

# Building A Common Society

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A response to Chawkat Moucarry's 'A Plea For Dialogue.'

Of late, dialogue between Muslims and Western Christian academicians has moved from defensive polemics to more constructive discourse that seeks to achieve mutual understanding. Every effort is made to set aside inaccurate stereotypes of Islam so that it is judged in the best possible light. The commitment on both sides to dialogue and to exploring how to live together based on new-found commonality has raised optimism.

Nevertheless, Christians living in Muslim majority countries remain guarded. Optimism comes naturally when one is theorizing within the safe and comfortable confines of Western universities. The fact is, Muslims are more interested in pursuing dialogue with Western Christians because dialogue confers recognition and this is what Islamic scholars want from the West. However, dialogue with local Christians is avoided as Muslims are reluctant to confer recognition to the local Christian community.

Dialogue beneath the Gothic arches of Western universities should be welcomed, but surely genuine dialogue would gain more credence if it took place at the ground level, especially in countries where Islamic authorities do not feel the need to modulate their power so as to present an acceptable face, as they would when dealing with their Western counterparts. If indeed dialogue takes place, the Islamic authorities typically set the terms of engagement, reducing it to social rituals to confirm the dominance of Islam rather than to promote mutual understanding and respect. Naturally, local Christians lose enthusiasm for 'dialogue.'

A case study

I shall focus on the situation in Malaysia as a case study to explain the ambivalence of Christian minority groups toward Christian-Muslim dialogue.

To begin with, Malaysian Christians are intimidated by the battery of existing laws that may be used against them if they express frank opinions in dialogue. But honesty also requires local Christians to admit to a lack of confidence arising from a shortage of trained experts who can present their case persuasively, using the language of public discourse. Consequently, Christians tend to prefer to practice their faith in private rather than to engage in open dialogue. In the process the Malaysian church ends up sounding like a feeble voice crying in the wilderness at the margin of society--or ends up having no voice at all.

Nevertheless, Christians should enter the fray of national debates regarding civil society and nation-building. Failure to do so results in a de facto surrendering of the public sphere to the dominant majority.

Effective engagement is possible only if Christians act out of a clearly defined social philosophy. In this regard, Christians must reject any political arrangement that allows Islamic officials to dominate other social institutions within society like the family, the school and the shrine.

Christians should also realize there are different currents of Islamic intellectual movements. On the one hand, there are the Islamic officials who expect the country to be administered according to an Islamic political hierarchy and reject socially differentiated institutions on the ground that such differentiations betray the influence of Western secularism. On the other hand, the reality of the modern nation-state has persuaded some Muslims to accept that society could be structured in terms

of relatively autonomous and socially differentiated institutions. Christians should seek to work with the latter to build a polity which accords social equality to both Muslims and non-Muslims.

### Forging a common vision

What are some common social projects that Christians can undertake together with their Muslim neighbours? It is said that while doctrine divides, common values unite. This may be true for people working together on projects which promote social welfare. The problem here is that since Islam is favoured and supported by the State, Muslim welfare activists have little desire to work together and share resources with Christians. Consequently, Christians have to do good works with their own resources until Muslims are prepared to work with them.

An area which offers greater possibility for Christians and Muslims to work together lies in the fight for social justice and human rights. The challenge for all religious communities, especially Islam, is to demonstrate that they have within themselves the ethical resources to achieve a genuine common vision for all citizens. Muslims in the West enjoy unrestricted freedom of religion. Christians should appeal to the sense of moral integrity among the more open Muslim thinkers to promote reciprocity of religious freedom so that non-Muslim minorities enjoy religious freedom comparable to the freedom enjoyed by Muslims in the West. Of course, any alliance between Christian and Muslim activists should champion the rights of all citizens regardless of their religious affiliation.

To conclude, dialogue in the Malaysian context obviously addresses a host of sensitive issues. Dialogue is not just an occasion for academic discourse. It is an ongoing negotiation of power between elites of different social-religious groups. It goes beyond exchange of abstract ideas and aims to forge alliances to build common society.

It takes much courage for anyone to critique social policy in the context of an authoritarian government. For this reason, it makes sense to begin dialogue at the informal level. The obvious advantage is that the participants are not cornered into any defensive position. Although one cannot hope for an immediate translation of agreements into just social policies through such informal channels, patient interaction is undertaken in the belief that dialogue inherently promotes peace and reduces communal tension.

This does not mean that Christians should eschew entering national debates on social issues; they should, in fact, use all opportunities available in the mass media. True, their rhetoric will have to be less direct or forceful. Indeed, their voice is often excluded by the government-controlled mass media. Nevertheless, Christians should recognize that there are still people of good will in authority and it is possible to find openings, however rare, for Christian input at the operational level in departmental planning and development of the civil services. Christians should be alert to make use of such opportunities.

Religious harmony is always a precarious blessing in pluralistic societies. It would be unrealistic to expect significant transformation of deeply held prejudices in the near future. But surely, this reality makes it all the more urgent and necessary for Christians to dialogue with their Muslim neighbours.

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