

The Audacity Of Dialogue

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

I am from northern Nigeria. My home state is in the region that has been characterized by incessant religious violence between Muslims and Christians. Today, the city of Kaduna, which used to be the symbol of national unity and integration, is divided into two parts. A river running through the centre of the city creates a natural demarcation. All the Christians live on the southern side of the river while Muslims have migrated to the northern side. Prior to 2001 Muslims and Christians used to mix and live in an integrated community. But the Sharia violence that broke out in 2001, which led to the slaughtering of Christians, has created deep fears and permanent division. The only thing that can break this dividing wall is dialogue.

'A theology that does not dialogue is a death theology,' argues Jürgen Moltmann. Mission and theology are twins. Therefore they are inseparable. Both can only be alive and well when they dialogue with other theistic faiths: Islam and Judaism.

So Chawkat Moucarry is not far from the truth when he says for the Christian, 'Dialogue is a way of life.' The plain truth is that Christians are apologists in every sense of the word (1 Peter 3:15). When Jesus sent out his disciples on their first missionary expedition, the instruction he gave them implied dialogue: 'Whatever town or village you enter, search for some worthy person there and stay at his house until you leave. As you enter the home, give it your greeting. If the home is deserving, let your peace rest on it; if it is not, let your peace return to you.' 'I am sending you out like sheep among wolves. Therefore be as shrewd as snakes and as innocent [harmless] as doves' (Matthew 10:11-13, 16; NIV).

In Nigeria, the perspectives and resultant attitudes of some Muslims make dialogue a daunting job. Dr. Musa Gotom, former general secretary of the Churches of Christ in Nigeria, once pointed out to me, 'Here in the North [of Nigeria] there is no dialogue.'

In 2009, for instance, we had Boko Haram sectarian violence. Boko Haram, which means 'western education is evil,' was part of the larger agenda of Muslims to reform Islam and situate Islam in its glorious economic and political past. The Boko Haram group was reacting to the West's continuous control of global economic and political power.

The Boko Haram are not alone in expressing their displeasure over Western globalization of economy and politics, which often benefits the West to the detriment of the Third World. Muslims tend to look at it from cultural and religious perspectives, resulting in seeing Christians in the Third World as co-conspirators with the West. This situation has made it extremely difficult for Muslims to be willing to dialogue with Christians.

Muslims have largely ignored the fact that Christians and Muslims in the Third World are both circumstantial victims of Western economic and political policies, which have continued to encourage transnational companies to perpetuate economic and social injustices in the Majority World. In spite of an overwhelming job before us, the only way we (Christians) can make Muslims understand that Christians are not exempted from Western transnational companies' injustices is dialogue.

Dialogue and public debates are part of the Christian tradition. John W. R. Stott has observed that our Lord and his apostles did not shy away from engaging in dialogue and even debate when the truth of the gospel was at stake. What we need to refrain from, however, is doing debate or dialogue with the intention of belittling the other. 'The apostolic command is clear,' wrote Stott. 'We are to

?maintain the truth in love? [Ephesians 4:15], being neither truthless in our love, nor loveless in our truth, but holding the two in balance.?

By and large, Nigerian Muslims are not happy with the situation Islam finds itself in. They continue to wish they could regain Islam?s past glory. Consequently, they get irritated when Christians in the region want a country where other religions can have freedom, particularly Christianity, which Muslims view as a Western ideology.

Religious violence often occurs because each faith is under pressure to make converts without the willingness to understand the other?s worldview. ?Christians and Muslims have huge misunderstandings about each other?s faith,? Moucarry observes. The only way to dislodge some of these misunderstandings is for Christians and Muslims to engage in legitimate dialogue. First, the basis for this dialogue should be our common ancestry. Science tells us that our mitochondria is derived from a single mother?;Eve. Second, the starting point for Christian-Muslim dialogue should be God, the Creator of the galaxies: Realizing that ?Muslims are first and foremost human beings, made in God?s image and loved by God as much as we are? will go a long way in creating an environment for genuine dialogue.

Dialogue is the key that unlocks Christ?s principle of non-violence in a world of violence and counter violence. As it is said, violence begets violence. But dialogue begets peace, love, justice, and hope for the future. Indeed, dialogue when carried out in the spirit of our Father?;love, compassion and patience?;will enable Christians and Muslims to foster a community of not only religious tolerance but of religious freedom. Finally, dialogue enables us to see where we have shared understanding and where we have differences. I therefore concur with Moucarry.

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