Re-Visiting Some Basic Truths About Islam: Road to Dialogue, Mutual Co-Existence and Sustainable Development in the Third World

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Abstract

Every Religion   دين or ديانـة has its fundamental truth, which is sometimes misrepresented by some of its own adherents and external prejudice. Such misrepresentations may lead to some myths and conceptions, which rarely present such a religion in a positive light. It happens to Christianity, Buddhism, Hinduism, Judaism, and Islam. In this paper, we shall concentrate on Islam by projecting some of its basic truths, especially as it relates to the Qur'anic injunction to maintain a healthy relationship with others (Surah 42:43). The love of kindred advocated by the aforementioned Qur'anic verse may be extended to mean the love of our common humanity, for all mankind are brothers descended from Adam (A. Yusuf Ali 1983:1312). The universality of this admonition is aimed at encouraging dialogue in countries where Islam and other religions co-habit, especially by proposing a re-visiting of the basic truths of Islam as a panacea for the promotion of dialogue and mutual co-existence. This might be particularly true and needed for sustainable development in Nigeria and other third world countries where various religions, especially Islam and Christianity must co-exist and contribute to their economic, political, democratic, social, and religious development.

1. Introduction

Human interaction of various sorts have increasingly made people of different religions and cultures to be neighbours (Surah 4:36). They are found in villages, towns, and cities all over the world. These neighbours from diverse religious backgrounds also teach in schools and work in hospitals where people of other religious affiliations are found. They are also strangers with whom we really do not have much in common with in our daily lives. But, in one way or the other, they require our care and love. This situation demands a new attitude of understanding, co-operation and collaboration without necessarily forcing any one to change his religion or deny it. This new globalizing concept of mutual interaction challenges the nearly 2000 years of struggle and conflict between East and West, as well as between Islam and Judaism cum Christianity. It challenges what Anthony Pagden refers to as "Worlds at War", reminding us that we live in an increasingly united world (2008:ix).

It is important to accept the fact that the fundamental Truth حق of all the great religions are necessary for the people who believe in its revelationإعلان. It is my conviction in this paper that when we are able to approach these religions from the standpoint of the followers of these faiths that we can really claim that we are neighbours. Particularly, the followers of any particular religion should also re-visit the fundamental truth(s) of their religion in order to be able to see the world broadly. In other words, fundamentalism should not be allowed to blur the truth of any religion. This is the basic condition to foster dialogue and mutual co-operation, especially in societies where religious groups must co-exist. In other words, the uniqueness of any religion does not oppose the upliftment and constant building up of the human community (see Clark, M.T., 1972:9). Let us take Islam, a fast growing religion, as an example where this critical examination is a *sine qua non*.

2. Islam and Peace

The word, peace, occurs more than 44 times in the Holy Qur'an. Literally, Islam الإسـلآم as a religion means submission, obedience, or surrender تسـلم or سـلم (Salam). By way of definition, one can refer to Islam as having peace through submission to the will of Allah الله(God; the One True God). This is   the basis for referring to Islam as a religion of peace. Surah 2:224 warns, thus: "And make not god's (name) an excuse in your oaths against doing good, or acting rightly, or making peace between persons; for God is One who heareth and knoweth all things". A Muslim is therefore a person who practices Islam. In other words, a Muslim is a surrendered one – a person who has submitted totally and completely to Allah الله; and pledges to promote peace. Commenting on this verse, A. Yusuf Ali writes, "In ii, 224 we are first of all told in perfectly general terms that we are not to make an oath in the name of God an excuse for not doing the right thing when it is pointed out to us, or for refraining from doing something which will bring people together. If we were swayed by anger or passion or mere caprice, god knows our inmost hearts, and right conduct and not obstinacy or quibbling is what He demands from us". Islam, therefore, imposes not only the duty of professing the oneness of God, but also his love for peace and unity among all creatures. By implication, a Muslim is one who professes that "there is no god but Allah and Muhammad is the prophet of Allah   لا إله إلا الله و محمد رسول الله (La ilaha illa Allah, wa Muhammad rasul Allah). To acknowledge these fundamental truths in Islam is to be a disciple of peace and love,

other accidentals notwithstanding.

3. Peace and Dialogue

Peace is open-ended and loving. Peace has a lot to do with acceptance of the other through mutual understanding and co-operation. A peaceable person shows readiness to engage himself in fruitful discussion with others, in dialogue and objective discussion of issues. A dialogical person is one who has developed "skills of encountering another culture and religion in such a way as to elicit the truth of that religion without finding too many of his own thumb prints in it"(Zepp, I.G., 1992:xxvii). In other words, both the adherent of a religion and its dialogical partner must approach the issue of listening to each other with empathy and sympathy, with the spirit of peace and dialogue (مكالمـة . محاورة).

4. Major Obstacles to Overcome

In presenting the basic truth of any religion, and in this context, Islam, the foremost bottleneck to overcome is prejudice. This can be seen in overriding journalistic literature which often mislead people in the judgment of a particular religion. Muslims do it in relation to Judaism and Christianity, and vice versa. The polemics of Al-Ghazali's type in relation to Christianity and Judaism can no longer help the image of Islam, for instance. In the same manner, Dante's Medieval Christian bias of Muhammad as an "arch-heretic", split from head to waist, to the lower circles of hell cannot assist the global struggle to enhance dialogue.

It is also a basic fact, if not a stark truth, that the activities of *Osama Bin Laden* have put Islam on the defensive, if not quickening the process of demonizing the religion, especially in the 21st Century. The tag of 'terrorism' cannot promote the image of religion. Rather, it diminishes it. The Cat and Mouse relationship established by *Al-Qaeda* ال قائـد has pushed hitherto endangered interaction to a lower level than it was in the Medieval period. Terrorism can never be a veritable way to dialogue and make Islam or any other religion understood and respected. Terrorism is violence, and so completely opposed to human progress and development. This is why anything or religion associated with it is suspect. Al-Qaeda gives the impression that it is identical with pure Islam. But this is a gross misrepresentation and distortion of the true meaning of Islam as religion closely associated with peace.

There is a real danger here in upholding the tenets of the Al-Qaeda and allowing it to be closely associated with Islam. If majority of Muslims accept it as a true representation of Islam and its belief, then Dante would be rejoicing in his grave. He would think that his dream about the Prophet of Islam locked in hell has come true. So, the major obstacle عائق to understanding Islam and its tenets in the 21st Century might be rooted in self-inflicted injuries – particularly by those who claim to know and propagate Islam - but, who actually are nowhere near or close to the true meaning of Islam as a peaceful religion.

For Islam to maintain its relevance today, there is the need to confront radical fundamentalism, which tends to make "the essence of Islam a negative protest against all non-Islamic phenomena" (Waardenburg, J. ed. 1998:122). Sayyid Qutb has been a model of this trend since his revolutionary appearance on the Egyptian scene in the mid-20th century. In fact, his "discourse on Judaism and Christianity in the Middle East and in the world represents the intellectual framework for radical groups and movements…(believing) that the whole universe is living a life of paganism (jahiliyya); false gods of materialism, atheism, secularism abound, and the forces that fight true religion are alive and well" (Waardenburg, J. ed. 1998:122). To identify every other religion and culture, except Islam, as 'jahiliyya' is a major obstacle to dialogical encounter in the 21st century.

In this regard, a lack of adequate attention paid to religious plurality and identity, or its negligence may not spell a good omen for growth and mutual co-existence. It is in this sense that T. Mitri sees religions as being divisive, and their manifestations, beyond the private sphere, as not being "conducive to peaceful and harmonious coexistence" (Waardenburg, J. ed. 2000:76). He argues further that the "failure to recognize the power of religious identity, and the meaning it gives in a world threatened by the loss of meaning, may defeat its own purpose: that of integration and the consolidation of civil and political rights of all, across the boundaries of religious affiliation" (Waardenburg, J. ed. 2000:76).

5. Concern for building bridges and dialogue

It was highly disheartening when the 21st century was marked by the ugly event of 9/11 in New York. No one had expected a disruption of such a magnitude at the beginning of a Century, which everyone had hoped would bring a lot of development and progress in human history. Almost a decade into the game, everyone is wary of the other, and no one knows the outcome. It was also unfortunate because it happened when Muslims were almost succeeding in convincing the world that the mission of Islam is not the disrespect of other religions, which in the actual fact, is true. A close study of committed Muslims would show the event of 9/11 as an aberration.

One of the major reasons for building bridges of peace and understanding is rooted in the Quranic admission of common brotherhood, inter-related by a series of divine revelation for the salvation of mankind. In

Surah 2:136, the Qur'an declares: "Say we believe in Allah, and the revelation given to us, and to Abraham, Ishmael, Isaac, Jacob, and the tribes and that given to all prophets from their Lord: We make no difference between one another among them".

For those who misrepresent Islam, both from within and without, the Qur'an recognizes a continuity of the monotheistic message through the prophets Adam, Noah, Abraham, Moses and Jesus. Even, the Holy Book acknowledges numerable prophets whose names are not mentioned in the Qur'an. In fact, by declaring that "every nation has had a Warner or a Prophet of God" (Surah 35:24) in the past, the Qur'an raises very broadly the possibilities that every nation has had divine revelation at various points in history. The implication is that all religions have fundamentally a teaching that needs to be recognized and respected.

An objective interpretation of these Qur'anic verses point to the fact that the sense and spirit of cooperation with other religions lie at the basis of the Islamic Creed. This means also that Islam gives a special status to the Jews and Christians, whom some extremist Muslims continually present to unsuspecting Muslims as arch-enemies of the Islamic religion. In fact, Jews and Christians are called "People of the Book" أهل الكتاب (Ahl Al Kitab). It is the close relationship perceived to subsist in their common belief, which makes the Qur'an encourage a common dialogue with them (Surah 3:6).

In Surah 3:13, the Qur'an lays further claims as to the reasons why Jews and Christians deserve the mutual respect of Muslims, their common Abrahamic root, thus: "There are people among them who stand by their Covenant, recite the word of Allah in the hours of night and prostrate before Him. They believe in Allah, and the last day of judgment, and enjoin what is good and forbid what is evil, and try to excel each other in good works. And these are among the virtuous. And whatever good they do, they shall not be denied its due reward and Allah knows well who are the God fearing".

On the basis of this injunction, the Qur'an forbids hostility against those who are not oppressors (Surah 60:9-10). Christianity goes further to recommend love for enemies, and even for oppressors. Jesus taught: "You have heard how it was said, You will love your neighbor and hate your enemy. But I say this to you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you" (Matt. 5:43-44). In conclusion, he commanded, "You must therefore set no bounds to your love, just as your heavenly Father sets none to his" (Matt. 5:48). For me, these are strong conditions and prerequisites for mutual respect and recognition of the need for sincere and meaningful dialogue.

What constitutes righteousness بر in Islamic faith has a universal application, especially in relation to Christian teaching. The Qur'anic teaching in Surah 2:177 is worth-noting: "It is not righteousness that you turn your faces to the East or West, but righteousness is he who believes in God and the Last Day and the Angels and the Book and the Prophets; and gives his wealth for love of Him to kinsfolk and to orphans and the needy and the wayfarer and to those who ask, and to set slaves free, and observes proper worship and pays the Zakah. And those who keep their treaty when they make one, and the patient in tribulation and adversity and time of stress; such are those who are sincere. Such are the God-fearing. A collaboration of basic Islamic tenet can be found in Matt. 25:31-46. According to Walter H. Wagner, "indeed, on the Last Day the prophets and messengers will assemble and will be asked about their faithfulness to God (Surah 5:116-18)…The existence of a brotherhood of human revealers points to God's plan to consummate the whole cosmos through the Day of Judgment and into the Hereafter" (Wagner, W.H. 2008:330).

Somehow, one observes a kind of emphasis on the unity of human race by Islam. It also points to equality of all humans before God, as can be read in the aforementioned passage on the demands of righteousness and criteria for last judgment. Righteousness requires a recognition of each other, making the most honourable creature before god to be the righteous of all. But a determination of who qualifies for this recognition depends on God himself. To crown the unity of human race, the Prophet Muhammad described mankind as "a family of Allah".

However, the ideal egalitarian tenets of Islam in relation to the entire human family has been brought to serious tests and critical examination. Concrete events question the rationale behind the persistent obstruction of Christians settling down properly in places like Saudi-Arabia, Turkey, Algeria, Somalia, etc On the contrary, North America, Europe, and even Asia are full of migrant Muslims agitating for acceptance and naturalization in their new-found homes. At the moment, the Turkish Muslims in Germany crave for equal citizenship with the Germans; demand to build Mosques and other centres of community meetings. They even wish to enter the European Union as Muslims without the readiness to fulfil the simple condition of allowing Christians in turkey to have their normal Churches re-opened or new ones erected for their traditional Christian worship. These hesitations are not the best of signals for dialogue and building of bridges of mutual communication and understanding.

6. Recommendations
It is my sincere conviction that a healthy interaction between religions, especially between Judaism, Christianity and Islam would go a long way towards ensuring mutual understanding, enrichment, peace, and prosperity to the

entire human community جماعة . A constructive trialogue of these religions would go a long way to restoring confidence in mutual relationship between them. This means that all hands should be on deck to build bridges of mutual understanding for each other's religion. In fact, as stated above in Surah 4:36, we are neighbours. The verse reads: "Serve God, and join not any partners with Him; and do good – to parents, kinsfolk, orphans, those in need, neighbours who are near, neighbours who are strangers, the companion by your side, the way-farer (ye meet), and what your right hands possess".

This injunction makes it imperative on all Muslims to realize that the essence of Islam is to serve God and do good to their fellow creatures. It emphasizes practical service rather than sentiment (A. Yusuf Ali, 1983:191). Muslim scholars should also practice the honesty of letting the less-informed Muslims that other religions, especially Judaism and Christianity emphasize the 'love of God and neighbour' as fundamental principles of religiosity (Matt. 5:43-48; Lev.19:18).

Since the boundaries and the miles separating the world into distant enemies have been radically bridged by modern communications and interactions of various kinds, the onus lies on all to promote the positive aspects of world unity and progress. In fact, we all must accept the fact that "today places that less than a century ago were remote, inaccessible, and dangerous have become little more than tourist sites" (Pagden, A., 2008:ix). In other words, we have become inevitable neighbours and should build upon this positive development for world progress and harmony.

Religious leaders and intellectuals in these religions should help to inform the society properly and positively about world religions, especially about Islam and Christianity in order to reduce the myth of prejudice that has led to series of religious conflicts and violence in their relationship. For instance, the present menace caused by an Islamist Sect called Boko Haram in Nigeria is not a positive story for sustainable development in the country (cf. Anyanwu, S.O. & Nwanaju, I. eds. 2010:6-9).

To encourage as many people as possible – especially the educated – to read the scriptures of the different faiths from the standpoint of the followers of these faiths, an exercise which would help us to find out that they are at the bottom, all one and helpful to one another (cf. Surah 2:177 and Matt. 25:31-46 to see the similarity of opinion regarding the Last Judgment).

To assist, through objective persuasion, many people to engage in constructive dialogue. This is because inter-faith dialogue has become necessary for the promotion of peace in the society. In fact, it is real peace that can guarantee real security in the third world, with its attendant sustainable development and progress (cf. Sharon D. Welch 2008:7).

The global revolution of the 21st century, which demands the world to be a *harmonious village* made up of brothers and sisters, should also challenge religious traditions to be less triumphalist than they were many centuries ago. By implication, all the religions, especially Christianity and Islam should engage themselves in a far more enlightened way than they had done in the past. By so doing, there would be a conducive environment for economic and political development, which would in turn lead to a desirable sustainable development.

Since Islam acknowledges a universal brotherhood of all peoples on earth, it becomes necessary for its leaders to be at the vanguard of promoting merit and justice in all spheres of societal life, especially in the Sub-Saharan Africa where the level of illiteracy and religious influence still play vital roles in development. Moreover, corruption should not be encouraged by any sincere Muslim or Christian. The history of Nigeria shows that this has not been the case, thus the vicious circle of underdevelopment (cf. Eluwa, G.I.C. et. al 2009:280) and killings (cf. Uba, C.N. 2001:326-327).

7. Conclusion

Man has an insatiable craving for the divine, the source of his existence. As a result of the search for a religious justification for his belief, he tries to posit the fundamental truths about his religion moderately or radically. Sometimes, the latter method obstructs his need for a dialogical encounter with members of other religions and beliefs. It is this stance which causes friction in their relationship with others, leading to conflicts and crises with the consequence of disrupting sustainable development. But every genuine human society demands tolerance and mutual understanding in dealing with others, which Islam really promotes. This is why a sincere balance is needed for progress and development in the society, especially a pluri-religious society. The paper uses the relationship of Islam with Christianity – especially in a multi-cultural and pluri-religious environment – as an example of how a proper presentation and understanding of its basic religious belief – can help to enhance sustainable development and progress. The greatest obstacle being prejudice ضرر and bias ميل, we have tried to recommend a positive approach to each other's religion, especially through dialogue, mutual understanding and mutual co-existence ألتمادل في الوجود . Islam recommends the enhancement of a genuine spiritual virtue (ihsan) (Carl W. Ernst 2003:64) as a way of deepening relationship between man and God, and by implication horizontally between human beings and their various human societies.

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