

Council of Christians and Muslims

Annual General Meeting, 25 April 2005

Ponsonby Mosque

The need for dialogue between Christianity and Islam

Sallam Mullaikum, Kia Ora and Good Evening,

Thank you for your invitation to speak to you this evening, at the Annual General Meeting of the Council of Christians and Muslims. I wish to speak this evening on the need for dialogue between Christianity and Islam. I have the privilege of many years of experience and learning on this issue from my time in Algeria, overseas, particularly in Europe, and of course here in New Zealand. As a Muslim I have been welcomed by the Dominican Friars to stay with their Christian community at the Dominican Priory in central-Auckland. This has been a wonderful opportunity for me to build on my understanding and commitment to the dialogue and understanding between my religion of Islam, and Christianity.

The Christian Muslim relationship is passing through a difficult time. Many challenges strain and complicate the relationship. But, in truth, if we examine our religions at their source, Christians and Muslims are brothers, we complement one another. We are both children of the book. We share the same concerns, such as freedom, human rights and justice. But the bonds between us are all but forgotten as geopolitics, history, and culture interferes with the dialogue between religions.

As they say, it is easy to fear and hate what you do not understand. The Christian West does not have a good understanding of the true situation in the Muslim world. Often, the West closes its eyes to the richness of Islamic civilisation and culture, preferring instead to view the Islamic world as the 'other' – foreign, strange, and ultimately incomprehensible. This euro-centralism is at the centre of Western conceptions of the Muslim world. In terms of history, the West has a strong, if selective, memory. By making Islam 'the enemy', is able to retrieve long sequences of history, from the Crusades to the colonial wars, and frame them as parallels and sequels to contemporary events.

In this way, the economic and geo-strategic relationship between the West and the Muslim world affects the dialogue between Islam and Christianity. But in truth, religion is not the reason for war. Instead, religion is used as a pretext and instrument of war.

To better understand the present situation, I wish to very briefly illustrate the history of Islam in relation to the Christian West by outlining the main periods which mark this history before reiterating the importance of inter-faith dialogue.

First period

The first period is the foundational phase of Islam, which extended from the 6th century to the 12th century. At this time, the West was essentially ignorant of the nature of Islam. The Roman Empire was at war with the nations that now form the Islamic states. Even before this time, Rome invaded pre-Islamic Africa and Arabia, regarding everything non-Roman as barbarian. The Berbers – from which the term barbarian originates – are the most populous tribal peoples of North Africa and my country Algeria. Similarly, on some readings, the Bible contended that any non-Christian religion was pagan and illegal.

However, from its inception, the religion of Islam asked its believers to be at peace and establish dialogue between the religions of the book.

The prophet instructs: *“O people of the scripture come to a word that is equitable between us and you.” (3/64) ...do not argue with the people of the scripture except in a way that is best.”*

The prophet instructs that we should say to those who commit injustice: *“we believe in that which has been revealed to us and revealed to you, and our God and your God is one and we are Muslims to him”*. When the Koran says *“we are Muslims to him”*, you must understand that the word ‘Muslim’ simply means *“in submission”*. As do followers of Islam, Christians submit to God, as to Jews. So, in those terms, Abraham is Muslim; Jesus is Muslim.

There are numerous verses in the Koran that not only contain the names of the prophets of the Old Testament, but express praise for them, and for their actions. Furthermore, the Koran contains more than 120 verses about Jesus and the Virgin Mary, including details of the birth and early childhood of Jesus that do not appear in the Holy Bible.

Islam shows concerns for the protection of Christianity and Judaism. *“And were it not that Allah checks the people, some by means of others, there would have been demolished monasteries, churches, synagogues and mosques in which the name of Allah is much mentioned” (22/40)*. In his book ‘Orientalism’, Edward Said makes the point that Muslims, even when they are extremely angry, had never dared to insult the prophets of ancient Israel.

Second period

Continuing this brief historical overview, the second period begins in the 12th century. This period is characterised by two phenomena. Firstly, the Christian world begins to know the Islamic civilisation and its religion through its source – the Koran. At this same time, Western scholars began to be influenced by Muslim philosophy, scholastic knowledge, and world view. Historical evidence shows that the Islamic world played a significant role in the renaissance of the West through contact, discovery and cultural exchange. For instance, in the Middle Ages, Europeans often sent their pupils to learn in Spain and Sicily, both Islamic communities.

A good example is the great Muslim philosopher Averroes, or Abu'l-Waleed Muhammad Ibn Rushd. Averroes was a physician, master of philosophy and Islamic law, science, mathematics and medicine who

lived in Cordoba in the 12th Century. Particularly through his commentaries on Aristotle, Averroes strongly influenced the seeds of European philosophy from the Middle Ages until the 16th century. Thomas Aquinas attempted to fuse Averroes' thoughts into his own system. However, this posed a challenge to papal power. In 1277, Averroes' works, along with those of Thomas Aquinas and other thinkers who had synthesised problems in Christian theology and philosophy, were condemned as anti-Christian.

The second phenomena of this period is its marking by blood, as the first of seven crusades begin. In this time, the Islamic caliphate and its state was very strong, but when the Moguls successfully took Baghdad in 1258, they gave the Christian world the courage to believe it could conquer the Islamic world in war.

The third period

At the end of the 18th century was a period of a new science called orientalism. In this rich period of learning, the West started to discover its own views of science and philosophy. The end of the 18th century marked the beginnings of Western concern about the East, especially the Chinese, Indian, and Muslim worlds through the study of anthropology and sociology. Unfortunately, this Orientalist scholarship, which was the subject of Edward Said's famous book, created and relied upon distorted and simplistic views of the Muslim world, and was a precursor to colonialism, the impacts of which are resonant today.

The need for dialogue

So, I believe that in our time, that religious dialogue is very important. That is dialogue that genuinely seeks to understand and accept, honour, respect, and celebrate our similarities and differences. It is all the more important for the following reasons:

1. Since September 11, the negative stereotype of the Muslim has been reinforced. It is only through understanding and dialogue that this can be dismantled.
2. We must also have dialogue because of the growing influence of the fundamentalist in both in the Islamic and Christian world. Fundamentalism is the path to war and terrorism. However, it is also important to understand that conflict is not solely caused by fundamentalist beliefs; instead, religion intersects with all other factors – economic, political and geo-strategic – to fuel and provide a pretext for the conflict.

Through dialogue, we must challenge the perception of religion as a negative force. We must see that religious understanding can play a big and positive role in diffusing conflict and bridge differences. We must not, as Christians and Muslims, stand back and allow religious to be used as a pretext for war. There is no Christian instruction to war – in fact, Jesus instructs us to turn the other cheek. Likewise, Islam says it is only acceptable to fight those who would fight you, but it is not acceptable to be aggressive. The use of religion as a pretext for war is ridiculous when we reason from the position of first principals. In the name of fighting terrorism, the US has given itself a blank cheque to interfere in the affairs of, and impose its agenda on, all nations. This, it is apparent, is not only a retreat from democracy and freedom but also a retreat from core religious principles.

The value of dialogue is easy to under-rate. It seems slow, and its achievements so much less dramatic than the deadly outbursts of conflict. As a religious practice, it consists of the patient building of bridges and

dissolving 'otherness'. We have to persevere. We have to show tolerance. It is by asserting the power of religious dialogue that we can diminish our differences and bring real hope of lasting peace.

Thank you

Ahmed Zaoui, April 2005