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ISLAM AND CHRISTIANITY: IS A PRODUCTIVE DIALOGUE POSSIBLE?

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Many may think productive dialogue between Islam and Christianity is not possible, but the angel Gabriel said to Mary, “For nothing will be impossible with God” (Luke 1:37 NASB). Since Christians and Muslims share a belief in the virgin conception, certainly some dialogue is possible. Theological differences, historical clashes, and resulting emotional baggage, however, can be significant obstacles to a productive dialogue.

Any dialogue would have to consider which persons or entities should represent Christianity or Islam. Khalid Duran counts seventy-three distinct sects within Islam.¹ *World Christian Encyclopedia* estimates there are about 33,000 Christian denominations in 238 countries.² Of course, the main sects of Islam can be reduced to Sunnis, Shi’ites, and Sufis. The majority of “Christians” (using the term loosely) can be condensed to Roman Catholic, Eastern Orthodox, mainstream Protestant, evangelical, and independent “other.” Even if a spokesperson could represent each subgroup, that individual’s authority would be questioned.

A monologue is a speech where someone forwards a position or opinion without conversing with others.³ There has been plenty of this over the centuries with regard to Christians and Muslims. The first great polemic Christian apologist, Karl Pfander, wrote *The Balance of Truth* in 1829. Although courteous in tone, Pfander did not interact with Muslims but sought to win them to Christianity through arguments. A generation later, Zwemer and Gairdner developed the “irenic” approach. They contended for a sympathetic understanding of Islam while insisting on a proper view of the atonement and incarnation.

Subsequently, the concept of dialogue emerged as an approach to engage Muslims. A dialogue is “an exchange of ideas or opinions on a particular issue, especially a political or religious issue, with a view to reaching an amicable agreement or settlement.”⁴ In regard to Islam and Christianity, however, any concord would require the capitulation of one to the other. Such capitulation is unlikely.

THE DIALOGUE METHOD

What became known as the Dialogue Method, popularized by Bishop Kenneth Cragg (1913–2012), calls for Muslim and Christian unity in Christ. This controversial approach sees Christianity not displacing Islam but fulfilling what Samuel Schlorff calls “what is there.” Schlorff says, “This involves the principle of open religion; a Christianity and an Islam open not just to a clearer understanding of their own sources, but also truth from other sources and perspectives. Yet Christ represents in some sense the fulfillment of both.”⁵ In addition, the dialogue approach has been linked to the World Council of Churches, including its condemnation of proselytism.⁶ Peter Pikkert writes,

Interreligious dialogue is also at a theological impasse. Muslims have real difficulty with the fact that Christians are reluctant to accept the authenticity of Muhammad as a post- Christ prophet who received a major revelation message from heaven....Christians, on the other hand, feel that the Muslims’ recognition of Jesus does not really cost them anything, while a “corresponding recognition of Mohammad by Christians would go against everything they are told by the weightiest religious documents in their possession”....Thus, instead of dialogue and debate leading to mutual understanding, discord between Christians and Muslims has been growing.⁷

Entering into formal discussions with Muslims using the Dialogue Method is not advisable because it raises false hopes. Both sides might feel they were making headway, yet neither religion would have any intention of conceding substantial ground. Given the flaws of the Dialogue Method, what about the possibility of informal discussions? I believe these can be somewhat productive.

A PERSONAL APPROACH

Mark Durie points out it is people, not religions, that dialogue. Furthermore, he observes that the Qur’an advises Muslims how to engage people of the Book.⁸ Durie notes that often dialogue takes place between marginal people on each side. For

example, a liberal Muslim may dialogue with a Universalist Christian. The parties may feel good about the encounter, but there is little impact.⁹

A method of working with whom we disagree is finding points of common concern. Sanctity of human life and the exclusivity of marriage are issues where Christians and Muslims largely can agree. Christianity also shares with Islam the values of modesty in dress, hospitality to strangers, and honor among friends. Another nonreligious issue of common concern is the effects of violence and poverty in places like Nigeria and Afghanistan.

There are a few religious similarities that could spur productive dialogue. Christianity, Islam, and Judaism respect the Ten Commandments given by God. The Law of Moses is foundational to a respect for the rule of law, which Christians share with Muslims. However, attempting to find more specific points of theological agreement is problematic because of the presuppositions each side brings to the table. For example, while Muslims believe the Qur'an records God's exact words, evangelical Christians do not believe revelatory writings after the New Testament are valid.

Islam recognizes the divine inspiration of the Torah, parts of the Psalms, and *Injil* (the Gospels), but teaches that these Scriptures have been corrupted and superseded by the Qur'an. Similarly, Muslims revere Jesus as an important prophet, but their view of Christ is flawed and unacceptable to Christians.¹⁰ Any discussion about Jesus leads Muslims to ask Christians about their opinion of Muhammad. When Christians deny Muhammad a prophetic office, dialogue reaches an impasse.

INSIDER MOVEMENT

Over the last twenty years, the Dialogue Method has been supplemented by a new way of approaching Islam. The Insider Movement advocates that Muslims follow *Isa* the Messiah while remaining within their faith communities.¹¹ Rebecca Lewis explains, "Insider Movements can be defined as movements to obedient faith in Christ that remain integrated with or inside their natural community."¹² Citing as their model the phenomenon of Hebrew Christians retaining Jewish identity and calling themselves Messianic Jews, the Insider Movement supports the concept of Messianic Muslims, acknowledging *Isa* the Messiah while retaining their Islamic cultural identity.¹³ Brother Yusuf defends the practice:

Some Messianic Muslims say the shahada,¹⁴ but not all of them are true believers in it. Nominal Muslims say the shahada, but they are not true believers. Some of them [Messianic Muslims] are engaging in dissimulation — masking one's inner thoughts and intentions. That is not the same

*as deceit, which involves manipulation or exploitation of others rather than mere social conformity or self-protection. Deceit is wrong, but is dissimulation categorically wrong or can it be used as a last resort?*¹⁵

At best, this blending of Christianity and Islam is dangerously misleading. As a member of the “Bridging the Divide”¹⁶ community, I have learned Insider proponents differ in regard to faith, practice, and their degree of “Insiderness.” Nonetheless, the Insider Movement tends to convince seeker Muslims that they can “have it both ways,” while deceiving (consciously or unconsciously) dialogue partners into thinking that Christianity and Islam are closer than they actually are. Therefore, I reject the presuppositions and applications of the Insider Movement.

As Christians and Muslims engage in dialogue, it is best to acknowledge they disagree on major beliefs and own their differences. In 2002, I visited a Brazilian Christian worker in Nairobi, Kenya, ministering to a very difficult Muslim people group. This missionary operated a trade school for young refugee men. I asked about his method of reaching these Muslims, as he had baptized seventeen of them. Speaking in Portuguese, he said, “I tell them Muhammad was a false prophet, Islam is wrong, and they are going to hell.”

I asked, “That’s your method?”

He replied, “Yes, I tell them the truth.”

SEEKER SUFIS

Perhaps an approach that has not been attempted sufficiently is engaging Sufi Muslims. Sufism represents a template or overlay on Islam as well as a subdivision of the faith.¹⁷ Some Muslims see Sufism as outside of Islam altogether, while others view it as the religion’s most vibrant manifestation.¹⁸ Carl Ernst estimates about half of all Muslims practice a form of Sufism.¹⁹ The medieval theologian and philosopher Abu Hamid al-Ghazali (1058–1111) brought Sufism respectability by attempting to reconcile orthodox Islam with mysticism.²⁰ Al-Ghazali believed in the necessity of both Islamic ritual observance and religious feeling.²¹ (This approach won him the name of *mujaddid* [renewer] of Islam,²² and he has been called the greatest Muslim after Muhammad.²³) William C. Chittick says there are three major Qur’anic themes in ancient Islamic teaching: (1) submission (*islam*), (2) faith (*iman*), and (3) doing the beautiful (*ibsan*). The first two are well known, while Sufism sees the third as its “special domain.”²⁴ Furthermore, Sufis pursue esoteric, mystical knowledge called ‘*arif* (gnostic) and believe in “modes of cognition beyond the intellect.”²⁵

I believe conversations between Christians and Sufis hold promise for the following reasons. Most Sufis care more about religious feeling than doctrine. For them, religious certainty is found in their experience rather than in Islamic doctrine. Although most Sufis claim to be orthodox Muslims, Sufi practices such as prayers to saints (*wilaya*), the pursuit of hidden knowledge, and the mandatory recitation of the ninety-nine names of God to achieve nearness to God belie the claim. Muslims such as these are not necessarily chained to the traditional Islamic answers one might encounter in a standard Christianity–Islam dialogue. Sincere Sufis desire spiritual truth, and such a dialogue might lead them in a more Christian direction.

Sufism contains a concept similar to the “new birth” in Christianity. Some Sufis refer to Jesus’ conversation with Nicodemus in John 3:3 and the “born twice” concept in their quest for spiritual truth.²⁶ When taking on “the way of Sufism” (*tasawwuf*), the new initiate “dies to self” (*fana*, or self-extinction) in order to live for God.²⁷ According to A. J. Arberry, his new life in God (*baqa*, subsistence) allows the Sufi to be “perfected, transmuted and eternalized through God and in God.”²⁸

Spiritual Veils

Sufis also possess a complicated theology of spiritual veils. Veil theory in Sufism flows from interpretations of fourteen occurrences of the Arabic verb *kashf* (remove) in the Qur’an. Muhammad said in the Hadith, according to Sufi teaching, God has seventy veils of light and darkness. Some see the entire universe as a veil. Others view birth and death as veils. This complex, mystical veil theology provides a fertile environment within which Sufis may seek a new birth and personal relationship with God. Thus, Christians should challenge the Sufi to turn to the true Jesus Christ, because “whenever a person turns to the Lord, the veil is taken away.” The grace of God in Christ removes the veil, enabling the individual to behold “as in a mirror the glory of the Lord,” receive the Holy Spirit, and be transformed into conformity with God’s image (2 Cor. 3:16–18 NASB).

Many Sufis have a higher regard for Jesus than other Muslims. Arberry writes that some Sufis “introduced the *Logos* doctrine into Islam, by which is meant the theory that God’s Vice-Regent controlling the material universe is the ‘Idea of Muhammad.’”²⁹ This is important because many Muslims who become Christians do so because of lofty descriptions about Jesus in the Qur’an.³⁰

Islam and Christianity: is a productive dialogue possible? No one can speak for all of Christianity or Islam, so a formal dialogue is not possible. Nevertheless, productive dialogue is possible at an informal level. The goals should be to understand

better each religion's positions, discover issues of common concern, and probe areas where Muslims can consider Christianity.

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NOTES

- 1 Paul Marshall, Roberta Green, and Lela Gilbert, *Islam at the Crossroads* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2002), 27.
- 2 David B. Barrett, George T. Kurian, and Todd Johnson, eds., *World Christian Encyclopedia*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 1:16, table 1–5.
- 3 “Monologue,” Literary Devices, <http://literarydevices.net/monologue/>.
- 4 “Dialogue,” Dictionary.com, <http://www.dictionary.com/browse/dialogue>.
- 5 Samuel Schlorff, *Missiological Models in Ministry to Muslims* (Upper Darby, PA: Middle East Resources, 2006), 20–21.
- 6 *Ibid.*, 22.
- 7 Peter Pikkert, *Protestant Missionaries to the Middle East: Ambassadors of Christ or Culture?* (Hamilton, Ontario: WEC-Canada, 2008), 187.
- 8 Mark Durie, e-mail message to Robin Hadaway, October 21, 2016.
- 9 Mark Durie, e-mail message to Robin Hadaway, October 26, 2016.
- 10 See David Wood, “Jesus in Islam,” in this issue of the JOURNAL, pp. 10–17.
- 11 Isa is the Arabic Qur’an’s name for Jesus.
- 12 Rebecca Lewis, “Insider Movements: Retaining Identity and Preserving Community,” in *Perspectives on the World Christian Movement*, 4th ed., ed. R. C. Winter and S. C. Hawthorne (Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library, 2009), 673.
- 13 Rick Brown, in “A Humble Appeal to C5/Insider Movement Muslim Ministry Advocates to Consider Ten Questions,” Gary Corwin, *International Journal of Frontier Missiology* 24, 1 (Spring 2007): 9.
- 14 The *shahada* (“testimony”) is the sincere confession by which one becomes a Muslim: “There is no god but Allah. Muhammad is the messenger of Allah.”
- 15 Brother Yusuf, in “A Humble Appeal to C5/Insider Movement Muslim Ministry Advocates to Consider Ten Questions,” Gary Corwin, *International Journal of Frontier Missiology* 24, 1 (Spring 2007): 12.
- 16 The Bridging the Divide (BtD) website defines BtD as “a network of biblically faithful scholar-practitioners building bridges among workers and believers in Muslim contexts for the expansion, maturity, and unity of the Body of Christ,” <http://btdnetwork.org/>.
- 17 Sufism is more of a spiritual orientation within Sunni and Shi’a Islam than a sect. As such, Sufi Muslims are somewhat analogous to Charismatic Christians. As one can be a Charismatic Baptist, a Charismatic Lutheran, or a Charismatic Presbyterian, so one can be a Sufi Sunni or a Sufi Shi’a (there are no Sufi Sufis).
- 18 William C. Chittick, *Sufism: A Short Introduction* (Oxford: One World Publications, 2000), 3.
- 19 Carl W. Ernst, *The Shambhala Guide to Sufism* (Boston: Shambhala Publications, 1997), xiii.
- 20 George W. Braswell, Jr., *Islam: Its Prophet, Peoples, Policies and Power* (Nashville: Broadman and Holman

Publishers, 1996), 98.

- 21 Malaise Ruthven, *Islam in the World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 233.
- 22 John L. Esposito, Darrell J. Fasching, Todd Lewis, eds. *World Religions Today*, 3rd ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 252.
- 23 Ruthven, *Islam in the World*, 35.
- 24 Chittick, *Sufism*, 4–5.
- 25 Ruthven, *Islam in the World*, 233.
- 26 Chittick, *Sufism*, 138.
- 27 Ruthven, *Islam in the World*, 228.
- 28 A. J. Arberry, *Sufism: An Account of the Mystics of Islam* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1950), 58.
- 29 *Ibid.*, 93.
- 30 Pikkert, *Protestant Missionaries to the Middle East*, 192–93.