

James Narithookil, C.M.I.
Carmel Vidya Bhavan, Pune

ISLAM'S ENCOUNTER WITH CHRISTIANITY

Introduction

The history of relations between Christianity and Islam goes back to the seventh century when Islam originated as a new religion. Ever since then, both these religions maintained mutual contact which, until recently, was either in the form of uneasy coexistence or hostile confrontation. From the very beginning, Christianity looked on Islam as a threat to Christianity because it appeared to supplant it as a religion. The series of Muslim conquests and the sudden rise of Islam to political power were alarming to the Christians who therefore wished to check the rapid growth of Islam. Christian hostility was aggravated when Islam captured many Christian provinces like Syria, Egypt, North Africa and Spain. The animosity of Christians against Islam passed through several stages in Arabia, in the Byzantine empire and later in Western Christendom.

Thus the seeds of antagonism conceived at an early stage went through a long period of gestation to give birth to the scandalous warfare of the crusades. Moreover, the polemic works of the Christians against Islam perpetuated the hostility between the two religions. In the Middle Ages, polemics reached saturation point so that there was nothing more to be said or written against Muhammad and Islam. No other religious founder in history has ever been so constant an object of ridicule and disparagement in the West as Muhammad.

Christian polemicists engaged in the study of Islam with the definite purpose of undermining it. Thus debates were held on theological matters using scholarly methods based on what was thought to be sound philosophy and scriptural texts. The Christians of the East were more equipped to encounter Islam on account of their knowledge of Arabic, the lack of which precluded the Latin West from entering the arena of active polemics at an earlier stage.

The Eastern Christians attempted to place Islam on the pedestal of heresy, whereas the Western Latins tried to discover certain Judeo-Christian aspects in it. Both agreed on one point, namely, that Islam contained nothing original and that it consisted in a confused combination of native Arabian heathenism, Judaism, Christianity and Zoroastrianism. Another reason for the Christians to raise serious objections to Islam was that it rejected such fundamental principles of Christianity as the Trinity, the divinity of Christ, the crucifixion, resurrection and redemption. Hence, Christianity rejected and condemned the whole teachings of Islam as erroneous.

The negative and hostile attitude which the Church has taken towards Islam since the seventh century persisted throughout the succeeding centuries till the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965).

The Attitude of the Catholic Church to Islam Before the Second Vatican Council

The attitude of the Catholic Church to non-Christian religions before the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965) was one of condemnation. The Church used to consider other religions as lies and works of the devil.

It was taken for granted that every human being would come to know about the Christian message. Therefore, it was incumbent on everyone to embrace Christianity as a requisite for salvation. This obligation is expressed in the famous axiom "Extra Ecclesiam nulla salus" (no salvation outside the Church).

The Church always maintained a claim to absoluteness, which was the result of combining its two attributes, namely, its being universal as well as unique.

Prophet Muhammad

For centuries the Prophet Muhammad (570-632) was the continual object of personal ridicule on the part of Christianity. The apologetic work of Peter the Venerable (1094-1156) was largely responsible for perpetuating the opinion of Christians regarding the image of the Prophet. Peter's account of Muhammad's birth and early life indicated his purpose to show the false claim of Muhammad's

prophethood. According to him Muhammad increased the terror of his name not only by attacking all those who were near to him, and particularly close blood-relatives, but also by killing whomsoever he could. Peter's work was instrumental in creating among Christians a hostile attitude to Muhammad which lasted for centuries.

St. Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274) attacked Muhammad for having enticed the people with the promise of carnal pleasures to the desire of which the concupiscence of the flesh instigated. With regard to Muhammad's teachings, Thomas recognized certain truths but claimed they were so simple that an average man could know them. He denied the authority of Muhammad, basing his argument on the absence of any sign of supernatural agency. The idea that Muhammad had corrupted almost all the teaching of the Old and New Testament was one of the most objectionable points to Thomas Aquinas.

The Quran

As was the case with Muhammad, the Church's attitude to the Quran prevailing in the Middle Ages has not changed until recently. It was considered to be incompatible with Sacred Scriptures in its inherent qualities, and in disagreement with philosophy and natural reason also.

Based on the writings of Peter the Venerable, Christians used to maintain that the sources of the Quran were the apocryphal literature of Christianity and Nestorianism. The concept that the Quran depended on various sources for its origin was widely accepted among Christians for centuries. Peter had no doubt about the fact that the Jews and the heretical doctors instructed Muhammad in producing the Quran. Since the Quran wove together the Jewish fables and the doctrines of the heretics, Peter did not hesitate to call it a diabolical Scripture.

Thomas Aquinas maintained that the Quran contained only such ideas as could be grasped by the natural ability of any one with a very modest wisdom.¹ Though Thomas acknowledged the fact that there were some truths in the Quran, he emphasized that the truth that it taught was mingled with many fables and with doctrines of the greatest falsity. From this, Thomas infers the absence of divine inspiration in the Quran.

1. St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica, Contra Gentiles*, I:VI, P. 13.

Many Christians used to consider the Quran as human wisdom which Muhammad's followers considered to be a gift of God.

The Trinity of the Christians had no point of contact with the Quranic Allah and the fatherhood of God had no place in Islam. Islam denied Incarnation, both by its teaching on God and its teaching on Jesus Christ. The Jesus of the Quran was seen as the antithesis of the living and true Jesus of the Gospels. To remove divinity from Jesus was, for them, to remove Jesus himself, because the human nature of Christ had no person other than the person of the divine Word.

Danielou (1905-1974) thinks that Islam was grafted on the Jewish trunk. It contains certain elements derived from Christian heretics of Abyssinia with whom Muhammad came in contact. Another defect of Islam which Danielou brings to our notice is that Islam materializes religion and brings it down to the level of temporal reality.² Danielou situates Islam between Judaism and "cosmic" religions in a comparative study of religions.³

The Second Vatican Council has formally declared that religious liberty is, in fact, an individual right of man and that this right must be respected by all institutions and societies.⁴

The right to religious liberty had been proclaimed in the "Universal Declaration of Human Rights" adopted by the General Assembly of the United Nations in 1948.⁵ It is established in the Council document that God is redemptively at work in the whole

2. Jean Danielou, *The Salvation of the Nations*, trans. Angeline Bouchard (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1962) pp. 37-47.
3. Jean Danielou, *Introduction to Great Religions*, trans. Albert J. La Mothe Jr. (Notre Dame: Fides Publishers, Inc., 1964), pp. 18-19.
4. "Declaration on Religious Liberty" in *Vatican Council II*, edited by Austin Flannery, O.P., with a preface by John Cardinal Wright (Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 1975), p. 800.
5. The text of the "Universal Declaration on Human Right" in the *Year Book on Human Rights for 1948*. United Nations, General Assembly, December 10, 1948 (Lake Success, New York, 1950), Resolution 217 (III) Art. 18, P. 467.

of humanity. A man should act on his own initiative and responsibility from inward motivation because religious liberty is based on the supreme principle of the dignity of the human person.

The Church recognizes that the Spirit is at work in the heart of every man and of every people, and consequently their religions have a place in the salvific plan of God.

Louis Massignon (1883-1962) was a great inspiration for the later Orientalists. He appreciated the graces existing in Islam and called himself an internalized Islamologist.

Louis Gardet (b. 1904) and Georges Anawati (b. 1905) contributed very much to the study of Christian and Muslim relations. Their research made it possible to compare the mediaeval scholastic theological developments of the two religions.

Texts on Islam in Second Vatican Council

Lumen Gentium

But the plan of salvation also includes those who acknowledge the Creator, in the first place amongst whom are the Muslims: these profess to hold the faith of Abraham, and together with us they adore the one, merciful God, mankind's judge on the last day.⁶

Nostra Aetate

The Church has also a high regard for the Muslims. They worship God, who is one, living and subsistent, merciful and almighty, the Creator of heaven and earth, who has also spoken to men. They strive to submit themselves without reserve to the hidden decrees of God, just as Abraham submitted himself to God's plan, to whose faith Muslims eagerly link their own. Although not acknowledging him as God, they worship Jesus as a prophet, his virgin mother they also honour, and even at times devoutly invoke. Further, they await the day of judgement and the reward of God

6. *Vatican Council II, Lumen Gentium*, No. 16, p. 367. "Dogmatic Constitution on the Church" was promulgated on Nov. 21, 1964.

following the resurrection of the dead. For this reason they highly esteem an upright life and worship God, especially by way of prayer, almsdeeds and fasting.

Over the centuries many quarrels and dissensions have arisen between Christians and Muslims. The sacred Council now pleads with all to forget the past, and urges that a sincere effort be made to achieve mutual understanding; for the benefit of all men, let them together preserve and promote peace, liberty, social justice, and moral values.⁷

The first text (*Lumen Gentium*) has drawn out the essential dogma of monotheism uniting Christians and Muslims beyond the divergencies over the names of God.

The second text (*Nostra Aetate*) is much more developed and is made up of two parts: the first is doctrinal, describing the values of the Muslim faith and worship. The second is practical, inviting mutual comprehension and collaboration. In order to explain the theological implications of this latter text we will analyze it in detail.

"The Church has also a high regard for the Muslims." This statement; in fact, represents quite a revolution in the Church's attitude to Islam. For over thirteen centuries, the history of the relationship between Christians and Muslims has been one of wars, conquest and bitter theological polemics. But this is the first time in the history of the Church that the Magisterium, in solemn Council, advocates an attitude of esteem and of friendship toward Islam and the Muslims.

Muslim monotheism is recognized as a fundamental value, for adoration of the only God is central in the Christian tradition as well as in Islam, even though the two hold a different view of this Oneness.

By admitting revelation in Islam, the Church distinguishes Islam from other theisms which originate solely from human efforts.

7. Ibid., *Nostra Aetate* (Declaration on the Relation of the Church to Non-Christian Religions).

The Council emphasizes the importance of the fundamental religious attitude, the total submission of one's soul to God. This clearly indicates the place of mystery in the Islamic faith and the readiness on the part of Muslims to submit to this mysterious will of God in advance and without question. The Council fittingly recalled that Abraham is the model for the Muslims' faith and obedience.

The Council recognized the Abrahamic character of Islam, in the purity of Muslim monotheism and in the beauty of its obedience. The Church also appreciates the Muslims' readiness to regard Jesus as a prophet and honour his virgin Mother. What is new in the attitude of the Church is that the Church did not hesitate to reveal her willing-ness not only to remain silent about the negative aspects but also to emphasize the positive ones which are common to both faiths.

By stressing the eschatological values and the ethical riches of Islam, the Council took a very important step forward. The Council was aware of the equal importance attached to eschatology both in Islam and Christianity, because it is eschatology that gives meaning to the world and to the lives of men: a meeting with God at the end of time when true values will be revealed. Undoubtedly, it is in the realm of eschatology that the Church assumed an entirely new attitude by giving up the attack on the deficiencies and stressing the positive aspects of the judgement, resurrection and paradise.

The Church recognizes that it is in view of the eschatological values that Muslims esteem moral life, hold the body of values enshrined in the Ten Commandments (which they share with Jews and Christians) and worship God, especially by way of prayer, alms, deeds and fasting.

The Church did not fail to express its admiration for Islam's religious designs which assign great importance to acts of worship and their interiorization, although the Council chose to remain silent on the mystical possibilities of Islam. The main "Pillars" of Islam are here recognized, although pilgrimage to Mecca, with its genuine opportunities for conversion, has been regrettably omitted. Though the rites and forms of prayer, fasting, and alms-giving may be different, the reality remains the same, namely, to adore God in truth.

It is true that the Council expressed great admiration for the fact that Muslims adore the one, true, living, and sustaining God, Creator of heaven and earth.

But the Church judged it wise to say nothing about the person and the mission of Muhammad which forms the second part of the *Shahada* (profession of the Muslim faith). Thus the Council's Declaration gives an account of the Muslim theodicy, but not of the essence of the Muslim faith which includes among its important elements belief in the prophetic mission of Muhammad.

Obviously this is the most sensitive point for the Muslims, and the experts have chosen to deal with it by ignoring it. The deliberate silence on the part of the Council concerning Muhammad and his prophethood signifies a real change in the Church's attitude. By this, the Church shows her determination to discontinue the negative and hostile attitude to the prophet Muhammad. By being silent about the person and mission of Muhammad, the Council has created a very favourable disposition for sympathetic and positive study to be pursued in future.

The final section of the Declaration is really the constructive part concerning Islam because it begins with an honest confession that many quarrels and dissensions have arisen between Christians and Muslims. Without mentioning the causes and consequences, the Council urges both sides (Christians and Muslims) to forget the past so that it may create a better disposition to begin a new relation between them. Forgetting the past is the pre-requisite for a sincere attempt to reach mutual understanding for the benefit of all men. The first part of the text deals with doctrinal values common to Islam and Christianity only to open the way for common action which is highly recommended in the second part.

The Council, knowing that the past bears heavily on the present, recalls quarrels and dissensions in the form of confession. To forget does not mean to ignore the past, but to understand in order to leave behind. In order to bring about mutual understanding, one has to strive sincerely to know the other and this knowledge will lead one to a change of mind and heart. The consequence will be the possibility and the preparedness to get rid of false problems, unjust prejudices and the tendency of subjecting the other to one's

own categories. Therefore, the Council outlines two ways or programmes in order to achieve these objectives, namely, mutual understanding and collaboration. In order to forget the past, we have to root out completely our prejudices and misunderstandings and admit the injustices committed in the past, in various forms such as crusades, colonisation, and so forth. To get rid of the worst prejudices, we have to avoid the ready made judgements to the detriment of Islam such as "fatalism" of Islam, "legalism of Islam," "Islam, religion of fear," "the laxity of Islam," "the fanaticism of Islam," "the static nature of Islam."

The Council concludes this text inviting all to joint action to safeguard and foster social justice, moral values, peace and freedom. The perspective changes here, from dialogue in the strict sense, to common action, side by side, on urgent and serious problems confronting Christians and Muslims as believers and concerning the good of all men. In this section the Council outlines the course to be followed to attain the mutual understanding by suggesting an area of effective cooperation outside that of dogmatic and theological differences. The Council invites all to be solicitous about social justice regarding the struggle against the glaring inequalities, the oppression of the poor within every nation, and the mounting inequality between rich people who die spiritually of their riches and the poor for whom the chances of getting a fairer share of the Creator's goods seem to become ever more and more remote. Appreciation for moral values in Islam urges the Council to admonish the Christians to collaborate with Muslims to promote moral values in a demoralized world.

The statement in the last section of the Declaration was quoted more than any other by the Arab press during the Council because it awoke a deep interest among Muslims who saw it as the beginning of a new era in the relations between the Christians and the Muslims.

The new attitude of Christians to Islam, namely, to view Islam positively, will help Christians to discover the deep religious character of Islam by doing research concerning Islam, for mutual understanding and respect. Then Islam will be seen as one of the best expressions of man's search for God by way of total submission

and an excellent way of worship; as a superior preparation for the spiritual acceptance of the God of Abraham, Moses and Jesus.

In the light of the positive values of Muslim monotheism, the Christian theologian can legitimately accept that Muhammad has some prophetic charism which enables him to communicate to his followers certain fundamental and biblical truths about God and man. Hence a Christian can regard Muhammad as a biblical person and Islam as wholehearted acceptance of the primitive revelation given to Abraham.

Christian Attitude to Islam Today

On the basis of God's universal salvific will, the possibility of supernatural revelation within non-Christian religions is established. Hence non-Christian religions are considered not as a work of man but as work of God. Revelation is in process at various levels both in Christianity and in non-Christian religions. With regards to universal revelation it is happening in all religions. God's revelation sheds light on the human condition that has need for redemption. God reveals himself to non-Christians through their historical religions no matter how diverse the circumstances of their origin are. God's universal salvific will presupposes God's grace to every individual and this grace is an integral part of every individual.

The existential approach to theology places man in his 'I-Thou' relationship to God. In this approach, one has to go beyond man's imperfect ideas about God and try to recapture man's living experience with God. This relationship is a personal relationship because when man prays he commits himself to God in faith and love, and he is saved, no matter how imperfect his concept of God is.

Guidelines for Dialogue between Muslims and Christians (first published in 1969) is one of the booklets that presents some directions that are intended to inspire and promote the relations between Christians and Muslims. This work is the result of the study and collaboration of several consultants of the Secretariat for Non-Christians, Vatican.

Dialogue

Now there is an ever increasing zeal and enthusiasm seen among the Christians to enter into dialogue with Muslims. Dialogue

gives a positive meaning to the encounter between adherents of various religions by its sincere effort to shatter all prejudices and misunderstandings. Thus dialogue has become a means to explore the possibility of developing mutual love, respect, and solidarity.

Dialogue in general has been a common platform for a healthy, inspiring and instructive exchange of ideas, though there were a few exceptions due to the zeal and concern to defend one's own faith against possible attack by the other.

The Christian participants of most of the dialogues were mainly academic people and intellectuals from faculties of theology, Sacred Scripture or literature. Most Muslim participants were academic people and intellectuals from faculties of literature or philosophy and they made it clear that they spoke on their own behalf rather than presenting official views.

Another remarkable achievement of the dialogue is the genuine interest and concern the Muslim and Christian participants showed to eliminate the bitter attitudes and outlooks that continued for over thirteen centuries. The Christian encounter with the Muslims taught the Christians what the living faith of the Muslims is and what Muslim theology has said about the mystery of God.

Hundreds of Christians and Muslims learned how to work, think and even pray together and this resulted in friendship and mutual respect. The Christian delegation in the Tripoly conference stated that it asked pardon of the Muslims for all unjust or hurtful things said by Christians throughout history concerning the person of Islam's reverend prophet.⁸

For over thirteen centuries, Christians looked down on Islam entertaining a hostile attitude. The Second Vatican Council put an end to this negative approach and introduced a positive one.

In the past, it used to be thought that religions created division and discord among men in the name of God: but now it is believed

8. Maurice Borrmans, "Le Seminaire du Dialogue Islamo-Chretien de Tripoli (Libye)" *Islamochristiana* (1976), pp. 159-160.

that religion can bring believers together, because it is held that God calls all together. Orientalists are contributing extensively to a positive understanding of Islam by their study and research.

The Christians are advised to understand Islam as it is understood and believed by Muslims. For that one has to place Islam in the historical context, trying objectively to see it as the Muslims have seen it since the time of Muhammad.

The Christian-Muslim dialogue has already proved to be a vital force in breaking down the barriers of prejudice and in building healthy relations.

In most of the dialogues, the Christians engaged themselves in self-criticism and were ready to discuss openly any issue vital importance. The response of the Muslims to this attitude was negative because they were not equally ready for self-criticism and viewed the dialogue as a subtle form of missionary work to convert the Muslims.

During dialogues the Christian participants were ready to listen to the Islamic view of Christianity, whereas the Muslims participants refused to listen to the Christian view of Islam or to criticism of its historical achievements.

Muslims are not prepared to admit that Christianity as lived by Christians and expressed by the whole tradition is legitimate Christianity because their criterion for this legitimacy is the Quran, which denies several basic principles of Christianity.

In spite of these obstacles, Muslim-Christian dialogue is making steady progress with sincere attempt to eliminate the differences that exist between these two religions. Thus the Christians have initiated a new era of relationship with Muslims, a relationship that has adopted a sympathetic and positive approach for the purpose of harmonious co-existence and collaboration.