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CHRISTIANS AND MOSLEMS TODAY

by Jean Landousies, c.m.

More than a billion people in the world today belong to the Moslem faith, that is, about 18% of the world's population. In certain places where our Vincentian communities live, it is normal to meet Moslem believers, either because they and our confreres share the same nationality in countries where Islam is long established, or because our confreres work there as missionaries. (It is now 350 years since Saint Vincent sent his first missionaries to North Africa, to Tunis and Algiers). In other parts of the world, for example in certain European countries, it is something new to find a Moslem presence.

This reality cannot be overlooked, because the meeting with Islam is to be one of the most important challenges the Church and societies will face in the years to come.

What will the relationship be? At present we are experiencing relationships that vary from a generous acceptance, frequently based on human relations that are warm and long established, to a fear and misunderstanding which are due to a lack of knowledge on both sides or to increasingly aggressive or proselytising attitudes on the part of certain groups of people.

We are conscious also that the Moslems are often among the poor whom we live alongside, and that Saint Vincent has left us the heritage of trying to reconcile people of opposing ways of life. So we cannot ignore this immense part of the human race to whom the Good News should be brought.

These few pages will offer a very brief assessment of the situation in which Islam finds itself and the challenges it faces in today's world, and also of the way in which the Catholic Church sees the relationship she wishes to have with Moslems.

I. ISLAM TODAY

The first thing to be noted about Islam today is that it is something which involves the entire individual and collective life of the believer. Certainly, Islam is a religion in the strict sense of the term, but it is also a culture, a mode of being and living in society. Again, we need to note that for all its diversity, depending for example on whether it belongs to the Arab, African or Asiatic world and culture, and on whether it is in a minority or majority Islamic country (forty-five countries call themselves Islamic), and on doctrinal differences such as Sunni (who make up 90%) and Shiite, Islam is ONE as well as DIVERSE. Thus, regarding how the various Moslem groups understand and live their religion, three main tendencies can be discerned, in a very general way. There are different currents within each, depending on the country, or even within particular countries.(1)

1. "Popular" Islam

This is a form of Islam that could also be called "traditional," of the kind that was lived peacefully up to recently in many parts of the world and which is still the Islam many people understand by the term. The beliefs of Islam took root in society, and shaped it over the centuries. It adopted various practices, local or imported: for example, survivals from the pre-Islamic period like animism, magic, and agricultural rituals, or maraboutism [a kind of monasticism], or the veneration of "saints," or special pilgrimages and rituals (often opposed by orthodox Islam), or even "brotherhoods" of a kind that could be called mystical (Sufism) and which link up with a spiritualising tendency in Islam.

This kind of popular Islam is very closely linked with the surrounding civilisation. It could be said to be inculturated. The thinkers who emerge from such backgrounds usually try to purify religion from everything unorthodox. It is sometimes called "Islam of the happy medium," because it tries to avoid extremes. Its social goal is to promote Moslem values while remaining open to a certain modernity. It aims to combine the spiritual and the temporal without confusing them.

2. "Radical" Islam

This is what people mostly speak about today. It is a tendency that has "exploded," which is why there is often talk of "Islamic fall-out." Some of those who follow this tendency are given to violence, but this is not the case with all. Too often a very complex movement is discussed without the necessary distinctions being drawn.

The radical tendency is very old in Islam. It reappears whenever society feels the need to react and reaffirm itself in face of events which impact upon it. Now at the close of the twentieth century we are witnessing a reaction against Western domination, the result of a prolonged series of humiliations of the Moslem community, for example, colonisation, the Palestinian problem, the Gulf War, and the impression of a loss of power in Islam in domains as varied as the sciences, politics and so on. Many developing countries have crises of the economy, political, culture and identity. These are like levers which mobilise the people against the established order. Not to be overlooked is the underlying religious element in these revolts, even if religion is often used for the sake of "undeclarable" objectives. The underlying doctrine has a radical and literal logic: God is Master and Lord, He is due complete and unconditional submission. A total blind obedience is due to His Book, (the Koran), the "foundation texts" of religion should be understood literally, and the religious law should be lived in the strictest way.

To attain this goal, radicals engage in a political militarism, which ultimately becomes terrorism. This form of political Islam is a rebellion against a power which is declared to be irreligious and renegade. Depending on local conditions, these movements display different degrees of radicalism.

In this precise context, the *Jihad* (holy war) is not primarily a war of defence or expansion outside the Moslem world, but an internal war, a revolution. At the same time, Moslems of this radical tendency are particularly given to proselytism and do not find it easy to think in terms of non-Moslems. They conceive of Islamism as the truth of Islam to which every Moslem should be converted.

3. "Modernist" Islam

Here too there are very different "currents." However, the Moslems of this tendency are not usually to the forefront of the socio-political or socio-religious stage, often because of the strength of tradition in their society or for fear of attacks by Islamists.

The general perspective of these "modernists" is to "reopen the gates of interpretation" of the foundation texts of Islam, gates which had been closed since the middle of the tenth century in a way that seemed definitive. In other words, they are engaged in a new way of understanding, an exegesis, of these foundation texts, while remaining faithful to the spirit beneath the letter. It is a quest for an Islam in contact with the challenges of modernity.

Among the great themes underlying this renewal movement is that of "secularism" or more correctly the search for the proper autonomy of the religious and the profane (especially political) domains, which Islam traditionally considered to be one or even confused. Put generally, it is a question of rethinking in a Moslem perspective the great issues of modernity: critical reason, democracy, the rights of the individual, and so on. Very concrete social issues are thus raised by the modern society to which many Moslems ultimately aspire, often without being able to discover how they relate to their faith.

This brief and over-general survey shows that there is in today's Islam an immense debate which goes far beyond local situations, however complex and dramatic they may be. The challenge posed by modernity is the background to this debate.

Islam is caught between this challenge which looks to the future and the desire for doctrinal authenticity which is rooted in its past.

The challenges arise from what Islam actually is. Let us notice some of them:

- How is **Revelation** to be understood? For Islam it is the word of God, given once and for all, unchangeable and expressing the will of God Himself. In other words the believer possesses the truth and all he has to do is submit to it and conform himself to the letter of the religious law. Any interpretation of the foundation texts, especially the Koran, becomes extremely difficult, not to say impossible. How can critical reason be integrated into this point of view? As a result, it is clear that the doctrine of human liberty, above all religious liberty, has only limited application. Still more fundamentally, the understanding of the unity of God makes diversity of any kind difficult to justify.

- From this follows the challenge of **how the individual relates to the group**. Modernity implies some degree of autonomy for the individual person in relation to every social group. This relation is difficult for Islam to implement, so important does it consider the cohesion of the community of believers in all matters.

- Hence also arises the question of **the place of religion in society**, which raises such issues as the link between religion and the State, secularism and democracy.
- Internal to the Moslem community, many other difficulties will arise, not least **the place of women in society**.

As regards its relationship to the outside world, it can be said that one of the major problems facing Islam is that of conducting its relationships with non-Moslems. This applies in societies where the majority of people are Moslems, and societies where they are a minority. It is true that "Tradition" envisaged the management of this relationship in Moslem society. But that is not the reality of today. It is now necessary to find arrangements whereby the "other" can be recognised and accepted in his otherness. Development in this matter is not always easy, inasmuch as people's mentality is often profoundly influenced by the traditional vision of the "Moslem city" where all private and social life is marked with the seal of religion. It is difficult to pass from a life "among ourselves" in a homogenous community to a life "with others" where every person and every group can express their autonomy and liberty, even in the religious sphere. This is true both within the Moslem community and in its relations with other religions and other nations.

II. RELATIONS BETWEEN CHRISTIANS AND MOSLEMS

What has been said above leads us to the question of relations between Christians and Moslems. These vary depending on whether a society is mainly Moslem, or Moslems are living in a society considered, rightly or wrongly, to have a Christian culture. They also vary according to the region of the world, the impact of the currents already mentioned, and specific problems relating to each country. We should also note that it is not always strictly religious matters that are the main causes of tensions between Christians and Moslems, or aggravate them. Very often these tensions are to be explained in terms of power politics, or economics, or ethnicity. The problem is to decide which!

The whole area of Islamo-Christian relations cannot be covered in a few lines. What is offered is an outline of the standpoint adopted by the Catholic Church and the fields of interest in which contacts are worked out.

1. The meeting of religions and the Church's Mission

Since Vatican II the teaching and involvement of the Church in the field of "inter religious dialogue" has considerably influenced the relations between believers in different religious traditions. Despite all difficulties, misunderstandings and even obstacles, the Church regards this as a firm and irreversible commitment, because it forms an essential part of her mission to bring the Good News to every person and to all societies. In his encyclical on the missionary imperative, Pope John Paul II wrote:

"The Church is the sacrament of salvation for all mankind, and her activity is not limited only to those who accept her message." (Redemptoris Missio, n.20). Disinterested contacts with other believers is not therefore a substitute for evangelisation, it is not the totality or the final word, but it is one of the elements which the Holy Spirit will bring to fruition at the time and in the way He intends. It is "a path towards the Kingdom, and will certainly bear fruit, even if the times and the seasons are only known to the Father." (Redemptoris Missio, n.57).

The object of inter religious dialogue is a coming together of believers "to walk side by side to seek out the Truth, and to collaborate in activities of common interest." This is not simply an exercise in good relations. It is "a journey of mutual discovery, a common pilgrimage." As John Paul II again says, *"there must be no abandonment of principles nor false irenicism, but instead a witness given and received for mutual advancement on the road of religious enquiry and experience and at the same time for the elimination of prejudice, intolerance and misunderstandings. Dialogue leads to inner purification and conversion which, if pursued with docility to the Holy Spirit, will be spiritually fruitful. "* (Redemptoris Missio, n.56)

John Paul II has considerably developed this teaching in several documents, *Redemptoris Missio* in 1990, and also the texts of the Pontifical Council for Inter religious Dialogue: *Dialogue and Mission* (1984) and *Dialogue and Proclamation* (1991). The Pope has also demonstrated his personal commitment by meeting believers from other religions both at the Vatican and on his apostolic journeys. His discourses to these believers are real models of catechesis, with the language well chosen to strengthen his hearers' respect for the Christian faith. The discourse to young Moslems at Casablanca (Morocco) in 1985 is particularly significant. So, it should be recalled again, are the great inter religious meetings inaugurated by John Paul II at Assisi in 1986 to pray for peace. Other such meetings followed, notably that for peace in Bosnia in 1994.

Since 1964 the Pontifical Council for Inter Religious Dialogue has been established at the Vatican. Many responsible Moslems have been received by the Council, and it has made visits to different Moslem countries. Several conferences have been organised in recent years, on the initiative of one side or the other, on subjects concerning possible common social commitments (for example, in Libya, Spain, Sri Lanka, Jordan and Lebanon.) World-wide, more and more local churches have established commissions for relations with Moslems, in order to encourage coming together and better mutual understanding.

2. Different forms of contact between Christians and Moslems

Dialogue between Christians and Moslems has fortunately not been confined to meetings between prominent people or more or less formal conferences. These are important, but what is lived out every day at the level of a locality, a village or a family has more immediate significance in the real experience of believers.

Central importance should be attached to the daily encounters of ordinary life, which can be called the **dialogue of life**. This does not mean simply living together side by side, as happens too often. The dialogue of life means setting out to acquire a

real knowledge of each other, it means an attitude of openness which permits the sharing of "the things of life." That can lead to deep friendship and reciprocal communion. This kind of dialogue is within everybody's reach, and is essentially just the sharing of charity. Is that not the heart of the Gospel? Special mention should be made of the exceptional witness given by families some of whose members are Christian and some Moslem, or even Islamo-Christian couples. Their situations are often difficult to live out well, especially in the case of the couples. But they are sometimes the places where dialogue of the first order is to be found.

At a wider level, when the charity lived at the personal level becomes more organised, there is what can be called **the dialogue of works**. Many Christian organisations collaborate with Moslem organisations, notably in the field of charitable action. An example is the co-operation in Eastern countries between organisations like the Red Cross and the Red Crescent. Within the Vincentian family, lay organisations like the society of St. Vincent de Paul establish similar links. Elsewhere, Moslems join Christian organisations in their private capacity. Collaboration like this is a way of showing acceptance of each other and bringing to fruition the values of the Kingdom of God.

Certainly more difficult is **the dialogue of theological exchange**. No religion can consider the content of its teaching as negotiable. Even so, in several parts of the world Christians and Moslems come together to discuss questions of social order or simply to acquire better knowledge of their different doctrinal positions, so as to appreciate each other better. Clearly real dialogue, authentic coming together, can only be based on **truth**. It takes a constant effort to speak truth and to live truth. As an example of a group trying to do this may be mentioned GRIC, *Groupe de Recherche Islamo-Chrétien*, which brings together Christians and Moslems from several Mediterranean and sub-Saharan African countries. It has already brought out some joint documents, including one called "The Scriptures That Question Us," which is based on common work regarding Revelation.

Finally, a fourth type of dialogue is that of **religious experience**. This is the dialogue of spiritual encouragement, the sharing of hereditary riches. It happens at different levels, from simple exchange between believers on spiritual subjects, to the point where they find themselves before God in prayer in the manner begun by Pope John Paul II at Assisi in 1986 with the representatives of the great world religions. This kind of dialogue can only begin and develop to the extent that people are firmly rooted in their faith and at the same time open to the work God is doing in them.

Can it be said that relations between Christians and Moslems have developed positively in recent years? On the whole, yes. A considerable effort has been made. Granted that here and there the results are scarcely encouraging and that conflicts are still going on, and also granted that problems within the Moslem community are obstructing progress, it can be said that almost everywhere in the world Christians and Moslems are genuinely meeting each other. There has been progress regarding mutual understanding and active co-operation. Gospel values have been shared to the benefit of all. True, those involved in these joint activities are not always understood,

sometimes even within their own communities. But it is certain that there are almost everywhere in the world people of good will who are convinced that the future for humanity is dependent in part on the relationships between believers of different religious traditions, and that commitment to progress in this matter is urgent. It is a challenge that seriously affects what is to become of us.

The expression "inter religious dialogue" often causes fear, or produces confusion, or seems utopian. Let us speak more simply then of "a coming together of believers" and let us not underestimate its possibilities. The difficulties will not be insurmountable so long as people agree that the objective of this coming together, instead of being any kind of proselytism, is the search for a deeper conversion of all to the God who leads every human person and community towards the Kingdom of His Christ. There is a long, a very long road to travel together as we place ourselves under the loving gaze of the Only God. For us Vincentians, "proclaiming the Good News to the poor" involves travelling this road.

Algiers, February 1995.

(Translation: Myles Rearden, c.m.)

1 What I say is based on experience mainly confined to Islam on both sides of the Mediterranean and in sub-Saharan Africa. But the general lines given can be found in other regions also.