

A FRUITFUL CHRISTIAN  
MUSLIM DIALOGUE

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## A FRUITFUL CHRISTIAN-MUSLIM DIALOGUE

By Professor Khurshid Ahmad

For some time past there has been growing consciousness in the Christian world of the need for a better understanding of Islam and the Muslims and several efforts have been made towards this end. One such significant effort was an International Conference, in Chambesy, Geneva, in June this year, brought about on the initiative of the World Council of Churches and arranged in co-operation with the Islamic Foundation, U.K., and the Centre for the Study of Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations in Europe, Birmingham.

The proceedings of the Conference have since been published in the October 1976 issue of International Review of Mission, journal of the World Council of Churches. The issue contains, besides the regular Editorial, two Guest Editorials, by Professor Khurshid Ahmad, Director General of the Islamic Foundation (U.K.) and Dr. David Kerr, Director of the Centre for the Study of Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations and Lecturer in Islam at the Selly-Oak Colleges, Birmingham, and the text of a "Statement of the Conference" on "Christian Mission and Islamic Da'wah". The Foundation have been kind enough to supply us with copies of the Editorials and the Statement, which we have pleasure in reproducing below, beginning with the "Statement," in accordance with the chronological order.- Emphasis, where supplied, is ours, and we have also added a few footnotes. — Editor, The Criterion.

### **1. STATEMENT OF THE CONFERENCE**

The last day of the consultation was spent in the preparation of a final document for publication in the IRM along with the formal papers and excerpts of the discussions. In order to speed this undertaking two working papers were drafted, one by the Christians and the other by the Muslims, in which each group set out its consensus opinion. When the plenary session reconvened it was decided to adopt the more detailed Muslim paper as a basis for the combined document, and various revisions in the form of amendments, deletions and additions were then discussed and agreed. The participants requested the editors to undertake the technical editing of the final version which appears below.

The final document reflects some of the concerns and hopes felt by the participants. The participants were invited to Geneva in order to consult together as people experienced in Christian mission and Islamic da'wah, and knowledgeable of each other's traditions, and it is in this spirit that the document seeks to draw together some of the main themes of the consultation, and to raise issues for the further consideration of the interested parties. (Editors)

(Text of the Statement) of the Conference on "Christian Mission and Islamic Da'wah", Chambesy, June, 1976.

1. In recognition that mission and daw'ah are essential religious duties in both Christianity and Islam, a conference on Christian Missions and Islamic Da'wah was organized by the Commission on World Mission and Evangelism of the World Council of Churches, Geneva, in consultation with the Islamic Foundation, Leicester, and the Centre for the the Study of Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations, Selly Oak Colleges, Birmingham, on

Jumada (II) 28 - Rajab 4, 1396/ June 26th-30th, 1976. Besides examining the nature of mission and of da'wah, and the experience of each community of the missionary da'wah activity of the other, the purpose of the conference was to promote reciprocal understanding between Muslims and Christians and to explore the means for a modus vivendi assuring the spiritual well-being of all.

- 2 The conference is in essential agreement that their respective communities, wherever they constitute a minority of the population should enjoy a de jure existence; that each religious community should be entitled to live its religious life in accordance with its religion in perfect freedom. The conference upholds the principle of religious freedom recognizing that the Muslims as well as the Christians must enjoy the full liberty to convince and be convinced, and to practise their faith and order their religious life in accordance with their own religious laws and principles; that the individual is perfectly entitled to maintain his/her religious integrity in obedience to his/her religious principles and in faithfulness to his/her religious identity.
- 3 The conference agrees that the family is a supremely precious and necessary institution. It expresses serious concern over the threats of disintegration and secularization facing the family institution, and it recommends that religious family law, whether Muslim or Christian be not interfered with or changed in any way, directly or indirectly, by outsiders to their traditions, it also agrees that the family and community should have the right to ensure the religious education of their children by organizing their own schools, or by having teachers of their own denominations' to teach religion to their children in the school, or by other suitable means. In any case they should be allowed to organize their cultural and spiritual life without outside interference, though with sensitivity to the situation in multi-religious societies.
- 4 The conference was grieved to hear that some Christians in some Muslim countries have felt themselves limited in the exercise of their religious freedom and have been denied their right to church buildings. The Muslim participants regard such violation as contrary to Islamic law as well as to the principle of religious freedom enunciated above.
- 5 The conference recognizes fully the right of Christians as well as of Muslims to order their corporate life in accordance with the injunctions of their own religious principles and laws, and to have and maintain all requisite institutions in accordance with their religious principles and laws as equal citizens.
- 6 The Christian participants extend to their Muslim brethren their full sympathy for the moral wrongs which the Muslim world has suffered at the hands of colonialists, neo-colonialists and their accomplices. The conference is aware that Muslim-Christian relations have been affected by mistrust, suspicion and fear. Instead of cooperating for their common good, Muslims and Christians have been estranged and alienated from one another. After more than a century of colonialism during which many missionaries served the interests of the colonial powers, whether deliberately or unconsciously, the Muslims have felt reluctant to co-operate with the Christians whom they have fought as agents of their oppressors. Although the time has certainly come to turn a new page

in this relationship, the Muslims are still reluctant to take the step because their suspicion of Christian intentions continues. The reason is the undeniable fact that many of the Christian missionary services today continue to be undertaken for ulterior motives. Taking advantage of Muslim ignorance, of Muslim need for educational, health, cultural, and social services, of Muslim political stresses and crises, of their economic dependence, political division and general weakness and vulnerability, these missionary services have served purposes other than holy - proselytism, that is, adding members to the Christian community for reasons other than spiritual. Recently revealed linkages of some of these services with the intelligence offices of some big powers confirm and intensify an already aggravated situation. The conference strongly condemns all such abuses of diakonia (service). Its Christian members dissociate themselves in the name of Christianity from any service which has degraded itself by having any purpose whatever beside agape (love for God and neighbour). They declare that any diakonia undertaken for any ulterior motive is a propaganda instrument and not an expression of agape. They agree to exercise their full power and use whatever means at their disposal to bring Christian churches and religious organizations to a proper awareness of this situation.

- 7 **The conference**, being painfully aware that Muslim attitudes to Christian mission have been so adversely affected by the abuse of diakonia, strongly urges Christian churches and religious organizations to suspend their misused diakonia activities in the world of Islam. Such a radical measure is necessary to cleanse the atmosphere of Muslim-Christian relations and orientate them towards mutual recognition and co-operation worthy of the two great religions. The conference urges strongly that all material assistance donated by outside churches and religious organisations henceforth be distributed wherever possible through »or in co-operation with the governments and local communities of people for whom they are intended, respecting the dignity and integrity of the people concerned.
- 8 The conference urges that soon after the measures mentioned in the two preceding paragraphs begin to be implemented, Muslims and Christians should be invited to an assembly representative of the two faiths to consider the methods of mission and da'wah, and the rules pertinent to each religion, and to seek modalities for enabling each religion to exercise its missionary call/da'wah in accordance with its own faith. The conference recognizes that mission and da'wah are essential religious duties of both Christianity and Islam, and that the suspension of misused diakonia services is to the end of reestablishing mission in the future on a religiously sound basis acceptable to both. Such an assembly may also establish permanent organs with Christian and Muslim participation for the purpose of preventing, or dealing with, aberrations or violations of Muslim/ Christian understanding by either party.
- 9 The conference is aware that good neighbourly and co-operative relations between Christians and Muslims cannot exist or endure unless there is a deep-anchored reciprocal understanding of theologies, histories, moral and legal doctrines, social and political theories and problems of acculturation and modernization faced by the two faiths. To this end the conference urges that the World Council of Churches, the Vatican and the international Islamic organizations sponsor conferences at which these themes will be examined and discussed at regular intervals.

- 10** The conference, and especially the Muslim participants, express their deep and heartfelt appreciation to the WCC and the editors of the IRM for calling and sponsoring this conference. All participants express their joy that God has granted them the grace to bear in patience and empathize with one another. They are thankful to God that this conference may have made some contribution toward purifying the atmosphere of Muslim-Christian relations, and they pray that relations between their people may soon blossom into spiritual fellowship, to the glory of God alone.

## **EDITORIAL 1**

Islam and Christianity are missionary faiths; among the adherents of both there is a desire to share the riches of the faith and the heritage with others. But it is notorious that, in the attempt to fulfill this missionary vocation, missionary activities of Christians among Muslims, and of Muslims among Christians, have sometimes led to grievances on both sides; both groups have long memories of past pressures to conform or more recent experiences of aggressive and insensitive proselytism.

With the unhappy events in the Lebanon and Mindanao and the growing tensions in other parts of the world demonstrating how-urgent it is today to create conditions of understanding and mutual respect, we felt that the least we could do was to try to contribute to the elimination of the religious passions which further inflame conflicts basically due, much of the time, to economic, ideological or political differences.

On June 26th, with the co-operation of the two co-convenors

Dr. David Kerr, Director of the Centre for the Study of Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations and Lecturer in Islam at the Selly Oak Colleges, Birmingham, and a sympathetic student of Islam, and

Professor Khurshid Ahmad, Leicester, Director-General of the Islamic Foundation, formerly professor of economics at the University of Karachi, and a man well-acquainted with the Christian world,

we called together a group of Christians and Muslims concerned with the fulfilment of their respective missionary obligations for a five-day consultation on Christian Mission and Islamic Da'wah.

We as Christians cannot surrender our missionary vocation nor our commitment to the Proclamation of the Gospel.

But the same missionary compulsion to engagement in da'wah belongs to our Muslim neighbours out of their own religious heritage and from their religious convictions. The group tried to explain to each other their basic motivations, to understand and if possible to correct the caricatures they had of one another, and to see how damaging realities could be changed and a pattern of behaviour in mission and da'wah defined and commended. The encounter was an impassioned one, in which it was not easy to agree. At the same time, however, time and time again, we came back to the conference table with the conviction that ways could and should be found to create more fruitful situations for reciprocal witness.

Working on a draft prepared originally by the Muslim Participants, the group was able to hammer out a general expression of agreement. This document might have reflected other approaches to the matter - more radical, or more daring, or more conservative. But its value lies in the fact that it is not just an expression of our Christian understanding of how mission could or should be carried out among adherents of the Muslim religion, or vice versa, but that, together, Christians and Muslims affirmed basic principles concerning the freedom to exercise one's religion, to propagate one's faith, "the right to convince and be convinced" and deplored those things which stand in the way of the exercise of such freedom.

For me, who had had little previous contact with Muslims and the world of Islam, the discussions, the papers and not least the human contacts, were an illuminating experience. We believe that you will find much to think about in this issue of the International Review of Mission. Now the editorial word belongs to our two friends, and the co-editors of this issue, Khurshid Ahmad and David Kerr.

## **EDITORIAL 2**

In the name of Allah, the Merciful, the Mercy-Giving

SAY : "People of the Book, (let us) rally to common terms, to be binding on both, us and you, that we shall worship only God (alone) and associate nothing else with Him, nor shall any of us take others as lords instead of God".

The Qur'an 3 : 64

Perhaps this is the first time that a Muslim has acted as a co-editor for a special issue of the International Review of Mission. On the face of it, this may appear to be a small step, yet it may go a long way in improving the state of religious co-existence; moving from coexistence towards pro-existence and greater co-operation between the family of Abraham (peace be upon him). The initiative for the present effort came from the Commission on World Mission and Evangelism of the World Council of Churches and the IRM, to which the Muslims have responded in good faith.

After working on this project for almost one year, I, for one, have no regrets for having entered these uncharted waters. We met and worked together as people committed to serve God alone, and as persons resolved to live in accordance with the religious values and traditions we firmly believe in. We hold no brief for syncretism, nor were we interested in producing compromises on matters religious and moral. Similarly, we did not enter the consultation with a view to scoring points on each other. We met with the objective of understanding each other's position more sympathetically, of identifying the areas of agreement and disagreement and of trying to build mutual trust so as to co-ordinate our response to threats and challenges that beset humanity today. Instead of merely talking about each other, we have tried to talk to each other, however haltingly. That is why we, instead of producing an impersonal collection of scholarly papers, have tried to collect around one table a few distinguished religious leaders of the two faiths and invite them to face each other as much as face the real issues that confront them. The fruits of this lively encounter are presented in this special issue on Christian Mission and Islamic Da'wah.

It is our considered opinion that the right approach in Christian- Muslim dialogue is to face the problems and issues that unite or divide us. These issues are legion: religious, theological, historical, socio-cultural, political. As mission/da'wah represents the outreach of one's religious tradition to the other and as the role of Christian missions in the Muslim world is regarded by the

Muslims to be at the root of estrangement between the Christian and the Muslim worlds, the conference on mission and da'wah provided a natural point of departure for a meaningful dialogue.

Although there have been moments of stress and strain, expressions of human weakness and pugnacity, even wars and political encounters, Christians and Muslims have lived side by side in the Muslim world, on the whole, in peace and harmony with each other, ever since the final revelation of Islam in the seventh century.

But with the arrival of the Christian missionaries in the company of European colonizers, a new chapter began in Muslim-Christian relationships. That some of them might have been motivated by the best of spiritual intentions is not among the points in dispute. But the overall Muslim experience of the Christian mission was such that it failed to commend itself as something noble and holy.

Any dispassionate evaluation of the experience would suggest that what has been achieved is a loss for Islam and religion as such, and not a gain for Christianity—the real beneficiaries being the forces of secularism, materialism and of moral insensitivity. The Muslim critique can be summed up in four points :

- (a)** Gross and flagrant misrepresentation of the teachings of Islam and of the life and message of the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him). Instead of examining Islam as it is, a totally unreal picture of Islam was concocted and used to denigrate Islam and Muslims/ Although the high watermark of this type of approach to the study of Islam has passed, the effort still persists, even though in low profile and under many a disguise.
- (b)** The methodology of Christian mission concentrated upon influencing the object in a state of weakness and helplessness. Instead of direct invitation, approaches were made to those who were disadvantaged, exploiting their weaknesses for the sake of proselytism. The poor, the sick and the immature were made special targets of economic assistance, medical aid and education. Many a Christian mission acted as an organic part of colonialism and cultural imperialism. All this was a very unfair way to bring people to any religion.
- (c)** Whatever the ultimate aim, subversion of the faith and culture of Islam seems to have been the prime target of the Christian missionary enterprise. Nationalism, secularism, modernism, socialism, even communism were fostered, supported and encouraged, while the revival of Islam and the strengthening of Islamic moral life among the Muslims were, and even now are, looked upon as anathema.
- (d)** Muslims were treated as political rivals and as such subjected to overt and covert discrimination and repression. Their just causes fail to evoke any significant moral response from the Christian world. Western Christendom's attitude towards the Palestine problem in general and towards Jerusalem in particular, for example, agonizes Muslims. Majority rule is denied to Muslims in a number of African countries. The sufferings of the Muslims in such places as Eritrea, Mindanao, Kashmir, Patani, to mention only a few, fail to sufficiently arouse the moral conscience of the Christian world. Muslims are puzzled when they compare the relative lack of Christian concern over the increasing de-Christianization of the Christian world with their obsession with what amounts to de-Islamization of the Muslim world.

This being the nature of the Muslim concern it was but natural that any meaningful dialogue must begin with a review of the Christian and Muslim positions in respect of the whole experience of

mission and da'wah, The Conference concentrated upon two major aspects of the problem : the fundamental position of Islam and Christianity in respect of da'wah and mission, and the Christian and Muslim experience of each other's missionary/da'wah/ activity. Both religions are light-sharing. But there are differences in the way they offer their message to others and, at a deeper level, in the way they concern themselves with the world.

The two sections on the nature and concept of the Christian mission and Islamic da'wah and the discussions that follow bring this into sharp focus. The missionary experience of the two communities too has its disparities. A careful perusal of the material presented here will show that three issues emerge distinctly from the debate:

First, there has been widespread abuse of Christian diakonia and something effective needs to be done to bring an end to that. Secondly, the whole question of secularism and Westernization has to be studied in the context of religio-historical traditions, of Islam and Christianity. Greater sensitivity needs to be shown to differences in the religious ideals and the historical situations of the Christian West and the Muslim world. Thirdly, although human freedom is even more essential for the flowering of man's spiritual and religious life than for his political existence, freedom becomes meaningful only within a framework Of commitments and responsibilities. As such, equal concern should be shown towards the freedom and integrity of the individual and the solidarity of the community.

With these key issues in perspective, the importance of the Conference statement becomes clear. Although representing the consensus of a few, its significance lies in the fact that it can show the way to a more universal consensus. Its uniqueness lies in the spirit of frankness and fairness in which it is offered. It represents an attitude of loyalty to God and not necessarily to one's "tribe"; acceptance of facts, whether pleasant or unpleasant; and respect for the viewpoint and the feelings of others. With such an approach, man can move towards a new world of mutuality and pro-existence. If this is what we are aiming at, then the Chambesy Statement could be a milestone. What about the future ? The Chambesy spirit and the concrete suggestions it frames represent a first step on a long and arduous road men of goodwill from Christianity and Islam will have to tread if they want to change Christian-Muslim relations for the better. The miniconsensus evolved at Chambesy deserves to be widened as well as deepened. It contains the seeds from which the tree of some universal consensus can grow. To deepen the consensus, efforts should be made to organize a series of conferences, seminars, conventions and colloquia at different levels with a view to developing better understanding of each other's religious and historical traditions; to frame ethical rules governing dialogue, co-operation and even healthy competition; to jointly produce works of serious scholarship and frank encounters and to participate jointly in centres and institutions devoted to serving these purposes. Along with widening and deepening the consensus, effective steps should be taken to implement the proposals contained in the statement. This is an area where organizations like the World Council of Churches, the Vatican, the Islamic Secretariat, the Muslim World League, the Call of Islam Society, and Islamic Council of Europe and the like can make some significant contribution not only in healing the wounds and clearing the debris but also in building new bridges to bring the family of Abraham closer in love and mutual trust. If the Chambesy Conference and the present efforts of the IRM, the Islamic Foundation and the Centre for the Study of Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations in Europe could make some opening in that direction, this small step could be the precursor of a great change.

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