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GROUNDS FOR CHRISTIAN-MUSLIM DIALOGICAL RELATIONS

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Introduction

Dialogue between religions is not something new. Dialogue normally means conversation. People belonging to different religions can speak to each other in a friendly manner. Though Christian-Muslim relations has a bitter past and still Christians should try to make dialogue with Muslims, recommended by the II Vatican Council, since dialogue is meaningful in itself. Dialogue can be done on three levels: on religious level; we can dialogue and collaborate in the promotion of common human and social issues and values and it can also be made for reconciliation before we go on to conversation. So dialogue can be for reconciliation sake and to collaborate at the socio-political level and dialogue at the religious level. In this small article I have paid attention to dialogue between Christian-Muslim relations on socio-political level in a local Church set-up. But such a situation is still far away from one's reach.

Council's Document

What shall we do? Where shall we go from here? We need to find a solution and I have mentioned in this regard dialogue between Christians and Muslims. Soon after the II Vatican council in 1965 the Church not just recommends but exhorts all Christians to get involved in dialogue with the Muslims. The document reads: "The Church therefore has this exhortation for her sons: prudently and lovingly, through dialogue and collaboration with the followers of other religions, and in witness of Christian faith and life, acknowledge, preserve, and promote the spiritual and moral goods found among these men, as well as the values in their Society and culture."¹ So Dialogue with non-Christian Religions in view of building relationship is in evitable. Further in line with our study the Document says: "the Muslims, also come from the Stock of Abraham's covenant with God.

Though they do not acknowledge Jesus as God, they revere Him as a prophet. They also honour Mary, His virgin mother; at times they call on her, too, with devotion. In addition they await the Day of Judgment when God will give each man his due after raising him up. Consequently, they prize the moral life, and give worship to God especially through prayer, almsgiving, and fasting."² And again, "As the sacred Synod searches into the mystery of the Church, it recalls the spiritual bond linking the people of the New Covenant with Abraham's stock."³ Scripturally speaking it should also to be noted that, "The Church cannot forget that she received the revelation of the Old Testament through the people (the Jews) with whom God in his inexpressible mercy deigned to establish the Ancient Covenant (Covenant with Israel through Moses and Abraham). Nor can she forget that she draws sustenance from the root of that Good olive tree onto which have been grafted the wild olive branches of the Gentiles (cf. Rom. 11:17-24). Indeed, the Church believes that by His cross Christ, our Peace, reconciled Jews and Gentiles, making them both one in Himself (cf. Eph. 2:14-16)."⁴ The recommendations from the Council's Document are ample enough reasons why Christians should have relationship with Muslim brothers and Sisters.

But generally speaking we are hesitant about coming together for dialogue from both sides. The past history of what the Christians did to Muslim after recapturing of Jerusalem in July 1099 is the climax of all the shocking events recorded by Stephen Runciman in a chapter with the deliberately agonizing title "The Triumph of the Cross at al-Aqsa mosque" is a reminder of the past which makes the Muslim look at Christians in suspicion. S. Runciman comments on the past, "It was this bloodthirsty proof of Christian fanaticism that recreated the fanaticism of Islam. When, later, wiser Latins in the

East sought to find some basis on which Christian and Muslim could work together, the memory of the massacre stood always in their way.”⁵ While this is the past, one of the sobering developments in recent history, among Christians as well as Muslims, is the spread of trends that are often designated as “fundamentalist”, a convenient but imprecise and therefore somewhat misleading generic term to characterize a number of comparable yet widely divergent tendencies. Let us not talk about militant fanatics who do not need to be commented upon. Another more important phenomenon is the religious-withdrawal symptom we witness in many circles, a sort of religious isolationism. Those who want to protect and maintain the reassuring safety look upon the outsider, ‘the other’, not as a source of renewal and enrichment, but as a threat. There are many other factors, considered by most of us to be largely beyond our control and such a feeling has an impact on Christian-Muslim relations in our time. Still there are many Muslims who talk about Christianity and West. There is no point continue talking about the ‘Christian west’. However, the atmosphere in which we meet or avoid each other is determined not only by religious and semi-religious statements but also by purely secular discussions and events. Here I feel that our future relations will be less affected by even the most impressive theological pronouncements than by our action and inaction on issues such as the use of world’s natural resources, questions of poverty, justice, equality, discrimination, marginalization and the delicate problem of equal treatment of all nations.

While these issues, beside others, seem overwhelming, there are also hopeful signs of a growing mutual understanding between Muslims and Christians, especially in the field of social ethics. News about the activities Christians in Latin America and observations in other parts of the world have made many Muslims aware of the fact that there are Christians who see their involvement in social, economic, and political struggles as an integral part of their faith commitment. This, at least to some Muslims, comes as a surprise and aware of the fact that there are Christians who see their involvement in social, economic, and political struggles as an integral

part of their faith commitment rather than faith and state as separate entities. As FazlurRahman frequently defended his reflection on the Quran and the interpretation of the law should be done not only in the light of the moral objectives and principles of the Quran, but also in terms of the change in the social situation. Often Islam is misunderstood as a religion of laws. Mr. F. Rahman would caution against legalistic fixation of Islam. But Islam never lost its relevance for the issues of society: Islam has had, as its central task – and this in its very genesis –to construct a social order on a viable ethical basis.⁶

Renewed interest for dialogue

As noted above, we find also in many Christian circles a renewed interest in questions of religion and society and a growing awareness of the need to find a balance between the recognition of civil liberties on the one hand and a concern for the well-being of society in which God has placed them and explore possibilities for joint action. This possibility for joint action is my concern in our age of dialogue. Action takes the primary role first not on all social issues which is impossible in a parish situation. That is why I lay the stress on local Church pastors being trained to work in parishes to accommodate all communities of people into account and start working mainly on two issues to start with, namely, poverty and equality of women. The training centres, the seminaries, should take into account the social situations of people living around the Parish Churches. Many young ordained pastors do not know the parish situations and the types of people live around. It is here that I would strongly recommend the trainees should go out and live with the people and know their life’s situations first and come back to reflect over what they have observed and reflect over it again and again with the help of their masters who lecture them on Scripture and Theology. Such a mode of action is not once and for all but it should be as regular as possible in a fast changing world. Many of the pastors do not know their own people they are working with. What the pastors are taught in the training centers only makes them as I would call it a

administratively 'academically isolated people'. We need to get out of this ghetto attitude and mentality to make our work and dialogue more effective.

Living with the people is a challenging future for every future pastor. Dialogue requires not just listening to people, but to understand their life style in an in-depth level and willingness to rethink again and again in a meeting level but get enriched by new insights in a pastoral situation in a parish. This can lead the pastor to full commitment and change of attitude if one is honest enough to himself and to his God. As Maurice Wiles says, "full commitment and openness to change are not incompatible, that loyalty and self-criticism can coexist."⁷ This presupposes that we take the "absoluteness" of our faith commitments as seriously as the openness to change. The ultimate value of any dialogue is perhaps determined less by the extent to which it changes the perspectives of others than by the way it affects and changes us. This is not just in the meeting level but on action level much more. Understood in this way, inter-faith dialogue is an extremely weighty matter. Care-giving by pastors to one's own community should reach out to members of other community in equal measure. The pastor does not need to preach but get involved in action first and then he can preach about what he has done and why he has done a particular programme. The pastor cannot make a project or a programme to implement before he lives, meets and understands the life situation of his community. By action, after studying the community, we may first silently witness to the people whatever religion the other belongs by our meetings and actions than anything else.

Earlier we touched upon why it seems important to build relations with the community members of Muslims. As pastors everyone who are going to work in a parish context should live with people and study the communities and their problems in order to develop within oneself a commitment, not just for the sake of dialogue alone but to development an attitude within oneself to commitment to members of other faith, here in our context with the Muslims, and work towards on two vital issues, namely, poverty and gender equality. Thus

we build and grow in our relations with each other as Muslim and Christians, for we need to gratefully recognize as belonging to "the imprints of God's mercy that the Quran and the St. Paul himself admonish us not to ignore.

Dialogues are the vital need on conditions that they are based on social issues. The pastor and his community should never think of dialogue on dogmatic or religious issues. We may soon end up as enemies than friends. These dialogues if started with discussion and big talks may fizzle out. The pastor should be careful about this. So he should first start at least with one programme with his own Christian community. They should be based on action oriented projects interspersed now and then with short, catchy, in-depth dialogue. Work to remove hunger and starvation takes the priority first. Let the other communities see what is happening inside Christian parish community and slowly we may able to extend the programme and build our relationship with them.

Conversion is one of the elements that the Christian community should avoid at all costs. Any pastor or a community which indulges in such an act may only lead the pastor himself and his community not just to be suspected upon their life and work and about their programme but bring in animosity and this may ultimately lead to violence between two communities. This will jeopardize the whole purpose of the programme a failure. Even distribution of leaflets to others about the Christian community's life and work should be totally avoided. On this particular point the life and work of Mother Theresa is a good example. She even openly spoke about it when interviewed that she never converted even a single soul to Christianity in all her life by her work and fame.

Conclusion

I have, in the introduction has written that religious dialogue between Christians and Muslims can be made on three levels namely, on religious, socio-political and on reconciliation levels not with the hidden intention of conversion but purely on pastoral grounds. Keeping in mind the bitter past in the history of mankind, I have kept

aside the religious level since it is not going bear fruit. Reconciliation during dialogue may be a necessary element when the issue comes up during dialogue and when if it does happen both sides can with a generous heart forgive one another unconditionally to build relationship, since history of our bitter past cannot be re-written. What is within our capacity is the right intention to build relationship by jointly working for social issues and in this regard I recommend poverty and gender equality which are common to both religions and the society at large beginning in a small parish set-up.

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