

# Mission and dialogue in the context of Christian-Muslim relations

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The terms 'dialogue' and 'mission', and what they seem to denote, are perceived to be, if not in outright contradiction, then at least in tension with each other. Mission is associated with an absolute claim to the truth and with an exclusivist theological point of view that excludes others because they are different. It therefore appears rather aggressive, profoundly non-dialogical and, in fact, potentially threatening to peace. Dialogue, in contrast, is usually perceived as an essentially non-hierarchical discourse rooted in a fundamentally democratic attitude that emphasises the equality of all people as a matter of principle. Dialogue is also thought to include an attitude of mutuality, of give-and-take, and a willingness not only to give but also to learn. Religion and belief are no exception in this respect. Dialogue is seen not only as respecting the dignity and truth of others, but also as finally giving up the divisive claim to possession of the truth, thus demonstrating its freedom from fundamentalist tendencies.

In conclusion, a good many people nowadays are noticing, to their relief, that dialogue is at long last putting an end to the era of mission. Truth in the sphere of religion is seen as manifesting itself, if it at all, wherever people relinquish all absolute claims to the truth, where they respect and as far as possible accept other people's religious and cultural way of life and convictions, and thus can at the same time devote themselves impartially to building a just society and preserving peace. It is thought, however, that ultimately peace can only be achieved if religions give up missionary efforts on a religious and theological level and renounce their respective absolute claims to the truth.

## **The legacy of the history of Muslim-Christian interaction**

It is not possible here to give an overview of the development and the various facets of the understanding and practice of mission. Hugh

Goddard offers a good short survey in his book *A History of Christian-Muslim Relations*.<sup>112</sup> Particular note should be taken of his account of the relationship between mission and colonialism. Goddard quotes and agrees with the mission historian Stephen Neill: “Even if many of them [the missionaries] tended towards what we now call ‘cultural imperialism’, not all missionaries were imperialists.”<sup>113</sup> In 1961, shortly before the beginning of the Second Vatican Council, the Catholic mission historian Thomas Ohm summed up the legacy of Christian missionary thought and missionary practice towards Muslims briefly – and therefore of course in a simplified way – as follows: “[...] From the seventh to the twentieth century, most Catholics saw in Islam an enemy and an opponent, even a deadly enemy and a highly dangerous opponent, and they thought about battles and ‘crusades’ against the Muslims. Fear, dread and even hatred ruled their souls.”<sup>114</sup> Nowadays, he went on, people no longer believed in “overpowering”: “Christians and Muslims have been partners for a long time in the realms of economics, politics and culture [...] Islam and Christianity still have an enormous urge to develop. Muslims and Christians are still seeking to outstrip each other in the race to win over the heathens. We would still like to make Muslims into Christians, and Muslims are still trying to recruit us to their faith.”<sup>115</sup>

### **The epoch-making breakthrough of a new missiological way of thinking**

In the course of the past half century there has certainly been an epoch-making and lasting upheaval, validated as it were by the Second Vatican Council, in thinking about mission in general and, not least, in thinking about Muslim-Christian relations. In terms of Catholic-Muslim relations, this upheaval has been described as ‘a Copernican revolution’. In his comprehensive work *Machet zu Jüngern alle Völker. Theorie der Mission*, which was also published just before the Second Vatican Council began, Thomas Ohm devotes the whole of the first chapter to defining the term ‘mission’. He closes his detailed discussion

<sup>112</sup> See Goddard, H., *A History of Christian-Muslim Relations*, Edinburgh, 2000.

<sup>113</sup> Goddard, H., loc. cit., 135. Cf. also: Daniel, N., *Islam and the West: the Making of an Image*, Oxford, 1993, 23.

<sup>114</sup> Ohm, Th., *Machet zu Jüngern alle Völker. Theorie der Mission*. Freiburg, 1962, 24.

<sup>115</sup> Ibid. 28.

with the words St. Matthew puts into the mouth of the Risen Christ, which are familiar to large numbers of Christians as the 'Great Commission': "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go, therefore, make disciples of all nations; baptise them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teach them to observe all the commands I gave you. And look, I am with you always; yes, to the end of time." (Matthew 28:18-20<sup>116</sup>). "To be more precise," Ohm continues, "mission is for us, firstly, the sending out of Christian heralds of the faith to non-Christians; secondly, the activity corresponding to this sending out, i.e. 'the making of disciples (for Christ)', 'the making of Christians', the Christianising of non-Christian people and nations, initiated or carried out by God's heralds; thirdly, the result of this activity, becoming disciples; and fourthly, the non-Christian world."<sup>117</sup>

Let us compare with this the definition given by the German bishops in their 2004 text, *Allen Völkern Sein Heil. Die Mission der Weltkirche [His Salvation to all Nations. The Mission of the Universal Church]*, immediately next to the same quotation from St Matthew's Gospel: "Universal mission means transcending the boundaries that separate us from others and, while respecting their otherness, bearing witness to and proclaiming the Gospel so credibly that they feel invited to follow Jesus and to accept His Gospel."<sup>118</sup> The difference between Ohm's understanding of mission in 1961 and the German bishops' understanding in 2004 is evident. Ohm speaks, for instance, of "non-Christians", "sending out Christian heralds of the faith", "making disciples (for Christ)" and "Christianising non-Christian people", terms which are missing from the German bishops' work in 2004. They in turn speak of "others", "respect for their otherness", "bearing witness" "credibly" "to the Gospel", "preaching", and "feeling they are invited to follow Jesus and to accept His Gospel." The paradigm shift in the understanding of mission that has taken place in the past half century can be sensed from a comparison of these two texts.

<sup>116</sup> The New Jerusalem Bible, 1985.

<sup>117</sup> Ibid, 53.

<sup>118</sup> Sekretariat der Deutschen Bischofskonferenz (ed.), *Allen Völkern Sein Heil. Die Mission der Weltkirche*, Die deutschen Bischöfe, no.76, Bonn 2004, 37.

## Our theses

In light of the developments indicated above, and in conjunction with the official documents mentioned, I have formulated the following theses:

- Mission, understood as sending out to bear witness to the Good News (= the Gospel of Jesus Christ) of the coming of God amongst us, which is irreversible and culminates in the crucified and risen Jesus Christ, and calling for a return from godlessness and sin to a new communion with God, includes inter-religious and inter-cultural dialogue as one of its fundamental elements.
- Dialogue is an activity which has its own kind of “reasons, requirements and dignity”; it must never be turned into a strategy for producing conversions.<sup>119</sup> To be religious today means to be inter-religious in the sense that, in a world characterised by religious pluralism, a positive relationship with believers in other religions is a basic necessity. In the light of the statement in *Nostra Aetate* 3, “the Church also regards with esteem also the Moslems”, this applies in particular to the Church’s relations with Muslims.<sup>120</sup>
- Mission – and thus the entire missionary task of the Church, taken to mean a process of evangelisation – reaches its pinnacle and fulfilment in the public proclamation of Jesus Christ as the Son of God and in the liturgical celebration of His presence among humankind throughout the world.
- There is a necessary condition for the possibility of positive and fruitful relations between Islam and Christianity, both of which assert a claim to universality and each in its own way considers itself to be witness to the truth revealed by God; that condition is an effective recognition and integral practice of

<sup>119</sup> John Paul II; *Enzyklika Redemptoris missio Seiner Heiligkeit Papst Johannes II. Über die fortdauernde Gültigkeit des missionarischen Auftrages*, Verlautbarungen des Apostolischen Stuhls, no. 100, Bonn 1990, 57, no. 56.

<sup>120</sup> Das Zweite Vatikanische Konzil, *Die Erklärung über das Verhältnis der Kirche zu den nichtchristlichen Religionen ‘Nostra Aetate’*, in: Rahner, K./Vorglimler, H., (eds.) *Kleines Konzilskompendium. Sämtliche Texte des Zweiten Vatikanums mit Einführungen und ausführlichem Sachregister*, Freiburg im Breisgau 1982, 357, no. 3.

religious freedom as well as a genuine acceptance of a social system and system of government based on fundamental human rights and a correct understanding of the separation of state and religions.

- Muslims and Christians alike recognise God as the creator and provider of guidance to all mankind and both alike know they are personally responsible before God, who is the judge of all mankind. They acknowledge before God that they are commissioned by Him to safeguard and care for creation. Muslims and Christians know they are called in faith to support justice and the fulfilment of the common good with regard to health care, education and the eradication of poverty. Should not both communities, as witnesses to God and with His help, be striving on all levels to promote love, in justice and compassion, and so to serve peace? Is there not in that sense a common responsibility and task as well as a common 'mission' for Christians and Muslims?

### **The understanding of mission**

How can the mission of the Church be understood in a way that goes hand in hand with what we understand by dialogue and the honest openness that dialogue requires? The conviction of the Christian faith that the abundance of revelation is presented to the Church in Christ does not release it from the obligation to listen and learn. Christians, and the Church as a whole, must bear in mind that they/she do/does not possess a monopoly on truth; they/she should rather be prepared for the truth increasingly to take possession of them – and this also applies to the Church community. Even if the partner in dialogue has not yet heard anything about the revelation in which God communicated Himself through Jesus Christ, it is still possible, through the power of Christ's spirit which enlightens the hearts of all mankind with the rays of truth, that he/she is already profoundly seized by that truth which he/she is still seeking.<sup>121</sup> Christians and others do in fact strive together through dialogue towards the truth.<sup>122</sup>

<sup>121</sup> See Zweites Vatikanisches Konzil, loc. cit., 356-357, no. 2.

<sup>122</sup> See Sekretariat für die Nichtchristen, 'Dialog und Mission' in: *Lebendiges Zeugnis* 41 (1986) vol. 2, 7, no. 10; Päpstlicher Rat für den Interreligiösen Dialog / Kongregation für die

Evangelisation, in Vatican Council and post-Council thinking, denotes the ways in which the Church presents and proclaims God's love. Evangelisation is a single but complex reality which develops in various ways: in all forms of Christian life and witness: in proclamation, conversion, inculturation, the formation of local churches, in dialogue and the promotion of the justice that God wills. As far back as the early 1970s a few Asian bishops were clearly pointing out that the Church's evangelising mission includes as an integral component not only the fight for justice and liberation but also inter-religious and inter-cultural dialogue. John Paul II took up this aspect from the very beginning of his pontificate (1978). In his first encyclical *Redemptoris Hominis* (1979) he called for recognition of the active presence of God's spirit in believers of other religions and cited the theological foundation for the importance of dialogue in the mission of the Church.<sup>123</sup> His aim was certainly to show the inner connection between evangelisation and inter-religious dialogue. That occurred for the first time in the document mentioned above, published by the then Secretariat for Non-Christians, *The Attitude of the Church toward Followers of Other Religions*. This states with regard to the Church's mission: "The task is one but comes to be exercised in different ways according to the conditions in which mission unfolds."<sup>124</sup>

### The understanding of dialogue

Dialogue is a valid part of the Church's mission. It cannot and must not be reduced to an external, supplementary element of that mission, nor can or may it be regarded or treated merely as a useful means of proclaiming the Gospel. It is not simply an additional means to an end, but is actually an end in itself, because it is in itself good. In order to understand this, and to understand in which ways dialogue

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Evangelisierung der Völker, *Dialog und Verkündigung. Überlegungen und Orientierungen zum Interreligiösen Dialog und zur Verkündigung des Evangeliums Jesu Christi*, Verlautbarungen des Apostolischen Stuhls, no. 102, Bonn 1991, 25-26, no. 49-50, 41, no. 80.

<sup>123</sup> See John Paul II *Enzyklika Redemptoris Hominis Seiner Heiligkeit Papst Johannes Paul II. An die verehrten Mitbrüder im Bischofsamt, die Priester und Ordensleute, die Söhne und Töchter der Kirche und an alle Menschen guten Willens zum Beginn seines päpstlichen Amtes*, Verlautbarungen des Apostolischen Stuhls no. 6, Bonn, 1979, 13-14, no. 6, 16-19, no. 11-12.

<sup>124</sup> Sekretariat für die Nichtchristen, o cit. 7, no. 11.

still remains open to the proclamation of the Gospel, its meaning and intentions must be clearly understood.

Dialogue demands balance from the partners involved. The sincerity of inter-religious dialogue requires that “each enters into it with the integrity of his or her own faith. At the same time, while remaining firm in their belief that in Jesus Christ, the only mediator between God and man (cf. 1 Tim 2:4-6), the fullness of revelation has been given to them, Christians must remember that God has also manifested himself in some way to the followers of other religious traditions. Consequently, it is with receptive minds that they approach the convictions and values of others.”<sup>125</sup>

Ultimately Christians know “that truth is not a thing we possess, but a person by whom we must allow ourselves to be possessed. This is an unending process. While keeping their identity intact, Christians must be prepared to learn and to receive from and through others the positive values of their traditions. Through dialogue they may be moved to give up ingrained prejudices, to revise preconceived ideas, and even sometimes to allow the understanding of their faith to be purified.”<sup>126</sup>

### **Understanding proclamation**

The aim of proclamation is to communicate to others an explicit knowledge of Jesus Christ and of what God has done through Him for the salvation of the world. Therefore, it wishes to invite people to become disciples of Jesus and to enter into the visible Christian community. Thus in proclamation the Church is fulfilling a prophetic function. It proclaims Christ as the source of the secret of salvation, in which the partners in dialogue already share, and it invites those who up to this point have taken part in the secret without being able to make out its origin and name its originator to acknowledge this secret.

Dialogue and proclamation thus represent different ways of carrying out the Church's one missionary assignment. They have different aims. While inter-religious dialogue cannot be regarded simply as a means of proclaiming the Gospel, it does at the same time

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<sup>125</sup> Päpstlicher Rat für den Interreligiösen Dialog, o cit. 25, no. 48-

<sup>126</sup> Ibid. 25, no. 49.

remain open to that possibility. In fact, the missionary assignment is a dynamic process which – even if it is not often concluded – culminates in the explicit proclamation of Jesus Christ and reaches its destination.<sup>127</sup>

### **Pluralism and religious freedom**

In few countries, the case is that Christians and Muslims constitute two numerically and politically equal partners. Usually there are majorities and minorities. Can the religious minorities, out of a genuinely defensible understanding of their own faith's teaching and tradition, accept a public order that is conceived on the basis of the obligations and rights of all citizens as such? Which social system and system of government can best ensure that a Muslim does not have fewer rights than a Christian and vice versa; and ensure that Muslims and Christians can meet freely and on an equal footing, particularly as faithful individuals and communities committed to their own missionary task? "It is the secularity of the legal system that guarantees the fundamental legal equality of citizens of different religions – in contrast to the Christian *ordo* of the Middle Ages and also unlike the situation in parts of the Islamic world, where the lesser legal status of Jews and Christians as 'protected citizens' still persists even today."<sup>128</sup> In such a system it is not religious affiliation but the secular legal system that defines a person's legal status.

What this means in practice was illustrated recently by Franz Magis-Suseno, using the example of Indonesia. The constitution there was amended in 1999 with the adoption of Article 18 of the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights. In subsequent discussions the Christians vehemently refused to accept a declaration on the part of the Suharto government, according to which missionary activity would not be allowed in respect of people who already had a religion (i.e. who belonged to one of the religious communities officially recognised in Indonesia). The Muslims, for their part, accused the Christians of proselytism. These positions still exist, but remarkable progress has taken place as a result of the patient dialogue among

<sup>127</sup> See *ibid.* 42-43, no. 82.

<sup>128</sup> Deutsche Bischofskonferenz, *Christen und Muslime in Deutschland*, Arbeitshilfen no.172, Bonn 2003, 162, no. 312 (italics in the original).

intellectuals (of Christian and Muslim provenance). Meanwhile, the major Christian churches (apart from a few Evangelical groups) have accepted that proselytism is an abuse of religious freedom, while yet more conservative Muslims would accept that – if someone, after careful consideration and without any external pressure, were to come to the conclusion that God was calling him or her to a different religion – this ought to be accepted (albeit with deep pain). Suseno notes: “Thus the main issue, as far as religious freedom is concerned, is the freedom to convert, and this freedom will be acceptable, provided no unfair means are involved.”

The co-existence of two religions with a claim to universality, which are by their very nature missionary in character, calls for a jointly formulated ‘code of conduct’ and eventually for some kind of watchdog committee, comprised of representatives of both religions, to share in regulating developments and events that cause annoyance and indignation on one side or the other, impair the religious climate and make common monotheistic witness implausible in the eyes of the world.<sup>129</sup> The fundamental question is which ‘means’ are appropriate / legitimate or inappropriate / illegitimate in the efforts made by either of the two religions to acquire greater influence for the values it advocates. The decree of the Second Vatican Council on the mission activity of the Church, *Ad Gentes*, also states clearly and unequivocally: “The Church strictly forbids forcing anyone to embrace the Faith, or alluring or enticing people by worrisome wiles. By the same token, she also strongly insists on this right, that no one be frightened away from the Faith by unjust vexations on the part of others. In accord with the Church’s ancient custom, the convert’s motives should be looked into, and if necessary, purified.”<sup>130</sup>

This certainly includes the constant efforts of Muslim parties and movements to link non-Muslim residents in an Islamic state into the structures of the Sharia and the refusal to acknowledge a religiously neutral sphere of state life for plural societies (and what societies are not plural nowadays?) Wherever it is advisable, all legitimate means must be used to insist on the protection and promotion of individual,

<sup>129</sup> Cf. Catholic Bishops’ Conference of India / Commission for Ecumenism and Dialogue, *Guidelines for inter-religious dialogue*, New Delhi, 1989.

<sup>130</sup> Das Zweite Vatikanische Konzil, *Das Dekret über die Missionstätigkeit der Kirche “Ad Gentes”*, in: Rahner, K./Vorgrimler, H.(eds.) o cit. 623, no. 13.

legally enforceable human rights, including the right to choose one's religion freely, to change one's religion, to opt out of belonging to any religious community, to disseminate religious convictions peacefully, and to bring up children in their parents' religion.

It is exactly at this point that considerable scope opens up for dialogue between all groups that constitute present-day society, on a national and global level, not least between Muslims and Christians. The aim of such a dialogue should be, on the one hand, to constantly define those parameters of a public order which seem to be indispensable to its development and maintenance and should be approved and defended by all participants in the community. On the other hand, the various religious and ideological groupings that make up today's plural society should be motivated to lend active support to the common good (understood in the broad sense) of plural civic society on the basis of their specific religious convictions.

### **Common responsibility and mission**

In the declaration *Nostra Aetate* of 1965 the Second Vatican Council admonishes everyone to "work sincerely for mutual understanding and to preserve as well as to promote together for the benefit of all mankind social justice and moral welfare, as well as peace and freedom." In many addresses in subsequent years, Popes have called on Muslims and Christians to stand up together for the preservation and promotion of spiritual and religious values. Paul VI wrote in 1967 in a *Letter to the Catholic Hierarchy and All the Nations of Africa* that he was praying "that in social life, too, where Muslims and Christians meet as neighbours and partners, mutual respect and a shared commitment to the acknowledgement and protection of fundamental human rights may reign."<sup>131</sup>

The first conference of the Catholic-Muslim Forum, held in Rome from 4 to 6 November 2008, went a step further and seemed to have in mind a notion of common witness when it said in its closing statement: "As Catholic and Muslim believers, we are aware of the summons and imperative to bear witness to the transcendent dimension of

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<sup>131</sup> CIBEDO e.V. (ed.) *Die offiziellen Dokumente der katholischen Kirche zum Dialog mit dem Islam*, Regensburg 2009, no. 2105.

life, through a spirituality nourished by prayer, in a world which is becoming more and more secularised and materialistic.”<sup>132</sup>

Benedict XVI's address to the closing session of that conference speaks forcefully and clearly of the common responsibility and vocation of Christians and Muslims: “God calls us to work together on behalf of the victims of disease, hunger, poverty, injustice and violence. For Christians, the love of God is inseparably bound to the love of our brothers and sisters, of all men and women, without distinction of race and culture. [...] The Muslim tradition is also quite clear in encouraging practical commitment in serving the most needy, and readily recalls the “Golden Rule” in its own version: your faith will not be perfect, unless you do unto others that which you wish for yourselves. We should thus work together in promoting genuine respect for the dignity of the human person and fundamental human rights, even though our anthropological visions and our theologies justify this in different ways. There is a great and vast field in which we can act together in defending and promoting the moral values which are part of our common heritage.”<sup>133</sup>

### Closing remarks

On both sides, Christian and Muslim, there is a broad range of widely varying interpretations of mission or da'wah and consequently there are very different ways of planning them and carrying them out. Every Muslim group and movement holds its own position on da'wah and dialogue and each one is, of course, based on a different interpretation of the relevant written sources. The Christian churches, free churches and movements (for example, the Pentecostals, Adventists and Mormons) are also differentiated, not least by a distinct conception and practice of mission and dialogue. On the one hand, the Orthodox and Protestant churches represented in the World Council of Churches and, on the

<sup>132</sup> Closing statement of the Catholic-Muslim Forum in *CIBEDO-Beiträge 4* (2008), 38.

<sup>133</sup> Benedict XVI, *Overcoming Past Prejudices. Address by Pope Benedict XVI to participants in the Catholic-Muslim Forum, Rome, 6 November 2008*, in *CIBEDO-Beiträge 4* (2008), 35-36. The closing statement of the Catholic-Muslim Forum of 6 November 2008 says at no. 14: “We intend to look into the possibility of convening a permanent Catholic-Muslim Committee, to discuss responses to conflicts and other emergencies” (ibid, 38). Given the non-implementation of such statements, the question arises as to how serious the signatories are about putting their own proposals into practice.

other hand, the churches that belong to the Lausanne Movement, have certainly moved closer to our field of discussion in their respective basic positions. The stance of the membership of the World Council of Churches is probably closest to the Catholic position as set out in the theses described above and in the accompanying commentary. In order to ascertain the exact situation specific exploratory talks are necessary in each case.

For all Muslims and Christians who care deeply about building constructive Christian-Muslim relationships as a contribution to peace the priority should be to make a constant effort to conduct serious and continuing intra-Muslim and intra-Christian talks about mission or da'wah, and their respective relationship with dialogue. Unless there is a basic consensus – intra-Christian and intra-Muslim as well as Christian-Muslim – on issues of mission / da'wah and dialogue, mistrust and irritation will keep on growing. In addition, without that mutual effort, a negative image of Christianity and Islam will become more deeply entrenched among followers of non-monotheistic religions and people of no religion. The God of Abraham deserves a credible community.

# MISSION AND DIALOGUE

Approaches to a Communicative Understanding of Mission



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