**Christmas is coming**

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Christmas is about change, hope and peace, and it is about family, friends, and food, as all big holidays are, in Islam, Christianity and other religions. A lot is also about fun, games and doing things together, especially for children and youngsters, depending on traditions and cultures. The church year has just begun, and the coming Sunday is the forth Sunday in the new year, called Advent, and it is also Christmas Eve. Monday the 25th of December is Christmas Day, and it is also the official birthday of the Founding Father of Pakistan, Muhammad Ali Jinnah, making the day important for all Pakistanis.
It should be added that Muslims, too, consider Jesus/Isa particularly prominent in their faith as a prophet, and in that way, the Christmas event forms a background also to Islam.| The commonality of many parts of Judaism, Christianity and Islam is important, and also the differences. Obviously, without the differences, the religions would have been one. I am glad, though, that there is close contact and inter-faith dialogue especially between Christians and Muslims. Muslims generally know more about Christianity than Christians know about Islam. To have knowledge about the other religion is only the beginning of a real dialogue; it is also required that we try to understand the faith of the others on their premises, and try to learn and show respect, without therefore changing own belief.
We should realise that the faith we have is built on the environment and culture we have grown up in. I grew up in Norway, where Protestant Christianity is dominant, but there is also openness to other religions, and also towards ‘freethinkers’. If I had grown up in Pakistan, in a Muslim community, I would have been a Muslim. In Pakistan, there are significant Christian and Hindu communities, and in Norway, there are today growing numbers of Muslims, especially in the big cities. In the capital, Oslo, there are today many newcomers who are first, second and third generation immigrants, and most stay true to their religious heritage.
Norway is a predominantly a Christian country, and nowadays, we would say that many people are culturally Christian rather than confessional believers. It is also a fact that religion is something individual between the person and God/Allah, and the actual faith is therefore not a public matter. Many would also say that their faith, and the depth of it, would vary over time. It is important to stress this, perhaps more so in our time than earlier. When I grew up in Norway in the 1950s and 1960s, coming of age in the 1970s, almost everyone would be Christian, but without talking about religious issues, and only attending religious services and other events of special importance, such as weddings and funerals, and at Christmas. It was an unwritten rule that we should not ask others about their personal faith, respecting their integrity, and we usually thought that everyone had some degree of faith, at least when they needed it most.
Norway has for a long time, actually for hundreds of years, been a major shipping nation. Still the country is amongst the largest shipping nations in the world, but the crews on Norwegian ships are now more often foreigners than indigenous Norwegians. In my youth, some fifty years ago, most sailors on Norwegian ships were Norwegians, and they would have grown up in Christian communities with Bible studies as a school subject. Norway has today thirty seamen’s churches abroad. There are fewer Norwegian sailors, but more other Norwegians travelling and living abroad, and the seamen’s churches are for all Norwegians abroad, with pastors based in port cities or ambulating from home. The churches abroad are religious in character, of course, but they are also cultural institutions, serving as contact points with home, with major parts of the costs are mostly covered by the foreign office.
In Islamabad, there is at least one visit annually by the seamen’s pastor, usually the man or woman pastor based in Dubai or somewhere else in the region. In a conversation during the pastor’s visit this year, somebody suggested that the Christmas Gospel should not necessarily be interpreted literally, but rather more figuratively and in broader ways. Behind the parables or stories, there are always deeper messages. Jesus/Isa was born to Maryam Bint Imran, the most prominent woman in the Bible. Her son became our history’s most influential person with messages concerning worship, peace, and doing good to fellow human beings. Jesus/Isa did not himself say he was the ‘son of God’, but people said it about him, perhaps more as an honorary title for a unique, good human being, teacher, and performer of miracles; others would say it should be understood literally. The change he created, his main message, was that good must always win over evil, light over darkness, positive words and actions over carelessness and negligence. Christianity and Islam always underline these aspects.
Jesus/Isa was born in Bethlehem some one hundred kilometres from Nazareth in Galilee, where Joseph/Yusuf and Mary/Maryam lived. They had to go to their ancestral city of Bethlehem, near Jerusalem, to be registered in the census which the rulers had ordered all to observe for tax and security purposes. When in Bethlehem, the time had come for Jesus/Isa to be born, and those who first knew about it were the shepherds in the area, but later came also kings and wise men, underlining the universality of the event. The parents returned with their firstborn to Nazareth, where Jesus/Isa grew up. Today, Nazareth is referred to as the Arab capital of Israel, with some two-thirds of the people being Muslims and one third Christians, and a small minority Jews. In Christianity and Islam, the second coming of Jesus/Isa is believed to take place in Jerusalem, the holy city to believers in the Abrahamic religions.
Let us underline that is possible for people of different faiths to live together. We should be reminded of that this year more than ever when there is a terrible war going on between Israel and Palestine in Gaza, and also wars elsewhere. We pray that the Christmas message of peace on earth come true and that all people can see what God’s will is.
Dear reader, may I wish you a Merry Christmas.