As I See It: Christian Presence in a Muslim World

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The Spiritans arrived in Pakistan in 1977. They had been invited by the local bishops to come and work among an oppressed and marginalized Hindu tribe called the Marwari-Bhils. After their arrival it was made clear that they could engage in this work only if they were also willing to care for the Punjabi Christians, also a despised and marginalized minority. But they found themselves in a land where 97.5% of the population were Muslims. They were surrounded by the life and all the symbols of an overwhelmingly Islamic culture.

Both the Marwari Bhils and the Punjabi Christians experience Islam as oppression. Their daily experience is that of being *avarna*: despised and oppressed, because of their religion, their caste, their colour and occupation. As tribal Hindus and Christian street sweepers they will not be served in many a teashop. If served, it will be from dirty and inferior cups that are often smashed or discarded after use. In their experience, the people who exploit, abuse and marginalize them are Muslims — so that is their measure of Islam.

Some years ago three sweepers were drowned in a main sewer by a rush of methane gas while attempting to unblock it. To do this work they have to descend into the sewer, often up to their necks in its contents, sometimes obliged to submerge themselves to find the problem. Accidents are frequent. It requires little imagination to realize that theirs must have been a horrible death. They had been ordered to work on their day off, no safety equipment had been provided, and the job was unsupervised. Two of the victims were Muslims and the third was a Christian. The Spiritans

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took up their families’ claims for compensation as a human rights’ case. The manner in which the authorities spoke of the victims communicated a total lack of respect — almost as if they considered them subhuman. Although two were Muslims, their status in the eyes of the powerful, themselves all Muslims, was defined by their occupation and not by their religion. They were sweepers, not Muslims.

Such experiences quite clearly fall short of Islam’s noble spiritual ideals. Many devout Muslims recognize this. But this is the only Islam that the minorities know.

**How the Spiritans are seen**

As Spiritans we are, by and large, not overtly subjected to hostility, much less oppression, although we are seen by many religious leaders as representative of a way of life that is inimical to Islam. Wealthy Muslims can be quite shocked when they realize that we eat and even stay overnight in Christian sweepers and Marwari Hindu villages. To them such behaviour is demeaning. Many people tolerate us rather than accept us. Although we seek to live simply, our buildings, cars, foreign travel and apparently limitless resources mark us off as wealthy.

At another level there is a kind of grudging admiration for us even on the part of some Muslim religious leaders. They see that for the most part we wish no one ill and try our best to do good, usually in solidarity with people who are poor and powerless.

For one Muslim friend, professionally very competent and devout in his religion, all that is wrong with us is that we are not Muslims. We behave like good Muslims, we treat others as good Muslims should, why do we persist in believing in three gods?

**We meet Muslims every day**

If we do not engage in formal dialogue with Islam, we certainly engage in a wide-ranging, daily “living dialogue” with Muslims. The rickshaw wallah who wants to overcharge us is Muslim. The fellow passenger who squeezes up to make room for us in the train when we have no booking is a Muslim. So is the one who has taken possession of someone else’s booking and refuses to budge. The fellow traveller who shares his food with us is a Muslim. So is the one who refuses to eat ours because we are Christians. The official who smoothes the way even when the papers are not quite in order is a Muslim. The religious man who proclaims what for him is the self-evident truth, that Christians do not pray, is a Muslim. So is the man who sincerely asks for prayers for his sick relatives or child, who prays with us as we pray, and who departs deeply appreciative.

For the most part our living dialogue with Islam is conducted not with official spokespersons, but with ordinary people. We meet them every day, many of them on an ongoing basis. The conversation is rarely just about the business in hand. Quickly it moves on to topics like what we think of Pakistan, what we are doing here, where are our children, and why we are not Muslims. The level of the exchange varies from the frivolous to the hotly argumentative, and even the potentially dangerous; from the voyeuristic to the honest and serious. On our part an initial enthusiasm and naiveté have gradually given way to a wariness buttressed by an array of survival strategies, but never quite despairing of genuine communication.

**Our common humanity**

At times, some of us, when aggressively asked what religion we are, will reply “Insan” (human being), in the hope of avoiding what experience has shown to be fruitless debate, and of focusing instead on our common humanity. Humorously deflecting ridiculous accusations can sometimes be more fruitful than trying to confront them. Not infrequently the exchange peter out, as often happens when the interlocutors, warming to a conversation with foreigners in Urdu or Punjabi, discover we are not Muslims. On occasion the religious difference can be put aside to confront the other landlord is his rival or his enemy. The official who smoothes the way even when the papers are not quite in order is also a Muslim. The religious man who proclaims what for him is the self-evident truth, that Christians do not pray, is a Muslim. So is the man who sincerely asks for prayers for his sick relatives or child, who prays with us as we pray, and who departs deeply appreciative.

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**Formal dialogue**

There is no strong desire in the Spiritan group for dialogue at the more formal level e.g. exploring historical questions, pursuing together the meaning of sacred texts in either tradition. Experience indicates that such work can be an arid and unproductive venture. Much of it is for show. Exchanging lofty sentiments, enunciating noble princi-
Dialogue and prayer

A common commitment to prayer can lead to dialogue. Indeed a Swiss missionary concluded that this was the only way to promote Christian-Muslim dialogue.

Dialogue and justice

As we struggle together for justice and the transformation of unjust structures, the courage of some women’s groups composed of secular and religious Muslims has been a source of admiration to many Christians. One group of Christian and Muslim women find their common experiences of oppression by the patriarchal structures of their religious systems a spur to sharing. In such struggles a new sense of mutual respect and interdependence arises. This can lead to a sharing which is a genuine inter-religious dialogue, on what justice is seen to be in our respective faiths and from there to a deeper religious sharing.

Dialogue and work

When Christians and Muslims belong to the same occupation or profession an inter-faith coming together is possible. Muslims came in great numbers to the funeral of the Christian drowned in the sewer. Much preparation had gone into the liturgy, including a special ceremony at the Offertory in an attempt to dignify the honest labour of the sweeper. The Muslims were very touched by this and joined in the prayers. One Spiritan regularly meets his fellow medical professionals and also runs a clinic in collaboration with a Muslim landlord. The dialogue here is between equals, starting at the professional level, moving out into life in general and, on occasion touching on religious faith.

Muslims have a keen sense of the importance, indeed the centrality of prayer in their lives. They are impressed to discover that we pray. But praying together is seldom if ever a formally structured or regular thing. It is more a matter of occasional felt need. Often when visiting Christian patients in hospital, we are asked by Muslims to pray for their sick relative and even lay hands on the patient. They sincerely appreciate this.

Occasionally people call at the door asking for prayers for themselves or a relative. They expect us to pray there and then. In times of need or distress, Pakistaniis and perhaps most human beings revert to a very inclusive notion of religion. They go to any place of worship or religious figure. The governing factor is the supposed efficacy of his prayers and not the orthodoxy or otherwise of his beliefs.

While touring the villages with a view to finding a suitable location for a Spiritan community, two Spiritans frequently participated in sessions of common worship lasting late into the night. Such inter-religious worship and explicit inter-religious dialogue with popular Hinduism is very much an ongoing part of the life of the group in Pakistan. Muslims too join in this kind of worship. In some cases, it seemed there was a real meeting of hearts. On the morning following one such session, a Muslim who had shared in the devotions came with tea for the Spiritans to show his appreciation for their participation — but he would not let the Hindus drink from the same cups! The Spiritans departed with many questions.

Fr. John O’Brien writes from Sadiqabad. Parts 2 and 3 of his article will appear in the May and August issues of *Spiritan*. 

Map of Pakistan

*Spiritans live and work in the area around Sadiqabad*