

Global Dialogue Among Religions

An Islamic Perspective

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Abstract: *The author raises questions about some aspects of the role of the theologian in a global world. He points out that the issues that theology faced in the past do not always directly connect with today's issues. In the past, a Muslim theologian was considered an expert in theology, law and Sufism. But many definitive categories from the past seem antiquated in today's complicated post-modern, globalizing world. We must now formulate our discourse in such a way as to be meaningful within our respective communities, but also within a larger pluralistic audience. Dialogue facilitates the process of distinguishing between the essential and the contingent. It can purify us of cultural ideology or imperialist religiosity. The Focolare offers a model for this wide-open dialogue, especially where tradition seems to conflict with innovation.*

Claritas: Journal of Dialogue and Culture, Vol. 7, No. 1/2
(November 2018) 46–48 © 2018

The title of this article is “Global Dialogue Among Religions: An Islamic Perspective.” As a theologian, I will discuss theology. For me, perplexity is a value in mystical theology. Theologians have the right to be perplexed and to share their perplexity and questions. So, I will present more questions than answers.

My first question is, What does it mean to be a believer in the global world? What does it mean to do theology in a postmodern or even a post-global world? In the traditional world and until a few decades ago, it was easier to belong to a particular religion or a religious movement. In Tunisia, for instance, especially in the University of Ez-Zitouna, one of the oldest Islamic universities in the world, a Muslim scholar used to present himself as *ash'ari* in theology, *maliki* in law, *shariah* and *shadhili* in *tariqa* or Sufism. These were three dimensions of the same identity. Today, this is no longer the case. It has become more complicated.

What does it mean to be *ash'ari* or *mat uridi* or *shia* or *sunni* today? All these schools were born more than a thousand year ago. It is as if a Christian were to introduce themselves today as Chalcedonian or non-Chalcedonian, or as an Augustinian or a Thomist. What do such terms really mean today? This is a big challenge for theologians. The problem is even more profound. What is the meaning of religion itself today? What is its definition? What is its mission or, more precisely, its religious mission? The religious mission of religion seems to be lost among many other false and (simple or pseudo) missions. What does religious identity mean? Olivier Roy has already offered us some useful considerations on this last point.

In a multicultural and interreligious society, what is the place of religion in the public sphere? What kind of relationship exists between religion and politics, religion and democracy, religious

rules and state rules? What is the meaning today of religious institutions? Can religious institutions be organized in a democratic way? How can they be independent from the influence of the state or political institutions?

I am aware that there are people who prefer to continue in the same way, reading and teaching the same books as if nothing has happened or nothing has changed, but even this category of people cannot avoid change, at least at the level of language and translation. Sometimes, even often, we find a kind of false traditionalism, a kind of formalism that seems to be very traditional in its form but also modern in its content. This is a big challenge for religions because we have also a crisis of tradition, a crisis of religious institutions. We have interrupted tradition and reinvented traditions.

So how should theologians, be they Muslim or Christian, who take seriously the radical changes in society, politics, and economics, produce meaningful transcultural discourse not only in dialogue with their own community but also with the pluralistic society in which they live? Our audience is no longer composed of Muslims only; we now have an interreligious audience, a world audience. This is a new factor. How should we be aware of this diversity in mental categories and concepts? How can we distinguish between the essential and the temporal, the principles and expired historical forms, especially in interpretation, translation, and renewal?

For all of this, I think that dialogue is very helpful. Dialogue is not only a question of methodology. It is not only a tool. It is also a program of changing, of rethinking, of reform. We should not think about dialogue in too abstract a way. We need to ask ourselves seriously: what kind of dialogue do we need? First, it is quite obvious that we need interreligious and intercultural dialogue, and

then we need dialogue with the secular world and people without any religious foundation—so without barriers, without borders—dialogue with humanities, dialogue with sciences. We know that, for instance, Islamic metaphysics or theology was born in a world with a certain vision of cosmology. How should such cosmology be brought into dialogue with the new sciences, with new cosmologies, with new views of the world? All of this is a big challenge. We need dialogue between traditions and modernity, dialogue between Islamists and modernists, especially in the Arab world. In Tunisia, there is big gap and a very sharp conflict between the two parts of society. So, I think the Focolare Movement can present a model or a good example of this kind of dialogue, this integral dialogue or all-inclusive dialogue. Theological provincialism is highly risky and dangerous because it can easily conceal a kind of cultural ideology.

We consider our own culture as absolute, and I think it is an act of liberation to think with new eyes, with a new language, with new tools, and with other people to discover other ways of thinking and living religion. I think dialogue has this mission to liberate us from cultural ideology, from the impulse to absolutize things in our cultures that are in fact relative. So, we have this opposition and polarity between the Focolare example and other negative examples that we can call a kind of imperialism without empire, a kind of imperialist religiosity imposed with force without dialogue, without serious dialogue with other cultures. I think in history Islam could adapt itself to different cultures, slowly. The process of enculturation is rich and interesting, but instead we often have the imposition of a particular model of religiosity, a set of formal rules imposed on other cultures without serious dialogue with the other. So, perhaps to avoid this kind of risk and this

kind of imperialism without empire, we need to discover together our common values. In this way, we are not imposing values but building on accepted values discovered together in dialogue and through dialogue. This is important because to live together, we need a minimum of shared values, otherwise we cannot even communicate with each other. Especially for communication, we must find a common language and common values with which to answer each other, to dialogue and to build a new world of peace, justice, and fraternity.

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