogue. What we need is to explore more often the ‘otherness of the other’, and to challenge our own perceptions about the ‘other’.

Finally, Muslim ‘theology’ and its experience of other faiths has a long history of tolerance and acceptance (not always). But that ‘theology’ of other faiths has been shaped by the socio-political climate and the circumstances of the time. What Muslims need to do is re-visit those theologians and explore afresh with regard to future relationships in which we may find ourselves. Here we have a challenge to go beyond our perception of others. Yes, we have a Quranic view of Jesus and Mary, but that should not prevent us from learning about Christianity and Christian beliefs from Christian sources. In this respect the community itself has to invest in future scholars who will be trained in languages such as Hebrew, Greek, Latin, Sanskrit etc., but will also be capable scholars in other faiths.

References

1. A.M. Macdonald (Ed.), *Chambers Twentieth Century Dictionary*, Edinburgh: W&R Chambers Ltd. 1978, revised edition.
2. Quoted in Schissel, Gregory A. S.J., “The Quest For Common Ground: The Roman Catholic Church and Islam After the Second Vatican Council” Ph.D. thesis submitted Cambridge, Massachusetts Harvard University, 1998, p39.]
3. Easter Homily” 29.3.1964.
4. Ibid.
5. Quoted in Glasser, A.F., “Vatican II and Mission 1965 – 1985”, *Missiology*, Vol XIII, No. 4. (October 1985), p 491.
6. In these four examples I have relied on Marcus Braybrooke’s book *Pilgrimage of Hope: One Hundred Years of Global Interfaith Dialogue*, London: SCM Press 1992.