

Session Four: Session Four: Practical and Social Theology II
DO MUSLIMS AND CHRISTIANS NEED RECONCILIATION:
ANOTHER MIDDLE EAST PERSPECTIVE

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Is there a Muslim Christians conflict?

Top world politicians assert that there is no Muslim--Christian conflict. On the other hand thinkers and writers on both sides, admit the conflict. Wahhabis thinkers and Jihadists on the Islamic side write and urge Muslims by speech, preaching and publications to defeat the Kufar (Infidels) who worship the cross (Christians).

In the year 1967 A.D, when three Muslim Arabic countries (that is Egypt, Syria, and Jordan) were defeated by Israel, Israel as a result occupied the West bank, Golan Heights and the Sinai peninsula. That war for the Muslims of the Middle East was a great humiliation. A modern Franco - Arabic sociologist described the feelings of the humiliated people as follows:

They suffer the sense of defeat, and their skills have become obsolete, and all of what they produce is worth nothing compared to what produced by the West, and their attachment to traditional medicine is a form of superstition, . . . their religion is accused of barbarism, and their language is studied by only a handful of specialists, while they are forced to study the languages of others, if they want to maintain communicating with the rest of the world" He added "So their personality is wounded at heart and their identity is threatened; they are in a world is not for them, where they feel that they are strangers and outsiders and outcasts and they do not have things to lose, for that it is not strange for them to chose Samson's way to kill their enemies by killing themselves.¹

That applies partly for the Muslims of the day. Such feeling of humiliation among many, if not the majority, of Middle East Muslims, paved the way for the modern Jihadists² to propose a way of salvation for the Islamic nation.

The Jihadists' prescribed salvation is to adopt the ideologies of the fourteenth-century Muslim scholar named Ibn-Taymīyah (1328 CE). The Jihad in Afghanistan against the Soviets was the ignition for the jihadists to rise up and to discover the power of Jihad.

The Al-Qaida terrorist organization found a fertile soil in Afghanistan war. Later, on September 11, 2001, Al-Qaida launched the horrific attacks on the World Trade Center in New York and the Pentagon in Washington.

These attacks caused a major shock for the civilized world. Such horrific attacks led to urgent calls for a better Muslim-Christian mutual understanding: so the need for dialogue has forced itself onto the agenda.

¹ أمين معلوف. الهويات القاتلة. ص 106-107.

² Jihad: is the Islamic holy war.

The Term "Reconciliation"

Reconciliation is the irrepressible action of a holy God toward the unholy people to replace the hostility and brokenness of their relationship with peace (shalom) and love. Although the Biblical term "reconciliation" is found in the NT only in the Pauline letters, its use there echoes the Septuagint (LXX) where it refers to fractured relationship being restored to health (2 Macc. 1: 5; 7: 33; 8: 29; cf. Jer. 31: 39-40). A much broader resonance is located in the ancient church's Greco-Roman setting where reconciliation includes peacemaking and stories of a mediator who acts to bring reconciliation between two warring parties.

In Pauline thought, the idea of a merciful mediator who exchanges peace for hostility and thereby restores friendship to a broken relationship achieves clear focus. Due to 2 Cor. 5:16-21, the divine act and the human effect of reconciliation define the message (v. 19) and ministry (v. 18) of God's people. The source is Christ's death and resurrection, which makes it possible for all people to live for Christ rather than for themselves (vv. 14-15). Christ is the mediator who alone acts faithfully on God's behalf to inaugurate a new dispensation of divine love (cf. Rom 5:8-10). This now makes it possible for anyone who is in Christ to understand and practice life as "new creation" (2Cor. 5:16-16). God reconciles the entire world through Christ, and he does so for his own glory (vv. 18-19).³

The term "Islam"

In brief, Mohammed, the prophet of Islam and his companions, and subsequent generations of Muslims have been guided by the Qur'ān, which they have understood as a **continuation** and **completion** of God's revelations to humankind.

The Qur'ān speaks of many prophets (*anbiyā'*, singular *nabī*) and messengers (*rusul*, sg. *rasūl*) who functioned as agents of God's revelation. Particular emphasis is laid on the revelations through Moses (*Alkitab*)⁴ the Torah and "Isa" Jesus (*Al- Enjel*)⁵ the Gospel, and their respective communities of faith or "People of the Book" (*ahl al-kitāb*).

On one hand the Qur'ān speaks of the prophets in equality: "Do not differentiate between one of them."⁶ But on the other hand the Qur'ān accused the "People of the Book" (*ahl al-kitāb*) of changing the truth. Both Jews and Christians, in later times, diverted the truth of their books: the Jews changed the "*Turah*"⁷ and the Christians changed the truth of the "*Enjel*" by saying Jesus is God.⁸

³ Robert W Wall, "Reconciliation" in *Global Wesleyan Dictionary of Theology* (Kansas City: Beacon Hill, 2013), 448.

⁴ 46: 12 (Surat Al-Akaf Vers 12)

⁵ 57: 27 (Al-Haded Vers 27)

⁶ 2:136 (*Surat Al-Bakarah Vers136*).

⁷ 2: 75 (*Surat Al-Bakarah Vers75*)

⁸ 5: 16 (Surat Al-Maidah Verse 16)

What is the need: is it Christian-Islam Dialogue or a Reconciliation?

Dialogue is not Reconciliation

Both Christian and Islamic faiths were borne and started in Middle East but a period of 700 years apart. In general the history of Muslim-Christian interaction includes periods of great tension, hostility, and open war as well as times of uneasy toleration, peaceful coexistence, and cooperation.⁹ Christians responded in daily life to the Muslim's questions.

Christians of the Middle East encountered Islam. In the beginning Christians aimed to understand what Islam is. One major example from the early days of Islam, perhaps the first dialogue between a group of Christians and Islam was the sending a delegation of sixty Christian leaders of Najran¹⁰ to Mohamed, where Mohamed received those delegates in his mosque. After three days, the Christian delegation decided to conclude the mission. In spite of doctrinal disagreements, the Prophet signed a treaty with the people of Najran.¹¹

Later in history two major dialogues happened during the rule of Abbasids. One was between the Nestorian archbishop Timothy the first (727-832 A.D) and the Abbasids Caliph "Al-Mahdi" in the beginning of the ninth A.D century.¹² The second dialogue was at the time Abbasid Caliph "Al- Ma'mun" (813-834 A.D). The dialogue was between Between Prince Abdullah al-Hashemite who was Muslim and the Al-Kendy¹³ Prince Abdul-Maseh, who was Christian. That dialogue is recorded in a booklet without publisher.¹⁴

Christian positions towards Islam

In recent times there were intended "Christian-Muslim dialogues" both in the west and in Middle East. A Middle East modern Christian writer reflected on "Christian- Muslim dialogue", and classified the positions of the Christians towards Islam in dialogue as five positions¹⁵

- 1 Attack. He found some Christians see Islam as a threat to the existence of the Christian community and its future. This approach argued that Islam was created on the love of intrusion and conquest. This position is not only taken in the Middle East, but as well echoed in the writings of western Christian conservative writers such as Mark Steyn¹⁶ and many others.

⁹ The History recording that Christians worshiped with Muslims in the building of church of John the Baptist in Damascus during the years 634 - 705 A.D. at the year 705 A.D the same church converted to be a Mosque.

¹⁰ Najran is a town in the southern parts of Arabia, close to the boarder of Yemen. In the days of Mohamed all the inhabitants were Christians.

¹¹ سيرة ابن هشام ج.2. ص215.

¹² The dialogue between the archbishop Timothy and the Abbasids Caliph is recorded in an Arabic booklet, prepared by the Catholic Father Luis Sheku.

¹³ Kindy, related to Kindah an Arabic Christian tribe which had a royal line in it.

¹⁴ A copy of the booklet is well known at this time in Lebanon, the researcher has a copy of it.

¹⁵ مشير باسل عون. الأسس اللاهوتية في بناء حوار المسيحية والإسلام. ص54-58. دار المشرق. بيروت. 2003م.

¹⁶ <http://www.commdiginews.com>

- 2 Defence. The holders of this position believe that the best defence is a certificate for their commitment to Christian faith.
- 3 Evangelize Muslims and win them to Christian faith. This position sees the non-Christians as in a great error and to save them is the duty of Christians.
- 4 Postpone. This position prefers to stay away and not to evangelize Muslims.
- 5 Equality. This position holds that God created all human beings in his own image and likeness. So Christians should consider Muslims made equal to them, and they have human and spiritual full appreciation for each other. They have to know each other and quote from each other in the intellectual and theological fields.

In giving some attention to the western positions on the “Christian-Muslim dialogue”, it is obvious that since the second half of the twentieth century, organized dialogue meetings have proliferated between Christians and Muslims.

Several motives have propelled the contemporary dialogue movement. These include desires to foster understanding, to stimulate communication, to correct stereotypes, to work on specific problems of mutual concern, to explore similarities and differences, and to facilitate means of witness and cooperation. The pragmatic need for better understanding and cooperation among adherents in the world's two largest communities of faith—Christianity and Islam—is particularly acute. Together Christians and Muslims comprise almost half the world's population, so the way in which they relate is bound to have profound consequences for both communities and for the world.¹⁷

What drives Christian-Muslim dialogue?

The factors motivating the “Christian-Muslim dialogue” in the west are many but can probably be reduced to three:

First: a religious-political factor. The accelerating expansion of Islam today which has significant influence in Africa, throughout Asia, Europe, and the Americas. The Muslim population today is around 1.57 billion, making up over 23% of the world population.¹⁸ One hundred years ago there were less than 200 million Muslims in the world, most of whom lived in traditionally Islamic countries. Compare that with nearly 600 million Christians worldwide which amounted to roughly a 3 to 1 ratio.¹⁹ Research done by Pew Research Center in America estimates that within the next 40 years the Muslim population will more than double the rate of global births, which are expected to rise by 35 percent. Given those numbers, in the next 60 years there will be more Muslims than Christians in the world.²⁰ So in general the first concern of west towards Islam is about the huge and rapid expansion of Islam in numbers in the world, which can be understood as a kind of **religious-political** issue in the first place.

¹⁷ Oxford Islamic Studies Online Muslim-Christian Dialogue.

¹⁸ According to a 2010 study and released January 2011.

¹⁹ <http://www.commdiginews.com>

²⁰ <http://www.commdiginews.com>.

Second: security factors. The terrorist attacks on the west are a disturbing factor for the western peace and stability of way of life.

Third: commerce and economy factors. The Islamic countries have both a huge market and huge oil reserves. Those factors are urging the west to conduct a "Christian Islamic dialogue." This kind of dialogue is motivated by pragmatic reasons, to smoothen the relations and give a hope to end terrorists attacks, but on the other hand such dialogue replaces real reconciliation.

"Be reconciled to God"

What Islam-Christianity dialogue cannot do, Jesus Christ can do through His ambassadors. "We are Christ's ambassadors and God is using us to speak to you. We urge you, as though Christ himself were here pleading with you, "Be reconciled to God" (2 Cor. 5:20)

A commentator wrote: "Paul has a natural pride in using this dignified term "ambassador" for himself and all ministers. The ambassador has to be "*persona grata*" with both countries (the one that he/she represents and the one to which he goes). Paul was Christ's "Legate" to act in His behalf and in His stead. The ambassador's message is: be ye reconciled to God. The message is to men from God."²¹ So Christian believers have to represent Jesus Christ to Muslims.

Representing Jesus Christ means to do and to act the same way as Jesus Christ, who is "God the Son became man through the Virgin Mary."²² The unlimited God took on Himself limited human flesh, to save all human kind. Christ ambassador's message is "Be reconciled to God." The message is directed to all men and women, from God.

In 1Cor. 9: 20-23 Paul imaged himself as the ambassador "*persona grata*" (V. 20.) and unto the Jews I became as a Jew, that I might gain the Jews; to them that are under the law, as under the law, that I might gain them that are under the law (V. 21) to them that are without law, as without law, (being not without law to God, but under the law to Christ,) that I might gain them that are without law. (V. 22) to the weak became I as weak, that I might gain the weak: I am made all things to all *men*, that I might by all means save some. (V. 23) and this I do for the gospel's sake, that I might be partaker thereof with *you*".

Paul knew how to put the gospel to the Jews without compromise and without offence" and he did the same to the Gentiles in the same way.²³ Paul identified himself with all to reconcile all to God. Another way of putting this might be, "Paul incarnated to all, Jews and Gentiles, by became all for all."

The Roman Catholic Church has worked on its theology in the Second Vatican Council and stated:

²¹ Archibald Thomas Robertson, *Word Pictures in the New Testament*. Vol IV (Louisville: Broadman Press, 1930), 233.

²² J Kenneth Grider, "Incarnation" in *Beacon Dictionary of Theology* (Kansas City: Beacon Hill, 1983), 279.

²³ Robertson, 147.

Religions, however, that are bound up with an advanced culture have struggled to answer the same questions by means of more refined concepts and a more developed language. Thus in Hinduism, men contemplate the divine mystery and express it through an inexhaustible abundance of myths and through searching philosophical inquiry. They seek freedom from the anguish of our human condition either through ascetical practices or profound meditation or a flight to God with love and trust. Again, Buddhism, in its various forms, realizes the radical insufficiency of this changeable world; it teaches a way by which men, in a devout and confident spirit, may be able either to acquire the state of perfect liberation, or attain, by their own efforts or through higher help, supreme illumination. Likewise, other religions found everywhere try to counter the restlessness of the human heart, each in its own manner, by proposing "ways," comprising teachings, rules of life, and sacred rites.

The Catholic Church rejects nothing that is true and holy in these religions. She regards with sincere reverence those ways of conduct and of life, those precepts and teachings which, though differing in many aspects from the ones she holds and sets forth, nonetheless often reflect a ray of that Truth which enlightens all men.²⁴

On the side of the Roman Catholic Church this is an act of opening new channels with other religions, including Islam. But that is only a door opened for relationship with Muslims, rather than a door for reconciliation, it is well understood in the light of Catholic's beliefs, which see that the reconciliation happens only inside the church, since *Catholics believe that "there is no salvation outside the church"*

Conclusions: The Needs of the Middle East

The Roman Catholic Church's role in Middle East can be stated as "only to do religious dialogue for more understanding" which is reconciliation between humans, but not the reconciliation of God and humans in the work of Jesus Christ. The Catholic position cannot serve the real needs of the Middle East for real reconciliation.

For Islam the different religious communities are explained as a part of God's plan; if God had so willed, the Qur'ān asserts, humankind would be one community. Diversity among the communities provides a test for people of faith: "Compete with one another in good works. To God you shall all return and He will tell you (the truth) about that which you have been disputing" (5:48).

At the same time, the People of the Book are urged to "come to a common word" on the understanding of the unity of God (*tawhīd*) and proper worship (e.g., 3:64, 4:171, 5:82, and 29:46). Christians, in particular, are chided for having distorted the revelation of God. Traditional Christian doctrines of the divinity of Jesus and the Trinity are depicted as compromising the unity and transcendence of God (e.g., 5:72–75, 5:117, and 112:3).

There are also verses urging Muslims to fight, under certain circumstances, those who have been given a book but "practice not the religion of truth" (9:29)"²⁵.

²⁴ Catholic Information Network (CIN). Declaration on the Relation of the Church to Non-Christian Religions *Nostra Aetate*. 3.

²⁵ Oxford Islamic studies on line .Muslim-Christian Dialogue.

From a Muslim point of view, dialogue is seeking a better understanding, without tolerating the message of the Qur'ān, which rejects the Christian teaching on Trinity. Islam seeks a reconciliation between humans, but comes up short on making the reconciliation between God and Humans.

Peoples of the Middle East in general suffer:

- The lack of Human rights, lack of Social justice, lack of justice in wealth distribution, lack of Health care.
- Lack of human freedom.
- High Illiteracy rate.
- Lack of Ecology – there is a lack of awareness especially in areas where the environment is badly damaged.
- The corruption of the Educational System on all levels by mixing it with religious superstition (Prophetical Medicine and others)

The people of the Middle East desperately needs to “be reconciled to God” which includes a reconciliation with the self, the others, and with the environment. This reconciliation in the Middle East will reflect positively on the whole world troubling major issue, that is the Modern terrorism.

Recommendation

1. To meet Middle East needs, there have to be ambassadors, who are willing to identify themselves with the people of the Middle East, not with Christianity as a religion. Religion limits Christ's ambassadors from reaching Muslims.
2. Middle East people do not need to convert from Islam to Christianity, but they need to complete their "Islam" by accepting the Liberating Jesus, who is the only one who can help them to overcome their many difficulties (The lack of Human Rights, lack of Social Justice, lack of justice in wealth distribution, lack of health care, lack of human freedom, high illiteracy rate, lack of ecological awareness, the corruption of the educational system, religious superstition)
3. Are there ambassadors for Christ who are willing to be called: "Muslim ministers of Christ"?

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