

Christian-Muslim Relations in Britain and The Gambia

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[I must ask the reader to forgive the rather personal and autobiographical character of this article. Our experience of relating to those of other faiths is different and our different experience may well shape those relations. I first encountered the challenge of relating to those of other faiths not personally (in the exercise of my pastoral ministry in circuit) but theologically (in debate in the Conference and in teaching in our theological colleges). The theological engagement has continued, for example, in writing on Bullinger's and Wesley's understanding of Islam,² but in the last decade it has been a largely pastoral and personal engagement. It has, however, been in the unusual context of another continent and of a country that, unlike Britain, is overwhelmingly Muslim. No country can offer a blueprint for another, but The Gambia is a model to the world of how Christians and Muslims can live together harmoniously.]

I do not remember engaging with the issue of our relations with Muslims before the 1970s. At the Nottingham Conference in 1972, the first one I attended as a representative, Dr English and I proposed an amendment to the report of the Faith and Order Committee on the issue of the use of church premises by those of other faiths. The Committee argued for giving 'permission to non-Christian communities as an expression of Christian love and the desire to improve community relations to hold their worship in Methodist premises' (Agenda p. 284). Our amendment, which was carried, rejected their proposal. As our churches, and indeed all our buildings, are dedicated to the glory of God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, we argued that there is a manifest contradiction in their being used for worship by those who explicitly reject that central element of the Christian faith.³ Such a use would equally deny the biblical witness to God's covenant with his people, the offer of salvation in Christ, and the missionary work of our Church among those of other faiths.

In 1976, when I gave the James A. Grey lectures on Preaching Jesus Christ Today,⁴ I had to engage theologically, although briefly, with the issue, in speaking of the universal Christ, the Christ for all people. I argued:

To preach Jesus Christ as the universal Christ is to affirm that God's action and revelation in and through Jesus Christ is decisive and

determinative for every age and every place. It is not, however, to say that there is not genuine encounter with God in non-Christian religions, but it is to affirm that in his encounter with us in Jesus Christ, he not only fulfils but also corrects every other response to him.⁵

Our duties in relating to those of other faiths

It was not, however, until 1998 that I sought to comment more substantially on our relations with those of other faiths. I did this in my Presidential Address at the Methodist Conference⁶ – and perhaps more significantly I gave that four-point part of my address a week or two later at a celebration of the birth of Muhammad in London. The occasion was organised by the Muslim Council of Great Britain and was addressed also by three MPs and John Monks, the General Secretary of the Trade Union Congress.

There was a certain risk in saying in a Muslim gathering what had been said in a Christian gathering, but it seemed to me that we should be able to say *to* people what we said *about* them. I thought my fourth point would be the tricky one (and, of course, it was), though on the night the second one was in some ways trickier. I spoke of four duties that Christians have in their relations with those of other faiths – the duties of welcome, of truth, of co-operation, and of witness.

A duty of welcome or hospitality is fundamental in our relations with both those of other races and those of other faiths. There is no place for racial or religious prejudice in our dealings with them. There is also, second, a duty of truth. As I put it, not every Muslim is a terrorist. It is so easy for us to stereotype people. We must not generalise from the fact that some Muslims have used their religion to defend terrorist attacks to imply that most or all Muslims are terrorists.

But in the duty of truth, I also stated that in many largely Muslim countries Christians are persecuted for their faith, which is contrary to the teaching of the Koran. Indeed, I dared to mention several countries by name, as I had done at the Methodist Conference, despite the fact that those countries, like all other Muslim countries, were represented at the banquet by their ambassadors or their deputies!

The third duty is that of co-operation. There are many areas in which our common convictions enable us to work together. We both affirm the sanctity of human life, the importance of the family, and the danger of drugs. On these and other matters we share common convictions, so that we can work together on areas of social policy from, for example, abortion to euthanasia.

The fourth duty is that of witness. We respect the fact that Muslims

Stephens: Christian-Muslim Relations

honour Jesus as a prophet, but we believe in him as Son of God and Saviour, and it is our privilege and duty to share that with everyone. (Indeed, I recall leading a group from the churches in Aberdeen in a welcome to the Dalai Lama, in which he said, 'We see Buddhism as for the East and Christianity for the West', and I had courteously to respond that our commission was to all the world, both East and West.) The response of the Muslim chairman of the gathering was striking. He had no difficulty with my stating of what we believed. Indeed, I think that, as a Muslim, he would expect a Christian to state what we believe, rather than adopt the safe liberal territory of warm words about community relations. He did, however, quite properly emphasise the way they honour Jesus.

If I were to give that address now, I would add a further duty – the duty of learning. As I will say later, we can learn from Muslims. Indeed, they may actually be a stimulus to us to become better Christians.

Critique of the prevailing view in the Methodist Church

Until I came to The Gambia in 2003 as Chairman and General Superintendent and then again in 2010 as Presiding Bishop of the newly autonomous church, my engagement, in our relations with those of other faiths was theological rather than pastoral or personal. I was in large part simply responding to what I regarded as misguided resolutions in the Conference or unbalanced or inadequate statements by those speaking on our behalf connexionally. They stimulated me first to challenge an official resolution at the Conference and then to engage with the issue in two theological lectures I was asked to give at Duke University on Preaching Jesus Christ Today, and after that to consider it in a wider address to the Church as President.

At the risk of over-simplifying, let me describe my position as critical of the prevailing 'orthodoxy' in the Methodist Church in this area. It seemed to me that the guilt that Christians felt about the way that, say, Asians have been treated because of their race has clouded our judgement in discussing the religion of the Asians who have moved to Britain, and often also our judgement in discussing race.

This, and perhaps a too liberal theology, has led to an almost exclusive concern with community relations at the cost of evangelism at home and the support of persecuted Christians abroad. Just as the churches, not least the World Council of Churches, were silent for decades about the persecution of Christians in Eastern Europe, our Church, not least those involved in inter-faith relations, has been silent about the persecution of Christians by those of other faiths.

The relativising of the Bible in much liberal theology and the relativising of the Christian faith in a postmodern culture left us with nothing to say in our defence and proclamation of the Christian faith. Mission was no longer expressed in evangelism, but in dialogue and presence. A selective reading of Wesley was, moreover, used even in some official reports to Conference to support a relativist or inclusivist approach to other faiths.

Dialogue and presence are not in themselves to be rejected, but they are to be rejected as alternatives to, or substitutes for, evangelism. Our relations with those of other faiths will involve dialogue in the sense of an attentive listening to and learning from them, and an endeavour to enter into their experience. The Christian, however, in this dialogue is part of a community to which Christ has said, 'As the Father has sent me, so I send you . . . Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptising them in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.' Christian presence is not to be rejected, but the presence of Christ, the Word of God, is not a silent presence. His ministry began with his presence in Galilee ('Jesus came to Galilee') *and* his preaching in Galilee ('preaching the Gospel of the Kingdom') (Mark 1:14). Moreover, his presence with us in Matthew 28:19–20 is related to his commission to us.

The Gambia

Leading the Methodist Church in The Gambia has been a fascinating and challenging experience. It is religiously, culturally and politically very different from Britain and Europe. It is 90%-95% Muslim and only just over 5% Christian. It is not secularised, but deeply religious. It is not monarchical and parliamentary in government, but presidential and parliamentary, with the same President and party in power since the revolution in 1994.

The Gambia is perhaps the only overwhelmingly Muslim country where Christians are free to practise and propagate their faith – indeed, where they have a significant role in national life. There are various factors which have led to this and which sustain it. The three historic churches (Methodist, Roman Catholic and Anglican) have contributed enormously to education. Education was indeed pioneered by the first Methodist missionaries in 1821 and they were followed later by Roman Catholics and Anglicans when they arrived. Many leading Muslims, including imams, were educated in Christian schools and send their children to Christian schools. Most families, at least in the urban areas, will include members of the other faith. The three bishops and, in particular, the one chairing the Christian Council, have a national role alongside the leading imam, the Imam Ratib of Banjul. The people, and not least the President, are com-

mitted to harmonious relations between Christians and Muslims. Indeed, the President has attacked those who bomb innocent people, especially doing it under the cloak of Islam. He referred to such Muslim extremists as the enemies of Islam, for whom there is no place in The Gambia.⁷

The role of religion and the churches

The national role of the churches is expressed in several public ways. Major national and international occasions begin with Muslim and Christian prayers. I recall an event in my first few days here. The Vice President was opening a Conference of West African social administrators and began by saying that it was unthinkable for the meeting to begin without calling on the aid of Almighty God to help in the deliberations. So before it began, there were Muslim and Christian prayers.

The occasions at which I have had to pray are as varied as life itself: the State Banquet on the President's Birthday, the launching of a detective series on television, the Annual General Meeting of a leading bank, the Passing Out Parade of the Armed Services, the Launching of the National Federation of Women, the State Banquet for the Muslim Head of a Muslim State, the Celebration of Gambian Independence, and the Laying of the Foundation Stone of the new Parliament building. I may know in advance, but I may not. There are occasions when I do not expect to be asked to pray, such as my initial courtesy call on the Imam Ratib and the Council of Muslim Elders, and occasions when I'm not sure whether prayer is expected, such as a courtesy call on a cabinet minister or ambassador, not least if they are Muslim.

I recall visiting two members where the former husband of the one and the father of the other had died. He was, or had become, a Muslim. After I had spoken to them and prayed with them, I was taken as a matter of course to the room where all the (Muslim) men were gathered. The occasion was unexpected, but I sensed that they would expect me to pray, which I did. Ironically most of them would probably not have understood a Muslim prayer as it would have been in Arabic, but would understand my prayer in English!

Prayer is part of the ordinary life of every day in The Gambia. A Muslim will be as likely as a Christian to ask me to pray. A group of Muslim men sitting on the pavement one Sunday after the morning service saw me in my white cassock and asked me to pray. I began by saying I would pray in church for them, but then simply stopped and prayed on the pavement. A young swimming pool attendant at the Atlantic Hotel whom I greet when I go to swim in the Atlantic asked me to pray for his marriage. The check-

out girl at the vegetable store, followed moments later by one of the men bringing produce for sale, asked me to pray. The Managing Director of the largest bank and his senior colleagues, when I called to see to the investment of a scholarship fund, said that they could not let me go without my praying with them for the bank.

Responding to the unexpected

Eight years ago I recall a greeting sent by the Imam Ratib to each of the Heads of Churches at Christmas. (Muslims here can share at least in part in the celebration of Christmas.) I wrote and then called to thank him. After that I called on him on a number of occasions (he was in his nineties) and his grandson called regularly on me. In the June he died, and within minutes I had heard from three people, including the grandson, of his death. The advice in our office was to call the next day, but the grandson asked me to come at once, which I did, and to come to the funeral. A Muslim funeral is on the same or the next day. What should I do?

I phoned the Anglican bishop (but he was out of the country) and the Roman Catholic bishop (but his phone was not working). I phoned his senior priest. He said that we did not go to Muslim funerals, but would just go to the mosque – and ‘hang round’ outside. The Secretary General of the Christian Council, an Anglican, then phoned and asked me to go with him to the Muslim cemetery and just ‘hang round’. As long as he was there, it seemed all right for me. But though I went, he did not! I learned afterwards that my arrival caused some astonishment in the crowd, as they saw one of the Heads of Churches going to a Muslim burial. Moreover, when I got to the entrance, the soldiers clearly had no expectation that I would simply ‘hang round’, and so I was ushered through the crowd to the graveside, to join the Cabinet, the High Commissioner and others round the grave. It was, no doubt with some relief, that I learned afterwards that people thought I had done the right thing in going beyond what they were accustomed to do. It was one of many occasions when I had to trust my spontaneous judgement.

Recently I was asked to give a ‘Christian blessing’ at a non-denominational service in the City Council Hall. (Unusually there were three days’ notice, whereas often one is invited on the day before or the day itself.) I asked the Deputy Lord Mayor, a Methodist, what it was – and discovered that it meant a Christian service alongside a Muslim recitation of the Koran, as part of praying for peace and for the forthcoming Presidential election. The Lay President enlisted a small group. We sang two Easter hymns, read short passages of scripture on peace, and prayed. The Council

Stephens: Christian-Muslim Relations

of Banjul Muslim Elders, who had arranged for the city council to organise the occasion, expressed their appreciation for such participation (I think they had expected only me) and were content to bid us farewell before they began a long reciting of the Koran.

Besides the Imam Ratib and the Council of Elders, there is the Supreme Islamic Council. It corresponds to the Gambia Christian Council, which was founded in 1966, with Methodists, Roman Catholics and Anglicans as the three founding members. (It is apparently the first council in which the Roman Catholic Church was a founding member.) The government looks to the Islamic Council and our Council to deal with certain issues. In December it referred to us rather than to the courts a dispute involving a mosque and two independent Christian congregations/churches. The mosque claimed that the noisy singing disturbed their prayers and, judging by the volume of the loudspeakers at the two mosques near me, the Christian congregations could have felt the same.

We took the initiative as bishops and suggested to the Islamic Council that we meet with them and with the imams and pastors concerned. After discussing it for two hours or so, we agreed broadly that mosques and churches should not be built close to each other and therefore that precedence should be given to the one that was there first. In this case it was the mosque. The process was in some ways very Gambian. The Government wished the matter to be dealt with by the religious leaders, not the courts, and the religious leaders and at least one and probably both of the pastors, as well as the imam, saw the importance of harmonious relations between Christians and Muslims.

Challenges

In a world where Christian minorities are frequently persecuted, we are privileged to live in peace in the Gambia with freedom to practise and to preach. The Christmas, New Year, and Easter messages of the three bishops are broadcast on radio and television and published in the papers. There is a service and a Christian programme every Sunday afternoon and evening on television. At times such as Christmas, Lent and Easter there are more frequent broadcasts.

I am perhaps more conscious than others in The Gambia of how relations between Muslims and Christians have worsened in other countries across Africa and Asia and even parts of Europe, most significantly in countries where there have been decades or more of relative harmony. Seven years ago I initiated the first independent meeting of Muslim and Christian leaders, although the original idea was not mine. The Secretary

General of the Supreme Islamic Council commented once, when he and I were waiting to see the Secretary of State for the Interior and Religious Affairs, that we ought not simply to meet when the Government called us together. In the light of that, I persuaded the two bishops that we should have a meeting, and we invited the Supreme Islamic Council to a joint meeting. (It was described in the press as a historic meeting.) It happened that about a week before our meeting a Christian, I think a Nigerian, stood up and began to preach in the mosque in Bakau. That gave a providential timing to our meeting. Unfortunately, the second meeting never happened. However, seven years on the bishops have now agreed with me that we should meet from time to time with both the Supreme Islamic Council and the Imam Ratib and the Council of Banjul Elders. Formal as well as informal meetings will help us to maintain our harmonious relations.

A concern to maintain good relations can constrain evangelism, but the lack of a missionary commitment would probably be more fundamental. Yet there are certain constraints. By tradition we would not instruct anyone under 18 without the agreement of their parents, though we will help them with books to read.

It is in general not easy for Muslims to become Christians both because they can be excluded from their family and because members of their family may even be those who, in some parts of the world, carry out the death penalty for apostasy. I recall a young Guinean who came to the manse just after Christmas eight years ago, wanting to be instructed in the Christian faith. We gave him daily instruction in the faith and at Easter he was baptized and confirmed. It happened that it was one of our televised services, but it did not seem appropriate even in a Gambian context to dramatise the occasion.

Political correctness has sometimes been destructive of Christian identity in the west, but this is not yet the case in The Gambia. Inclusive language has not led us to abandon trinitarian language (Father, Son and Holy Spirit) for unitarian language (Creator, Redeemer, Sustainer) and Christian prayers on public and private occasions are trinitarian. We most often begin 'In the name of God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit'. In public we are invited to lead Christian prayers, although sometimes the reference is to praying in the Christian way. In doing things together or alongside each other, and in recognising what we have in common, we do not compromise the distinctiveness of Christian faith, which is always a risk when there is a concern for community relations.

Pastoral concern and theological conviction can be in tension, as is the case with inter-faith marriages. Some of our leading members are in an

inter-faith marriage, and this appears to have been generally accepted. But there are others who see such marriages as in conflict with the biblical witness, not least Paul's instruction in 2 Corinthians 6:4. They would argue, moreover, that women in such a marriage would in some cases have difficulty in practising their faith. A challenge I face at present is what alternative, if any, I should draft to the existing and proposed Standing Orders relating to inter-faith marriages. For example, at autonomy a constitution was adopted without debate which required of a member in such a marriage 'a declaration of compliance with the doctrinal principles of the Methodist Church to the Leaders Meeting [in order to] be entitled to hold office in the Church'.

A further issue is the blessing of a marriage in church. Should it be encouraged after an Inter-Faith marriage? Should it be allowed/encouraged as soon as possible after the civil marriage or should it not be allowed for a period of, say, five or ten years, when the marriage has shown itself to be stable? To many in The Gambia the Guidelines in CPD would seem to lack both rigour and a sufficient theological foundation. For me the issue expresses the tension not only between pastoral and theological considerations but also between leading the Church and listening to diverse voices in the Church, with the added complication that the Church is Gambian, and the leader is not.

Learning from Muslims

Living in an overwhelmingly Muslim country has helped me to see what we can learn from Muslims – indeed, that they can even help us to recover dimensions of a biblical Christian faith that we may have neglected or forgotten. A sense of the sovereignty of God has disappeared from the faith of many in the Church today (not helped by anxiety about words such as King and Lord) and so has a sense of God's transcendence. Contact with Islam offers a corrective there and may make us look afresh at elements of the biblical witness which are out of fashion.

In much of the West, religion has been pushed to the margins of society, as relevant only to our private life, not to our public life. Experience of Islam confronts that head on. For Muslims, the whole of life (social, economic, political, cultural) is under the rule of God. They have not abandoned the public square and so have not had to try to recapture it.

Life in a Muslim country is punctuated daily by the call to prayer. (On the few occasions here when I am not up before 4.30, I cannot say I rejoice to be wakened by the loudspeakers from mosques on both sides of the manse!) The several calls to prayer throughout the day may recall us to the

Christian tradition of prayer at certain times of the day and the practice of arrow prayers. Such practices give a rhythm both to the week and to the day, so that we may truly sing, 'Seven whole days, not one in seven, I will praise thee' or 'so shall no part of day or night from sacredness be free'.

In Ramadan you have a sense of a community that fasts by day. The universality of the practice makes it easier for the individual and has, I imagine, helped to maintain the practice of fasting among many Christians here.

In none of these examples, is it a case of importing elements of Islam into Christian faith and practice. It is rather that their faith and practice may call us back to forgotten or neglected parts of the biblical and Christian tradition. The form of each of them in Islam is different from its Christian equivalent, although related to it.

There is also the way Muslims do what they do. There are, of course, nominal and bad Muslims as there are nominal and bad Christians, and I am not referring to them. But is worshipping God with your hands in your pockets more appropriate than prostrating yourself before him? Is knowing at most the Lord's Prayer and the Twenty-third Psalm better than learning to recite the whole of the Koran by heart? Is giving to the needy when you feel moved to it better than the obligation to give a fixed percentage of your income? When we consider those of another faith at their best, we cannot so easily stereotype them or dismiss them. When I wrote on what Bullinger and Wesley said about Islam and Muslims, I was struck that with all their criticisms they could also see where Muslims put Christians to shame.

If I end with the duty to learn, it is not because it is the most important, though for some of us it may be the most necessary duty. It has, however, its proper place alongside the duty of welcome (or hospitality), the duty of truth, the duty of co-operation and the duty of witness.

NOTES

- 1 The Right Reverend Professor W. Peter Stephens is the presiding Bishop of The Gambian Methodist Church.
- 2 'Understanding Islam – in the Light of Bullinger and Wesley', *Evangelical Quarterly*, January 2009.
- 3 A different but related issue arose at Conference a quarter of a century later, to which my fundamental response was similar, as was the outcome.
- 4 Published in *Worship and Preaching* (8) 1978 and republished as *Jesus Christ Today* (The Church in the Market Place: Buxton, 2000).
- 5 *Jesus Christ Today*, (p. 17).
- 6 See *The Methodist Recorder* 25 June 1998 (pp. 8–9).
- 7 See *The Daily Observer* 16 May 2011 (p. 2).