

# COMMUNICATION BETWEEN CHRISTIANS AND MUSLIMS - PAST, PRESENT AND PERSPECTIVES

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## Abstract

It seems that a multicultural world is threatened by the evolution of the events from the Middle East.

Religion is more and more used as a powerful tool by the politicians to impose their will against their followers as well as against other communities belonging to different religions.

Misinterpretation, misinformation and lack of trust between Muslims and Christians have generated and still cause violent and bloody clashes between communities belonging to both faiths.

The biggest religious communities of the world – Christians and Muslims – may fall into a mutual intolerance if wisdom and restraint will not prevail as a necessary ingredient for shaping their relations.

**Keywords:** *multiculturalism, religion, intolerance, Christians' domination, Muslims' frustration.*

Multiculturality has been and still is an important goal for humankind. In order to reach it there are some steps that have been put forward at a conceptual, organizational and action plan. Secular and religious organizations were established and they promote dialogue between communities belonging to different cults. Although all these initiatives are meant to ease the tensions and to eliminate the violent clashes between different cultural communities, terrorism still poses a threat to the positive outlook on the future of intercultural communication.

## 1. SHORT HISTORY OF INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION BETWEEN CHRISTIANS AND MUSLIMS

The history of the relationships between Christians and Muslims covers a wide and diverse range of manifestations, from tolerance to confrontation.

Many people who study the history of the relationships between Christians and Muslims are tempted to focus much of their attention on the inefficiencies displayed by religion on the way in which the two communities act and on their mutual relationships. This approach is partially true because, in fact, religion was also used as a means to justify the struggle for power and some reprehensible actions. Christian crusades and the Moorish and Turkish conquests started in the name of religion but, in reality, they were actions which helped their secular and religious leaders express their desire for power. Saddam Hussein was presented as a passionate Muslim in TV shows, but in fact he was a tyrannical dictator who intoxicated and bombarded the Kurds, although the Quran forbids the killing of Muslims by Muslims. Besides Saddam, there were also other people who, in their desire for power, used religion as a strong motivation in order to reach their goals (Woodlock et. al 2013).

## 2. THE RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN CHRISTIANS AND MUSLIMS IN THE PRESENT

The latest violent events in which Muslims destroyed Christian churches in Egypt and Syria and killed the Christians who did not convert to Islam and to the so-called Islamic state of Syria, Iraq and Levant (ISIL) or the Islamic state of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), killed pupils and students who studied in schools that used an European model in Nigeria, call into question the peaceful cohabitation of Muslims and Christian in the states with a majority of Muslim population.

In the Muslim world one can see an intensification of the anti-Christian attitude, highly promoted by religious extremists, both in Muslim schools and in the speeches of the political leaders, presented in the classical and digital media. This attitude is generated by the desire for power of the anti-American and, in general, anti-European promoters, on the basis of religion (Cervellera 2005).

On a religious plan, the most important allegations of the Muslim extremists to Christians and Christianity refer to the transformation of a prophet – Jesus Christ into God (Small 1997a) and to the inconsistency of the Biblical text which, in their opinion, contradicts the concept of God united through Trinity (Small 1997b).

On a politico-economic plan Muslims accuse imperialists and colonists, whom they consider Christians, of the current economic, technological and scientific downturn of the Islamic states (Samir 2012).

In their opinion, the economic downturn is a result of the colonial domination of the West. Moreover, the 2003 Iraq war had a devastating effect on the Muslims' perception of Christians and of the West. According to Danielle Archibugi, that war showed the world that the West takes further the imperialist politics disguised behind the noble values of freedom and democracy (Archibugi 2008).

From another perspective, the military interventions in Afghanistan (2001) and Iraq (2003) are part of a plan to reorganize the current world order by creating conditions for as many states as possible (if not all) to move to a democratic government. Hobsbawn called the military actions of the international coalition led by USA in Afghanistan and Iraq "an export of revolution" (Hobsbawn 2005). The failure of those actions shows that imposing, in a community, some social cohabitation rules coming from the outside has very few chances of success, if it is done by brutal force, meaning a military intervention.

Christian domination on Muslims represents the basis of the frustrations felt by the Islamic world, and frustrations lead to violent emotional reactions, such as those triggered by the caricatures of the prophet Muhammad published in Denmark, France and in other European states,

but especially by the movie "The Innocence of Muslims", produced in USA. Both the caricatures published in Paris in *Charlie Hebdo* and the movie were considered blasphemies and triggered outrage and therefore Muslims attacked the American and French embassies killing some dozen people and injuring another few hundred (Samir 2012).

Although Islam means peace (*What is Islam* n.d.) and the Quran contains verses named surahs which urge Muslims to live peacefully together with people of other religions, the Islamic religious extremists promote only the part of the book stimulates "holy war" (jihad) in order to impose Allah's religion in all communities of the world.

Christian theologians accuse Muslims of blasphemy because they consider Jesus to be just a prophet and the concept of Trinity a contradiction of the unique God.

As well as in the Islamic world, in the Christian one, especially in its Catholic branch, there were theologians who only emphasized the antagonistic part of the Islamic religion. In the 8<sup>th</sup> century after Christ, Saint John of Damascus called the Islamic religion "a heresy of the Ishmaelites", whom he considered the descendants of Ismael, son of Abraham. He also attributed the epithet "psychopath" to the prophet Muhammad, whereas Jerry Falwell considered him "terrorist" and Jerry Vines "a devil-possessed paedophile" (Kalin n.d.).

### **3. THE PERSPECTIVE OF THE RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN CHRISTIANS AND MUSLIMS**

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In order to pertinently evaluate the perspective of the relationships between Christians and Muslims one must very well know all their components, not just the religious one.

Religion had, has and will have a significant role in the reciprocal perceptions of the members of the two human communities, as well as in the decisions of their leaders. However, Christians and Muslims aren't just members of two different religions, but members of some cultural communities in which politics, economy, diplomacy, finances, technology, arts, science and security have significant roles that have to

be known and people have to anticipate their future evolution. A thorough comparison of the evolution requires a laborious study, and that is why I will only focus on the most relevant aspects.

### **3.1. What We Know and Believe About Each Other.**

#### **3.1.1. The Christians about the Muslims**

There are many misconceptions of both communities about each other, most of them inspired by the theologians and the politicians. To sum up the Christians know and believe about the Muslims that:

- they are the followers of a monotheistic religion, which counts about 20% of the world population (Farrugia-Borg n.d), the supreme deity is Allah and Mohammed is its last prophet;
- the Koran, the Muslim holy book, contains provisions calling for confrontation with other religions, to impose the Islam globally, but also provisions calling for peace with the members of other religious communities;
- the Koran contains provisions that justify the inferior status of women in society, but also provisions that encourage the right behavior of men towards women;
- the Muslims are prohibited the consumption of pork and alcohol;
- the Islam is not a monolithic world but a divided one into several religious communities out of which the most important are the Sunni and the Shia;
- the Muslims have misconceptions about the Christians such as: all the Westerners are Christians, all the Christians are the enemies of the Muslims, although they a people of the holy book (their existence recognised by the Koran) they are „infidels” and should be treated as such (Demarco n.d.); the current economic backwardness of the Muslim countries is a consequence of the colonialist and imperialist domination of the West over them;
- the Muslims’ martyrdom must result in killing as many enemies as possible, which is why the Muslim extremists claim that they will win the war against the Christians because they

love death, unlike Christians who love life (Piper 2008);

- most of the Islamic countries are autocratic;
- the Muslims are more fanatical than the Christians and they react violently to criticism because they have never been truly free (meaning the liberties and the human rights promoted by democracy);
- the name of Mohammedan is offensive to the Muslims because it violates the spirit of the Koran, Muhammad was the last prophet of Allah who is the unique God of the Universe (Badawi n.d) so he is a man not a deity.

#### **3.1.2. The Muslims about the Christians**

The Muslims, the same as the Christians, are subject to the influences that are promoted by the theologians in the Muslim schools or through fatwa, but also by the political leaders. In essence, the Muslims believe about the Christians that:

- the Christians are the most numerous in the world population, counting about 25% of the human beings of the planet (Farrugia-Borg n.d.);
- the Christians belong to the domineering West (oppressor, a term which comes from the cross and from the Crusades of the Western Christians undertaken at the urge of the Popes of the Vatican), and are the enemies of the Muslims;
- the Christians raised a man, Jesus - one of the prophets of the unique God (Allah) -to the rank of deity (Small 1997a);
- the Bible contains additions and contradictory provisions, such as the one concerning the unique God and the Trinity, that is why it can not be true (Small 1997a);
- the Muslims do not believe that Jesus died on the cross because Allah would not allow one of his prophets to be tortured to death (*What is Islam* n.d.);
- the Christians are considered inferior to the Muslims because they believe in Jesus, who was one of the prophets of Allah.

### **3.2. Possible Scenarios of Relations between the Christians and the Muslims**

There are several points of view about the future of the relations between the Christians and the Muslims but most of them converge on



three possible scenarios: intolerance, tolerance and dialogue.

### 3.2.1. The Intolerance

The intolerance is understood as a form of extremism that each community seeks in order to exterminate the other on the biological or social level through marginalization (Farrugia-Borg n.d.).

The biological extermination is currently happening through terrorist attacks, the killing of Christians in the so-called Islamic State of Syria, Iraq and the Levant, or the terrorist Muslims killing, but also the non-combatant civilians (considered as casualties) in the war against terrorism. The biological extermination was practiced under the form of ethnic cleansing (the Second World War, in the Balkans, the Caucasus, Sudan, Kashmir, India, Pakistan and other areas where the two communities live together in the same state).

The social marginalization was consumed mainly during the colonialism when the conquerors imposed their language of communication, their religion, their institutions and their customs to the conquered countries' population transformed into colonies. Today, the social exclusion/marginalization is practiced in democratic states against the immigrants - including the Muslims - who have lower levels of education than that of the majority of the population of the states of adoption. Social marginalization is taking place in the Muslim countries with a secular regime against that part of the majority of population who does not have a sufficient level of knowledge and experience to occupy important positions in the hierarchy of the subsidiaries of the multinational companies (*Saudi Arabia Country profile* n.d.).

The religious intolerance is manifested today in the Islamic countries where the minority Christian population is required to pass to Islam or to pay additional fees or forced to flee because the Christian churches are destroyed (Philipott 2012) and the Christians risk to be killed.

The religious intolerance towards the Muslims is present in the Christian majority countries

(Nelson 2012) especially after the atrocities committed by members of the self-proclaimed state of Syria, Iraq and the Levant (Blair 2014).

### 3.2.2. The Tolerance

The tolerance means peaceful coexistence, in fact, an acceptance by members of the majority culture of the existence of the minority culture manifested by the protection of minorities. The tolerance can not be ensured only through political decisions and laws but through education, the increase of interpersonal contacts between the members of those communities, through a better mutual understanding and increase of mutual trust.

### 3.2.3. The Dialogue

It is the form through which it was attempted to resolve the disputed issues through negotiations and discussions both in the religious (Badawi n.d.) and the political, economic, cultural and military areas.

The dialogue between the Muslim and the Christian communities has been on ever since the advent of Islam in the seventh century after Christ.

In modern times, the dialogue between the Christians and the Muslims has evolved towards a more advanced form, thanks to the will of religious leaders and lay people, who initiated the establishment of organizational entities whose main mission is to facilitate interfaith and intercultural negotiations. Currently, there exists in the Vatican the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue and the Muslims set up the Islamic World League, the Muslim Congress, the Middle East Council of Churches etc. All the structural entities mentioned and other ones, with a less area of enrollment, developed the dialogue on several levels: spiritual (for exchange of ideas on religious rituals), theology (to identify commonalities and those in dispute in religious dogmas), institutional (between structural entities created specifically for this purpose both in the secular and the religious areas) and parliamentary (under the auspices of the World Conference on Religion and Peace and the World Congress of Beliefs) (Kimball n.d.).

## 4. CONCLUSIONS

Over time the relations between the Christian and the Muslim communities were either in conflict (the Christian Crusades against the Muslims to free the holy country, the colonization of Muslim states by the Western countries, the Moorish and the Ottoman conquests of territories inhabited by the Christians etc.) or peaceful. So, the history can divide or bring us together depending on the goals that we set.

The globalization and the information turned us all into "neighbors" – that is residents of the same "global state" because the distances and borders do not have the same relevance as before the advent of the Internet. Currently, the media, particularly the digital ones, cover the whole globe and can not be stopped to enter the homes of the people through personal computers, televisions, radios and mobile phones, by any kind of obstacle.

The live broadcasts (in real time) of some unfortunate events (terrorist attacks, atrocities committed by extremists, violent demonstrations of some members of the Muslim and Christian communities, the bombing of some targets in the war against terrorism, etc.) have a strong influence on the perceptions that the Christian and the Muslim community members have about each other.

The dialogue and the tolerance between the Christians and the Muslims are possible if each side eliminates the emotional approach and makes use of reason with tact and politeness. In other words, if those two communities focus on promoting the common and positive issues between them and discuss calmly and with pertinent arguments the controversial issues, the peaceful coexistence is possible. Otherwise, the conceptual confrontation will be transferred on the acting one, the destructive collisions will rise and the intolerance will find ground to manifest itself in a continuous expansion.

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