

# CHRISTAIN-MUSLIM DIALOGUE: MIRAGE OF DESTINY?

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Reference to be provided by Prof. Khurshid

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## CHRISTIAN-MUSLIM DIALOGUE: MIRAGE OR DESTINY?

Prof. khurshid Ahmad\*

Two questions have agitated my mind and tormented my soul ever since my early youth: I am still grappling with them, not without hope. I have always believed that there is light beyond the tunnel, however long the tunnel may be. Faith continues to be the greatest source of strength. And it is faith that makes life and its strivings including, failings, meaningful, purposeful and hope-inspiring. The fact that one is not alone in this search for light is an added source of strength. Commitment to serve God and humanity is the ultimate ambition of all men and women of faith. I am taking this opportunity to share with the intellectual and spiritual community engaged in inter-faith dialogue some of my own reflections and experiences.

The Quran suggests that humanity can be grouped into two major streams of human beings: under one umbrella can be seen all such human beings and communities which believe in God and aspire to follow the path shown by Prophets and Messengers raised by God to convey His Guidance to mankind. The other umbrella takes care of other stream consisting of all people who do not relate their life and destiny to God and His Guidance, regard themselves self sufficient, and look upon this life as the be-all and end-all of human existence. Within these two streams there have been many belief-systems, cultural configurations and socio-political articulations. However, these two Grand Paradigms provide two huge umbrellas under which all human beings, past, present and future can be grouped.

In the first group one can see in our times followers of divinely inspired religions, particularly, Islam, Christianity and Judaism. The other paradigm is currently represented by the Secular Civilization of the West currently dominating the world.

The two questions that have disturbed me are product of this understanding of the human situation: first, why is it that despite belonging to the first stream there is so much tension and serious lack of cooperation even antipathy between the forces that represent Islam and Christianity today? And secondly, why is it that even a large number of good Christians, who are committed to the mission of the Prophet Jesus (peace be upon him) to bring the Kingdom of God on the Earth, yet most of them seem to have reconciled themselves to the Paradigm of Secular Civilization to an extent that they, wittingly or unwittingly, have become instruments for promoting secularization of human life and society in our times, disturbing the equation between humanity's moral and material life. I am equally worried in respect of Muslims who are caught up in this contradiction.

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The Quranic Paradigm inspired me to look toward other religious faiths and traditions as part of my own past. Tawhid (belief in Oneness of God) and belief in all Prophets of God as His representatives, acting as mankind's real source of guidance, prompted me to approach other religious leaders and communities, particularly those described in the Quran as ahl-al-Kitab (followers of Divine Books) as members of my own wider family, the family of Prophet Abraham (peace be upon him). Prophet Muhammad's (peace be upon him) message represents continuation and culmination of the Divine Message, linking the past with the present and identifying pathways for the future.

The Quran expounds this concept of the unity of Divine Guidance in very clear terms:

“He has prescribed for you the religion which He enjoined upon Noah and which we revealed to you (O, Muhammad), and which we enjoined upon Abraham and Moses and Jesus, commanding: "Establish this religion and do not split up regarding it.”

**(The Quran 42:13)**

Addressing all believers the Quran makes the clarion call:

“Do they now seek a religion other than that prescribed by Allah and this despite all that is in the heavens and the earth is in submission to Him — willingly or unwillingly — and to Him all shall return? Say: "We believe in Allah and what was revealed to us and what was revealed to Abraham and Ishmael and to Isaac and Jacob and his descendants, and the teachings which Allah gave to Moses and Jesus and to other Prophets. We make no distinction between any of them; and to Him do we submit. And whoever seeks a way other than this way of submission — Islam— will find that it will not be accepted from him and he will be among the losers in the Life to come.”

**(The Quran 3:83-85)**

As Muslims we believe that all the prophets of God called humanity to the way of the Lord, the way of submission to the Will of the Creator, the way that leads to peace within and peace without. Yet the Quranic paradigm has built-in space for pluralism. As humans are endowed with freedom, the right to choose, and that there is no compulsion in religion (Al-Quran 2:256), multiplicity of faiths and faith-based communities may go to make up the matrix of humanity. If compulsion is not the way, what is the right course: it is Da'wah, dialogue, discussion and acceptance of diversity and coexistence. However, the Quranic paradigm assigns to the people of the Book a special place — spelling out guidelines for intellectual discourse, solidarity in respect of shared values, and desirability of common pursuits and socio-cultural inter-actions and institutional relationships, despite differences in belief perspectives.

The need for intellectual discourse and its imperative as to search for common ground has been succinctly pointed out by the Quran:

“Say: 'People of the Book! Come to a word common between us and you: that we shall serve none but Allah and should associate none with Him in His Divinity and that some of us will not take others as lords over other than Allah.” **(The Quran 3:64)**

The Quran is sensitive to even the modalities of this discourse. The clear instruction is:

“Argue not with the People of the Book except in the fairest manner, unless it is those of them that are utterly unjust. Say to them: "We believe in what was revealed to us and what was revealed to you. One is our God and your God; and we are those who submit ourselves to Him." **(The Quran 29: 46)**

In human relations two points of contact are of critical importance: food, on which human life depends, and family, which ensures continuity of human race. The Quranic Paradigm creates space for both in respect of the People of the Book:

“This day all clean things have been made lawful to you. The food of the People of the Book is permitted to you, and your food is permitted to them. And permitted to you are chaste women, be they from among the believers, or from among those who have received the Book before you, provided you become their protectors in the wedlock after paying them their bridal-due, rather than going around committing fornication and taking them as secret-companions. The work of he who refuses to follow the Way of faith will go to waste, and he will be among the utter losers in the Hereafter.” **(The Quran 5:5)**

The Quran enjoins kind conduct, friendly relations and equitable dealings with all human beings save those at war on the basis of religion and even in respect of those at war there are clear edicts, differentiating between the belligerents and non-belligerents, combatants and non-combatants:

“Allah does not forbid you to be kind and just to those who did not fight against you on account of religion, nor drive you out of your houses. Surely Allah loves those who are equitable.” **(The Quran 60:8)**

The Quran acknowledges the presence of noble souls among other faith-communities and does not demonize people on the basis of differences in faith and culture:

“Yet all are not alike among the people of the Book: there are upright people who recite the messages of Allah in the watches of the night and prostrate themselves in worship. They believe in Allah and in the Last Day and enjoin what is right and forbid what is wrong, and hasten to excel each other in doing well. These are among the righteous. Whatever good they do shall not go unappreciated. Allah fully knows those who are pious.” **(The Quran3:113-115)**

Presence of people in different faith-communities pursuing the medium course is recognized, not merely as an existential reality, but something relevant to human contact and relationships:

“(O Prophet), the Book we have revealed to you is the Truth, confirming the Books that came before it. Verily Allah is well aware of His servants and sees everything. Then we bequeathed the Book to those of our servants that we chose. Now, some of them wrong themselves and some follow the medium course; and some, by Allah's leave, vie with each other in acts of goodness. That is the great bounty. They shall enter the everlasting Gardens, shall be adorned with bracelets of gold and with pearls, and their apparel therein shall be silk.”

**(The Quran 3 5:31 -3 3)**

Among the good and godly there is a special mention of the followers of the Prophet Jesus (peace be upon him). The Quran says:

“And you will surely find that of all people they who say” “We are Christians,” are closest to feeling affection for those who believe. This because there are worshipful priests and monks among them, and because they are not arrogant. And when they hear what has been revealed to the Messenger you see that their eyes overflow with tears because of the Truth that they recognize and they say: “Our Lord! We do believe; write us down, therefore, with those who bear witness (to the Truth).”

**(The Quran 5:82-83)**

This has been the intellectual and ideational perspective that helped me building my relationships with other faith communities during my stay in the U.K. (1968-78), particularly, as Director General, The Islamic Foundation, Leicester (1973-78). I had rich and rewarding opportunities of participating in international dialogues, and inter-faith consultations focusing more specifically on Christian-Muslim relations in Europe. One document that influenced my own approach deserves to be mentioned. In December 1967, six months after the Israel-Arab War, Pope Paul VI took an important initiative by sending through personal representatives the New Year's message to some of the Muslim luminaries the world over. Mawlana Sayyid Abul A'la Mawdudi was one of them. Mawlana Mawdudi responded to this message with a frankness that was the hallmark of his personality. But this response also unveiled new opportunities for Christian-Muslim dialogue and avenues of cooperation in the pursuit of a common objective: the establishment of a just world order. **(Annexure-I)**

Although I had been active on a number of Inter-faith platforms but my most rewarding experience relates to participation in a 3-day consultation (May 9-11, 1975) organized at the Sellyoak Colleges, Birmingham that led to the establishment of the Centre for the Study of Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations (CSIC). I had the honor to serve as a member of its Advisory Council (1976-78) which worked under the chairmanship of late Prof. Albert Hourani. The Chambesy Dialogue (1976) was also an outgrowth of these efforts. Its proceedings epitomize a new approach to the whole dynamics of Christian-Muslim Dialogue (Annexure-II: Statement of the Conference).

Despite little progress towards the goal-posts identified in these efforts, it is undeniable that these, among others, constitute milestones on the road to closer cooperation between the two faith communities of the world. Looking back on these thirty years I feel proud to have been associated with these pioneering efforts, however minor or peripheral my own role may have been. I firmly believe that these efforts are their own prize and to be a participant in this process gives one a sense of fulfillment.

There is, however, a more personal and very valuable dimension. To me the greatest reward was discovery of a host of noble souls and consequently building with them personal and intellectual relationships that went beyond friendship, a kind of fellowship and spiritual communion. In the galaxy of this spiritual fraternity, David Kerr's fellowship remains outstanding.

My first in-depth encounter with David was on the occasion of the May 1975 Sellyok Consultation. Dr. Norman Goodwill chaired this consultation. Dr. Albert Hourani and I were key speakers. David Kerr was the Coordinator and the real spirit behind the consultation. His sincerity and openness won our hearts. He was always firm in his commitment to Christianity, but this did not hold him from going more than half way to welcome the other viewpoint. He was eager to build bridges with the Muslim community and his openness to discussion and respectful acceptance of dissent and alternate approaches impressed us all and brought us closer to him. He cared more to win our confidence, and not necessarily agreement.

These early impressions were profoundly confirmed and deepened when we took up a joint project to co-chair the Chambesy Consultation on "Christian Mission and Islamic Da'wah" which were organized at the request of the World Congress of Churches Geneva. It became a joint project of the Sellyok Colleges and the Islamic Foundation. A journey that began in the fog of apprehensions, moved through honesty and frankness, into brighter pathways of mutual trust, meaningful cooperation, and fruit-bearing engagements aiming at serving God and humanity. David and I have worked together as people committed to serve God alone, and as persons resolved to live and work in accordance with the religious values and tradition they belong to. I recall, with fresh endorsement, what I wrote in 1978 on the occasion of presenting our joint effort in the form of the Special Issue of the International Review of Missions.

- We hold no brief for syncretism, nor were interested in producing compromises on matters religious and moral. Similarly, we did not enter the consultation with a view to scoring points on each other. We met with the objective of understanding each other's position more sympathetically, of identifying the areas of agreement and disagreement and of trying to build mutual trust so as to co-ordinate our response to threats and challenges that beset humanity today. Instead of merely talking about each other, we have tried to talk to each other, however haltingly. That is why we, instead of producing an impersonal collection of scholarly papers, have tried to collect around one table a few distinguished religious leaders of the two faiths and invited them to face each other as much as face the real issues that confront them.

- It is our considered opinion that the right approach in Christian-Muslim dialogue is to face the problems and issues that unite or divide us. These issues are legion: religious, theological, historical, socio-cultural, and political. As mission/Da'wah represents the outreach of one's religious tradition to the other and as the role of Christian missions in the Muslim world is regarded by the Muslims to be at the root of estrangement between the Christian and the Muslim worlds, the conference on mission and dawah provided a natural point of departure for a meaningful dialogue.
- Although there have been moments of stress and strain, expressions of human weakness and pugnacity, even wars and political encounters, Christians and Muslims have lived side by side in the Muslim world, on the whole, in peace and harmony with each other, ever since the final revelation of Islam in the seventh century.
- But with the arrival of the Christian missionaries in the company of European colonizers, a new chapter began in Muslim-Christian relationships. That some of them might have been motivated by the best of spiritual intentions is not among the points in dispute. But the overall Muslim experience of the Christian missions was such that it failed to commend itself as something noble and holy. Any dispassionate evaluation of the experience would suggest that what has been achieved is a loss for Islam and religion as such, and not a gain for Christianity — the real beneficiaries being the forces of secularism, materialism and of moral insensitivity. The Muslim critique can be summed up in four points:
  - a) Gross and flagrant misrepresentation of the teachings of Islam and of the life and message of the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him). Instead of examining Islam as it is, a totally unreal picture of Islam was concocted and used to denigrate Islam and Muslims. Although the high watermark of this type of approach to the study of Islam has passed, the efforts still persist, even though in low profile and under many a disguise<sup>1</sup>.
  - b) The methodology of Christian mission concentrated upon influencing the object in a state of weakness and helplessness. Instead of direct invitation, approaches were made to those who were disadvantaged, exploiting their weaknesses for the sake of proselytism. The poor, the sick and the immature were made special targets of economic assistance, medical aid and education. Many a Christian mission acted as an organic part of colonialism and cultural imperialism. All this was a very unfair way to bring people to any religion.

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1. Unfortunately the trend has once again been reversed after 9/11. The present tirade comes more from secular and liberal forces representing current American hubris.



- c) Whatever the ultimate aim, subversion of the faith and culture of Islam seems to have been the prime target of the Christian missionary enterprise. Nationalism, secularism, modernism, socialism, even communism were fostered, supported and encouraged. While the revival of Islam and the strengthening of Islamic moral life among the Muslims were, and even now are, looked upon as anathema.
- d) Muslims were treated as political rivals and as such subjected to overt and covert discrimination and repression. Their just causes fail to evoke any significant moral response from the Christian world. Western Christendom's attitude, towards the Palestine problem in general and towards Jerusalem in particular, for example, agonizes Muslims. Majority rule is denied to Muslims in a number of African countries. The sufferings of the Muslims in such places as Eritrea, Mindanao, Kashmir, Patani, to mention only a few, fail sufficiently to arouse the moral conscience of the Christian world. Muslims are puzzled when they compare the relative lack of Christian concern over the increasing de-Christianization of the Christian world with their obsession with what amounts to de-Islamization of the Muslim world.

Christian-Muslim dialogue in the Century must take cognizance of these issues and realities, if it is to prove meaningful and productive.

Looking back on over; quarter of a century of my involvement in inter-faith dialogue I have no regrets in having chosen to pursue this path. While the fellowship of persons like David Kerr and others like him remains my greatest personal wealth and treasure, I think we have covered only limited ground in this long march towards destiny.

I have always believed that Christian-Muslim Dialogue must be founded on foundations of sincerity, transparency and acceptance of diversity. Essence of dialogue is openness. It consists in two-way communication. To be genuine, it must take place between 5representatives of the faith communities. It is only people who firmly believe and uphold their faith and tradition and enjoy the confidence of their respective communities as their trustworthy representatives who can deliver. Dialogue involves discussion but it is much more pointed and focused than discussion per se. It; may have all the contours of debate but it is essentially different from verbal encounters that characterize debate. It has to be more focused towards exploration of issues, themes and subjects that cry for solution. It must lead to grappling with strategies capable of resolving problems and facing challenges. Dialogue can thrive on trust. It can bear fruits only if it is grounded in mutual confidence and esteem. It involves argument, yet this argument must be devoid of heat and point-scoring. Most important it is a process, and not simply an event. Time; is of essence, and time-consuming it cannot but be. Its real merit lies in talking to each other and not merely about other. Its success depends on acceptance of diversity and disagreement as acceptable, and a stepping stone to measure search for common grounds and areas of agreement and disagreement. The real



soul and breath of dialogue is effort to understand each other and explore avenues of cooperation and common concerns there from. Conversion or silencing is not the objective. That may kill the very process of dialogue. That is why eclecticism or syncretism is enemies of dialogue. Its success lies in identification of areas of agreement and disagreement — pursuing common concerns, building on shared values and visions, co-participating in effort for perusal of agreed goals and targets, and continuation of and respectful discussion on issues of divergence, accepting dissent and differences are genuine and authentic and not merely deviations and aberrations. That is how I have visualized dialogue, and I have found David Kerr a trustworthy co-traveller during our rumblings in these thorny pathways.

Let me conclude by submitting that dialogue is at best a method, not an objective in itself. The real objective is serving God and humanity and the immediate target is to involve leaders and members of faith- communities to understand each other and work hard to remove irritants and road blocks that hamper close cooperation between them, so as to build new bridges of trust and goodwill and explore possibilities of cooperation and co-participation in the pursuit of values and visions we share. My agenda for structured efforts in this direction include the following:

1. Sustained efforts to understand each other's position on moral theological and cultural issues through respectful discussion and acceptance of divergence and dissent<sup>2</sup>.
2. Research, discussion and dialogue on shared values, visions and concerns from the respective perspectives.
3. Greater emphasis on community-oriented issues and services.
4. Joint efforts towards elevation of sufferings of humanity and its moral regeneration and uplift, strengthening of the institutions of family and community, promotion of right type of education and above all, strength for the establishment of Just Social Order in all parts of the world. Looking beyond ones' self is a decisive step on the road that leads to serving God and humanity.
5. Search for peaceful solutions to conflicts that afflict humanity at all levels, individuals, groups, countries, the world community.

It is men and women of faith and faith-based communities that represent real glimmer of light beyond the tunnel. I hope and pray that dialogue between these two greatest faith-communities — Christianity and Islam — will harness the best in us to the service of God and humanity. Then only we can have our tryst with destiny.

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2. Although not agreeing with him, I cannot forget David Kerr's seminal effort to understand the Muslim position without compromising his own, in his paper on The Prophet Muhammad in Christian Theological Perspective (Centre for the Study of Islam and Christian Muslim Relations, Birmingham, No. 2 Sept 1982). Have others followed the lead?

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