Ján MIHÁLIK

Islam and Christianity: Debate or Dialogue?

Imagine a Muslim who has never read the Bible; who has studied just four or five books about Christianity, none of which was written by a Christian; who has met Christians who have not kept the basic Biblical principles in their lives; and who has heard quite a lot about fanatic fundamentalist Christian missionaries who ask the poor to convert for food aid.

To what extent is she or he prepared for a dialogue with Christians? At least by reading those four or five books, however, she or he is still more advanced than the majority of us regarding Islam.

MOTIVATIONS IN DIALOGUE

Nowadays dialogue with Islam seems to be unavoidable. Globalisation has moved us to neighbouring streets in the global village. We can paraphrase the famous sentence: We will live with Muslims side by side—the question is how. Thus we have to talk also about our religions.

What are Muslims and Christians looking for when entering into direct dialogue? Peace in the world, truth, their own perfection, survival, an effective tool for mission, or a kind of unity? We can see a bit of everything in the dialogue between them.

There are groups which seek primarily *peace* and *non-violence*. Interreligious dialogue between Muslims and Christians is basically one small part of wider steps to making the world more peaceful. They look for ways to build ties which could keep relations in the world without violence.

Some people are looking for improvement on the way to *religious perfection*. They want to follow better what they believe in and they want to improve the overall attitude of their religious community (or Church) towards other religions.

We can find there people who think that a religion which behaves violently or supports violence has betrayed its original meaning. Sometimes at a minimum they want to improve the public image of their church, by pretending openness and wide liberal attitudes.

Others are pragmatics, saying that communication labelled as dialogue is a *political inevitability* today. It is the behaviour appreciated by public opinion, by those who provide the funds, or by those who could cause some harm to our people or to our country.

As an example, it is enough to be reminded in this respect of the wave of openness for negotiation and even for dialogue shown by the countries neighbouring Iraq after the threat of the war has emerged.

Then there is a group of people who looks for the *Truth*. In the confrontation between Muslims and Christians, they see the opportunity to find another morsel of truth. In the worst case, they just want to find another argument for their own position.

For still others, dialogue is more or less an effective tool to bring the right *teaching* and doctrines to those whom they deem ignorant or unenlightened. In their understanding it is the politically correct way to do this, at least at first sight.

In each group there are people who are authentically interested in the partner in dialogue. Their agenda brought to the encounter, however, influences where they put the emphasis, what they expect from the partner, and what methods they use.

Looking at the aforementioned points, the encounter with Islam could remind us of ecumenical dialogue between Christian churches or dialogue between Christians and Jews in a certain scope.

All of these are influenced by the fact of common religious roots and (at least partly) sharing the same sacred texts. It seems that the same should apply for Islam, due to shared roots in Abraham and the Qur'an's reference to Jews and Christians as to the *People of Book*, respected more than the others.

Nevertheless, there are certain features that make dialogue very different. They lay also somewhere in the core of the clashes of our three religions, which some scholars, quite precisely, call *Abrahamic civil war*.

TYPES OF DIALOGUE

William ISAACS describes a few types of conversation, as well as two dilemmas which determine our way of communication with partners. It can help us to sort out our attempts between Islam and Christianity.

When communication starts, one often begins with *conversation*. Parties take their turns to talk. Then some expressions and sentences seem to be more relevant and others less so for the other party.

Some of them the partner likes; the others she or he dislikes. The selection and processing of information starts to take place. Its next phase is *deliberation* (weighing out). There the basic dilemma appears: to suspend what I think and remain open, or to defend my position with the assumption that I am right. Thus we can enter into two different types of conversation. The first one is *reflective dialogue* and the second one is *discussion*.

ISAACS speaks about *controlled discussion*, if one chooses unproductive defensiveness, and one is stuck to one's original position without any possibility to change. This means competing, advocating one's own position without any doubts. It can lead to *debate* where a solution is reached by putting down one of the parties.
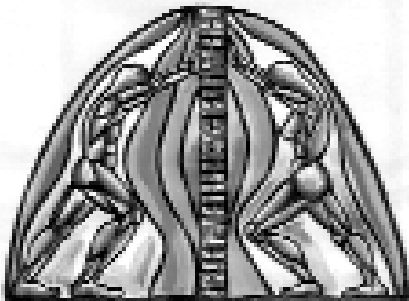
If the defensiveness is productive, using hard data to find answers to problems, reasoning explicitly, analyzing the situation, the discussion can change into *skilful conversation*, which after certain tensions can bring the synthesis of opposites.

On the other hand, the parties in *reflective dialogue* have deeper ambitions. They aim to explore deeper levels of their relationship. They look for underlying causes of the existing problems; they try to understand unspoken rules of their dialogue.

They give up finding solutions. Rather they are opened to name new aspects, which can show even new problems. Thus dialogue produces a collective flow. It is process of thinking together, which does not mean necessarily finding answers.

Dialogue, however, helps to invent unprecedented possibilities and to bring new insights. The parties can create a new framework or a new atmosphere and understanding, which in turn can lead to unexpected solutions.

Dialogue is a long run; it takes a lot of time. But its fruits are more solid and enduring. In the dialogue with Islam we need both types: skilful conversation as well as reflective dialogue. We need some quick answers and agreements, which will not be perfect, but will make space for the next steps.

We need to put a certain pressure on Muslim scholars and representatives, and on the other hand we need to experience the same pressure on ourselves in order to look for solutions for our co-existence and clashes in daily life.

We need this pressure to examine carefully our positions and to provoke a look beyond our horizon. There should flow, however, an underlying river of long-term dialogue. But what do we need in order to enter dialogue or skilful conversation and to avoid the trap of debates at the same time?

CHANGING AND REMAINING

When applying ISAACS' approach to the relationship in the world influenced more by Christianity and the one influenced more by Islam, we can describe the long-term nature of our relationship as *debate*.

Dialogue, as described by ISAACS, presupposes an ability and possibility to suspend our own point of view, our own opinion, and to go a certain part of the way together with our partner. Something like this involves our identity.

Values and believed truths are at stake at once. Things are in danger of *valuequake*. The answer to the questions "Who am I?" and "Where do I belong?" seems to be opened again in such circumstances.

It is in certain contradiction to what religion aspires to provide: certainty and a lasting tool for distinguishing the good from the bad, the sacred from the profane. Thus we face one of the crucial problems in interreligious dialogue.

How can we be open for dialogue, for possible change, and yet stay the same, unchanged and traditional in the key points of our own beliefs? For entering real dialogue between religions, they must be equipped with skills and mechanisms allowing them to reinterpret old beliefs and known truths in a new context. Religion has to enable its followers to find new interpretations, to deduce truths previously unknown.

"In striving to adhere to traditional beliefs and moral codes, religious actors recognize that tradition is pluriform and cumulative, developed in and for concrete and changing situations. In this process the *internal pluralism* of any religious tradition bestows on the religious leader the power of choice," writes Scott R. APPLEBY.

Reinterpretation is a complex multi-level process. At the individual level in daily life an ordinary religious person has to apply and reinterpret religious principles in her or his unique situation.

"To act intentionally in a religious sense, the believer or the religious authority must discern the meaning of the present circumstances, select the past that speaks most authoritatively to the meaning, and choose an appropriate course of action in response," says APPLEBY.

On the other hand, it is present even at the highest social level when a religious entity formally acknowledges a new part of doctrine or announces a new understanding of traditional principles.

Despite the tendency to stress traditional principles and to keep continuity in religion, there must also be a lot of attention paid to reinterpretation processes. These processes keep religion real and lively.

If a religious group renounces reinterpretation of principles and doctrine and strictly sticks to certain wording, it closes the door to its life. Such a religious entity is either doomed, or it will have to make certain innovations.

The tension between keeping tradition and reinterpreting it is present in Islam as well as in Christianity. It is unavoidable and necessary, and each religion has to manage this tension on its own.

It is not possible to directly make any religion open to reinterpretation. It is possible, however, to create pressures and challenges, which help to trigger intrareligious dialogue about the issue. An example of such a dialogue is the question of *ijtihad* in Islam.

REOPENING THE GATE OF *IJTIHAD*

Shari'a, the traditional Muslim law, is in the structure of Islam the order of God given to people. It characterizes Islam more significantly than dogmatic theology. Like most religious cultures, Islam classically drew no distinction between religious and secular life. Hence *Shari'a* covers not only religious rituals, but also many aspects of day-to-day life.

In the early Islam, the older legal customs with small modifications in the spirit of Qur'an where used. That is why the first attempts to systematize *Shari'a* appeared. As the consequence of those trends, legal schools (*maddhab*) were established. Four of the most successful legal schools of Sunni Islam last even until today.

Ijtihad is a technical term in Muslim law and means the process of making a legal decision by an independent interpretation, or rather, working with the sources of dogma.

After the settling of Muslim jurisprudence in four *maddhab*s in the IXth and X[th] centuries, the opinion appeared that their founders were the absolute *mujtahid*s (persons who are experts of Muslim jurisprudence).

Therefore, later generations of lawyers can perform just a limited *ijtihad* within the framework of their schools, based on the model principles and texts of the school's founder. Later in Sunni Islam, the opinion prevailed that the gate of *ijtihad* was closed and the lawyer can give answers to specific questions only based on previous solutions in his school.

This should help to avoid errors of over-confidence in judgement. Even though the gate was closed, the dialogue on *ijtihad* regularly appeared in the works of Sunni legal

scholars. The Shiite concept of *ijtihad* is different, and it was continually practiced.

The discourse on *reopening the gate of ijtihad* gained new power in the XXth century, because of the external challenges that the Western Judeo-Christian and the secularized world presented to the world of Islam. The situation in the last centuries, probably from the times of colonialism, presents many new unprecedented influences and pressures on Islam, which must answer in some way.

How the question of *ijtihad* will be settled is not sure. It is the internal task and challenge of contemporary Muslim scholars. The quality of the relationship between Islam and Christianity, however, is dependent also on the ways Islam will find to reinterpret its tradition in the new globalised world.

What Christians can do in this process is to enhance their own instruments serving openness in dialogue and to find, together with Muslims, an appropriate and suitable (proper and apt) new language for common understanding.

Suggested Reading
APPLEBY Scott R., *The Ambivalence of the Sacred: Religion, Violence, and Reconciliation*. 2000.
ISAACS William, *Dialogue: The Art of Thinking Together*. 1999.
Islam. In *Wikipedia: the Free Encyclopaedia*. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Islam
KROPÁČEK Luboš, *Duchovní cesty islámu* (Spiritual Ways of Islam). Praha, 2005.
KÜNG Hans - van Ess Josef, *Křesťanství a islám* (Christianity and Islam). Praha, 1998.
MENDEL Miloš, *Islámská výzva* (Islamic challenge). Brno, 1994.

Ján MIHÁLIK works for Partners for Democratic Change Slovakia as consultant and trainer in the fields of NGO management, youth work and youth policy, and religion and peacemaking. He has an academic background in social work and social development practice. Prior to joining Partners for Democratic Change Slovakia, he was executive director and later president of DOMKA – Association of Salesian Youth, which is one of the biggest Slovak youth organisations. He is Roman Catholic. His email address is mihalik@pdcs.sk.

BAKOS T. Gergely OSB

Mystical Theology as a Way to Dialogue?

"It would seem to me a waste of the past if we were content to see in the literature of every bygone age only the reflection of our own faces."
Clive Staples LEWIS

In the 16 June 2003 issue, Time magazine gave a special report on Christianity in Europe with the title: "Where Did God Go?" This attention towards religious–cultural changes from secular print media should not be surprising.

In fact, 37 years earlier, on 8 April 1966, Time had already published a similar dossier with a more eloquent and sombre title: "Is God Dead?" This question was set with red letters on a black cover—in order to emphasise its seriousness and tragic importance.

As Time put it "Christian history allows the possibility of development in doctrine, and even an admission of ignorance in the face of the divine mystery is part of the tradition. Thomas Aquinas declared that 'we cannot know what God is, but rather what he is not'."

ADMISSION OF IGNORANCE

Anyone familiar with the first pages of Thomas AQUINAS' two *Summa*s will recognise that this *admission of ignorance* is a genuine piece of Thomistic thought.

Perhaps this approach—negative theology served in the nutshell of journalism—"would fit comfortably today's pluralist context."

Be that as it may, even if one agrees with AQUINAS' statement, one can still approach the Divine Mystery in a way that does not render it another postmodern platitude—readily accepted with a nonchalant smile of indifference.

Thomas AQUINAS himself seriously considered both the possibilities *and* the dangers of a rational discussion with heretics, Muslims and non-believers, but he did not make mystical ignorance a positive starting point for dialogue.

His premise was that if we cannot positively know who God is, then, on these grounds, it is at least not clear how to enter into discussion. The Divine Mystery ought to be respected and can be only accepted by an act of faith.

Hence, those people who do not share the same commitment, the same act of faith, cannot be brought to fully understand God. As AQUINAS put it, there exist articles of faith that cannot be proven with necessary reasons. But neither can they be disproved in any way.