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## MUSLIM/CHRISTIAN ENCOUNTERS

"Dialogue" is not restricted to religious circles. Tense situations in world affairs necessitate much serious dialogue. Likewise, new frontier opportunities for investment, such as the oil fields in Kazakhstan, prompt ongoing "strategic dialogue" between potential developers such as the Chevron company in the USA and the Muslim leaders of the newly acclaimed Republic of Kazakhstan. The massacres in Algeria have prompted various human right organizations to tackle the government of Algeria about their inability to handle this purely internal situation. Meanwhile in the religious arena there have been a succession of Muslim/Christian encounters. Several well advertised dialogues have been spear-headed by a well-known Islamic propagandist, Ahmed Deedat. Using a literary venue we can study how it was worked out in the reprint of the 1980 book "A Muslim and a Christian in Dialogue" by Badru D. Kateregga and David W. Shenk. We will consider the implications of such a project.

Kateregga and Shenk were already close friends when they undertook this rather unique endeavor to put such a dialogue into print. They were both teaching at the Kenyatta University College, in Nairobi, Kenya. Kateregga, a Muslim, taught Islamic history and theology while David Shenk, a Christian of Mennonite tradition, taught Christian history and theology. Dialogue, from its very nature, implies a format prone to compromise as those engaged would be striving to accomplish some measure of agreement with each other. It thus offers a hazardous path for a Christian in his attempt to be loving. The Muslim enjoys this form of contact for he never is tempted to compromise. This comes out clearly in the above mentioned book.

In the Kateregga/Shenk dialogue you are quickly aware of the desire to please, on the part of the Christian. You find yourself wanting a stronger Christian response. For example, let us look at just one chapter as presented by Prof. Kateregga when he dealt with the Muslim view of the Prophets. First of all he lists the prophets mentioned in the Quran, the holy book of the Muslims. You find Jesus (called 'Isa) mentioned as merely one in a list of twenty-five which starts with Adam and ends with Muhammed. He says: "Adam, the first man on earth, was also the first Prophet of Allah. God revealed the religion of Islam to Adam, which is submission to the one true God, the Creator, Sustainer of the world, Lord of the universe, and Master of the day of judgment." Further on there is this statement: "All Prophets brought this message (Islam) from Allah." Then comes this very uncompromising statement: "Like all Prophets before him, Isa (Jesus) son of Mary, preached the Oneness of Allah. The Christians received the universal message of God, but have compromised it by stressing the 'trinity' instead of the 'unity' of Allah."

In the Christian response to these statements, Shenk does not react as you would expect. Instead he says:

"The early Prophets such as Abraham and Moses laid a foundation for the building. Later Prophets such as David and Isaiah formed the walls of the building. The Prophet Jesus, the Messiah, is like the roof on the building. All the biblical Prophets taken together form a beautiful building. Christians earnestly and humbly give witness that all people should read and accept the message of all the true Prophets of God. Every part of the building is important. All are needed to understand God's full revelation to humankind."

Not much more needs to be said in the face of such obvious compromise unless one could protest that surely Jesus could be likened to the "spire" rather than the "roof."

How would you have responded?

It is unfortunate to see Mr. Kateregga referring approvingly to Ahmed Deedat--the prolific author of scathing and offensive Islamic literature such as his tract "Crucifixion of Cruci-fiction?" We remember acutely the many letters we received in response to our radio broadcasts, specially from Algerian listeners, who would tell us of the reruns of videos during the month of Ramadan in which their favorite Deedat tackled various Christian leaders, including the dubious Swaggart; and according to them--they all were thoroughly "routed." Deedat's rhetoric was not intent on pleasing any Christian. We have noted before how he has appeared on Internet in a less abrasive style.

So--what is the purpose or place of dialogue in Christian circles? Definitely there is value in talking openly with someone but one wonders if it is right to set aside the desire to convert and replace it with the desire to arrive at a pleasant conclusion.

In this regard we were profoundly struck by a recent newsletter from a missionary couple, whose devotion to their work and field had included acquiring fluency in the language of the people they were serving. They related an opportunity to witness to their faith in a Muslim home where Muslim visitors happened to be present. It wasn't a formal dialogue, per se, but they experienced the instant, emphatic, negative response of several of those Muslim

guests. They were using the language of these people. After one statement they were made about the assurance a Christian has for sins forgiven, they were rebutted by the traditional Muslim argument "Jesus was just a man. Muhammed is the last prophet. His revelation supersedes anything before it."

This was a different kind of dialogue because the Christian participant had experienced a calling to bring the Gospel to Muslims. A task requiring much patience and prayer. Thus one longs to have seen Rev. Sherk boldly saying that Jesus was not merely a prophet but that He was the Son of God, our Savior, whose mission was not simply to inform but to seek and save lost human beings.

Badru Kateregga presents the classical Muslim objections to Christianity as a redemptive religion. In the final analysis, Muslims are not simply offended by the doctrine of the Holy Trinity, but by the Biblical doctrine of the Fall. Quite early in his dealing with Rev. Sherk, he asserts in the most certain way that Islam rejects the doctrine of original sin. Therefore the Muslim believes man has no need for a redeemer. To him and to other Muslim propagandists, the Christian doctrine of Christ as Redeemer is totally irrelevant. Since Adam's day, according to him, mankind seems to keep forgetting the doctrine of the Oneness of God. This is what led the Almighty to send "nabis" (prophets) to lead people back to this fundamental religious truth. The plight of man, according to Kateregga and to Muslims, is not enslavement to sin but simply ignorance of God's will. Man simply needs divine information, not divine redemption.

It is unfortunate that the Christian side of this dialogue did not emphasize that Christ, as revealed in Holy Scripture, is primarily and above all a Savior. That is what Jesus means. We don't agree with Sherk when he says "Christian and Muslims worship the same God." How could this be when our God is a triune God who has planned our salvation before the creation of the world?

"All people are born as true Muslims, innocent, pure and free. Sin is acquirable but not innate, and therefore, if man rightly uses those special qualities which he has been endowed with he can easily avoid sin. Sin is not inevitable, because man is not sinful."

You can see how important it is to tackle this particular doctrine if you would bring the Gospel to a Muslim. First he has to see that he is a sinner in need of salvation. Anyone who has lived in a Muslim country would be aware of the tragic reaction to death in anyone's family. The lack of assurance under which they live becomes starkly evident. No matter how they strive to obey God's will they can never be sure that they have succeeded.

One is mystified by Sherk's response in the chapter about the "seal of the Prophets"

"Thus when a Christian looks at the Prophet Muhammad, he needs to evaluate Muhammad in light of the total biblical witness culminating in Jesus the Messiah. To the extent that the Prophet Muhammad accepts the total biblical witness and the central significance of Jesus the Messiah, and to the extent that the life and teachings of Muhammad give witness to the revelation of suffering redemptive love which we perceive in Jesus the Messiah, Christians should appreciate and affirm the Prophet Muhammad."

It's time to open Scripture and remind ourselves of the words in I Peter 3: 15: "But in your hearts set apart Christ as Lord. Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give a reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect, keeping a clear conscience, so that those who speak maliciously against your good behavior in Christ may be ashamed of their slander."

The Book of Acts is rich with examples of proper dialoguing. The Apostle Paul had many occasions to stand up and explain the Christian faith. We can be encouraged by the last words of this mighty book of the Bible: "Therefore I want you to know that God's salvation has been sent to the Gentiles, and they will listen! ....Boldly and without hindrance he preached the kingdom of God and taught about the Lord Jesus Christ." As he explained when talking to King Agrippa, in Chapter 26 of Acts: "First to those in Damascus, then to those in Jerusalem and in all Judea, and to the Gentiles, also, I preached that they should repent and turn to God and prove their repentance by their deeds."

Can each of us say with Paul "I'm not ashamed of the gospel"?