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Christian-Muslim Relations: Critical for Religious Harmony

By Mohammad Alami Musa

Synopsis

The “Allah” issue, which had a final hearing in the highest court in Malaysia, provided further evidence that Christian-Muslim tensions globally are on the rise. The Christian and Islamic worlds can contribute to global inter-religious harmony given their common Abrahamic roots.

Commentary

CHRISTIANITY AND ISLAM are two major religions embraced by more than half of the world’s population. With such a significant share of the global population, relations between Christians and Muslims will therefore have a huge impact on the state of religious harmony globally. Unfortunately, the world today continues to witness the rising global trend of Christian-Muslim tensions and even conflicts that seriously affect inter-religious relations.

One that is very near home is the “Allah” issue. It became so protracted that it created tension between the two communities in Malaysia. The recent verdict of the apex Federal Court to reject the appeal of the Catholic Church to over-turn the High Court’s earlier judgement in October 2013 disallowing use of the term “Allah” in its weekly bulletin *The Herald* will hopefully put a closure on the “Allah issue”.

Closest yet different

Fortunately, the “Allah issue” did not escalate into violent conflict, unlike the numerous Christian-Muslim conflicts in recent times. The bloody Christian-Muslim confrontation in Maluku, Indonesia a few years ago, in which many were killed, was a grim reminder about how tragic inter-religious strife could be.

Even today, in many parts of the world especially in Africa, Christians and Muslims are killed almost daily in religious-based hostilities. Moreover, according to a report released earlier this year by Pew Research Centre, a majority of religious hostilities today involve Christians and Muslims who are in conflict with one another.

It is difficult to understand how this can happen given that Christianity and Islam are closest to each other compared with all other world religions. They share the same Abrahamic roots like belief in God,

the same prophets, the Last Day and life after death. Their moral codes of behaviour are similar in many aspects. This explains why both Christian and Muslim scholars have always reiterated that the cause of these conflicts does not come from within either religion but lies in the corrupt use of religion by feuding parties on both sides to mobilise support and garner sympathy.

The closeness of the two religions was acknowledged as soon as Islam began to be preached as a new religion in Arabia by Prophet Muhammad about 1400 years ago. As a religion that came after Christianity, there was great curiosity to compare the two. Interestingly, the comparison was undertaken in 615AD by the pious Christian king of Abyssinia (now called Ethiopia) through what can be historically considered as the first Christian-Muslim dialogue.

The subject discussed was the prophethood of Jesus Christ. The king declared at the end of the dialogue that the difference in understanding of the two religions was no more than the length of a stick that he held in his hand.

Building Muslim-Christian relations

Nevertheless, there are significant differences between Islam and Christianity. The differences in doctrines, coupled with negative historical encounters between Christians and Muslims in the crusadic wars as well as during the Euro-Christian colonisation of the Islamic world, and the proselytising nature of both religions to win over converts, have paradoxically made both religions the farthest from each other despite being the closest to each other.

Scholars, intellectuals and clerics from both religions are however, not riled by the problematic nature of relations between Christians and Muslims. On the contrary, they see the critical importance of peace-building, bridging the gulf of understanding as well as re-capturing the spirit of fellowship between Christians and Muslims. They have initiated many commendable efforts at the dialogical, scholarly and practical levels to achieve these objectives over the last four decades.

The Roman Catholic Church took a historic step, through the Second Vatican Council to issue a pivotal document *Nostra Aetate*, in 1965, that gave a positive view of non-Christian religions. It encouraged Catholics to engage non-Christians.

The World Council of Churches, too, in 1970 organised a watershed inter-religious meeting in Lebanon which declared through the *Aljourn Memorandum* that the coming together of different religions was very positive and something to be carried forward urgently.

These historical decisions provided impetus to inter religious dialogue and Christian-Muslim dialogue took off on a self-propelling trajectory. Notable global initiatives include the *Building Bridges Seminar* initiated by the Church of England and the *Common Word between Us and You* organised by 138 prominent Muslim scholars and clerics.

Singapore experience

Christian and Muslim scholars in Singapore from the National Council of Churches and MUIS Academy (of the Islamic Religious Council) respectively had also for the first time, in 2013, embarked on a path of dialogue. Adopting the approach of *scriptural reasoning* (which is a form of dialogue), they discovered commonalities and differences through their open discussions of Abrahamic texts.

While the dialogical and scholarly endeavours at re-building bridges of understanding are happening in a big way, the real task is to bring the two flocks together as “brothers and sisters of the same Abrahamic family”. Here dialogue of action is more effective than dialogue of words.

Adherents of both religions come together to deal with concerns and challenges that confront people regardless of their faith. The dialogue of action is more than collaborative action. It is also a platform where participants will engage each other to understand the teachings that they draw from their respective religious traditions that motivate them in their involvement.

A model is the collaboration between the Muslim-based Misr Foundation and the Anglican Diocese in Egypt to provide medical services to the poor and to get youths from both sides to be involved in music as well as the arts. These helped to minimise Christian-Muslim tension.

It is a complex and uphill but not hopeless task to counter the bigotry, extremism and militancy that affect Christian-Muslim relations. The momentum exists for the Christian and Islamic worlds to rebuild the unique spiritual relationship between them through sustained dialogue and collaborative action.

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