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ISLAM  -  CRISTIANITY-    Challenges for all of us    -

A Roman Catholic view                                             P.J. Cullinane


The Second Vatican Council spoke for all Catholics when it said the Catholic Church looks upon Muslims "with esteem" (*Nostra Aetate, 3)*. Inter-faith dialogue is a blessing. Its aim is not proselytism, but simply to better understand and respect each other. But this needs to go deeper. A tranquil relationship between us should not depend on not being able to ask each other questions people need to ask;  a kind of stand-off – respectful, but afraid.  A deeper level of trust, mutual esteem and genuine dialogue depends on and generates deeper friendships.

However justified it may be to meet jihadist force with force, ultimately, military action does not deal with the root causes of the problem. It is necessary to engage at the level of ideas, and in respectful dialogue between mainstream Christians and mainstream Muslims. [1]

Christians readily identify with devout Muslims who object to the violence committed by jihadists claiming to be honouring "the prophet". Many Muslims regard their religion as being damaged by the atrocities carried out in the name of their religion.  Christians, too, have sometimes felt embarrassed and un-represented by narrow and even bigoted interpretations of our faith by some of our own.

We can, however, also identify with Cardinal Reinhard Marx, president of the Catholic Bishops' Conference, who has called upon Islamic authorities to "go more deeply into the question of why some Muslims, especially young ones, are so susceptible to such an extremist and misanthropic understanding of their own religion".

One former jihadist, now an advisor to British security authorities, has said that the savagery and cruelty shown by extremists are really coming from sociopaths, who  interpret their faith as giving them the permission they feel they need for unleashing their violence, even giving it heroic and virtuous status. So, while acknowledging references to mercy and peace in the prophet's teaching, it is still fair to ask: is there within Islamic religion something that suits the purposes of people with a disposition for violence, coercion and punishing others?

Similarly, allowing that the radicalization of young Islamists has been fuelled by oppressive foreign policies by some Western countries, it is still fair to ask whether Islam's apocalyptic tradition leads them to expect and welcome confrontation.

Again, while making a proper distinction between Islamic faith itself and cultural aberrations practised in some  predominantly Muslim countries (e.g. female genital mutilation; oppression of women, etc) it is still fair to ask:  how effective is Islam in purifying cultures within its own territories in accordance with human dignity and a more humane world?

Again, notwithstanding a tradition of respect for education, it is fair to ask: is it something within Islamic faith, or is it a cultural phenomenon, that leads to the oppression of women and excludes them from education?

And, it is fair to ask: even though the prophet himself allowed the practice of other faiths within Islamic countries, is there something within Islamic religion that allows governments today to forbid religious freedom to others?

Christians can ask these questions with humility because we know what it is like to be guilty on all counts. Our history shows that we have been non-inclusive, oppressive, fundamentalist, coercive and violent. These things always start at the level of ideas, including misunderstandings of our own faith. Aberrations we have had to correct include the following:

- For centuries it was assumed that "error has no rights". It was an easy step from there to thinking that people in error have no rights. And from there it comes easily to justify torture and persecution. Hence the crusades against Islam, persecution of the Jews, and sometimes of fellow Christians. What has changed that will prevent such things from happening again? We now realize that it is meaningless to say "error has no rights" because it is *persons* who have rights, including persons who are perceived to be in error. And the Church now repudiates every form of persecution against anyone whomsoever; (2nd Vatican Council);

- For a long time Christians believed salvation was not possible outside the Church. Effectively everyone else was consigned to Hell. Today we accept that no one has the right to make that judgment, and that God offers to all people the possibility of being saved (2nd Vatican Council);

- Sometimes our errors derived from an overly literal interpretation of the holy scriptures. Words and sentences would be quoted without proper allowance for their historical, cultural and literary contexts. Today, we realize that it is the *meaning* of scripture that God has inspired, and that to know the meaning we must take seriously the historical, cultural and literary contexts.

- For several hundreds of years it was assumed that the State could impose Christian beliefs and punish dissent. We now realize that all persons have the right to freely follow their conscience and to practise their beliefs (2nd Vatican Council), and that the role of the State is to create the conditions in which this can happen. It is not for the State to enforce religious beliefs or practices.

Christians have had to learn, and re-learn, that salvation does not ultimately depend on our own success and on being in the right. It is an easy step from that assumption to being obsessive, driven, judgmental, oppressive and fanatical. The on-going challenge is to believe that salvation comes not from our being proved right but from our being forgiven. And our own need of God's mercy requires that we ourselves be forgiving and merciful.

Through such experiences of having to correct previous interpretations, the Church has come to realize more clearly that there is absolutely no place for exclusiveness, coercion, violence, fundamentalism or killing in the name of God or religion. Moreover it required openness to other people's thinking and to the discoveries of the sciences. We used to think we had nothing to learn from others because we saw our Catholic faith as complete. But, through inter-action with others we learned how to better interpret our own faith. The Spirit who guides the believing community from within is also at work in the world around us. Discovering God's presence within creation and within human history involves no disloyalty to God's presence within Christianity.

Is this a journey that Islam has yet to make? Has the memory of persecution and of grave injustices on both sides left Muslims twice-shy of engaging with the wider human community? Does their

understanding of "God's word" allow for the fact that when it is received by human beings it enters the processes of human understanding, and that human understanding can err? God is the source of both reason and faith, and we honour God by engaging **both**. Reason does not challenge revealed faith, but it does challenge us all to examine our human interpretations of it. Is it good enough merely to quote from the Qur'an – ignoring the requirements of hermeneutics - when the same can be done by others to justify violence and murder?

Just as it is with individuals, so too with religion: any religion that is afraid of honest questions is insecure, living in fear that it might be found wrong. Of course, nothing that God has revealed can be found wrong, but our human interpretations of it can be found partial, incomplete and sometimes wrong. Whether we are Muslims, Jews or Christians, none of us is immune from the limitations of human understanding. Only God is perfect.  Renewal and reform is part of God's agenda for all of us.

If this suggests that the leaders and scholars of Islam have much work to do, so too do Christians. We have our own act to clean up, as zealous Muslims don't hesitate to remind us, and rightly so. It is well known that Muslims feel offended by both the secularism and the neo-paganism of much modern life.  A culture that places a low premium on honouring God, as ours does, invites criticism from a religion that places a high premium on honouring God.

Worse, however: some of the offending against Muslims today comes from deliberate insult. The claim that "freedom of expression" includes a right to insult and to mock is symptomatic of a culture that has lost its sense of connection between rights and duties. A more deeply civilized culture recognizes that rights and duties go together, and that respect for persons, civility and common sense provide the common ground on which true satire, and honest, robust debate and dissent all have their rightful place.  When these aspects of civilization go missing, so too does genuine dialogue.

And so too does satire. After all, the traditional aim of satire was to bring about social or political change of some kind. Ridiculing others' ideas ran the risk of offending, but the real aim was to change opinions. Mere mockery, with reckless disregard for causing deep hurt, does not win over hearts and minds. So is it less likely to bring about change, and is less likely to be true satire.

If freedom of expression really does include a right to mock or insult, then what is meant by respecting other people's right to practise their sincerely held religious convictions without harassment or persecution? It seems secularism has its own form of intolerance, and totalitarianism.

How to respond to ridicule in this environment is the question facing both Muslims and Christians. Jesus taught his disciples to regard themselves as "blessed....when people hate you and revile you and speak all manner of evil about you on account of my name…" The prophet Muhammad personally reacted without violence when he was insulted.

The "je suis Charlie" campaign was liberal democracy's way of protesting against violence and defending "freedom of speech". Freedom is fundamental to human living. But freedom itself is diminished when it is misused. Deep respect for other persons is just as essential to human living.  Gratuitous insult provokes violence, and so is itself the beginning of violence. To many, the "je suis Charlie" campaign seemed to encourage the kind of offending that provokes violence.  Jean Vanier was right: "instead of the protest that infuriated many Muslims, there should have been a call to mutual respect".

It is wrong to think of freedom and self-restraint as being somehow opposed to each other, or even needing to be balanced against each other – as if they were opposing tendencies. They

actually *belong to* each other. Freedom for everybody depends on self-restraint. And self-restraint comes out of free choice. They both presuppose respect for others.

For Christians, deep respect for the God-given dignity of every person is a requirement of Christian discipleship.

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[1]  It is not the purpose of this essay to discuss variations within Islam, nor variations among jihadists. The fact that violence is being committed in the name of Islam is itself sufficient reason for promoting dialogue between Christians and Muslims – rather than offering our own answers, or asking our questions out of earshot.