

MUSLIM-CHRISTIAN INTERRELIGIOUS DIALOGUE

- Topic: Interreligious conversations as *Da'wah*: An Invitation for Comparative Study and Praxis among Muslims and Christians
- Convener: Marianne Farina, C.S.C., Boston College
- Presenters: David B. Burrell, C.S.C., University of Notre Dame
Most Reverend Theotonius M. Gomes C.S.C.,
Auxiliary Bishop of Dhaka, Bangladesh

Since the seventh century Muslims and Christians have engaged in conversations which promoted academic and pastoral development in a pluralistic setting as well as contributed to each tradition's hegemonic interests. Moving beyond the negative history of some encounters, this session was devoted to offering helpful suggestions for dialogue. The workshop explored the Islamic concept of *Da'wah*, as a method for interreligious conversations. *Da'wah* is an invitation from God to share one's faith with others so that these conversations proclaim God's unity (*tawhid*) and providential care (*tawakkul*) for all. From their study and experiences, each presenter offered illustrations of how this method helps Muslims and Christians to live peaceably together and to unite their efforts in projects of mutual concern and interest.

Reverend David B. Burrell initiated his presentation by dedicating the workshop to the memory of Most Reverend Joachim Rozario, C.S.C. of Bangladesh. He shared that Bishop Rozario's fervent commitment to Muslim-Christian Dialogue inspired the Congregation of the Holy Cross to engage in this ministry. Highlighting his own vocation to study Islam, Burrell described comparative theology as a search for truth and not simply for certitude. Such endeavors, he said emerge from Jean Danielou's original insight that Christians not only bring Christ to the world but also encounter Christ in cultures. Burrell explained that those who participate in dialogue do not fear that they will lose their particular religious identity. In fact, he added, they are energized by the search for meaning, which accompanies the sharing of similarities and differences between faith traditions. Burrell summarized his remarks stating that *Da'wah* is a journeying together of all faith-filled people in the hope that mutual understanding and insight emerge.

Most Reverend Theotonius Gomes' presentation described the experience of *Da'wah* in Asia. He began by offering some general principles for interreligious conversation. Bishop Gomes noted that "to be interrelated and in communion with the other(s) is the natural living dimension of all being." He said that, "to be in intercommunion is the final spirituality, the final holiness and perfection of being." Bishop Gomes then placed these observations into Bangladesh's reality. He highlighted the history of the region's openness to receiving religious-cultural elements from Hindu, Buddhists, Muslim and Christian traditions. Reporting that of the 125 million people in Bangladesh, 86% are Muslim, 12%

Hindu, 1.5% Buddhists, and the remaining 0.3% include Christians and members of tribal religions. He explained how this rich heritage continues to shape Bangladesh's commitment to religious freedom.

Related to this goal for religious freedom, Bishop Gomes also stated that the Catholic Bishops' Conference of Bangladesh established a commission for inter-religious dialogue. This commission promotes formal study of the religions in Bangladesh as well as personal involvement with the various faith communities. The bishops believe that activities of this kind establish positive relationships in both local and national settings. Bishop Gomes explained that at the center of these engagements is the sharing of one's faith life through various types of dialogue. He described these as (1) *dialogue of life* taking place in personal contacts and friendship; (2) *dialogue of action* in which Muslims and Christians join together to help the poor and disenfranchised; (3) *dialogue of discourse* involving religious and civil leaders in creating social policies; (4) *spiritual dialogue* which involves the respectful sharing of one's cultural and religious heritage; and (5) *secular/media dialogue* fostering national harmony by the media's favorable and comprehensive reporting about religious traditions and celebrations. Bishop Gomes concluded with the hope that all religions would recognize that "[they] have the mission to confirm, guide and foster interrelationship and communion . . . [and that] the faithful have within their heart the power and grace for communion and harmony with all people. . . ."

Following the presentations, those attending the session discussed their experiences of interreligious dialogue and raised questions about the model of *Da'wah*. The group agreed that successful dialogue begins with activities that foster personal relationships between faith communities and then moves into theological discussions. They identified the reciprocal visiting of holy places and the initiation of interfaith projects for the common good as ways for people to share openly with one another. They noted that these activities lay the foundation for the formal discourse about religious beliefs and practices. Participants also commented that difficulties emerge when some groups use social activities as a first step toward their goal of converting the other. However, others offered the view that when clear intentions precede interreligious exchanges of any type, trust between the faith communities grows. The session concluded with the affirmation of *Da'wah* as an effective model for comparative theological discourse and praxis.

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