

Current situation of Christian-Muslim Relations: emerging challenges, signs of hope¹

by dr. Jørgen S. Nielsen, prof. at the Centre for European Islamic Thinking, Faculty of Theology, Copenhagen

The major turning point in Christian-Muslim relations in recent years has been the end of the cold war (ca. 1989-1991). This had a number of consequences, not least of which was the end of the bi-polar world which had kept regional and other rivalries subdued in a secondary level of priorities compared to the pressures imposed by the global contest between the Soviet bloc and the West. Talk of a 'peace dividend' was a threat to certain economic interests, including those of the 'military-industrial complex' which President Eisenhower had warned against. Within less than two years, a new discourse surfaced which coalesced around the idea of "Islam, the new enemy". It was encouraged by political and commercial interests, and the secretary-general of NATO inadvertently revealed the trend when he publicly warned against a new enemy appearing in Islam.

The clash way of thinking

Although the phrase 'clash of civilizations' can be traced some years further back, it became common currency in the wake of the publication of Samuel Huntington's article of that title in *Foreign Affairs* in the summer issue of 1993.² The consequent debates and the attention devoted to the 'clash' in the media contributed to strengthening an already existing tendency to interpret certain political crises in religious terms. This was a particularly dangerous development at a time when the conflicts sparked by the collapse of the Soviet block (disintegrating Yugoslavia in particular, but also tensions in Central Asia, esp. in Tajikistan for a time, violence in the Caucasus, esp. in Chechnya) were easy to locate in this matrix. As a result, the assumptions of the clash way of thinking were so deeply rooted in the frameworks of analysis in political and media networks that the events of 11 September 2001 could easily and immediately be assimilated. The opportunities of starting on a radically constructive reorientation offered the US by the global outbreak of sympathy, best expressed in the French newspaper headline 'Nous sommes tous américains',³ were squandered.

Historical mythologies

The politicization of Christian-Muslim relations is reflected also in the way in which history and historical mythologies have been mobilized in support of the process. This applies above all to the proto-typical role accorded to the Crusades. Historically that series of conflicts

¹ Summary of a contribution in the World Council of Churches. Geneva, 17 January 2008.

² Samuel Huntington, 'The clash of civilizations', *Foreign Affairs*, 72:3 (summer 1993), pp.22-49.

³ Editorial by Jean-Marie Colombani, *Le Monde*, 13 September 2001.

across the Mediterranean was a multi-faceted affair. In western Europe it was an integral part of the process of constructing Roman Catholic Christendom, and crusading, although primarily targeted at Islam, was aimed at everything non-Catholic. Constantinople, the symbol of Orthodox Christian faith and power, was sacked in 1204; Scandinavians ravished the heathen regions of the eastern Baltic; the Jews of the Rhineland and elsewhere were made to suffer, as were various allegedly heretical Christian sects in parts of France and Spain.⁴ The Crusades were adopted as part of the imperial discourse of the European powers in the 19th century, and both French and British generals referred to their victories over the Ottoman armies towards the end of the first world war in Palestine and Syria in crusading terms. Modern parallels grew with the establishment of Israel in 1948, and comparisons between Israel and the Frankish states of the Levant in the 12th-13th centuries became popular in the history departments of Arab universities as well as in public discourse.

Most remarkable has been the way in which this historical mythology of a Mediterranean ‘frontier’ has been adopted in other regions of the world. In parts of south and south-east Asia, and especially in areas of sub-Saharan west Africa there are regions where Muslims and Christians have lived together peacefully for generations. Villages have inhabitants of both communities and extended families have Christian and Muslim members. In some cases, the same family will include both a Christian priest and a Muslim imam. (I have come across instances of this also in Lebanon.) In such areas, the collective memory was of a common history, identity and interests. Over the last three or four decades, that memory has gradually been replaced by that of the frontier – someone else’s history has taken the place of their own. The mechanisms are varied but are in one way or another part of the general process of globalization.

Christian mission and Muslim da’wa have been driven by particular trends within the respective religions, primarily those characterized by aggressive and impatient attitudes towards those who are different, be they of their own religious family or of another. So North American conservative evangelical Christianity and puritanical forms of Arab Islam have increasingly set the agenda. In both cases their strength is supported by financial and organisational resources which local institutions cannot compete with. They bring with them a perception of relations between Islam and Christianity at the core of which is an innate enmity and distrust symbolised by the Crusades and the myths of the Mediterranean frontier.

Asymmetrical dialogue

Through these radical changes in the context, the character of Christian-Muslim dialogue has also radically changed. In the past the dialogue was “asymmetrical”. It was usually a question of Christian initiatives, to which friendly individual Muslims were invited. The

⁴ See particularly Christopher Tyerman, *The invention of the Crusades*, London: Routledge, 1998.

participants were specialists and enthusiasts and, it is clear, were dealing with issues which were only marginal in the priorities of the various churches. When such dialogues were initiated by an official church body, the common complaint was that while the Christian partners could in some way be seen as 'representative', the Muslims were not and could not be, primarily because there was no Muslim 'church' which they could represent. A meeting in 1973 between the Vatican and a Libyan Muslim institution was an attempt to move beyond this weakness but it was trapped by the political interests of the Libyan government.

Within a few months of the publication of Samuel Huntington's article on 'The clash of civilizations' there was a veritable explosion of dialogue meetings and conferences. Many of them, if not a majority, were Muslim initiatives, many by government-sponsored Islamic agencies or Islamic studies department at government universities and sometimes directly by government ministries. Occasionally the official theme was relations between Islam and Christianity, but much the most common title in one way or another involved relations between Islam and the West.

Of course, this reflects the agenda set by Huntington but it also reflects the general broadening of the dialogue agenda from working within the confines of a narrow concept of religion to one which paid much more attention to the political, social and economic dimensions. Ironically, while these meetings and conferences were organised to combat Huntington's vision of a clash, they unquestioningly accepted his concept of civilization!⁵

Change in the character of Christian-Muslim dialogue

The events of 11 September 2001 had their obvious political and military consequences, most immediately in the invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq and the increase in spectacular terrorist operations. In many countries, discussions about Islam and policies towards Muslims became much more security-driven. The western responses to 9/11 led also to a growing mistrust towards Christians in Muslim majority regions of the world. Networks of promising Muslim-Christian cooperation came under external pressures which some were unable to survive, while in other places new networks were created to resist the pressures towards conflict.

It is clear that the comfortable little niche of Christian-Muslim dialogue which had been carefully nurtured in the decades after 1945 (although some of its Christian theological can be traced a good deal further back) was being forced to face new realities. The asymmetry, of which participants and observers had complained, had ceased, but its cessation had been achieved by a sharp expansion of the field being covered and by the identities of the

⁵ See my critique in "Western civilisation: myth or reality? A debate about power", in Irfan A. Omar (ed.), *Islam and other religions: Pathways to dialogue. Essays in honour of Mahmoud Mustafa Ayoub*, London: Routledge, 2006, pp.181-191.

participants. The issues have become too immediate to be left to theologians and too urgent to be left in the hands of local community projects. In becoming politicized at an intercontinental level, relations between Muslims and Christians drew in politicians across the board.



Christian-Muslim dialogue meeting in the World Council of Churches, Geneva

In the Barcelona agreement of November 1995, the European Union and the Mediterranean coastal states explicitly included dialogue between the religions as part of the third, cultural ‘basket’ to provide some depth to the baskets of political and economic cooperation. The events of 9/11 very quickly led to governments in Europe and elsewhere to involve themselves in what they saw as interreligious dialogue. Inevitably this brings with it the danger that the politicians will take over, that short-term considerations of strategic and material interests will manipulate and corrupt the religious dimensions. From being restricted to religious circles, where it was marginal and comparatively simple, Christian-Muslim dialogue has become central and complicated. It now explicitly involves social and political dimensions, ground on which both Muslims and Christians are challenged to explore together. The function of transnational religious agencies, such as the World Council of Churches, in resisting such a take-over is crucial.