

Working together to Improve Our Interreligious Dialogue¹

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Introduction

I am very grateful indeed to be part of this dialogue event for which there is such a pressing need for both Christians and Muslims. Both what we are here to do and the fact that we are here to do it are important. The eyes of the world look to religious leaders to work for understanding and to help build a world of justice, peace and mutual understanding.

Whilst it would be wrong to identify conflict between Muslims and Christians as the norm in the modern world, we can in no way be satisfied with the state of Muslim-Christian relations. Where we should be in a position to join forces in every part of the world to promote peace and justice and to give shared witness to our faith in God, instead we are often ignorant of each other, perpetuate negative stereotypes of each other and even in some instances advocate unjust treatment for each other. These are sinful matters which cause God to grieve, create a scandal and give us and religion in general a bad name.

Of course, we must take into account the distortion of reality which the media cause by their preference for conflict, drama and their constant resort to a pre-scripted narrative about religion as a source of division. A distortion is thereby manufactured which reinforces the impression that interreligious violence is the norm. This is certainly not the case, thank God. There are many millions of people around the globe living in happy co-existence with people of other religions, whose concern for their neighbour, no matter their creed or colour, refuses to be beaten down by the forces of distrust or resentment. There is, too, an abundance of projects of one sort or another working to counteract the causes and consequences of ignorance and prejudice. This Forum is just one of many in which Christians and Muslims come together to listen, to learn and to explain their beliefs. Regrettably, all these are hidden from public view. They do not meet the criteria of “news stories”, nor are they ever likely to do so.

¹ This paper owes much to a number of people working in the field who have inspired and helped me over the last few years, none more so than Dr Chris Hewer whose ideas and experience will be instantly recognisable to anyone who knows him and has benefitted from his unflagging commitment to improving Christian-Muslim relations. Any inaccuracies or errors, however, are purely my own responsibility.

This paper is not going to present an account of what dialogue means to the Catholic faithful, nor spell out a recipe for future collaboration. What I want to do is very modest: to offer some thoughts which spring from experience “on the ground” about what might help in very practical ways to improve our on-going dialogue, addressing the challenges and overcoming the obstacles which face us.

The Challenge of Dialogue

Not everything that presents itself as dialogue *is* dialogue. Dialogue is not two monologues which happen to be taking place in the same room. Nor is it *dawa* or proselytism. Of course, Christians and Muslims share a missionary impulse and seek the transformation of the world which comes when all hold faith in the one, true God. But the conversion of the other is not the objective of dialogue. In the dialogical setting, I accept the sincere beliefs of the other. I know that my religion has given me the resources which enable me to speak to those who have declined to enter it.

Dialogue is not the kind of apologetics which seeks constantly to prove that one’s own position is the correct one or to save face. We all seek, of course, to present our beliefs as rationally justifiable. But there are many ways of being rational in a world as complex as ours. Our theological, ethical and juridical judgments are human, even if they draw on divine revelation. Our traditions are living and developing, not fossilised and static. Constant effort is required to renew and refresh them. Dialogue, at its best, can even contribute to that process, feeding broader experiences and perspectives into our deliberations, thus enabling us to be creatively faithful to the revelations we have received by learning from others.

Dialogue, we often forget, is an act of communication. As such, what is said by one party needs to be received by the other, otherwise, both parties have failed. That means that it requires skill in and attention to both listening and to exposition. Listening is not something we human beings do naturally. It requires patient learning. True listening is a tiring business. It means that we give our full attention to what the other is trying to communicate and that we suspend for that time any attempt to respond. It means that we give the benefit of the doubt to the one we are listening *to*; we must assume sincerity and coherence, even though we may eventually, with regret, have to conclude that those qualities were absent. It means that we listen to the person expounding views, religious and otherwise, with which we passionately disagree; but we do it with patience and serenity, putting our trust in the eventual triumph of truth because the truth has a force and power all of its own because God is truth.

Listening of this sort requires our mastery of a delicate balance. It means, on the one hand, being open enough to the person to listen to them without constantly trying to correct them (or at least to counter their views with my own) whilst, on the other, ensuring that what the person is saying still makes sense to me. The moment that I adopt the relativist stance (“this makes sense for them but makes no sense for me”)

then I have given up on true listening and relegated the otherness of the other to meaninglessness. The truth that the other perceives must grab me.

If I may be bold, this demanding kind of listening is one that a person of prayer has often developed to a high level. I listen patiently to God (though not as patiently as God deals with me!) even if His Word is not always immediately intelligible to me. I trust that what is baffling now will one day give way to limpid truth.

There is a further balance we have to achieve in our listening related to a certain interior freedom we all need with regard to our identity. It is hard to let the other be what she is rather than what I need her to be. When we listen we might observe in ourselves one of two disordered desires at work. On the one hand we may want to establish polar oppositions between ourselves and the other, a move which gives us a clarity about what makes us different to the other; we are constantly looking out for what is missing in the other which is essential to me and so we end up making reductionist statements, vast over-simplifications: “the trouble with Islam/Christianity is...”. On the other hand, we can attempt to subsume the other in our own position, denying them the possibility of ever saying anything that sets them apart. To risk a generalisation myself, the first tendency I associate with Christians, the second with Muslims.

If I have not yet understood the different paradigm, then I will misconstrue the other, perhaps even resorting to the charge of irrationality. A crass example is the supposition made by some Christians in the past that Muhammad must fulfil a similar function in Islam to that of Jesus in Christianity. The epithet “Mohammedan” is witness to the absurdity of this type of mistake. An example in the other direction, I would contend, and one which operates at a somewhat higher level of sophistication, is the criticism which Muslims have meted out to the Christian doctrine of the Trinity. Let me stress: I am not suggesting that dialogue requires us to assent to the doctrines of another religion, but rather that serious listening obliges us to explore how they can be persuasive to wise and intelligent people. And that this means fathoming the deep logic of a different paradigm. Recourse to the conclusion that the other is irrational or even mad should be a very reluctant one indeed and come late in the day, if at all.

The breakthrough, I tend to find, comes when something that the other says suddenly discloses to me a different paradigm at work in their thinking which is utterly different to my own but which also reveals deep commonalities. Until that happens, we are imprisoned in our own paradigm; the best we can do is to try and fit what we are hearing into our own structures of thought. Once the breakthrough has happened, there is a sudden rush of meaning which makes sense of what they have been trying to say all along.

An example of different paradigms at work. Many modern Christians find it almost impossible to understand how Muslims can be so insistent that the Qur’an is purely divine in origin and in no sense the result of human initiative or authorship. Yet,

Christian theology has gone to extraordinary lengths to insist on a similar line with regard to the grace which brings salvation. It is, indeed, heretical to affirm that human beings can take the initiative with regard to their justification in God's eyes, even the desire for salvation being already evidence of grace. Muslims and Christians may differ in their understanding of the source of their holy books and in their estimation of the integrity of the human constitution. But they both draw a *cordon sanitaire* around the locus of the action of God to remedy what is deficient in the human condition. Once the difference in paradigm is grasped, a striking commonality emerges which can only aid deep understanding.

In such a spirit, one can be curious as to how "dialogue" itself fits into the bigger picture for each religion. To ask that question of contemporary Catholicism is to enter the realm of a particularly lively debate. Strikingly, it is to discover that, for Catholics, dialogue is not merely instrumental, a means to an end (although dialogue does have ends); it evinces something essential of the relationship of human beings to God and even of God's own Trinitarian life. Dialogue is a religious and spiritual event, an entry into the power of God's creative Word, ever present through the Holy Spirit in the life of the Church and beyond. Dialogue can advance because this life-giving Spirit is present and active in the lives of both partners. This is why each can learn from the other. This explains why "dialogue" for Catholics is not and cannot be proselytism by other means.

A further complexity: if I am to be effective in dialogue, it is not quite enough for me to master the art of listening. I must work too on the way I communicate, framing what I say in such a way as to make it accessible to the other who has not yet grasped that a different paradigm is operative in what I am saying.

Modern Communications

Good relations between Muslims and Christians in our time are imperilled by developments in mass media. Especially damaging is the way in which deliberately destructive agents can exploit the power of the media to incite hatred. An obscure pastor in some backwater burns a sacred text and posts a video of the felony on a website. For those who know nothing of the context, political or religious, in which the crime took place, this can only betoken an egregious act of blasphemy by Christians in general. Another example: East London has recently witnessed the activities of far-right extremists who have insulted Muslim worshippers outside their mosques and who refer to themselves as "Christian patrols". Terrible distortions of reality are spread which cause damage all over the world. The promotion of dialogue entails that we all confront such deliberate strategies of misrepresentation and correct those who find themselves even unwittingly caught up in such manufactured hysteria.

Another issue pertains to the plight of religious authority at the present time. The dynamics of modernity have dealt a severe blow to the credibility of traditional religious authority structures. The internet is now the principle port of call for anyone who wants to know anything about the practice of their faith. Self-appointed experts

know how to persuade the young that they have the authentic interpretation of the religion, even though they then offer at best only a partial picture and in some cases serious distortions, often mixed in with invective and falsehood on a vast scale.

If this is true of both Christianity and Islam, it is even more so in relations to the way relations between them are represented. Perhaps because of its apparent anonymity, the internet is particularly susceptible to the cultivation of scorn, resentment and contempt. It is easy to find evidence of this in the field of Christian-Muslim relations. As well as promoting lies and stereotypes, polemical and hateful material cheapens and debases the conversation for everyone. I have had intelligent students come to me wanting to devote their scholarly dissertations to a response to street polemics. Their intellectual horizons have been lowered to the point that conspiracy theories, twisted thinking and forced readings of history and texts have become normal fare for their minds.

A further question arises with regard to the media and it is one to which thought needs to be given: Who provides authoritative and good quality information to those seeking it? Where, for instance, does an educated lay-person go to discover the truth about Catholicism, Islam, the Church's teaching on Islam *etc.*? For Catholics, there is no shortage of official documents: papal encyclicals, the Catechism, documents of the Second Vatican Council and of Bishops' conferences *etc.* They are wonderful resources, all of them, but not of the highest order from a pedagogical point of view. The same problem exists for Muslims with the added difficulty of there being no central authority which can speak on behalf of the religion.

Sectarianism and Diversity

Dialogue, if it is to be genuinely helpful to all, requires us to be honest about the way in which our religious communities are fractured and divided. We need to offer at least a gesture towards ecumenism. This does not come naturally to many of us. Given that sectarian differences can provoke an intensity of bitterness which is largely absent from interreligious relations, the difficulty involved should not be underestimated. None of us wants to draw attention to divisions, be they between Catholic and Protestant or Sunni and Shi'i. Division, we tend to worry, is a sign of failure. I would argue that the stakes raised when God reveals His will to humankind, are so high that division and disagreement are practically inevitable. They are, in any case, most unlikely to disappear.

Our temptation can be to offer our sincerely held theological position as the true one. And the truth is that, not infrequently, those engaged in dialogue do just this. But we cannot afford to speak as if we represented the whole of our religious community. Not only is it misleading; it also undermines our credibility. Outsiders are entitled to know about different views and groups.

Even within our traditions, this is not always straightforward. There is, for example, much diversity within both Sunni Islam and the Catholic Church. This is evident not

least in the wide variety of ways in which we evaluate other religions: some Catholics see them as instruments by which God reaches out to non-Christians whilst others will view those traditions as at best irrelevant to God's plan of salvation. Are these views legitimate, however? The answer to that is not always easy to establish. The Holy See functions as a guarantor of legitimate diversity in the Church, speaking out when a given position on matters doctrinal or moral has gone beyond what is acceptable. Even then the theological distinction can be a fine one.

An example which bears on our dialogue is the doctrine of atonement: the theology of penal substitution is one of a number of legitimate atonement theories which attempts to answer the question of how the life, death and resurrection of Christ bring about the redemption of humankind. It states that Christ bears the punishment due to all human beings and thus satisfies the demands of justice. Such a view, it is often said, is impossible to accommodate in a Qur'anic paradigm (see, for example, Q6:164) which would see such a substitution as a scandalous injustice. But a not insignificant number of Christian theologians would agree on this matter, arguing that penal substitution implies a theology which does not cohere with the self-revelation of the merciful God made manifest through the life of Christ. Dialogue on such topics can therefore be much more fruitful when we are honest about our internal differences.

There is another important reason for us to be honest about our divisions: it helps us to avoid those inappropriate generalisations which do such damage to our dialogue by ascribing guilt to a whole community when in fact it should be attributed to a small group or even a single individual. I cannot stress enough the importance of letting Christians see the Muslim world in all its diversity, legitimate and otherwise. It is a crucial factor in countering the view spread maliciously to ignorant audiences that Islam is synonymous with violence. When Christians are persecuted in certain countries (usually alongside certain types of Muslims as well) it is easy to analyse this crudely as "Muslims attacking Christians" and to generalise the specific incident so that it comes to stand for Muslim hostility to Christians in general. In such cases, photographs of and news items about Muslims standing in solidarity with their Christian neighbours do immense good, shattering the false generalisations.

The understandable concern to present the Muslim world as a unified whole has increasingly given way to the need to overcome the simplistic and often erroneous generalisations of the media and politically biased lobbies. It has, I think, been one of the advances of the last fifteen years in dialogue in a country like Britain, at least, that Muslims are now much more at ease in discussing internal differences than had been the case. This has been due, in part, to greater public attention and consequent improvement in public awareness and a higher level of education about Islam.

The Demands of the Context

Every encounter between human beings has its own dignity and that dignity demands that it not be constrained unduly by the intrusion of contextual factors from other

situations. This is, once again, a challenge in the era of mass media when the demands of a context many thousands of miles away can be thrust upon another in a disruptive manner. This is hard to resist in cases which involve injustice, oppression and persecution. There can even be voices insisting that “we” cannot treat “them” with fairness in our context if “they” do not treat “us” justly in “theirs”. The perverse consequences of following it to its logical conclusions would be that the worst practice in the world would be universally adopted. Dialogue requires that we all be vigilant in respecting the dignity of every context.

It follows that Muslim-Christian dialogue in the UK will be different from that which needs to take place in Jordan, Pakistan, Nigeria or even contexts which might seem rather similar, such as the United States. And this means that those who must practice this dialogue must be familiar with the demands of the local context.

Such attention to the context is also geared towards the promotion of God’s work in that place. God is always already at work within cultures and societies. His Word, be it the voice of the Qur’an or the Risen Christ, is asking and answering questions, challenging and affirming, warning and forgiving. Catholic theology speaks of inculturation, emphasising that the Gospel is a living thing which enters and transform human culture from within, assuming the existing fruit of God’s work and healing what has been damaged by sin. Muslims are also able to think of the way God’s Word, even as spoken in previous and now abrogated revelations, has shaped the cultures we find around the world with the result that they can now offer a space of spiritual hospitality to Muslim belief even in countries where its presence has been historically marginal.²

Proper attention to a specific context requires us to ask not only what God’s Spirit is doing but also what the evil spirit is trying to achieve. Here, wisdom and discernment are required; first impressions can be misleading. An example: to an outsider (and insiders too!), contemporary western culture can seem anarchic, dismissive of law. This is because shocking moral transgressions have a tremendous power over the imagination. Consequently, our preaching becomes an all-out assault on the evils of licence and libertinism. Yet, a deeper and more accurate knowledge of the culture reveals that western culture, far from being lawless, is attached in a disordered way to a certain understanding of “law-as-regulation”.³ Modern westerners have an almost messianic trust in the idea that the precisely correct body of regulations will save them from every catastrophe, medical, financial or agricultural. The culture of box-ticking and constant evaluation and reform is evidence of this. Effective preaching to such a culture and dialogue within it does not harp on about yet more legalism but fosters a hunger in people for truth and goodness, for sincerity and authenticity, things which cannot be regulated or assessed quantitatively. Dialogue follows suit.

² Cf. T.J. Winter’s “British Muslim Identity; past, problems, prospects”, Muslim Academic Trust, 2003.

³ See Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age*, London: Belknap, 2007, pp.738f.

Going further, the question should arise with regard to our dialogue: “what are we trying to achieve in our dialogue here?” Dialogue is not free-floating and without an agenda. If we think it is then we are simply refusing to acknowledge what that agenda is. There can be a trap for Christians here for whom dialogue has now almost come to be accepted as a goal in itself. They must always remember that a given dialogue is always related to the broader mission of the Church to co-operate with God’s project in the world. Only when I reflect honestly and clearly on this question will I be able to answer questions about the method to be adopted, the questions to address and the partners who need to be engaged, questions which often haunt us like a miasma of unknowing. I am not convinced that this problem is quite so pressing for Muslims who seem comparatively clear about the outcomes they are hoping for.

We academics have to face a specific challenge with regard to our motivation. Through no fault of our own, we frequently find ourselves engaged in dialogue for what should be secondary reasons and which, when they dominate, can lead to ambiguity. We need to examine our consciences: are we engaged in dialogue to gain prestige either personally or for the institution that employs us? To attract more funding? Or to serve the common good? We cannot distance ourselves totally from those more ambiguous considerations; but they must be honestly faced lest they poison our endeavours. Other “hidden agendas” include promoting power interests, religious or otherwise, and even such innocent and laudable objectives as promoting social cohesion.

There is, in short, a need for us to purify our intention. Christians and Muslims have long engaged in penetrating analysis of the believer’s intention and need to practice it with particular intensity in their relations with one another. Our spiritual masters remind us that much ambiguity masks itself in the human heart under a noble appearance. For the missionary or the *da’i* who works tirelessly to bring people to their faith: is it a sincere love of the other and their salvation which drives him? Or is he really motivated by fear or even a desire to efface otherness and to render the other like himself? There is again a rigorous spiritual discipline required here.

Popularising the Dialogue

My own work involves teaching Christians and Muslims about each other in a university setting and reflecting on relations between us in the European context. It is always striking that the most plentiful fruit of this kind of education, even in the tertiary sector, is harvested in the first encounter between the two groups. It is not necessarily the result of years of study. Christians who have been fed a diet of alarmism about Islam can be surprised to discover that the vast majority of Muslims are totally unsympathetic to terrorism. Muslims, who have often heard disparaging commentaries about the decadence into which Christianity has apparently fallen can be surprised to find the Church very much alive and still offering a relevant reflection on social and political matters. (Which is not to say that the two religions face symmetrical challenges: for all that sophisticated modern Europe has long cultivated a distaste for Christianity, it cannot match the extent of Islamophobia which blights understanding of Islam.)

One challenge for us, then, is how to popularise dialogue by empowering people to learn and change their attitudes. For dialogue need not and should not be the preserve of an elite, middle class and educated, but should also reach grass-roots level. This can be achieved relatively straightforward by means of solid adult education. I know some people working at this level, their efforts nothing less than heroic, rolling out courses about Islam for parishes and synagogues, and effecting real cultural change in the process. Their experience suggests that Christians teaching Christians about Islam is an effective way of providing this education, as long as the Christian in question has sufficient knowledge, is honest and leads the group to a real encounter with Muslims. This is partly because a Muslim presenting her own religion would always have the complication of having to negotiate the difference between exposition and *dawa*. But it is also because a competent Christian will often better manage the complex hermeneutical matter of the conflicting paradigms discussed earlier in this paper. Such adult education is not only very much in demand but almost instantly fruitful in promoting better understanding and even empathy. I find repeatedly, for instance, that basic education in Islamic diversity, focussing on the historical origins of the Muslim communities in the UK in the colonial experience of South Asia, dramatically changes perceptions in a positive way.

Face to face dialogue is important. But it can seem artificial and even sterile when it focuses exclusively on matters of religious belief and practice. Dialogue is neither a natural pursuit nor one with much in the way of precedent in either of our religions.⁴ It is not surprising, therefore, that, more and more, dialogue around the world is being enhanced by work side by side, especially in social projects at local level. This has something to do, I think, with the nature of respect: I do not esteem the other for the beliefs she holds but for the life she leads, informed as it is by her faith. Working alongside someone who is motivated by her love of God brings about admiration and esteem. It is then that I may become curious about the relationship between her faith and the life she leads.

In this mutual edification, esteem can build to friendship and trust. We thus enter the territory of something new that God is doing. The “*dia*” of dialogue has taken us beyond the old categories and forged a new “we”. This is, perhaps, dialogue in its highest and most beautiful form. Such dialogue is truly a gift for those to whom it is granted.

Conclusion: balance, discipline and a spirituality of dialogue

In writing these reflections, I am conscious that I have had recourse to the words “balance” and “discipline”. This betrays a deeply held belief that dialogue must not be colonised by the secular agencies who would instrumentalise it for their mixed motives but must be first and foremost a religious and, indeed, spiritual matter, a coming together of women and men desirous of growing as listeners to God’s Word, trying to make sense of what God asks them to do in their particular time and place. It will make

⁴ A point made by Professor Seyyed Hossein Nasr in our Forum discussion following the giving of this paper.

real demands on all concerned but it will also take them back to the very core of their religious and spiritual way. With God's grace they will discover that they are companions on that way and they can pray that this spirit of companionship which they share might prove to be infectious and transform this world into a place of solidarity and reconciliation.