

Christian-Muslim Dialogue in India

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The setting for Christian-Muslim dialogue in India goes back to the seafaring activities of the Arabs. They are well known in history for their ability to traverse deserts on their hardy camels, but they were also enterprising seafarers who had discovered how to use the South-West and North-East Monsoon winds to sail directly from Arabia to India and back again. When they embraced Islam in the seventh century they spoke about it when they went to India, but we have no details about this earliest form of dialogue, and even whether Christians were involved or not. We go to the end of the sixteenth century, however, to witness the beginning of an extraordinary episode of Christian-Muslim dialogue.

The Jesuit-Muslim Encounter

It has to be remembered that sixteenth-century Europe saw the bitter struggle between Charles V of the Holy Roman Empire and Francis I of France; the birth and rise of Protestantism; the acrimonious polemics between Catholics and Protestants, which even led to armed conflict; and the battles, by sea and land, between the invading Ottoman Empire and Europe's defenders. The fact that the invading Turks were Muslims, while the defending Europeans were Christians, did not augur well for Christian-Muslim dialogue.

The Jesuit-Muslim encounter in India, which began at Fatehpur Sikri, near Agra, in 1580, was due to the initiative of an extraordinary man, the Mughal Emperor, Akbar, (1556-1605). Like his contemporaries, he took religion seriously, but unlike them, he had an inquiring, inquisitive mind and was keen on learning all he could about the religions professed by his subjects, the majority of whom were Hindus. He therefore invited Hindu, Jain, Parsee as well as Muslim scholars to participate in religious discussions held in a specially constructed building known as the *Ibadat Khana*. It is important to be aware of the fact that Akbar was a very simple yet complex man. He could show genuine, spontaneous affection, for example, as well as juggle multiple realities in view of a specific goal or goals.

When Akbar's delegation arrived in Goa in 1579 with an invitation to "the Fathers of St. Paul," so called because the Jesuits ran the College of St. Paul, "to teach him the Gospel and the Law," there was a mixed response on the part of both the civil and ecclesiastical leadership. What finally won the day was the hope that, by converting the Mughal Emperor to Christianity, his subjects

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would also be won over. They would go on a mission to convert, not to teach! This manner of thinking was the fruit of their sixteenth-century European experience, but the situation in India was very different – as the Jesuits were soon to discover!

What happened? Rudolf Aquaviva, an Italian, the first to reach Fatehpur Sikri, soon found himself plunged into religious discussions in the *Ibadat Khana*. Francis Henriques, a Persian convert to Christianity, was supposed to be their Persian interpreter, but his arrival was delayed. Moreover, since he had lived most of his life with the Portuguese-speaking Christians, his actual grasp of Persian was very limited. Antonio Montserrat, a Spaniard, was also delayed by sickness on the long journey from Goa. Francis Henriques was not up to the task and soon returned to Goa. Rudolf and Antonio, who had diametrically opposite personalities, remained behind. Rudolf was single-mindedly devoted to the task in hand. He led the charge against the Muslim scholars. He had a copy of the Quran in Latin. Although Akbar had instructed Abul Fazl to teach the Fathers Persian, the debate could not wait for that to be accomplished. Interpreters were employed to convey in Persian what the Fathers were saying in Portuguese, and vice versa. The plan was simple. The Jesuits marshalled all the objections they had found while studying the text of the Quran, and also attacked the character of Muhammad. By way of contrast, they also pointed out the coherence of the Bible and extolled the character of Jesus. By means of this double strategy they meant to prove the superiority of Christianity over Islam. Having proved their point, they thought that, logically, Akbar should then ask to be baptised. Dialogue? Not at all! In fact, if it had not been for Akbar, they would have been put to death for some of their remarks about Muhammad. Many would concede that, in military terminology, although the Fathers won all the battles, they lost the war.

This encounter remains an abiding object lesson about the fact that dialogue is definitely not a combination of winning arguments and criticising revered religious personages! Nevertheless, dialogue did take place, on the sidelines, so to say, to use the contemporary imagery of meetings of world leaders. For example, time spent with Abul Fazl gradually turned into dialogue sessions. He agreed with some of the criticisms of the Fathers about the text of the Quran, but also insisted that the text contained much of great value. Even the Trinity was discussed in Persian. The Fathers were amazed at Abul Fazl's lucid exposition of the mystery of the Trinity, and simply could not understand why he did not become a Christian. Akbar himself grew particularly fond of Rudolf. He admired his keen intelligence; his progress in Persian; his dedication to his religion; and his utter fearlessness. Akbar even listened to criticisms levelled against some of his actions!

The fruit of Rudolf's learning experience can be gleaned from a letter he wrote to his Provincial on 27-9-1582, i.e., after almost three years at Akbar's

court. He wrote: "I have many things to convey to you regarding this mission which I have found out and am still finding out each day, ever since I learnt the language, and wherein there is need of great discretion and much advice and consideration in order to be able to deal properly with the affairs of this mission."² When Rudolf had arrived, he was living to the full his Christian faith. He also had a thorough grasp of Christian Theology. On the other hand, he had no experience of Muslims who lived their faith as wholeheartedly as he was living his, and he was totally unaware of their rich theological and spiritual tradition, known as Sufism. His focus was on attacking the text of the Quran and the character of Muhammad, not to understand them and then be in a position to appreciate or criticize what he discovered. As his knowledge of Persian grew, so too did his awareness, as his words indicate. This increased knowledge was accompanied by a deepening humility, as is conveyed by the tone of his words. These changes were the fruit of dialogue.³

Antonio Montserrat was also involved in these discussions. His extroverted personality was a foil to Rudolf's introverted nature. He took a keen interest in what was happening around him, and his detailed observations are found in his precious volume, *Mongolicae Legationis Commentarius*. This is particularly valuable as a record of what he himself had observed. It could justly be referred to as a work of cultural dialogue.

Jerome Xavier 1595-1614

The first mission (1580-83) was followed by a short-lived second one in 1591, but the real father of the Jesuit mission at the Mughal Court, which continued until the middle of Aurangzeb's reign (1658-1707), was Jerome Xavier, the grand nephew of Francis Xavier.⁴ From our vantage point we know, as just mentioned, that this third mission was to last for about ninety years, although with decreasing significance. Jerome did not enjoy our magisterial view, however, and had, as a precedent, only the first mission of less than four years, and the abortive second mission. He could easily have thought – perhaps even wished – of his mission as another short-term enterprise which could be milked for what it was worth with the aid of translators. In the event, he considered it to be a long-term venture, even though there seemed little prospect of the desired fruit of the Emperor's conversion, and set about laying a solid foundation on which his successors could build.

The most basic, indispensable element of such a foundation, was a thorough

² Correia-Afonso, John, Letters from the Mughal Court, Anand, 1980, 117.

³ The best single source of information about this period, and about the whole Jesuit Mission to the Mughal Court, remains Maclagan, Edward, The Jesuits and the Great Mogul, Burns Oates & Washbourne Ltd, London, 1932.

⁴ An excellent scholarly account of Jerome Xavier's work is found in Camps, Arnulf, Jerome Xavier SJ and the Muslims of the Mogul Empire, Nouvelle Revue de Science Missionnaire, Switzerland, 1957.

knowledge of Persian, the language of the imperial court. Jerome wrote on 20th August 1595: “Now our entire occupation is to learn the Persian language and, moreover, we trust in God’s mercy that within the space of one year we shall speak it; only then we shall be able to say that we are in Lahore, for up to now we are statues.”⁵ One year later he reported that he was already translating material into Persian and even presenting his efforts to Akbar, but he deliberately refrained from translating religious material until his grasp of the language was more secure. By 1597, however, he felt confident enough to begin translating religious material. A glance at his rendition of the Lord’s Prayer, however, reveals a lack of elegance as well as a failure to grasp the subtleties of the use of the subjunctive mood in Persian.⁶ When you consider that the common “rule of thumb” for a budding Persian poet of the period was to memorize 30,000 couplets before attempting to write poetry himself, these shortcomings can be seen in perspective. Moreover, Xavier was not a young man – he was forty-six years of age when he began his mission – and was desperately keen to produce religious material in Persian as quickly as possible. He achieved his aim. People did not read his writings for the elegance of his style but for their content, and this was what he wanted. Camps devotes twenty-seven pages (13-39) to enumerating them, mentioning the locations of known copies, and providing an indication of their contents. They were an invaluable tool for dialogue, for they enabled the Persian-speaking elite of the Mughal Court to read, for the first time, Christian religious literature in their own language, and also provided a corpus of writing for succeeding missionaries to utilize and build on in subsequent years. Some of his works found their way to Europe and Persia and resulted in exchanges of a polemical, rather than dialogical, nature.

As a result of the material Xavier made available in Persian to the members of the Mughal Court, another very important dimension of the religious dialogue he was engaged in was that of discussions based on this material. They were too many to attempt to enumerate, and sometimes even lasted “for three or four days at a time and compelled him to be on his feet half a day or the entire night and a good deal of the next day.”⁷ These prolonged discussions were in addition to the much shorter ones held with Akbar and then with his son and successor, Jahangir.

From an historical perspective, the scope and extended time frame of the Jesuit-Muslim encounter in the Mughal Court, with the manifold interactions it involved, was the most outstanding example of dialogue ever undertaken between Christians and Muslims anywhere. The circumstances of its setting remain as challenging as they are instructive.

⁵ Camps, 181.

⁶ Camps, 183.

⁷ Camps, 212.

Pre-Vatican II Efforts

At a personal level, the contribution of Henry Martyn (d.1812) has to be mentioned. He was an Anglican who had been posted as chaplain to the troops of the British East India Company stationed at Danapur, about fifteen kilometres west of Patna in North India. In addition to his chaplaincy work – and, one might add, his efforts to educate local children by setting up three small schools for this purpose, as well as his spiritual ministrations – he was involved in translating the New Testament into Urdu, Persian and Arabic. Although he was a linguistic genius, and knew both Hebrew and Greek, he wisely employed people to help him. These were naturally Muslims, though one was a convert to Christianity. The work of translating was not at all plain sailing. More was involved than simply translating the New Testament Greek into these languages. As Martyn had not studied Islam, and the Muslims had certainly not studied Christianity, some expressions evoked passionate discussions. For example, the Urdu version of "Son of God" is simply *Khuda ka Beta*. Linguistically, there is no problem at all with this, or with the respective Persian and Arabic translations of the phrase. The problem emerges from the whole religious mind-set of a committed Muslim scholar brought up on the unambiguous Quranic teaching that "Allah is One, the Eternal God. He begot none, nor was He begotten. None is equal to Him" (Q112). He would never dream of uttering *Khuda ka Beta*! Some discussions grew quite heated as Martyn once recorded. In a letter written shortly after such an encounter, he said that he was "still trembling." One fruit of this whole enterprise was the realization, by both parties, of the depth of their religious convictions. That this resulted in a degree of mutual respect is clear from the fact that the work continued, in spite of some passionate outbursts, during the years 1806-9.

Martyn's Persian translation was criticized – undoubtedly for its lack of elegance – and so he went to Shiraz, the home of Persian, to enhance its literary merit. This was in 1811. It is of interest to note the irenic nature of his Persian controversial writings penned during his time in Shiraz and found in English translation in Samuel Lee's *Controversial Tracts on Christianity and Mohammedanism. By the late Rev. Henry Martyn, B.B. and some of the most eminent writers of Persia*, Cambridge, 1824. Henry Martyn died in 1812.

Nineteenth-century Agra saw some spirited debates between Anglican missionaries and Muslim scholars. As each side was out to score points over the other, these controversies could scarcely be termed 'dialogue.' One interesting outcome of these encounters is the fact that many Muslims did hear about Jesus and felt inclined to find out more about Him and a number of them became Christians. This stands in stark contrast to the lack of any initiatives on the part of the Catholic Church. After the suppression of the Society of Jesus in 1773 there is a deafening silence on the part of the Catholic Church with regard to any form of outreach towards, or dialogue with, Muslims in India.

This drought was only broken in 1946 by the lonely voice of Fr. Victor Courtois, SJ. Perhaps the following remark, made to the present writer by several Catholic priests in different parts of North India in 1973, explains this inactivity: "What are you wasting your time for? You'll never convert a Muslim!" This advice, if adhered to, becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy, for it closes the door to any form of interaction with Muslims. It also narrows down the meaning of 'conversion' exclusively to a change of religion. This ignores the need we all experience to turn away from sin and all forms of self-centred pride and open our hearts and minds more and more to God and to alleviating the hardships of our fellow human beings. Sharafuddin Maneri, the outstanding Sufi saint of the state of Bihar, put it succinctly when he realized that God was calling him to the task of *rahat bedilan rasanidan*, "bringing comfort to hearts." Maneri taught that "every particle of existence was a path that led to God, but there was no other path that could lead a person in a better fashion, or closer to God, than that of bringing comfort to hearts."⁸

Fr. Courtois, who set about studying Arabic in earnest, as well as a thorough study of Islam, was more in tune with the thinking of Maneri than with that of the priests encountered in 1973. He began his *Notes on Islam* in Calcutta with the September issue of 1946.⁹ In his Editorial, Fr. Courtois wrote about his dreams for the publication:

It would like to remain expository and abstain from polemics although it may at times suggest a solution to Muslim queries or difficulties. It is destined especially to missionaries and Ecclesiastical Students who feel the need of reliable information about the Faith and the aspirations of those many Muslims with whom they come into daily contact. 'Other Christs' cannot see such a vast multitude without taking pity on them, for they are like sheep that have no shepherd. They are waiting for their hearts to be healed. 'Notes on Islam' would like to discover a little the unknown riches of those hearts so that in them we may recognize the features of our Heavenly Father and love them as Brothers. Were they better known, they would surely be better loved, and where there is Love, there also is God.

It should be noticed that *Notes on Islam* continued until the September issue of 1960 which contained the news of the sudden death of Fr. Courtois. Significantly, there was no one to take up the work after him, and *Notes* suffered a demise along with that of Fr. Courtois.

It is instructive to reflect on the work of Fr. Courtois which lies, 'encapsulated' so to say, in his *Notes*. In addition to a great deal of accurate information about

⁸ Jackson, Paul, *Sharafuddin Maneri: The Hundred Letters*, Paulist Press, New York, 1980, 293.

⁹ A complete set of *Notes on Islam* is found in the Goethals Memorial Library, St. Xavier's College, 30 Park Street, Kolkata. Another set is found in Manresa House, Ranchi.

Islam and some of the questions raised by Muslims, the *Notes* contain a valuable news commentary on issues affecting Indian Muslims during the years of the journal's publication. It should also be mentioned that Fr. Courtois played an active role in the Iranian Society of Calcutta. A full-length portrait of him, with his flowing beard, adorns a wall in the premises of the Iranian Society in Kolkata. Those Muslims who associated with him, as the present writer can testify, fondly remembered him many years later. A Jesuit priest who had been a member of his community made a thought-provoking remark: "He never spoke about his work."

It is well worth the effort of situating the significance of Fr. Courtois' editorial comments. It needs to be pointed out that a number of Protestant Churches in India continued to present Christ through various activities, including publications, through an Institute named after Henry Martyn. It was situated in Lucknow during the period under discussion. Naturally, several people were involved in this enterprise and their mutual collaboration was a source of encouragement in what was readily acknowledged as a challenging field of work. The Protestant effort, no matter what effects were felt by the vagaries of the times, somehow continued right from the time of the inspiring work of Henry Martyn.

This stands in stark contrast to the Catholic scene, with its complete absence of activity. It has to be acknowledged, as the remarks of some priests given above indicate, that the focus was on education, social uplift and conversion, as clearly exemplified by the Jesuit Mission in Ranchi under the inspiration of the Belgian Jesuit, Constant Lievens. Fr. Courtois ploughed a lonely furrow. Initially he had a companion, a man who had lived with the Bedouin and gained a remarkable mastery of Arabic, but who subsequently felt called to a work which brought more immediately tangible results and sense of accomplishment. His departure must surely have compounded Fr. Courtois' sense of isolation. Perhaps he did not speak about his work in his community because he realized that others were not interested in what he had to say. If this were so, it would have added another dimension to his sense of isolation. Apart from the merit or otherwise of the work undertaken by Fr. Courtois, the courage and commitment of the man in undertaking the work itself have to be judged in the light of this specific situation.

While a post-Vatican II perspective might not be comfortable with the notion of Muslims' being *like sheep that have no shepherd*, nevertheless the final two sentences spring from a heart that is obviously filled with love. They could easily be adopted as the framework for any fruitful Christian-Muslim dialogue. It has to be mentioned that Sr. Arati Snow, RSCJ, began a fruitful collaboration with A.A.A. Fyze in Bombay, but was put in charge of the English Department of Sophia College and was unable to continue to utilize her excellent knowledge of Arabic.

After Vatican II

“But the plan of salvation also includes those who acknowledge the Creator, in the first place amongst whom are Muslims: these profess to hold the faith of Abraham, and together with us they adore the one, merciful God, mankind’s judge on the last day.”¹⁰

“The Church has also a high regard for the Muslims. They worship God, who is one, living and subsistent, merciful and almighty, the Creator of heaven and earth, who has also spoken to men. They strive to submit themselves without reserve to the hidden decrees of God, just as Abraham submitted himself to God’s plan, to whose faith Muslims eagerly link their own.”¹¹

This second quotation is the first of three paragraphs in *Nostra Aetate* that are devoted to Muslims, and include a “plea to achieve mutual understanding; for the benefit of all men, let them together preserve and promote peace, liberty, social justice and moral values.”

The first thing we notice about these quotations, which constitute a clarion call to Christians belonging to the Catholic Church to embrace this new attitude of the Church, is to notice its person-oriented nature. The Council Fathers are directly speaking about real, flesh and blood Muslims, and indirectly about Islam. Perhaps it is more accurate to say that they are speaking about Muslims precisely as followers of Islam who “strive to submit themselves without reserve to the hidden decrees of God.” Catholics are clearly urged to engage with Muslims. Efforts to learn as much as possible about Islam are meant to foster and facilitate an ever-deepening knowledge of those people the Church urges its members to collaborate with in doing good for the benefit of all.

After the Council came to an end in 1965 the legacy it provided in the field of Christian-Muslim dialogue – and other areas as well – was a clear call to a change of attitude towards the billions of people who were not Catholics. The Muslims constitute only one of the many other groupings specifically mentioned in the Council documents. It is of interest to notice that a Secretariat set up during the Council to implement the consequences of this new attitude towards Muslims and others was called The Secretariat for Non-Christians. The term Non-Christians was a convenient shorthand way of referring to people belonging to a variety of religious traditions. Nevertheless, it essentially referred to them in a generically negative expression which, in itself, said nothing about who or what they actually were. A quarter of a century later this was rectified when the name was changed to The Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue. Unfortunately, a Council does not have the same

¹⁰ *Lumen Gentium*, no.16.

¹¹ *Nostra Aetate*, no.3.

status as a Secretariat.

What was the response in India? At an All India Seminar organized in Bangalore in 1969 it was urged “that scholars be set aside to study the Muslim religion, social life and culture in India, hoping by this means to come to a better understanding of this great people.” At an All India Consultation held in Patna in 1973 a workshop was devoted to evangelisation and dialogue with Muslims. In the final Declaration of the Consultation numbers 33 to 37 dealt with Muslims. The verb ‘should’ was used seven times “suspended in mid-air,” so to say, without being attached to any subjects. The material constituted a pious ‘wish-list’.

The next step up was a Consultation on Dialogue with Muslims. This was held in Agra, 28th until 30th March 1979, under the auspices of the Catholic Bishops’ Conference of India (CBCI) Commission for Dialogue and hosted by Archbishop Dominic Athaide. The participants realized that, unless a group was formed to carry out the suggestions made during the Consultation, no follow-up action could be expected. Consequently, a committee of five was elected. This was the origin of the Islamic Studies Association (ISA), which is set to celebrate its thirtieth birthday in March 2009. A report of the meeting was published in a zero edition of JAMI Notes. This was a cyclostyled quarterly begun by a group of Jesuits in India founded in 1977 and known as JAMI – Jesuit Apostolate among Muslims in India. Christian Troll, S.J, had edited it. It was decided that the publication would become the organ of ISA. Its name was changed to Salaam in 1983. It is currently (2008) in its 29th volume.

“The essence of the 1979 report of the Consultation is contained in these words: The results of the discussion, in which Fr. A. Nambiaparambil expressed his mind quite freely, could be summed up as follows. There was a definite need for a group in the Church in India to foster Christian-Muslim relations in India; this, de facto, is the group; it has grown up from the grassroots level of the Church and is not the result of an official ‘fiat.’ Nevertheless, it is anxious to work in and with the Church. Hence it is grateful for the initiative taken by the CBCI to convene the meeting and for Archbishop Dominic Athaide’s patronage. At the moment it is more of a movement that needs freedom and encouragement to grow, to find its own way, to explore new avenues and to enter into relationship with all it can help or be helped by. Hence its freedom was stressed, but a freedom rooted in a deep sense of ecclesial responsibility, coupled with grave obligations towards our Muslim brother and sisters.” Fr. Nambiaparambil was the Secretary of the CBCI Commission for Dialogue at the time.

These words summed up the spirit in which the Islamic Studies Association came into existence. They were elaborated in the Memorandum of Association of 1984, and have remained an inspiration for the Association all through its existence.

This is not the place for a detailed history of ISA, but a few general remarks would seem to be appropriate. ISA enabled the handful of Catholics in India who were interested in somehow reaching out to Muslims to interact with one another. The members of the Managing Committee, enlarged to seven, met twice a year, and the General Body members met once in every two years. This meeting was accompanied by a Convention which helped bring local Christians and Muslims together. As a result of trial and error a format was developed in which Muslims came and shared their faith-enriched personal stories with Christians in one of our institutions. Sunday was the most convenient day for people to gather. The following day a group of Christians would visit some of the Muslim institutions and experience the work being done there. Different cities were chosen for these Conventions.

ISA members also collaborate to produce *Salaam*, a quarterly journal, as well as to produce books such as *The Muslims of India: Beliefs and Practices*, and *Questions Muslims Ask*. For the most part, however, members are engaged in a variety of activities at the personal level. A full-time commitment to some activity involving reaching out to Muslims is rare. Between 1983-86 ISA had the services of the late Fr. James Tong, SJ, and Sr. Fatima I.C.M. from 1986 until 2000. For the rest of the time, as at the present moment, ISA has no one fully devoted to the work of the Association. This obviously places severe constraints on what can be done.

The Association has never reached 30 members since its inception. Its normal membership hovers around the 20 mark. Most have other occupations, but their membership indicates their interest and their attempts to make a contribution in their own way, according to their circumstances. Clearly, a lot remains to be done in the field of Christian-Muslim dialogue in India. The CBCI Dialogue Commission has conducted many meetings and seminars with people of other faiths, including Muslims, over the last decade or so. Moreover, some diocesan dialogue commissions have regular sessions with Muslims and others, such as at Jhansi. Sr. Fatima I.C.M. has been engaged in a fruitful dialogue of life in Patna, Old Delhi and now in a village in Tamil Nadu. It should also be pointed out that the Protestant effort, inspired by Henry Martyn and continued in the Institute that bears his name, is indeed a commendable one.

One area of activity, already identified as the top priority of ISA in 1979, has been the widespread inclusion of basic courses on Islam in the curricula of a large number of Catholic seminaries in India. Previously this was a rare phenomenon. Present-day ISA members, as well as some erstwhile members and others, have generously responded to invitations to give such courses. *The Muslims of India: Beliefs and Practices* was specifically prepared by ISA as a handbook for seminarians and has been used in a number of courses. Unfortunately, only a few congregations of religious sisters have included any such course as a regular requirement of their formation programme. The wide

media coverage of suicide bombers at the international level, and of bombing attacks in India itself, has obviously produced a climate of opinion which tends to be inimical towards Muslims and inhibits Christian-Muslim dialogue. On the other hand, the Letter of 138 Muslim religious leaders and scholars to the Pope and other Christian leaders was an event of hopefully far-reaching consequences. ISA organized a fruitful seminar on the letter, explaining its historical setting and indicating some of its implications.

Patna, the capital of the state of Bihar in North India, has had a modest outreach programme running for twenty-five years. The present writer goes to various towns and meets Muslims in madrasas and Sufi centres, as well as making contact, usually through a Catholic school, with middle class Muslims, and also with poor Muslims. He then prepares the first-year students of Theology at the regional theologate just outside Patna to go, two by two, to these various towns where they meet and interact with the four classes of Muslims mentioned above. They leave on a Monday and return on the Wednesday of the following week. We then have sharing and reflection sessions for the next three days. They then have to write up an account of their experience together with their own reflections. This has proved to be an experience of great transformative value for the students. It also provided an opportunity for much in-depth personal dialogue between the students and the Muslims with whom they were interacting.

Another unusual outreach programme in Patna is a dialogue at the level of spirituality. The 14,000,000 Muslims of the state of Bihar, and many others as well, greatly revere Sheikh Sharafuddin Maneri and consider him to be their greatest saint, spiritual guide and mystic. He died on 2nd January 1381, but is still very much part and parcel of the spiritual scene in Bihar. Of inestimable value for people of this twenty-first century is the large corpus of Persian writings, either from his own pen, or as accounts of what he taught at the regular assemblies over which he presided. Manuscripts and printed versions of these Persian writings are found in the world-famous Khuda Bakhsh Oriental Public Library here in Patna. It has been the good fortune of the present writer to be able to make a number of these works available in English translation, beginning with Sharafuddin Maneri: *The Hundred Letters*, which was first published in 1980 by the Paulist Press, New York, in their Series, "The Classics of Western Spirituality." The letters were written to a disciple, Qazi Shamsuddin, in 1346-47.

Maneri's treatment of the topic of service was not only a challenge to the original recipient of his Letters, Qazi Shamsuddin, the local official in charge of the township of Chausa, but also an indication of the timelessness and depth of his teaching:

In service one acquires many benefits and special favours that are not found in any other form of devotion or submission. One is that

a person's selfish soul perishes. Pride and haughtiness are removed from his countenance and, in their place, humility and submission appear. A person becomes well mannered, and his behaviour improves considerably. He learns both the theory and the practice of the group. Gloom and heaviness are removed from his soul. He becomes gentle, light-hearted and radiant, both internally and externally. (293)

Maneri spells out three preconditions required for this type of service:

A precondition of service, however, is to abandon entirely one's own wishes, desires and control over one's affairs, and to live according to the desires of the group.

A second precondition of service is not to consider oneself as important or favoured. Whatever belongs to the disciple should be viewed by him as the common property of all. To the extent that he is able, he spends himself, his goods, and even his own desires and inclinations for the sake of others. In all circumstances he gives preference to the group over himself.

A final precondition is that the disciple considers it incumbent upon himself to be grateful for whatever service he performs on behalf of anybody, or whatever favour he enjoys. He does whatever he can for the group, utilizing every opportunity for advancing their good. If he wastes even a moment, he considers himself bound to be sorry for it. There are innumerable ways of rendering service. The purpose of saying this is to indicate that there should be no young person who cannot find some appropriate work to do for others. (294-5)

Conclusion

This brief outline of Christian-Muslim Dialogue in India has highlighted the Jesuit-Muslim dialogue at the Mughal Court that began in 1580 and continued, in real terms, until the death of Fr. Busi in 1669. It was only in 1946, with the work of Fr. Victor Courtois, SJ, that the Catholic Church once again became active in the field of Christian-Muslim dialogue. The work of Henry Martyn was mainly dialogical in nature, but the main thrust of various Protestant groups in the nineteenth and into the twentieth century was evangelical. The Henry Martyn Institute now focuses on the much-needed work of reconciliation. The Catholic response to the clarion call of Vatican II 1962-65 has been presented, albeit briefly.

From the point of view of the undoubted need – indeed, urgency – of Christian-Muslim dialogue, not only in India, but also in the world at large, the Catholic response is far from satisfying. When examined within the perspective of the last three centuries, however, the enormous significance of the admittedly inadequate response can be clearly seen. Today's call is to fan the flame of that response.