As I See It: Christian-Muslim Dialogue

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As I See It

Christian-Muslim Dialogue

John O’Brien CSSp

Pakistan

In Pakistan so all-pervasive is Islam, even in the lives of non-Muslims, that a cultural osmosis produces a Christianity deeply shaped by Islamic values and presuppositions. Thus Jesus becomes “our prophet” and, sad to say, sometimes only that. Christmas is our Eid. We become people of the book: the primary revelation is the book of the New Testament and not Jesus himself. Sometimes the text is read in a quasi-magical way. It is enough that it be read: comprehension or interpretation is irrelevant. In Islamic fashion the book is given a place of honour, often placed on the highest point in the living room. In itself this is touching, indicative of a deep religious sensibility, but often what lies behind the gesture can be counter-productive of genuine church life.

People long for cut-and-dried answers to questions like “What is our sharia (law)? How do we observe fasting? How often should we pray?” Some years ago in Peshawar there was a movement to begin a Christian Taliban! — a note taker found his way into one of our seminars to report us to their authorities. Inter-religious dialogue through the looking glass!

On the other hand, what we imagine to be purely Christian symbols can speak clearly to Muslims. The statue of Our Lady near a Spiritan church was a much-frequented place of prayer for many Muslim women. They would place their scarf or shawl around the statue as an act of veneration and devotion to Hazrat Maryam whom they greatly esteem. Shared veneration of Mary may well be a rich and untapped source of Muslim-Christian dialogue.

Islam is a complicated social reality

In Islam the difference between Sunni and Shia can run deep, not infrequently leading to violence and atrocities. These attacks are the work of unrepresentative extremists; there are many recorded cases of ordinary people helping the victims irrespective of their denomination. Popular Shi’ism is effectively regarded as heretical by fundamentalist Sunnis who form 80% of Pakistan Muslims. Shias often seem to have a deeper insight into the Christian understanding of the sufferings of Jesus on our behalf. Here too is a fruitful basis for dialogue.

At another level, there is the difference between the secular minority and the fundamentalist majority. In Pakistan there are far right fundamentalists: extremists who until recently were quite openly recruited for armed struggle. But the majority of fundamentalists reflect the history of the people, the ghettoized nature of the society and the regrettable drop in educational standards. The secularists are to be found among the less numerous educated urban middle class. Due to the increasing presence of multi-channel TV, videos and the Internet, this class is constantly growing. Urban youth
Entering each other’s worlds

You meet a man on a train. After an exchange of greetings, you get into a conversation about the Pakistan cricket team, the obligatory complaints about Pakistan Railways, and polite enquiries into the health of our respective families. He may explain his worries about the nervous disposition of his daughter. If it is a genuine worry, how do you engage with him? Allow him to speak and express his concerns and gradually discover that he and his daughter fear the injurious influence of evil spirits. By now he has figured out that his conversation partner is some kind of Christian missionary — what other European dresses in Pakistani shirt and pyjamas, speaks Urdu, and travels all night in a train? How to respond? Give him the best of western psychology and explain it all away? He may be duly impressed but his daughter will still be troubled and so will he. Is this Christian-Muslim dialogue?

What has one’s religion to say to the man’s predicament — which he constructs in religious terms? You begin to speak tentatively of how Hazrat Isa (Jesus) was renowned for casting out evil spirits, and you see his interest growing. He tells you he has heard something about that. You have now entered his world — one perhaps where Jesus was before you came. The sharing continues. You tell him to call on the name of Hazrat Isa with all his heart and soul and no evil spirit can ever harm him or his. There seems to be real recognition on his face as he gratefully nods agreement. Despite all the western reservations about the very notion of a spirit world, you have referred to the One in whom you believe. You have tried to encounter someone where that person was — the only possible place you can encounter him. Is this Christian-Muslim dialogue?

Inter-religious dialogue, when real, is between the practitioners of two living religious systems

Dialogue with Muslims, not with Islam

There is a very real distinction between the Islam of the mosque and the lived religion of the people. Below the surface of the official religion is the popular religion of the people. Inter-religious dialogue, when real, is between the practitioners of two living religious systems.

Popular religion is concerned with blessing in this life. Its aim is to win God’s favour in the shape of blessings such as a male child, or some material advancement, or deliverance from illness usually understood to have been caused by an evil spirit or an enemy’s curse. This can be obtained by the intercession of a pir or holy man — a living pir with some claim to holiness or the descendant of one in whom the original, divinely bestowed spiritual power is still presumed to reside. It may be a matter of visiting the tomb of such a pir, doing prescribed rituals such as dervish-like dancing, or making an offering. This popular religion extends to knowing which name of God to recite in pursuit of which blessing.

Dialogue with Sufis

To dialogue with Muslims in Pakistan is to dialogue with Sufism. The Islam of their hearts is the religion of the Sufis: the Islam of mystical longing ad personal interior experience. This is an Islam characterized not by legalistic observance, but by the sheer delight in seeking and worshiping the God who dwells not in mosques or temples or books, but in the human heart. This popular Islam has a mystical theology of the highest order, including practical guidelines into the stages of prayer by which one enters into deep personal communion with God. Many of the great Indo-Pakistani Sufis were also poets. Their poetry communicates what it is to hunger for the one true God who is beyond all religious constructions, and who can be known and possessed in ecstatic love by the true disciple who is prepared single-mindedly to seek Him.

It is a form of Islam that democratizes holiness: one’s religion is only as real as one’s actual experience of God. It also provides the basis of one important part of social life — the festivals around the tombs of the great Sufi saints. It would be difficult to exaggerate the importance of these events in the actual religious life of the people. Hindus and Christians will be found there, especially poor people. If there is ever to be a relevant and transforming type of inter-religious dialogue in Pakistan, this will surely be one of its starting points. That, in turn, will point toward a Church more interested in the mystical than the monetary — surely a fruitful point of departure.

These Sufis are also celebrated in popular music. On a long bus journey, one may quite literally hear hours of this music blasted out over the loudspeaker. A very particular form of dialogue with Islam occurs when one listens to the great mystical poems of the Sufis passionately sung with the abandon of a rock star or the raucousness of a balladeer. One is brought close to the heart of Pakistani Islam and of all true devotion. God is real, there is nothing more real. He can be known and loved by the heart that truly seeks Him. In this is the joy that no one can take from us.

One God — but what kind of God?

Declarations from dialogue groups tend to stress what is held in common, most especially when we both believe in one God. A key issue for inter-religious dialogue then is: what kind of god God really is and, in particular, whether oppressive dehumanization could really be His will. The issue is easily dealt with in the lecture hall. Not so easily in the lives of the downtrodden where resignation to the greater power of the wealthy and influential may be the one and only way to put some shape on their ultimately inevitable suffering. To describe such a shameful way of allowing people to be oppressed as “the will of God” and to teach that, amounts to a denial of God’s desire to give His people life.