

faith and development

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THE MUSLIM-CHRISTIAN DIALOGUE : A CHALLENGE FOR CONSTRUCTING PEACE

By Thomas Michel*

All attention is on Iraq. Committed to the concept of a “preventative war”, suited to fit its vested interests, the United States has chosen to crush Baghdad. Using Saddam Hussein as an excuse, and possessed by the Sept. 11- humiliation, the Bush administration has cried for retribution. No one knows its outcome. And yet, in the midst of this programmed disaster, we have to think of constructing the future.

The reflection we propose is a challenge. The way to peace is blocked by the use of arms and especially by the traditional rigidity of all kinds of extremism, as much in Islam, which has taken several forms, as in Christianity, which is lost and disoriented.

This first war in the era of globalization is above all full of resentment and of fear, misconceptions and prejudices. Dialogue becomes impossible because the Americans see Muslim terrorist plots everywhere, and because the terrorists themselves, their allies and even some moderate Muslims insist on identifying western policy with Christianity.

The clash of civilizations seems to come about as a confrontation between the US

messianism and the prophetic thrust of the Qur’an. The confrontation of these two hegemonic visions of religion builds on material interests. In decades, our planet has never moved so far away from all hopes of dialogue between Muslims and Christians.

But this will be our challenge: to find a way out of this war without creating, once more, humiliation and despair in the Muslim world. To be able to realize a liberating dialogue, Christians must not hesitate to refer to the strong prophetic traditions of the Bible. Thus proposes Fr. Thomas Michel, an American Jesuit, who is in charge of the Jesuit Secretariat for Interreligious Dialogue, in Rome.

Likewise, Islam merits deeper study, especially in its social traditions which are not well known in the West. It is in their mutual concern for justice and for the poor that Muslims and Christians will find a way to reconciliation. Fr. Thomas Michel is certain about this. His article is probably one of those prophetic testimonies which we badly need in order to find the way to world peace.

Albert Longchamp

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Muslim-Christian dialogue must never be separated from dialogue with cultures and, more important still, from the centrality of ongoing dialogue with the poor. Interreligious dialogue can too easily become an elitist exercise in which scholars and religious leaders create among themselves a clubby brotherhood across religious lines to perpetuate and, in the worst cases, justify the economic and social status quo.

Too often in interreligious gatherings, the daily concerns of the poor are simply ignored, as if they were non-existent; or mentioned and passed over, as though the indignities and injustices they experience daily were irrelevant, or even an embarrassment, in the context of the lofty religious concepts and ideals expressed. The excluded voices of the poor, of women, of indigenous peoples, and of children, undermine the whole effort of dialogue, and prevent it from becoming an effective means of social transformation.

A much needed contribution

What is needed today is an interreligious dialogue that begins from the needs and concerns of the poor, and is oriented towards true human liberation. In a world where decisions that affect the lives of millions are made on the bases of market policy, spreadsheets, real-politik and demographic projections, religious groups are challenged to provide an alternative reading of social situations, by drawing upon the liberative elements of our specific traditions. It is either in this area where the religious traditions can make a unique and much-needed contribution to the transformation of society, or nowhere. If religious believers fail to voice the genuine longing of the masses of the world's poor for dignity and justice, we simply contribute to the malaise of values that secular modernity inexorably propagates.

In dialogue with Muslims, Christians must not hesitate to draw upon the strong prophetic tradition of our Scriptures. I have rarely heard - and must confess, to my shame, that I have too rarely expressed - such central elements of the Christian tradition in situations of Christian-Muslim dialogue. One wonders why we

are more inclined to formulate Jesus' relationship to the Father, of God's Trinitarian life, than to deal with basic Gospel teaching concerning the majority of our neighbours who daily "hunger and thirst for justice", whose demands, our Master teaches, will be satisfied. Part of the reason, obviously, is that most of those who engage in formal dialogue are well-fed, well-housed, well-educated, and well-placed in society.

These are the kind of things that we should be talking about with Muslims, the aspects of our faith that we need to be in communication about. Muslims need to know about the liberating aspects of Christian faith; and it is just as important that we Christians learn about the elements of liberation and transformation that the Muslim poor, who are far more numerous in Asia than Christians, find grounds in their Islamic faith for strength and hope and consolation. We need to discover the strong prophetic tradition carried on in the Qur'an, and the elements of liberation found in the pillars of Islam and in the shari'a, the Islamic way of life.

It is a sign of our ignorance that many Christians respond, "I didn't know that there were liberating elements in Islam. I thought Islam was oppressive of the poor, of women, of sinners. I have the impression that Islam is impassive and fatalistic in the face of injustice and wrongdoing". Yet 30 minutes in any Muslim bookshop will reveal titles such as: *Transformative Islam*, *Islam: the Religion of Justice* and *Islam and the Liberation of Women*. It is sobering, but small consolation, to remember that Muslims are usually no better informed about our faith than we are about theirs; and are normally surprised to find that Christianity has any concern for human liberation. They often regard Christian faith mainly as a justification for power and wealth.

An obstacle to dialogue

Christians also need to learn how to listen to Muslims, especially to poor Muslims. They often frame and phrase their hopes and struggles in terms different from ours. Throughout the Islamic world Muslim scholars and activists are rediscovering the liberative elements in the Qur'anic teaching, and in the hadith¹. In the past, Muslim

efforts to elucidate the social message of Islam were often hampered by a literalism that made it difficult to apply Qur'anic passages to the very different social and economic structures of today. However, what we find in Asia today, to speak of that region which I know best, in writings of Muslim scholars, like Ali Asghar Engineer of India, Chandra Muzaffar of Malaysia, Muslim Abdurrahman of Indonesia, or the feminist activist Mucha Shim Quiling of the Philippines; and what might be called the co-operative projects of groups, like the Asian Muslim Action Network (AMAN); may be properly described as attempts to draw out the societal and economic implications of the Islamic sources, and to implement them in modern Asian societies.

An obstacle that prevents Christians from appreciating and entering into dialogue with Muslims on elements of liberation is the sad fact that all too often Christians and Muslims are locked in confessional conflicts, in which religious affiliation, while not the cause of the conflict, plays an important role in pitting one against the other. This unhappy situation too often leads Christians to see "the Muslim" as a threat to our well-being, or even the enemy to be defeated; just as it leads Muslims to regard Christians as inimical to Islam and Muslims. An understandable concern with political Islam, the Islamic State, and the application of the shari'a can blind Christians to the reality that, for the vast majority of ordinary Muslims, Islam is first and foremost a response to God, a way to encounter the Creator and to do God's will on earth. These Muslims are not interested in politics, or revolution, or communal conflict, precisely because they are far too busy trying to provide for their families, raise their children to be God-fearing people, and eke out a measure of God's abundant gifts, blessings for humankind, but very unequally distributed within the human family. It is with such Muslims that we must enter into dialogue concerning the One God, who is able to liberate people from sin and from the oppressive strictures that we have fashioned.

Without pretending to do justice to the transformative exegesis done by Muslims today, I would like to point out some of the Qur'anic passages that are inspiring some Muslims to propose and carry out a liberative agenda in the

context of the social realities of modern Asia.

A simple family-oriented life-style

The Qur'anic ideal which has influenced millions of Muslims down through the centuries is that of a simple, family-oriented life-style, that rejects both consumer-oriented displays of wealth and the piling up of material possessions. This, even critics of Islam are ready to admit. The Qur'an teaches that what God has given is good and can be enjoyed, but within strict limits of moderation. "Eat and drink", states the Qur'an, "but do not be extravagant. [God] does not love those who go to excess" (7:31, also 6:141). Wealth and property are considered blessings from God, but must be used properly. Those obsessed with seeking, multiplying and displaying wealth are even accused of being in the same family as demons who are not grateful to God for God's gifts. The Qur'an teaches: "Do not squander [your money] extravagantly. Spendthrifts are the devils' brethren and Satan has always been ungrateful to His Lord" (17:26-27). The call to a modest way of life underlies, for example, the prohibition against men's wearing gold ornaments, such as rings, bracelets, chains, and the like.

The Qur'an was first preached to a people who were no less imbued with a dog-eat-dog mentality than our own modern societies. It teaches that aggressive economic activities, and amassing personal wealth, serve to distract people from what is truly important in life: to do God's will in all things, and to stand before God in patience and humility. "Competition has distracted you, until you visit graveyards. Nevertheless, you soon will know" (102:1-3). The message is clear: the day is coming when people will discover, too late, that their desperate passion for wealth had led them astray, and they will have nothing to show for their life's work. Whole civilizations have gone under because of their lack of restraint in regard to material possessions and all that remains of them are deserted monuments and ruins. As the Qur'an states, "How many civilizations have We wiped out who were reckless in their way of living. Their dwellings have been inhabited only occasionally since then" (28:58).

The Qur'anic ideal of a virtuous life contrasts sharply with that of the "modern advertising ideal" of constantly pursuing fortune, power, beauty, prestige and eternal youth, and restlessly searching for new and exciting pleasures. A famous Qur'an passage sums up what Islamic life is about; it is about faith, generosity, effective concern for the poor, patience in times of distress, and fidelity: "Virtue does not mean that you turn your faces towards the East or West, but [true] virtue means to believe in God, the Last Day, the angels, the Book and the Prophets; and to give one's wealth away out of love for Him to relatives, orphans, the needy, the migrant and beggars; and towards freeing captives; and to keep up prayer and pay the tax for the poor; and those who keep their word whenever they promised anything; and are patient under suffering and hardship and in times of violence. Those are the ones who are loyal, and those are the ones who are heedful [of Gods message]" (2:177).

Islam constantly teaches that those who have been blessed with sufficiency or, a fortiori, abundance, have a serious obligation to those who are lacking the basic essentials. It is not merely a matter of good will or feelings of sympathy for the poor, but an obligation that corresponds to a divinely acknowledged right of the poor. In more than one place, the Qur'an states unequivocally: "The beggar and the destitute have an acknowledged right to a portion of people's wealth" (70:24-25, see also 51:19).

A poor tax

The concept does not remain simply a good idea; but structures have been created in the religion itself to carry out this injunction. The Zakat, the fourth obligatory pillar of Islam, is intended to provide for the poor of the community. Sometimes mistranslated as almsgiving, the Zakat is more accurately understood as a poor tax. It is a tax of a specific percentage of a Muslim's income (2.5%) or harvest (10%), and is levied expressly for those classes of society who cannot provide for themselves. In the list of recipients of Zakat, the Qur'an always puts in the first place near relatives, particularly one's aged parents; and goes on to list other categories of those whose circumstances put them at the mercy of

others: the Biblical orphans and widows, beggars, and migrants. Addressing what has in recent times become a significant class of Asia's suffering poor, the Qur'an commands that assistance is also to be given to "refugees who have been expelled from their homes and property" (59:8).

While Zakat is intended to provide for all members of the Muslim community charity or alms to anyone in need, Muslim or non-Muslim, is highly encouraged in the Qur'an. Such free-will offerings, called sadaqa, are to be used "for the poor, the needy, those working at [collecting and distributing it], those whose hearts are being reconciled, for [freeing] captives and debtors, for those [struggling] in Gods way, and for the migrant, as a duty imposed by God" (9: 60). The Qur'an knows that charity can too easily be its own reward in that the giver is seen and praised as a person of means who is nevertheless bountiful to the poor. The true charity proposed by the Qur'an should be performed as faithful obedience to what God commands; and as such, it need be seen by no one but God. Thus, in a passage reminiscent of Jesus' teaching in the Sermon on the Mount on giving alms, the Qur'an teaches: "If you give sadaqa (alms) openly, that is good; but if you conceal it and give it [directly] to the poor, that is better for you" (2:27 1).

Zakat is commanded of every Muslim; and in addition Muslims are urged to perform sadaqa. An example of how sadaqa can be used to supplement Zakat can be found in the action taken by the Organization of Islamic Conference (O.I.C.) during the severe drought in the Sahel region of Africa in the 1980s. The O.I.C. used funds collected from Zakat payments by Muslims to aid the predominantly Muslim nations affected; and then contributed \$1,000,000 in sadaqa or alms to Capo Verde, a mainly Christian nation. More recently, a friend who is an aid worker in El Salvador, said that, after last year's earthquake in that virtually 100% Christian country, the most effective organizations in supplying fast and much-needed assistance were the Christian organization Caritas and the Islamic Relief Worldwide. Both were on the job within a week of the earthquake and offered their services to all in need,

with no proselytism or other strings attached.

Islamic Relief Worldwide (I.R.W.) operates in some 22 countries, and offers not only disaster relief but development projects of water and sanitation, literacy, business loans, reintegration programmes for returning refugees, projects for women's economic empowerment, mother and child care, computer centres, mobile clinics, orphanages, homes for the aged, etc. It is significant that the projects in which I.R.W. is engaged reads very much like a list of projects by various Christian welfare agencies -and, one might add, international Jewish relief agencies. Should it be any cause for wonder that the same prophetic tradition, when its teachings are actually put into practice, would result in very similar approaches to the person in need?

Islamic laws of inheritance

Zakat is not intended only as temporary emergency relief for those brought low by personal familial or natural tragedies, but as a type of ongoing income redistribution... This goal of a periodic redistribution of wealth underlies the intricate Islamic laws of inheritance. The Qur'an states: "Men shall have a portion of whatever parents and near relatives leave, and women shall have a portion of what parents and near relatives leave. No matter how small or how large it be, a portion is stipulated for them. When near relatives, orphans and paupers are present at the division [of inheritance], provide for them from it and treat them politely (4:7-8)".

Repeating the same injunction in the same words underlines the inadmissibility of ignoring female heirs, or cheating them out of their share. Still more surprising is the Qur'anic inclusion of "relatives, orphans and paupers", who also have a right to a portion of the inheritance. These latter are not to be treated as interlopers or unwanted guests, for they have a certain right to be present at the redistribution of funds. No doubt referring to the abuse to which such outsiders are commonly subjected, the Qur'an adds pointedly, "and treat them politely...".

The underlying view of wealth presumed by such Qur'anic teaching is that a person's wealth is not simply a private fortune to dispose of in any way one wants. God has a say in the matter and wants to ensure that the person's spouse, children, relatives, as well as helpless and dependent sectors of society, receive their proper share. Thus, along with the wealth that one has received from God goes a responsibility to provide for others, beginning with one's closest family ties and extending all the way to those whose claim is based solely on common humanity.

Wealth and inequalities in economic status are seen in the Qur'an as a test of one's fidelity to God. The Qur'an states: "He is the One who has placed you as overlords on earth and raised some of you higher than others in rank so that He may test you by means of what He has given you" (6:165). And again, "God has favoured some of you more than others in providing [for them]. Yet those who have been allowed to excel are not willing to hand over their provision to those under their control so that they become equal partners in it. Do they not thus abuse God's favour?" (16:71, see also 64:15; 8:28). In the God-centred universe envisioned by the Qur'an, the fact that some are wealthy, while many are poor, is not simply an accident of history, nor the inevitable result of economic determinism or class struggle, but a means by which believers are tested in their fidelity to God's word, in their generosity, sense of responsibility for the neighbour, and humility in recognizing that all that they possess comes from God's bounty.

The Qur'an saves some of its harshest warnings for those who are selfish and egotistic in using what they have been granted. "Announce painful torment for those who hoard gold and silver and do not spend them for God's sake" (9:34). The Qur'anic warnings do not stop with personal selfishness, but extend as well to those who fail in their responsibilities to teach generosity and social concern. "God does not love someone who is conceited and boastful, nor those who are tight-fisted and encourage others to be stingy" (4:36-37). One of the strongest condemnations in the whole Qur'an is directed at the person who refuses to believe God's message and fails to teach the necessity of taking care of

the poor. "Take him off and handcuff him. Padlock him to a long chain. Then let him roast in Hell. He neither believed in God almighty, nor encouraged others to feed the needy" (69:30-37).

The message is clear and uncompromising : God is deadly serious about the importance of "feeding the needy", with all that is implied in that obligation; and about the importance of encouraging others to do likewise; and God will not treat lightly those who neglect this duty. We must not allow the hyperbolic language (reminiscent of some of the prophet Amos' more stringent warnings, or of Jesus' injunction to pluck out your eye or cut off your hand, if they cause you to sin) to distract us from the passage's unequivocal message. Failure to integrate what we today call "social concern" into personal and communal religiosity is placed right alongside the refusal to believe in God. Both those who promote an unbridled consumerism, as well as theologians and other teachers of religion, might do well to hear this warning and tremble!

Muhammad's early followers

Given the force of the Qur'anic strictures against an unrestricted use of wealth, and the obligation to "give away a part of it (2:177), it should come as no surprise that a disproportionate number of Muhammad's early followers were women, slaves, and people without means, while his main opponents were the prosperous merchants of Mecca, whose financial comfort was connected with the city's role as a flourishing pilgrimage site of the pagan religion.

The Qur'an, however, sees Muhammad's rejection by the wealthy classes of Mecca as indicative of a more general unwillingness to accept the prophetic message on the part of those overly attached to material possessions, those whose security is based on what they "have", rather than what they "are" before God. The Qur'an states: "Whenever we sent a warner to civilizations, the wealthy elite said: 'we do not believe in what you have been sent with!'. They say, 'We have more wealth and children [than you]; we will not be tormented'" (34:34-35).

The Christian scholar from Sri Lanka, Aloysius Pieris, has called Jesus "God's defense pact with the poor". In Christ, he sees God displaying, to use the modern phrase, "a preferential option for the poor", and a promise to defend them from the arrogant and unjust use of power on the part of the rich. I agree with this view, but feel that it could be extended to cover the major thrust of the whole prophetic tradition since the time of Abraham and Sarah.

The Qur'anic attitude to an economic system in which "the big fish eat the little fish" is twofold. On the one hand, there are strict warnings against "devouring the wealth of others" through exploitation and manipulation. On the other hand, there are strong expressions of God's commitment to defend the defenseless against those who would take advantage of their vulnerability. One passage displays a knowing awareness that economic aggressiveness and official corruption often go hand in hand and reveal the same Godless mentality. "Do not devour one another's wealth to no good purpose", states the Qur'an, "nor try to bribe authorities with it, so that you can aggressively consume a share of other people's wealth, even while you realize [what you are doing]" (2:188).

The unbearable burdens on debtors

Economic competition, where the only rule is that of profits and annual returns, is strongly condemned. What is foreseen, instead, in an Islamic way of life, is economic activity in which both partners freely consent, and which is mutually beneficial. "You who believe, do not use up one another's wealth to no good purpose, unless it is for some business based on mutual consent among you" (4:29). The idea that in business affairs, one takes whatever one can get, is not the way that those who obey God's word must deal with one another.

Profiting from the needs and weaknesses of others underlies the Qur'an prohibition of interest-taking. Debts that cannot be repaid should be postponed, or better yet, written off, rather than imposing unbearable burdens on debtors. The Qur'an states: "Listen to God and write off anything that remains outstanding, from lending

at interest if you are [true] believers. If you do not do so, then be prepared to face war declared by God and His Messenger. If any debtor suffers hardship, then postpone [repaying] it, until conditions become easier [for the debtor]. And if you treat it as an act of charity, it will be better for you" (2:278-280, cf. also 2:275). In today's world where crushing international debts are causing untold suffering for millions in poor countries, I need not elaborate on the relevance of this teaching.

The second aspect of the Qur'an's teaching is the promise that God will punish those who exploit the weak and defenseless. Here again, the Qur'an is repeating the consistent prophetic tradition. From early prophets like Nathan confronting David, and Elijah condemning Ahab and Jezebel, through the writings of the Hebrew prophets, and into the teaching of John the Baptist and Jesus, the prophetic word has consistently taken "widows, orphans and strangers" as paradigmatic of all those groups in society who are at the mercy of others. The widows and orphans must rely on the strength of God's word to protect them from injustice, exploitation and oppression. The widows and orphans in Asia today include indentured labourers, factory workers, street children, sex-industry workers, child labourers, tenant farmers, Dalit² sweepers, and fishing folk.

The Qur'an reiterates the prophetic word by calling for a change of heart in people, urging them to join the defenders, rather than the oppressors, of the weak. The Qur'an focuses particular attention on the plight of orphans. Many commentators have pointed out that this concern might well reflect some of the misery and indignities to which Muhammad had been subject as an orphan (cf. 93:4-5)... What is clear is the strong Qur'anic condemnation of those who would exploit the orphan and the needy. "Those who live off orphans' property unjustly will only suck up fire into their bellies, and they will toast in the Blaze" (4:10)... One might go so far as to say that, according to the Qur'an, a key indication of whether one is accepting or refusing the divine message is the way one treats the orphan and the pauper...

The shameful practice of selling one's children, particularly young girls, into prostitution, which is so prevalent in certain regions of modern Asia, was apparently also quite common at the time of Muhammad. The Qur'an categorically condemns this practice: "Do not force girls, if they want to preserve their chastity, into prostitution, so that you may seek worldly benefits" (24-23).

Other social concerns which the Qur'anic teaching raises for Muslims include: dishonesty in business practice; manipulation of markets and the use of power to obtain unjust advantages; partiality and favoritism in judicial systems; racism and ethnic chauvinism.

To work for peace and reconciliation

I conclude this introductory study with a few words on the duty of those who believe in God to work for peace and reconciliation. The Qur'an allows the Old Testament principle of "'eye for eye, tooth for tooth' [Ex 21:24] as a limit of strict justice, that is, one cannot require compensation greater than the crime (i.e., never demand two eyes for an eye or two teeth for one); but at the same time, the Qur'an encourages believers to go beyond strict justice and operate instead on principles of mercy and forgiveness... to move beyond a legalistic mentality of demanding strict justice, to a God-centred spirituality in which people are invited and urged to treat others as God treats us. Here I call your attention to several passages of the Qur'an that point in this direction: "The payment for an injury should be a proportionate injury. But anyone who pardons offences and makes reconciliation shall be rewarded by God." (42:40-42). "A good deed and an evil deed are not alike: repay [evil] with something better (ahsan) and see how someone who is separated from you because of enmity will become a bosom friend" (41-34). "Let those among you who have wealth and resources give something to relatives, paupers and those who are refugees, for God's sake. They should forgive and be indulgent. Do you not want God to pardon you? God is forgiving and merciful" (24:22).

Concluding this brief review, I hope that for Christians listening to these

elements of the Qur'anic message, many of the phrases and attitudes expressed will ring bells with Gospel passages... Some readers might be thinking: "These are lofty ideals, but we do not see them put into practice by Muslims. Muslim political leaders seem to be as rapacious and unconcerned about the plight of the poor as non-Muslims. Muslim scholars seem less interested in teaching these elements of the Qur'anic message than in preaching domination and intolerance. Muslims with economic power act with the same ruthlessness and greed as those of other religions or of no religion".

The reactions are similar, when I teach Christian theology to Muslims. My Muslim students repeatedly say that they have no quarrel with the teachings of Jesus or with the way he lived. He is, after all, considered "the Seal of Holiness" by Muslims, but they

regret that this is not what they see when they look at the behaviour of Christians around the world. Gandhi's famous phrase: "Christianity is a beautiful thing; it's just never been tried" is a challenging accusation, although it does not express the whole of Christian reality and history.

The sad reality is that both Christians and Muslims are constantly struggling to live in obedience to the prophetic message we have received. We are constantly failing, constantly being called back to repentance... Moreover, we must not overdraw the picture. I could point to countless examples of Muslims and Christians who concretely seek to care for the poor, to support their just causes, to oppose dehumanizing and unjust systems of economy and government, and to work for true human liberation. There are millions of Muslims and millions of Christians around the world

who are striving, often together, to put into practice the message contained in the prophetic word.

But is this not exactly what Christians and Muslims ought to be talking about together - our magnificent ideals and our all-too-often sad realities; our sincere efforts as well as our shameful failures; our wonderful experiences of God's love and our selfish refusal to share that love with others? I suggest that this is what dialogue is all about. I conclude with a verse from the Qur'an: "If God had wanted, He could have made you one community. So compete with one another in doing good deeds, so that He may test you by what he has given you" (5:48).

Thomas Michel

Notes

1. Hadith: collection of acts and words of Muhammad; the Hadith supplements the Qur'an
2. The Dalits formerly called Untouchables or Harijans are the most excluded in Indian society. They are around 170 million (18% of the total population).

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