

The Consequences of Evangelization for Interactions between Muslims and Christians*

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Abstract

Interactions between Muslims and Christians began with misgivings. However, passage of the time taught the followers of both religions to conduct a dialogue in a more charitable way. In the contemporary world where atheistic inclinations threaten, not a particular religion, but the very foundations of religiosity, an ever increasing convergence was formed between Muslims and Christians. In fact, this convergence still faces historical and theological obstacles. We intend to articulate Christian evangelism as an obstacle for the establishment of convergence in some places. We conclude that evangelization as a theological commitment, rooted in the New Testament and Christian tradition, extended from its limited version among Jews to other nations, including Muslims. Evangelization always plays the role of a major obstacle to fundamental convergence. Suspension of cultural and social identity, inferiority, and cultural uprooting are some of the repercussions of evangelization. Each of these is sufficient to hurt the religious feelings of the Muslim nation. In addition to these, one can add fraudulent activities and deception by several Christian missionaries.

Keywords: convergence, interaction, interfaith, theology, evangelization, Christians, Muslims.

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Introduction

In the contemporary world, religiosity faces a variety of challenges in its confrontation with the growing strand of atheism, which poses challenges to the very foundations of the religiosity. This fact about the new world makes the need for interfaith interactions and convergence clearer than ever. In these circumstances, Islam and Christianity, due to their divine origin and widely shared principles as well as the common experiences of their respective theologians in the past two centuries, can form interactions and convergences more than other religions, especially due to their geographical proximities.

At any rate, there have always been many obstacles to any collaborations and interactions between these two religions. Such hurdles undermine the prospect of their common front in face of atheism. One major hurdle is the notion of Christian evangelism that strives to disseminate the message of the promised Jesus Messiah to other nations and to Christianize them as a religious commitment. Consequently, this idea turned into an obstacle for the formation of “convergence” and “interfaith collaboration and rapprochement.” Evangelization has plunged Christianity into the abyss of "unilateralism" and prevented the discovery of reconciliation capabilities between religions. Early Christian evangelism was intended to convey the good tidings of the advent of Jesus to the children of Israel as well as to the pagan nations of the time. But the problem is that the Christians think they have the same evangelistic mission in the new era. As a result, they pursue the idea, instead of collaborations with Muslims, in confrontations with atheistic threats. This article puts emphasis on the notion of evangelism as the major hurdle on the way of establishing collaborations between Muslims and Christians in the face of problems caused by atheism and irreligiousness.

1. The concept of evangelization and missionary

The word 'evangelization' derives from the Greek noun *euangelion* (literally: good news), and the verb *euangelizomi* (i.e., to announce or proclaim or bring good news). Evangelization is the proclamation of the historical, Biblical Christ as savior and lord, with a view to persuading people to come to him personally and be reconciled to God (Elwell 1984). "Mission" means "to send." More precisely, "mission" means "sending a messenger from God" to "convey God's message" to the world. The use of "mission" to mean "sending" and "duty" to describe the activities of church members in spreading the gospel is relatively recent. In the sixteenth century, Ignatius Loyola used the term to describe the activities and commitments of his group members. Before the sixteenth century, such practices were often described as the spread of the faith, the conversion of nations' religions and beliefs, the proclamation of news to the world, the conversion of unbelievers, and the institutionalization and strengthening of the church tradition. In the nineteenth century, religious missions expanded to include non-Christians as well (Carson 2002, 683). Therefore, what is meant by sending is the sending of the good news. In fact, "mission" means the proclamation of the good news by the missionary. Dedication to evangelization is a historical and strategic practice that has always been pursued by the missionaries. There is sufficient evidence for this practice in the New Testament, as well as the tradition of apostles and the Church's Fathers. Elaborate theological foundations have been developed during history in support of this practice.

2. The scope of evangelization

According to the teachings of Christianity, the transmission of divine revelation to all people is a definite duty of the Christ and his

successors. The transmission of revelation in the act of evangelism is achieved by educating all peoples. Christianity sees the realization of its goals in reinforcing and developing evangelical practices. "God wants all people to be saved and to come to the knowledge and truth" (1 Timothy 2:4).

The Christ must therefore be preached to all nations and individuals so that this good news reaches all over the world. "God, out of His graciousness provided provisions of salvations and preserved it throughout the ages and passed it on to all generations" (Paul II, 1994). Accordingly, evangelism and tutelage among Christians have a high status and a wider scope than they do in Judaism, as they include the whole world. Christians think of evangelism and tutelage as the main reasons why Jesus selected and trained his twelve disciples. The main idea here is that the Christ's evangelism was among Jews, and that Jesus preached among the people of Israel and never went to preach amongst other communities. But the Church believes that evangelization is not limited to a particular nation because Jesus commanded his disciples to "go back and make disciples of all nations" (Matthew 19:28). And this is the reason for the development and expansion of evangelism in Christianity. The Church seeks to embody the gospel in the culture of all nations, seeing the duty as universal to all nations. In fact, the church considers its main task to be the promotion of Christian teachings and Christianization of all nations and peoples.

According to Christian teachings, the most significant characteristic and duty of the apostles was to continue the role of Jesus, such that the service of the apostles is the service of Jesus.

This role, originated during Jesus's lifetime, must continue to be actively practiced in human societies in later times. According to the Christian teachings, the apostles are in fact ambassadors of the Christ,

and this duty, in their view, must continue to be discharged in one way or another until the establishment of the kingdom of God. This role can manifest itself in the form of Christian evangelism. The divine mission that Jesus has entrusted to them must continue until the end of the world (Paul II, 1994).

In light of Christian teachings, although followers of other Abrahamic religions, Judaism and Islam, have a monotheistic nature, they have gone astray because they do not believe in the Christ. Therefore, a Christian, in line with the love for humanity and its high value, has the obligation to guide them to the right path.

An important point to note is that according to verses from the New Testament, Jesus initially limited his mission to the children of Israel (Sanei 2013, 100), as when he said, "Do not go in the ways of the Nations, and enter not into the land of the Samaritans, but go to the lost sheep of Israel" (Matthew 10: 5-6). Also, in response to a woman asking him to heal her daughter, Jesus says, "I have not been sent except for the lost sheep of the house of Israel" (Matthew 15:24) and "You worship what you do not know but we worship what we know, for salvation is from the Jew" (John 4:22). These verses restrict the realm of evangelism to the children of Israel.

Even if the tradition of evangelism is not limited to Jews and it includes non-Jewish people, Christian evangelists, who purportedly follow the teachings of the Bible and the Ecclesiastical tradition, have expanded the scope of evangelism from the "Israelite" communities and, in a broader reading, from the "polytheistic" communities to the "Islamic communities." In this way, they have paved the path for hostility and violence.

3. Christian evangelization in the Islamic world

Interactions between Muslims and Christians waxed and waned through different periods. Early Christian approaches after the advent of Islam were appalling. On these approaches, which developed in the period of Umayyads, Christianity was deemed as the true religion and Muslims were viewed as the followers of an awry religion. This was the reason why theologians such as John of Damascus tried their best to prove internal contradictions in the holy Quran and the fallacies of the Islamic faith. Textual works of that era show that Christians did not as much try to Christianize Muslims as they struggled to demonstrate the rationality of their own teachings and justify them in face of the Quranic teachings. In later periods, conflicts between Muslims and Christians went to extremes and even lead to physical conflicts. Though these conflicts were not solely religious, religious clashes had a remarkable role to play in the wars and bloodsheds. After this period, their interactions were to some extent peaceful and civilized. In this period, evangelism was theorized and was pursued less fiercely. At last, in the fourth period, Christians acknowledged Islam as a divine religion and a way to salvation. This approach was mentioned in the statement of Second Vatican Council. Nonetheless, evangelism has always been pursued as a religious duty in Catholic churches, and Muslims have always been considered as proper targets for Christian evangelism. Of course, Christians acknowledge that the Islamic world firmly resists Christian evangelism (Murphy 1970, 227). The land of the Levant, i.e., Jordan, Palestine, Syria, and Lebanon, once colonies of France and Britain, was more exposed to Christian evangelical activities than other Islamic countries. During the Ottoman rule, the Jesuit monastic sect did not have much success in its evangelical activity. In the nineteenth century, American Protestant missionaries entered the Arabian-Islamic region. During

this time, the first Protestant church was built in Beirut, wherein American missionaries were sent to Iraq, Egypt, and the Gulf countries (Abdul Razzaq 2005, 67). In addition to their sanitary, medical and other social activities, American missionaries published books and engaged in evangelic training. The evangelists focused on the land of the Levant because they felt that people of these areas were more closely related to the Western culture and Christian beliefs. Moreover, the Promised Land to which Jesus would return was located in these areas (Abdul Razzaq 2005, 69). The Levant is more popular with American Protestants because of the influence of evangelical Christian thought. This was because they believed that the return of Jesus depended on the return of the Jews to the land of Palestine. Therefore, in their view, by adding to the population of Jews and Christians in these areas, they paved the way for the return of Jesus (Mahmud 2009, 168).

In addition to the Levant, in the Arab countries of the Persian Gulf region such as Kuwait, Bahrain, the UAE, Qatar, Iraq and the like, in coordination with the governments of these regions, evangelistic activities are carried out under the disguise of educational and medical activities. Abdul Malik Khalaf al-Tamimi, a Kuwaiti author, wrote a book entitled *Evangelization in the Persian Gulf*. In this book, he provides reports based on his own observations about evangelical centers in this region.

Apart from the Arab countries, the evangelical activity can be seen in other Islamic countries such as Pakistan, Indonesia and the like. As the fourth most populous country in the world and with a ninety-percent Muslim majority, Indonesia has been of great importance to the Catholic Church due to its location at the crossroads of Asia and Oceania. Similarly, the Catholic Church has also strongly supported the Catholic universities of the archipelago. With the expansion of

Catholic activities, more than ten Catholic universities are active in the archipelago. Due to extreme poverty in more than half of the predominantly Muslim population, many are attracted to these Catholic universities (Mahmud 2009, 168).

Pakistan, with a large number of poor people, has also presented an opportunity for evangelists to preach under the disguise of social and charitable services, educational and medical associations, etc. There are more than five Catholic universities and institutes in the country. Pakistan is a country where Christian evangelical activities among Muslims led to violent reactions from some Muslims (Mahmud 2009, 168).

In the case of African countries, we can note the interaction of colonizers and missionaries. In the past, colonization was distinct, and colonial countries obviously cooperated with missionaries. But after the independence of the colonial countries, the colonization continued in secret, such that even after the independence of the African countries, which were colonized by Britain or France, evangelical relations with the colonial countries are still in place until today. In Senegal, for example, poor children are taken care of, and expenses of their families are paid with the condition that their upbringing should be in accordance with the provided guidelines. Thereafter they are sent to evangelical schools. In this way, the child is cut off from the Muslim family and is educated according to Christian beliefs (Khalidi and Farugh 1968, 35).

Central Africa, now a hotbed of extremist Christians and racist Christian groups who kill Muslims, was almost entirely Muslim in the middle of the twentieth century, but with the Catholic Church's educational activities people increasingly converted to Christianity. The Catholic priest Jordan, who has been preaching in the area for thirty years, explicitly says, "School is the natural way of the church

and, more than eighty percent of the adults baptized in the church are educated in Christian schools" (Omenka 1989, 1886-950).

4. Evangelization and religious violence

A major, yet less-discussed, issue is that of overt and covert effects of Christian evangelism in shaping the violent actions of certain Muslim communities against Christian minorities. It seems that Christian evangelists viewed Muslims as pagans, and as a result, they conducted their evangelistic enterprises among Muslims as well.

Francis Xavier, the first Jesuit missionary, one of the most revered evangelists of the Catholic Church, whose performance in the papacy has been hailed as distinguished, has come up with a phrase that analyses the depth of Christian evangelical practices. During his evangelistic activities, he says: "I want to preach where there are no Muslims and Jews, leave the other unbelievers and atheists to me" (Rasulzadeh and Baghbani 2010, 235). The adjective "other" in the phrase "Leave other unbelievers to me" suggests that Muslims and Jews are also unbelievers, as they do not accept the glad tidings of the gospel. Thus, they are treated as infidels and the task of evangelization among these infidels should be given to the other evangelists.

Apparently what is predominant among Christian evangelists today is a view based on the above analysis of Xavier's words. That is, by strengthening evangelical activities in Islamic and Jewish communities, Christians portray the message that, on the Christian belief, Islamic and Jewish communities are among the infidels. The Christian community, the Catholic Church and other churches have a duty to promote evangelical movements in the Islamic and the Jewish world and to remove them from the defilement of disbelief. Such an approach adopted by evangelical Christianity leads to the institutionalization of extremism and violence in human societies in

interaction with Christianity. In view of the above remarks about the roots of evangelism in Christian theology, as well as the methods of evangelism presented in the form of analysis, one must acknowledge that Christian evangelism and Christian methods and practices in its organization of evangelical affairs characteristically pave the ground for violence and extremism when applied to Islamic societies.

4. 1. Evangelization and opposition to religious identity

Religion is the most important source of identity and meaning in religious societies. The role of religion in giving identity has been increasingly important in the modern turbulent world. Religious communities establish and define their national identity with their religious teachings, beliefs, and rituals. There are several definitions of “identity.” One of the most prominent among these is its definition as “a set of personality traits, a culture that distinguishes one from others,” or identity as “the existential reality of everything, and how its essence is” (Anwari 2014, 645). It is observed that “identity” is the most crucial element in human societies. Moreover, in proportion to its depth in social culture, every society always seeks to preserve and transfer it to the next stages of social life.

The history of every land and nation with its scientific, literary, artistic, religious and civilizational approaches is the most important factor in shaping and explaining the frameworks of its national and religious identity. Obviously, such an important element, which helps protect people and nations, does not easily undergo changes. Indeed, the element of identity is an active, dynamic, and indestructible element. On the other hand, identity has such a high prestige in the minds of nations and peoples that they resist anything that might challenge or destroy it, to the extent that people are willing to sacrifice their lives to preserve it.

The Consequences of Evangelization for Interactions .../ 59

The claim is that evangelization and missionary movements target fundamental identities of ethnic groups in Islamic societies. Evangelization is basically a challenge to the religious identity of Islamic societies. Given what we have said so far, missionaries first consider Muslims and Jews as infidels and then begin preaching among them. This is exactly where the religious identity of Muslims is threatened. It is natural that followers of Islam, in the face of this accusation, oppose Christianity and their evangelical movements in proportion with their ethnic and religious backgrounds. When there is an element of hostility between Christians and Muslims, the result will be the spread of extremist and violent thinking.

A study about evangelization by William Hawking in 1932, titled "The Rethinking Missions," addressed the problems with conversion, arguing that missionaries should not seek to convert people, but they should assist the forces of justice in any religion. From 1920s and 1930s, many missionaries said that their goal was to simply introduce Jesus Christ to them and not to change the culture of the people. World War II further weakened the Western power and eventually led to the collapse of imperialism. During 1950s and early 1960s, countries such as India, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Ghana, Egypt and others consecutively gained independence. Rejection of colonialism implied rejection of Christianity as a foreign religion. During 1960s and 1970s, the cry of "missionaries go home" was heard around the world. Since 1960s, western academics criticized and analyzed the pathology of the evangelicals. The critics focused more on the cooperation between colonialism and evangelism. Harvard historian Schlesinger stated in 1974 that the main evil of evangelism was something called "cultural imperialism." Although the missionaries seldom used guns, they were supported by Western economics and politics to pressure people to change their culture (Robert, 2009.200).Major critics of

evangelical activity arose amongst Muslim and Hindu scholars who felt that they were victims of Western imperialism and colonialism. In the nineteenth century, during the Ottoman rule, Muslim scholars wrote books to denounce the presence of Christian missionaries. In 1953, Mustafa Khalidi and Omar Farugh wrote a book in Arabic stating that missionaries were not religious in the first place. On the contrary, they were the cutting edge of Western imperialism. Their work was translated into other languages and the ideas were reformulated by other Arab writers in 1980s and 1990s. Tensions between the West and the Islamic world escalated in the late twentieth century. Anti-Christian literature arose among Muslims and Hindus, which resulted in reduced presence of missionaries in Islamic and Hindu areas (Robert 2009, 200).

4 .2. Evangelization and humiliation of followers of other religions

Evangelization is premised upon the idea that Christianity is the superior religion. This self-aggrandizement implies a contemptuous look at any other person or nation or ethnic group. The depth of this approach becomes more apparent when this feeling permeates all spheres of the social life of people or religion. Above all, the ultimate loss occurs when followers of one religion claim to be guided by the Holy Spirit and draw on the spiritual pressures of this view to humiliate other nations. With a view of the history of Christianity and the ways in which it spread in historical periods, it can be seen that, especially in periods when Christianity was in power, it considered itself as superior to other nations and peoples.

It is in line with this view that evangelistic activities are organized in the heart of the Christian church. Prejudiced, biased people are sent to all parts of the world, including Islamic societies. Christian

missionaries have always sought to portray Islam as a religion full of superstitions and polytheism, as opposed to Christianity, and have strived to weaken the foundations of the Muslim faith, in order to accelerate the process of Christianization. Obviously, this movement is at its heart full of self-aggrandizement, imposing its worldview the Islamic world. Such humiliation of other people is followed by their resentment and anger, as well as an increase in retaliatory, aggressive and violent behaviors.

4.3. Evangelization and totalitarianism

Totalitarianism is characterized by intolerance towards other independent social or individual identities. Totalitarian thinking, as commonly defined, is an attempt by governments to seize absolute, unquestionable power. Totalitarian thinking takes on a more dangerous aspect when it is accompanied by an ideology. If one takes a look at the historical development of the church, one finds that churches utilized great financial and political resources available to popes, to suppress their opponents (Williams 2006, 23). The expansionist characteristic of evangelical goals indicates the institutionalization of the spirit of totalitarianism in the evangelical approach to Christianity, especially in later times.

Right after the advent of Islam and the mission of the Holy Prophet of Islam (s), Christianity was initially bewildered, and it considered Islam as a rival identity for its undisputed dominance and sovereignty. Christianity found Islam as a religion that, with an ever increasing number of followers, undermined the foundations of the Christian religion. In this way, with the totalitarian thinking instilled in the Christian church, especially after the establishment of Christianity in the Roman Empire, it started confronting Islam with cruelty and

violence, to the extent that it launched the Crusades to weaken, humiliate and ultimately defeat the Muslims.

The contemporary world, especially societies and nations with great history and great civilization would oppose any type of totalitarian thought and practice. Christian evangelism, which arises from the totalitarian thinking of the history of Christianity, simply cannot find its way among Muslim nations and tribes. Muslims stand against this culture and practice, and as a result, foundations of violence are born and nurtured by the evangelical practice of Christianity.

4.4. Evangelization and arousing the religious emotions of Muslims

Emil Durkheim believes that Religion is not just a system of ideas, religion is first and foremost a system of forces. A person who has a religious life is not just a person whose world is portrayed in one way or another and who knows what others are unaware of, rather, first and foremost a person who has a religious life feels within himself a power which one normally does not have and in the absence of the religion he does not feel it. A person who has a religious life believes that he participates in the force that dominates him, a force that supports him and calls him beyond himself. One who does not consider a religious feeling in the study of religion cannot talk about religion. He is like a blind man talking about colors. The faith of a religious person is part of his existence (Durkheim 2004, 201-207).

Many social academics and sociologists believe that religious orientation and religious sentiment are inherent in the human nature. Accordingly, when Christian preachers enter the sanctuary of a Muslim's religion and religiosity, they in fact intrude into his holiest sanctuary. In their missionary activities and by encroaching on the

religious sanctity of people, Christians do in fact play with the religious sentiments of Muslims. This is where the religious sentiments of Muslims are evoked by the element of evangelization. The point to consider is that missionaries do not simply preach the message of the gospel. Rather, many of them, before anything, try to destroy Islam and insult Islamic sanctities.

When a religious movement such as Christianity adopts an evangelical approach to develop Christianity and to resort to destruction and insult, religious feelings are aroused, and when these feelings, entrenched as they are in the human nature and soul, are aroused, this can lead to violence. Therefore, evangelical activities of Christianity and its attempt to weaken the faith can be characterized as a source of violence and unrest.

4.5. Modern Evangelization

In the modern era, missionaries know that evangelization cannot be easily practiced in Islamic societies. For this reason, instead of the older Latin Christian model that separated religion from culture, some of them proposed a weaving model. Pieres says, "We should not plant Christianity in Asia without breaking its vase." The weaving model seeks to convey the gospel to people in a way that is acceptable and meaningful in the context of their indigenous culture. To present Christianity in a way that meets the needs of the people and makes them followers of Christ while remaining in their own culture. The challenge is to try to create a Christian society while preserving its identity and cultural heritage (Bonk 2007, 94-95).

Catholic and Evangelical Protestant anthropologists have played a major role in evangelical anthropology (Bonk 2007, 97). The *Journal of Practical Anthropology* cites stories and examples of how

anthropology can facilitate the complexities of cultural interaction for evangelism.

The weaving strategy is designed for societies such as Islamic societies. On this model, missionaries are advised not to use Western expressions. On the contrary, they should make use of local poems, songs, and literature. On the weaving model, new converts are encouraged to maintain their social relations within the Islamic society as much as possible and to show a transformed life after converting to the Christian faith. Many examples of this strategy can be found on social media.

Among the models related to the weaving model are the following: (1) Planting church and creating house churches, (2) insider movement. In the planting Church movement, the church should be expanded by the indigenous population (Garrison 2004, 21).

The home church is a clear example of the planting movement. Home churches are small Christian groups that meet regularly in private homes and hold their services (Jones 2004, 55). Annunciation is the core of the home church.

A follow-up of the weaving models is the "internal movement" model. The International Conference on Foreign Evangelism in 2006 called the insider movement an influential model in the Islamic world. The weaving strategy consists of six spectrums. Each spectrum refers to Christ-centered communities. The insider movement is a model of Christian-centered societies that is used to reduce the connection of Christianity with the Western culture to eliminate the negative mental set and find an opportunity to influence the Islamic society. This model has several levels. Among others, in the fifth or C5 level, even the missionaries call themselves Muslims. Likewise, Muslim converts who want to remain in the Muslim community, abide but follow Jesus Christ. They say prayers and attend mosques, but they believe in the

Christ as the God of salvation. These are weird Muslims (this is called insider movements) (Martin 2012, 4).

Theorists of the insider movement seek to create an identity crisis for future generations of Muslim families through immoral and deceptive methods. Of course, this model has its proponents and opponent. Even some Iranian missionaries, such as priest Sasan Tavasolli, oppose this model and consider it immoral and deceptive (Tavasolli 2013, 325).

Conclusion

Evangelization is rooted in the Bible. Christianity sees its development and promotion as a major, fundamental teaching for the salvation of humankind. There are verses in the New Testament pertaining to the scope of the mission of Jesus being limited to the nation of the children of Israel and that it does not include other nations. However, there are other verses wherein Jesus commands his companions to preach and to convey the message to all the worlds, including both people of Israel and others. On these verses, some have claimed that the evangelistic mission that Jesus entrusted to his apostles and successors is not limited to the Jews.

It is important to note, however, that at a time when Christianity tried hard to evangelize among the Gentile, the nations beyond them and throughout the land of the great Roman Empire were polytheists. Accordingly, even if we accept that the mission of Christ's successors included the Gentile, we must admit that their purpose was to preach the gospel to pagans and not to monotheists. Nevertheless, the missionaries today have focused on monotheistic and Islamic societies. When the Christian community, contrary to its original duties and regardless of the emergence of Islam, further broadens its evangelical movements and treats the followers of Islam, who believe

in God and the Day of Resurrection, as polytheists or infidels, religious emotions of Muslims are aroused, particularly when some missionaries do not content themselves with evangelism and destroy and insult Islamic sanctities.

Due to its interventions in the culture, the threats it poses against social and cultural associations, and its defamation of the history and identity of Muslims, evangelization has always led to humiliation of Muslims. Therefore, this sense of distrust, even severer than atheistic trends, has played the role of an obstacle that hinders collaborations between Muslims and Christians against atheism as their common enemy.

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The Consequences of Evangelization for Interactions .../ 69

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