

The Challenges in Catholic–Muslim Dialogue

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The most important challenge to the Roman Catholic–Muslim dialogue is perhaps also the most obvious and the simplest: to believe that the work of dialogue is an action of God’s grace,” Fr. Elias Mallon told participants in the first national-level consultation between the National Conference of Catholic Bishops and Muslims October 21–22, 1991

The challenges which face the Catholic–Muslim dialogue are intimately related to several factors. The purpose of the dialogue, the culture in which the dialogue takes place, the familiarity of the dialogue partners with each other’s religion and the expectations of the dialogue all work together to influence the dialogue positively or negatively. In what follows I hope to touch briefly upon what I think are the challenges facing the Catholic–Muslim dialogue in the United States

I am aware that both Roman Catholicism and Islam are worldwide religions with histories spanning over 1,500 years. Nonetheless, I believe that the situation of both religions in the United States provides more than enough challenges for a fruitful dialogue. What this implies is that the dialogue limit itself to questions and problems pertaining to Roman Catholics and Muslims in the United States and avoid dealing with questions and problems obtaining in other parts of the Christian and Islamic worlds

Purpose of the Dialogue

One of the main challenges facing the Catholic–Muslim dialogue is to articulate the purpose of the dialogue. This is important both internally and externally. The articulation of the purpose of the dialogue is important internally in that it helps the dialogue partners to focus the discussions and to set goals which are understood by both the Catholic and Muslim partners and which are realistically related to the purpose of the dialogue. Through a clear focusing of the discussions, the dialogue can avoid getting lost in generalities or so caught up in particulars as to have no effect on the average Muslim or Roman Catholic in the United States

It is also important to clarify the purpose of the dialogue for those who are not members of it. Only the most naive Roman Catholic and Muslim believes that all our fellow believers are equally convinced of the necessity or even the advisability of a Catholic–Muslim dialogue. There are among both Roman Catholics and Muslims those who fear that to engage in dialogue is to betray the principle of a revealed religion—be it Christianity or Islam—with its unique truth claims. If at the beginning we are clear about the purpose of the dialogue, we can avoid much confusion among our own constituencies and also obviate many fears about syncretism or cryptoproselytism

The Challenge of Religious Pluralism

Both Islam and Christianity find themselves in a unique position in the United States with its constitutional separation of church and state, and its cultural and religious pluralism. At the outset it is important to be clear about religious pluralism. By religious pluralism I mean a situation in which no religion is politically or culturally dominant (1) and all religions and their adherents are considered equal in society. This is important because in the history of Islam and Christianity there has been religious pluralism in the sense of the presence of other religions. But neither in Islam nor in Christianity were the adherents of other religions considered equal politically or societally to the adherents of the dominant religion. Both Islam and Roman Catholicism have long experiences of cultural and political dominance in societies in Europe and Asia. Both Islam and Catholicism have also limited experience of being a minority religion in countries where the other religion is .dominant

I am fully aware that Islam historically has tended to be more tolerant of Christianity and Judaism than European Christianity has of Islam and Judaism. Nonetheless, although the status of the dhimmi in Islam was often much better than the status of a ghetto resident in European cities, in no way could the dhimmi be said to enjoy political equality with Muslims in the society. To a great extent these conditions still exist albeit in a milder form. In many Islamic countries it is illegal for a non-Muslim to hold the office of president or prime minister and in some countries, e.g. Argentina, the president is required by the constitution to be a Roman Catholic. A situation, therefore, in which both religions and their adherents enjoy the same rights and obligations is new to both Roman .Catholicism and Islam

Religious pluralism offers both a challenge and threat to Catholicism and Islam. Both Roman Catholicism and Islam are religions with a clear code of behavior which each religion connects with its understanding of God's revealed will. In a religiously pluralistic society not everyone is obliged to conform to a given code of behavior which a particular religion considers to be in accord with God's will. Thus Muslims and Catholics will disagree, for example, as to God's will on the consumption of alcohol or pork. For the Muslim, God has forbidden both; for the Christian, God has allowed one and proscribed the other in the eucharist. Even among themselves Christians have deep divisions as to .God's will in matters of sexual ethics

Religious pluralism can be painful and disorienting to members of religions whose values are not dominant in society. Roman Catholics refer to themselves as "the people of God" in the documents of the Second Vatican Council. Christians are called to be "salt of the earth" and "the light of the world" in the New Testament. For a long time in Roman Catholicism the principle "error has no rights" was used to secure a special position for Roman Catholicism and to prevent full religious freedom for non-Catholics in predominantly Catholic cultures. The Quran refers to Muslims as "the best people raised for the good of mankind; you enjoin what is good and forbid evil" (3:111). For the

Muslim it is unthinkable that anyone other than a Muslim should rule in a Muslim society. Thus each .religion sees itself as the ideal guardian of society's moral structure

When Catholicism or Islam are not in decisive positions in religiously pluralistic societies, there is, on the one hand, the temptation to privatize religion. Religion becomes no longer a matter of human .beings living in the world but a private matter between me and God

The privatization of religion is, however, incompatible with the public and societal nature of both Christianity and Islam. On the other hand, there is a temptation to interpret religious pluralism demonically. Thus deep differences of opinion are not attributed to sincerely held beliefs of people of different persuasions but are attributed to "indifference", "hostility toward (of course, my) .religion", and the ever-handly "secular humanism

It is this second temptation which provides, I believe a major challenge to the Catholic-Muslim dialogue. As religions which are accustomed to being culturally and even politically dominant, Islam and Catholicism can look upon the Catholic-Muslim dialogue as a type of alliance against a third party. Whether that third party be atheism, communism, secular humanism, etc., the purpose of the dialogue becomes strategic. The dialogue becomes a subtle or perhaps not so subtle "you and me against them". In a "you and me against them" situation, it is not important that I know who you are or that you know who I am. What is important is that both of us know whom we are against. This attitude, even in its subtlest forms, is fatal to interreligious dialogue as envisioned in all the documents published by the Roman Catholic Church and in the writings of Muslim intellectuals such as Mohammed Talbi, Mohammed Arkoun and others, as well as the work done by the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue and the Al al-Beit, to mention merely two organizations. The Catholic-Muslim dialogue which has arisen in the context of religious pluralism is seriously challenged persuasively to present its values to the overall society. But it is challenged to do that not by overcoming religious pluralism but through mutual recognition, understanding, respect and appreciation. Such a dialogue sees its greatest challenges and opportunities not in areas of similarity .and agreement but precisely in areas of difference and disagreement

Notes:

It might be argued that Christianity is the dominant culture in the United States, and that this is .1 something to which Christians should be sensitive. Nonetheless, the culture of the U.S. does not seem to be determined by anyone denomination or church, and there is good reason to question whether our much-touted "Judeo-Christian" values have not been superseded by something more .secular

.Walter M. Abbot, SJ (ed.), *The Documents of Vatican II* (New York: Guild Press, 1966) p. 113 .2

.Cf. *Origins*, Vol. 20: No. 34, Jan. 31, 1991, pp. 541–568 .3

.Cf. especially “Dialogue and Proclamation”, *Origins* Vol. 21: No. 8, July 4, 1991, pp. 121–135 .4

Perhaps one of the most honest expressions of the tensions that mutual commitments to mission and da’wa can cause is found in Maurice Borrmans (ed.) *Guidelines for Dialogue Between Christians and Muslims* (New York: Paulist Press) 1990: “Should Muslims be forbidden the desire to see their Christian friends become Muslims, or, similarly, do Christians not have the right to wish that their Muslim friends become Christians? They should not be denied such a desire, for otherwise there would be an undue limitation to their desire for sharing with others. Such desires are legitimate even if practically speaking they effectively exclude each other

In Christianity God is often presented as a judge. In Islam, God is also considered to be a judge; .6
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.Historical and Theological Relationship Between Christianity and Islam

In the Catholic–Muslim, and indeed the Christian–Muslim dialogue, it has become common to stress the fact that both Muslims and Christians believe in the same, one God and consider themselves children of Abraham. Muslims are fond of showing the great reverence which they have for Jesus and Mary. Indeed the Quran has more on Mary than does the New Testament. While such exercises are important for building good will and trust, the challenge of the dialogue lies, I believe, in other areas which sometimes surface unexpectedly. Muslims with their high regard for Jesus and Mary are, for example, perplexed by Christian lack of reverence for Muhammad and even their hostility toward him. While the hostility can sometimes be attributed to simple bigotry, there are deeper theological issues at stake

For Roman Catholics and for most, if not all, Christians Jesus Christ is the perfect and final revelation of God. This is clearly stated in the document on revelation from the Second Vatican Council. In *Dei Verbum*, 4, we read, “The Christian dispensation, therefore, as the new and definitive covenant, will never pass away, and we now await no further new public revelation before the glorious

manifestation of our Lord Jesus Christ (1 Timothy 6:14 and Titus.2:13)” (2) This is very similar to the Muslim belief that Muhammad is the Seal of the Prophets (33: 41). The two beliefs are also to a great extent mutually exclusive. This sets up a situation which is often difficult for the Muslim partner to understand and which is taken for granted by the Christian partner. Judaism, Christianity and Islam consider themselves to be revealed religions. Christianity sees itself as built upon or even fulfilling Judaism; Islam sees itself as purifying and perfecting both Judaism and Christianity. In this situation each religion looks back—sometimes grudgingly—with respect on its “predecessor” and accepts the scripture of its predecessor as inspired. Thus Christians consider the Hebrew Scriptures as part of their own patrimony. Moses, the prophets and the holy people of the Old Testament are revered among Christians much as Jesus and Mary are revered among Muslims. The Quran sees the tawra (Torah) and ‘inji-l (Gospel) as having been revealed by God. Each of these religions, however, .“has serious theological problems with its “successor

Thus Judaism cannot accept the validity of Christianity and Islam without calling its own validity into question. And Christianity cannot accept the Quran on a par with the Old and New Testaments without calling its own validity into question. Schematically and analogically put: Judaism is to Christianity as Christianity is to Islam, and as Islam is to Bahaism or Ahmadiyyah. This presents a challenge to the dialogue in that it recognizes a certain asymmetry exists between the partners. .However it also inserts a note of realism and caution

Theological Methodologies

A very important and long-term challenge to the Catholic–Muslim dialogue can be found in the attempt to understand each other’s theological methodologies. Although the term sounds particularly, if not peculiarly, Western, its import should not be overlooked. Through the centuries both Roman Catholicism and Islam have developed highly sophisticated methods of handling religious questions and of articulating their respective faiths. Disciplines such as exegesis, philosophy, moral reasoning and jurisprudence have enjoyed long histories in both traditions. It would be disastrous, however, to think that both traditions use and understand these disciplines in the same way. Islamic disciplines such as fiqh, kalam and tafsir are highly developed sciences with their own internal laws and logic, and which may or may not correspond without remainder to Roman Catholic Jurisprudence, theology and exegesis. Although this may seem somewhat academic, .it has important consequences for the catholic Muslim dialogue, especially in the area of morality

It has been the case recently that Roman Catholics and Muslims find themselves on the same “side” in public discussions on matters of sexuality. Given a particular moral question, Roman Catholics and Muslims often arrive at similar or identical conclusions. It is mistaken, however, to believe that both Catholics and Muslims have arrived at the conclusion in the same way. It is of the utmost importance that both Catholics and Muslims understand how the other tradition theologizes. If there is not a thorough understanding of how the dialogue partner arrives at religious/moral conclusions, the stage is set for disillusion and a sense of betrayal. Without an understanding of how the dialogue

partner theologizes, Catholics and Muslims become perplexed when, after having arrived at the same conclusion regarding one question their different methodologies lead them to radically different conclusions on other questions. Abortion, birth control, divorce, capital punishment and war are cases in point

The Kerygmatic Nature of Christianity and Islam

Both Christianity and Islam, unlike Judaism, are universal and missionary religions. Christians see a serious obligation to spread the Gospel in Christ's command to "make disciples of all nations" (Mt. 28:19). Likewise Muslims see a serious obligation in da'wa, the "invitation" or "call" to Islam. Both the Christian and Muslim sense of responsibility to spread their message must be recognized in the Catholic-Muslim dialogue. While it must be recognized that both Christians and Muslims have at times engaged in unfair proselytism, it cannot be expected that either Christians or Muslims will abandon what they believe is their God-given mission to the world. It is extremely important that both partners in this dialogue realize this, since it has recently been the cause of some confusion in local dialogues

The publication of the encyclical *Redemptoris Missio* (3) on the need for evangelization was greeted by some Muslims as a betrayal of the principles of interreligious dialogue. This stems perhaps from a misunderstanding of the nature of interreligious dialogue. Subsequent documents have attempted to correct that misunderstanding, (4) although it remains a major challenge to the dialogue. The purpose of the Catholic-Muslim dialogue is most clearly not to replace either Christian mission or Muslim da'wa(5). The papal encyclical as well as the continued existence of da'wa societies should make that quite clear. The dialogue, however, can help develop guidelines of fairness and honesty in situations where the Christian missionary and the Muslim da'i, or missionary, work in the same areas. In the United States, for example, Muslim missionary activity among African-American Christians provides a challenging point of dialogue

Creative Possibilities

There are also, I believe, some great challenges for creative cooperation between Roman Catholics and Muslims. In addition to sharing and in some cases even re-appropriating our respective traditions, there are positive challenges which the modern world offers to people of faith. These new challenges offer us the opportunity to move beyond the wounds and prejudices of the past and to move together into a new future. I am thinking particularly of questions of justice, peace and the integrity of creation. Neither Roman Catholics nor Muslims have developed an articulated theology concerning responsibility for the planet. This is to a great extent due to the fact that such questions are new. Their very newness, however, opens up the possibility of exploring our traditions for indications of a common approach to the questions of modern ecology. In Christianity (and Judaism) humans are presented as having been created in the image and likeness of God (Genesis 1:26-27) and given the earth to fill and subdue (Gn.1:28). The psalmist proclaims "The highest heavens belong to God, but the earth he has given to the children of Adam" (Psalms 115:16). In creation the psalmist

sees God reflected: "The heavens declare the glory of God, the vault of heaven proclaims his handiwork" (Psalms 19:1). God announces in the Quran that the human he is about to create is khallfa, his vicar (2:31). The reader/hearer of the Quran is informed that God has not created the heavens and the earth for no reason (38:28). Together Roman Catholics and Muslims are challenged to show how our individual traditions call for responsibility toward the creation which ultimately sprang from and will return to God. We are further challenged to see how our traditions can together provide a framework of faith in which human beings can live harmoniously with high technology and a fragile environment

In addition both Catholicism and Islam are challenged by the dialogue once again to explore topics such as prophecy in Christian theology and the notion of tahrif in Islam, merely to name two

Ultimate Challenge

The most important challenge to the Roman Catholic–Muslim dialogue is perhaps also the most obvious and the simplest. That challenge is to believe that the work of the dialogue is an action of God's grace. We must, however, pause before too readily acknowledging this

If the dialogue is an action of God's grace, the responsibility of the dialogue partners is great. In both traditions God holds human beings responsible for their actions.⁽⁶⁾ To turn an action of God's grace into a debate or a special-interest lobby would be nothing less than sinful. Recognizing in the dialogue a graced moment, the challenge is to open ourselves to this moment and to the uncertainties which it brings. God does not need us to defend him; that is not what we are here for. We are here as a people who follow and believe in a mysterious transcendent Other who has spoken to us and revealed himself to us

Where God will lead us in the dialogue is not yet known to us. However, if we believe that the dialogue is an act of God's grace then we are challenged to find the courage to follow the dialogue through with faith and conviction

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