

How I, as a believing and practicing Muslim, look at the Christian faith

By Hisham Nashabé

Allow me first to tell you, in the form of a testimony, my experience as a Lebanese Muslim with the Christians I have known, and among whom I have lived and worked. I give this testimony because I want to emphasize that the attitude of Muslims towards Christians, and, I suppose, of Christians towards Muslims, is not determined only by the sacred texts and official attitudes of Christians and Muslims towards each other, but also by the living experience that they have as compatriots and fellow-believers in the Abrahamic tradition which they share.

I will then present to you, very briefly, the doctrinal attitude of Islam toward the Christian faith. Finally, I will make a few simple proposals which I think will lead to the creation of a better spirit of understanding and cooperation among believers on both sides.

Very early in life I had the opportunity to come in contact with Christians, both in neighbouring Syria and in Lebanon. My father, a graduate of the Ottoman Law School in Istanbul, and a member of a family which claims descent from the family of the Prophet (Peace be on Him), had joined Amir Faisal Ibn al Hussain who, in 1918, had proclaimed himself King of Syria. That was the first Arab state which was created after the dismemberment of the Ottoman Empire. My father became one of the first judges in the nascent Arab State which at the time included present-day Syria and Lebanon.

When the Arab hopes to establish an independent Arab state were brutally shattered, and both Syria and Lebanon came under French rule, my father, although from Tripoli (Lebanon) opted to stay in the Syrian judiciary, because he felt, as many other people, that Syria was the larger, more secure and stable state than the newly created State of Greater Lebanon.

Thus, my early years at school began in Latakia (Syria). In 1935, I was in Kindergarten at the Collège des Frères, in Latakia, a missionary French School. My father, a devout Muslim of noble descent whose ancestry includes many illustrious ulamà', chose to send his children to a Christian missionary school because government schools at that time were worse, poorly equipped, staffed by half-educated teachers and housed in run-down buildings.

He and my mother knew well the risk that they were running by sending their children to Christian missionary schools; they knew that their children would be taught Christianity, not Islam, and that they might be alienated from their own faith

and tradition. But they were ready to accept this risk because they wanted to give their children a good education, i.e., along education on western lines and a good knowledge of French. Of course, they would have preferred to give them also a good Islamic education, but this, they thought, they would provide at home... and this is indeed what they did.

This awareness on the part of my parents did not prevent them from being scandalised and deeply offended when I came home one day - I was only four years old - to recite to my mother what I was taught at school: it was a Christian prayer which started with "Au nom du Père et du Fils et du Saint Esprit" and then a short text which I learned by heart, it said, "Maman Cherie, Petit Jésus m'a donné un grand coeur pour t'aimer beaucoup maman...".

For me that was the beginning of a systematic exposure to, what seemed to me, two alien and antagonistic faiths: Islam, my, ancestral faith at home, to which my father and mother were keen on developing in me a sense of belonging, and Christianity which was the faith of the French oppressor which I was to accept with mixed feelings of animosity, admiration and fear.

It is remarkable, however, that at home we never discussed or compared Islam and Christianity. We just accepted that they were different, but that Islam was superior without really knowing why, and that Islam was "our religion" and that Christianity was "theirs."

As the years went by my elder brothers and I moved from one missionary school to another: the Franciscan Sisters in Aleppo, then the Frères Maristes in Aleppo too, then the Jesuit School in Homs, then the Collège des Frères in Tripoli (Lebanon). In the meantime, my father thought that I should have an education in English, and thus I went to the American College in Aleppo, a Protestant missionary school, and then to a national non-missionary school in Tripoli (Lebanon), and finally to the American University in Beirut. Upon graduation from AUB, I went to McGill University in Montreal (Canada) and then to Harvard University in Cambridge, Massachusetts (USA).

Never until my university years at McGill have I ever had a systematic education in my own faith. Nor have I had a systemic knowledge of Christianity. But I learned a lot about Christianity indirectly, and by daily exposure to it in the classes of religion, in the prayer meetings and by various subtle influences during class at school and outside it. I must say, that this exposure did not develop in me an appreciation of the Christian faith and its values. This appreciation came from a different source, and, strange as it may seem, from my father himself, whose deep commitment and knowledge of Islam and his social contacts and numerous Christian friends had a marked influence on my attitude towards Christians, especially Arab Christians, both Catholic and Orthodox.

In a very subtle manner my father was teaching us - my brothers and I- that commitment to Islam was in no way incompatible with a very genuine respect for Christianity and the love and friendship we must feel toward Christians. While in Syria we used to receive regular visits from Christian dignitaries and bishops of various denominations. These visits were often quite informal. I remember that the atmosphere of these visits was genuinely friendly, and as a child, and later as a young man, I used to enjoy the conversation, often light, and, sometimes, of high intellectual quality which took place during these visits. The differences and similarities between Islam and Christianity were often brought up in the course of these conversations, but never was there tension or malice... my father felt a real friendship toward his guests.

I remember vividly that during the forties and fifties my father used to spend the summer in Becharré, a Maronite village in North Lebanon. A bishop from Dimàan the summer residence of the Maronite Patriarch (I think his name was Bishop Risha) used to welcome my father in Bacharré on behalf of the Patriarch, at the beginning of summer, and my father used to pay back the visit. I used to accompany father on these visits. Our host, Patriarch Arida at that time, was a very dear friend of my father. Their conversation during the visit was delightful to follow; both of them were experts in the art of conversation. When issues related to religion were brought up, neither of them felt that he had be reserved or diplomatic; they were respectful and appreciative of each others' differences and accepted them, I dare say, with pleasure; they seemed to be happy with the differences, even positively fascinated. This had a tremendous influence on my young mind and influenced my attitude towards the Christian clergy throughout my life. When, later in life, I had some unhappy encounters with Christian clergymen like Monseigneur Ignace Maroun and Father Boulos Nimàn, I was doubly disappointed because this was not what I had experienced with the Christian clergy I had known in my father's company in Syria, in Becharré and Dimaàn.

My experience was much more successful during the civil war in Lebanon. It was during these terrible years of sorrow and anguish that I came to know Father Augustin Dupré La Tour (a Jesuit) and Father André Scrima (a Greek Orthodox). I owe them both a great deal; a first hand knowledge of Christianity on matters of mutual concern, and a profound respect for the noble feelings they felt towards me. With them, I and Professor Yusuf Ibish, established in 1978, and while the civil war was at its worst stages, the Institute of Muslim-Christian Studies at St. Joseph University. Two years later, I established at the Islamic Makassed Philanthropic Association the Institute of Islamic Studies, and in 1994 a protocol of academic cooperation between St. Joseph University and Makassed was signed stipulating modes of academic cooperation between the two Institutes. This protocol is a unique example of cooperation between two academic institutions, one Christian and the other Muslim, and needs to be highlighted in the history of Christian - Muslim relations in Lebanon. This cooperation continues to this day and carries the seeds of an even deeper and wider cooperation in the future.

Apart from this living experience with Christianity and Christians, a Muslim's view of Christianity is derived from Islam itself, and, more specifically, from the Quran and Hadith. In the second part of this paper, this is what I will try to summarize.

For a Muslim, the Quran is the revealed Word of God and the acceptance of the Quran as such is a prerequisite of faith in Islam. God has revealed one religion. This religion is Islam. Abraham the father of all later Prophets (Peace be on them) was a Muslim (hanif) and so were they. The message is one and the same, but as a result of historical circumstances the authenticity of this message has not been properly preserved. Only with Muhammad who delivered the Abrahamic message in the 7th century of the Christian era, that is "in the full light of history," has this message been fully preserved in its entirety in the Holy Quran whose text remains unquestionably authentic despite some attempts at casting doubts on this authenticity. These attempts have generally been vitiated by obvious bias, insufficiently documented, or, have touched form but not substance.

Hadith literature, which is the second major source of Islam, includes an invaluable source of knowledge about Islamic faith and practice. Unfortunately, however, hadith literature was not been compiled until two hundred years after the death of the Prophet Muhammad (Peace be on him) and has been tampered with, sometimes with good intentions, sometimes not, and must therefore be judged on the basis of the Quran, so that only that hadith which agrees with the Quran must have a binding force on Muslims.

I say this because I do not want to ascribe to Islam what this or that Muslim says about it, concerning Islam's position towards Christians. Such opinions by individual Muslims - be they scholars, poets, sufis or average Muslims - are important in so far as they represent the evolution of Muslim society, but they are not necessarily true, or beyond criticism by Muslims and non-Muslims alike.

Bearing this in mind, what is the Quran's view of Christianity and Christians?

The Quran refers to Christians as "al-Nasara" (the people of Nazareth) and to Christ as "al-masih" (the messiah) and as Isà b. Maryam. It is an article of faith in Islam to believe in "Isa and his message which cannot be essentially different from the Islamic message. Indeed Islam in history came to vindicate and complete previous divine messages.

The followers of Jesus (Peace be on him) are referred to in the Quran as ahl al-kitab (people of the book) and are described as the "nearest people" to Muslims. Muslims are, therefore, bound to respect the followers of Jesus, their religious authorities, and their places of worship. These basic precepts were scrupulously observed during the life to time of the Prophet Muhammad and have generally been

adhered to in the Muslim world throughout Islamic history. Even in the worst periods of religious wars, namely during period of the Crusades, Muslim historians generally refrained from making injurious remarks about Christianity. When they fought the Crusaders they did not fight them because they were Christians, but because they invaded Muslim lands, and were referred to as "the foreigners." (al-faranj).

Muslim jurists, under the influence of circumstances that surrounded them, established rules for the treatment of Christian minorities in Muslim lands, which were tolerant and respectful by any standard. Even during the periods of decadence, and under the Ottoman caliphate (1517 - 1920) the laws governing the treatment of Christians were exceptionally tolerant. Occasional outbursts of fanaticism were rare and often the result of obvious provocation.

Muslims, however, refuse the "divinity of Jesus," and his crucifixion. They also reject the concept of the Trinity. Christian practices like the representation of Jesus and saints in statues, pictures and other such forms are not accepted by Muslims; neither is the concept of the Purgatory, the sacrosanct decisions of Church authorities, the eating of pork, the drinking of wine and the concept of the original sin. Celibacy is not a virtue in Islam, The separation of church and state are foreign to Islam and generally rejected.

Muslims are also becoming increasingly aware of the distinction between Western Christianity and Eastern Christianity. The first as being associated with a materialist civilization, while Eastern Christianity is generally considered nearer to the pristine purity of early Christianity.

Muslims both at the official academic and popular levels have, on the other hand, shown a keen interest in participating in the Christian - Muslim dialogue and have been engaged actively in it. This new culture of dialogue augurs well for the future relations between the two great faiths, Christianity and Islam. This is particularly significant in view of the fact that the religious character of the Twenty-First Century may be determined primarily by the outcome of the Christian - Muslim dialogue and the eventual cooperation between them to create a "culture of peace" where ethics and morality provide the necessary guidelines for scientific and technological progress.

In conclusion, may I present for your consideration a few general principles which, to my mind, are essential for the success of the Christian - Muslim dialogue:

1. That toleration, mutual respect and even appreciation of each others' differences must become a living culture in both Muslim and Christian countries, and not just mottos or emblems.

2. That living together and working together must be considered more

important, at least at this juncture in time, than theoretical and theological dissensions which may lead to dead ends or, allow me the expression, "analysis paralysis."

3. That Christians and Muslims must refrain from undertaking missionary work in each others' lands or among each others' communities. Rather, missionary effort must be conducted among atheists and anti-religious groups and individuals.

4. That Christians and Muslims must stand united in the face of the exploitation of religion to foment conflicts or to serve political and material ends.

5. Finally, as a Lebanese and a Muslim it will help me a great deal if Christians all over the world join hands with Muslims to help them free Southern Lebanon from occupation by Israel, and protect Jerusalem from becoming the capital of one religion at the expense of all others. Efforts must rather be directed toward keeping the Sacred City of Jerusalem, as it has always been, in Arab hands of all faiths, a true heaven for peace for all three Abrahamic religions: Judaism, Christianity and Islam.

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