

To care for the elderly would be a clear case of ‘doing good’, and likely would be perceived as such and welcomed by families, neighbourhoods, communities, and governments at all levels.

May our gracious and compassionate Lord and Saviour guide us in His own paths of righteousness for His own name’s sake.

MUSLIMS AND THE METHODOLOGY OF DIALOGUE, DEALING WITH OTHERNESS

by Rev. Marten de Vries

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The material in this article was presented in Amsterdam May 2010, at a conference of the Federation Islamitische Organisaties Nederland (FION—Federation of Islamic Organisations in the Netherlands), a department of the Federation of Islamic Organisations in Europe (FIO), linked to the Muslim Brotherhood. Subsequently, in September, the same material was presented at an assembly organised by the Nederlandse Zendingsraad (Dutch Mission Counsel), where theologians and church workers who are engaged in conversations with Muslims met each other.

Introduction

The following seven comments are of a methodical nature. They all revolve around the subject ‘Muslims and dialogue’. By this I mean specifically the inter-religious dialogue between Muslims and Christians. I am speaking from a Christian perspective; I could not do otherwise. Nevertheless it is my genuine intention to formulate my comments in such a way that Muslims and Christians alike can deal with them. My wish is that they may contribute to the organisation and holding of respectful meetings, and that they meet the satisfaction of both Muslims and Christians, in accordance with their deepest motives.

Seven Comments

1. Muslims and Christians have something to say to each other

Naturally my focus on meetings between Muslims and Christians has to do with the service that has been entrusted to me by a number of churches and

therefore by God. However, I also believe Muslims and Christians have something to tell each other.

Their religions are mutually related. Islam claims to be the successor of Christianity with the Qur'an as a replacement of the Bible. Even though Christians cannot accept that concept, it cannot be denied that the same people figure in both holy books. And even though theological notions take on their own specific meaning in different contexts, Muslims and Christians share a set of concepts that is derived from their respective religious sources.

In its essence Islam is an attack that goes to the heart of Christian confession, just as Christianity to Muslims must feel like a stab in the back because of the rejection of monotheism,

Moreover, Muslims and Christians are eager to share something with each other. A good Muslim calls upon a Christian to follow the prophet Mohammed and to give up the Christian belief that Jesus is God and appeared in the flesh, and that God himself brings atonement to sinful human beings through the death of His Son on the cross. A Christian on the

other hand wants nothing more than to share his greatest wealth with his Muslim neighbour. That wealth is the comfort he has through his belief in the Lord, who was crucified, risen and ascended to heaven. Muslims and Christians have a special concern for one another.

2. Pain is inevitable in the encounter between Muslims and Christians

By saying this I admit there is a tension. Superficially there may be resemblances or points of recognition, but reasoned from the heart, both religions find themselves in a position of rivalry towards one other. That is painful, especially because of this family relationship.

It is unrealistic to deduce or reduce differences merely to different ways of expressing the same content. In its essence Islam is an attack that goes to the heart of Christian confession, just as Christianity to Muslims must feel like a stab in the back because of the rejection of monotheism, as Muslims understand it to be. It is unwise and even harmful to disguise that. It is indeed a challenge to work with this.

If one is not prepared to feel the pain, one chooses not a society but—at best—a peaceful co-existence; for example, by allowing people to live in separate city areas or ghettos. While it is doubtful that that is really a suitable solution in the East where it commonly occurs, we certainly do not want that here in the West.

Pain is inevitable in a pluralistic society. Pain is not only to be found where followers of one religion are discriminated or persecuted in name of another dominant religion; it is also characteristic of a respectful meeting.

3. A double agenda is fine but a hidden agenda is terrible

A respectful meeting demands transparency. A Muslim should not have to be secretive about his da'wah obligation. And let a Christian openly acknowledge that his missionary task is part of the essence of his faith.

There are Muslims and Christians to whom this is not a priority. Others even find it unnecessary or only relevant within specific circumstances. This can be either pragmatically or theologically motivated. For the rest it is clear that dialogues by, or between, people of different religious convictions take place and should take place, at various levels.

In the meantime, we do ourselves a favour if we are not secretive about a double agenda in an exchange of thoughts on religious subjects. It is unnecessary too. Missionary drive does not exclude a dialogue in formal equality. For it concerns the *motive* for the meeting and therefore need not necessarily place its stamp on the way the dialogue takes shape.

When the form of the communication remains neutral, a spirited manner of discussion only makes the content even more interesting. At least, when the discussion is not coming only from one party, but from all participants.

God, who reveals Himself, does not want hidden agendas. It puts one in a predicament and forces one to say something different on the inside than to the outside world. Sooner or later one will be discovered, and that would be damaging to one's credibility and the credibility of one's message.

4. When one forces the other to speak within his or her own frame of reference, there is no discussion

One of the first requirements for an inter-religious discussion is to speak on the same level. Of course one may consider one's religion to be superior to the belief of the other. For one does not believe one's own ideas, but instead what one sees as God's revelation. But if one does not wish to hold a monologue, but wishes to have a true dialogue and exchange of ideas, one will have to grant the other more space than one's own frame of reference allows.

Christian dogmatics with integrated apologetics against Islam is unfit as dialogue material. Just as unfit as an Islamic book titled 'dialogue about the divinity of Jesus' that in the end boils down to the fact that a Christian must become Muslim.

Christians should not call Muslims ‘Mohammedans’ because in doing so they are defining the prophet for Muslims as an Islamic Jesus. Muslims, on the other hand, should realize that Christians are not the ‘people of the book’. They are followers of a Person, of Jesus Christ. Their Holy Scripture is not a Christian Qur’an but it leads them to Jesus, in the same way that, in the Islamic understanding, the prophet brought a Book to the people.

Christians should not judge the Qur’an by the lack of chronological order, which is specific to the Bible. Nor are they obligated to make the Old and New Testament answer to the Islamic criteria for the way a holy book should be.

5. For a meeting it is necessary that one is prepared to stand in another person’s shoes

The Christian who is not prepared to stand beside a Muslim does not understand how he is misunderstood when he explains his beliefs. He is also incapable of interpreting his neighbour’s questions. He has even less right to make critical remarks on what the other brings into the discussion from his Book and from his heart. A Muslim who cannot, and will not, try to imagine how a Christian can find comfort and direction in his Faith in Jesus Christ as Gods Son and Saviour, is unfit to be a partner in dialogue.

If you, as a Muslim need more than the Qur’an, or as a Christian cannot do with just your Bible, then you have disqualified the holiness of your own sources

The Christian must understand that monotheism is everything to his Muslim neighbour. A Muslim must try to understand that to a Christian his belief in Jesus is not in contradiction to monotheism.

Sometimes people think that a convert can serve some purpose at a dialogue. Certainly, he can serve as a role model for those who, like himself, wish to trade one religion for the other. In the discussion between convinced Muslims and confessing Christians, however, a Christian who is born in the house of Islam or a Muslim who has betrayed his faith, is a disturbing factor, because of his apostasy. Pushing someone like that forward is a sign of disrespect for the other and deprives the inter-religious discussion of its necessary neutrality.

6. It is unnecessarily disrespectful to use another’s religious sources for one’s own purpose

There are Christians who want to read the Qur’an with Muslims. What they want is to lead the Muslims to Jesus through the Qur’an. The underlying idea is that what the Qur’an says about Jesus leads to a Christian creed sooner than to the Islamic Jesus, who is no more and no less than a prophet between Moses and Mohammed.

Likewise, there are also Muslims who abuse the Christian Bible to prove Islam. They point out passages that they say foretell the coming of the Islamic prophet and claim that some of Jesus' words confirm this. The assumption is that the Christian canon is a corrupt book in which traces of the original revelation are nevertheless still to be recognized.

This method exists due to the disregard for the near, or broader, context. It also displays a disregard for the phenomenon of another person's scriptures and their use of them. It should be beneath everyone's dignity to pester the other with one's own interpretations of what is holy to the other.

If you, as a Muslim need more than the Qur'an, or as a Christian cannot do with just your Bible, then you have disqualified the holiness of your own source.

7. We live permanently in a globalized world, so territorial thinking in religion has had its day

We live together as Muslims and Christians in one country. We live in a world that is becoming smaller and smaller. This will never change, thanks to modern transport and the Internet. A government that wishes to protect its citizens by withholding what it sees as religious disinformation, will in the long term achieve the opposite of what it intends.

Territorial thinking has had its day. Christians should not think that way, as Jesus clearly said that his kingdom was not of this world. A Christian or Jewish-Christian state, for example is an unchristian expression.

While the concept of the house of the Islam as territorial ground can be placed within a theological construction, it has become fruitless. The same can be said about the Islamic state. Naturally, it is up to Muslims to draw this conclusion. However, I associate with Islamic scholars, who are accepting the reality, and who in fact have reached the same conclusion.

Muslims live all across the world. They deserve equal rights but cannot dictate the Shari'a to others. Countries dominated by Muslims harbour millions of non-Muslim inhabitants. The indigenous inhabitants will only accept a second-class status at the cost of loyalty. Western or Asian guest labourers will not let themselves be locked up in compounds forever.

We are left with the task of bringing ideological building stones from our own religious conviction into a mixed society in which everyone feels at home. Not just tolerated, but emancipated.

Muslims are prepared to do that. Proof of this is the time offered to me today, in which I could speak freely.