Conflict Between People of Different Religions Is Not Religious Conflict

Hermen Shastri

Noting the fact that religious conflicts, most especially between the West (perceived as Christian) and Muslims, have in the last decade of so, assumed greater significance for a variety of reasons, it needs to be unequivocally emphasised that religious conflict does not equal conflict between religions.

Religious doctrines and practices represented by the world's living faiths, however different they may be, seldom give rise to actual conflict. If this was not so, there would exist endless religious wars around the world and one would not find the peaceful intermingling of people of various faiths and no faiths on a daily basis in the public square.

For every fundamentalist and fanatical outburst of religious expression promoting violent conflict, there is always an equally sizeable force within that religious tradition that appeals to the non-violent nature of its cardinal tenets of faith.

The fact that religious conflicts have occurred more frequently in recent decades, is largely due to the resurgence that is taking place within various religions as they come to terms with the process of globalisation, with all its implications for politics and cultural identities. At the same time, societies that were once largely mono-religious are now becoming multi-religious. The traditional cultural identity and affinities of nation-states have to grapple with new challenges and problems associated with pluralism.

It is suggested increasingly that in the post-Cold War world, symbols and flags of religions and cultural identities count tremendously. In an era of cultural struggle, wars and violent confrontations, politics are determined increasingly by cultural affinities instead of ideological options. When people want to safeguard cultural identity, they

invent enmity and enemies become essential in their cause of aggression. The most potentially dangerous enmity occurs across the fault line between world religions.

As far as Christian and Muslim relations are concerned, the events of 11 September 2001 marked a major turning point. The events crystallised the build-up of suspicion, hostility and fear that was already in the making with the end of the Cold War era. Religion became one of the driving determinants of war and violence. The western media played up perceptions of an Islamic threat and at the same time the Muslim world saw itself as being threatened by Western powers.

Seen in this context, *A Common Word* (ACW), signed by 138 Muslim scholars and political leaders (13 October 2007), can be understood as a timely and significant faith declaration that the resolution of hostilities between Muslims and Christians cannot be left to politics. Theologians from both sides, drawing inspiration from the cardinal aspects of their faith, may be able to find a common theological basis to work together for justice and peace.

The signatories make a passionate appeal for drawing closer together on the basis of the twin pillars of faith common to both religious traditions; the belief in God's oneness and the equally important love of the neighbour. ACW states: "Let this common ground be the basis of all future dialogue between us."

On the theological basis of the vertical and horizontal aspect of submission, devotion and piety, and a mutually reinforced self-giving love ethic, it is hoped that a path may be found to approach the difficult but pressing questions of Muslim-Christian dialogue in our day. What obligations do we have as we relate with each other, the state and society as a whole; as we bring the dual commandment to bear on the intrinsic human values we share when related to freedom, justice, peace, equality and human dignity?

The response from the major streams of world Christianity has been encouraging. The Vatican, the Archbishop of Canterbury, the Orthodox and the World Council of Churches have officially responded positively and have taken concrete steps to promote and foster dialogue between theologians from both sides.

The Experience of Religious Coexistence

The various case studies emanating from the African, South and South-East Asian contexts that have been circulated have highlighted various insightful concerns that characterise the current discourses of religious peaceful coexistence and the challenges it poses for both religious communities.

Instead of going into details on every point made in the papers, I wish to highlight a few, which I feel resonate in the context from which I come.

- Embedded in the whole discourse of religious diversity is the politics of identity. With the advent of nation-states and the introduction of competitive party politics, party leaders have used every conceivable means to manipulate mass sentiments and mobilise support to maximise their popularity.
  By playing to the fears of the majority, the nation-state clothes itself in the cultural or religious garb of the majority community. The culture or religion of the majority therefore becomes the accepted identity of the nation and promotes this through policies that alienate the minority religious communities.
  In almost every case study, the end result is that religious leaders get co-opted by the political powers to condone a "divide and rule" policy; a political culture with antecedents during the colonial era. Almost all countries in Asia, a region noted in history for its essentially plural and tolerant societies, have succumbed to the powerful pull of ethnicity and religious affinities by leaders that develop authoritarian tendencies in order to remain in power.

- The interplay of economic forces, which easily disadvantage the minority over the majority, results in religious tensions that often overflow into riots and in extreme cases into wars of insurgency.

- Religious minorities, who are subject to discrimination and second class status as citizens, invariably develop certain cultural and religious attitudes, which are antithetical to the majority. They resent the religion of the majority and begin to articulate religious sentiments of the "demonization" of their perceived oppressors.

- The tendency is for some segments of a religious community to develop an exclusive view of their particular religion. Truth, justice, freedom and morality are perceived as values, which they hold to a greater degree than others. The unity that they seek is invariably the unity of their own kind. The rituals and symbols that distinguish their particular religious tradition become rallying points of opposing the existence of the other.

Democracy and Constitutional Safeguards

All the papers explore the implications of the separation of religion and politics for religious diversity and how the separation of the public and private domains may enhance the functioning of a viable democracy. In this regard, the call is for the protection of human rights within the framework of a constitution that treats all citizens equally.

Although many of the countries cited in the studies do have constitutional provisions to safeguard the rights of minorities, the state must be seen to support these safeguards by values and principles that uphold the equality of all religions, a free media, an impartial police force and a judicial system that provides recourse to fairness and justice. These essential safeguards of a democratic system become meaningless if the majority community uses its power and hegemony to impose its political and religious will on minorities.

Striving Together in Dialogue

The World Council of Churches has had a long history of pursuing Muslim-Christian dialogue and has discussed many thorny issues of religion, law and society, human rights, religious freedom, community rights, mission and *da'wa* and local communal tensions. At a Muslim-Christian Conference in Amersfoort, the Netherlands (2000), a document was produced carrying the title: *Striving together in dialogue*.

Interestingly it came to the same conclusions as those advocated by ACW. It emphasised that in a world where Christians and Muslims live as neighbours and co-citizens, dialogue should be understood

…as a way of living out our faith commitment in relation to each other, sharing as partners common concerns and aspirations and striving together in response to the problems and challenges of our time.

In dialogue, the deepest meaning of what our scriptures say to us is opened up and speaks anew. Christians are motivated by the teaching that God wills love of neighbour inseparably from the love of God, which is shown in human action through love of other… Christians also recall that they are not to bear false witness against their neighbour (Ex 20:16). In dialogue, they come to know their neighbours of other religions in ways that enable them to keep this commandment, "What does the Lord require of you," the prophet Micah asks, "but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?" (Micah 6:8)

As Muslims enter dialogue, they recognize the Qur'anic texts concerning diversity and God's purpose which say: "O people, we created you from a single (pair) of male and female, and made you into nations and tribes, that you may know each other" (Q. 49:13), and, "We sent you solely as a mercy for all creatures" (Q. 21:07). Plurality is inscribed in God's design: "To each among you have we prescribed a law and open way. If God has so willed, He would have made you a single people but (His plan) is to test you in what He has given you; so excel each other in good deeds; it is He that will show you the truth of the matters in which you dispute (Q. 5:48). Muslims are called to seek justice through their dialogue activities.

Therefore dialogue needs to be a process of mutual empowerment in public concerns and their common pursuit of justice, peace and constructive action on behalf of the common good of all people. In this process, Muslims and Christians will draw on their spiritual resources. Pope John Paul II in 2002, in his calling for a meeting of religious leaders for a day of prayer for peace in Assisi, came up with the "Assisi Decalogue" which reinforced many of the points made above.

Conclusion

ACW is to be welcomed as an indispensable affirmation on the part of Muslims to dialogue with Christians with recognition of and respect for differences. It seeks to discover and appreciate approaches stemming from a common theological basis.

The dialogue can only be viable if we take the following into consideration to guide our dialogue:

- It is crucial to de-globalise Christian-Muslim tensions. We will have to counteract cases where conflicts in one place with local goals and character are perceived as having a wider relevance and are instrumental in a conflict in another place that has different goals and character.

- Solutions to outstanding problems are to be found, first and foremost, in addressing the local causes of conflicts. Leaders from both faith communities must refuse to be drawn into each other's conflicts on the basis of an uncritical response to the call for solidarity from adherents of one's own faith.

- Christians and Muslims should recognise that Christianity and Islam are not two monolithic blocks confronting each other. In dialogue, they understand that justice is a common value founded in their faith and they are called by their religious persuasion to side with those who are oppressed, irrespective of religious identity, not with co-religionists because of common religious identity.

- Appreciation of both diversity and commonalities can be achieved in dialogue as an educational process that enables each community to come to know each other better.

- Both religions, in upholding the dual commandment, have an indispensable contribution to make in affirming human dignity and that the principles of human rights and religious freedom are indivisible.

It is my ardent wish that ACW will stimulate creative encounters all over the world and bring the two largest faith communities in the world closer to each other.