

Hopes for A Common Word

We know that during his captivity in Asia Minor in the fourteenth century, the Orthodox archbishop Saint Gregory Palamas, greatly impressed by the tolerance and kindness of the Muslims he met, became close friends with the son of the Turkish Emir, with whom he had many conversations. In one of the letters he wrote at that time, the saint expressed his hope that “a day will soon come when we shall be able to understand each other”. Now, nearly seven hundred years later, one prays all the more for such a day. But what exactly is the understanding we seek, and what kind of dialogue are we called to engage in?

Interfaith gatherings are common enough, but dialogue is too often confined to the outward or exoteric level of doctrines and practices, and at this level, given the considerable differences among the world’s religions, belligerent contradiction or platitudinous compromise often appear to be the only alternatives. This is particularly so in the case of Christianity and Islam. Exoterically speaking, Jesus is either God or not, and the Koran is either the final and uniquely perfect revelation of God, or not—to mention only two of the more obvious “contradictions” between these traditions. It is therefore inevitable that Christians and Muslims who limit their approach to the dogmatic letter of their religions will find their perspectives to be mutually exclusive, and their dialogues—if and when they discuss their theological beliefs at all, and do not resort instead to conflict and violence—will be reduced to two parallel monologues.

Religions, however, are not just systems of outward beliefs and behaviors deployed on a horizontal plane. Each of the great traditions also has a vertical dimension leading to an inward or mystical heart. Here the deeper meaning of the doctrines and practices comes alive, and here the spiritual pilgrim may discover, beneath the level of seemingly contradictory forms, an inner commonality with those who follow other paths.

This is certainly true of the two religions here in question. Despite the long and well-known history of conflict between Christians and Muslims, one finds that their mystical traditions, especially in the Christian East and in Sufism, have for centuries shared many of the same spiritual methods and goals, and in certain exceptional cases Sufi *shaykhs* and their Christian counterparts have even accepted disciples in the others’

tradition. The anonymous Russian classic *The Way of a Pilgrim* is quite explicit in teaching that in the absence of a *starets*, or spiritual father, the Christian seeker may receive spiritual instruction “even from a Saracen”, and evidence of the reverse relationship can be found in the spiritual friendship of the Sufi Ibrahim ibn Adham and the Orthodox monk Symeon.

These and other such historical contacts and openings suggest the possibility for a deeper and more inward dialogue between Christians and Muslims than is customary in our day. It is my personal hope that *A Common Word Between Us and You* could serve as the occasion for precisely such a dialogue, one in which spiritual travelers from both religions, while insisting as they must on the dogmatic truths of their respective revelations, might come to realize what the great Sufi teacher Ibn Arabi meant in saying, “My heart has opened unto every form: it is ... a cloister for Christian monks ... and the *Ka’ba* of the pilgrim.”

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