

The Perils of Ecumenism

Two recent disturbances ought to have tempered our new found exuberance for ecumenism both within and outside the Muslim community. In the first, a popular Sunni scholar in Pakistan, during the course of his lecture, unwittingly quoted a well established sunni text that allegedly disparaged `Ali, the fourth caliph. In so doing he incensed Shiites to the extent that the government of Pakistan stepped in with threats of legal action against such 'irresponsible behavior'. In the second the Muslim hosts of the Madrid interfaith conference upset some Jewish guests for drawing a distinction between Judaism the religion—which was deemed good—and Zionism, the political movement that gave birth to the state of Israel—which was deemed evil. As one participant put it, no sooner had the Saudi king called in broad terms for tolerance and moderation than a government adviser from a neighboring state urged Muslim leaders to avoid the company of Zionists. Tough business this ecumenism—and made tougher still, by unrealistic expectations on all sides. What then are these expectations?

The first is that ecumenism is driven by the search for peace and that peace would follow dialog just as night follows day. Actually, this modern urge towards ecumenism—which, who knows, might well produce that all elusive peace—is less a response to some higher call for peace, and more a consequence of having to live cheek by jowl, yet amicably, with erstwhile adversaries in a secular humanistic culture. Not surprisingly therefore, in places like Europe as Muslims grow in number so too does media coverage on Islam and democracy, Islam and pluralism, Islam and gender equality. Such coverage is driven by concerns that immigrants with faith lack the ability to think and live in harmony with others in faith free societies. But this happens elsewhere as well, and to others besides Muslims. In India, for example, similar questions are being asked about the Hindu majority's ability to live in harmony with Christians, Muslims and Sikhs. In the past living as a religious minority meant that sectarian privileges more than hard work determined economic well being, that harmony obtained only at the pleasure of the majority, and that rebellion often meant an evaporation of the very goodwill that permitted minority liberties. Until the modern age it was only goodwill that stood between any minority and a life of penury, exile, or even death. Much of the grudges that we bear, the wounds that we nurse, and the scores we try to settle today are a result of this tolerant dispensation. Modern civil society deserves credit for replacing goodwill and tolerance with constitutions and laws that protect all human rights. But it has failed to assuage past slights and heal old injuries even with its Nuremberg Trials, and its Truth and Reconciliations Commissions. For that to happen religion is still needed. Ecumenism, if done correctly, under the watchful eye of duly trained scholars and professionals is our best hope of healing humanity's many wounds.

The second is that ecumenism within faiths—sometimes called intra-faith relations—is driven by the search for unity before God and solidarity against outsiders. This too, is only partly true. To some extent Sunni and Shiite Muslims, Catholic and Protestant Christians, and Sephardic and Ashkenazi Jews, do momentarily suppress their differences and stress their commonalities out of religious conviction. But pure religious conviction has never been quite the incentive to social action that both loyalists and critics claim. In the case of Islam, in particular, ecumenism is as much an unintended consequence of the

waning of imperial power and the colonization of much of Islamdom as it is a quest for Muslim unity. During the halcyon days of Muslim power it was brute force, not Muslim brotherhood that determined whether Sunni Ottomans or Shiite Safavids would dominate the Middle East. Since the collapse of these empires it has become decidedly more appealing for both parties to privilege umma over sect, to celebrate a common faith rather than lament a divided history, and to envision a healthier terrestrial future together as Muslims rather than apart.

And the third is that ecumenism is a single event that rights past wrongs and presses otherwise divided hearts and minds into the service of some irenic future. The truth is that to succeed in the long run ecumenism must be viewed as a process rather than an event. It must be viewed as a series of hesitant steps that sincere yet wary antagonists take more for pragmatic reasons than out of moral or faith concerns. And most importantly, it must be viewed as a painful somewhat embarrassing process in which dirty linen eventually, does get washed in public and the carpet under which so much of history's detritus still festers comes right off. And finally when that dust settles, we must be willing to accept that some of the history we blindly accepted—and upon which so much dogma was built—is either patently false, or at least exaggerated. We must be willing to accept that even where facts are not in dispute there might still be more than one way of interpreting these facts. We must be willing to restore rights where possible, or offer reparations where not. And above all, we must be willing to forgive oppressors their oppression and seek forgiveness for our own.