CHRISTIAN-MUSLIM PARTNERSHIP
CHALLENGES AND PROSPECTS

M.D. Thomas

INTRODUTION

I am edified to learn that the motto of the 98th German Catholic Convention is 'to venture a new beginning' and that the focus of the programme is on the 'common responsibility for the future of faith, church and society'.

Relations with Muslims come under the general purview of relations with people of other religious communities and ideological affiliations. Obviously, relation occurs as the immediate result of the open interaction between persons or communities that are involved in the process. It is the same policy that is applied to Muslim individuals and community when we think of relations or partnership with them.

Christian-Muslim Partnership is the culmination of inter-faith interaction and relations between Christians and Muslims. The nuances of the potentials and problems of this partnership have to be searched for in the positive and negative experiences in Christian-Muslim dealings in the different contexts of day-to-day life, across the countries and varied situations worldwide.

Diverse local, regional, national, cultural and social settings of the world have in store various dimensions of interactive partnership between Christians and Muslims. Pinpointing a practice as the best project is certainly a task that is next to impossible. In fact, is there a best model of Christian-Muslim partnership that the entire world could adopt? I do not think so. Each environment is governed by its own genius.

Beyond doubt, insights could be imbibed, inspiration could be drawn and challenges could be accepted from the continental and national milieus of the world. I believe, the Asian, the African and the European contexts complement each other. I am sure, the global dimensions of Christian-Muslim partnership could be explored from an exercise of such open-ended sharing.

I do hope, this discussion, which relies on a reference to India in special and a reference to other corners of the world in general, will prove relevant to the situation of Christian-Muslim dialogue and partnership in Germany, at least in some measure.

1.   SIMILARITIES AND DIFFERNECES BETWEEN CHRISTIANS AND MUSLIMS

1.1.   Abrahamic roots and the subsequent perceptions

Both Christians and Muslims trace their roots to Abraham. Both Christianity and Islam are called Abrahamic religions.

Christian faith is grounded in the tradition of Isaac, born of Sarah, the wife of Abraham; where as Muslim faith is rooted in the tradition of Ishmael, born of Haggar, the servant woman of Abraham.

The Christian concept of the filial mindset in terms of God as Father and of the Son of God in Jesus seems to have emerged from the filial heritage of Isaac from Abraham. The Muslim idea of a servant-like and fixed relation to Allah appears to have been inherited from the Ishmaelite tradition.

The sonly and daughterly freedom with God and the resultant filial relationship has contributed to the spiritual perspective that regulates the forms and postures of prayer in Christianity. The mindset of total surrender indicated by the religious obligations in Islam as well as by the postures of namaaz, no doubt, is spiritually appreciable. All the same, they smack of fear and distance that are innate to the servile foundations of the Muslim tradition.

1.2.   Revelation

Both Christians and Muslims believe in revelation from God.

Christians hold that revelation is mediated through various prophets and that at the end God the Father revealed Himself in Jesus Christ his Son decisively. This final revelation was intended to redeem the humans, to save them, to free them from the bonds of sin and to lead them to the fullness of life, once and for all.

Muslims believe that revelation is unmediated and it occurred in the mouth of Muhammad as the last prophet and that it is recorded in Qur'an to all details. This very last revelation was intended to provide guidance for right way of living in this world.

1.3.   Idea of God

Both Christians and Muslims believe in monotheism and that God is one.

Christians articulate their belief in line with the statement 'love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul and strength'. Muslims bear testimony to heir faith by stating 'la ilaaha illa Allah', i.e., 'there is no god but God'.

Christian idea of God could be called pluralistic or Trinitarian monotheism. Christians believe in a Trinitarian God, Father, Son and Spirit. Christians address God as 'Father', with the freedom of a son or daughter and this relational term varies according to language. There is no word for God in the Christian tradition. The Christian idea of God is very flexible, familiar and relaxed.

The concept of Trinity has to be understood in terms of the revelation 'God is love'. As love can never be exercised in isolation and is manifested in 'relationship', God is a 'community within himself', a community of three Persons, among whom their mutual love is so perfect that they, though three, are perfectly 'one'!

Muslim idea of God is a strict monotheism. Muslims believe in an indivisible God. Muslims address God 'Allah', without any personal connotation and the term in Arabi is fixed and is used in all languages without any change. The Muslim idea of God is inflexible and suggests distance, awe and servility.

The extreme monotheism of Islam and the Trinitarian monotheism of Christianity seem to conflict with each other. The divine Son-ship of Jesus and the prophetic picture of Muhammad are different, too. The definitive revelation of God in Christ and God's complete and final revelation in the Qur'an contradicts with each other, as well. Extreme positions in either tradition can render understanding the point of view of the other difficult.

Christian understanding of God is that of a loving Father who gently invites the humans to do his will in a spirit of filial freedom and relationship. Islam conceives a God who dictates to human beings to obey his will, like a taskmaster commanding his servant.

1.4.   Jesus as the 'Son of God'

Both Christians and Muslims accept Jesus Christ as true. For Christians, Jesus is the central figure, whereas Muslim consider him a side figure. Jesus is mentioned and described in the Qur'an elaborately, though differently, but obviously, there is absolutely no mention of Muhammad in the Bible.

Christians believe that Jesus is the Son of God as well as a member of the Trinity. They understand the Son-ship of Jesus as a testimony to the divine love. God's intense love forced him to become part of the creation through the Incarnation of his Son, rather than bless it from outside. The full partaking of the human nature in the created order enabled the Son to sanctify humanity 'from within'.

Muslims believe that Jesus was conceived by an act of God and, though a highly respected one, is one of the prophets only, Muhammad being the last prophet. To say that Jesus is the Son of God is nothing less than a blasphemy according to Muslims, since God is far above having a son. They seem to land up in biology and fail to comprehend the divine logic of love and the ensuing spiritual transformation of the humanity from within.

1.5.   Understanding of Scripture

Both Christians and Muslims admit the fundamental importance of the Scripture in one's religious life.

Christians believe that the Bible is the Word of God, but mediated. It is written by human beings under divine inspiration. The divine revelation filtered through human lens and it was written in human words and within human history. Scriptures refer to historical circumstances and chronicle God's amazing intervention in human history. The Bible was subject to revision and newer interpretations in view of unearthing the on-going revelation of God in the diverse situations of time and space across the world.

Muslims consider the Qur'an 'unmediated' word of God. Muhammad was illiterate and passive. He simply recited what was put into his mouth, without any input of his own. 'Qur'an' means 'recitation'. It eternally existed in heaven and got descended. Islam affirms the veracity of the earlier revelations, affirmed the completeness of the Qur'an and theoretically kept it free from distortion, revision and new interpretation.

1.6.   The sin of Adam and Atonement by Jesus

This is a matter that pertains to Christians only.

Christians believe that the guilt of disobedience by Adam caused his posterity to get afflicted by Original Sin and the crucifixion of Jesus Christ brought atonement for the sin of the human species.

Muslims not only believe that Adam was faultless, but also assert that Jesus did not die on the cross and therefore, there is no question of atonement. Each person is born sin-less and he or she must be responsible for maintaining this state throughout life.

Christians believe that original sin has in it a universal and corruptive power and it renders human beings completely incapable of doing anything good without assistance from divine grace. Breaking the overwhelming bonds of sin loose and getting relieved of the undeniable proclivity to sin is what is meant by salvation. Jesus Christ is that eternal Saviour who renders the sinful humans sinless.

The logic behind is that every puff that one takes from a cigarette pollutes the air that all breathe. Similarly, every sin committed has a negative effect, on oneself, on others and on everything,

though in more or less degrees. It disrupts the entire cosmos. The sin of the father has a bearing on his children and contaminates the whole human record.

Muslims are at a loss to understand the rationale of one person shouldering the guilt of the sin of another person. It is unthinkable for them why a Christ should pay the penalty for the so called sin of the human species. Besides, Muslims think that prophets are sinless. For that reason, to say that Christ died the shameful death of a sinner on the cross is a sheer blasphemy.

Besides, the idea of 'salvation from sin' does not occur to Muslims. Muslims understand religious life as following the right path or the shari'a that is mapped out by Islamic law. It means living a good life and be pleasing to God in all that you do. One should submit to God and follow His directives.

1.7. Religion and religious duty

Both Christians and Muslims consider their system of faith religion. This religion, in its turn, necessitates performing religious duties, as well.

Christian perspective of religion is life-centred. Life is God's gift and religion is at the service of life. The dictum of Jesus 'sabbath is for the human being' is the norm. One has to conduct religion in such a way that it adds to the quality, meaning and happiness of life.

Muslim understanding of life is religion-centred. Religion is the biggest gift of God. One has to fall in line with the mandates of religion, like adjusting the body to a ready-made coat. Dying or killing is considered meritorious when it is for the religion.

Christianity is a 'person-centred' religion. 'Jesus Christ' is the Eternal Word and the centre of Christian life. Jesus Himself is God's Word to humanity. For Christianity, God has spoken through a Person. Christianity stresses 'orthodoxy' or right belief and underlines the law of love that is written on one's heart or conscience. The religious duty for Christians is to ardently pursue becoming Christ-like in loving and serving the other, especially the weaker and the deprived of the world.

Islam is a 'book-centered' (Quran) religion. 'Qur'an' is the Eternal Word of God and the written Arabic Book is the centre of Muslim life. Qur'an is God's Word to humanity. For Islam, God has spoken through a Book. Muslims emphasize 'orthopraxy' or 'right practice. Islam is a religion of law. By way of a basic religious duty, Muslims have to scrupulously face Mecca and recite a prescribed liturgy called 'salat' five specific times every day, in a mandatory manner.

1.8. Religious community

Both Muslim and Christian idea of faith is communitarian. One cannot believe in isolation, but has to be linked to one's brothers and sisters in faith. Christians have 'church' as the community and Muslims have 'umma'. Both systems hold that accountability to the community is the key to one's faith.

Christian church has erected hierarchy and encourages ordained ministers for humanitarian as well as religious service. Muslim umma is regulated by 'sharia' or religious law and stresses on homogeneity and people share a common pattern of life throughout the world, to a very great extent.

Christian community appreciates freedom of conscience, thought, word and action and accommodates various streams of ideologies and behaviour. Muslim community, on the other hand, does not tolerate dissimilar patterns of thinking and conducts.

Christian community is development-oriented, secular-minded and holistic in its outlook. It is an integrated and more qualitative group as regards its various components. Too rich and too poor are very few. Only a small portion falls beneath the low poverty and low literacy scale. People are more or less hard-working, self-dependent, educated, less reactionary and peace-loving.

Muslim community is religiously tuned, one-sided and much less secular. It is highly divided between extremes. It records a high percentage of polarization in terms of rich and poor as well as literate and illiterate. There are filthy rich among Muslims on the one side and miserably poor, that too in huge number, on the other. A small portion of Muslims is highly educated and a very large portion literally illiterate.

A few of the exceptional marks of the Christian community are responsible parenthood, value-based living and a spirit of sharing. Commitment to the transformation and wellbeing of the country and of the larger society, irrespective of community-affiliations, is its outstanding and world-acclaimed strength.

Unfortunately, the dismal picture in the Muslim community is that it does not seem to have a clear plan of bridging the disparities and of making its community balanced. Worse still, good many of them seem to hold others responsible for their poor plight. The worst part of the story is that they, especially the rundown lot among them, keep on multiplying without due reflection and make the struggle of life more backbreaking because of overload.

1.9.   Cultural Adaptation

This is an issue that concerns mostly Christians only.

Christian faith is grounded in the logic of 'incarnation' and attempts to adapt its theology into local-regional cultures worldwide. The entire Christian content is translatable and adjustable to the local medium, both tongue and folklore. Christian perspectives and values are adaptable and have to be incarnated into all human civilizations and cultures of the world.

The Bible is translated into all possible languages and dialects. It stands first as the book that is translated into the highest number of languages in the world. As Christian God has no name, so also Christianity has no sacred language. All the languages of the peoples are sacred languages for Christianity.

The Qur'an is considered 'untranslatable'. The message of the Qur'an is inextricably linked to the original language, so much so that the real Quran is in Arabic only. Renderings of the Qur'an in other languages have the status of interpretations of Quran only. As Muslim God is 'Allah' and only Allah in all languages, Islam has Arabic as the religious language. One has to learn it, in order to be a good Muslim.

1.10.   Patterns of worship

Both Christians and Muslims are oriented to a community style of prayer and worship.

Christians admit diversity and adaptability in worship patterns, although there are basic guidelines that are binding for all. There are different traditions of worship, according to denominations as

well as to social and cultural contexts. Free-style ways are accepted in personal contexts and even in smaller groups, as well. Interior dispositions have fairly a preferential space.

Muslim worship is a single phenomenon and uniformity is un-negotiable. They worship the same way, throughout the world, with no major variations and with hardly any reference to the differing social and cultural contexts.

Christians accommodate a lot of flexibility in the mode of praying and consider the involvement of the entire body less important. Western Christians, especially Protestants, worship in a comfortable setting and Eastern Christians, Evangelicals and Pentecostals worship in a much more informal and unregulated manner. Women have equal participation in worship, too.

Muslim worship requires more attention to the external aspects than perhaps the interior. Muslims use their whole body in prayer, especially by way of making prostrations. The submission of the spirit is symbolized by the submissive gestures of the body, set according to a ritualized pattern. Women are not included in the community prayers and even the minor exceptions are carried out separately.

2.11. Gender considerations

Both Christians and Muslims stress the social dimension of life by way of community. But, while Christian concept of community is fully inclusive of women, Muslim understanding of community is significantly exclusively of men.

Christians, as they ground themselves on the idea of creation of human beings in the image of God, firmly believe, of late all the more, that the same image of God is reflected in both men and women. Gender-sensitive language and sentiments as well as gender-inclusive perspectives are significantly an emerging realization in the Christian world, so much so that this has influenced other communities also.

Muslims on the whole strongly maintain the traditional view that woman is created by Allah as an inferior human being and they relegate them to the world of the household as a private commodity of the man of the house. Though it is true that minor changes are visible in the community at large as well as exceptional individuals are seen standing the test of time across the countries, the gender-based attitude of discrimination is universally blatant in the Muslim community as a fundamental religious tenet.

Christians encourage male-female mixing in social life and promote the participation of women in public life. The contribution of women to the intellectual, emotional, spiritual, cultural, political, economic and other social areas has been commendable in the Christian community all over and is widely appreciated. Christian men and women worship together. Christian community forbids polygamy. Both males and females in the Christian community can wear silk and gold.

Muslim men do not appreciate the free mixing of men and women and they segregate in their worship and gatherings. Though some Muslim women have made praiseworthy contribution to diverse fields, participation of Muslim women in social life on the whole is almost banned and their contribution to the society is hardly anything. Muslim community allows men to have more than one wife. This custom makes a marked difference negatively in the dignity of Muslim woman in comparison to man. Only Muslim females are permitted to wear silk and gold.

Christian community allows lot of freedom to women with regard to dress habits. The personal choices of women are respected. The twentieth century has manifested drastic changes in the community in this regard and has even influenced all communities and countries, in more or less

measures. Modern and secular perceptions have fostered lot of individual-centred and free-style ways to women, as well as to men.

Muslim community has maintained fairly a male-centred and conventional fibre especially with regard to gender consideration. The one-sided and arbitrary systems of burqa, talaaq, polygamy, non-admission to public places, etc seem to violate the dignity of the person of woman. Exaggeration of the sexual aspect of woman and subjugation of her human nature are evidently aberrations of the design of the Creator as well as of the rhyme and reason of human existence.

1.12. Fundamental loyalties

Both Christians and Muslims have certain fundamental loyalties required by their respective faith and they are more or less uncompromising. But, Muslim understandings and loyalties are relatively much stauncher, total and un-negotiable.

Muslim allegiance to Allah (God), Muhammad (The prophet), Quran (the Scripture) and Shariya (religious law or tradition) is full amount. Islam makes no distinction between religion and life. To live life is to live religion, and vice versa. Therefore, it is natural for Muslims to get stuck up with the fundamental tenets of religion and be fanatic and scrupulous. The conservative and conformist attitude regarding the observances of faith is applauded. Fatwa also is seen to be highly binding to people. Educated people also fall in line with such an approach. The Muslim loyalties seem to be slightly overcharged.

Christians have to abide by the basics of faith all over the world, by all means. The Catholic Church, which is the most organized system in the world, has a clear outline of allegiance to certain perspectives, interpretations, observances and regulations. All the same, especially in recent times, there is much wider scope for newer insights, explanations and models of conducting oneself as a Christian, in line with the pluralistic perspectives of the world.

Muslims seem to have a licence to fight, especially in terms of jihad. Though jihad is a struggle against the evil force, over the span of time, the application of it was distortedly extended to cover non-believers and even people of other beliefs. Getting intolerant over even small issues or non-issues, they are seen ready to fight with some enemy, inside or outside. It appears that this compulsion was inherited from the social context of their origins.

Christians also have been over-enthusiastic about their religious understandings down the centuries. They have been notorious for passionate ways of saving others and, though highly honest, they have very much tread upon the feet of people of other religious persuasions. The twentieth century toned down the obsession due to new perceptions of other religions as well as a commendable commitment to service of other communities as well as to transformation for social wellbeing.

1.13. Separation between state and religion

Both Christian and Muslim countries emerged on the strength of a close alliance between state and religion. The popular way of referring to many countries abroad as 'Christian countries' and 'Muslim countries' affirms this fact, too. The state of affairs seems to continue still though in more or less degrees.
Christian countries in recent centuries mostly maintain state and religion separate. Political and religious power functions almost independently. Most of the traditionally called Christian countries today have secular governments and keep law and morality apart from each other. The political motivations that were inherent in religion got fairly transformed in favour of a larger loyalty in life towards the human species as well as the God of all, both within the respective country and in external relations.

Islamic countries resolutely hold the theory that state and religion are synonymous and combine law and morality into one force. For Islam, law is based on their moral code and politics are governed by their religion. The political overtones of this hypothesis are clear from the Muslim-ruled countries, even to this day. Even though national level turmoil have been in the process in many countries in support of secular and democratic governments, the Muslim outlook is yet to accept a conscious revision of the mixed up ideology, in terms of the larger good of the society.

1.14.   Food policy

Christians have a more comfortable and functional view about food habits. Having due respect for one's brother and sister is the only Pauline instruction that is binding.

Muslims consider it wrong to defile God's creation with certain items of food and drink. Muslims are not inclined to pork, alcohol, etc. Though changes are seen in individuals, the community is resolved on its assumptions.

1.15.   Commitment to Inter-faith relations

Both Christians and Muslims involve themselves in inter-faith meetings and relations.

Christian commitment to inter-faith relations is to be traced back to the revolutionary philosophy that was pioneered by the Second Vatican Council in the sixties of the last century. This new wave of inter-faith dialogue has been a Christian contribution to the world human society. It has been the fruit of a deeper understanding of Jesus Christ, coupled with a new perception of people of other faith traditions and social ideologies. Though many communities have taken inspiration from this initiative and are making efforts in the similar line, the Christian engagement in this sector worldwide has been incomparably estimable.

Muslim involvement in inter-faith dialogue is on the whole weak. There are various individuals and institutions that spearhead excellent initiatives. But, majority of those involved in the exercise appear to hold their own definitions of the same or have their own reservations. A large number of such inter-faith initiatives seem to be superficial because of an extra preoccupation about the veracity and completeness of one's own faith, as well.

Besides, it is an observable fact that Muslim sentiments are mostly coiled around Muslims only. They think of each other, love each other and help each other as brothers. Although the spirit of brotherhood among them is commendable, it is often seen that this spirit is confined to the members of their community only. Free and open extension of the brotherly sentiments to people outside their community could better be considered an exception only. Given this phenomenon, which is nurtured by their religious energies, it could be stated that genuine friendship and fellowship with people of other faith-based communities is not yet a main stream engagement in the Muslim community.

2.   CHALLENGES FOR CHRISTIAN-MUSLIM PARTNERSHIP WORLDWIDE

2.1.   The plight of Christians in Muslim-dominated countries

Countries where Muslims are the majority the plight of Christians is really deplorable. Some of those countries are Nigeria, Pakistan, Africa, Sudan, Indonesia, Turkey, Philippians, Saudi Arabia, Bangladesh, Somalia and Egypt. Partnership with Muslims, especially in those areas, obviously, is a very remote question.

Christian-Muslim relations have been an issue ever since the historical rise of Islam, more than fourteen centuries ago. The internet is almost full of heartbreaking reports of persecution of Christians by Muslims. In recent years violence against Christian minorities has become the norm in Muslim-majority nations stretching from West Africa and the Middle East to South Asia and Oceania.

In some countries it is governments and their agents that burn churches and imprison Christians. In others, rebel groups and vigilantes take matters into their own hands. The situation of Christians has deteriorated in many Islamic countries since the terrorist attacks on the US and the subsequent US-British raids on Afghanistan.

Islamist radicals attempts to establish sharia and condemn western education. The ungodly religious leaders seem to be steering calamities for the other, with no basic respect for the faith or life of the other. Much of the religious preaching and upbringing these days is all about hatred, falsehood and hypocrisy. Self-centered religious heads and politicians use God's name to create division among the people and even shatter the larger interests of the country as well as of religion.

The havoc proceeds even to kidnapping, ethno-religious killings and senseless political and business assassinations. Murdering Christians, burning places of worship across the country and driving them from regions where their roots go back to centuries. Becoming a Christian in many Muslim countries can mean losing one's job, educational opportunities, family and even one's life.

The assassination of the only Christian Minister in the Pakistani Government, Shabaz Bhatti, refers to the barbarity that prevails in Pakistan in the name of religion. Young Christian girls are kidnapped, raped and even converted to Islam. Christians are accused of blasphemy and are hanged. Muslim leaders issue fatwas to kill two Pakistani Christians for every Afghan Muslim who dies in the Anglo-American air raids. The situation in Pakistan is deteriorating.

The authoritarian government in Sudan has been notorious for the heinous genocide Christians are still subjected to through aerial bombardment, targeted killings, kidnapping of children and other atrocities. Reports indicate that between 53,000 and 75,000 innocent civilians have been displaced and that houses and buildings have been looted and destroyed, in addition to raping, torturing to death and crucifying. Roughly two million people, chiefly Christians, have been reported to be killed in a civil war fought by the radical Islamic regime.

Indonesia records the campaign to eradicate Christians from the whole country by the government-supported 'holy war fighters'. The campaign of forcible conversion of Christians to Islam seemed to have cost the lives of 5,000 to 6,000 people, as well.

Even in the secular Turky, Christians are known to be arrested with false charges of insulting Islam and Mohammed, applying their criminal laws.

Southern part of the Christian country, Philippines, reports Muslims terrorizing, kidnapping and even beheading Catholics, with a motive to establish a separate Islamic state.

Saudi Arabia, the home of Islam, is one of the most oppressive countries for Christians. There are no churches in the whole country. Foreign workers make up one-third of the population, many of whom are Christians. They are forbidden to display any Christian symbols or Bibles or even meet together publicly to worship and pray. Women of other religious communities are forced to wear burqah. Deploring Christians even for private worship, arresting and jailing them through midnight raids, confiscating their religious material, etc are heard to be usual instances. 'No religion other than Islam' seems to be the prevailing slogan.

In Bangladesh, small radical groups supporting Osama bin Laden is reported to have bombed or burned down churches.

Somalia sources report that anybody found out to be a Christian will quickly be beheaded by Muslim vigilantes.

Egypt is known to have a government that discriminates against Christianity by financing the construction of mosques and by denying permission for the construction and reconstruction of Christian sanctuaries.

The general trend in Muslim-dominated countries is to apply Islamic law or shariya as a license for considering people of other countries second class citizens. The rigid political model hinders the society from coping with modem challenges. This attitude generates fear among many Christians, who cannot accept being treated as aliens in their own nations. Such approaches to marginalizing Christians, obviously, are violations of fundamental rights and are the reasons for tension.

Christians living in Islamic countries have to be allowed the same religious freedom that Muslims currently enjoy in the United States and Canada.

2.2. Problems of Muslims in Christian countries

Muslims have mostly a good time in countries where Christians are a majority. United States of America and United Kingdom are almost exemplary secular states where Muslims have a free hand in purchasing land, establishing them and in enjoying the complete freedom of the citizen. Some restrictions were placed on Muslims in Switzerland regarding the construction of minarets and in wearing burqah in public places in France.

But these restrictions were in line with law of the land that was supported by the votes of the majority in governance and therefore cannot be considered discriminatory measures against Muslims. The irony of the matter is Muslims do not keep a balanced policy between what they expect from Christians and what they give to Christians. Honesty demands a fair policy that applies on either side in an equal manner.

2.3. Measures for conflict-transformation and bridge-building

Christians and Muslims have collaborated in political struggles, like Indonesian independence movement and early Arab nationalism. The false ideas, images and stereotypes inherited shaped their mutual perceptions. Political, economic, theological and continental factors have combined to polarize Muslims and Christians into mutually antagonistic communities.

The tragedy about the polarized opinions is the fact they have been shaped, transmitted and perpetuated mainly by those who do not interact routinely with each other or those who had bitter experiences or take a polemical and apologetic stance. Recently, the beginning of a new understanding has been facilitated by PCID, WCC and other international and national organizations on either side.

Some polarized situations endanger national unity and communal stability. Different groups fear that their interests or rights are being violated or threatened by others. Such rivalries or contradictions are often portrayed as being based on religious differences. Religious sentiments are easily used as a tool to assert identity and mobilize people for political power. In some contexts, the interplay of religious ethnicity and citizenship results in antagonistic national movements. Besides, Muslims often suspect that the educational, medical and philanthropical activities of Christians,

especially among poor Muslims, are motivated by the hidden objective of proselytism, though Christians maintain integrity of intention.

Christians and Muslims need to explore seriously models of governance that further a balance between individual and community rights. Such situations also challenge us to develop new forms of political involvement. This involvement necessitates an ability to liberate religion from narrow sectional interests, with the aim of engaging critically in issues of human rights and social and political justice and striving towards peaceful resolution of conflicts.

The pluralistic texture of the society is characteristically a modern phenomenon in the world today. People of different backgrounds, in terms of language, culture, ethnic origin, socio-economic class, race and religion, live together and they have to do so. Majority-minority concern with respect to mere number is a folly today. Access to political power, economic resources and social influence also affect interactions between groups. All communities have their own strengths and they matter. If the minority group is made up of newcomers, strangers, guest workers or foreign residents, they deserve an extra care. Even original inhabitants also can be a minority of natives.

In many secularized societies where Christianity has historically shaped the collective identity and remains culturally influential, Muslims are confronted with the choice between integration and self-assertion. Many strongly affirm their human rights against all forms of racism and xenophobia, call for a greater participation in public life, and seek, at the same time, recognition of their particularities as individuals and communities.

In the context of religious pluralism, interfaith marriages can provide opportunities for inter-religious understanding. Partners coming from different faith traditions bring their distinctive spiritual gifts to their lives together, and when shared in a spirit of mutual respect, these will enrich, religiously and otherwise, the life of the household. Besides, the personal and familial values of the their respective religions are to be reaffirmed, a common consciousness of the promises and limitations of interfaith marriages are to be developed and communities, families and couples in inter-religious marriages to be instructed to cooperate with each other in addressing the social and legal complexities involved.

Christians and Muslims have to overcome prejudices and apprehensions regarding the other. There seem to be reservations about inter-faith dialogue on either side, due to prejudices and apprehensions. Muslims see the Christian initiative of dialogue as a disguised and strategic form of neo-imperialism or intellectual colonialism. Christians consider Islam inherently monolithic, homogenous, intolerant, violent and menacing and dialogue with Muslims as naive and romantic, due to the Islamic fanaticism. Well-meaning people from either side have to overcome such prejudices and apprehensions and refrain from acting on sheer generalizations. Dialogue requires mutual trust, respect for the identity and integrity of the other, willingness to question one's own self-understanding and openness to understand others on their own terms.

Christians and Muslims have to shed the preoccupation with one's self-defeating religious theories. Religious theories that do not take the follower to the practice, as a matter of fact, are out of focus and are self-defeating, with regard to their basic purpose. The role of religion is to provide human life with the right orientation, to create appetite for living, to instill values of life, to motivate right conduct of life, to guide towards the destiny of life and to supply meaning and fulfillment in life. Life, at the end of the day, is functional. Religion in terms of human life is like the grease that is applied to the machine. Grease by itself is not anything important. The relevance of the grease is in making the machine function smoothly. The same is the story of religion. Religion is like the light, which helps seeing the other. It is like the salt, which adds taste to life. Preoccupation with the fruitless and self-defeating theories has to give way for a realistic approach to life. Helping people

in need, loving one's neighbour and living together in peace are the ultimate values of life that really construct human life.

Christians and Muslims have to perform one's mission in a modest manner. Both Islam and Christianity are missionary or mission-oriented religions (da'wah). Both believe that they have a divine call to invite others to join their respective faiths. This right and duty is definitely to be appreciated. Yet, the eagerness to spread one's faith and bring others to the knowledge and worship of God does not sanction exercising one's mission or da'wah in ways that disrespect the freedom and dignity of the other person or disrupt the harmony between the communities. One's missionary presence with the other has to be non-aggressive, sensitive and divinely motivated.

3. CERTAIN COMMON GROUNDS FOR CHRISTIAN-MUSLIM PARTNERSHIP

3.1. Christians and Muslims have a shared spirituality

Spirituality is 'an attitude of being committed to the promptings of the Spirit'. It cannot be more than one. Neither Christian nor Muslim religious traditions are identical with spirituality. Grounded in their own singular characteristics, they are different religious persuasions that lead to the same spirituality.

Real spiritual sensibilities emerge from a holistic outlook to life. Christians and Muslims are complementary in their perceptions of faith and life and are co-travellers in the process of being spiritual. Christians and Muslims have a shared spirituality.

3.2. Christians and Muslims have a common religious and cultural heritage

In the ultimate context, the Christian and Muslim religious traditions are the gift of the same Creator. They are the common religious and cultural heritage of the human society. They cannot be monopolized by either party.

The natural response to this heritage is a large attitude, 'both traditions are mine; one is mine in special and the other is mine in general'. Both Christians and Muslims have a common origin, a common existence and a common destiny. To contradict these commonalities would be a fundamental crime against God.

3.3. Christians and Muslims are like branches of the same tree

The diversities between Christians and Muslims with regard to their religious, ethnic, linguistic, ideological, social and cultural affiliations as well as to their basic visionary figure are the innovative design of the Creator. The master mind of God has to be honoured. At the same time, they cannot exist like islands that are cut off from each other or afford to travel like parallel lines that do not meet.

Christians and Muslims are like 'branches of the same tree' that is rooted in the mother earth as well as the same God, the Creator. They have to share the divine sap of life and grow together. To be rooted in one's own specific tradition would mean to be interactively related to the other, at the same time.

They are mirrors to each other in order to check the human and spiritual fitness and thus are 'made for each other'. They have to cross the boundaries they have erected between them and build bridges of understanding, closer relations and collaboration and thus establish a 'culture of harmonious living' in this world.

3.4.   Christians and Muslims have a common mission

Christians and Muslims have common concerns to pursue together. 'Becoming a better human being', while being well-founded in one's own tradition, is the first religious duty. 'Travelling into the religious world of the other', like the flowing water, in a spirit of learning from the other is the second duty. 'Making one's religion a source of goodness, harmony and peace', as Pope John Paul II exhorted in 1999 in New Delhi, is the third concern.

'Making a communion of the two communities' and 'presenting before the world good models for inter-faith relations' is the culmination of the common concern. 'Witnessing to such quality of religion for the worldwide human society' is the Christian-Muslim mission the 21st century is looking for.

4.   EFFORTS FOR CHRSTIAN-MUSLIM PARTNERSHIP IN INDIA

4.1.   Efforts for inter-faith relations with Muslims in the 16-17 centuries

Mughal Emperor Akbar (1556-1606) initiated Christian-Muslim interaction by inviting Christian scholars (Jesuits) to his court in 1580 and engaged in discussions on matters concerning religion and philosophy.

But, the intellectual tactics and the over-enthusiasm of the Jesuits to awaken conviction among the Muslims in the Christian categories of faith, that too, to the point of underrating the Muslim faith as well as explaining Christian faith in Muslim categories, made a negative effect on either side.

More genuineness and sincere commitment to the promptings of the Spirit in inter-faith perceptions, more honesty and straight-forwardness in inter-faith interactions and less one-sided strategies and tactics are called for, in order to make the inter-faith endeavour effective.

4.2.   Efforts for inter-faith relations with Muslims in the 18-19 centuries

Henry Martyn (1781-1812), an Anglican priest and missionary, organized 'public debates' with Muslim scholars on 'The True Revelation'. But, the debates that were oriented to win over the other ended in widening the distance between Christians and Muslims and caused mutual deafness.

He proceeded to organizing sessions of 'personal sharing' of his Christian faith in small circles of interested Muslims. The stress on 'sharing the forgiveness and peace' that they attained in Christ with Muslims and that on 'recognizing the activity of God in what is good in Muslims and their faith and appreciating it' made a positive difference.

His realization that an open-minded move towards fostering good friendship between Christians and Muslims as well as of studying both the Bible and the Quran paved the way for a spiritual listening to each other. This inter-faith perspective that emerged from the Copernican revolution in his approach added a new chapter to Christian-Muslim relations, too.

William Muir (1819-1905) and Karl Gottlieb Pfander (1803-1865) involved themselves with Muslims and their faith. While Muir focussed on the 'authenticity of the Bible' and on 'how Qur'an borne testimony to it' and attempted to prove Qur'an as a historical document about Muhammad's inner evolution, Pfander argued out Islam's claim to be a true revelation.

But, their narrow outlook and non-dialogical approach made them land up in controversies and aroused the anger of Muslims. Their engagement with Islam through their studies on Islam, though had been laudable, amounted to merely a disservice to inter-faith relations.

4.3. Efforts for inter-faith relations with Muslims in India in the first half of the 20th century

Henry Martyn Institute (HMI) was founded in 1930 as an ecumenical Christian organization. It was originally intended for the study of Islam, but later was broadened to include the promotion of reconciliation and relations among people of all affiliations of faith.

HMI today is a major centre for teaching and research on all religions, with special focus on Islam. It is well-equipped with qualified staff, library and other facilities. It publishes an academic journal and books on diverse religions.

4.4. Efforts for inter-faith relations with Muslims in India in the 2nd half of the 20th century

The Second Vatican Council (1964), with its ground-breaking perspective on other faiths, made a commendable impact on Muslims in India, as well. Lumen Gentium, paragraph 16, affirmed 'Muslims as part of the plan of salvation and as sharing the same faith in Abraham as well as in the same merciful God'. Nostra Aetate, paragraph 3, articulated 'high regard for Muslims' as a matter of regular policy.

The All India Seminar, Bangalore, (1969) insisted that 'scholars be set aside for studying the Muslim religion, social life and culture in India, in view of fostering better understanding of this great people'.

The All India Consultation on Evangelisation, Patna, (1973) set apart a workshop to 'dialogue with Muslims' and came out with one third of the resolutions that dealt with Muslims.

The Commission for Inter-faith Dialogue of the Catholic Bishops' Conference of India organized a Consultation on 'Dialogue with Muslims' in Agra on 28-30 March, 1979. This Consultation launched the Islamic Studies Association, which started later 'Salaam' a journal for Christian-Muslim relations.

Many priests pursued Islamic Studies to the doctoral level and courses on Islam have been introduced on a regular basis in many seminaries in India. A lot of articles and books on 'Christian-Muslim relations' as well as on 'Islam' is being published since then.

Other ways of interacting with Muslims pursued have been 'hearing about Islam from Muslims themselves, listening to their personal experience of what it means to be a Muslim, visiting madrasas, mosques and Sufi shrines, observing and participating in their ways of worship', etc.

4.5. Efforts for inter-faith relations with Muslims in the 21st century

The National Commission for Inter-faith Dialogue of the Catholic Bishops' Conference of India conducted a series of Regional Consultations and as well as a National Consultation on 'Christian-Muslim Endeavours for a Better Society' in 2004 and 2005 respectively.

These Consultations shed considerable light on the inner construct of the Muslim faith and their frame of mind as well as that of the Christian. They placed forward significant insights as to re-fashioning the approaches to Christian-Muslim dialogue, as well.

A major shift of emphasis that was surfaced by the Consultations was from the traditional approach of inter-faith dialogue on 'doctrines and theories' to dialogue on 'values of scriptures and community traditions' and to 'inter-community relations and collaboration', for making a more harmonious and qualitative society.

4.6. Focussing on Common roots with Muslims

Christians and Muslims share a faith that is rooted in Abraham and they are called Abrahamic faiths. Theistic perspective of life is fundamental to both of them. Primacy of God is the key notion in both faiths. Commitment to the Founder, as Son of God or Prophet, is characteristic to both of them.

Importance of Scripture is non-negotiable in both traditions. Both Christians and Muslims conduct themselves in a communitarian way, though slightly differently. Administration in both streams of faith is invariable, though the style and degree vary.

4.7. Personal friendships and interactive sharing with Muslims

The most practical form of inter-faith dialogue is entering into personal friendships with Muslims. Personal friendships open immense scope for inter-personal sharing of perceptions, ideas, feelings and experiences and make inter-faith interactions easier and more effective.

In personal friendships, the content of conversation is not only faith but also other matters. Such an integrated approach makes a better effect. Discussing only faith is artificial and discussing all aspects of life is natural. One's faith would remain the worldview or the angle of sharing. The best of sharing of faith takes place in the natural processes of life.

4.8. Collaborative action for a more harmonious society

Both Christianity and Islam have peace at the heart of their worldviews. Christians call Jesus the 'Prince of Peace'. Prayer for peace is at the heart of Christian prayer.

Muslims greet each other with 'as-salaam alaikum' (peace is upon you!). 'As-salaam' is one of the ninety-nine most beautiful names of God in Islam.

Nearly half the population of the world is comprised of Christians and Muslims together. The way these two communities conduct themselves individually and together is of considerable importance to the wellbeing of the entire human family.

Both Christians and Muslims have to feel responsible for the human society, like elder brothers, and develop a culture of working together. Social justice, human rights, religious freedom, conflict transformation, caring for refugees and displaced people, etc are some crucial areas for collaboration.

As regards entering into business partnership with non-Muslims, there is a tendency among Muslims to be on the upper side on account of the high self-image as non-corruptible and of the low impression about others as kaafir or corrupt or not trustworthy. Muslims are in the habit of avoiding business partnerships with others and seclude themselves with partnerships with people of their own kind.

Collaboration can accord these communities better spiritual insights about God and life, more humane qualities, sensitivity to the needs of others, mutual transformation and better enrichment, combating stereotypes and solving global problems, like war, poverty, corruption, disease and illiteracy.

Humanitarian action is mainly a Christian approach to one's life and society and it has two directions – curative and preventive. Getting Muslims involved in campaigns against female

foeticide, abortion, corruption, un-hygiene, lack of work culture, indiscipline, etc is applied inter-faith interaction that is in favour of making a more harmonious society.

Getting Muslims involved in advocacy for responsible parenthood, literacy, poverty alleviation, secular education, fundamental rights, value-based life, ethical public behaviour, composite culture, integrated community, etc is diverse dimensions of processes of social transformation that is oriented to humane altitude and spiritual wellbeing.

Inspired by the values of their faith, people have to come together in joint action, in order to overcome community tensions and create peaceful and prosperous societies. This is the culmination of right partnership between Christians and Muslims.

5.   MODELS FOR CHRISTIAN-MUSLIM PARTNERSHIP WORLDWIDE

5.1.   Christian Muslim Forum in London

The CMF was initiated by Archbishop of Canterbury and is a living symbol of how faith could be a 'catalyst for good relationships' with the 'other'. The objective of this initiative was to develop and maintain 'channels of communication' between diverse Christian and Muslim groups for a 'partnership' between the two communities, in view of enhancing the 'better health of the country'.

Encouraging shared reflection on the spiritual, ethical and practical values of the two traditions, strengthening committed relationships, making faith a resource for peace, conflict resolution, understanding and valuing all human beings and working together for the benefit of both faith communities and wider society are the schemes evolved for achieving the above objective.

5.2.   Positive Efforts in Africa

The Programme for Christian-Muslim Relations in Africa (PROCMURA) is the oldest inter-faith organization established by the churches in Africa, for 'constructive engagement' with Muslims for peace and peaceful coexistence.

5.3.   Saudi Arabia Leader Calls for Interfaith Dialogue

King Abdullah of Saudi Arabia called for a dialogue among monotheistic religions, marking a first for the ultra-conservative Muslim kingdom. He asked representatives of Quran, Torah and Gospel to meet in faith, in order to come up with ways to 'safeguard humanity'. This initiative came against the backdrop of the controversy of Danish cartoon. Abdullah's initiative came as the Vatican was in the process of negotiating for permission to build the first church in Saudi Arabia following the inauguration of Qatar's first Christian church.

The Saudi monarchy has long banned the open worship of other faiths, even as the number of Catholics resident in Saudi Arabia has risen to eight lakhs thanks to an influx of immigrant workers from places like Philippines and India. Mosques are the only religious buildings in the country where the strict Wahhabi version of Sunni Islam dominates. A Christian place of worship in Saudi would be a 'historic achievement' for religious freedom as well as for interfaith spirit.

5.4.   Positive efforts in England 'Near Neighbours Relationship'

'Near Neighbours relationship' is about people of different communities living in immediate neighbourhood coming together for social interaction and action. Leicester, Bradford, Birmingham and East London are some of the model areas, where this effort is commendably pioneered. The

basic objective of this effort is getting to know each other better, build relationships and collaborate together on schemes that improve the local community better.

Some of the marked benefits of this movement for Christians and Muslims are -- improving the mutual understanding and engagement, local pairings for addressing larger concerns, strengthening the foundations for resolving conflicts and tension, developing leadership skills among faith leaders, shared learning of governance methods, highlighting role models, reinforcing the ethical fibre and mutual involvement for fostering trust and respect for each other.

5.5.   Effort for Conflict Transformation in Egypt

A group of right-thinking young Muslim and Christian leaders in Cairo is reported to have initiated a timely Christian-Muslim collaboration, in due response to a horrible conflict, domestic killings and destruction of the Church that followed the rumour of a romantic affair between a boy and a girl from either community.

The God-send group proceeded to mobilize both communities to protect the places of worship of the other and facilitated a Muslim delegation to volunteer to 're-build' the respective Coptic Church, as a 'living symbol of harmony' between the two communities.

5.6.   Positive forces in America

A prominent US imam assailed the 'un-Islamic persecution' of Christians in Muslim countries ranging from Indonesia to Nigeria. Muzzamil Siddiqi, director of the Islamic Society of Orange County, commenting on the murder threats, violence, forced conversions, imprisonment and discrimination some Christians are being subjected to, observed that 'The Koran enjoins Muslims to treat everybody with dignity and compassion'.

'US churches were quick to speak up on behalf of Moslems in our society. They rightly encouraged all America to treat them with respect. At the same time, the churches should speak up when Christians in Muslim areas are in jeopardy. The National Council of Churches' news service condemned persecution Monday and said, 'we consider persecution of any religious group unacceptable. We are actively engaged in protecting Christians and other religious minorities in countries around the world in partnership with indigenous religious groups.

Marshall, an internationally recognized authority on religious rights, in an interview with United Press International, drew a grim picture, country by country, 'Christians were in peril in a long belt of Muslim nations stretching from the eastern parts of Indonesia all the way to West Africa. In some cases, this was due to government policies; in others, religious fanatics are menacing Christians, embarrassing national governments'.

CONCLUSION: MODULES AND MODELS FOR CHRISTIAN-MUSLIM PARTNERSHIP

By way of conclusion, let me highlight in a condensed form a few of the time-tested modules and insightful models processed from the above discussion. These, I am sure, can compose an effective, meaningful and worthwhile partnership between Christians and Muslims.

1.   Grow beyond the childish strategies of competing with and fighting against the other and mature towards grown up ways, by way of giving inspiring examples to the world as senior communities.

2.	Shed the exclusive, petty and worldly claims that are geared towards political, economic and social gains and make a new inter-faith beginning, with a broad-hearted outlook of having a shared divine heritage and a mutual belonging in life.

3.	Grow beyond the narrow understandings and uncompromising fixations of the past and journey to the spiritual altitude that focuses on the essential values of human life, from the strengths of one's own religious affiliation.

4.	Descend from the theoretical pedestal of 'I am OK, you are not OK and I am going to make you OK' and ascend to the practical and humble mindset of a 'pilgrim', in an attitude of 'learning from the other'.

5.	Recognize the 'image and likeness of God' in others and treat them as 'temples of the living God' and meet them as 'believers' and 'human beings', in a humane sense of 'meeting God himself'.

6.	Get into unconditional personal friendships with others and consider him or her a brother or a sister, a friend and a companion, a co-believer and a co-traveller in life, in a spirit of 'honouring the other above you'.

7.	Rise to the fully grown stage of being capable of 'celebrating differences' as a powerful source of mutual enrichment, with the aspiration of arriving at a 'deeper and refined fellowship with Muslims.

8.	Keep awakening the 'consciousness of being rooted in the same divine power', as branches of the same tree, accepting that one's loyalty to the roots has to be reconciled with being related to the other in order to relish the spiritual sap of life.

9.	Love and serve the other genuinely, with a deep realization that at the end of the day, 'when we open ourselves to the other honestly, we open ourselves to God' and 'when we accept the other whole-heartedly, we celebrate the presence of God in life'.

10.	Engage in joint action with the other in view of ameliorating the wellbeing of the entire human society, in a spirit of translating the personal conversion into the transformation of the human society.

11.	Remain genuinely committed to fostering a 'culture of interactive, participatory, harmonious and peaceful life' as the largest communities of the world, in view of leading the human society towards a 'community of communities', in a 'spirit of togetherness'.

Dr M.D. Thomas
Founder Director, Institute of Harmony and Peace Studies
Floor 1, A 128, Sector 19, Dwarka, New Delhi 110075

Tel.: 09810535378 (p), 08847925378 (p), 011-45575378 (o)
Email: mdthomas53@gmail.com (p), ihps2014@gmail.com (o)
Website: www.mdthomas.in (p), www.ihpsindia.org (o)

Twitter: https://twitter.com/mdthomas53
Facebook: https://www.facebook.com/mdthomas53
Academia.edu: https://independent.academia.edu/MDTHOMAS