

Islamic-Christian Dialogue

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DIIALOGUE (Arabic *hiwâr*: Discussion; analysis; of: *hâra*: discuss III) generally refers to mutual respectful listening and discussing between two equal partners in order to attain an understanding and balance while acknowledging existing differences.

The interreligious dialogue between Islam and Christianity is based on related, theologically founded positions. It is specifically connected with the topos of the common Abrahamic roots; i.e., the belief in one God. The dialogue between both religions is to be seen simultaneously in the context of geographic proximity and continuous historic encounters. Representatives from both sides have stood opposed to each other in various constellations during the course of history, from armed conflicts to peaceful coexistence and even alliances.

As Islam regards itself in comparison to both other monotheistic religions as being in a continuity of development, its writings and upholders are also accepted, even if only to a certain degree. Jews and Christians (*ahl al-kitâb*), the “People of the Book” thoroughly accord to the Godly plan of a pluralistic religious world in which the religions compete with one another (5:48), and they have the opportunity of being rewarded for their actions (2:62; 5:69). Peaceful coexistence is emphasized (49:13; 106:1-4). Violent conversion, however, is rejected (2:256), a state of affairs completely conform to the lack of missionary thinking. But, the creed of the trinity is criticized, as it puts the commitment to unitarianism into question (5:72-75; 5:117; 112:3). Furthermore, the relationship of the Muslims to the Christians was generally determined by the societal situation: The Christians were wards (*dhimmi*) under the Islamic reign. Interreligiosity therefore stood under the portent of political and legal power.

The rapid expansion of Islam had far-reaching consequences for the Christian world. Although a relatively peaceful coexistence between Christians and Muslims was the general rule at the time of the Umayyad caliphs, Christian theologians saw a Christian heresy in Islam, for example the Byzantine Church Father, John of Damascus (d. ca. 750). The

Christian reception of Islam at the time of commencement was thus not aimed at impartially getting familiar with Islam. Rather it was a matter of discrediting the competing new teaching.

Yet, a lively intellectual and material interchange took place between the Christians and Muslims at different levels. Just as the cultural assets and methods were transported over the distant transcontinental trade routes between the Yellow Sea in the East and the Atlantic in the West, material and intangible goods were now exchanged between the Muslims and the members of other religious communities, mainly the Christians. Above all, intellectual impulses radiated from the Nile valley and the Maghreb, which also had a determining significance for the Christian-occidental culture: the Greek-Arabic and the Arabic-Latin translation endeavors. The former started in the Aristotelian reception of the neo-platonic school of Alexandria through which the Arabs encountered classical thinking. The second movement started with the Arabic translations of classical philosophy and the scientific texts and Arabic commentaries, but finally also from original Arabic-Islamic texts based on the reception of classical philosophy. This movement led to the emergence of translation schools in Europe, founded by Christian monks, and found its heyday around the turn of the century in the Toledo translation school. Up through the 16th century, in Europe, natural sciences such as medicine were based on the work of Ibn Sina (980–1037), and the astronomic achievements of Nicolas Copernicus (1473–1543) would hardly have been thinkable without his reception of the earlier work done by Ulug Bek (1393–1449).

Apparently, the Arabic-Latin translation movement was one-dimensional throughout the entire Mediterranean, whereby one can conclude that a reception of European-Christian history of thought hardly existed that would have precipitated into Latin-Arabic translations. The question is: why was this not of interest to the Arabian Muslims? Was it cultural chauvinism or did an ignorance exist or was there even erasure of the trails of the Muslim reception?

There was certainly a long tradition of *munâzara*, debate and dispute, which even received patronage by the ruling houses, such as by the Abbasid caliph al-Ma'mun (reigned 813–833) and the Mogul emperor Akbar the Great (reigned 1556–1605). However, our current knowledge only allows the realization that Arabic-Islamic sources on Christianity—beyond dialogue—were predominantly polemic, such as the writings of the Hanbalite religious and legal scholar Ibn Taymiyya (d. 1328) (e.g. *al-Jawâb al-sahîh li-man baddala dîn al-Masîh*), (the correct response to those who changed the religion of the Messiah), a detailed response

to a work against Islam written by Paul, Bishop of Sidon and Antioch, in which the Christians were especially reproached by Ibn Taymiyya of having falsified the original revelations (*tahrîf*).

Against the background of the crusades, when the aristocracy was bored and the bourgeoisie sought trade expansion opportunities, the latent fear of the Arabs was turned into a willingness to go into battle by many Christians. The so-called “Saracens” were, in part, considered to be idol worshippers, Muhammad appeared to be a magician and an anti-prophet smitten by promiscuity; a scene that established itself not only due to distorted Koranic verses, Islam was now made to appear, as also consolidated in Dante’s *Inferno*, as a religion of the sword: a religion of the devil and the Antichrist. An ideological demarcation evolved; Islam became the image of the foe par excellence. Even though there were a few sympathetic utterances, such as from Francis of Assisi (d. 1226), the popular opinion that Islam must be excluded, remained. Thus, the reformer Martin Luther (d. 1546) took the view that Islam was a false religion per se; i.e. an incarnation of evil. This point of view additionally took the experiences of the Ottoman expansion into consideration.

This distorted picture of Islam was rejuvenated during the colonial age as the European powers started projecting their ideas onto foreign cultures and “orientalized” Islam in the imagined manner (cp. Edward Said, *Orientalism*). The heterogeneous Islamic world was reduced to a monotheistic, inherently anti-modern and anti-rational world and thus excluded the Orient from world-history. European powers now made clear how far they wanted to push the Europeanization, point-blank. While doing so, they became preaching or “instruction cultures” (W. Lepenies) and immunized themselves against non-European criticism to a large extent. Various scientifically based cultural and historical science contributions legitimized the colonial and eventually epistemological dominance. The other, the outer, objective world, was mainly seen in the religious, but not at other levels of identification in a time when one’s own religious-cultural identity was being put to the test. The polemics established in the Christian tradition retorted in the same vein. Even if the disputes between the scholars were initially of a peaceful nature, even if polemic (cp. the disputes between Karl G. Pfander—Rahmatullah Kairanawi in India), the aggressive tendency of the apparent incompatibility of both systems increased, particularly when Islam continued to be seen as a monolithic warlike religion, proclaiming Jihad against all infidels and thus opposing the peaceful Christianity of the Sermon on the Mount.

The antagonistic scenario continues into the 20th century (cp. S.

Huntington, *Kampf der Kulturen*), blurs the Abrahamic legend-of-origin, equally shared by both religions. Instead, the relatively trivial doctrinal differences, which separate the Abrahamic religions, are overemphasized and the respectively dividing aspects made excessive.

On the other hand, the multifarious interaction processes between the cultures created new opportunities for dialogue. Especially during the time between the World Wars, the churches undertook efforts through various missionary movements to come closer to the Muslims in their plurality and to simultaneously rethink their own positions and put things into perspective. An example of this is the three World Missionary Conferences at Edinburgh (1910), Jerusalem (1928) and in Tambaram (1938), which paved the path for the foundation of the World Council of Churches, borne by the protestant and orthodox churches (World Council of Churches in Geneva) in 1948.

The dialogue between followers of various religions has become strongly differentiated since the middle of the 20th century at various levels (national, institutional, everyday life). That involves patronage, carriers, content, and locations where dialogue activities are to take place.

At the institutional level, the dialogue movement arose in the 1950s as the Vatican and the World Council of Churches organized a series of events between Christian leaders and representatives of other religions. New institutional structures developed from that. In 1964, Pope Paul VI had a "Secretariat for Non-Christian Religions" established, to deliberately promote interreligious dialogue at various levels. Positive words about Islam could be found in article 16 of the "Dogmatic Constitution on the Church" for the first time. This can be evaluated as the first step by the Catholic Church toward serious discussions with Islam. The "Nostra Aetate" declaration on the relationship of the church to the non-Christian religions in 1965 finally demanded a mutual willingness for understanding and openness to communication by both Christians and Muslims: Article 3 of the declaration underlined the common interests of Islam and Christianity. The monotheism of both sides, the belief in resurrection, in the Last Judgment, and in the progenitor Abraham were to serve as the basis for a dialogue. In 1989, the "Secretariat for Non-Christians" was restructured as the "Pontifical Council for Inter-religious Dialogue."

In 1971 the World Council of Churches in Geneva established its own organizational unit for interreligious dialogue (Unit for the Dialogue with People of Living Faiths and Ideologies), which was devoted especially to the relationship between Muslims and Christians, and which

held numerous events with various Muslim partners in the 1970s and 1980s in Europe, Asian, and Africa (Chambesy 1976; Colombo 1982).

In its wake, international Islamic organizations have also championed dialogue, for instance the Islamic World League (Mekka) and the Muslim World Congress (Karachi), even if the interests here were often rather of a diplomatic-political nature.

In the meantime, there are numerous dialogue programs and promotional institutions at the local level, whereby their respective sphere of action varies greatly from one another. In the South and Southeast Asian Muslim Diaspora, a whole series of Christian institutions exists, studying the various manifestations of Islam and seeking or initiating dialogue in this manner. This also has a positive effect on the local Muslim Organizations so that a thoroughly fruitful exchange has arisen, which is shown in numerous initiatives.

In the Muslim Diaspora in the West, e.g., in Great Britain, Muslim organizations are active and through contact with the Church at the level of social services and education seek to establish dialogue (Centre for the Study of Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations, Birmingham; Islamic Foundation, Leicester).

In Lebanon, tormented by the civil war (1975–1992), religious leaders were able to continually negotiate a kind of armistice with other important public figures, who lay beyond confessional borders and thus occasionally contributed to a constructive dialogue process. In particular, the Middle Eastern Council of Churches resident in Beirut emerged as a contact there.

Additional dialogue programs and initiatives exist, among others, in the USA and Canada, in North Africa and sub-Saharan Africa. Here, the emphasis of commonalities is in the foreground, the respect and the equality of various religions is sought.

This appears to be contrary to Muslim organizations such as “Nation of Islam” in the USA, which, in the past due to the objective experiences of the black inhabitants, leaned more towards separation and continually swore the superiority of—ethnic black—Islam. Larger interfaith events are also being held in the form of “Parliamentary dialogues” such as the World’s Parliament of Religions in Chicago 1893. This form of dialogue has increased in the 1980s and 1990s—for example under the leadership of various multifaith organizations.

From a structural point of view, “institutional dialogues” are organized meetings to deliberately bring representatives of various religious institutions into contact with each other. “Theological dialogue” on the other hand refers to structured meetings that deal above all with theolog-

ical and philosophical aspects, such as the concept of God, the meaning of the revelation, humanity and the society, etc. in the context of a religious pluralistic environment, namely both inter- as also intra-religious. “Dialogue in Society” and “Dialogue of Life” concentrate on the problems in everyday life and therefore have practical concerns in the center of their treatise, for example the relationship of Church and State, religious minorities and their rights, problems in interreligious marriages, education and religion. Often, the goal is to develop mutual action programs to improve the local, rather also informal interaction, for instance through getting to know one another. Among others, the Christian-Islamic Association in Cologne has emerged as a contact partner for this in Germany. More recent *face-to-face*-initiatives, with their encountering concepts, are finding a culmination in Germany for instance in the *Open Mosque* project in Mannheim. The goal of the Mannheim initiative is the establishment of interreligious dialogue among the faithful of both sides and the practical implementation at the personal level, similar to a variety of “Islam-Forum,” or the recently (2004) established “Muslimische Akademie” in Berlin. The “Multi-Faith Centre” project by the University of Derby in England is currently attempting something similar. However, problems arise when Muslim nations meddle in internal dialogue processes, such as can be seen in the case of Turkey. One must recognize that the Muslims in Europe have not been “outposts” of Muslim nations for a long time; rather they are an integral part of the European society.

One should consider the fact that the participant groups are often restricted, these generally originate from liberal and ecclesiastically engaged “educated classes,” and that few female participants are present at such events.

Periodical meetings and discussion groups to get to know each other and to gain knowledge about the faith and daily lives of others should take place alternatively in parishes and mosques, whereby the opening and concluding prayer could each be said by a Muslim and a Christian. The objective is to have an effect on daily lives and the local districts and thus develop an interculturalism lying beyond religious essentialism. For it is not the religions that meet; rather it is the people anchored in differing religious systems. The bearers of these systems are contextually dependent and consequently flexible in the interpretation of the religious repertoire available to them. For, dialogue presupposes religious pluralism which is more than mere diversity; religious pluralism implies active engagement with plurality. It is not a given, but has to be created. It therefore requires participation, and it is more than mere tol-

erance, because of its inherent active attempt to understand each other. And, it does not displace or eliminate deep religious commitments, but it is the encounter of commitments.

Hence, the “spiritual dialogue” is to make the spiritual lives of the various religious communities comprehensible and tangible such as expressed in the participating observation of other religious rituals or even in the form of a mutual interreligious prayer experience. Practiced inter-religious interchange takes place, among others, in Islamic mysticism, in Sufism—a special kind of dialogue. This is because it was the Sufis who have found their way into foreign cultures since the 12th century and, by absorbing local elements, contributed to a fruitful interaction. In this way, the integrating potential of Sufism can be utilized today once again to promote mutual familiarization and integration of Muslims.

The organized dialogue movement is a new chapter in the long history of the encounters between Christianity and Islam. This is of particular significance against the background of mutual mistrust and mutual fear. Dialogue successes are therefore to be noted especially at the interpersonal level.

Considering the long hostile history and the experiences of colonialism as well as the political meddling into the politics of Muslim nations by influential western industrial nations, Muslims continue to be skeptical towards dialogue initiated by the Christians. They occasionally perceive a continuation of Christian-missionary activities here. Likewise, a stereotyped picture of Islam persists among many Christians, as a militant religion standing in the way of a peaceful Christendom. These prejudices must be overcome.

New opportunities for dialogue lead to the eagerness to experiment, meaning new strategies must be continually developed on the path of *trial and error*, in turn fostering and promoting mutual respect and cooperation.

Fundamentally, dialogue itself is a benefit in intercultural communication and decisive for understanding the others and even oneself. For, in the dynamic process of construction and reconstruction of the other—through projection and introjections—one’s self-perception changes at the same time, resulting in the constant modification of one’s own perception as well as that of the others. Imagined ideas about subjects like essentialism, purity, homogeneity, and national cultures are therefore subject to permanent change. Consequently, on and above all, between both sides, a whole series of societal transitions can be perceived that can have quite a positive effect as they offer social space for the most

varied—including religious—identity and discourse levels.

Above all, breaking taboos is necessary to prevent remaining in old cognitive structures. Dialogue especially demands criticism of one's own system. This is because those who join in dialogue without the willingness to emerge changed are incapable of dialogue. Here, making an effort toward hermeneutic re-thinking is helpful. An exclusively western value-based orientation as a prerequisite proves to be counter-productive in dialogue. After all is said and done, an intra-Muslim dialogue is also needed to face up to the stereotypes and indoctrination attempts of various groups within the Islamic spectrum. Above all, the exclusion of missionary thinking, in return respect of the others and of their self-portrayal as well as the willingness of having a personal learning process are, as experiences at various local levels show, guarantees for constructive and sustained dialogue.

After September 11, 2001, there is once more a new thrust and reinforced search for dialogue, especially by Christian institutions. Even political foundations now feel called on to deliberately build-up dialogue with Muslims and thus search corresponding strategies. This dialogue is, however, not very prominent yet. It is based on the "Jihad-crusade rhetoric" as well as endangered by it.

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