

Islam and Christianity: our Future Together

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The atrocities of 9/11 in America and 7/7 in England might seem like distant nightmares, but they did bring about an overpowering urge for people of the Islamic and Christian faiths to develop better mutual understanding. As part of that urge, I was privileged enough to take part in a recent open discussion at Sarum College in Salisbury, the outcomes of which form the bulk of this short article. I should add that the views expressed are my own.

Islam teaches that where Muslims comprise a minority, they should observe the legislation of their host countries if it does not contradict the teachings of Islam. So, for example, if our government was to legislate that drinking alcohol was compulsory or that every Muslim must kill a member of the Sikh faith, quite clearly Muslims could not support such legislation. If however, our country's legislation upholds peace, justice, tolerance and mutual respect then Muslims can easily co-exist.

British Muslims do face social pressures in some circumstances, which test their faith: a Muslim's college, university and working lives might bring alcohol into close contact when socialising with a group of friends or clients; a Muslim woman feeling uncomfortable about wearing a hijab at work; a Muslim child at school being bullied simply because of their faith.

In principle though, Muslims and Christians should of course find it easy to co-exist, which we have been doing across the world for centuries. It is just that historians find it easy to highlight the crusades and jihads (both medieval and modern), which appear to have come about as a result of people in power at those times using religious differences to further non-religious ambitions. Instead the Qur'an (Chapter 30; Verse 20) teaches "Among His signs is the creation of the heavens and earth with variations in your languages and your colours. Surely in that are signs for the learned."

Two excellent examples can be cited for both Muslims and Christians as to how we should behave towards one another. The first example is the address by Pope John Paul II given at the celebration of the World Day of Peace on 1 January 2001, echoing the above Quranic passage in that "cultural diversity should be understood within the broader horizon of the unity of the human race". Pope John Paul II further recalled meetings in Assisi and St Peter's Square with religious representatives which confirmed to His Holiness that mutual openness between the followers of various religions can serve peace and "the common good of the human family".

The second example is the letter from Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) to the monks of St. Catherine Monastery in Mount Sinai (the Prophet's Charter of Privileges). The Prophet proclaims, "I, the servants, the helpers, and my followers defend them, because Christians are my citizens; and by Allah! I hold out against anything that displeases them". The letter goes on to set out clauses dealing with Christians' freedom of worship and movement, freedom to appoint their own judges and maintain their own property,

exemption from military service, and the right to protection in war. At the beginning of the letter, the Prophet states to Christians "as a covenant to those who adopt Christianity, near and far, we are with them" and at the end of the letter to Muslims, "No one of the Muslim community is to disobey this covenant till the Last Day (end of this world)".

Since 9/11 and 7/7, I have been involved with numerous meetings, discussions, conferences and lectures between various religious representatives in the UK. Most of the representatives agree that despite strong common principles and values across the religions, the politicians and the media have somehow made it difficult to formulate a clear message of solidarity because of their distortions and omissions. Many Muslims were however very upset that as a community the implication was that they should apologise for the actions of certain fanatical individuals misinterpreting Islam - after all, did Catholics per se apologise for the IRA's actions? I recall during the couple of weeks after 7/7, that when boarding the underground in London I myself felt doubly scared due to the media fuelled stereo-types I had developed - firstly, I kept nervously looking at young bearded 'ethnic' males carrying rucksacks and secondly, staring over my shoulders each time I passed a policeman carrying a gun.

Although at the national level solidarity seems an uphill struggle, at the local level this is very different. Locally a lot of very necessary and useful work has brought together 'learned people'. For example Muslims up and down the country have reached out to their local communities by providing talks, writing articles and helping to set up interfaith groups, often with the help of non-Muslim organisations. However, someone recently pointed out to me, that Muslims have always been part of the fabric of this country and have never been mis-perceived on the scale we have been since these two atrocities. I believe such misperception is slowly changing but more work is still required.

With rights come responsibilities, and we are indeed lucky to have so many rights in this country (although the law can always be tweaked in a number of areas). But what are our responsibilities? Muslims and Christians have obligations to one another as denoted by the Pope's address and the Prophet's charter. We need to better understand each other's commonalities and respect our differences, and then get the message of solidarity out to the wider public if our future is to be a good one. What we do at the local level Insha Allah (God willing) will reach the national level, and we should not forget the scrutiny facing the UK at the international level. As the Qur'an (Chapter 103) states, "By virtue of time, humans are in loss; except for those who believe and do good works; and join together in the mutual teaching of truth, patience and constancy". *f*

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