



Religious versus Cultural Dialogue

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Arthur Koestler wrote that “one is generally prepared to accept a correction of one’s ideas by, say, 10 percent; a correction of 1,000 percent is beyond one’s capacity”. This is particularly true when it comes to religion where even a 10 percent correction may become an impossible task. Koestler came to mind when reading the interview with Egyptian professor *Pakynam Al-Sharqawi*¹ conducted by the program “Dialogue among Civilizations”.² *Al-Sharqawi* opined that what have been called “dialogues” on religion are nothing more than photo opportunities, conforming to a useless agreed

upon protocol. She contends that the “absolutes” of different religions are difficult to discuss and impossible to reconcile. *Al-Sharqawi* therefore favors establishing cultural dialogues. She declares that only by understanding the multiplicity of perspectives emanating from religious beliefs and their cultural manifestations are we able to envisage a rapprochement between people of different religions. On a purely religious basis there can only be mutual respect which does not require a dialogue. PI Online examines *Al-Sharqawi*’s views.

Al-Sharqawi’s argument for cultural rather than religious dialogue seems to stem from two basic premises. First, she argues that most differences in religious beliefs and dogma are irreconcilable. They are based on faith and religious leaders in particular are adamant about such issues. Second, political dialogue is equally non-productive because of what she refers to as the global political and economic imbalance between the West and the Islamic World. One side, she explains, wants to dominate while the other is constantly on the defensive. In her view, political dialogue between the West and most Asian cultures has been easier because of a more level field economically and politically.

Al-Sharqawi also presents a somewhat confusing picture of the increased role that religion plays in the political arena. She does not contemplate separation of religion and politics or a secular government in the Muslim World. She does however seem to imply that the rise of religion in politics in the West represents some convergence with the Muslim view that it is impossible to separate religion and politics. *Al-Sharqawi*’s provides no basis for her claim that intermixing religion and politics can lead to a rapprochement between the West and the Islamic World. In fact, such a conclusion seems to be at odds with her view that irreconcilable differences render religious and political dialogues useless. Even if more religion in Western politics would lessen pressure on the Muslim world to secularize, the fundamental religious differences would lead to political conflict unless both sides could agree to disagree. In addition, Professor *Al-Sharqawi* ignores the implications of her earlier claim that successful dialogue between

¹ *Pakynam Al-Sharqawi* is a professor of Political Science at the University of Cairo

² Reported in Islam Online:

http://www.islamonline.net/servlet/Satellite?c=ArticleA_C&cid=1213871135070&pagename=Zone-Arabic-ArtCulture%2FACALayout

Western and Asian cultures is facilitated by a more level political field, not more religion in politics. She has chosen to ignore the possibility that dialogue between Western and Asian cultures is also easier due to the absence of any conflict between their dominant religions.

Nevertheless, there is some justification for *Al-Sharqawi's* endorsement of cultural dialogue. Such a dialogue, she contends, must be based on a firm belief by all parties that there is something to be learned from the other. For example, the declaration of "cultural unity" by Turkey and Spain in 2005 initially attracted considerable attention in the Muslim World. That enthusiasm seems to be fading and no Arab Islamic country has taken the initiative to genuinely endorse it through action. In my view, however, the cultural dialogues advocated by Professor *Al-Sharqawi's* have value at the micro level, through initiatives undertaken by associations and organizations that are not seeking political gain and have no religious agenda. With almost sixty percent of the population in the Arab World below the age of 30, and more than 50 million Muslims living in Europe and the United States, education and cultural exchanges can break new ground and foster better understanding and peaceful co-existence. Like Professor *Al-Sharqawi*, I see little value in interfaith dialogues such as those organized by the Vatican, which produce numerous documents³ that are read by few, if any, in the Muslim world, or the interfaith dialogue called for by Saudi Arabia.

Cultural dialogues on the other hand enable people to find common ground in how they live their daily lives regardless of differences in their faiths. It remains to be seen whether the continuing growth of Islamic fervor in the Muslim world will alone define the culture or, as in the West, simply be one aspect of a culture that is also defined by its people and their many traditions, music and arts. In the latter case, "religious harmony" may be achievable as a by-product of "cultural harmony".

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³ The Vatican Secretariat's *Guidelines for a Dialogue between Muslims and Christians*¹ (hereafter VS 1); *A New Threshold: Guidelines for the Churches in their Relations with Muslim Communities*,² from the British Council of Churches (hereafter, BCC); the World Council of Churches' *Christians Meeting Muslims: "WCC Papers on Ten Years of Christian-Muslim Dialogue"*³ (hereafter, WCC); *The Muslim-Christian Dialogue of the Last Ten Years*⁴, published by Pro Mundi Vita, "an international information and research center under Catholic auspices" (hereafter, PMV); *Orientations pour un dialogue entre Chrétiens et Musulmans*,⁵ from the Vatican Secretariat (hereafter, VS 2); and *Christian-Muslim Relations. An Introduction for Christians in the United States of America*,⁶ sponsored by the N.C.C.C.U.S.A. Task Force (source: the Institute of Interfaith dialogue)