Fall 2017

Muslim-Christian Dialogue: A Challenge for North-American Spiritans?

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Introduction

Between August 14-19, 2016, representatives from the three North American Spiritan Provinces of Canada, TransCanada and the United States met in Granby, Canada. They prayed and planned together for the future of their Congregation in North America. An informal summary of the event noted, “We came to share our histories, our hopes, and to forge a path towards a more collaborative future.” A synthesis of the gathering conveys a touch of urgency: “Where is the Spirit leading us in North America as we look to the future?”

As a contribution to this reflection process, Fr. John Fogarty, C.S.Sp., the Spiritan superior general, sent the gathering a wide-ranging paper entitled, “Responding Creatively to the Needs of Evangelization of Our Times” (published in this number of *Spiritan Horizons*). A section of Fr. Fogarty’s document seemed particularly relevant to the Granby assembly. It is entitled, “Strategic Planning for Mission.” In this segment of his paper, he recalls the three-year planning process asked of the various Spiritan circumscriptions by the 2012 general chapter held in Bagamoyo, Tanzania. He underscores the “many encouraging signs of the presence of the Spirit.” Fogarty also writes of concerns: diocesanization; nationalization; and difficulty finding confreres for leadership. Fr. Fogarty ends this list of concerns by mentioning that “congregational investment in inter-religious dialogue remains an ongoing challenge…”

In his reference to interreligious dialogue, I find several possible understandings. As he was addressing representatives of the Spiritan jurisdictions of North America, was Fogarty simply completing his list of major concerns? Or, was he sharing the “big picture” of needs for the Congregation? Perhaps, he was raising this challenge for consideration of this form of mission by a self-selected Spiritan body, whose aspirations and intent were to reach “Beyond (current) Spiritan Borders?”

Let me declare my bias regarding these various readings. As a Spiritan sociologist who has spent more than two decades in an inter-religious peacebuilding ministry, I find here, however deliberate on our superior general’s part, a haunting challenge for Spiritans in North America, particularly the United States, to take up mission as dialogue. My question is: can Muslim-
Christian dialogue be a ministry for Spiritans working in North America? In this article, I address directly only those working in the Spiritan Provinces of the United States, Canada and TransCanada; other Spiritan circumscriptions may want to reflect on how this applies to them.

Mission as Dialogue: Early Traces

I am indebted to Olaf Derenthal⁴ for tracing indications of Muslim-Christian encounters in the work of Spiritan founders, Claude Francois Poullart des Places and Francis Libermann. This author comments even-handedly on his sparse but intriguing finding: “[Our founders] cannot give responses to questions that their contemporaries never asked them” (ibid., 55). Given the times, circumstances, and focus of his ministry, des Places’ life showed “no explicit” encounter with Muslims. More than a century later Francis Libermann sent his early missionaries to evangelize areas of Africa, where Islam was well-entrenched. Derenthal sketches a picture of Libermann and some of his early missionaries as trying to reconcile a deep belief in their own Catholicism, as understood in their native France at the time, with the warm and inquisitive welcome and fresh challenges they received from Islamic leaders in Africa (ibid., 58-59).

It is a grand historical leap from the times, sentiments, and interreligious actions of Libermann and his early missionaries to the 1980s and the publication of the Spiritan Rule of Life (henceforth SRL) in 1987. That time gap and, especially, the development of missiological practice during the intervening years is best captured in two Spiritan gatherings of those working in Muslim-Christian dialogue and one meeting directed more broadly to those in non-Christian dialogue (ibid., 59). A deeper look at the post-Libermann encounter with Islam by Spiritans and their wisdom about dialogical ministry is beyond the scope of this article. It must be left to researchers closer to historical resources. What is more available are the calls to mission as dialogue found in two pivotal general chapters, that is, 1987 and 2012. When the SRL was published thirty years ago, it urged Spiritans to “take as our own the points that the church is currently stressing in mission” (SRL 13.1). Among the five areas highlighted for our apostolic focus was, “Mission as Dialogue” (ibid.). SRL did not specify or elaborate on what form of dialogue should be undertaken. But, even at the time, some Spiritans were deeply engaged with peoples of other world faith traditions as well as local traditional religions. As our community expanded its outreach into Asia and non-Christian majority sectors of African countries, our experience of religious dialogue deepened.
In its discussion of mission, the 2012 Bagamoyo General Chapter drew attention to four forms of mission: Mission of Evangelization of the Poor; Mission of Interreligious Dialogue; Mission as Promotion of Justice, Peace and the Integrity of Creation (JPIC); and Mission as Education. In its commentary on Mission as Dialogue, the chapter document noted: “interreligious dialogue is among today’s greatest challenges.”

The 2012 Chapter gave expression to the seriousness with which it wanted this form of mission to be taken. It called for adaptations along the entire continuum of Spiritan life and training, to better enable us to respond to this challenge as a community. The chapter gave specific guidance as follows. 1) This ministry is seen as ideal for what is called overseas training program (“stage”), part of the initial formation experience; 2) greater importance will be given to placing new Spiritans in an apostolate of dialogue; and 3) “serious and on-going formation through reading and study is encouraged. We will set up … libraries and resources which enable understanding the realities among those we work.”

Intending to be illustrative rather than all-inclusive, the Spiritan International Justice, Peace, and Integrity of Creation office in Rome listed those countries where service amid Muslim communities is a significant part of Spiritan ministry today: Algeria, Mauritania, Pakistan, the Philippines, Senegal, Tanzania and Nigeria. One may add that many if not most Western countries express concern about both increased Islamic presence and the concomitant rise of indigenous Islamophobia.

**Mission as Dialogue: Why Us?**

American Spiritans looking at the fourfold range of calls to mission by the 2012 Chapter see themselves or members of their province in three of these four guides: service to the poor; the cause of justice, peace and integrity of creation; and, certainly, education. In contrast, Mission as Dialogue seems distant from our customary ministries. In the following pages, I will argue that Mission as Dialogue is a ministry much closer to the US Province, and, possibly, North American Spiritans, than we think. The Granby gathering of August 2016 did not have the status of a provincial or trans-provincial chapter. Still, leadership of the three North American provinces convened the meeting. It arose from a “felt need for a deeper insight into our Spiritan charism and to find new ways of living it.” When the assembly turned its attention to the service of others, there was a clear resonance with the 2012 Chapter: “those on the peripheries, the poor, the refugees, the immigrants, the marginalized and those living in communion with all creation.” (ibid.).
The Bagamoyo Chapter began its discussion of future mission for Spiritans by reflecting on the globalized world in which we live. In our present human context, it drew our attention to new forms of poverty. Service to those in economic poverty is neither denied nor abandoned, but, placed by its side in the chapter document, are the “new poor” defined as: “young people in difficulty, migrants, people who are discriminated against and oppressed, and those marginalized by the phenomenon of globalization” (Bagamoyo 1.3).

It does not take a very great stretch of credibility to apply such identity qualifiers to the Muslim community in the United States. As a demographic group, Muslims worldwide have the youngest median age of any religious group. How some of these young Muslims living in the United States become radicalized to serve militant causes is a significant concern to our society. Most (63%) of the 3.3 million Muslims in the U.S. are immigrants. Islamophobia, the particular brand of marginalization Muslims living here suffer, is an exaggerated fear, hatred and hostility toward Islam and Muslims that is perpetuated by negative stereotyping resulting in bias, discrimination and the marginalization and exclusion of Muslims from social, political and civil life.

The 2012 Chapter calls for new approaches to evangelization in response to globalization's fresh challenges. This urge is clearly directed to “first evangelization” and “new evangelization.” A strikingly new addition, however, that also demands approaches that we must develop, is added: “...working with and promoting reconciliation among groups of people who are marginalized with a view to their integral human development.” (1.7). And Muslims in the US seem to fit this description.

Reflecting on interreligious dialogue in the future of the American Catholic Church, John Allen at once complimented Catholics on how far they have come in their relationship with Jews and how far they have to go in building equitable relations with “assertive Muslims.” He writes,

A church whose primary interreligious relationship for the last forty years has been with Judaism finds itself struggling to come to terms with a newly assertive Islam not only in the Middle East, Africa and Asia, but in its own European backyard.
The Work Ahead

One might add Catholics in the United States as being in need of interreligious relationship building with Muslims, if a person takes seriously the findings of a September 2016, Georgetown University study. While it can be dangerous to give one study too much weight, the Prince Alwaleed Bin Center is reputable, though its findings are sobering to anyone interested in the reconciliation of peoples. Here are some of the findings.

- Nearly half of Catholics cannot name any similarities between Catholicism and Islam.
- When asked their overall impression of Muslims, three in ten Catholics admit to having unfavorable views.
- Catholics are less likely than the general American public to know a Muslim personally.
- A majority of Catholics correctly identifies prayer and fasting as important parts of Muslim life, but also incorrectly believes that Muslims worship the Prophet Muhammad.
- Those surveyed who consume content from Catholic media outlets have more unfavorable views of Muslims than those who don’t.
- In prominent Catholic outlets, half of the time the word “Islamic” is used in reference to the Islamic State terrorist group.
- Often the words, gestures, and activities of Pope Francis frame discussions of Islam in Catholic outlets.
- Catholics who know a Muslim personally or have participated in dialogue or community service with Muslims often have different views about Islam and interfaith dialogue than those who have not interacted with Muslims.

I take up the last item for deeper reflection. Dr. William Vendley, International President of Religions for Peace (RfP), offers a sense of how positive change occurs in such relationship building situations. He notes that this is based on his organization’s study. Vendley contends that people who mingle freely and fully with members of other faiths improve their images of people from other faiths. In turn, they strengthen their desire to cooperate with those different from themselves. He reports, strikingly, that people who interact with persons of other faiths strengthen their hold on their own faith. His theory stretches to institutions such as mosques, synagogues and churches. When such centers of different faith expressions...
interact with some regularity, they begin to change their collective attitudes toward a more positive understanding of the ecclesial institutions of other faiths. Though intriguing and, in part, self-evident, this theory requires more rigorous study for validation. Yet, observation of such relationship building, when it does happen, seems to collaborate this. A mosque in southern California, for example, is notable for its interreligious collaborative engagement with a number of Christian churches to house the homeless in the winter. A humanitarian Sufi organization readily welcomes its Christian neighbors to its iftars (iftar is the dinner eaten by devout Muslims after sunset during Ramadan) and, in turn, is often invited to address Christian audiences. As one reflects on tensions with Islamic people in the United States and American Catholic ignorance of Muslim life and religious practice, social distance and lack of acceptance of Muslims stand as a haunting summons of Spiritans to an apostolate of Muslim-Christian reconciliation.

**Spiritan Assets for Muslim-Christian Dialogue**

While quite new to interreligious dialogue here in the United States, Spiritan priests and Lay Associates can engage in Muslim-Christian dialogue with strong assets. Some of these advantages for Mission as Dialogue are limited to priests, but well-placed and alert Spiritan Associates share many of them.

The Spiritan is rooted in a given “neighborhood.” As a member of a local community and serving in a parish, school or service center, our colleague will know the local environment. As a result of one’s formation, the Spiritan would be attuned to ethnic and religious sensitivities, tensions and indigenous leadership’s willingness to collaborate. Our Spiritan tradition of international service and recent trans-province emphasis on intercultural living and mission should equip us to bring a certain finesse to inter-faith and intercultural settings.

A Spiritan priest typically gains a certain authority and respect as a religious actor in his locality. This comes from his own community to which he is in service but, also, from people of other faiths who offer deference to a “person of the cloth.” While the strength and luster of this asset has dulled with the increase of secularism and the shame of social improprieties such as child abuse by Catholic clergy, the civil and larger public service sector of Americans still affords the religious actor space to speak, intervene, and heal. This can be enhanced, and may take on the quality of a personal attribute, if the priest or Lay Spiritan lives a simple, caring, and compassionate life. One potentially important expression of this authority is the “bully pulpit.” This refers to the multiple settings and circumstances in which the priest or Associate addresses believers and others...
who might be in attendance in a religious or public gathering. Often, this takes the form of the written word. Pastoral letters posted at national, diocesan, parish or school-wide levels can be powerful disseminators. Bishops and priests often commission such works to well-informed lay persons. Again, examples help.

- I have seen Cardinal Charles Bo of Yangon, Myanmar and Cardinal John Onaiyekan of Abuja, Nigeria speak and write with force and directness about ethnic tensions and against violent militancy.

- Some years ago, a Spiritan priest used the occasion of a prominent Spiritan activist’s funeral in Haiti to chastise the government for alleged injustices. High government officials were in the congregation.

- I was on-site when the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops was about to vote on their 1983 Peace Pastoral, “The Challenge of Peace.” The bishops received an impassioned note from the President of the United States urging them not to issue it, because of some views that were at odds with government policy. The pastoral passed.

As a “person of religion,” the Spiritan can more easily call upon and effectively use the “soft power” of concepts such as peace, justice, equality, compassion, et cetera. One remembers Archbishop Tutu’s fabled role in the Republic of South Africa’s Truth and Reconciliation Commission. Sessions that he facilitated began with a prayer. He did not hesitate to use the softer language of prayer?

The church has rites, rituals, prayers and other religious instrumentality that can soothe a troubled institution or community and help to put troubles and hostility in perspective. One hears at times the macabre comment that Catholic churches know how to “do a good funeral.” The cumulative effect of these assets, if well-employed in Muslim-Christian dialogue, is to make the Spiritan an apt candidate for inter-faith dialogue with a given local community of Muslims. It is important to comment that most of the assets described here can be equally put to use by a local Imam, Muslim educator serving in a Muslim school, and other Islamic leadership persons.

Dialogue in Practices

Throughout this work, I invite Spiritan from North America to take up Mission as Dialogue through Muslim-Christian interreligious peacebuilding. It would be wrong to suggest that this is an entirely new ministry. In fact, throughout this article, I mention a number of examples. It
might be conducive to Spiritan involvement to highlight several additional cutting-edge examples from different settings.

- Theology Department and Dialogue. The theology departments of some Catholic universities in the United States include a religious studies’ unit. This enables them to teach other than Catholic or Christian theology. Georgetown’s theology department, for example, has a unique doctoral program, where a candidate already schooled in one faith tradition enters a select doctoral program that focuses on a different and additional faith tradition.

- Dialogue for Religious Leaders. “Bridging Communities” is a forty-four hour Interreligious Peacebuilding Certificate program initiated by the Kroc School of Peace Studies, University of San Diego, California. The program creates neutral space for local Islamic and Christian leaders to interact closely. Participants gain a strong grasp of a faith not their own, acquire conflict resolution skills, and build trans-religious relationships. One-third of the seminars is in the community, visiting alternate faith centers. The program aims to empower participants to promote interreligious dialogue in their communities.

- Top Down Dialogue. A civil war began in the Central Africa Republic in 2012. Violence and tension continue to trouble this country. A number of reconciliation efforts have been attempted. One of these initiatives is led by an interfaith team of religious leaders. This Interfaith Peace Platform of Islamic, Protestant, and Catholic actors has fostered interreligious dialogue. They have achieved some notable successes at home and helped bring the conflict to the attention of the international community including America. Members of the team are: Imam Omar Kabine Layama, Archbishop (now Cardinal) Dieudonné Nzapalainga, C.S.Sp. and Rev. Nicolas Guérékoyame Gbangou.

- Bottom Up Dialogue. Catholic Relief Service (CRS), a large United States-based relief, development and Justice and Peace organization, has been championing interreligious dialogue-action for more than twenty years. The major focus of its efforts is local, religiously diverse communities, where there is tension and often violence. A number of dialogue-action models have been developed with local collaboration. The models are monitored by CRS staff, and both shared and critiqued across the agency. Six of these models from
across Africa, Bosnia Herzegovina, and the Philippines are presented in Interreligious Action for Peace.19

Religion: Missing Dimension of Peacebuilding

When someone asks me, “What do you do for a living?” I respond, “I teach peace studies.” Inevitably, I have to repeat myself. The inquirer hears me, but the person does not expect to hear “peace” as an academic discipline. If nudged to be more specific, I say that I work in the area of interreligious peacebuilding. Given this post-9/11 era in which we live, there is an immediate recognition that “someone ought” to be looking at the intersection of peace and religion.

Historians fuss over the origins of interreligious (inter-faith) peacebuilding. Scott Appleby, a noted peace scholar, pinpoints this discipline’s start with the 1994 publication of Religion: The Missing Dimension of Statecraft.20 Appleby captures well the purpose of this groundbreaking book: “... [It is] a lament that a counter-productive strain of secular myopia had excluded expertise in religion from foreign policy circles, and a clarion call to analytical arms, so to speak, by senior policy advisors ...who had ‘gotten religion...’” (ibid.).

The training wheels fell from the emerging sub-discipline of interreligious peacebuilding in the first decade of this century. Catholic, Mennonite, Muslim, and non-affiliated religious peacebuilders made their intellectual contributions. It is Appleby again who, in staccato fashion, puts forth the argument that religious peacebuilding is an established field: 1) it has its own journal and placement at major academic conferences; 2) the field has its own “mother and father” founders; 3) dissertations have been written in the field; 4) and, though debated, the field has been sufficiently conceptualized (ibid.). As I have taught and researched in interreligious peacebuilding, a widely used framework has frequently surfaced. It is found both in the works of Catholic authors21 and other Christian writers.22 And, it is recommended to religious leaders without a great deal of training in the discipline. For the alert religious actor, its value is easily grasped.

I was pleased to see that the Bagamoyo Chapter in its treatment of Mission as Dialogue (1.11) cites the “four levels of dialogue” which have become common in church mission documents: dialogue of everyday life, dialogue of collaborating in common projects, spiritual dialogue, and theological dialogue. Using Thomas Thangaraj’s formulation in somewhat different words, I will treat each of these elements or levels both to give a fuller understanding of them and to illustrate by examples. With each expression of the model, I offer examples drawn largely from international contexts.
“The dialogue of life is where people strive to live in an open and neighborly spirit, sharing their joys and sorrows, their human problems and preoccupations.”

• Father Peter Pham, a Vietnamese-American Georgetown University theology professor, took his devotedly Catholic mother to Vietnam for a visit. She lighted candles in a Buddhist temple for friends in Washington, D.C. where she lived. Asked why, she explained that her Vietnamese Buddhist neighbors were most considerate in providing her transport. When they heard that she was returning to their home country, they asked her for this favor. She obliged.

• “The dialogue of action is where persons of all religions collaborate for the integral development and liberation of people.”

• Catholic Relief Services (CRS) faced one of its greatest humanitarian challenges in responding as a Catholic service agency when the Asiatic tsunami occurred on December 26, 2004. Banda Ache, the disaster’s epicenter, was an almost totally Muslim community. For the first time, local people experienced the assistance of Christian aid groups. At one point, CRS asked local people what they most wanted. They answered: “copies of the Koran, prayer rugs, and coverings for the women.” This proved awkward for CRS. Its leadership wondered how pious Catholic CRS donors might receive news of such assistance. The wish was fulfilled.

• “The dialogue of religious experience is where persons, rooted in their own religious traditions, share their spiritual riches, for instance with regard to prayer and contemplation, faith, and ways of searching for God or the Absolute.”

• The yearning of Father Thomas Merton, the famed American Trappist monk, to interact with monks of other faiths in Asia is portrayed in the new film, The Many Stories and Last Days of Thomas Merton. The customary habitat for such a monk is his cloistered monastery living with co-religionists. Merton died from an electrical accident in Thailand while fulfilling his dream.

• “The dialogue of theological exchange is where specialists seek to deepen their understanding of their respective religious heritages, and to appreciate each other’s spiritual values.”

• A focus of San Diego’s bishop, Most Rev. Robert
McElroy, is Christian-Muslim dialogue. In 2015, he drew together scholars and practitioners of the two faiths at the School of Peace Studies, University of San Diego, for the first Christian-Muslim National Dialogue. The deliberations were restricted to a select few specialists.

The Bagamoyo Chapter closed the discussion of these peacebuilding levels with the remark: “These different levels help to establish genuine peace between believers in true mutual trust and in the refusal to become prisoners of our own fears.” (Bagamoyo 1.11).

**Muslim-Christian Dialogue for American Spiritans: Suggestions for a Modest Beginning**

This article does not urge American Spiritans to abandon or diminish the mission orientations which we have traditionally served, namely, Evangelization of the Poor, Promotion of Justice, Peace, and the Integrity of Creation, and Education. It does, however, urge that we enlarge our outreach to include Muslim-Christian dialogue. Some suggested actions would both attend to the Bagamoyo Chapter recommendations and accommodate to the North-American context.

- Engage the experience already gained by North-American Spiritans working abroad interreligiously.
- When blessed with new priestly, brother, or lay vocations, encourage entry of such individuals into this ministry.
- Service in this area can become part of the formation process and placement of new Spiritans as they become available.
- When receiving international Spiritans from other provinces for service in the North-American provinces, request those with experience in this ministry, thereby enriching our personnel resources.
- Lay Associates with expertise in Islam, religious dialogue, reconciliation or related fields could be attracted to us as we gain experience in mission as dialogue and our interest becomes known.
- As we have done with other areas of human and spiritual development, we can attend to our ongoing formation through the instrumentality of retreats, workshops, topics for regional meetings, social media, website, addresses by experts, et cetera.
- It may happen that (a) confrere(s) will develop expertise and leadership in service to Muslim-
Christian dialogue as a full-time ministry. More likely, as our sensitization to this form of dialogue grows, we will take on the task of reforming Catholic parishes, schools, and service center constituencies to inter-faith exchange, respect, and reverence.

• There is the simple recommendation, made both by the Georgetown University Bridging Initiative and Dr. Vendley of Religions for Peace, cited above: Make friends with Muslims. Visit mosques or Islamic schools. Invite Muslims to visit our churches, schools, and centers. Share feasts such as an iftar or parish appreciation nights with festive meals, presentations, and social time together.

Suppose I was quite wrong and Fr. Fogarty never intended to urge North-American Spiritans gathered at Granby in August 2016 to take up mission as dialogue. Still, a Spirit-filled reading of the “signs of the times” will bring us Spiritans working in America to take up mission as dialogue with Islamic peoples living as our neighbors. They may be part of the “new poor” of which Bagamoyo speaks. The challenge to find new approaches to reconciliation within Muslim-Christian dialogue is ours.

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Endnotes


4Derenthal, Olaf, (2015), “‘You Are Not Christians, but I Also Know That… (You) Know God,’ Interreligious Dialogue -- A Spiritan Vocation,” Spiritan Horizons, 10, 52-63.

5The 2012 XX Bagamoyo General Chapter, 1.7-32.

6Ibid., 1.11.

7Ibid., 1.14.


11Ibid., 3/83.


16Sufism is a mystical way of belief and practice usually considered an expression of Islam.


