

Dialogue(s) with Islam(s) – A Critical Approach

Introduction

Increasingly, 'Dialogue with Islam' is receiving attention in German public spheres. Proportionately, it is receiving funds from German government bodies. This has increased since the infamous September 11 of 2001.

The history of institutional 'dialogue' with Islam, however, goes back to the post-war period, especially into the early sixties, where a mutual understanding between Christian denominations and non-Christian religions was propagated on the side lines of the ecumenical activities of the two established Churches in Germany, Catholic and Protestant.

As a result and for the first time in history the Catholic Church officially declared its high esteem for Muslims and Islam at the end of its Second Vatican Council that was held from 1962-1965.

In the early seventies, various Islamic organisations responded by suggesting a cooperation between Christians and Muslims in the field of missionary activity and *da'wa*. Missionary activity / *da'wa* should preferably address non-believers. Christians and Muslims were to jointly oppose anti-religious and secular forces instead of opposing each other.

It would be a misunderstanding to conclude from these attempts at interfaith dialogue that Christians and Muslims should have accepted each other as equals. While turning a friendly face to each other, each side turns around to its own followers and makes it very clear that it is their own respective faith exclusively that warrants salvation. Apparently, the exercise was more in diplomacy than in inter-faith theology. Some critics speak of an attitude of "condescending tolerance,"¹ which would not have been conducive to inter-faith dialogue.

We have to distinguish, however, between interfaith dialogue, which is concerned with theological tenets shared by different religions, and inter-community dialogue, which

¹ Cf. Schweizer. *Islam und Abendland*. 205f.

leaves aside religion and tries to further peaceful interaction between different cultural or religious communities in the same polity.

Interfaith dialogue is about religious issues. Inter-community dialogue, by contrast, is about very secular issues such as the fair distribution of rights and opportunities to members of all communities.

Sometimes secular controversies are represented in religious terms because this can be a most efficient means to grab people by what is holiest to them and mobilise them for political action. This mixing up of religious and secular issues, however, is equally non-conducive to inter-communal dialogue as 'condescending tolerance' is to interfaith dialogue.

The necessary conditions that ought to obtain for proper dialogue are neatly enumerated by Johannes Kandel, a long-term player in the field of inter-community dialogue:

honesty, credibility, openness, readiness to take risks, firmness in ones own convictions, reciprocity, preparedness to listen, self-critique, openness for reformation of ones own attitude, and the will to cooperate in practical matters²

Very often these conditions are not fulfilled. Kandel observes that whereas the Christian side often lacks firmness and has a tendency for "self-minimalisation", the Muslim side very often uses dialogue events as platforms for ritual self-proclamation and/or *da'wa*. It thereby lacks in all of the above criteria except firmness.³

Governmental Dialogue Initiatives

Since September 11, 2001, the strategy of dialogue is increasingly propagated outside the arena of inter-faith and inter-community relations. It is proposed as an alternative to the 'clash of civilisations' that seems to some to be looming in the near future. These *inter-cultural* or *inter-civilizational* dialogue strategies take as a point of departure the essential

² Cf. Kandel. *Dialog mit Muslimen*. 323 [my translation].

³ Cf. Kandel. *Dialog mit Muslimen*. 326ff. [my translation].

opposition between 'the West' and 'the 'Muslim World''. They propagate dialogue as a necessary and effective means for the prevention of violent conflict between cultural groups or nations belonging to the two juxtaposed spheres of civilisation.

- In 1990, Bernard Lewis coins the term 'clash of civilisations' in an article explaining 'the roots of Muslim rage.'⁴
- In 1993, Samuel Huntington picks up and popularises Lewis' clash of civilisations thesis in his article *The Next Pattern of Conflict* in *Foreign Affairs*.⁵
- In 1997, German president Roman Herzog declared inter-cultural dialogue a national responsibility.
- In 1998, the then president of Iran, Khatami, called for declaring 2001 the 'year of dialogue between civilisations'. The initiative was endorsed by the United Nations Organisation.
- In 1999, the Organisation of Islamic Conferences invited the European Union for such an inter-civilisation dialogue, which took place in Istanbul in 2002.
- In 2001, the German foreign office created a panel for 'dialogue with the 'Muslim World'' as part of the programme 'European-Islamic Intercultural Dialogue'.⁶
- In 2002, Dr. Gunter Mulack was appointed first German Commissioner for the Dialogue with the 'Muslim World'.⁷
- Since 2002, project work is supported by way of the federal 'European-Islamic Intercultural Dialogue' programme.⁸ Most of these funds are channelled through organizations of cultural relations and education policy such as the Goethe Institutes (GI), the German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD) and the Institute for Foreign Relations (Institut fuer Auslandsbeziehungen – ifa).

⁴ Cf. Lewis. *The Roots of Muslim Rage* (1990).

⁵ Cf. Huntington. *The Next Pattern of Conflict* (1993); *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order*. (1996).

⁶ Cf. Auswaertiges Amt. *Dialogue with the Islamic World*.

⁷ Cf. Auswaertiges Amt. *Special Programme 'European-Islamic Intercultural Dialogue'*, and Qantara. *Politische Differenzen zur Sprache bringen*.

⁸ Annual budget 2002/03 EUR 5.1 million, 2004/05 EUR 4.5 million; cf. Auswaertiges Amt. *Bericht der Bundesregierung zur Auswaertigen Kulturpolitik 2004*, and Auswaertiges Amt. *Dialogue with the Islamic World*.

Critical Objections

Critics of the strategy of inter-civilizational dialogue point to the vagueness and imbalance in the juxtaposition of 'the West' on one hand and 'the 'Muslim World'' on the other. Repeatedly, attention is drawn to the fact that neither the so called West nor the so called 'Muslim World' are homogeneous entities or rock-hard realities. Instead they are man-made conceptual constructions based on airy generalisations and invariably linked with interests. One can have a legitimate interest in reducing complexity. More often, however, these generalisations are invoked with the interest to unite politically – one selves – and to separate – oneself from the others – along lines which may be convenient to some (oneself) but less convenient to others.

Many critics⁹ have observed that these lines, which until recently were defined more in terms of nationality or ethnicity, are increasingly redrawn along religious categories. This paradigm shift, which became pervasive after September 11, 2001, is also inherent in the juxtaposition of 'the West' with 'the 'Muslim World'.'

To be sure, there is nothing academically wrong in creating an ideal type, in the Weberian sense, of a civilisation that covers all the areas that have been touched by Islam, from Spain and Africa in the West to Indonesia in the East, and naming it 'Islamic civilisation' and the covered area 'Muslim World'. These terms, however, have become increasingly politically misleading because they reinforce the present tendency to not only call this civilisation by its predominant religion but also explain it exclusively by reference to Islam.

As we all know, much more goes into the making of this civilisation than a single religion. It has absorbed the Jewish and Christian cultures of West Asia, the Persian civilisation, the Greek-Byzantine culture, Indian civilisation and African cultures. For want of a better term, I will continue to speak of 'Islamic civilisation' and 'the 'Muslim World'' for the remainder of this paper while I keep all these intricacies in mind.

⁹ only recently by Shaila Benhabib in an international conference on the caricature controversy (War of Images – Modernity and its Discontinuities), which was organised at the *Haus der Kulturen der Welt* (House of World Cultures) in Berlin, 5-7 Mai 2006. Cf. http://www.hkw.de/en/programm2006/bilderkriege/projekt-detail_3.php [09/05/06].

Islamic civilisation may in fact be seen as the common denominator of a huge part of the world that enabled dialogue within its umbrella for a great number of centuries.¹⁰ Words bear witness to the dialogue of cultures within the 'Muslim World' from al-Andalus in the west to Indonesia in the east. Witnesses that pre-date the world wide expansion of western civilisation in the times of colonialism, imperialism and globalisation. Even today in India the 'stranger' is called Arabic 'ajnabi'. Likewise, white people are called 'firangi' in Urdu/Hindi, a word stemming from Arabic 'Firanğ' / 'al-Ifranğ', which evokes the 'Frankish' crusaders.

Similar cases could be made for other indicators of exchange within civilisations in terms of artefacts and narratives. This only helps to demonstrate that what is meant by Islamic civilisation cannot be captured by reference to Islam as a religion. Islam is only the indicator of the extent and intensity of cultural exchange, just as in medicine radioactive markers can serve as indicators of the veins of communication in an organism without, however, contributing much to their explanation. 'Islam' and 'Muslim' are used as tags to a civilisation, not as denoting its substance.

Dialogue partners of 'the 'Muslim World'' often criticise their western partners for their ignorance or disinterest in their dialogue partner's historical and cultural developments and in their social and economic circumstances.¹¹ We are reminded of the long history of inconsistent and often unjust policies carried out by western nations in parts of the 'Muslim World' in a constellation of western hegemony. While this history is still very present in the minds of the formerly colonised, the former colonizers seem to have had an easier time in forgetting the past and casting an ever fresh look onto the situation in their former spheres of influence.

An further critique often heard is that the West uses (and has always used) double standards in its dealings with the peoples of its former colonies. They are perceived to be less convinced of the necessity of such double talk as Samuel Huntington seems to be when he

¹⁰ For the concept of a civilisation or culture as a "field of discourse" cf. Malik, ed. *Perspectives of Mutual Encounters in South Asian History 1760-1860*, p. 3.

¹¹ Cf. Hippler / Billows / Shair, eds. *The West and the 'Muslim World'. A Muslim Position*.

writes that a “world of clashing civilizations ... is inevitably a world of double standards: people apply one standard to their kin-countries and a different standard to others.”¹²

An often repeated aim of dialogue with the ‘Muslim World’ is to “discuss values, viewpoints and opinions without trying to avoid controversy. Deep-set clichés are to be replaced by qualified perceptions ... The dialogue is to be an opportunity for people who have decided against violence. It aims to support the forces wanting to develop reform ideas and their own identity using peaceful means with a view to offering a political alternative to potentially violent groups.”¹³ A necessary prerequisite for this to happen is that dialogue partners find themselves at eye level.¹⁴ This is often simply not the case for reasons of economic and military imbalances that can not easily be ignored at the onset of dialogue.

Criticism of inter-cultural dialogue within the German public emanates from nationalist and Christian-conservative circles such as those surrounding Hans-Peter Raddaz¹⁵ and the ‘Christliche Mitte’¹⁶ who generally reject the strategy of dialogue with respect to Islam. Christian fundamentalists reject the idea that Islam should deserve an equal standing as a religion in Germany. Instead, they would demand of non-Christians in general and Muslims in particular the recognition of Christianity as the pre-eminent religion of Germany. At most, non-Christians could expect toleration, but not to be treated as equals among citizens of various religious or with no religious allegiances at all. Since Islam as the fastest growing religion poses a perceived threat to Christian pre-eminence thus conceived, Muslims engaged in dialogue are defamed as hypocrites who cunningly pursue the Islamisation of

¹² Cf. Huntington. *The Next Pattern of Conflict*.

¹³ Cf. Auswaertiges Amt. *Dialogue with the Islamic World*.

¹⁴ “Als unabdingbare Voraussetzung dafür muss der Dialog auf gleicher Augenhöhe mit den Partnern vor Ort geführt werden.” Auswaertiges Amt. *Bericht der Bundesregierung zur Auswaertigen Kulturpolitik*. 7.

¹⁵ Cf. Würth. *Dialog mit dem Islam als Konfliktprevention?* 16f.

¹⁶ An organisation promoting a ‘Germany following God’s commandments.’ Cf. *Kurier der Christlichen Mitte. Für ein Deutschland nach Gottes Geboten*, a journal distributed free of charge from the office’s at Lippstädter Strasse 42, D-59329 Liesborn. Their concern number one is to say ‘no to an Islamisation of Germany / yes to a Christian Germany.’ Cf. *Kurier Sonderdruck: Grundsatzprogramm der CM*.

Germany.¹⁷ Even the doyen of German historiography, Hans-Ulrich Wehler is sceptical about the possibilities of dialogue with Muslims.¹⁸

Between the proponents of dialogue and their critics, those who call for minimal conditions for dialogue such as mutual respect for human rights take a middling position.¹⁹ They welcome dialogue as a strategy for conflict prevention as long as the price is not the denial of values, which would be at the core of any conceivable conception of peaceful and fair interaction between human beings as well as between nations.²⁰ The viability of this position largely depends on the compatibility of traditional Islamic conceptions of law and justice with modern human rights law.

Germany has been carrying out institutionalised human rights dialogues with China and Iran. Human Rights organisations such as Amnesty International have commented critically on these initiatives as not meeting minimal conditions for dialogue such as clear benchmarks, a transparent agenda, continuity etc.²¹ Others criticise that human rights dialogue at the hand of the German government are only a fig leaf for the pursuit of economic interests.

Civil Society Initiatives

Besides such governmental initiatives, an abundance of dialogue events organised by civil society actors has sprung up in the last decade, with a dramatic growth after September 11, 2001. Among the first to name are state sponsored but programmatically independent agents of civil society such as those of cultural foreign policy, i.e. Goethe Institute, DAAD, and *ifa*; political and religious foundations such as Heinrich Böll, Friedrich Ebert, Konrad Adenauer, and Hans Seidel; Protestant, Catholic, and Muslim Academies; and state sponsored media such as Deutsche Welle (DW), Deutschlandfunk and their regional equivalents.

¹⁷ A forum for such criticism is the website <http://www.konservativ.de/islam/home.htm> [27/04/06].

¹⁸ Cf. Wehler. *Das Türkenproblem*; Bollmann. *Interview mit Hans-Ulrich Wehler: Muslime sind nicht integrierbar*.

¹⁹ Cf. Außenminister Fischer. *Kein Anti-Terrorabbatt bei Menschenrechtsverletzungen*.

²⁰ Cf. my conception of a 'minimally acceptable praxis' in *Der Philosoph als Mediator*. 40ff.

²¹ Cf. Würth. *Dialog mit dem Islam als Konfliktprävention?* p. 18f.

Civil society actors engaged in dialogue with Islam and not receiving any public funds are considerably less. Well-known intellectuals with roots in the Islamic world criticise the faulty premises of both, institutionalised, state sponsored, and non-institutionalised dialogue initiatives.²² According to these critics, these have had a tendency to 'essentialise' Islam. This narrow focus on Islamic civilisation as primarily determined by religion may be in the process of being overcome within academia in Germany, but it still characterises public debate and public policy.

Instead of questioning its premises, so the critique continues, state-sponsored German dialogue initiatives apparently reproduce the essentialism of this ill-conceived controversy. They presuppose 'the West' and 'the 'Muslim World'' as well-defined and separate entities whose dispartateness they then attempt to overcome. Thereby, says the critique, Germany would strengthen a confrontation between the two instead of helping to resolve it. In this essentialising view, the critique worries, what would appear problematic is the religion more than political mistakes, double standards, and imbalances in power relations.²³

Dialogue(s) with Islam(s) – European and South Asian Perspective

As part of the German governmental European-Islamic Intercultural Dialogue programme, the Universities of Erfurt and Jamia Millia in Delhi together with DAAD have carried out a project called "Dialogue(s) with Islam(s) in European and South Asian Perspective" in the winter semester of 2005/06.²⁴ The project was designed to allow six junior researchers from Europe and South Asia to do research on European-Islamic intercultural dialogue in South Asia and Europe respectively and to compare the results in a conclusive seminar in Delhi.

In the design of the project, the diverse criticisms mentioned above were taken into account as far as possible in the given framework. Of course, the main critique, namely that any

²² Cf. Kermani / Lepenies. *Für eine islamisch-muslimische Akademie in Berlin*. In a slightly different context, namely that of Muslim-Jewish dialogue in Israel/Philistina, Navid Kermani criticises that Europe has not only drawn the political borders in West-Asia, it also projects these borders back into the art, history, and culture of the orient. In its cultural and science policies toward the orient, Europe separates Jewish from Islamic traditions and thereby consolidates the ideological divide that hinders a peaceful solution of the Israeli-Palestinian-conflict. Diplomatic attempts at initiating a dialogue between Jews and Arabs underestimate the importance of a centuries old shared Jewish-Islamic culture.

²³ Cf. Würth. *Dialog mit dem Islam als Konfliktprävention?* p. 21.

²⁴ Cf. <http://www.uni-erfurt.de/islamwissenschaft/en/dialogue%20with%20islam/> [08/05/06]

dialogue initiative in the framework of European-Islamic Intercultural Dialogue would reproduce the notions of two essentially different civilisations facing each other over a gap could not be fully accommodated for structural reasons. In order to receive funding, the project had to operate within this conceptual framework. It was made clear, however, by the organisers, that participants were free to challenge this framework and propose alternatives. Thus, instead of looking only at western countries facing Islamic countries the participants were free to also look at former colonist countries facing former colonies, which would have encompassed more than just Islamic countries and would have relativised Religion as the only determining factor in the controversy. A comparison between dialogue with Islam and secular human rights dialogue or with nuclear proliferation dialogue were possibilities.

The project Dialogue(s) with Islam(s) started with the observation that dialogues do not just happen spontaneously and that the motives behind their organisation are manifold. The acknowledged difficulty was that there is, in real life, never a straight forward way of having a religion or a religious community engage in a dialogue. Invariably, the stage is prepared, representatives chosen, the process administered and interpreted by someone. This someone, a person or an agency, stands in a power relation with respect to those whose faith or community is to be represented. There is much room for manipulation here, and the result of such dialogue is often and to a large extent dependent on the parameters chosen by those who set the stage for the dialogue, who represent its results and who interpret its conclusions. It was the aim of this project to make explicit the hidden agendas and operative ideas and projections behind the organisation of such Dialogues. Sometimes, the construction of the counterpart, the Muslim dialogue partner, tells us more about this someone or the agency that attempts to conduct the dialogue than about the dialogue partner with whom the interaction is sought. The constructed dialogue partner can be interpreted as a conscious or subconscious projection of the organising party.

For all the reasons mentioned above, the project was not to be just another such dialogue event. The project was designed to allow for a reflexive approach to dialogue itself. The participants were encouraged to reflect upon the conditions of dialogue in general, in its

applications in the European and South Asian context, and, in their own case, as participants in a dialogue project. A workshop on critical discourse analysis which took place in Erfurt in November 2005 was meant to increase awareness of the reflexive character of the project.

The comparison between South-Asia and Europe was justified by the fact that in both regions Muslim communities form an important part of society. In both, religiously based convictions have come into conflict with the secular tenets of the state or with other received traditions, which in turn have to be reconsidered in the face of new religious challenges which demand religious pluralism. In both regions, we find polemical discourses on Islam and its alleged inability to submit to the overwhelmingly secular environment (as in Europe) or to the Hindu dominated environment in India, for example. In both regions, Muslims live for decades, if not centuries, and share their every day lives with people of other faiths or no faiths at all.

Long before discourses on Islam started to dominate the feuillets of newspapers, they have found ways of accommodating duties to their religion with duties towards their non-Islamic environment. In both regions, leading contemporary Muslim intellectuals have reflected upon the challenges of the secular state in productive manners and work to overcome the apparent dichotomy of Islam and secular society.

That these strands of thought exist in the 'Muslim World' is a point to remember. The fact that they have not attained wider currency is a problem which affects the prospects of dialogue between civilisations. It is an open question, however, whether Islamic civilisation should receive the blame for it. More so religion. One should be wary of any attempt to reduce a complex and multi-causal situation to the simple formula: "It's the religion, stupid!"

The project 'Dialogue(s) with Islam(s)' has entered the phase of its completion. After a concluding workshop was held in Delhi in February 2006, the papers are now being finalised and shall be published within a year's time.

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