As I See It: Living in the Islamic World

John O'Brien

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Our Spiritan group in Pakistan has been deeply affected by the experience of living and working over many years in a totally encompassing yet extremely complex Islamic environment. This multi-layered experience by turn has overwhelmed, tolerated, enriched, addressed and invited us.

**Overwhelmed**

“It tames you” is how one missionary described it. It is simply bigger and stronger and more vast than any combination of strategies can get a handle on. You have to come to terms with a situation of minority: accept to be pretty far down the line, to be small and to count hardly at all. We follow Muslim feasts, observe Islamic dietary restrictions, use Islamic terminology, hear the Friday sermon on the loudspeakers. These loudspeakers that blast the call to prayer from every mosque seem to take a particular delight in aiming the transmission at the houses and churches of Christians. They presumably think they are doing a good deed, proclaiming God’s word and offering salvation to the lost. We have to relinquish a lot of familiar supports e.g. December 25 is a public holiday because of the birthday of Jinnah. The first Good Friday in a Muslim country is an extraordinary experience: life proceeds as if Christ had not died for humanity — as indeed he has not, according to their ideology.

While missionaries, precisely because they are perceived as good-living foreigners and wealthy to boot, are spared the undisguised hostility shown to ordinary Christians and Hindus, the hostility that hides behind sometimes feigned politeness and sometimes genuine acceptance occasionally explodes to the surface. Two of our churches have been attacked and desecrated, a Christian village has been burned down, there have been massacres of worshipping Christians, several Christians have been sentenced to death under the blasphemy laws. It would be misleading to suggest that this kind of behaviour represents the majority of Muslims. It does not. Nor is it directed solely against Christians — Sunnis and Shias perpetrate similar attacks against each other. But it can and does happen. What was always a church of survival increasingly seems like a church of martyrs.

**Tolerated**

It is no small thing that missionaries are tolerated in the Islamic Republic of Pakistan. They are not given entry to Hindu India or Buddhist Sri Lanka despite the claims of both to be secular states. In however hedged and restricted a manner,
Pakistan is their homeland.

The deeper dimension of this tolerance is the hospitality of the people. Until you are known you are a stranger, but when you are known there is a welcome. Culturally, this follows from the value that it is honourable to receive a visitor with proper respect. This value is deeply held. The generosity with which it is expressed can sometimes humble us and invite us to a more inclusive hospitality in our own lives.

Enriched

If there is one facet of Islam that continually enriches our lives it is its non-negotiable and relentless confession of the absolute transcendence and sovereignty of God. “La ilah illa Allah” (There is no god but God). Religion is not God. No experience of God is God. Neither the Church nor its laws and traditions are God. Only God is God. While there remains the question of what kind of god is the God who alone is God, this confession of faith serves to purge us from our never-ending tendency to construct religion in our likeness rather than allow God to be God.

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With this enrichment comes the invitation to submit to the sovereignty of God. This is the spiritual and theological heart of Islam. For a Christian to submit to this foundational conviction would be to submit unreservedly to the God revealed in Jesus of Nazareth by taking the unconditional, but always utterly mysterious love of God made visible in Jesus with the same absolute seriousness and submission that convinced Muslims show before the name of Allah.

To observe the devout Muslim at prayer, whether in the standard way, or in some of the devout practices of popular devotion such as standing together in the mosque and chanting Allah-u (God is) rhythmically as they beat their breasts, raising the tone and speed of the recitation to a dervish-like state of ecstasy, is to see people for whom the reality of God is to be taken with absolute seriousness. To speak to such people about religious faith inevitably implies an examination and deepening of one’s own. Before we ever embark on the path of dialogue, Islam is speaking to us and facilitating a dialogue within ourselves. Visitors to Pakistan have rediscovered buried dimensions of their own Christian faith in observing the faith of Pakistani Muslims.

Addressed

There is an aesthetic side to Pakistani Islam especially in its calligraphy and architecture. The exquisite architecture of some mosques and Sufi shrines communicates a deeply religious message. Space and...
proportion are an unmistakable testimony to the transcendent presence of the sacred. These places speak, even if wordlessly. One is in no doubt about the invitation to listen in silent wonder.

In this religious culture the divine is beyond representation. But calligraphic art, intricate but undorned lettering in Urdu script, communicates the presence of the mysterious and the divine. Gradually this is making its way into Christian art — examples are *Khuda mubarat hai* (God is love) calligraphed in the shape of a triangle to communicate God’s tri-unity, or *Alleluia* in the form of a circle to indicate God’s infinity.

This type of interfaith dialogue arguably speaks to deeper levels of consciousness than verbal exchange.

Hearing the Call to Prayer is a mixed experience. An aggressive cacophony from the loudspeakers of any number of mosques at the same time makes it difficult to experience it as a call to prayer. When it is a tape-recorded message, or is given out by a young boy, or there is an edge of weariness or aggression in the voice, it can elicit a mixture of annoyance and sympathy: annoyance at its empty formalism, sympathy for a ministry that must sometimes seem as unrewarding as our own, the uphill struggle to summon people to faith.

Sometimes there is a single call. The tone is appealing, the words are clear, the voice seems sincere. One actually does hear within oneself a call to prayer. *Allah-akhbar* (God is great) seems a faith-filled proclamation that God is indeed great, that His compassion and forgiveness are great, that His designs for humankind are great. Some of our group consciously try to experience the call to dawn prayers as an invitation to pray and to be one with our Muslim sisters and brothers before the greatness of God.

**Invited**

Many of us feel invited to enter more deeply into this world. Islam remains for us an object of ongoing reflection, study and engagement. Some have attended courses on Islam. The group has twice organized its annual study session around Islamic theology. There is still much to learn. Yet we may not allow ourselves to forget that our ministry does have a specific focus, and however much the imperative of religious dialogue with the people of Islam asserts itself, we have made a preferential option to accompany two marginal groups from the minority communities. That is our mission. A dialogue of life with Muslims co-defines its context.

Such dialogue raises one final question: what kind of Church can speak of the foundational mysteries of its faith — Trinity, Incarnation, the Cross, Redemption — in a manner that is not simply religious ideology? A Church no longer focused on its institutional power, but a servant of human community and solidarity, a Church that turns its back on triumphalism, that refuses to retreat into a cycle of mere self-perpetuation but never ceases to pitch its tent among suffering humanity, a Church that is prepared to suffer and become small in fidelity to the project of love, a Church that chooses to serve rather than control and risks its very self so that others may have life.

Perhaps part of the purpose of a living dialogue with Islam in a situation of minority, vulnerability and oppression is to learn to become a Church like this.