



A journey into the heart of the 'religious other'

My Superiors missioned me to 'Apostolate among Muslims'. This mission placed on me a twofold responsibility: explore, find and establish contacts with Muslims in order to help them understand the Church and her love for Muslims, and help Christians who prepare for ministries in the Church to recognise the importance of dialogue with Muslims. With Pope Francis leading the universal Church in his efforts to broaden and deepen contacts with Muslims as a model par excellence, it is certainly a kairos moment for us to launch out into the deep in dialogue initiatives with Muslims. In this short article, I share the two most important challenges in teaching Islam and Christian-Muslim relations in the centres of theology in India.



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Ignorance is far more widespread than understanding

The first challenge is to confront the 'layers upon layers' of prejudice against Islam and Muslims in India. These prejudices have grown from certain interpretations of historical memories of certain groups or have been largely drawn uncritically from the distorted images of Islam and Muslims in the mainstream media. These prejudices are

underpinned by ignorance that is often expressed through cynical comments on Muslims, their morality and way of life.

Often students make comparison of the ideals of Christianity with the realities of Islamic world, and judge Muslims negatively. In his book 'Christians and Muslims: From double standards to mutual Understanding' Hugh Goddard relates an incident of gross ignorance of a Jesuit. A British-based Muslim who was born and educated in South Asia told him the story of his Jesuit teacher

who surprised him one day by asking him why Muslims worshipped pigs! Further conversation between teacher and pupil revealed that the former had observed that in South Asia members of the Hindu community did not eat beef cows were considered to be sacred animals. He had also observed that members of the Muslim community did not eat pork. So he assumed that pigs were considered sacred, and were worshipped by Muslims. The question, therefore, though logical was based on ignorance. Goddard comments that even

a basic understanding of Islam should be enough to make it clear that Muslims certainly do not worship pigs, since Islam is an insistent monotheistic faith. Helpfully, he adds a footnote that today's Jesuits are considerably better informed and educated concerning other religious traditions!

I have learnt that overcoming ignorance is no easy task. Christian scholars in interfaith relations such as David Cheetham, Douglas Pratt and David Thomas give some helpful classification of ignorance in reference to the 'religious other'. In my teaching experience, I have found that some students display ignorance that could be termed as innocent ignorance. They are simply ignorant of the faith and praxis of the 'religious other'. They do not display any intentional prejudice. They acknowledge their ignorance and correct their perception on receiving right information.

The second type displays blind ignorance born of intellectual stubbornness that effectively prevents 'coming to know the other'. Though not necessarily malicious, this blindness draws from close-minded conservatism. Sustained educational efforts, especially personal experience of the 'positive other', brings about desirable changes. The third type of ignorance, culpable ignorance, is sustained by refusal to know, avoidance of the challenge of cognitive change, and the reinforcement of a prejudicial perspective by deliberately shunning any evidence to the contrary. This is an ideologically driven ignorance.

In my experience most students come under the first two categories. They need good information gleaned from the scholarly works of Christians and Muslims as well as personal experience of meeting Muslims. I place before them such works and humbly reflect on the intellectual labour of others with the students. Besides such class room presentation and interaction, following the model of my teacher and Guru Paul Jackson, I make efforts to provide opportunities for meeting with diverse Muslims.

I have realized meeting Muslims and having conversation with them is the real game changer. I am convinced that there is no alternative to personal experience.

If the heart is touched and moved, one learns to recognise the preciousness of the 'religious other'. I have also noticed to my great joy some students display gently the capacity to reflect theologically on the Christian faith in the light of the insights that come from the Islam. On such occasions I join them in touching the avenues of comparative theology. I invite them to read deeply the contributions of Paul Jackson who sailed into deep waters of comparative theology in his lifelong commitment to Maneri Studies. I also propose to them to read the works of the leading exponent of this field, Francis Clooney. I have met Christians who display culpable ignorance with respect to Muslims. They often express it in insensitive comments laced with heavy doses of prejudice and even hatred for Muslims. I am yet to develop a method to confront and help such people.

Avoid reductive essentializing and pluralizing

The second intellectual difficulty is a tendency to 'essentialize' Islam that is reducing Islam to one or other dimension. I found this more of a theoretical challenge. 'What is Islam? The Importance of Being Islamic' by Shahab Ahmed helped me to deal with this question. I find myself fortunate to meet and have long discussions on this work with some of the leading lights in the field such as the Jesuit Dan Madigan and the Franciscan Michael Calabria. Shahab Ahmed presents a view that Islam is a human-historical phenomenon and it cannot be labelled simply as such as 'religion', 'culture', 'civilization', or 'symbol-system' nor can it be identified with some 'essence' or 'core'. He argues that Islam has to be conceptualized in such a way that it accounts for, as Shahab Ahmed puts it, 'Balkan-Bengal-Complex' where from 1350 CE to 1850 CE Islam has settled across the geographical and cultural situations holding diversities and even contradictions. Such broader conceptualization will avoid reductive essentializing like 'Islam is the legal core of the religion' or pluralizing Islam by giving up the search for coherence and thus not taking Muslims seriously when they define themselves. Further, the author in responding to the question, 'what is Islam?' notes that 'Islam is a hermeneutical engagement with its

search for meaning in the Pre-Text, Text, and Con-Text'.

The Pre-Text is Truth that lies beyond and behind the Text of revelation given to Muhammad. This Pre-Text is ontologically prior to the Text. The Sufis and philosophers engage with the Pre-Text through mysticism and philosophy. The Sufis, for example the Chistisufis, embraced the concept of Wahdat al-wujud. This concept emphasizes that there is only one existence, one wujud that is God. True existence belongs to God alone. Though in the phenomenal world we perceive diversity, in reality everyone reflects the existence of the One. In other words, everyone is one in the One. The philosophers emphasize that through reason one has access to Truth, the mind of God. Here the premise is that the Universal Reality of God-in-the-Unseen whose truth is knowable. The simple believers engage with 'Text' which is revealed from the Unseen-God-beyond-this-world to a human messenger-in-this-world, i.e., Muhammad. At this level the premise is that God-in-the-Unseen whose truth is seen in the Text. The Con-Text is the way Muslims historically lived through cultural, linguistic, expressions often expressed through art, poetry, and architecture.

The problem with the contemporary conceptualization of Islam is, in Ahmed's view, that it defines Islam solely by the Text of Revelation. Revelation has, in effect, been downsized to Text alone, whereas historically Islam has been "nothing other than the hermeneutical engagement with Revelation in all its dimensions and loci" (p. 355-6).

This theoretical position clarifies that those Christian students who are preparing for ministries must learn to conceptualize Islam through a wide-angle lens: 'hermeneutical engagement with Revelation'. It is my hope that at least some students will grasp this challenge and equip themselves with intellectual curiosity towards Muslims, their histories, cultures, spiritualities and their expression through poetry and arts and open up new avenues for theological and cultural dialogue with them.

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