

Christian Muslim Forum
Wednesday 24 June 2009

Ethical Witness – a Christian Response

It seems that the word “Evangelical” is losing its original and more honourable meaning. Such words are losing their currency due to political conditions we find ourselves in, as well as the uncomprehending reaction of the media to this. However, for the purposes of this conversation I will stick with this word and hopefully make my meaning clear.

However, I count it an honour to be invited to contribute to the launch of such a significant document. It is long overdue among the confessional faith communities which have “intentional witness” in their core DNA.

The Muslims I find most stimulating to talk with are Muslims who genuinely want the best for me (i.e. that I become as they are), but in the full knowledge that I too would love them to become as I am. With that issue out of the way more meaningful relationship becomes possible.

We have to recognise that Muslims and Christians are changing allegiance today more than ever before. Indeed in Britain we find ourselves in a social environment where there is increasing concern for the human right to enjoy the freedom of religious choice and expression without either *inducement* to convert or the enforced *prevention* from conversion. In this regard, it seems inevitable that the Apostasy Law and other such issues will come under increasing scrutiny.

I am aware of growing numbers of Muslims who are changing allegiance to Jesus Christ. For example recently in Egypt (where I used to live), a devoutly dressed and bearded Muslim taxi driver invited a nervous Coptic priest to a top floor flat where over 90 men, of the same ilk as the taxi-driver, were meeting to worship as followers of Jesus Christ. They merely wanted to compare notes with a member of the Christian community.

Egypt is a signatory of the International Bill on Human Rights, yet a decision was made last week in an Egyptian court, which ruled that “conversion poses the threat of public order” and therefore must remain illegal for Muslims to convert out of Islam.

We believe in a world where people from Muslim backgrounds can follow Christ in ways that are culturally appropriate to them and with minimal dislocation of cultural and community identity. These people should be free to hear from the teaching of Christ himself (*salamu alaina*), what they should or should not take with them on this journey.

We in Interserve have suffered accusations from the more scurrilous elements in the media which have caricatured the whole issue of inter-faith “conversion” and “converts”. We are all familiar with the stereo-type of covert deception, hidden agendas, subterfuge, manipulation or outright coercion of the vulnerable. Sometimes it seems that to attempt to be a modern Good Samaritan can prompt a cynical response in a secular leaning society.

I and my colleagues in Interserve warm to the fact that the Christian/Muslim Forum has identified some of the elements, which we too perceive to contribute best to appropriate forms of witness which are far from the ‘cash for conversion’ I observed in Egypt.

After a commitment to ‘wholistic’ Christian witness over the past 157 years in South Asia, the Arab world and the UK, Interserve can affirm that whole life witness provides the best context for words and actions to have meaning.

For us, the witness that Christ calls us to is not just about the propagating of a verbal proposition (i.e. what the message says), it should also be about our interaction with others, which must also be based on what the content and the 'spirit' of what the Gospel message actually says.

This means trusting the Spirit of God and building genuine relationship – for its own sake - with no strings attached. We cannot say “I am your friend so that you will convert” but “I want you to convert because you are my friend; but even if you don't, I will still be your friend”.

By our behaviour we earn the right to speak. Witness with integrity is surely as much about how we say what we say and how we do what we do.

I particularly like the transparency being espoused here. I can honestly say that most, if not all of our workers are known to be, and trusted, as Christians by the Muslim community.

The Ethical Witness statement helps distance us all from that, pointing to an alternative way where the invitation is not to convert to “Christianity” but to Christ, not to join the church but to gain access to the Kingdom of God, not to become a “Christian” but to discover the blessings offered by Jesus Christ. The way is prepared for an invitation to become an “eastern follower” of Christ.

I am therefore pleased to add support to the Ethical Witness statement before us. Witness with integrity causes us to (in the words of Chawkat Moucarry) ...

‘accept the other, not by ignoring the distance between us, but by measuring that distance accurately and by recognizing that whoever wants to cross over, has the right and the freedom to do so. Only love can create the necessary conditions for the truth to emerge’.

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