

SET IN CONCRETE: MUSLIM AND CHRISTIAN ENCOUNTERS OVER WORDS

Sayyed Nadeem Kazmi and Shaykh Muhammad Amin-Evans

Sayyed Nadeem Kazmi is the founder and director of The Britslam Partnership, an innovative non-profit consultancy catalyzing change through multi-level engagement processes. Its projects include a major community cohesion initiative, launched in September 2007 as MCDN (Muslim Communities Development Network). He has been an adviser to Prince Hasan bin Talal of Jordan, The Elijah Academy Board of World Religious Leaders, American Islamic Congress, Rights and Humanity, and Justitia et Pax.

Muhammad Amin-Evans is the Consulting Editor of Shia Affairs and holds the degrees of Sultan al-Fadhl wal-Islamiyya wal-Arabiyya, an MA in Islamic Studies from the Al-Mahdi Institute. He has taught Fiqh, Methodology and the Comparative Study of Religions. He currently serves on the executive committee of the West Midlands Faiths Forum, is a member of the World Congress of Faiths, Birmingham Council of Faiths, gives moral support to the International Association for Religious Freedom and was formerly a trustee of the Roger Hooker Trust.

This paper began as a reflection presented by S. N. Kazmi upon faith-based motivation in strengthening our capacities as faith-based organizations and individuals, drawing some inspiration from the words he often heard from H.R.H. Prince Hasan of Jordan, 'I consider myself to be a non-governmental organism before I am a non-governmental organization.' Mr. Kazmi asked how do we resist being reduced by state agencies, and indeed the State, to a common mixture when we think we function as elements? This current paper looks broadly at the achievements of faith-based organizations while drawing attention to anomalies within inter-faith encounters that it is suggested may have impact upon the greater effectiveness and consolidation of the role that faith-based organizations have successfully assumed.

Our objections to being reduced by state agencies may not be wholly their problem. We, as faith or religion-based entities have to consider what we contribute to the process of reduction. The attitude of governmental agencies may be a response to our words and actions, and it may be, we are criticising the splinter in their eyes when it is essentially a reflection of the plank in ours. In representing ourselves with united voice we might give the impression of being incorporated but the unity and co-operation between faith-based organizations cannot be a conceptually contractual relationship which binds its parties into an inseparable whole. Organizations which have as a fundamental tenet the right to act according to their perception of morality cannot limit themselves with imprecise and open ended agreements. For instance, a simple statement of a collective belief in marriage has different meanings to Christians, Muslims and (some¹) Hindus which would allow them to declare *ex turpi causa non oritur actio*.² Yet, faith-organizations can support their own perceived

¹ http://www.thaindian.com/newsportal/uncategorized/man-marries-two-sisters-and-the-three-are-happy_10098644.html

² No action can be based upon a disreputable cause.

rights and each others' rights within a voluntary, inclusive moral covenant with many of the features described by Professor Gorsky elsewhere in this series.³ For Muslims as well as in Islamic terminology this might be considered under the heading of *mithāq*,⁴ a promise made by a believer in the knowledge that its fulfilment is a religious duty.⁵

It is right, moral and necessary that faith communities strive to jointly address the issue of how we talk to Government. It is also right and beneficial that faith communities make efforts to speak with a shared voice when responding to challenges that are common to all of us. In this exercise an inclusive net has to be cast as far and wide as possible or at least as wide as the remit claimed by government and governmental agencies. The need and willingness to speak with a united and inclusive voice may invite a reductionist view of faith communities but only if those communities allow the characteristics of their own beliefs to be side lined. Language is a key consideration in negotiating one's position as a non-state actor with state actors and in defining the nature of the non-state negotiator. The case of the social and political assertiveness of Muslim communities, particularly post-Rushdie, cannot be denied and can positively and constructively inform the inter-faith agenda. Events that like the Sikh protest at the staging of the play 'Behzti',⁶ while raising questions to the limits of legitimate expression of religious feelings, offer the opportunity to assess the effectiveness of inter-religious dialogue when it is placed under an external pressure.

The late Canon Roger Hooker is remembered with great fondness as the inter-faith advisor to the Anglican Bishop of Birmingham, who regularly visited Amin-Evans at the Al-Mahdi Institute in Birmingham to drink tea and discuss faith in the city. While on one of his many visits, and drinking his second mug of tea he said without preamble, 'You know, Amin, I love tea but what I really love is a chap who believes his faith is right and is ready to fight tooth and nail for his corner.' Roger had summed up his own dilemma and his vision of inter-faith dialogue. He was committed to the Anglican Church, an evangelical and former missionary to India. Yet, he was equally committed to understanding the realities perceived by followers of other faiths and ensuring they had the opportunity and means to express their belief. It may be that he was from a time when playing cricket and fighting fair had more meaning but everyone who met Roger knew that his discourse was not just words. Differences were real things to him that needed to be dealt with and not simply avoided or ignored.

Returning the question of reductionism, how do faith communities resist being reduced to some common convenient element, we have to get our own house in order first and that involves a reassessment of where we are in terms of our inter-faith dialogue. We are quite hopeful because inter-faith dialogue is at a very sophisticated level of community interaction and community interconnectedness. We now know more about one another than we have ever done before because we are communities and generations that have grown – and are growing up with knowledge and

³ Gorsky, J., 'Radical Covenant: Jews, Christians and the Politics of Neo-Liberalism', *Words in Action: Speaking in Our Own Words*. The Institute Series 10, 2008.

⁴ Q. 23:8 and 23:20.

⁵ Biazar, A. al-K. (1356 SH) *The Covenant in The Qur'an*, Tehran, Office for Diffusion of Islamic Culture, pp. 10-11 and 65-66.

⁶ http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/england/west_midlands/4107437.stm

experience and understanding of the 'other'. But there are internal challenges, the clashes within civilizations (to borrow Huntington's clash of civilizations model), that need to be addressed by communities of faith themselves.

'Words in Action' is an intriguing title for all students of religions but especially for those students who are Muslim or of other faith identities that consider words to have a spiritual value in their physical forms. We are all aware that for many faiths the touching of particular religious texts is forbidden or only permitted if the person touching the text has acquired a requisite state of purity. However, the effect of these restrictions upon practical issues for inter-faith dialogue seem to have been assigned to the file marked 'tolerance' rather than being explored as phenomena important to developing mutual understanding.

The following anecdotes are intended as examples of types of anomalies that occur within the context of the encounter of faith-cultures. We have described them as anecdotes since they were not recorded according to any particular methodology and are simply a selection of the authors' observations in relation to the practical use of words.

Anecdote one

When one of the authors entered Coventry Cathedral for the first time with a Muslim friend they faced the problem of crossing a floor inset with biblical verses. There followed a spectacle that resembled the combination of a challenge from a dungeon and dragons movie and a beginners' course of Caribbean dancing as they attempted to walk through the letters rather than upon them. The author paused with one foot in the air while considering whether the space in the letter 'O' is just a space or part of the letter and his friend said, 'It's so easy for them!' People who simply walked past with ease cast disapproving glances at what must have appeared to them to be a most disrespectful game. Yet the two Muslims were driven to act by serious emotional and theological obstacles created not by what the words said but who might have said them. A Muslim scholar, to whom the story was told pulled a horrified face at the description of Holy text set in a floor, laughed at a re-enactment of the dance routine and asked whether the text in question was revealed text or an addition to the original. However, it was agreed that in terms of respect, rather than if a sin might be committed, the precaution is to treat all text in Holy books as revealed. The Qur'an is explicit concerning what a believer must think about revealed texts, 'And who believe in the Revelation sent to thee, and sent before thy time, and (in their hearts) have the assurance of the Hereafter' (Q. 2;4). Therefore the way Muslims approach and handle primary religious texts is an act of worship informed by the customary treatment and protection of the Qur'an.

The emotional responses to threats to a copy of the Qur'an are well known and publicised. In fact, the response even to accidental damage can reveal a dark side to words in action. Imagine then the feelings of a Muslim telling a Christian clergyman at an inter-faith gathering about the consequences of entering Coventry Cathedral and receiving the reply, 'We have to get over these little things.' Which is the 'little' thing, the Bible or Muslim sensibilities? What is the integrity of dialogue if it ignores the emotional knowledge of religion, awareness of which is fundamental to the empathic experience of other faiths?

Crucial to this discussion is the observation that what is said about our own confession may be treated as words not worthy of action. Of course, in expecting action there was no thought that the cathedral floor might be excavated or have a bridge constructed over it. The action desired was recognition of difference and not the implicit response that 'if it's not a problem for us then it's no problem for you'. However, it might be thought that this is an isolated incident but in the day to day function of inter-faith encounter it is often repeated.

Anecdote two

During a seminar for evangelical Christians Farid Essack studiously moved a pile of books to one end of a table before perching at the other end. He asked the participants if they had ever considered how offensive it was for Muslims to see them sitting on books, placing Bibles on the floor or even taking books into a toilet. One young man caused some merriment when he stood and picked up the Bible he had been sitting on but Farid emphasised his point that if the written word is perceived to be disrespected then the spoken word is likely to be less respected.

Is this just the product of Muslim sensitivity or is there an issue of substance that affects the relationship between religions? It may be suggested that what is observed is not carelessness towards the sensitivities of other faiths or habit but an expression of what Smart described as an asymmetry in the study of religions.⁷ Many emotive issues do not hold prominent positions in the categories of theological thought and this is a case where the normative behaviour of the majority partner is designated as 'right' unless it is directly questioned.

Anecdote three and three A

The language used for the study of religions and derivatively for discussions of inter-faith issues is the product of largely Christian academic writing. In other contexts the terminology can be problematic. When reading an unpublished paper, written by a Muslim academic, a Muslim reader understood the writer to think that the Shi'a are Christians because of the phrase, 'The Shi'ite church and clergy.' In that case the problem was easily rectified but, consider the conversation between a vicar and a Muslim alim (scholar) on the topic of God's Mercy and their realisation that they had both assumed that they both understood the term with identical meaning but actually held two extremely different concepts of its application.

Anecdote four

A few days after a party of Christian students from the former East Germany had visited a Mosque in the UK, one of the visitors contacted their Muslim host to ask 'Is it true that the word love does not appear in the Qur'an?' While inside the Mosque they had been told that the absence of the word love was proof that Muslims worship a different God by the inter-faith advisor to one of the major Christian denominations who also represented Churches Together as an executive member of an important inter-faith committee. It is the Arabic word '*Ishq* that does not appear in the Qur'an but *ḥubb* and *wud* appear frequently and all three words mean love.

⁷ Smart, N., *Concept and Empathy*. New York: New York University Press, 1986, pp. 207-219.

A complaint to CT met with prevarication. A complaint to his Church met more prevarication and the objection that to suggest he had been less than truthful was being ungenerous. However, while one does not expect an open admission of error from a Church, Christian or Muslim, it was the reaction of the inter-faith organization that was most disappointing. They chose to describe the issue as a ‘personal problem between two of their members’ and offered mediation. The offer was declined.

The joint apocrypha and beyond

Inter-faith encounters replete with genuine misunderstandings are further hampered by the activities of overly enthusiastic proselytes. ‘Muslim’ groups practicing daw’ah, calling ‘unbelievers’ to Islam promote absurd and unlikely meanings for Biblical verses. ‘Christian’ writers pour forth an equally absurd and equally literal barrage of pamphlets and paperbacks proclaiming ‘What the Quran Really Says!’ While it has a provenance stretching back in time to the earliest polemical encounters of Islam with Christianity it is essentially a deplorable hindrance to the discussion and understanding of valid differences between religions. Worse still the champions of our faiths educated by such literature flood websites and email inboxes with questions concerning the need of the ‘Christian God to sleep’ or the Muslim belief that ‘the Sun sets in a muddy puddle’.⁸ Subjected to the comedic mind of Radio Four’s Dennis Norden’s (feigned) belief in literalism was very amusing but jokes wear thin with repetition.

While we can rely upon broadcasting organizations to occasionally discipline their comedians, in the world of inter-faith encounter there is often little attempt to address or regulate what happens other than a reliance upon self-discipline. We sit on fences until the problem seems to disappear. Muslims and Christians, for example, have long been affected by terrorism in a number of different ways – as victims, as perpetrators, as bystanders. Surely one of the first steps towards greater security for all is to ensure that we act against falsehood but it seems to have a low place on the common agenda. In Islam we know that these ideologues are far removed from not only the mainstream but perhaps even the traditionalist views of Muslims (not to mention the views of Muslim secularists, Muslim democrats, and all those Muslims who simply hate any type of definition or pigeonholing). Take former President of the Islamic Republic of Iran, Sayyed Muhammad Khatami, for instance, perhaps a traditionalist (certainly one open to reformist ideas) who warned of the ‘parochial and regressive visions’ of ‘dogmatic believers’ who are leaving ‘a clear void in religious intellectualism’. So the clash in Islam is between the forces of pluralism and the forces of extremism, not necessarily traditionalists but often individuals with extreme views and tendencies built almost exclusively around an interpretation of religious scripture that is so puritanical as to be unrecognizable to most ‘ordinary’ believers. This is also the clash between the forces of separatism and those of cohesion and is a dichotomy that could have far-reaching repercussions in our own negotiations with one another as people of faith.

The business of modern inter-faith encounter appears to resolve questions of difference and antagonism between faiths. However, is this resolution apparent or

⁸ Q. 18:86

real? Is it due to action or inaction or a lack of awareness? The real resolution of religious misunderstandings, where it exists, we believe needs no other proof than the genuine friendships that develop between members of different faiths in assemblies such as the one to which we present this paper. The significant and positive effect of inter-faith encounter cannot be denied and this paper is not intended to suggest otherwise. Rather it has drawn attention to anomalies in the implementation of inter-faith encounter methodology. These are the observable and observed awkward moments that cause pauses in the otherwise smooth and constructive process of dialogue. Moments when, to borrow from John Hick,⁹ we apply epicyclic thought to bridge gaps when perhaps we should be praying for a Kepler to appear.

It is the issues introduced above that remain prominent among those unresolved or unexplored that are of concern to realising the potential that inter-faith dialogue offers. Wilfred Cantwell Smith wrote in ‘Conflicting Truth Claims: A Rejoinder’:

[W]hen one of our number (from India) affirmed the transmigration of souls and another (from Europe) denied it, their statements surely conflicted, or at least appeared to conflict, it was urged; so that I seemed both obtuse and obdurate when, in the face of this, I still demurred to the formula.¹⁰

However, thirty-five years later the solution to differences occurring due to inter-faith encounters is to elide. Thus, long before government agencies knock on our door we, the faith communities, have already opened it for reduction. It seems we are, sometimes, more concerned about the embarrassment of being different than dealing with the issue of difference.

So what we are looking for is even greater inclusiveness in our approach to faith communities because, when it comes to talking to government, faith communities are looked up to as beacons of effective dialogue and communication. However, greater inclusivity brings with it the challenge of greater diversity. A challenge which Government balked at and policy moved from multiculturalism to integration which many engaged in inter-faith and inter-cultural encounters see as a regressive step. However, it is one of a number of areas including community cohesion and foreign policy that faith communities can effect change through dialogue with government agencies.

In relation to foreign policy in particular both US and UK political culture may be led by what Francis Fukuyama has called ‘a narrow and cynical realism’. However, what may be needed is a return to a strong idealism but one that is rooted in morality, what Muslims might refer to as ‘*nahī anil munkar wa ‘amr bil ma ‘rūf*’¹¹ (enjoining the right and forbidding the wrong). The consideration of morality here introduces, by definition, a reality in one’s approach towards action at all levels of faith encounter. The moral man, or woman, is the decisive man, or woman. In this way, as God-fearing subjects that live and breathe and exist in Western political and social environments, we may move away from accusations of trying to impose a

⁹ Hick, J., *God and the Universe of Faiths*. London, The Macmillan Press, 1973.

¹⁰ Smith, W. C., ‘Conflicting Truth Claims: A Rejoinder’, in *Truth and Dialogue*. Ed J. Hick, London: Sheldon Press, 1974, pp. 156-162.

¹¹ Q. 3:104.

peculiarly Western form of liberal democracy on the world whilst paradoxically supporting the very principles of liberal democracy through (1) active political participation, and (2) accentuating pluralism through promoting the moral imperative. Everything about government action thus becomes a question of morals, ethics and, dare it be said, spiritual progressiveness.