

Reconciliation: The choice of peacemakers.

By

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Since 9/11 Western and Muslim scholarship has characterized the political relationship between the Muslim world and the West as one full of tension and conflict. For evidence of this tension we need look no further than Barack Obama's recent speech at the heartland of Islamic scholarship, al-Azhar University in Cairo, in which he said "...a time of great tension between the United States and Muslims around the world – tension rooted in historical forces that go beyond any current policy debate." "Indeed Obama's prime purpose was to open a pathway to bridging political alienation", wrote Richard Shumack¹ in his article "Islam and the West: facing conflict for mutual gain?"²

Is the tension getting any better? Unfortunately, the answer is a firm no. Recent acts of terrorism within the United States continue to rekindle the tension and fear within both the Muslim and the non-Muslim American communities. In fact those recent acts of terrorism, especially those planned or committed by American Muslims, give legitimacy to comments such as the one that was made by Daniel Pipes in November 2001 about the American government and its Muslims' citizens³.

In this environment of tension, working for reconciliation and peace is long overdue. In fact, if we are to prevent a much larger disaster from happening, we have no other alternative but to work for better understanding and reconciliation. It is no longer possible to depend solely on America's long standing tradition of constitutional rights, tolerance and minority protection.

My Islamic faith has taught me that it is my duty and I hope the duty of every American of goodwill to try to work towards peace and true reconciliation. Obviously, there are no guarantees for success, as the agenda is often dictated by fanatics. Perhaps however, it is not that the fanatics are in control, but that we have failed to respond with the love that our Creator has commanded.

As for me, the only choice was always to work with my Evangelical friends for better understanding. It is a personal agenda that reflects my own faith. One day, when I stand in front of my maker to account for my time on earth, I will have this peacemaking effort to report.

After years of trying to build bridges toward others, I thought it would be useful for new bridge builders to have a few insights from my experience on what makes certain efforts qualify as reconciliation efforts.

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² Abc News reported on this article on Wed Jul 1, 2009 8:54am AEST.

³ The Danger Within: Militant Islam in America, by Daniel Pipes, Commentary, November 2001

True reconciliation requires one to identify and establish sufficient common ground with the other that will enable both to live together in peace. I would think it fair to describe the people engaged in reconciliation as peacemakers. When Jesus spoke of peacemakers, he noted that they shall inherit the earth – and perhaps it is the peacemakers that will help to prepare the Kingdom he spoke of? True reconciliation and peacemaking requires nothing less than sincerity of heart. It is never an effort to show that one faith is better than another.

For reconciliation to be successful, both parties involved in this effort should be willing to consider that both messages are from the same source, God Almighty, and they both include worthy inner values that can guide their followers to a life of peace with others. The absence of these basic assumptions will not lead to a successful effort.

To be clear, we are not talking about God reconciling the world to Himself through Jesus Christ as in the New Testament. Just as building peace is a cherished principle of Jesus, the reconciliation I am discussing here is a conscious effort to please God by establishing peace with our other neighbors that adhere to other revealed messages.

The first requirement is that one clearly understands their own beliefs before trying to find common ground with others from another faith. If neither has a deep understanding of their own beliefs, the reconciliation will inevitably be based solely on cultural or humanitarian grounds which usually leads to an agreement on general human moral values. While this is good, it does not address the root of a problem that is becoming deadly in certain parts of the world.

While we are talking about religion, faith and beliefs, one has to realize that reconciliation is not theological but relational⁴. At the heart of any successful reconciliation is God's love and not doctrinal issues. I am engaged with you to show you that I accept you as you are, while I need attention from you and respect. These relational needs if placed at the foundation of the reconciliation effort will put the discussion on the right track that will help both to gain appreciation for each other. These relational needs are rooted in biblical teachings while for a Muslim they are based on verse 13 of Sura 49Al Hujurat:

^{49:13} *People, We created you all from a single man and a single woman, and made you into nations and tribes so that you should get to know one another. In God's eyes, the most honored of you are the ones most aware of Him: God is all knowing, all aware⁵.*

Reconciliation, by definition, is a conscious effort based on common sense. If both messages are from the same source, it will make sense to find common ground for peaceful coexistence. However, faith is not necessarily logical. Therein lays the

⁴ 10 important relational needs: Acceptance, Affection, Appreciation, Approval, Attention, Comfort, Encouragement, Respect, Security, Support. See David & Teresa Ferguson.

⁵The Qur'an a New Translation by M.A.S.Abdul Haleem. Oxford Press

difficulty of engaging one that has deep commitment to his faith while hoping and praying that he gains appreciation for you and your faith. Usually the most productive reconciliation is done one-on-one and not in public. After all, you are hoping and praying that God touches the other person's heart and bring him a step closer. This is not easy when an audience is watching and positioning is at play. A good starting point is what is obviously common such as the belief in One Creator.

I have also learned over the years that no real productive Christian/Muslim reconciliation effort can take place unless both parties respect one another and share basic respect for the religious beliefs of the other. It takes deliberate and sincere effort to walk in the other person shoes and see where they are coming from.

Another requirement of a real Muslim/Christian reconciliation is to put a real effort to learn and understand the other's beliefs in order to expand one's horizon enough to appreciate the other. Thus, if you are involved in a dialogue with a person from another faith but neither you nor the other are reading, experiencing and learning about and from each other, no meaningful reconciliation can truly take place. So let me be clear; if a Muslim confuse his local culture with Islam and does not put an effort to learn his religion from its accepted sources, he will end confusing himself and the other, or if he continues to quote the Qur'an to a Christian thinking that the information in the Qur'an will suffice, he may be mistaken. For if the Christian believed that the Qur'an is the word of God, there will be no need to have the discussion in the first place. The same is true for a Christian that starts the conversation by asking a Muslim whether he considered the "*I Am's*" of Jesus in John's Gospel⁶. Of course the first thought that will come to the Muslim's mind when he hears the I Am's is blasphemy.

I believe that a Muslim intending to engage in reconciliation needs to at least read the Qur'an and the biography of Prophet Muhammad in order to have a basic understanding of his own religion but he also need to at least read the Bible in order to understand the basic teachings of Christianity. The same is true for a Christian. He needs to understand his own religion and its doctrines and read at least a good translation of the Qur'an⁷ in addition to a neutral biography of Prophet Mohammad⁸ before he embarks on a meaningful discussion with a Muslim.

⁶ "*I am the bread of life*" ([John 6:35,48,51](#)). "*I am the light of the world*" ([John 8:12](#)). "*I am the door of the sheep*"([John 10:7,9](#)). "*I am the good shepherd*" ([John 10:11,14](#)). "*I am the resurrection, and the life*" ([John 11:25](#)). "*I am the way, the truth, and the life*" ([John 14:6](#)). "*I am the true vine*" ([John 15:1,5](#)).

⁷ I recommend one of the following: The Qur'an a New Translation by M.A.S.Abdul Haleem. Oxford Press, The Qur'an, A new translation by Tarif Khaldi, Penguin Classics, The Message of The Qur'an by Muhammad Assad. The Book Foundation; Second edition edition (December 1, 2008).

⁸ [Muhammad: A Biography of the Prophet](#) by [Karen Armstrong](#) or **The Life of Muhammad by Muhammad Husayn Haykal** translated by Ismail Ragi A. Al-Faruqi

Sometimes, under the guise of reconciliation, there is a veiled conversion effort on the part of some Muslims or Christians, although it is done with good intentions. Both usually start with the notion “if I only have a chance to make him hear “The Truth”, I will be able to change his heart”.

I’ve learned that there is a built-in inner logic that each religion has developed over the years. This has made its principles (doctrines) coherent, very appealing and a source of pride to its followers and made it defiant to naïf assailants.

I have also learned through experience that the aforementioned notion is silly. A committed Christian, like a committed Muslim invests a lot of time exploring and learning his or her religion. No one is going to convert another by simply talking to them about his side of the truth. The notion of converting another to your religion is a very egotistical notion and a misguided one at best.

If one is doing it in order to boast to his friends that he got one for the Lord, this will be as far from God’s teaching as one can get. For God has taught us that making one’s heart accept His truth is His doing. We don’t control guidance, He does. This necessitates that all we do is to present what we believe to be true to others and pray that God open their hearts to see it. If we want, however, to be true to ourselves we should pray at the same time that God open our hearts to the truth that others might be presenting to us.

This brings me to discuss the approach some of us use when presenting our faith to others. After the 2003 invasion of Iraq, the American forces were followed by an army of missionaries thinking that “Iraq is open now for Jesus” and they can now bring the Good News to the Iraqis, to discover that many of those that they were calling on were, in fact, Christians while the other Muslims knew far more about Christianity than the missionaries knew about Islam. The missionary approach is a direct response to their limited understanding of the Great Commission. The most famous version of the Great Commission is in Matthew 28:16-20 where Jesus calls on his followers to baptize all nations. In Christian tradition however, it tends to be limited to the instruction of the resurrected Jesus Christ to his disciples, that they spread his teachings to all the nations of the world.

So what were his teachings that the disciples are to spread to all nations? The one I recall every time I think of Jesus is from a passage in Matthew where one of the Pharisees tested Jesus with a question, "*Teacher, which is the greatest commandment in the Law?*" (Matthew 22:36 NIV). Jesus replied, "*Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.' This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.' All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments*" (Matthew 22:37-40 NIV). Here, let us heed Jesus’ advice and compare his highly civilized teaching to that of a young missionary from anywhere in USA going to the Middle East to convert people to Christianity. There is something wrong with a twenty-three year old missionary telling a God fearing fifty-five year old man that he has been wrong all of his life and that he, the

young man, has been sent to bring him “The Truth”. *“How can you say to your neighbor, ‘Friend, let me take out the speck in your eye, when you yourself do not see the log in your own eye? You hypocrite, first take the log out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to take the speck out of your neighbor’s eye.”* (Luke 6:42) Isn’t the person that you are trying to convert your neighbor? Does he not deserve respect and understanding just like you do? Aren’t you required to love him and his family members like yourself?

I think we would all be wise to turn the critical lens on our own traditions before we attempt to show the negative in other traditions.

Now of course, the missionary zeal is not limited to Christians. You will find the same passionate dedication on the Muslim side. Muslims also want to convert the whole world forgetting that faith is a gift from God to those that He chooses and has nothing to do with our zeal, convincing logic, or need to convert others.

Islam, in fact, teaches his followers to set an example to others through the principle of “Demonstrated evidence (أقامة الحجة)”. This principle requires every Muslim to live in a self evident way to others that Islam offers a better way of life: closer to God and consequently a better society based on justice. This is the only legitimate path open to Muslims at this point in time to call others to Islam. This principle necessitates that Muslim failure to establish such evidence will excuse others in the eyes of God from the requirement to follow an Islamic way of life.

So before my Muslims brothers judge others or condemn their beliefs or their way of life, it will be wise to turn the critical lens on our own shortcomings. We, at this time do not live up to God’s expectation of us. We, unlike our forefathers are not at the forefront of science and technology. We are not responsible for discoveries that advance human knowledge and worst of all, we import from the West all that is necessary to survive. How can we at this time present Islam to the West as the better way when we have not established the evidence for our case?

What is required, in my opinion, is a lot of soul searching, a critical look at our own values and our place on this earth. What is it that we want of ourselves and others? The Earth is getting smaller every day and it is getting very crowded. Hence, we need to rise to the occasion by presenting ourselves and Islam to our neighbors instead of fearing them and hating them. The self-glorification we have been engaged in for the last few hundred years will not bring peace to our world. We need to make ourselves known to our Christian neighbors in order for them not to continue to fear us. Let us humbly examine what the Qur’an requires of us when we engage others in this renewed discussion:

The Bees 16:125 ¹²⁵ Call people to the way of your Lord with wisdom and fair counsel, and debate with them in the most courteous way, for your Lord

knows best who has strayed from His way; He knows best who is rightly guided⁹.

The Spider 29:46 [Believers], argue only in the best way with the People of the Book¹⁰, except with those of them who act unjustly. Say, 'We believe in what was revealed to us and in what was revealed to you; our God and your God are one [and the same]; we are devoted to Him¹¹.

It also teaches:

The Family of Imran 3:64 Say, 'People of the Book, let us arrive at a statement that is common to us all: we worship God alone, we ascribe no partner to Him, and none of us takes others beside God as lords.' If they turn away, say, 'Witness our devotion to Him¹².'

On the other hand, Christians and Muslims should heed Jesus' advice when they are reflecting on the second issue that we like to raise within the context of reconciliation. How can leaders on both sides minimize the danger of fanatics on one side and terrorists on the other?

The best way Christians can help "Muslims take on their more violent and extreme elements" is to address themselves to the "violent and extreme elements" within the Christian West. A case in point is Jerry Falwell, the fundamentalist televangelist, who said On CBS's *Sixty Minutes* "I think Muhammad was a terrorist". Or Pat Robertson, who on June 12, 2007 said "we have to recognize that Islam is not a religion. It is a worldwide political movement meant on domination of the world. And it is meant to subjugate all people under Islamic law". Or Hal Lindsey's book, *The Everlasting Hatred: The Roots of Islam*. This is nothing less than a diatribe by Christians against Islam.

If Christians wish to be helpful to their Muslim neighbors, who are working within their Muslim traditions for greater peace and justice, they could do no better than to take on the Jerry Falwells, the Pat Robertsons and the Lindsays of this world who are promoting a distorted and hateful Christian attitude toward Islam. As a person that believes deeply in the principles of Jesus, I see uninformed Christian rants against Islam as providing fodder for reactionary elements within both religions.

Those who wish for war and not peace among religions are exact mirrors of each other, actually helping each other bring about what they each claim to fear; a state of permanent war. The good news is that enlightened elements in both Islam and Christianity can also help each other, by building bridges to understanding and long-term peace and stability.

⁹ Translation is mine

¹⁰ Christians and Jews are called the people of the book in the Qur'an

¹¹ The Qur'an by M. A. S. Abdel Haleem Oxford University Press

¹² Ibid

At this time in history, the Christian West is far more developed than the Muslim East. It behooves the followers of Jesus to take to heart his teachings: “*You shall love your neighbor as yourself.*” Jesus raised this commandment dramatically when he said, (Mt 5:43) “*You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’*” He changed (Lv 19:18) “*love your neighbor*” to (Mt 5:44) “*Love your enemies,*” expanding the range of his followers’ love from the neighborhood to the world. Jesus said, (Mt 25:40) “*As you did it to one of the least of these My brethren, you did it to Me.*” This is the Jesus that I know and I love the same way I know and I love Mohammad and his message as revealed in the Qur’an which also teaches to love one’s enemy:

Fussilat 41:34 “Good and evil cannot be equal. [Prophet], repel evil with what is better¹³ and your enemy will become as close as an old and valued friend”.

If Christians decide to live by the principles of Jesus, they should find ways to love, serve and honor their Muslim brothers. Find ways to show your love to Muslims in order for them to love you back. Do we need a think tank to study how to show love toward others? Isn’t feeding the hungry and healing the sick a sure way to accomplish this? Follow Jesus and you will find the way.

Reconciliation at the end is a journey that God puts you on and leads you through. It is neither for the fanatic nor for the faint of heart. It is for those that have the deepest faith in Him and the deepest love toward other human beings—those who are too humble to judge others and ready to extend a loving hand toward them.

In today’s world, I hold the view that it is of highest importance that people of goodwill and deep faith engage in reconciliation efforts in order to spare both Muslims and Christians the agony of conflict and alienation. For it is not enough to love God with all our heart, mind and soul, if we don’t love our neighbor like ourselves.

¹³ kindness, forgiveness, good manners, honesty, transparency, integrity etc...