Debate and Dialogue – do they ever meet?

Exploring ways of effective witness to Muslims

Walter Eric – SIM Consultation, September 2005

As we were witnessing from door to door in Cape Town, South Africa, during the last years of the apartheid era I was welcomed in a sheikh's home with some cool drink. "So you come from Germany", the sheikh noted. "I love German people", and after some pause he continued "especially Adolf Hitler. He only made one mistake: he never finished the job." After that 'friendly reception' we had a brief, but candid dialogue about the state of the Christian and Muslim communities and the nature of man.

We live in an age where by and large dialogue is in and debates are sniffed upon as a thing of the past. At many an international conference you will receive a pitying, if not angry glance on mentioning debates as a relevant method for reaching Muslims today, meaning to say: "Brother, that was 150 years ago, when Pfander, St. Clair-Tisdall and other argumentative missionaries publicly debated their Muslim opponents. But what came out of it, nothing at best, but more likely plenty of hatred and isolation." (Is this a factual assessment?) And who wouldn't go along with the oft-heard phrase: "We are not here to win arguments, but to love Muslims."

1. Dialogue

It's so easy to contrast the worst of debating models with the most amiable form of dialogue – or vice versa – and just dismiss the other side as hopelessly aggressive or sadly compromising. In due time there are always good and bad bananas in a basket and unless we check carefully, we might mistakenly throw out the good ones. So let's look at the two a bit closer starting with dialogue.

The term 'dialogue' has a beautiful ring to it: it's a two-way approach. Taking the other person serious in listening to him carefully, reflecting on what he says, responding appropriately to his thoughts and mindset. God dialogued with Adam and Eve because they were created in His image, made to relate to their creator in an intensely personal way. This continued with Cain, Noah, Abraham, and reached a level where he became known as "the friend of God" in both Jewish-Christian and Muslim scriptures. So 'dialogue' has a great pedigree!
In that sense it is wonderful to sit around a table and talk about spiritual matters of mutual interest with a group of Muslims as promoted by Bruce A. McDowell & Anees Zaka in "Muslims and Christians at the Table"[1]. Let's use such opportunities as long as we have them.

David Bosch in his classic "Transforming Mission" ponders on the relationship of "Dialogue and Mission". I quote: "Christian theology is a theology of dialogue. One-way, monological travel is out, as is militancy in any form." (Bosch 1991:483)[2] - Well, this comes long before 9/11. - He illustrates this trend with an interesting journey through the themes of the WCC consultations that departed from "The Witness of Christians to Men of other Faiths" in 1963 to "Dialogue in Community" in 1977. Quite a journey in 14 years! Bosch then makes a number of excellent qualifying remarks about the inclusiveness of missions in dialogue, and writes: "It is fallacious to suggest that, for dialogue to be 'in' mission has to be 'out', that commitment to dialogue is incompatible with commitment to evangelism." Well said, and even more encouraging are his final sentences in that reflection: "We believe that the faith we profess is both true and just, and should be proclaimed. We do this, however, not as judges or lawyers, but as witnesses; not as soldiers, but as envoys of peace; not as high-pressure sales-persons, but as ambassadors of the Servant Lord." – Beautiful words indeed!

Coming closer to home, let's include some of the pillars on which PROCMURA (= Project of Christian-Muslim Relationships, based in Nairobi; formerly known as Islam In Africa Project) is built.

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[1] Bruce A. McDowell & Anees Zaka, *Muslims and Christians at the Table*, PR Publishing: Phillipsburg, 1999.
[2] David Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, Orbis Books, Maryknoll: New Jersey, 1998.

The present advisor, Mr Johnson Mbillah (Ghanaian) lets one of their members (Catharine Jarra, Gambia) explain the nature of Dialogue in a recent publication:

> *"Dialogue of life – living in an open and neighbourly spirit sharing their joys and sorrows, human problems and preoccupations*
> *Dialogue of action and deeds – collaborate for the integral development and liberation of people*
> *Dialogue of theological exchange – seek to deepen understanding of their religious heritage, and to appreciate each others spiritual values*
> *Dialogue of religious experience – share spiritual riches, prayer and contemplation, faith and ways of searching for God and the Absolute…"*[3]

As much as we applaud a genuine peace commitment between Christians and Muslims we ask: can there be a meaningful basis for peace with such a widely differing assessment of the 'Prince of Peace' between Christians and Muslims?

Dialogue should be clearly differentiated between individual, group and institutional ways. I suggest:

- Let's see the person first, not fight the system.

This should receive our resounding AMEN. Since Muslim Evangelism is first and foremost "personal evangelism" we often need to earn the right to speak by listening carefully and responding to relevant issues and questions.

- Small group meetings certainly have their place wherever possible.

Here we may be more systematic by dealing with relevant topics either by way of comparison or contrast. This gives shyer members the chance to listen in, compare and form their own opinion and convictions.

- Institutional efforts in dialogue may prove helpful for reconciliation and peace building.

It is certainly commendable to seek mutual understanding and negotiate towards peace and acceptance between communities in volatile areas such as Northern Nigeria, Sudan and many other hot spots on our continent. But such meetings also carry with them the danger of theological compromise, and a denial or betrayal of given realities, especially in the suffering and injustice done to the Christians in various settings. Yet the greatest trick of the devil may be a minimization, or almost complete failure of the church's mandate for evangelism among Muslims. It also causes great irritation and disorientation to many Christians about Islam and Muslims in general.

2. Debate

We now turn to the second aspect of our theme: debate. First of all we need to clarify that debate is not the same as polemics. Gerhard Nehls in "The Islamic-Christian Controversy"[4] explains:

> *"The science of the defense of Christian Truth is named 'apologetics'. 'An effort is made to anticipate the points of a possible attack, and to defend them by evidence and sound reasoning. Positively, a Christian view of God and the world is elaborated, aiming to make it so adequate and winsome as to obviate attack before it even gets started.'* (Encyclopedia of Religion)"

In contrast to this 'polemics' has a much more negative connotation, almost justifying any means to confuse, irritate and ultimately defeat ones opponent. – Yet, as one African brother remarks: "Sadly, there is a great temptation to do just that during street debates with Muslims, and almost always it derails into a competition as opposed to genuine truth sharing."

Historically debates have been used throughout the centuries starting from the lifetime of Muhammad (see *The Great Deception*, by Abd al-Masih, Villach: 1995) till today. Dr. C. Schirrmacher points out in her doctoral thesis "*Mit den Waffen des Gegners – Christlich:Muslimische Kontroversen im 19. und 20. Jahrhundert*" (Using your opponent's weapons – Christian: Muslim controversies of the 19th and 20th centuries) how missionaries such as G. Pfander (1803-1865) and others were confronted with the

[3] Johnson Mbillah & John Chesworth, edit., From the Cross to the Crescent, A PROCMURA OCCASIONAL PAPER, Vol. 1, No. 1, Jan. 2004 - Here one begins to ask serious questions and wonders where the gospel proclamation has been lost along the road of peace and reconciliation.

[4] Gerhard Nehls & Walter Eric, *The Islamic-Christian Controversy*, Life Challenge Africa: Nairobi, 1994.

latest arguments of liberal theology from Europe in their encounter with Muslim scholars in Northern India. Anyone who has read Pfander's "*Mizan ul-Haqq" (The Balance of Truth*), designed in German, composed in Persian and revised and translated into English by W. St. Clair-Tisdall in 1910 will be fascinated by the masterly proposal to the superiority of the gospel both in defence and the devotional invitation to submit to its unique claims. In chapter 6 "*The Life and Conduct of a True Christian*" the true Christian is characterized as one who "loves God because he knows that God first loved him", who is thankful to God, worships Him in sincerity and truth, recognizes all men as his brethren, is truthful, upright, kind and pure, was created for God's service, shuns every unworthy word and deed, and thus is known by his conduct and obedience to the law of God. Pfander sought to exemplify this with his own life as is testified by a British governor of the Punjab who wrote:

> *"Who that ever met him can forget that burly Saxon (sic, Pfander was actually Swabian☺) figure and genial, open face, beaming with intellect, simplicity and benevolence? He had great natural gifts for a missionary, a large heart, a powerful mind, high courage, and indomitable good humor."*[5]

No wonder that almost sixty years after his death an expert of the Indian situation could write:

> *"I can remember no conversion of a thoughtful Moslem in which this book (Balance of Truth) has not played some part. Recently, we hear, it is being eagerly read in Palestine…"*[6]

During our first assignment as missionaries with Life Challenge in South Africa we had numerous opportunities to attend debates or symposiums with the Ahmed Deedat from Durban, SA, the uncrowned, global champion of Islamic propagation during the 70s to mid-90s. Interestingly, as Deedat once shared, it was the rejoinder to Pfander's book by his major opponent al-Kairanawi entitled "*Izar ul-Haqq*" (The Revelation of Truth) that inspired him to his career as an Islamic polemic. Deedat had providentially found a copy of this monumental work in a store room of the grocery shop where he had worked as a young man. Although Deedat explained his engagement in public debates, that started as early as 1951 in Cape Town, as a response to the aggressive witnessing of Christians in his early years, it is important to note that usually he was the one challenging preachers and apologists, bishops and even popes, to engage with him in public contests. John Gilchrist who knew Deedat's mind better than most Christians once responded to an attack on his allegedly confrontational handling of Deedat that this was painted in a way that

> *"gave the impression that I was some kind of Christian Frankenstein who had created a Muslim Godzilla in the form of Ahmed Deedat who in turn had spawned a generation of little godzillian Muslim monsters who were trampling the comfortable, gentle world of Muslim evangelism underfoot in the style of typical modern horror movies."*[7]

He then clarified that Deedat was thirty years older than him and asks:

> *"If you decide in advance that you are only interested in befriending Muslims, what happens when they confront you? When I first witnessed to Muslims in my home town in South Africa with a few friends in 1973 we quickly came up against fierce opposition from many Muslims who seemed to be equipped with an armoury of arguments against the Gospel. We soon met Ahmed Deedat with whom I had one public debate only in 1975. Thereafter he embarked on a massive campaign locally for ten years, debating with other Christian leaders (including Josh McDowell in 1981) and holding numerous mass meetings at local City Halls on deliberately anti-Christian subjects. We could have taken the path of least resistance by ignoring him and by playing ducks and geese with local Muslims that is, ducking and diving all the issues he was debating and just being friendly instead. We could have remained comfortable – meeting a few Muslims here and there, and melting them with kind sentiments and Christian pleasantries. To honour the Lord, however, whose Word was being ruthlessly perverted, we decided to withstand him. I knew we would be at some risk, opposing him in the open.*
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> *We prayed for courage and the ability to effectively answer him. For ten years we produced literature refuting his publications and other evangelical booklets sharing the Gospel with Muslims. We invaded virtually all his meetings, even though outnumbered at times by 2000 Muslims to 5 of us, but we were able to defend God's Word while at the same time spreading its message to thousands of Muslims at once. We never flinched despite verbal abuse, vicious pamphleteering against us, and various threats. Even though our local churches dozed*

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[5] Christine Schirrmacher, *Mit den Waffen des Gegners*, Klaus Schwarz Verlag: Berlin, 1992, p. 65.
[6] Ibid., p. 71.
[7] John Gilchrist, personal email message.

peacefully nearby, by God's grace we never lacked the resources to publish the thousands of booklets we needed."[8]

Finally he further clarifies:

> *"I have always distinguished between a man and his mission. I do not recall ever insulting Deedat personally – I have worked only to refute and neutralize his anti-Christian campaigns. Recently I visited him at his home in Verulam (Durban) and was moved when I saw him lying helplessly on his bed. (Comment: The late Deedat was paralysed for the last nine years before meeting his creator a month ago.) … I might add that none of the issues we challenged him on were 'academic'. They struck at the root of all Biblical truth and as knowing and believing the truth is part of all real faith, we knew our ministry would have no credibility unless we stood him down. I have personally visited hundreds of Muslim homes in South Africa and shared the Gospel directly with thousands of Muslims. All the arguments I have dealt with in my new book Facing The Muslim Challenge were heard firsthand from local Muslims. We shared the Gospel and very often they confronted us. We simply responded as we believed God wanted us to."*[9]

I have quoted from Gilchrist's response extensively not only because it so convincingly shows that he was not the one calling for confrontation and debates, but also because of the exemplary personal example and rationale of bold evangelism through both a public and personal witness to the Gospel.

In the East-African context Christians are facing similar challenges today. Long gone are the times when open air crusading was considered the sole prerogative of fiery Christian fanatics. Muslim mass meetings are going on in many places of our towns and cities with loud speakers, parading of some miracle kids, and ridiculing Christ and Christians alike. Our colleague Jared Oginga may verify and further explain what caused him to take a public profile for Christ. Here is his story:

> *"I was on my way in our suburb of Kawangware (Nairobi) to fetch some milk at a nearby shop when I came across an open air meeting where they talked about the Bible. Naturally I assumed this was some church rally from nearby, only to notice from closer distance that the speaker was dressed like a Muslim, and in fact, many in the crowd seemed to cheer him along. As I listened more intently a young woman was brought to the center of the crowd to be interviewed by the speaker: 'What is your name?' – 'My name is Elizabeth.' – 'And why do you want to become a Muslim today?' – 'I want to become a Muslim because for several weeks I have been listening to what was said from the window of my flat up there. And in all these weeks not one of the objections against Christianity brought up by the speaker was answered by any pastor. Obviously the Muslim arguments must be true, so I want to become a Muslim myself too."*

Jared couldn't believe what he saw and heard, but was too shocked to react that moment; nor did any other Christian. It was too late and this lady actually turned to embrace Islam. From this day on Jared told himself that he would not remain silent another time whenever Muslims challenge Christians to respond. He has been much involved in public debates ever since.

This shows us the two-pronged necessity for a public defence of the gospel: one is to present the plausibility of the Christian truth in a convincing way to the Muslim hearer[10], but at the same time the Christian witness has an awesome responsibility towards his own fellow-believer to strengthen, reassure and revive him in his understanding of Christian teaching and commitment. For ignorance breeds fear, and fear is perhaps the most powerful weapon of the devil in blinding and enslaving people in a truly diabolic system of religious intolerance; and at the same time keeping the followers of Christ paralysed in a religious non-interference mentality. The Timothys among us need to remind ourselves that

> *"God has not given us a spirit of fear / timidity, but of power, love and a sound mind." 2Tim 1:7*

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[8] Ibid.

[9] Ibid.

[10] Jay Smith who has been engaged in public debating with Muslims at London's Hyde Park Corner and other venues makes a passionate appeal in *Battle For The Hearts* to present answers and proofs to the many Muslim objections one is immediately exposed to in any conversation with them.

Speaking out for the truth

A very fascinating, recent development is the emergence of an increasing number of former Muslims that have turned their backs to Islam simply because of escaping the clutches of oppressive Islam by reading the Qur'an with an open mind, or reflecting on the testimonies of other apostates that are easily accessible on various web-pages today. The journey of several of these freethinkers is given in the book "*Leaving Islam – Apostates Speak Out*", and makes fascinating reading. Ali Sina, a Persian apostate, describes why he left Islam. His "exit analysis" bears an amazing clarity:

> *"After reading the Koran, my perspective of reality was jolted. I found myself standing face-to-face with the truth and I was scared to look at it. This was not what I was expecting to see. I had no one to blame, to curse and call a liar. I had found all those absurdities of the Koran and the inhumanities of its author by reading the Koran itself. I was shocked. Eventually this shock made me come to my senses and face the truth. Unfortunately, this is a very painful process and I do not believe there is an easy way. The followers of Muhammad must see the naked truth and they must be shocked. We cannot keep sugarcoating the truth. The truth is bitter and it must be swallowed; only then the process of enlightenment starts.*
> *Even as a man I was shocked when I read that Muhammad instructed his followers to beat their wives and called women 'deficient in intelligence.' Yet I have come to know many Muslim women who have no difficulty accepting these derogatory statements uttered by their prophet. Not that they like to be beaten, agree that they are deficient in intelligence, or believe that the majority of inhabitants of the hell are women, as the prophet used to say, but they simply block out that information. They read it, but it doesn't sink in. They are in denial. The denial acts as a shield that covers them, that protects them, that saves them from facing the pain of shock and disillusionment. Once that shield is up, nothing can bring it down. It is no use to repeat to them the same things over and over. At this point they must be attacked from other directions. They must be bombarded with other shocking teachings of the Koran. They may have a weak spot for one of them, and one of those stupid teachings may shock them. That is all they need: a good shock. Shocks are painful, but sometimes they can be lifesavers. Shocks are used by doctors to bring back to life, clinically dead persons.*
> *For the first time the Internet has changed the balance of power. Now the brutal force of guns, bombs, prisons, and death squads are helpless and the pen is almighty. For the first time Muslims cannot stop the truth by killing its messenger.*
> *I believe when people learn about the unholy lifestyle of the Prophet and the absurdities of the Koran, they will be shocked. At first they will deny, but when they recover from denial, they will be on their way to enlightenment. Our job is to expose Islam; to write the truth about Muhammad's unholy life, his shameful deeds, and his stupid assertions; and bombard the Muslims with facts. These people read what you write, they become angry with you, curse you, insult you, and tell you that after reading your articles their faith in Islam is strengthened. But that is when you know that you have sown the seed of doubt in their mind. They say all this to you because they are shocked. Now they have entered the state of denial. The seed of doubt is planted and it will wait for the first chance to germinate. In some people it takes years, but given the chance it will eventually germinate."*[11]

These words were not penned by a confrontational missionary (thankfully!), and none of us would like to see a Muslim left in a limbo with no faith at all. Thank God, we have much more to offer through the Gospel than shock therapies! However, it makes us aware about the crucial process of setting people free from the lies of their old prejudices and beliefs, and introducing them to the "Prince of Truth" who in turn is the only access to the Father of Light giving us enlightenment that produces eternal hope.

3. Do they ever meet?

Yes, they do; and possibly more so than we would freely admit from a dogmatic mindset. I have often wondered in observing contention among missionaries, whether it were the theological positions of my friends that were world's apart, or whether it might rather be a matter of widely differing personalities that resulted in their very different perceptions. How easily can we champion for the truth and nothing but the truth, when our personality structures are standing in the way to deeply seek to understand and appreciate our opponent's position!

[11] Ibn Warraq, edit., *Leaving Islam – Apostates speak out*, Prometheus Books: New York, 2003.

But convictions are absolutely crucial, and down-grading our beliefs in order to accommodate the other person's views is not what is asked for. Let me exemplify this from the highly acclaimed dialogue book by Kateregga and Shenk ISLAM AND CHRISTIANITY[12]. When one reads the book one cannot but conclude that the Christian witness deliberately arranged and "toned down" his presentation to fit the Muslim mind. For example: In comparing the Muslim and Christian witness about God both start their presentation from the point that 'God is one'. While this may be quite typical for Muslim thinking, few Christians would consider this to be the first characteristic of the Creator God. Others would insist to clarify that "God is one in the Holy Trinity"[13]. Not surprisingly, both of them affirm in their "Response" sections stating: "Christians and Muslims worship the same God" (Shenk) and "When Christians and Muslims talk about God, they are talking about the same God, although their witnessing concerning God may be rather different" (Kateregga). Shenk goes much further in bending over to the other side by stating that "Christians accept with thankfulness all[14] the ninety-nine names of God, which Muslims repeat in worship and praise to God". Now, for any committed follower of Christ it should be unthinkable to join in "praising God" as "The Killer", "The Subtle One", "The Distresser (who is responsible for evil)"; nor would he agree with the whole theological baggage of a "rosary concept" as a mode of worship and adoration.
No doubt, if others (G. Nehls always dreamed of finding a willing Muslim to approach a similar project together) had taken up a similar task, their book would hardly have presented a "dialogue-styled" book but rather a presentation of contrasting beliefs (see *Islam – Basic Concepts* by Gerhard Nehls and Walter Eric).

Suggested Guidelines for Dialogue and Debate

1. Whereas Christian witness to Muslims should always be sensitive to the Islamic context and appealing in nature (Mark 6:20; 12:37), it should avoid any compromise in content and retain its sharpness (Hebrews 4:12; 2 Cor 4:2).
2. Whereas boldness is repeatedly commended in Scripture (Acts 4:13.29.31; 9:27+29; Eph 6:19+20; Phil 1:20), we are not asked to provoke foolishly just for proving that we are fearless (2 Tim 2:23-26)!
3. Whereas we are called to be messengers of the Good News (Matt 24:14; Mark 16:15; Acts 20:24; Rom 15:19; 1 Thess 2:8), we dare not suppress the Bad News about man's sinful nature, Satanic deception and lies in the pseudo-spiritual mantle of religious beliefs and practices, and the eternal lostness of man without salvation in Christ to anyone we meet, including Muslims.
4. Whereas peace should certainly characterise the life of a Christian (Rom 5:1; 14:17; 15:13+33; Gal 5:22; Eph 4:3; 2 Tim 2:22; Heb 12:14 "Make every effort to live in peace with all men and to be holy..."), this cannot be the highest value of Christian character worth to be bought at any cost. Even Christ cautioned us quite realistically: "Do not suppose that I have come to bring peace to the earth… For I have come to turn a man against his father, a daughter against her mother, … a man's enemies will be the members of his own household"(Matt 10:34-36). And Paul reiterates this in Romans 12:18 "If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone."
5. Whereas people without Christ are bound in sin and fear (Luke 13:16; John 8:34; Rom 7:14), they are also blinded in ignorance and kept in bondage by religious deception. Thus, unless they hear the truth (John 8:32; 1 Tim 2:4 "…and come to a knowledge of the truth") in a truly challenging manner they will not be freed from error, nor ready to be filled with the renewed mind that brings about a change of behaviour patterns.

Denial may manifest itself in many different ways. For the one silence may mean denial at a time when he is challenged to take a public stand for his faith, for the other failing to lovingly seek an opportunity for gentle witness spells a crucial failure. But for all of us it is right to acknowledge that "delay (in reaching Muslims wherever they are, and in whatever armour they encounter us) is the most subtle form of denial."

[12] Badru D. Kateregga and David Shenk, *Islam and Christianity – a Muslim and a Christian in dialogue*, Uzima Press: Nairobi, 1980.
[13] See Zachariah Butrus, *God is one in the Holy Trinity*, Markaz-al-Shabiba: Basel, no date.
[14] Underlining mine.