

Deepening the Dialogue:

The Future of Muslim Christian Relations

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I am delighted to have this opportunity to address this assembly in this historic place and I want to thank Dr Serageldin for his warm welcome. I am admirer of Dr Serageldin's abilities as a scholar, thinker and teacher and I want to thank him for his huge contribution to the World Economic Forum, of which I am a part, and all he does to bring people and communities together.

There is another person I want to recognise and that is my colleague and fellow Christian Bishop, Dr Mouneer Anis. Formerly a physician who had dedicated his life to healing bodies, Dr. Anis now seeks to heal souls and communities. He is a courageous, wise and – in the best sense – a holy man and I am privileged to call him a friend. Through Bishop Anis's vision today we open the Alexandria School of Theology which we hope and pray will become an important centre for research, study and dialogue in the days to come.

To be in this place, the famous Bibliotheca Alexandrina to launch the Alexandria School of Theology, is for me an enormous pleasure. The famous Royal Library of Alexandria was once the largest library in the world, holding perhaps 500,000 books. Its destruction robbed the world of great treasures but it is a delight that under Dr. Sirag el Din's Presidency the new library of Alexandria is fast becoming a fitting successor to the great library the world lost so many centuries ago.

Probably, like me, you are dismayed by the controversy and conflict that troubles our world. Wherever we look we see the world torn by division, bitterness, hatred and war. Yet neither the Quran nor the Bible actually encourages conflict. Both Islam and Christianity seek to promote peace and concord.

Consider the deep polarisation that exists today. In the Western mind, Muslim societies are associated with terrorism, lack of human rights, despotism, poverty and little freedom of speech. For Muslims, the West is the place of decadence, corruption, materialism, poverty of the spirit. We cannot deny that such stereotypes contain a glimmer of truth – but all stereotypes distort and only confirm our worst prejudices.

Following the destruction of the World Trade Centre, the Financial Times of Feb 27th 2002 arranged a unique public opinion poll which canvassed 10,000 people in nine Islamic countries –Saudi Arabia, Pakistan, Indonesia, Jordan, Morocco, Iran, Kuwait, Turkey and Lebanon. The survey revealed populations deeply at odds with the West in general and the United States in particular. The United States was regarded as ‘ruthless, aggressive, conceited, arrogant, easily provoked and biased in its foreign policy’. The respondents believed that ‘western nations do not respect Arab or Islamic values; do not support Arab causes and do not exhibit fairness towards Arabs’.

As far as the West is concerned I do not have the fruits of a similar opinion poll to appeal to. What I do know from personal experience, gathered over many years, is that the roots of Islamophobia are real and deep. It is assumed by many in Britain that Muslims wish to take over ‘our’ country and if we allow them to enter Britain in significant numbers they will in time make the country Islamic. Even though the facts are that the growth of Islam in Britain is mainly through ethnic communities entering the country and not through conversion, such worries persist. Muslims are treated with suspicion and little attempt is made to engage with their communities and to understand them. I am glad to say, however, that the churches are playing a positive role in reaching out to Muslim communities in the UK though much more still needs to be done.

Perhaps like me, again, you are not content with such polarisation and distortion and, perhaps like me, you believe there has to be a better way of engaging with fellow human beings.

So how may we deepen the dialogue?

First, we must ask: what is dialogue? I am sure that in all traditions there exists an understanding of dialogue as an attempt to convert others to 'my point of view'. In the New Testament of Christians the verbs for dialogue ('dialogemai' and 'dialogizomai') may be properly understood as arguments for reaching the truth about God revealed in Jesus Christ. One of the earliest books after the writing of the New Testament is Justin Martyr's '*Dialogue with Trypho, a Jew*'. Written from a Christian point of view, it is a learned and courteous dialogue which results in Trypho's conversion. Dialogue, as a deliberate attempt to change another's mind, has been the classical method of religious dialogue for many centuries. I understand that this has also been the practice in Islam, following the Q'ranic injunction, 3:64.

Now, to be sure, there is nothing wrong in believing with one's whole heart that the revelation we have been given is complete and definitive and should be shared with all. Christians believe that Jesus is God's living Word and any attempt to scale down his significance is to move away greatly from the norm of Christian faith. For that matter, I have not met a Muslim who does not believe that Mohammed is God's last and greatest messenger and the Quran is God's Word.

However, such a form of dialogue is not without its problems. It is often limited, it can lead to confrontation and does not help in building up community and establishing peace.

We have to dig deeper and I want to suggest to you that genuine dialogue must have three elements at its heart. Let me summarise these three points- genuine dialogue is a form of

listening to differences, sharing our experiences and seeking to work together to shape a better world.

Listening is often very hard but, genuine dialogue is impossible without a willingness to hear the other point of view. When we consider the convoluted and complex relationship of Islam to Christianity we can see that the relationship has often been good and positive. It is common to hear Christians in the West claiming that Muslims persecute Christians but, in reality and in all honesty, Muslims in the past have often been kinder to Christians. Many Christians in the past welcomed Muslim rule because it gave them more freedom to practise their faith. Christians, like John of Damascus held positions of authority in the royal courts. Early Islam was far more inclusive than later forms of Islam in its welcome and willingness to incorporate the most advanced elements from other traditions and cultures. The most often cited example of inter-religious tolerance is that of Muslim rule in Andalus (Spain) from 756-1000, where Jewish, Christian and Muslim faiths flourished side by side and where dialogue thrived also.

The point I am making is that listening is most difficult when a majority faith has to live with a minority faith. It has to be asked if this is true of the mutual relationships within Egypt and in the United Kingdom. Do we know what are the problems of the minority faith in our countries? Are we prepared to listen to their concerns? Are there ways their interests may be integrated into the concerns of the whole?

Two years ago, in launching his *Call for A Dialogue Among Civilisations*, the then President of the Islamic Republic of Iran, Seyed Mohammad Khatami declared:

“Leaders, scholars and thinkers in our world today play a key role in nurturing the common human yearning for truth, understanding and compassion, and in freeing us from historically conditioned prejudice”.

We would all agree with those thoughtful remarks, yet we can but wonder how far rhetoric is made a reality in Iran's relationship with its neighbours and the west.

Central to any meaningful dialogue is the need for all participants to re-examine the stereotypes we have of each other. Despite post 9-11, efforts to promote a better understanding of Islam in Europe and the US, the views of the conservative Protestant televangelist Pat Robinson who described Islam as a violent religion that 'wants to dominate and then, if need be, destroy' are not uncommon. Political leaders like Silvio Berlusconi have also reinforced negative and monolithic images of Islam by claiming it to be the greatest threat to western security since the fall of communism. I have no doubt that parallel remarks, hostile to the west, can be found in Muslim countries, and merely reveal the alarming ignorance we have of one another.

But dialogue has an experiential element to it. When we listen to the stranger we hear a *language of experience* which often sounds very familiar because it translates into ideas that we all share.

At the level of ideology, Islam and Christianity are different. Despite common theological roots, Islam and Christianity clashed from the very beginning, because Islam offered an alternative religious vision, with a correspondingly different political and social outlook. Islam rejected the finality of Jesus and challenged the universal message of Christianity with a universal message of its own. Yet when we explore our experience of spirituality, prayer, worship and silence we find that people worshipping in different ways find themselves struck and amazed at shared experience.

When the great Christian saint, St. Francis of Assisi met the Muslim leader Sultan al-Malik al-Kamil in 1219, the Muslim warrior saw something in his strange visitor that impressed him and I think the name we give to it is holiness. The Sultan

recognised in St. Francis, not the menace of a soldier who wished to take his land away from him, but the simple holiness of a saint who made no pretence of saying to the warrior 'I wish to convert you'. Each of them impressed the other through this encounter.

In his latest book, Michael Nazir-Ali¹ draws attention to the area of interaction through monks and mystics in the deserts of Syria and Egypt. He shows that the encounter of holy men, Christian monks and Sufis, did not result in conflict but in friendly contact, influence and dialogue.

In our own day we too may be impressed by the goodness, holiness and integrity of other believers who do not believe the way we do. Speaking personally, we have neighbours who are practising Muslims. They are a lovely, attractive couple. Just before our Christmas they told us that they were making their Hajj. They were excited about it but they told us that they were worried about leaving their two children behind. 'Please pray for us' they begged. It was a moving request; fancy asking two Christians to pray for their pilgrimage to Mecca! On my first visit to Egypt, when I was in the RAF, I remember walking down a street at noon and seeing a man getting out his prayer mat and doing his devotions. It touched a chord in me. Here was a godly man, unafraid of what people might say; simply doing what he was commanded to do. Through spirituality and the love of God we begin to see beyond the 'otherness' of the stranger, we begin to discern the shape of a different form of dialogue – that of prayer. This perhaps explains why Fez in Morocco, is fast becoming a centre for the study and encounter of faith in the arts, music and theology.

But let me take this deeper. As we encounter one another as spiritual persons it may be possible to draw upon insights from our scriptures and cultures, laced with respect and

¹ Conviction and Conflict, p.74. Continuum.2006. See also Also Sir Norman Anderson in Christianity and Comparative Religion. Tyndale Press, 1970

understanding. In Jacques Dupuis's wonderful book, *Christianity and The Religions*², Dupuis challenges Christians to discover in the Bible those elements that make a strong case for inclusion and not separation. He shows how the Hebrew scriptures, followed by the New Testament, outline God's compassion and love for those who appear to be outside the community of faith. He studies such concepts as 'logos' and 'wisdom', together with many passages of the Christian bible that lead to a broader interpretation than most Christians and Churches have usually given. Standing firmly within the Catholic tradition, Dupuis shows how it is possible to be orthodox in doctrine and yet receive other truths and insights from faiths, other than our own. I suggest that this presents a challenge for us all to embark upon a dialogue that seeks to find support from within our own teachings for the inclusion of others.

Recognising that each of us may well maintain that truth is primarily to be found in 'my' religion, may we draw insights from our own faith that lend support for inclusion rather than exclusion? Does my faith say anything positive about other faiths? For myself I have often been drawn to Wilfred Cantwell Smith's dictum that 'for Christians God is defined by Jesus Christ, but not confined to Jesus Christ'. To use a Christian term; does 'grace' exist outside my faith-tradition? Without compromising our own commitment, is it possible for Muslims, Jews, Hindus, Sikhs and members of other faiths to endorse this from different perspectives? For example, in the Holy Q'ran, Surah 5,8 it is written:

Nearest to you in love wilt thou find those who say 'We are Christians' because amongst these are men devoted to learning and they are not ignorant'.

That appears to express a generosity of spirit that invites closer dialogue and understanding.

² Orbis Books, DLT. London.2002

Dialogue, it seems to me must have a practical form if it is to succeed in its endeavour.

So my third point is that we are called to work together to shape a better world.

The last time I was here in Alexandria I shared in a consultation with religious leaders representing the Abrahamic faiths – Judaism, Christianity and Islam. From that consultation emerged a significant document known as the Alexandrian Declaration. The Grand Imam of Al-Azhar and I chaired this historic gathering. We declared our opposition to anything that shames the name of God, we stated our opposition to suicide bombers and urged political leaders to find a lasting solution to peace in the land we all call ‘Holy’. Although the difficulties remain and violence continues, the Declaration did commit religious leaders to work more closely together and under the inspired leadership of Canon Andrew White the work continues. This is a small example of what is possible.

Religion is too important to be brushed aside. Even in the secular and indifferent West, the churches remain strong and their contribution to what is called ‘social capital’ is well recognised. But too often religious leaders are ignored when it comes to political solutions. In reality, they are crucial allies when it comes to community building and understanding the ideological foundations of historic differences. Of course, I do not rule out the possibility that, as well as making concrete solutions to problems, some forms of faith need to be corrected, cautioned and sometimes reprimanded. In both Christianity and Islam there have been, and still exist, hotheads and extremists who use religion for their own ends. Westerners are not alone in viewing the Al-Qaeda movement as essentially regressive and their only success is terrorism which will make things worse for all. Moderate Muslims also believe that. Here there is something upon which we can all unite. Wherever religious violence is

found we must all work together to educate and combat the ugly face of intolerance and bigotry.

Working together must also mean that we help one another when there are problems. In my country it is important to assist the Muslim communities who seem estranged from the main life of Britain having a disproportionate number of young people unemployed. I am glad to say that in my time as Archbishop of Canterbury I started a listening exercise which has resulted in a formal Muslim-Christian Council that contains much promise for future relationships. Under my successor, Dr. Rowan Williams, the idea has become a reality.

But I need to say also something that I have said in many lectures in Muslim countries: namely that there is a need for minority Christians to have the same rights of freedom of religion, ability to build churches and to welcome all to worship that Muslims have. Christians are not even allowed to worship publicly in Saudi Arabia and that, surely, goes against the UN Declaration on Human Rights. I am glad to say that here in Egypt things are much better and excellent relationships exist – but true dialogue must include the willingness of the majority religion to be our advocate when needed. I am glad that the Cardinal Archbishop of Westminster, Cardinal, Cormac Murphy-O'Connor, made this point last week in an address in Oxford. Indeed, Dr. Rowan Williams made the same point powerfully when he visited Pakistan last year.

Let me return to where I started and the increasingly polarized situation in which we find ourselves.. We may well dismiss the idea of a 'clash of civilisation' as absurd in practice and abhorrent in principle. But we cannot be complacent. The disturbing sequel of terrorist attacks since Sept 11th 2001, has resulted in a climate of paranoia that could, if not addressed, be a worrying precursor of serious conflict. There is an urgent need to tear down the walls of separation and the myths that give rise to conflict. No one single culture or civilisation is superior to another; it is time for more humility and not a little listening to one another's story and journey.

My final word is to recognise the context tonight in which I am giving this lecture and to remind you all of the significance of this place. The old Library of Alexandria was founded at a unique place and time which allowed its scholars to draw on the deductive techniques of Aristotle and Greek thought, in order to apply these methods to the wisdom of Greece, Egypt, Macedonia, Babylonia, and beyond. The location of Alexandria, as a centre of trade, and in particular as the major exporter of writing material, offered vast opportunities for the amassing of information from different cultures and schools of thought. While modern scholars often lament the amount of information lost through the centuries since the Museum's fall, an amazing number of Alexandrian discoveries and theories, especially in mathematics and geometry, still provide the groundwork for modern research in these fields.

I would like to think that the new Library will again make a great contribution to a new world in which, though part of a shrinking world through modern technology, is more divided and more estranged than ever because of clashing ideologies and religious confrontation. I hope and pray that as we open the Alexandria School of Theology it will provide a vital context where Muslims and Christians see each other not as enemies but as friends, different maybe but united in our attempt to make this world a safer and better place.

May God give us the vision to refute the despairing lines of the poet Matthew Arnold who wrote of being caught 'between two worlds, one dead, the other powerless to be born'.

We are not powerless – together, we can bring to birth a world of which we can all be proud and where Roosevelt's four 'freedoms' become a reality everywhere: 'freedom of speech, freedom of religion, freedom from want and freedom from fear'.

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