Islam and Interfaith Dialogue: Some Observations

On March 21, 2014, Seyed Amir Akrami, a visiting Iranian scholar at the Eastern Mennonite University in Harrisonburg, VA, visited the headquarters of the International Institute of Islamic Thought. He holds a PhD in the philosophy of religion (McGill University), as well as a BA and an MA in Islamic theology and mysticism (University of Tehran).

In his opening remarks he stated that with the end of the Cold War, the closer relations between politics and religion necessitates interfaith relations. Realizing this, the West (especially the United States) has undertaken an unprecedented step: establishing centers for religion and diplomacy. Akrami considers this a very positive development. Another reason for this new approach was Samuel Huntington's (d. 2008) "clash of civilizations" theory, which upset many Muslims. What is often forgotten, however, is that Huntington also called for dialogue. President Mohammad Khatami of Iran responded to this by launching his 2001 "dialogue of civilizations" initiative. Akrami maintains that political and economic polarization is being replaced by cultures, of which religion is a very important part. Given that Islam and Christianity are the world's two largest religions, it is more practical to focus on them than trying to start a dialogue with all religions at this time.

The second part of his presentation consisted of several historical observations related to Christian views of Islam, Muslim views of other religions (especially Christianity), and how best to approach/view these two religions' relationship. John of Damascus (d. 750), an early Christian scholar of Islam noted for his largely polemical works, viewed Islam as a Christian heresy. Centuries later, the Crusades poisoned Muslim-Christian relations. But, importantly, part of the reason for this military onslaught was the great schism of 1054 that split Christendom between the Catholic Church (Rome) and the Orthodox Church (Constantinople).

Normal Daniel's *Islam and the West: The Making of an Image* (Oxford: Oneworld, 1993) is a very good source for these negative views. Among them are the following: (1) Muhammad was a cardinal who wanted to become the pope. When he failed in this attempt, he became a heretic; (2) Muhammad trained a dove or a bird to sit on his shoulder in order to deceive/delude his followers into thinking that he was being inspired; and (3) Dante, in his *Divine Comedy*, called Muhammad an imposter and liar and therefore placed him in the eighth circle of hell.

Peter the Venerable (d. 1156), who still saw Islam as a Christian heresy, was among the first to appreciate that one needed an accurate understanding of Islam in order to respond to it effectively. In 1142, he began to create a team to translate the Qur'an into Latin; this project took approximately one year. Francis of Assisi (d. 1226), who undertook a personal mission to Egypt to convert Sultan Malik al-Kamil, was impressed by the Muslims' dedication to prayer and let his opinion be known upon his return to Europe. Nicholas of Cusa (d. 1464) believed in the fundamental unity among religions, regardless of their adherents' ways of praying to and worshipping God. Shortly after Constantinople fell (1453), he wrote *On the Peace of Faith*, an imaginary dialogue held among seventeen representatives of religions (including Islam) and various dominations. Akrami would like to see his works studied more closely. Relations became more acrimonious with the rise of the Ottomans and the fall on Constantinople. For example, Martin Luther (d. 1546) was very anti-Islam and anti-Ottoman for this reason. In his *War against the Turk*, he claimed that Muhammad was the "destroyer of our Lord Christ and His Kingdom," among other things. He also promoted the view that Islam follows "the law of works and of the sword," which lasted until the nineteenth century.

In the contemporary era, three major developments have led to a more positive view: the development of communication and transportation, the rise of the academic study of religion (especially Max Müller [d. 1900]), and missionary activities in the Muslim world. This last element was quite important because it meant that Christians were now having personal and direct contact with Muslims. Over time, Muslims gradually moved from "enemy" to "other," "them," and "you" until they became a part of "us." He then cited several more-recent positive events:

- The Parliament of the World's Religions (1893) in Chicago, at which Islam was represented by Mohammed Alexander Russell Webb (d. 1916) an Anglo-American who had converted while serving as the United States' Consular Representative to the Philippines.
- The World Missionary Conference (1928) held in Jerusalem, during which Henry Kraemer "disavowed all spiritual imperialism."
- The establishment of the World Council of Churches (1948), which is composed mainly of Protestant and Eastern Orthodox denominations. According to him, this is one of the most fruitful ongoing dialogues.
- The Second Vatican Council (1965), especially the declaration *Nostra Aetate*, which moved Catholicism from exclusivism to inclusion.
- The "A Common Word between Us and You" initiative, launched by Muslims in 2007. Akrami sees this as "interesting" and worth pursuing.

The traditional Muslim view of Christianity and other religions has been largely negative (based upon several Qur'anic verses), exclusionary, and polemical. Charges are still made that the Bible has been altered and that Christians follow seriously errant doctrines (e.g., Original Sin, the Trinity, submission to the political authorities, and turning the other cheek). But according to Akrami, Muslims fail to consider the many nuances of the Trinity and other Christian doctrines. A major problem remains for Christians involved in dialogue with Muslims, however: As nothing can come after Jesus' final redemptive act, in their eyes Islam and Muhammad cannot possibly be true.

In his opinion, both Muslims and Christians need to go beyond exclusivism (which the Qur'an itself rejects) and inclusiveness (which implies the existence of one religion that is superior to all others), and embrace pluralism (no religion is superior to another religion). He made the point that the Qur'an emphasizes submission to God (***m****uslim*) and that Islam is not only the historical religion that was revealed through Muhammad, namely, ***M****uslims*. Therefore, as submission to God cannot be limited to Muslims, they should also study the verses dealing with the People of the Book.

During the ensuing question and answer session, Akrami elaborated upon the purpose of interfaith (e.g., to find the truth and live accordingly, break down stereotypes and prejudices, and understand that no religion has a monopoly on truth) and posited the concept of multiple understandings of God. In response to a comment about how Christians have given God a "face," he replied that all conceptions of God are the result of fallible human interpretations. Did not Muhammad not say that "we do not know You as we should?" Perhaps the only way to reach a common understanding of this, as well as of the Trinity, is to raise such matters from the theological level to the philosophical/mystical level.

In closing, he related that pluralism did not come from the modern world, but that it can be found in Sufism; he found his own inspiration for it in the writings of Rumi (d. 1273). Unfortunately, contemporary Muslims have largely forgotten how tolerant and pluralistic their pre-modern ancestors were. He left the audience with the following thought: The Qur'an talks about a general attitude. Thus wherever any attribute associated with Islam is found, the person possessing it is a ***m****uslim* even if he/she is not a ***M****uslim*.

Jay Willoughby
AJISS
Herndon, VA