

MONDAY INTERVIEW

Fostering 'dialogue of life' across religions

Michael Bos, Director of the Muscat-based Al Amana Centre, is working to build trust and peace between Muslims and Christians

MANY people talk about it but the world at large may still be finding it elusive. Religious tolerance is simple when articulated but is perhaps difficult to practise because it is a mindset to be cultivated. MICHAEL BOS, who prefers to be called a human being first and then an American, is among those who practise what they preach. He talks of a 'dialogue of life' between any two people and gently rules out the idea of a 'clash of civilisations'.

Bos is Director of the Muscat-based Al Amana Centre, which is working to build bridges of understanding, trust and peace between Muslims and Christians by facilitating programmes of exchange with students and encouraging scholarly contributions in this area. He is also working on his PhD at the University of Bristol (UK) on the religious basis for

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tolerance in Ibadism, the tradition of Islam prevalent in Oman. He believes that the ability for religions to coexist peacefully emanates from within religious traditions. More importantly, it demonstrates that although terms such as dialogue, religious pluralism, interfaith relations, etc. are relatively new, such concepts were actively lived out in history, though not by these names.

Bos's attitude is as positive as his observation. "With globalisation, we live in an interconnected and interdependent world as a result of which religions are no longer confined to one geographical area, but are interspersed throughout the world as minority communities. As these minority communities grow, such as Islam in the US, it affects people's disposition towards religious diversity in positive ways."

Bos makes a distinction between 'plurality' and 'pluralism'. Says he, "Plurality only requires that one acknowledge that other religions exist. Pluralism, on the other hand, signifies that one accepts religious diversity in principle and will actively engage others to create space for all within our communities."

He is convinced that media are attracted to extreme points of view, leaving unrepresented the vast number of people who are moving from plurality to pluralism. To enhance this process, Bos suggests, among other things, inculcation of a sense of internal advocacy for each other. "It simply means we must learn to speak respectfully of others when they are not present," he tells P RAMESH KUMAR in a tête-à-tête. Excerpts from the interview:

When did this idea of pluralism/religious tolerance first enter your mind? I mean what is the motivation? Did anything happen in your neighbourhood or in the immediate family to trigger it?

Long ago, I remember eating in the home of a couple we had just met, and at the time, we were not aware of each other's religious affiliation. We had a wonderful evening together, and as the

night unfolded, our faith perspectives became a natural part of getting to know each other. The fact that they were Muslim and we were Christian only enhanced our friendship. It taught me that our initial encounters with people of other faith should begin as a "dialogue of life," that is, through friendships that are built on the commonalities we share by virtue of our common humanity.

Do you believe there is a clash of civilisations? Is it just a political observation?

One only need listen to the news to know that there is conflict in the world, but to define our times as a clash of civilisations is to ignore the vast number of people from different cultures who live in peace with one another. Peaceful communities and peace-loving people are generally not deemed news worthy. Therefore, we should take care not to define our times by CNN or Al Jazeera headlines.

Pundits have a tendency to present local conflict as evidence of a global conspiracy pitting East versus West or Islam versus Christianity. Not only does this misrepresent religions, it misrepresents regions because of the shifting demographics in a global era. People and information now move across borders with ease, and there are significant religious and ethnic minorities living around the world. Attempts to tie religious and ethnic boundaries to geography are becoming increasingly difficult.

For example, there are now six to seven million Muslims in America and the number is growing fast. Islam has become a part of the religious fabric of America. Therefore, when one uses vague generalisations to divide the world between us and them, it does not do justice to the diversity that now exists within civilisations.

Samuel Huntington, who popularised the idea of a clash of civilisations, was correct in noting

that people are rethinking their national and religious identities, but he builds his thesis around the assumption that whatever identities we form, enemies are essential in their formation. The question is whether this is the principal way people are forming identities in response to globalisation. While it is true that some people view our increasing interconnectedness as a threat of foreign influence, there are growing numbers of people who are recognising and appreciating the values we share across religious and cultural boundaries. Because of this, their identities are formed in positive relation to others.

Would it be better to have a world full of agnostics and atheists so that there is no religious quarrel or is it okay the way it is?

Underlying your question is no doubt the assumption that if religion were absent, perhaps there would be less conflict. I do not believe this to be the case. What is deemed "religious conflict" is not something essential to religion itself. History shows that quarrels and conflict are a risk wherever people live in community — which is everywhere — and it is irrespective of whether a religious orientation is held. This need not mean that major clashes are inevitable, but it does mean that all segments of society must work to develop just and peaceful means of dealing with disagreements that arise from being in community.

A part of this involves the responsibility of religious leadership to address the ways in which religion is misused to support conflict, and to commit more effort to religion's use in developing a culture of peace. This raises the question, what would be lost if religion were absent? We would lose an enduring source of noble ideals and ethical guidance on how to conduct ourselves in the world.

Though things such as honesty, integrity, jus-

stice, charity, etc., are not confined to faith, religion has been the domain that has sought to preserve these values, which are fundamental to the creation of just and peaceful societies. Religion holds an important place in the solution to conflict.

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Do you look at yourself as an American Christian? What is your identity in your opinion?

American and Christian are central elements of my identity, yet to leave it at that would be too vague a label to know who someone is. Identity is formed through our relationships, and in my case, relationships with Muslims and Islamic scholarship has shaped who I am in many positive ways, consciously and unconsciously.

To live in an age of globalisation means we live in an interdependent and interconnected

world. This also means our identities are interconnected and labels do not do justice to the ways we influence each other. This is probably more than you were asking for in asking this question, but it strikes at the heart of my work. When we attach labels to others we tend to attach judgments about someone before getting to know them. Therefore I think it better that we put labels aside and approach each other as people first, and let the sources of one's identity unfold in the course of our relationship.

Tell us about Al Amana Centre — its history, purpose, achievements and its future plans.

Al Amana Centre, historically known as the American Mission, has been in Oman for over 110 years. It established Oman's first hospitals and started a coeducational school. The hospitals were incorporated into the Ministry of Health in the 1970's and the school was closed in the 1980's, but there was a wonderful legacy of Muslims and Christians working together for the common good of the community. The idea then surfaced to build upon this heritage by finding ways to foster understanding, trust and peace between Muslims and Christians. I arrived three years ago to help turn this vision into reality.

Thus far there has been considerable international interest. One of the initiatives that begins this year is hosting university students from the West who come to Oman for a short-term experience. Our goal is to help students shed false stereotypes and develop an understanding and appreciation for Arab culture and Islam. What better place to be an ambassador for the Middle East than Oman!

We are also working to facilitate scholarship on religious coexistence. Oman is becoming a centre of scholarship in this area. It publishes an excellent journal, "Al Tisamah" (Tolerance), that is fast becoming an important venue for scholarly contribution, and the Ministry of Religious Affairs hosts an annual lecture series with world-renowned figures that help facilitate dialogue. The Grand Mufti of Oman has a leading role in

PROFILE

MICHAEL BOS
Director of Al Amana Centre

What is your research on? Your subject of specialisation?

I am working on my Ph.D. at the University of Bristol (UK) on the religious basis for tolerance in Ibadism, the tradition of Islam prevalent in Oman. Ibadism is known as a moderate and tolerant expression of Islam, and I am researching the basis for this irenic spirit.

What's your hobby?

I love to read. Admittedly, it is mostly in my area of research, but my wife prods me to read a little more broadly. She says it makes me a more interesting person!

Your favourite author, book or singer?

I loved *Angels and Demons* by Dan Brown. I thought it was better than his more popular work *The Da Vinci Code*. I also recently read *The Rule of Four*, which is of the same genre and was excellent. Anything about the discovery of ancient manuscripts or great secrets from the past has my attention.

Marital status, children etc.

I have been happily married to Tena for 20 years, and have two children, Austin (12) and Alicia (15).

Any offbeat information. Anything that makes you come through as a person different from the serious liberal academic that you are?

Many people do not know of my love for classic movies, but my definition of "classic" is a bit different than most. I think Jim Carrey's *Dumb and Dumber*, Ben Stiller's *Zoolander*, and Bill Murray's *What About Bob?* are all time greats. I can watch them over and over! My kids and I quote lines to each other, much to the dismay of my wife.

Your favourite pastime?

I love tennis, waterskiing and wakeboarding. If I have a racket in my hand or I am on the water, I am extremely happy.



the International Association of Muslim Scholars, which has, as part of its purview, dialogue with other religions and cultures. All of this helps to make Oman a welcoming environment for scholars to visit for research.