

CHRISTIAN-MUSLIM RELATIONS CHALLENGES AND PROSPECTS

Dr M.D. Thomas

‘Christian-Muslim Relations’ is a matter of colossal significance in the mission of inter-faith relations worldwide. There are several reasons that contribute to this statement. Christians and Muslims compose more than half the population of the world. Majority of the countries of the world have either Christians or Muslims as majority communities. Christians and Muslims respectively form the largest and the second largest community in the world. Besides, amidst fundamental similarities, there are marked and even inflexible differences between them in perspectives and approaches with regard to life as well as to religion. Ethnic, ideological, political, economic and social overtones tell upon the efforts for their mutual relations, as well.

It is imperative, therefore, to explore the challenges and prospects of the relations between Christians and Muslims across the countries, relying on the positive and negative experiences and their implications in day-to-day life. Diverse local, regional, national, cultural and social settings of the world have in store various aspects of interactions between Christians and Muslims. Although the experiences and success-failure stories from one side of the globe are incomparable in themselves, certain insights and models could be beneficial to other national and continental milieus of the world, in a complementary manner. Moreover, adding a spiritual quality and a humane taste to Christian-Muslim relations, in view of pioneering a culture of working together, is vital for the brighter future of the world. It will bring better religious integrity and social credibility to the respective communities themselves, as well.

1. CHALLENGES OF CHRISTIAN-MUSLIM RELATIONS

1.1. Certain fundamental differences in religious perspectives

Muslims hold the view that religion is the centre of life. They see the entire life from the angle of religion. It is like a ready-made coat, to which one is bound to adjust one’s body. Separation of state and religion is out of question and religious autocracy seems to be innate to the basic Muslim worldview of life. Christians perceive life as the centre of religion as God’s gift and religion to be at the service of life. Religion and state in principle are separate and therefore, there is lot of scope for secular perspectives in most cases, especially in recent times. However, Christians need to proceed much further still.

Though exclusive and fanatic understandings were part of Christianity till the 20th century, there are lot of pluralistic, inclusive, participatory and interactive approaches in the recent decades. These perspectives have a positive bearing on relations with other communities, with Islam as well. On the other hand, Islam, on the whole, is fanatically under the grip of a nonnegotiable mindset, especially with regard to religion. Excepting a few individual instances, the interactions with Muslims do not seem to proceed much further into meeting of hearts and minds that are ready to travel as co-pilgrims.

The obsession with narrow outlooks, exaggerated notions, outdated interpretations, over-charged enthusiasm, rigid mindset and hidden interests must be shed from either side. Christians, by virtue of their mindset that is as large as life itself as well as being members of a more grown up tradition, must

go a supplementary mile in breaking new grounds towards Muslims, by way of opening oneself up in a spirit of appreciative brotherhood.

1.2. Paralleling and competing tendencies

Parallel lines, obviously, do not meet each other. Competition without the spirit of sportsmanship can cause the parties land up in sheer rivalry. Religion is often manipulated for political interests. Worldly power, when fuelled by uncritical religious emotions, can make the worst out of the world, too. Christian and Muslim traditions, even after having emerged from the same roots, have not only travelled as parallel lines, to a great extent, but also were manipulated by vested interests for competitive reasons.

The inherited or acquired drives in the above communities have caused over the centuries incalculable hatred, unbridgeable distance and unpardonable rivalry towards the other, all in the name of God. This is blatantly reflected even now in countries where Christians or Muslims are the majority. Christians in Muslim countries appear to have a much tougher time than Muslims in Christian countries. This unfortunate phenomenon in the largest communities of the world amounts to be a real scandal for other communities in the world. The untold miseries the people of the victim community are inflicted upon bring mammoth shame to the ruling community. It has also ruthlessly shattered the superior claims made by both of them, in the name of religion, ethics, morality and spirituality. The world history stands a silent and helpless witness to this fact.

Both Christians and Muslims, especially the heads of communities and nations, need to make honest introspection and take pro-active steps for awakening their respective world of religion and areas of operation. They have to lead the concerned segments towards getting back to the track from the derailed status, towards repairing the wrongs done or being done to the other and towards building up cordial relations between the communities. Christian communities by way of inter-faith initiatives and Christian countries by way of secular policies and practices, for the most part, seem to be fairly better off in heading towards this objective. Nevertheless, the Christian community, on account of its seniority, need to show a brighter model by way of value-based policies and dialogical measures.

1.3. Conflicting common roots

Common roots as a rule keep the stem and the branches united by sharing the same sap of life. Disunity between the branches is not only an abnormal trend, but a sign of deterioration or even death unto eternal ruin. Christianity and Islam share their origins by way of geographical setting as well as Jewish background, although their immediate sources of inspiration are different in Jesus Christ and Muhammad respectively. It is highly unfortunate and even tragic that the two major traditions strayed from its roots and conflicted with each other in various disgraceful and deplorable ways down the centuries and across the countries.

The Asian backgrounds, Abrahamic ancestry as well as the monotheistic perception of life have to once again bring the two divine traditions closer to each other in a significant manner, in favour of facilitating better prospects for the human society as well as of justifying the *raison de'tre* of the respective heritages. This endeavour calls for a more spiritual and humane understanding of life as well as a more honest practice of the respective affiliations of faith. While maintaining one's legitimate space as a community, what is shared between the two communities have to get a greater focus. The spirit of togetherness and genuine partnership between them has to evolve from such a shared viewpoint and a larger and more inclusive goal in life.

1.4. Falling short of the global vision

Keeping oneself at the centre of one's thinking could be considered a spontaneous and natural approach to life. But, beyond a limit, it becomes counter-productive. It makes one remain coiled around oneself as a selfish being or a group. It applies to a community, as well. Unsocial individuals and communities develop into anti-social elements and they, manifestly so, are doomed to perish in the long run. Christians and Muslims as different communities down the centuries have been self-centred to a great extent and even today in various areas. Though both have a sort of universal outlook inherent in them, they have not come close enough to work together in many respects as mature communities of faith and no doubt this Himalayan failure has massively contributed to the chaos of the world as well as to the dismal pictures of the respective communities in different countries.

Both Christians and Muslims need to improve their worldwide vision further and feel closely united for a 'responsible leadership' at the global as well as at the respective national levels, with a better-quality spirit of 'we-feeling'. Christians have been very much universal in their perspectives, especially with regard to the idea of God as father of all and all human beings as brothers and sisters and therefore have been extending service to all men and women irrespective of community-affiliations. All the same, Christians, as elder brothers, have a greater duty to assist the younger brothers in faith. Christians and Muslims together have to facilitate the society towards global attitudes, approaches and achievements, which will usher in an era of partnership between Christians and Muslims and that in its turn with other communities.

2. PROSPECTS FOR CHRISTIAN-MUSLIM RELATIONS

2.1. Christians and Muslims have a shared spirituality

Spirituality is 'an attitude of being committed to the promptings of the divine Spirit'. It cannot be more than one. Neither Christian nor Muslim religious traditions are identical with spirituality. Grounded in their own singular characteristics, they are different religious persuasions that lead to the same spirituality.

Real spiritual sensibilities emerge from a holistic stance to life. Christians and Muslims are complementary in their perceptions of faith and life and are co-travellers in the process of being spiritual. Christians and Muslims have a shared spirituality.

2.2. Christians and Muslims have a common religious and cultural heritage

In the ultimate context, the Christian and Muslim religious traditions are gifts of the same Creator. They are the common religious and cultural heritage of the human society. They cannot be divided and monopolized by either party. Besides, abiding by this heritage is not by way of tuning oneself to the past scrupulously and slavishly, but by re-interpreting and applying it in terms of the demands of the context and the times, in a spirit of freedom and growth, and with one's face oriented to the future.

The natural response to this heritage is a large attitude, 'both traditions are mine; one is mine in special and the other is mine in general'. Both Christians and Muslims as human beings have a common origin from the same Creator. They have a common existence that is shared on the life-friendly planet of

earth. They have a common destiny of reaching the one and only heaven of divine abode. To contradict these commonalities would be a fundamental crime against the God both communities believe in.

2.3. Christians and Muslims are like branches of the same tree

The diversities between Christians and Muslims with regard to their religious, ethnic, linguistic, ideological, social and cultural affiliations as well as to their basic visionary figure are the innovative design of the Creator. The master mind of God has to be honoured. It is their privileged right to uphold, develop and be faithful to their unique religious and cultural characteristics. At the same time, they cannot exist like islands that are cut off from each other or afford to travel like parallel lines that do not meet.

Christians and Muslims are like ‘branches of the same tree’ that is rooted in the mother earth as well as in the same God, the Creator. They have to share the divine sap of life and grow together. To be rooted in one’s own specific tradition would mean to be interactively related to the other, at the same time. To decide to remain and travel alone would mean to opt for being the withered branch that will be cut off from the tree and is consequently doomed to be surrendered to fire.

Christians and Muslims are like ‘mirrors’ to each other. One could look into that mirror and check one’s human and spiritual fitness and thus improve oneself. For that matter, they are ‘made for each other’. Their differences are intended by God as factors for mutual enrichment. They need to cross the boundaries they have erected between them, resolve and transcend their animosity wherever it is present and build bridges of understanding, closer relations and collaboration, in view of establishing a ‘culture of harmonious living’ in this world.

2.4. Christians and Muslims have a common mission

Christians and Muslims have common concerns to pursue together. ‘Becoming a better human being’, while being well-founded in one’s own tradition, is the first religious duty. ‘Travelling into the religious world of the other’, like the flowing water, in a spirit of learning from the other, is the second duty. ‘Making one’s religion a source of goodness, harmony and peace’, as Pope John Paul II exhorted in 1999 in New Delhi, is the third concern.

‘Making a communion of communities’ between them and ‘presenting before the world a good model for inter-faith relations and partnership’ is the culmination of their common concern. ‘Developing a culture of working together’ in order to make the human society more qualitative is the common mission both communities have to shoulder.

Christians and Muslims have to address together the vital problems of the society that are staring the very survival of the humans as well as of different communities. They have to elicit from within and act upon the larger good and wellbeing of the human society and of the creation, with a sense of responsibility for one another and for all entities. ‘Witnessing to such quality of religion’ and ‘leading the worldwide human society’ towards further heights is the shared Christian-Muslim mission the 21st century is looking for.

3. WAY FORWARD FOR BETTER CHRISTIAN-MUSLIM RELATIONS

By way of conclusion, let me highlight in a condensed form a few of the time-tested inter-faith modules and insightful models processed from the above discussion. These, I am sure, can compose the idea of an effective, meaningful and worthwhile partnership between Christians and Muslims.

3.1. Grow beyond the childish strategies of competing with and fighting against the other and mature towards ‘grown up ways’, by way of giving ‘inspiring examples’ to the world as senior communities.

3.2. Shed the exclusive, petty and worldly claims that are geared towards political, economic and social gains and make a ‘new inter-faith beginning’, with a broad-hearted outlook of having a ‘shared divine heritage’ and a ‘mutual belonging’ in life.

3.3. Transcend the narrow understandings and uncompromising fixations of the past and journey to the ‘spiritual altitude’ that focuses on the ‘essential values of human life’, from the strengths of one’s own religious affiliation.

3.4. Descend from the theoretical pedestal of ‘I am OK, you are not OK and I am going to make you OK’ and ascend to the practical and ‘humble mindset’ of a ‘pilgrim’, in an attitude of ‘learning from and travelling with the other’.

3.5. Recognize the ‘image and likeness of God’ in others and treat them as ‘temples of the living God’ and meet them as ‘believers’ and ‘human beings’, in a humane sense of ‘meeting God himself’.

3.6. Get into unconditional ‘personal friendships’ with others and consider him or her a brother or a sister; a friend and a companion; a co-believer and a co-traveller in life, in a spirit of ‘honouring the other above you’.

3.7. Rise to the fully grown stage of being capable of ‘celebrating differences’ as a powerful source of mutual enrichment, with the aspiration of arriving at a ‘deeper and refined fellowship with other believers’.

3.8. Keep awakening the ‘consciousness of being rooted in the same divine power’, as ‘branches of the same tree’, accepting that one’s loyalty to the roots has to be reconciled with ‘being related to the other’, in order to relish the spiritual sap of life.

3.9. Love and serve the other genuinely, with a deep realization that at the end of the day, ‘when we open ourselves to the other honestly, we open ourselves to God’ and ‘when we accept the other wholeheartedly, we celebrate the presence of God in life’.

3.10. Engage in joint action with the other in view of ameliorating the ‘wellbeing of the entire human society’, in a spirit of translating the ‘personal conversion’ into the ‘transformation of the human society’.

3.11. Remain genuinely committed to fostering a ‘culture of interactive, participatory, harmonious and peaceful life’ as the largest communities of the world, in view of leading the human society towards becoming a ‘community of communities’, in a ‘spirit of togetherness’ and in an ‘abiding partnership’ with the other.

Dr M.D. Thomas
Founder Director, Institute of Harmony and Peace Studies
Floor 1, A 128, Sector 19, Dwarka, New Delhi 110075

Tel.: 09810535378 (p), 08847925378 (p), 011-45575378 (o)
Email: mdthomas53@gmail.com (p), ihps2014@gmail.com (o)
Website: www.mdthomas.in (p), www.ihpsindia.org (o)

Twitter: <https://twitter.com/mdthomas53>
Facebook: <https://www.facebook.com/mdthomas53>
Academia.edu: <https://independent.academia.edu/MDTHOMAS>