**Muslim-Christian Dialogue & Relations in the 21st Century:**

**Challenges and Prospects**

John L. Esposito

Sarajevo, 3 October 2013

*Talking points*

In today’s global world where the lines between East and West, between “us” and “them”, and between Christian and Muslim are no longer clearly defined thanks to the development of mass communications and global mobility, the need to engage in dialogue is even more urgent than in the past if peaceful coexistence and dialogue are to prevail over confrontation and conflict.

* Islam and Christianity are the two largest religions and engaged globally
* Second and third largest religions in Europe and America

**Muslim-Christian Relations**

Despite many common theological roots and beliefs, throughout history, Muslim-Christian relations have often been overshadowed by conflict as the armies and missionaries of Islam and Christendom have been locked in a struggle for power and for souls. This confrontation has ranged from the fall of the early Byzantine (eastern Roman) empire before Muslim armies in the seventh century to the fierce battles and polemics of the Crusades during the eleventh and twelfth centuries, the expulsion of the "Moors" from Spain, the Inquisition, the Ottoman threat to overrun Europe, European (Christian) colonialism and imperialism from the eighteenth to the early twentieth centuries, the creation of the state of Israel, the political and cultural challenge of the superpowers (America and the Soviet Union) to the Muslim world in the latter half of the twentieth century, and the global threat of Muslim extremists.

**Coexistence and Convivencia**

Historic clashes and violent confrontations have occurred and their atrocities cannot be denied or forgotten. But they do not represent the total picture. Positive interaction and influence have also taken place.

* Islamic civilization was indebted to the West for many of the sources that enabled it to borrow, translate and then to develop its own high civilization that made remarkable contributions in philosophy, the sciences and technology while the West went into eclipse in the Dark Ages.
* The West in turn reclaimed a renovated philosophical and scientific heritage from Islamic civilization, retranslating and re-appropriating that knowledge, which then became the foundation for its Renaissance.
* Similarly, Muslims, Christians and Jews have co-existed in Andalusia, Lebanon, the Balkans and elsewhere.
* In many areas, Muslims and Christians throughout the centuries engaged in trade and business.

**21st Century**

The 21st Century is an extraordinarily multi-ethnic and multi-faith world. Critical to recognize and to affirm the centrality of our core principles and values: faith, religious pluralism & freedom, human rights, equality of citizenship and civil liberties for all.

Regardless of religious and cultural differences, Muslims and Christians share common religious/civilizational principles, values and aspirations:

* belief in God and His prophets, revelation, moral responsibility and accountability, the sanctity of life,
* the value of the family, a desire for economic prosperity, access to education, technology, peace and security, social justice, political participation, freedom and human rights.

**Dialogue and Cooperation in a Shared Future**

The process must be a joint partnership which emphasizes the beliefs, values and interests that we share in common; addresses more constructively our differences and grievances; and builds a future based upon the recognition that all face the challenges as well as opportunities of globalization and an increasingly inter-dependent world.

Today there is growing recognition today among both many Muslims and Christians that the ethical and moral codes provided by religion need to be restored and used as universal principles upon which to build a more just society. Both condemn greed, economic injustice, materialism, excessive individualism that threatens the public good: conspicuous consumerism, sexual promiscuity; as well as ethnic and religious violence and conflicts, religious extremism and terrorism. The basis for cooperation and mutual understanding, for greater unity and the acceptance of diversity is a more pluralistic outlook, rooted in a rereading of our faith traditions and scriptures and a recognition of our shared values and shared futures.

**Why Pluralism?**

The goal of pluralism is to move beyond the pitfalls of a*bsolutism* (belief that there is only one truth and that a particular religious community has exclusive possession or claim to it) and religious exclusivism.

* Historically, absolutism has too often resulted in intolerance and oppression. It has been used to justify religious persecution, oppression, and, at times, warfare and killing the other, the “unbeliever” or infidel.

These examples demonstrate the danger of an absolutism that rejects or demonizes the “other,” dismissing him or her as the “enemy,” and/or “evil.”

* Religious traditions today are challenged to embrace a new world order that celebrates diversity through inter-civilization, inter-cultural, and inter-religious dialogues to promote peaceful coexistence rather than mutual antagonism.

For Christians and Muslims in particular, mutual recognition that both worship the God of Abraham and share similar beliefs, traditions, and ethics can be the starting point for a dialogue.

As the Quran states, “We believe what has been sent down to us, and we believe what has been sent to you. Our God and your God is one, and to Him we submit,” (Qur’an 28:46) and “We have sent revelations to you as We sent revelations to Noah and the prophets who came after him; and We sent revelations to Abraham and Ishmael and Isaac and Jacob and their offspring, and to Jesus and Job...and to Moses God spoke directly” (4:163-164).

Because no one religion can claim a monopoly on social justice, love, mercy, compassion, mysticism, or perfect government on earth, both Christians and Muslims need to recognize that both religions contain elements of truth about how society ought to operate and how man ought to interact with his fellow man.

* Both proclaim the Golden Rule - “Do unto others as you would have them do unto you” (Luke 6:31) and “No man is a true believer unless he desires for his brother that which he desires for himself” (Hadith: Muslim, chapter on *iman*, 71-72; *Ibn Madja*, Introduction, 9; *Al-Darimi*, chapter on *riqaq*; *Hambal,* 3).

**A Common Word Between Us and You!**

It is only by acknowledging the validity of other religions, that they too are open to God’s revelation rather than espousing an attitude of exclusivity, that the world can develop a pluralistic outlook which can defuse the religious absolutism that has intensified and validated so many international conflicts throughout history:

* As Hans Kung, the Catholic theologian, has observed, ‘There will be no peace among the peoples of this world without peace among the world religions.[[1]](#footnote-2)”

**Conclusion:**

**In an age of globalization of communications, travel, religions, and religious extremism, all are challenged** to understand and respect the religious and cultural traditions of others and to **distinguish the transcendent from the dark-side**, the mainstream from the extremist. In a post 9/11 world, it is **critical to know and understand the richness and diversity of the Muslim experience** (Govts., military, media, religious leaders, citizen voters).

* **Muslims and Christians are challenged to embrace a religious inclusivism that, while not compromising their faith, avoids a religious exclusivism that undermines a healthy religious pluralism and feeds interreligious and intra-religious (Sunni-Shia) division and conflict.**
* **Both need to denounce and marginalize their preachers of hate.**
* **Followers of Christianity and Judaism** are specifically challenged to become more aware of Islam, to acknowledge their Muslim brothers and sisters as **Children of Abraham.**
* **Muslims need to follow the lead of Islamic reformers who emphasize the religious interconnection of all the People of the Book and thus their common humanity, citizenship and rights.**
* **Not only religious leaders but also schools and seminaries, chuches and mosques and yes the family**

Finally, **all people of faith** need to remember their own histories.

* **Avoid pious religious and historical amnesia.**
* Compare ideal to ideal; reality to reality
1. Hans Kung, *Christianity and the World Religions* (New York: Doubleday, 1986), 443. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)