

MEMORY HOLES ON THE TRAIL

I want to set out four models for Christian Muslim relations that in some way bring together past, present and future. To illustrate them I will go mainly to South India, but first I want to explain my title.

The title is related to an era and a culture context remote from the issue of Christian Muslim relations. It comes from the early history of this country when the Mayflower immigrants arrived. At that time Massasoit was chief of the Pokenoket Indians, living at the head of Narragansett Bay, now Warren, Rhode Island. The road from Plymouth where the Pilgrims landed to Pokenoket was about 60 miles long, part earthen trail and part water. Two of the Mayflower group set out to visit Massasoit. They reported that they saw on the trail

circular foot-deep holes in the ground that had been dug where "any remarkable act" had occurred. When the traveller passed by he was to remember the act, maintain the hole, and pass on the story to others.¹

The purpose of these holes, then, was to connect people with their past and carry forward its lessons into the future. The travellers were to stop at the hole in the path, but were not to remain beside it, and were certainly not to fall into it. They were to reflect, and then go on to the next stage of their journey.

May I suggest a simple analogy? In Christian Muslim relations we should indeed stop for reflection beside our memory holes, whether they commemorate the good or the bad. We should also maintain them by accurate scholarship and reporting. But then we must go forward in our journeys, digging new memory holes in the present, which will in turn provide learning for future travellers.

For that digging task I would like to give attention to four possible relational forms or models, recognizing that there are others that also need to be considered.² The four that I propose to take up are what I call the idealist model, the community self-change model, the most certainly religious model, and the deep friendship model.

1. The Idealist Model

subheading: Have we forgotten good memories?

By the idealist model I mean the approach of those who believe that noteworthy examples of good relations do exist, that they should be celebrated, and that in essence they can be replicated. This is an important approach in the present day when what is evil is given greater prominence than the good.

If there were more time I would be inclined to share with you the not very happy details of an experience I had with a national TV news anchor in Canada, who was reporting on an interview. After the fuss was over and I had received fulsome apologies for the misrepresentation of my position I asked the well-known interviewer: "Eve, why don't you show more good things on TV?" She replied: "Roland, good things aren't news." Her straight-forward response states a problem that is gathering momentum. I refer to the indulgent and perhaps sickly fascination with evil in the media, both print and visual -- perhaps also in us -- fed by its steady, alarmingly influential "in your face" presentations. A well-known and quite influential Quranic phrase declares: "Prohibit the evil and commend the good" (3:103). Evil is to be prohibited, not given exaggerated attention, and humanity is to be invited to the good. The idealist model seeks to give attention to and

to commend the good things in Christian Muslim relations. These stories need telling for their inspirational value and for the consolation they offer that ideals are at least partially attainable. And they will help build a fuller and truer mythic past. Let me offer an example from a South Asian context.

In the southwest coast of India lies the heavily populated state of Kerala. It is notable for the relative equilibrium in its religious population. Hindus are in the majority, but Muslims and Christians each have over a fifth of the population. How did this religious profile develop? At a very early period, perhaps from the time of the Apostle St. Thomas, as some believe, but certainly by the third century (CE), the indigenous Hindu community welcomed Christians from the Middle East. Similarly, from the very inception of Islam they also welcomed Arab Muslims, making Kerala the first home of Islam in India. All this took place in a peaceful context. Gradually Christians and Muslims grew in number, creating a remarkable triological socio-religious milieu. The interreligious harmony continued for a full 8½ centuries. It was based not only on mutual respect but also on commercial self-interest, for this was the home of the spices that the world wanted. Hindus and Christians grew them, and Muslims traded for and transported them. Although this history of harmonious interreligious living ended with the western colonial expansion into the region, beginning with Vasco da Gama in 1498, "it being dead, yet speaketh."

The idealist model is a call to defy the current preoccupation with evil and to report the good. Wherever they are, and whatever they are, the examples of successful interreligious relationships

in the past and present need to be raised up and in some sense celebrated -- not as being unique, but as the natural expression of human brotherhood. Cain killing Abel is not the only human pattern; there is also David and Jonathan. There are memory holes on the path which to stand beside cause sadness and anger; there are others that bring wonder and arouse the desire for emulation. In Christian Muslim relations good things are news.

2. The Community Self-Change Model

subheading: Can the religions change?

Is there any ability or power in a religious community to bring about internal change when needed? At present it may not look like it. The memory hole that I wish to bring to your attention tells of people who did exactly that. I return to southwest India.

The eight million Kerala Muslims whom we have already mentioned are called by the name "Mappila," an honorific term. We have noted that the Mappila co-existence with Hindus and Christians was disturbed by western incursions, but we have not stated how tragically their conditions changed. The Europeans -- first Portuguese but later Dutch and English -- had mixed motives in South India, but the primary one was commercial gain. Particularly the Portuguese manipulated the interreligious situation to their advantage, drawing the Hindu and Christian spice producers to their side, and leaving Muslims out of the picture. There were also religious overtones in that strategy. Thus, for example, the militant Afonso Albuquerque who established Portuguese hegemony at Goa in 1510 was the same individual who planned to invade Mecca, seize the bones of the Prophet Muhammad, and hold them in ransom for the recovery of Jerusalem.

The tragic results of the early colonialist period in Kerala are a matter of historical record. The unusual interreligious harmony crumbled. Among Mappila Muslims their new situation produced anger, hatred and militancy. They became a poor, oppressed and fearful people who took refuge in defensive religious traditionalism. Their frustration issued in a series of hopeless geurilla outbreaks fed by a declared martyr ideology. The outbreaks culminated in the unhappy Mappila Rebellion of 1921 whose violence shook the foundations of the Hindu-Muslim entente in India's Freedom Movement. The British rulers, many of whom regularly referred to the Mappilas as "hopeless" or as "religious fanatics," put down the Rebellion with considerable loss of life. Human relations were simply another casualty. Although at individual levels wonderful people kept the doors open to each other, Muslims now hated Hindus and Christians as economic and religious oppressors. Given this dire condition in its recent past, how can we explain the fact that today Kerala culture is once again noted throughout India for its positive relationships? Somehow the old ideal rose again like a phoenix from the ashes.

For the answer we must go to the Mappila Muslim community's decision for self-change. The key to this noteworthy development was the vision and will of a group of enlightened leaders who in effect said, "so shall it not be among us any longer." They quietly determined to deal with their problems in a new way, and gradually a community consensus developed to support them. Various factors fed its evolution. Theological reform, communist critiques, an educational revolution, democratic politics, and

economic improvements all contributed to a context of culture change. Behind them all, however, was the sense of the leadership that something had to be done. The Mappila community's self-change did not come easily. It travelled through heavy seas before entering the outward harbor of co-existence. Nevertheless, the voyage was made, and it brought a recovery of relationships.

An incident illustrates the dramatic turnabout in the relations between Muslims and Hindus, especially in the Malabar area of Northern Kerala. In the 1990s India was convulsed in communal agony over the long-standing Ayodhya issue. Ayodhya in North India was the site of a small Muslim mosque. Hindu activists claimed that it was the birthplace of their god Ram. The mosque, they said, must be dismantled and replaced by a temple. On December 2nd, 1992, about 125,000 Hindu extremists broke through police lines and destroyed the mosque. Violence and rioting, the worst since Partition, broke out in many places. It was inevitable that there would also be some repercussions in Kerala. In the town of Malappuram a small group of Muslim youth attacked and damaged the precincts of the Siva Temple. One can safely surmise that a generation ago that action would have provoked widespread uproar. What happened next, however, was quite the opposite. A determined Mappila youth leader and his colleagues refused to let chaos rule. They went around Malappuram District, gathered generous donations from concerned Muslims, took the collection to the temple and presented it to its Hindu priests to cover the costs of the repairs. The mending of that temple symbolizes the mending of relations.

Self-change touch^{ing} on human relations reflects basic spiritual affirmations and is therefore always an inherent necessity for religious communities. At the same time, any positive shift within one community also has an outward impact. Gandhi used to remind Indians, that "when I change, I also change others." A few months ago I asked Syed Shihabuddin Mohammedali Tangal, the most widely respected Mappila religious and political leader, "How do you feel?" He replied, "Kerala Muslims have no problems now because of communal harmony. We have nothing to fear." That positive situation is partly his doing. In the soil of fearlessness, relational gardens grow.

3. The Most Certainly Religious Model

Subheading: Have we forgotten how to say I'm sorry?

Christianity and Islam belong in the category of major religions. That being the case they are both in trouble because a growing number of people are saying that we should get rid of the religions. The religions, it is asserted, are the source of too much human misery. Look at the memory holes, critics say -- they mainly tell bad stories. As for the present day, they argue, the words and actions of religious people have created a grievous burden for society. Hence, it is said, humanity's salvation depends on lowering the level of the religions, if not entirely eliminating them in the future.

We quail and are struck down. Try as we will, we cannot separate ourselves from the judgment. We stand condemned. As Christians and Muslims walk the relational road, we need to stop in shock and view the irony. What is happening both within our communities and between them is patently injuring the human sense

of the holy. The question arises whether there is still any room for a convincing model of human relations that has the word "religious" in its description.

I believe that there is. I accept the critiques, but not their conclusion. My contention is that the so-called "failure" of the religions rests not in their being religious, but rather in their not being religious enough. The religions have not let down their buckets into their own spiritual profundity to draw forth the living water needed for this moment. The water is there. It is the theology and practice of forgiveness. Although with differing perspectives, forgiveness is a central theme in both the Christian and Muslim understandings of religious truth and behavior. Yet we will have to admit that both traditions have neglected their core contribution, and to that extent we are disappointing the natural expectations of humanity. We have not been religious enough.

I happen to belong to the Lutheran denomination that confidently calls the forgiveness of sins the central doctrine of the church. Lutherans classically state that belief in a phrase that calls the forgiveness of sins "the article by which the church stands and falls." Resting on God's reconciling love, it becomes in turn the lifeblood of God's people, for where there is forgiveness there is life as well as salvation. Conversely its absence makes the church a dry branch fit for the fire of rejection. It may be suggested that in the contemporary Christian spirituality related to Muslims this core concept is being perilously lost to view. Yet Jesus repeatedly reminded us that God's forgiveness and human

forgiveness are connected. He said, "When you pray, say....And forgive us our sins, for we too forgive all who have done us wrong" (Lu.11:4; NEV).

Rather diffidently, may I suggest that some Muslims may similarly ask to what extent their practice related to Christians is reflecting the Quranic picture of God's character as al-Ghafūr, the Forgiver, and al-Ghaffār, the All-Forgiving. A Sufi writer, Sheikh Toysun Bayrak, declares that without divine forgiveness "there could be neither a society nor a single family."³ The great classical theologian, al-Ghazālī, sharply states the implication for our behavior. After noting that the names al-Ghafūr and al-Ghaffār mean that the Almighty forgives perfectly and completely, he adds: "Man's portion of this name lies in his veiling for the next man that part of him which needs to be veiled." In commenting on another beautiful name, al-ʿAfū, "the One Who Erases sin," he says: "Man's portion of this is self-evident; it consists in forgiving everyone who does him wrong....as he sees that God most high is the One Who does good to the disobedient...."⁴

While verbal forms of penitence and forgiveness may be difficult and may even have an artificial quality, their expression in attitude and action are less so and more significant. Can the religions, then, roll up the carpet of forgetfulness and grasp the hem of their theological memories, and lead the world in their special resource, so desperately needed? Not in the grandiose sense, but in simple relational ways. In this connection I have a small memory hole that takes me back to a Malabar event in 1953. A new Muslim acquaintance invited me for a cup of tea at a coconut-thatched

village teahouse. After the usual cordial preliminaries Mr. Khader asked me pointblank: "Why did you do that to us in the Crusades?" I was very taken aback. We seemed remote from those sad events -- geographically, historically and culturally. Flustered, I blurted out: "I didn't do it! But I'm sorry." Khader smiled, his smile was alms for me, I was reassured, and the conversation went on. In the context of forbearance, issues may remain complicated, but relationships need not be.

4. The Model of Deep Friendship

subheading: Can the human reflect the divine?

I call this the trans-religious or transcendent model because it is divinely patterned. In my view it is the primary paradigm for Christian Muslim relations in the present and for the future. It is the informing power of other models, lifting them above utilitarianism and crisis-management. It is not time-bound or culture-bound. It crosses over into any situation, and is profoundly enabling. It is the ultimate answer to the question of why be bothered about Christian Muslim relations. You may be familiar with an old movie, "Bridge Over the River Kwai." Deep friendship is the "Bridge Over the River Why." Ali Shariati's words in another context express what it does. It compels us forward on the relational path where the wayfarer, quote, "is engaged in a constant migration from his self of clay to his divine self.... so that this animal made of mud and sediment can take on the characteristics of God!"⁵ With our creativity, he says, we can "transcend the natural parameters" of our existence.⁶

Our understanding of deep friendship begins with natural human friendship. Human friendship has a warming beauty, and between

Christians and Muslims it is desirable, possible and highly rewarding. I am not talking about the casual usage of the term but rather as represented by the words of Solomon: "A friend loves at all times" (Prov.17:17). There is a certain kind of sailing vessel manufactured in the town of Friendship, Maine, intended for fishing and lobstering on the Atlantic Coast. It is named the "Friendship" type. Designed with a forward tilt, it looks as though it is about to take off. So also we are, as it were, to lean forward a little, take off, and enjoy the rich boon of human friendship.

Nevertheless, we cannot remain on that level. For all its loveliness, ordinary human friendship has limitations. It is often imbued with self-interest. It is frequently emotional and changeable. It may lack staying power. It is certainly too frail to bear the full load of Christian Muslim relations. We need an unshakeable vision and a force of energy from outside ourselves, and so we turn from the clue-laden but shadowy picture of a human quality to the deep friendship that we learn from God.

As Christians understand it, this is the defining truth for human relations, and therefore also for Christian Muslim relations. The phrase deep friendship is virtually synonymous with âgâpe, that is, selfless love. That we understand to be the nature of God whose name be exalted God is not merely friendly, but is friendship itself. Because is inherent in the divine character deep friendship is not dependent on our response and is also shared with those who do not deserve it. It holds nothing back. It is not emotional, self-interested, changeable, impermanent or frail. It is self-forgetting, even self-giving. The distinction between

divine and human friendship is especially striking in the way it deals with rejection. It does not break down when reciprocity fails or ends. It reaches out, and is ready to suffer.

Can humans aspire to what is divine? Evidently that is the intention when it comes to attitude and behavior. Jesus said, "You are my friends, if you do what I command you." These words came immediately after his saying, "No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends" (Jn.15:14f.). What he commands, the theology and practice of friendship-based intervention, is particularly germane to Christian Muslim relations. We are to leave the arm-chair of wishful thinking -- "why doesn't someone do something about that?" -- and enter the arena of personal involvement, so potentially disruptive, so risky. In imagining what Jesus did in going to the cross my mind often travels to Albert Schweitzer's dramatic image -- the wheel of this world was madly spinning, out of control. He threw himself into the wheel and is left there hanging, but it stopped spinning. The wheel of Christian Muslim relations in our immediate backyards is now spinning a little madly. Deep friendship will say, "So shall it not be among us," and will seek to contain the spinning. Is there a memory hole on the path which suggests that perhaps, after all, the human can reflect the divine? There is indeed.

So in conclusion I take you to Francis of Assisi and one of the wildest examples of deep friendship intervention to be found in Christian Muslim relational history. He had been persistent in his efforts to journey into Muslim contexts, but had been twice thwarted. Finally he managed to take a ship to Damietta at the

mouth of the Nile River. There in 1219 the warriors of the Fifth Crusade were camped under their leader, Cardinal Pelagius, and were facing a Muslim army. It was surely one of the weirdest of the Crusades because Sultan Malik al-Kamal, the Viceroy of Egypt, was a conciliatory person. It had been a time of peace and, in fact, many Italians were resident in Egypt. Nevertheless, the Crusaders came and the armies faced off. Francis took permission to cross the firing lines on a peace mission. His was a strange figure, but a symbol for all seasons. The Muslim soldiers, who must have been astonished, took him to the Sultan. After recovering from his own surprise Malik al-Kamal received Francis graciously, and they had an animated discussion. The immediate results appear to have been inconclusive, but there are later hints of something more. They, however, are not the point we wish to make with this illustration.

This is the memory hole of someone who dared to go into the middle at a stressful time. ^{That is our} point. Fr. Bassetti-Sani suggests that it is through St. Francis that the phrase "brothers and friends" entered the church.⁷ In that spirit this saintly man was reaching out. He believed that two things are needed for Christian Muslim relations and the church's task. The second of the two is intellectual preparation. Prior to that is the first, which he calls "suffering in reparation." Heart and head. In putting them together he offers a possible exegesis of deep friendship for a new study centre in Christian Muslim relations and, indeed, a godly way by which we may all walk toward each other on our paths from Plymouth to Pokenoket.

....Thank you for your patience.

FOOTNOTES

¹Nathaniel Philbrick, Mayflower (New York: Viking, 2006), pp.105f.

²Other models include the sharing of spiritual treasures, serving human needs, peacemaking, and dialogue.

³Sheikh Tosun Bayrak al-Jerrahi al-Halveti, The Most Beautiful Names (Brattleboro, Vermont: Jerrahi Foundation, 1985), p.22.

⁴Al-Ghazālī, Ninety-Nine Names of God in Islam, tr. by Robert C. Stade (Ibadan: Daystar Press, 1970), pp.37, 70, 115.

⁵Ali Shariati, On the Sociology of Islam, tr. by Hamid Algar (Berkeley: Mizan Press, 1979), pp.91, 96.

⁶Ali Shariati, Marxism and Other Western Fallacies, tr. by R.Campbell (Berkeley: Mizan Press, 1980), p.25.

⁷Fr. G. Bassetti-Sani, "Muhammad and St.Francis," Muslim World, Vol.XLVI, No.4 (October 1956), p.343.