Peace and Reconciliation:
The Constructive Dimension of Christian – Muslim Interaction

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As we witness the tragic persecutions and killings of Christian minorities by extremist Muslim groups in some unstable countries around the world, the prospect of Christian – Muslim relations does not seem very promising. These terrible acts of crime inevitably leave their marks in our memories and can define relationships with people in our own local environment in a negative way. Stereotypes and prejudices towards Muslims are now all too common and have led to the widespread phenomenon of Islamophobia. This is primarily due to the fact that believers on both sides do not have many close encounters with each other. Muslims are simply guilty by association, by the very fact that they identify themselves as Muslim. To present however only this side of Christian – Muslim dynamics would be an unfair assessment.

While many of us usually serve as a filter for the bad news catered by popular media – which generally displays a lack of ethical journalism by presenting only one aspect of a story – we tend to be oblivious to the many good initiatives happening all around the world in terms of Christian – Muslim engagement. Good news makes bad news as the mantra goes, though from the divine perspective the good always outweighs the bad since it is much harder to accomplish.

Those of us who have been deeply involved in interfaith work between our two communities can testify that there is hope on the horizon and reason to celebrate many accomplishments. I am here reminded of two Qur’anic verses which poignantly read, “Perhaps you hate a thing and it is good for you; and perhaps you love a thing and it is bad for you. And God knows, while you know not” (Q 2:216). Or as Q 13:11 puts it, “God does not change the condition of a people until they change what is in themselves.”

From a Muslim faith perspective, this is not to say that God approves of the evil acts in the world although He is in full control of all what is happening. While His universal will allows for evil choices to be made as part of the blessing of human freedom, His legislative will expressed through divine revelation and guidance radically condemns such horrific acts and will hold those unrepentant criminals accountable on the Day of Judgment.

Rather, what the above verses allude to is a call to constructive and positive action issued to people of faith. Every time I see these heartbreaking and devastating images of innocent civilians killed, I turn to myself and ask, “What is my response to this?” Do I simply complain and fall into despair about the atrocities in the world committed in the name of religion? Or do I display a pro-active attitude and try to change things in my own microcosm. Instead of asking, “God where were You?” we should pose the question, “Where am I? And how do I utilize the great potential, skills and faculties God has bestowed on me as a caretaker of this planet? And
there is so much each of us can do in that regard. The burden of responsibility should be felt on every shoulder. An escapist or passive attitude can therefore not be an answer.

This brings me back to the much neglected second dimension of Christian – Muslim interaction. As horrible as the events of 9/11 were, they have resulted in so many interfaith alliances and lasting community ties. Since that catastrophic day, many Muslims and Christians have realized that they can no longer remain in their isolated worlds by living side by side but had to reach out to one another. For better understanding, for mutual respect and more importantly to be witness to God’s voice of hope and love in the midst of so much confusion, anxiety and fear. Those people realize that there is no better time to stand up for their values than when those very same are under attack.

In our American context, we see an effort to establish the interfaith movement as a purposed and public enterprise similar to the civil, women or environmental movements. Religious diversity continues to grow both in demographic fact and in salience in our public discourse. One of the most important areas of positive change is in education. The American Academy of Religion (AAR) has recently added an interfaith and interreligious studies group, the earmark of legitimation of a focal area in the academy. The Association of Theological Schools (ATS) has developed a set of criteria that require schools to examine how they deal with religious others. AAR and ATS are involved in establishing accreditation standards.

The US government recognizes now the potential of interreligious cooperation and has established the White House Office on Faith and Neighborhood Partnerships and helped to develop recommendations related to training, representation, and access. Though interreligious cooperation is often not the primary purpose or focus in some cases, it is becoming valued as a secondary means towards more primary purposes. Interreligious cooperation, for example, is seen as a means towards working on immigration, poverty, development, or veterans’ issues, one that builds social cohesion and healthy communities.

Since 2011, the United Nations has celebrated World Interfaith Harmony Week each year in the first week of February. As the organizers state,

The World Interfaith Harmony Week provides a platform—one week in a year—when all interfaith groups and other groups of goodwill can show the world what a powerful movement they are. The thousands of events organized by these groups often go unnoticed not only by the general public, but also by other groups themselves. This week will allow for these groups to become aware of each other and strengthen the movement by building ties and avoiding duplicating each other’s efforts.

Another important effort is A Common Word initiative. This initiative was launched by a group of Muslim scholars in 2007 as a response to Pope Benedict’s XVI speech at the University of Regensburg in 2006. It invites Muslim and Christian leaders to enter into dialogue on the basis of two common fundamental religious commandments: love of God, and love of neighbor. This should be undertaken without compromising one’s own beliefs or jeopardizing the integrity of one’s faith.
Since 2002, the former Archbishop of Canterbury Dr. Rowan Williams has chaired the annual Building Bridges Seminar which brought together a range of internationally recognized Christian and Muslim scholars for intensive study. Texts from the Christian and Islamic traditions are used to begin conversations on a range of subjects: scripture; prophecy; the common good; justice and rights; human nature; interpretation; science and religion; tradition and modernity; prayer; death, resurrection, and human destiny. The annual program, each lasting three days, still continues under the leadership of Georgetown University after Dr. Williams took up his post at Cambridge.

One of the largest Muslim umbrella organizations in the United States, the Islamic Society of North America (ISNA) has long partnered with religious communities on joint initiatives. These interreligious programs continue to dispel misperceptions, shape sincere relationships of faith and ethics, and create a platform to cooperate on social justice issues for the common good. Throughout their years of experience, ISNA and its many partners have collected resources to assist in interfaith dialogue and understanding. These helpful tools are accessible to all communities and individuals.

These are really only few examples among the numerous interfaith initiatives taking place between Christians and Muslims. Despite these positive developments in Christian-Muslim relations, religious intolerance is still a concern that threatens to undermine the hard work of devoted activists over the decades. Religious literacy is dangerously low in the United States, even among the faithful. At a time when Islam is particularly prominent in public discourse, only 38% of Americans say they actually know someone who is Muslim.

It remains therefore vital to build on these well-established initiatives and increase the efforts in the area of Christian – Muslim relations. In this context, two key components are important to keep in mind when carrying on this work. First, as has been argued by Dr. Ian S. Markham, “the future of interreligious relations needs strong tradition-constituted accounts of how to handle and relate to religious diversity.” As he explains it, this means that the reasons for dialogue should be based on the foundations of our tradition and not on principles transcending the tradition. In the modern era, there is a tendency to enter into dialogue out of a commitment to “peaceful relations” or “mutual love.” Such reasons though, as Markham correctly points out, would not persuade someone who is deeply connected to a certain faith.

Second, the twenty-first century needs more localized accounts of Christian-Muslim engagement. In order to ensure that, faith communities need to establish systems and mechanisms for conversation. Certainly, a characteristically diverse city can resist social tensions between religious communities much more easily if it has created such mechanisms and forums. That this is a major challenge to tackle remains true both for Christian and Muslim congregations. The latter mostly operate on the basis of voluntary work without having the sufficient intellectual and economic resources fully available. To dedicate sufficient energy to these types of projects is therefore difficult. Christian parishes have also limited resources to

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create these local mechanisms. However, local communities can overcome these obstacles by joining their forces and create powerful faith alliances for the future. Christian-Muslim dialogue has come a long way and in my judgment will continue to enhance this constructive dimension.