

Questions from The Gambia

In January 2014, a journalist from The Gambia, Sainey Darboe, posed a series of questions to which I wrote responses. These were published in an online journal in The Gambia and are repeated here for a wider audience.

The world has seen its fair share of religious violence over the years; what do you identify as the main obstacles to peaceful co-existence of the adherents of different religions?

We need to divide this question into two parts: there are causes between peoples that wear religion like a flag, as an identifying marker, but the religion itself has nothing to do with the causes of the tension, and then there are tensions that arise out of differences of religious beliefs and practices.

The first group, those without religious cause, are by far the most common in my judgement. The causes could be economic, political, cultural or territorial. There are many different group identities: for example, based on language, ethnicity, race, tribe, skin colour and so on. Sometimes these differences take on a religious colouring and so they are reported as religious tensions. If we take two examples: Christian missionaries arrived in West Africa from the sea and so began their work of serving people and converting them from the coast. Islam arrived in West Africa from inland through sufi missionaries and groups of peoples dispersing after the break-up of the Mali Empire; therefore we find a dominance of Muslims from the inland side. This kind of division can be seen in Nigerian and Ghana, just to take two examples. By contrast, Islam arrived in East Africa from the sea, with trading and slaving missions from the Arab lands, and Christian missionaries arrived overland, thus the pattern of territories in which these two religions predominated were the reverse of West Africa. Not surprisingly, the influence of these “outsiders” affected the development of the peoples of these regions, so, for example, the Christian missionaries provided opportunities for modern education, health care and improved agricultural techniques in the areas where they were in strength. This provided economic advantage in the “Christian areas” and meant that after independence from colonial rule, the Christians tended to have a head-start over Muslim areas and so many of the “religious tensions” have been due to this economic and political imbalance in recent decades as the Muslims advance to their rightful place in development. The same can be seen in countries where natural resources: oil, gold, copper, fertile land, are concentrated in one part of a country, where one religion dominates, and thus economic tensions over a fair share in such natural resources take on a religious colouring.

A similar situation can be seen in terms of politics. If we take the case of Iraq under Saddam Hussain: The majority of the people of Iraq were Shi'a Muslims but they were oppressed by the richer, military forces of the secularised Sunni political party that was led by Saddam. Tensions between the ruling minority and the oppressed majority, which are essentially political, take on a religious colouring. In countries

like Sudan, where there was a strong Arabised culture in the north, the tensions were essentially cultural but they are associated with religion. The same kind of thing can be seen where certain traditional tribal leaders were of one religion and the subordinate tribes were of another. This kind of inter-tribal conflict can be seen with Christian-Muslim colouring in the current troubles in the Central African Republic. This is not an “African problem:” European political and cultural conflicts took on a religious colouring in Europe for hundreds of years (Catholic against Protestant and one group of Protestants against another group of Protestants). We need also to bring to this discussion territorial divisions. When the European powers decided to “share out” the African continent between themselves in the 19th century, they took no account of traditional territorial boundaries and the traditional movement of peoples, so that we find people who share the same cultural heritage being divided by artificial boundaries into the modern nation states of Africa. It was one of the great arrogances of the European mind-set that led them to divide up many parts of the world into nation states that took no account of the traditions or wishes of the people who lived there. We can see this after the fall of the Ottoman Empire to the British and French after the 1914-18 War. Quite literally, a British and a French man sat down with a map and drew lines to create countries that did not exist before, for example, Jordan, Palestine and Lebanon were created from Greater Syria, and the countries of the Arabian Peninsula and the Gulf: Saudi Arabia, Iraq, Kuwait, the Emirates and so on, were created in the same way. The same is repeated around the world; we can think of the countries that made up former Yugoslavia or the Republics that were dominated by Russia in the USSR. My advice is to look at every apparent “religious conflict” and ask if there are economic, political, cultural or territorial roots to the troubles that are far more important than the religious colouring.

When we think of “religious conflicts,” we need first of all to correct the easy assumption that these are between two different religions. Many more Christians were killed by other Christians in the 20th century than were ever killed by Muslims. This is true in Europe but also in African conflicts such as the civil war in Rwanda. The same is true of Muslim vs. Muslim conflict, for example in the Pakistan-Bangladesh war, the Iran-Iraq war and the present conflicts in Pakistan/Afghanistan, Syria and Iraq. Again, we have to look for other underlying causes rather than religion, for example, there were huge economic, political, cultural and military imbalances that led to the Pakistan-Bangladesh war in 1971.

Now we can turn finally to conflicts based on religious doctrines and practices and we see that these also occur. There are Sunni-Shi'a conflicts in Pakistan and Iraq at the current time. The conflict in Syria has many shades of complexity, affected by different Sunni groups, the Alawite sect, which lies outside the bounds of Islam, and those who seek a more secular way of life. We have to say that such conflicts based on religious doctrine and practice fall far short of the high ideals taught by Prophet Muhammad and Jesus, by authentic Islam and Christianity, and thus we can say that they are sinful. Unfortunately, many religious people are bad followers of the religions that they proclaim.

We know from the biographies of Prophet Muhammad (*sira*) that he welcomed a Christian delegation from Najran in Madina and allowed them to offer their Christian prayers in his own mosque even though they were engaged in a heated debate about the correct interpretation of the nature and status of Jesus. Sunni Islam has always had a variety of different Schools (*madhhab*), which eventually resolved to the four Schools that we know today, so difference of practice was always tolerated within the Muslim community (*umma*). Christians were divided right from the first decades after the time of Jesus, for example, between those who wanted to keep more of the Jewish code of living and those who wanted a more Greek influence and a break with Judaism. Different Christian groups were influenced by culture and politics between the western church focused on Rome and the eastern churches focused on Alexandria, Jerusalem, Antioch and later Byzantium and yet all these groups would claim to follow the same Master and Gospel.

In both Christianity and Islam, we have a fundamental principle that justice is a forerunner of peace and that peace can only grow where justice prevails. When we see injustice based on politics, economics, culture and territory then there can be no lasting peace until these injustices have been put right. We can see this as an underlying principle behind the Brandt Report that called for a correction of the injustices between the Global North and Global South as a necessary element in establishing global peace. The struggle for justice is thus a fundamental part of both religions, which requires some people to surrender their economic and political unjust power so that the grounds for justice and peace can be established. In short, peace between religious communities can only come about when all follow the high ideals of the faiths that they proclaim and that requires that justice be established as a fundamental human and Godly right.

Inter-faith dialogue has been favoured by many as the way to go about addressing such problems. What is your take on the argument that such efforts are bound to end in failure due to the antagonism of and differences in the core beliefs of the two major religions: Islam and Christianity?

When speaking of Christianity and Islam, we have to begin with the fundamental statement that both worship the same, the one and only, God. The Arabic term Allah has the same meaning as the English God; the one and only God. Arabic-speaking Christians, numbering some 14m in the world today, have always spoken of God in Arabic as Allah. So we have to start from this fundamental principle that both religions worship God and there is no division within God, whatever may be the differences in the way that we formulate our beliefs: whether *tawhid* or Trinity; these are the best ways that we have found within human language and concepts to speak about God who is fundamentally beyond our ability to grasp. As the Qur'an reminds us, on the Day of Judgement, God will make clear to us all those things about which we disagree. What we have to do in this life is to live faithfully bearing witness to

what God has revealed to both communities through the Qur'an and Jesus and leave to God those things on which we disagree.

Dialogue means “talking things through” and requires both talking and listening. Christians and Muslims have to learn to listen to what the other is saying and seek to understand it from within the mind-set of the other. If Christians try to understand Islam within a Christian mind-set, then this is bound to fail; the same applies to Muslims seeking to understand Christianity. To understand a religious way of life requires that we understand both with our heads and with our hearts; religious ways of life are not just intellectual packages but they are also fundamentally about human beings’ relationship in faith before the one God. To understand requires not just “book learning” about the other but also exposing ourselves to really know the hearts of the other, to understand “what makes them tick” in their relationship with God. This is based on a fundamental respect for the other, not just in terms of them being fellow humans but also as fellow believers in the one God.

One of the central messages of the Qur'an is that God is the God of all humankind and will not be “tribalised” by any religious group claiming that they “own” God as their exclusive property. Similarly both Muhammad and Jesus are seen by their respective communities as a blessing for all humankind and not just for their followers. This means that what unites both communities: a devotion to the worship of and obedience to God, a life of prayer, fasting and self-denial, a passion for justice that leads to peace, a compassion for all God’s creatures without distinction, a duty to share the good things of God and be responsible for the way that we care for one another and all creatures (*klalifa* in Islamic terminology and stewardship in Christian terms), is far more deeply-seated that what divides us.

This is not to pretend that there are not differences in core beliefs between Christianity and Islam, there are. Some of these, like the Christian doctrines of Incarnation and Trinity and the Muslim relationship to political power, will remain as differences that need to be understood, discussed and if necessary left to the judgement of God on the Day of Judgement but they must not be allowed to divide us into artificial divisions within our one common humanity before God.

Should such a process of inter-faith dialogue be restricted to Islam and Christianity, if so or not why?

We begin again with the principle that God is the God of all humankind and God has no favourites. The Qur'an reminds us that no people were left without a Prophet and guidance has been sent by God to all. This means that inter-faith dialogue cannot be restricted to Christians and Muslims but must embrace all peoples. This includes the great religions of the East and the traditional religions of Africa, Asia, the Americas, Europe and so forth. Having said this, it is clear that Christianity and Islam are the two largest religious communities on earth today accounting for around half of the

world's 7+ billion people and thus we have a huge responsibility to lead the way in inter-faith dialogue and building a better world for all God's people and creation.

Islam has been, perhaps with a modicum of justification, seen by many in the West as a religion of violence. Suicide bombings by Muslims in Afghanistan, Pakistan and Boko Haram in Nigeria are almost daily occurrences. Is it your view that such perceptions have a basis in reality?

Violence, that is, violating the rights of other human beings, can never be a central part of any Godly religion. From the time of Prophet Muhammad, we see the way in which he sought peaceful solutions, such as in the Treaty of Hudaibiyya, rather than violence. He treated captured soldiers and civilians with respect and was noted for seeking peace through granting amnesty, for example, at the conquest of Makka. The rules of engagement in battle laid down by the Qur'an and the Prophet restricted any combat to being between combatants and forbade any attack, killing or terrorism of non-combatants, which included explicitly all women, children, the sick and elderly and also surrendered soldiers. A similar decree can be seen in the teaching of Jesus, who forbade his followers to take up the sword against those who opposed them. A code for the conduct of war through the "just war principles" was laid down in the Christian tradition. Therefore we can say that violence can be no part of a Godly religion.

That is not to say for a moment that Christians and Muslims have always abided by the principles of their faiths in this matter. It must be a cause for shame on the part of the followers that they have used violence against the decrees of God and God's revelations. Unfortunately, this continues to our own times and can be seen in the wave of indiscriminate killing that has afflicted us all for example in the 20th century and until today.

In both Muslim and Christian teachings, suicide is forbidden as it takes upon the individual the fundamental right of God to determine when each one of us dies. Suicide bombers almost invariably target civilian populations and thus go against the rules of conduct even in war. For these two reasons, we can see that suicide bombers are forbidden in both Christianity and Islam. This is a distortion of true religion that has afflicted our own generation. The same can be said of Western forces using missiles, aerial bombardment, drones and so forth as weapons of indiscriminate killing. From the Muslim perspective, this position was made clear in the Amman Message in 2004 signed by scores of Muslim Heads of State and the principal religious authorities (see www.ammanmessage.com).

The first suicide attack that we know of in Muslim history occurred in 1983 in the Lebanon targeting the American Marine base. They occurred again in the Intifada in Palestine against Israeli forces from 1991. The terror that has been unleashed by those who follow the methods of the al-Qaida Tendency in the 21st century must be seen as

unIslamic and an aberration against the teachings of Islam, as the Amman Message made clear.

What is your take on attitudes towards Muslims in the West in the post 9/11 world?

The fundamental error that was made by the American administration after the attacks on the Twin Towers was to fail to ask what were the causes that led to this event; instead there was an immediate rush to the so-called “war on terror” with the disastrous consequences with which we are familiar. Instead of treating these attacks as a matter for international action against a criminal offence, to be prosecuted through the courts, a military reaction was launched. Most Americans know nothing of Islam and the affairs of the Muslim world and so it was easy for them to be manipulated into an assumption that this was in accordance with Islam, which became the “new enemy.” Even in countries like Britain and France, which had a long association with Islam and Muslims, most people followed the American lead and believed their rhetoric.

The only way to deal with the present situation is through educating Muslims about what Islam truly teaches and helping non-Muslims to understand Islam and see that those who support terrorist attacks are extremists, far away from the true teachings of Islam. There were attacks by terrorist groups in Europe: the Irish Republican Army, the Red Army Faction, the Basque Separatists and so on, but the general population knew that they represented only a tiny extremist tendency within the general population and so did not hold whole peoples responsible for their actions. The fact is that most people, even in Britain and France, which both have millions of Muslim citizens, were ignorant of them, their ways and their religion, and so were open to be told lies by those who wanted war instead of a renewed effort to establish world peace. This ignorance is an underlying problem and it is something that I have been trying to address in decades of teaching about Islam to non-Muslim audiences (see www.chrishever.org).

What else must happen to promote the culture of religious tolerance? Some say better education will go a long way in changing attitudes but the media in the west, I stand to be corrected, is rabid and anti-Islam?

Education of the head and of the heart is certainly a key element in promoting a culture of religious tolerance. People need to be exposed to true followers of both faiths, which is why groups like the Marlborough-Gunjur exchange projects in Britain and The Gambia are crucial contributors. It was common in the 20th century in many parts of Africa that Christians and Muslims lived together as members of the same family and shared the same villages. They knew each other in their hearts and thus their common humanity was obvious to all concerned so that a mutual respect was there which gave religious differences a proper context as secondary to being brothers

and sisters in humanity. This experience needs to be shared on a much wider basis: we need to know one another in our common humanity.

As regards the media in the West; we must accept that they have their own agendas, which are set by political and economic forces rather than on the basis of truth or educating their readers. They want to sell newspapers etc. and serve their masters above all else and will make the news as sensational as they can. They too share the ignorance of many people but in their case they have the money and power to do something about it. One good piece of news is that many people in Britain, for example, know that what they receive from the media has the bias of the owners and politicians rather than being free and fair reporting.

What are your last words and how do you feel about the state of the world as far as religious tolerance is concerned?

We have to accept that there are forces of international power, economics and politics that make the world a more dangerous place than it was fifteen years ago. Political corruption is a widespread phenomenon in many countries in the West and in Muslim-majority lands. The way in which movements such as we have seen at work in the Arab lands have conducted themselves mean that we have not seen the last of violence in the name of religion. The way that western powers have handled international affairs and their own domestic policies have stored up problems for the future. We will live through difficult times and have to accept that religious intolerance on many sides will make matters worse.

There must always be the attitude of hope within all Christians and Muslims. We must hope for a better and more respectful world and do all that we can to strive towards it in whatever circumstance we find ourselves. Better to light a candle of hope and truth in the world than to curse the darkness that pervades. In whatever circumstance we find ourselves, we owe it to God and humanity to continue the Godly *jihad* of working for justice, peace and mutual respect.