



Misunderstanding the “Other” A Call for a New Perspective to Foster Dialogue



In a recent interview, the Egyptian philosopher, ‘*ali Al-Saman*¹ addressed the issue of the controversy that was reignited when several Danish newspapers reprinted caricatures of the prophet Muhammad, which Muslims consider an affront to Islam. The reprint on February 13th was in response to a foiled assassination attempt against the Danish cartoonist who drew the caricatures in 2005. The issue escalated today when the Egyptian parliament asked the foreign ministry to introduce a motion for condemnation at the September meeting of the United Nations.

Al-Saman argues that it is ignorance of “the other” that leads to over-reactions. According to *Al-Saman*, the secular West insists on unlimited freedom of expression, while religious institutions are adamant at establishing limits around this freedom. He notes that attacks are not limited to Islam. Books and movies have also targeted Christianity and the nature of Christ. Such works, he adds, represent the views of the secular establishment more than other religions.

Al-Saman points to two other reasons for the failure of dialogue between civilizations. First, the centers of power within the various religious establishments use religion for political gains. Second, the message of reconciliation agreed upon by Muslim leaders and the Vatican in 1998 has not been communicated to, or embraced by, the masses.

The philosopher sets forth five points that should serve as the foundation for a new perspective by participants in the dialogue:

- The three monotheistic religions do not represent the entire universe of thought; there are other cultures and religions who wish to be part of this exchange of ideas.
- There is a difference between religious dialogue and cultural cooperation and both have a role to play in the discussion.
- The World media must play a role in enlightening the masses.
- Recognition that the war of religions is primarily political in nature.
- We must all be prepared at any time to antagonize our own people and culture in support of truth and justice.

Al-Saman recognizes that the current dialogue is preferable to none at all and that many of the sectarian problems would have resulted in stronger conflicts without that discourse, but he also sees the need for change and represents a calm voice in what is sometimes a strident debate. He is known for his skepticism about worshipers who claim God’s favoritism for their own religion. During the Fifth Doha

¹ Dr. *Ali Al-Saman* is the Chairman of the International Dialogue between religions. During the Alliance of Civilizations Forum, which took place in Madrid on the 15th of January 2008, *Al-Saman* suggested a new language for the dialogue between religions based on the points mentioned in his interview.

Conference in May 2007, he had said that no one person and no single religion has the right to monopolize what constitutes “faith in God, the words of God, the interpretation of these words or to specify the standing that worshipers have in front of God.” So far, his initiative for a new perspective seems to be perceived favorably, but more by the West than by Muslim institutions.

Source: Interview with Dr. Ali Al-Saman (interviewer ‘Aza Mas’ud) – Date: 3/2/2008
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