

ENCOUNTER AND THE RISK OF CHANGE

Religious Experience and Christian- Muslim Dialogue

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‘**M**Y MOTHER’S CHRISTIAN PRACTICES made me think more deeply about our Islamic traditions.’ This is what was said by Jehan Sadat, a Muslim, and the wife of Egypt’s President, Anwar as-Sadat. It could serve as a motto for any dialogue between Christians and Muslims: the process begins with discoveries about each other; one is surprised by both the similarities and the differences one finds; finally one discovers oneself and one’s own tradition in a quite new way. This article explores the enrichments that can come from interreligious dialogue in general, and Christian-Muslim dialogue in particular. I shall try to say why interreligious dialogue is important for me and how it has influenced my own sense of religious identity. My aim is not simply to promote a better understanding across the religious borders, but also to help us come to appreciate our own traditions better, and thus grow in respect for each other.

Beginning with Religious Experience

Authentic encounter between religiously committed people sets a process in motion. This process takes a long time. It requires from all of us a willingness to be continually learning, and a readiness to respect the Other, warts and all. Once one has got beyond the beginning, one needs more than theoretical knowledge of another religion. Lived experiences of shared religious events begin to become more important. In my view, it is precisely religious experience that really brings human hearts together. In recent years, I have often had the experience that encounters on this level have had profound influence on people and on their convictions. The Jesuit pastoral centre in Ludwigshafen, the Heinrich Pesch Haus, deliberately set itself a new priority two years ago, and began to specialize in interreligious dialogue. In particular, it has put on a study programme for all who are

interested in Christian-Muslim dialogue, aiming to provide for both Christians and Muslims an opportunity to become more sensitive to each others' tradition and practice.

Dialogue and Fidelity

When I give talks about the significance of Christian-Muslim dialogue, I keep on coming up against an unease that arises in people well rooted in their faith: 'you're on a slippery slope—be careful'. These people are assuming that dialogue in fact means that we are putting into question the truths in which we firmly believe, or at least playing them down. Thus they think that, in dialogue, the truth of faith is being treated like a commercial object, a matter of bargaining. This is, however, quite false. Interreligious dialogue does not entail one's own faith becoming something for barter. Dialogue admittedly does require an option for open-mindedness, and an attitude of large-heartedness. People seeking dialogue must be ready to move beyond where they already are. They must be ready to move away from the safe places with which they are familiar, from the securities offered by their own tradition, and to approach something which is Other. But this openness is something quite distinct from putting my own faith up for negotiation. When I open myself up to interreligious conversation, I recognise a convergence with Jesus' own way of life. He too opened himself to the world around him, and gave himself up for all people. It is only through this kind of openness that a person can begin to understand, indeed can want to understand. It involves two things: the attempt to understand what is different, and a fidelity to one's own faith.

The Attempt to Understand

The attempt to understand what is different requires firstly that we not begin by confronting our conversation partners with a collection of accumulated prejudices. We should not load them down with stereotypical formulae and easy sentences learnt from a dictionary. We must listen to them, and obtain from them the most objective sense we can of how their religion works. This sense must begin from how the religion understands itself; it must constantly be trying to stress this living centre, so that we can meet our partners as they really are.¹ This

¹ Francis A. Arinze, *Meeting Other Believers* (Leominster: Gracewing, 1997).

does not mean that we simply receive what we hear, nor that there is anything illegitimate about the critical search for truth. It is precisely critical openness that is required—or ‘critical sympathy’, to use a favourite formulation of Adel Theodor Khoury, the doyen of Christian-Muslim dialogue in Germany. Being critical is a sign of respect for the dialogue partner, a sign that one is taking them and their religion seriously. More is involved than the exchange of polite pleasantries; the conversation needs to get beyond the kind of syncretism that just ignores differences.

Fidelity to One's Own Faith

Christian-Muslim dialogue, however depends on more than mutual openness. The dynamism that comes from fidelity to one's own faith and religion is equally necessary. This does not mean that I must hold fast, blindly, to anything which comes from my own tradition. Neither, conversely, does it mean that I must casually give up the substance of my own faith, that which goes to shape my own identity. There is a form of fidelity which is open; and this is the basis of a genuine and fruitful interreligious dialogue. The deeper my convictions about the truth of my own religion and the richer my experience of it, the more open I can be to the convictions and experiences shared with me by people who believe differently. Moreover, this keen interest will in no way imply that I have begun to be a relativist. Dialogue does not depend on self-restraint, or on a polite refraining from making truth claims. On the contrary: dialogue becomes true dialogue, as opposed to a vacuous exchange of nice thoughts, precisely when both my dialogue partner and I stay true to our own faiths. In the end, both partners are under an obligation, towards themselves and their faith-communities, to speak of what makes their faith live, and of what nourishes their religious life.

Different Religious Experiences

Faiths are held and lived out historically, and so faith-experiences must inevitably be different, at least to some extent. It follows that diversity does not necessarily signify contradiction: it can simply betoken otherness, another way of being human. I have often had this kind of experience in conversation with Muslims. It can happen that my dialogue partners are using the same words as I am, but giving them a quite different significance on the basis of their own experience and religious convictions. In such a situation, the task is not simply to

know what the other person is saying, but also to understand why they are thinking and believing in the way they do. In other words, if I am really to understand the position put forward by a person of another faith, I have somehow to move with them though the very process by which they have come to their religious convictions and insights. What is at stake here is simply understanding, not necessarily agreement. In my experience, this kind of readiness is the most authentic attitude I can bring to my dialogue partners when I want to take their religious feelings seriously.

The way is long and arduous, but Christian-Muslim dialogue—and inter-faith dialogue in general—has no alternative. We are still at the beginnings; a great deal of courage is still required if we are to attain the patience and the growth in mutual understanding that will allow this dialogue to flourish. It will not do simply for us to say that what is different in the other faith is irreconcilable with our own. We should rather say something like this:

I do not yet see how this is to be put together with my faith. But who knows? If we can get a broader view, a deeper idea of what we have just come to know, then perhaps possibilities will open up. Perhaps we will discover a more expansive framework that will enable us to reconcile and bring together these different statements.²

Patience is needed; in Christian-Muslim dialogue, one must avoid trying to anticipate what can only happen as the culmination of a long process. Perhaps we can agree on one criterion for judging religions, which is biblical, and which Matthew's Gospel puts as follows: 'you will know them by their fruits' (Matthew 7:20). We need to assess the quality of our witness, both in our daily lives and in our histories; that will help us once again take more seriously the way individuals' religious practice affects their faith-community and society at large. In my experience, dialogue helps us firstly to recognise these fruits, then to evaluate them critically, and finally to learn to appreciate them. If we reach this point, then we will be able to see interreligious dialogue in general, and Christian-Muslim dialogue in particular, as something more than 'a polemic for scoring points over our adversaries or as primarily an exercise in apologetics, refuting various objections'. It

² Adel Theodor Khoury, *Der Islam und die westliche Welt* (Darmstadt: Primus, 2001), p. 206.

will become 'a conversation between people who are sharing and listening, giving themselves to the promotion of good communication and living witness'.³

The Challenges of Interreligious Dialogue

As I look back on the many experiences of Christian-Muslim dialogue that I have had in the past few years, one thing strikes me particularly. There are many religious elements in Islam, regarded by Muslims as true and holy, that do not have their origins in Christianity but are rather genuine fruits of a tradition that is not at all Christian. Despite this, however, I also notice that I as a Christian can often understand many of these. As we exchange our experiences and insights, I discover a kind of complementarity here with my own Christian faith—often in a way that is very enriching. I think, for example, of the prayer evenings I have experienced in various Sufi communities, for example following the dreadful events of September 11 2001. The experience was always the same: an enormous sense of spiritual enrichment for myself, combined with a question as to how far I, as a Christian, could accept and integrate elements of Islamic piety into my own faith and religious practice. I have always fundamentally let myself be guided by the conviction expressed by Pope John Paul II following the World Day of Prayer for Peace in Assisi: 'every genuine prayer is called forth by the Holy Spirit, who is mysteriously present in the heart of every human person'. The Pope is alluding here to a 'mystery of unity', quite evident in Assisi 'despite the differences in religious confessions'. This expresses a basis on which positive values in other religions can be appreciated: all these true values are traces of God, the workings of God's Spirit in human lives. It follows that Christians and Muslims stand together in our search for God, and for the living, all-embracing truth. Moreover, we can practise the sensitivity to others which is a central virtue for both Islam and Christianity—not merely towards believers in each others' religion as persons, but also towards the values shaping each others' tradition. Perhaps in the future we will indeed discover God's working in each others' religions and in the world that it is our responsibility to form: the one God in different forms. After all, Vatican II had already taught

³ Adel Theodor Khoury, *Islam kurz gefaßt* (Freiburg: Herder, 1998), p. 125.

us that other religions ‘often allow a ray of that truth to be seen which enlightens everyone’.⁴

Dialogue and the Future

No one can accurately predict what the future of Christian-Muslim dialogue will be. One thing, however, seems to me certain: despite the problems with dialogue, there is much to be gained from it. Over the last thirty years, progress has been enormous. Thirty years ago, it would have been unthinkable that our mutual understanding and interest, and our work together, would have grown to the extent that they have. The effects on the Church—both of interreligious dialogue in general and of Christian-Muslim dialogue in particular—have been remarkable. Both sides have made moves; there have been notable exchanges; believers in both religions have noticed. We need to continue along this path so that religion can remain a living presence in our world and continue to make a contribution—a contribution that will be reflected in human solidarity, and in engagement for justice, peace and love. Christian-Muslim dialogue has just begun—we need to make conscious efforts to keep it going.

A Truth to be Done

‘Truth is not just the truth that one believes and formulates and tries to justify; truth, religious truth, is primarily the truth that one does.’⁵ To put it another way: in today’s situation, we cannot be content with mere statements of intent; we cannot just live as strangers alongside each other, regarding each other as rivals. In interreligious dialogue today, we need to be convinced, and to keep on discovering, that we are irrevocably united with each other. This conviction will give new impetus to interreligious dialogue: in the future, it must serve really to strengthen and encourage what we undertake together in practice. It follows that those who engage in it cannot any longer be content simply to sit opposite each other and talk about their relationships, what they have in common, and what divides them. They must be prepared to look at practical problems together, as things that affect us

⁴ *Nostra aetate*, n. 2.

⁵ Adel Theodor Khoury, *Der Islam und die westliche Welt*, p. 207; compare John 3:21: ‘Those who do what is true come to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that their deeds have been done in God.’

all, and affect us in our faiths. We will need to be asking of our religion what it might contribute towards the resolution of the issues facing us in common. Christians and Muslims will need to strive together to make their contribution—or rather, to make their contribution together.

Moving Forward

Interreligious dialogue is still, in my view, in its infancy: it has hardly affected the population as a whole. Those who engage in it soon notice how profoundly it affects one's own faith. My own experiences with Christian-Muslim dialogue is that dialogue becomes fruitful when I see it as part of an experiential learning process. Anyone engaging in that kind of dialogue knows that no-one emerges from the process without having been enriched in their own faith. Nevertheless, dialogue is not an end in itself. Whenever we work together on the basis of our faith and conviction with people of good will, be they Jews, Muslims or believers in other religions, we build something in common with them, and this has its positive effects. The way has been marked out: the way of encounter with all at the level of religious experience. It is inviting us: 'Let's move towards each other! Let's visit each other where we celebrate liturgy, where we pray and meditate! There it is that we will see what sustains our faiths and our lives!'⁶

Every encounter with those
who hold another faith
and live in another way
can give rise to anxiety
both in us and in them.

Every encounter of this kind
involves the risk of change:
change in what is most fundamental
both in our own lives, and in theirs.

Because this is how it is,
because this is how it has been for centuries—
it is not something we have just invented—
human beings in these encounters
have caused each other pain beyond reckoning.

⁶ 'Brief an die Religionen in Deutschland', *WCRP-Informationen*, 52 (1999), p. 32. Also available on www.wcrp.de/brd.html (Schriften).

They have inflicted wounds,
 multiple, deathly wounds;
 but they themselves have also been wounded.
 It has been going on for generations;
 it cannot be forgotten.

The history of the Church proves the point:
 in the cruelty of the Crusades and the Inquisition,
 the terrors of the heresy-hunts and the pogroms,
 human beings were desecrated,
 deprived of their autonomy, their rights.

That's how it has always been:
 those who did not want to let themselves be wounded
 have inflicted the wounds;
 those who could not let themselves be called into question
 have hunted down and removed those who asked the questions.

Right up to the present, encounters of this kind have shown
 whether love is just being preached about
 or whether we are actually living it.
 Right up to the present, encounters of this kind have shown,
 whether or not perfect love has really cast out fear.
 Right up to the present, encounters of this kind have shown
 whether or not we are respecting each other in truth and love.
 Right up to the present, encounters of this kind have shown
 whether we can let ourselves be wounded.

When we meet this crucified one at table,
 he makes us mindful of his vulnerability
 with the symbols of bread and wine.
 He invites us to depart from his table as women and men,
 as human beings, who prefer to let themselves be wounded
 rather than inflict wounds themselves.⁷

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⁷ Anonymous German poem, taken from *Die Begegnung von Christen und Muslime* (Hamburg: Evangelisches Missionswerk, 1997), pp. 49-50.