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Interreligious Dialogue in Zanzibar

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A Short History of Zanzibar

Zanzibar consists of two sister Islands, Unguja and Pemba, and has been part of the United Republic of Tanzania since 1964. Before the union, Zanzibar was a separate state and had a long trading history with the Arab world. The population of the islands is about 1.6 million, made up of Muslims, Christians, Hindus, Bahia’s and other minority faiths. However, in Zanzibar, interreligious dialogue takes place mainly between the Muslim majority and Christian minority who make less than 2% of the population.

During the age of exploration, the Portuguese empire was the first European power to gain control of the Islands in the year 1499. They soon established a trading station and a Catholic mission run by Augustinian friars.

For the next 200 years, Christianity would remain in these islands until Zanzibar fell under the control of the Sultanate of Oman in 1698, ending Portuguese control. After the Portuguese retreat, only a few Goan Christians remained on the islands. They had neither church nor priests but maintained their community through private devotions.

The Omanis developed a thriving economy of cash crops and trade in ivory and slaves from mainland Tanzania, the then Tanganyika. Plantations were developed to grow spices, which earned Zanzibar its name, “the spice islands.”

In 1890, only a few years after the Berlin Conference, Zanzibar became a British protectorate
and it gained its independence from the British in December 1963 as a constitutional monarchy with the Sultan as the head of state. However, just a month later, the bloody Zanzibar Revolution, in which a number of Arabs and Indians were killed or expelled from the islands, resulted in the emergence of the Republic of Zanzibar. On April 26th 1964, the Republic merged with mainland Tanganyika and became the United Republic of Tanzania, of which Zanzibar remains a semi-autonomous region.

In 1860, the bishop of St. Denis in Reunion sent two diocesan missionaries, six religious sisters (Filles de Marie) to Zanzibar; the arrival of the Holy Ghost Fathers in 1862 marked the official beginning of continuous evangelization in the islands, which has continued to this day.

**Spiritans and Interreligious Dialogue**

The success of the Spiritans in Zanzibar is partially due to their skill in interreligious dialogue. Anxious to avoid any trouble with the Sultan, and recognizing the realities of life in Muslim Zanzibar, the Spiritans limited their activities to education, pastoral work among the city’s small Roman Catholic Goan community, and health care, opening the sultanate’s first European-directed hospital, famously known as “The French hospital.” They did not embark on direct evangelization or conversion of the island’s Muslims. They lived out the advice from their Founder Fr. Libermann who urged them to be African with the Africans; to understand their aspirations; and learn their culture.1

The Spiritans continued to enjoy good relations with both the Sultan and their neighbors and, in 1894, he gave permission to build St. Joseph’s Cathedral. Its cornerstone was laid on July 10, 1896. Bishop Allgeyer celebrated the first mass in the new cathedral on Christmas night, 1898.

The Sultan, Majid of Oman (1834-1870), in 1868 offered a vast tract of land to the Spiritans to build the first mission in East Africa in Bagamoyo on the mainland, Tanzania. The mission built on that land is still active today.

Sultan Majid also strongly supported the work of the German linguist, Dr. Johann Ludwig Krapf (1810-1885), sent by the British Church Missionary Society. He compiled the first grammar and dictionary in the Swahili language, and translated the Book of Genesis into Swahili. Spiritans such as Fr. Longmann and Fr. Secule used these to produce books for elementary education.

**The Purpose and the Importance of Interreligious Dialogue**

Interreligious dialogue in Zanzibar aims singularly at enabling people of different faiths (mainly Muslims and Christians) to come to mutual understanding and respect that allows them to live and cooperate with each other in spite of their differences.

The very fact that Muslims and Christians make up over 50% of the world’s population makes dialogue and cooperation imperative. A letter signed by one hundred and thirty eight
Muslim Scholars and Leaders from across the Muslim world and sent to Christian leaders in 2007, says:

Muslims and Christians together make up over half the world’s population. Without peace and justice between these two religious communities, there can be no meaningful peace in the world. The future of the world depends on peace between Muslims and Christians.²

**The Catholic Church and Interreligious Dialogue**

The plan of salvation also includes those who acknowledge the Creator; in the first place among them are the Muslims: these profess to hold the faith of Abraham, and together with us they adore the one, merciful God, mankind’s judge on the last day (LG, no. 16).

The Second Vatican Council’s Declaration on the Relation of the Church with Non-Christian Religions, *Nostra Aetate*, portrays the positive attitude towards dialogue with Muslims that is reflected in most Christian denominations.

This document urges Christians and Muslims “to work sincerely for mutual understanding” and “to make common cause of safeguarding and fostering social justice, moral values, as well as peace and freedom” (*NA*, 3). However, as said by Fr. Shorter:

It is important that, in reacting to the shortcomings of dialogue, we should not fall into the opposite extreme of subordinating dialogue to proclamation, conversion work and church implantation. Evangelization and inculturation seek the conversion of peoples and cultures, the permeation of human culture by Gospel values. Dialogue results in a conversion of Christianity. Indeed, it is an essential aim of dialogue that all the parties involved undergo conversion in a wider sense of the word. In dialogue, Christians challenge others and are challenged by them.³

**Interreligious Dialogue and Islam**

In Islam, when referring to the attitude that Muslims should have towards Christians and Jews, the Holy Quran⁴ says “argue with them in ways that are best” [16.125] and calls on Muslims to “compete in good works” (i.e. to out-do Christians in their good works).

The existence of different religious communities is recognized in the Quran: “Had thy Lord willed, he would have made mankind one nation” [5.48]. Muslims are also called on to be patient in dialogue: “Bear, then, with patience, all that they say, and celebrate the praises of thy Lord, before the rising of the sun and before (its) setting” [50.39]. It is, then, fair to say that, at least officially, both Islam and Christianity call for dialogue and cooperation between them.
**Forms of Dialogue that take place here in Zanzibar**

The Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue highlights four forms of interreligious dialogue:

a) *The dialogue of theological exchange*, where specialists seek to deepen their understanding of their respective religious heritages, and to appreciate each other’s spiritual values. There is little of this happening in Zanzibar.

b) *The dialogue of life*, where people strive to live in an open and neighborly spirit, sharing their joys and sorrows, their human problems and preoccupations. This is happening in Zanzibar in a casual manner.

c) *The dialogue of religious experience*, 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. This is practiced informally perhaps.

d) *The dialogue of action*, in which Christians and others collaborate for the integral development and liberation of people. This is the form of dialogue most widely practiced in Zanzibar.

In this presentation, I concentrate on this last form of dialogue, the dialogue of common action. In his book *Evangelization and Culture*, Shorter, a well-recognized anthropologist, argues that the dialogue of action is probably the most practical form of dialogue, as it does not require the immediate collaboration of theological elites.

Here in Zanzibar, for example, without the need for theological experts, Muslims and Christians live in the same neighborhoods or villages, use the same shops, markets, hospitals and transport and go to the same schools. We also face the same societal challenges to which we try as best as we can to respond to them together. This daily interaction between Christians and Muslims provides a platform for dialogue, cooperation and respect.

**Areas of Collaboration and Dialogue of Action:**

a) *Peace Building Committee*. We have a nine-member peace building committee made up of Muslims, Catholics and some other Christian denominations working hand in hand with both the government, civil societies, and some international organizations to promote peace and make immediate interventions where peace is being threatened in our islands. The Mufti of Zanzibar is the chair of the committee while the bishop of the Catholic Diocese of Zanzibar is the vice Chair. This committee meets regularly to discuss matters relevant to peace maintenance and conflict resolution where conflict resulted from electoral dispute, religious misunderstanding or any
other source. But, the main purpose of this committee is to prevent conflict from occurring for whatever reason.

b) **Educational, Medical, and other social Services.** When in 1992 the Government of Zanzibar allowed the provision of education and other social services to involve the private sector, the Catholic Church was the first to take advantage of this liberalization. We immediately got involved in the provision of educational, medical, and many other social services that bring us into daily contact with people of other religions. In our nursery, primary, secondary schools and other educational institutions, in our dispensaries and medical centers, in our various seminars on entrepreneurship or counseling sessions, the great majority of those who are immediate beneficiaries of these services are our Muslim brothers and sisters. This interaction provides us with an opportunity for dialogue at the level of action. When you bring people together for service, and specifically the youth and children, you are building future peaceful co-existence.

c) **Diocesan Pastoral and Development Offices.** They create another platform for dialogue in action by dealing with wide ranging issues including justice and peace, human trafficking, HIV-AIDS intervention and human rights, to mention only a few. The scope of this paper does not allow me to go into much detail with regard to what our diocese does through these offices. Briefly, through various programs and activities organized by these offices we have achieved quite much:

- Educating women and children in their basic rights through seminars at all levels of education and our involvement with women groups. Through these programs and seminars we have managed to bring about a significant reduction in child abuse and child marriages; we have offered education and basic services to victims and potential victims of human trafficking that end up here in Zanzibar and those who could potentially end up in the Arab world. We have been able to influence government decisions on issues of great concern for us as a society.
- We offer services to HIV victims who attend clinic in our Chukwani center. Here we offer counseling and other relevant services including education to reduce stigma that society attaches to this kind of illnesses and the family crisis that proceeds from being an AIDS victim.

We have a close collaboration with the government and some of its institutions like One Stop Center and the Zanzibar AIDS Commission (ZAC). Our collaboration with the One Stop Center is very effective as it brings together the police, counselors, doctors, nurses, and a lot of other professionals that very effectively help victims of rape, drug abuse, kidnapping, human trafficking, and other issues.
Obstacles to Dialogue

Interreligious dialogue in Zanzibar is not without its share of obstacles. These obstacles are several and not unique to Zanzibar. In general and around the world, there is a tendency for both Muslims and Christians to generalize their perceptions of each other. This leads to stereotyping, such as “All Muslims are terrorists or support terrorists,” and “All Christians are decadent, immoral, or unjust.” Fortunately, our experience has taught us that the vast majority of Christians and Muslims are none of these things.

Another significant obstacle to dialogue is self-sufficiency. This is a false belief that we, Christians and Muslims, have nothing to learn from or offer to each other. In addressing this problem, Fr. Shorter acknowledges that, while we Christians have largely accepted dialogue and its consequences, the great majority of our Muslim brothers and sisters have not. We, Christians, have largely abandoned explicit disrespect for Muslims in our pulpits, official declarations, publications, and in our seminars. The Second Vatican Council explicitly asks Christians and Muslims to strive sincerely for mutual understanding. On the other hand, some Muslims continue with their anti-Christian propaganda, publishing materials that may be harmful, offensive, or disrespectful to Christians. Sometimes Christians are openly condemned as unbelievers and some mosques continue tacitly, and sometimes explicitly, to inspire their members to maintain a hostile attitude.

We have these challenges. Nevertheless, we are determined to address them together with our brothers and sisters of other faiths.

Conclusion

Here in Zanzibar, just like in most other places, some people are simply unaware of the need for interreligious dialogue. This group includes religious and political leaders on both sides. Some are simply not interested, while others actively oppose interfaith cooperation. These facts have not stopped us in our efforts to build interaction and understanding between Christians and Muslims. However, I would like to call formators, wherever they are in the congregation, to make interreligious dialogue a central focus of formation. Without dialogue between people of faith, the vacuum in communication and understanding can easily degenerate into gossip and mistrust that fuels the prejudice that leads to unnecessary violence.

Some Examples of sectarian Violence

One prominent Muslim scholar who spoke out against extremist behavior in our islands paid a heavy price for his convictions. In 2013, Sheikh Fadhil Soraga, secretary to the Grand Mufti of Zanzibar, had acid thrown in his face apparently from people of his own faith for saying that Islam is a religion of peace and that it did not support violence. He stood firmly for peace and understanding among people of different faiths and he paid a heavy price for it.
The Catholic diocese of Zanzibar has suffered violence mainly directed towards some of the few priests serving in this diocese. Fr. Ambrose Mkenda was shot and seriously wounded at the gates of one of our schools as he returned home on Christmas day. Fr. Anselm Mwang’amba had acid thrown in his face in broad daylight in downtown Zanzibar. Fr. Evaristus Mushi, a Duquesne university alumnus, parish priest of St. Joseph’s cathedral, was shot dead as he arrived at an outstation.

While we have no hundred percent proof that these attacks were religiously motivated, their common denominator points only in that direction. All the victims were Catholic priests and the attacks were punctuated by additional small attacks on some of our churches and random name-calling towards our people on our streets. Our experience has taught us that religious intolerance is usually fed by fear and acute ignorance. Without continued dialogue and mutual respect, extremism, hatred, and random violence will only grow.

**Abbreviations**

*LG* *Lumen gentium*, Vatican II Dogmatic Constitution on the Church

*NA* *Nostra aetate*, Vatican II Declaration on the Relation of the Church to Non-Christian Religions

**Endnotes**