

INTERCULTURAL UNDERSTANDING & DIALOGUE

Views • Discussion • Documents

Inter-Faith Dialogue in a Globalising World

Minaret Research Network

Globalisation may well be regarded as the defining feature of the present age. The process of globalisation, which is gathering momentum around the world, seems to harbour certain paradoxes. Thus on the one hand, it has brought about an incredible shrinking of time and space, thanks to the unprecedented advances in transportation and communication technologies. Globalisation has also opened up unforeseen vistas and avenues for the wide dissemination of information, ideas, technologies, capital, cultural patterns and lifestyles and provided vast opportunities for interaction and exchange among people belonging to different nationalities, religions and cultural traditions.

The prospects and opportunities unleashed by globalisation should have ideally led to greater understanding, tolerance, cooperation and harmonious coexistence among different communities and should have made the “global village” (as the cheerleaders of globalisation describe the present-day world) as a better place to live in. Unfortunately, this has not happened. Globalisation has undoubtedly made a highly significant contribution to the mitigation of human hardships and the reduction of poverty and destitution in large parts of the world. At the same time, the world we are living in is characterised by enormous and widening inequalities, deprivation and insecurity. Despite the amazing technological innovations and unprecedented affluence, we are living in a fragile, fragmented world.

The present age is often hailed as the era of information. The information revolution that has transformed modern societies should have ideally resulted in better understanding and peaceful coexistence. Unfortunately, this does not seem to be the case. We are witnessing a disturbing rise in prejudices (compounded by e-hatred), stereotypes, racism, xenophobia, violence and terrorism. There is a pervasive state of ignorance and misperception about other people’s beliefs and cultural traditions, which may be characterised as cultural and psychological ghettoization. This kind of ghettoization is characterised not only by the physical separation and segregation of communities—parallel societies, as they are now described—but also by social and cultural distance, by psychological insularity. It is strange that different communities which have been living together in the same town or city for years know so little about each other’s beliefs and cultural traditions. The little that they know about each other is largely based on stereotypes and misconceptions. These stereotypes are nurtured, shared and transmitted from generation to generation through the socialization process and through family lore.

Inter-faith dialogue

A great deal of confusion and misunderstanding surrounds the social reality of religion. Many people tend to take an oversimplified, idealised view of religion by focusing only on its core beliefs, doctrines and worldview. Before addressing the dynamics and significance of inter-faith dialogue, it is instructive to bear in mind the salient features of religion.

- There is an enormous range of diversity in religious beliefs, rituals, ceremonies, institutional structures and cultural patterns. Therefore, one needs to be careful while making generalisations about religion.
- Religion needs to be viewed in its totality. Every religion encompasses a set of beliefs and doctrines, rituals and ceremonies, worldview, moral values, code of conduct, institutional structure, and perception of and attitude towards outsiders.

- All religions have a core of fundamental beliefs, doctrines and worldview, on the one hand, and an assortment of rituals, ceremonies and customs. In most cases, the outward manifestations of religions—rituals, ceremonies, customs—take precedence over its core beliefs and worldview. While these two aspects of religion are closely intertwined, it is important to make a distinction between them.
- Religion has much to offer to our troubled world. Unfortunately, the humanizing and liberating potential of religion has not been adequately harnessed. Religious sensibilities can be a valuable source of personal fulfilment, cultural vitality and social solidarity. The history of the resistance movement against the apartheid regime in South Africa provides an illuminating illustration of this fact. The strength of inter-religious solidarity in the anti-apartheid movement played a vital role in bringing this obnoxious system to an end. In order to release and harness its great potential, religion needs to be reinterpreted in a humane, inclusive and accommodative spirit.
- Inter-faith dialogue can be greatly strengthened by the engagement and participation of different communities in shared voluntary action, including grass-roots work and social movements. This can go a long way in fostering sensitivity towards other people, in breaking barriers of communication, in dispelling mistrust and stereotypes, and in facilitating greater understanding and conciliation.
- The objective or focus of inter-faith dialogue needs to be clearly defined. Here the pertinent question is: Dialogue for what? Inter-faith dialogue should be aimed, not at resolving the complex and myriad difference among religions, but at fostering a spirit of tolerance and inter-cultural sensitivity and at building bridges of understanding and harmonious coexistence among different communities.



Inter-faith dialogues are increasing involving members of diverse faith communities

Muslim-Christian dialogue

The initiative for inter-faith dialogue in the West was taken by the Vatican and the World Council of Churches in the 1950s. A major impetus to inter-faith dialogue was provided by the Second Vatican Council (1962-65). In 1964 Pope John Paul II established the Office for Non-Christian Affairs at the Vatican to study diverse religious traditions, provide resources and promote inter-religious dialogue through education. This office produced a document entitled “Orientations for a Dialogue between Christians and Muslims” in 1970, which urged Christians to clear away the “outdated image, inherited from the past, or distorted by prejudice and slander, that Christians have of Islam”. It also recognized the “past injustice towards the Muslims for which the West, with its Christian education, is to blame”.



Muslim-Christian dialogues are gaining frequency in the West and in the Muslim world

On April 24, 1974, Cardinal Pignedoli, head of the Vatican's Office for Non-Christian Affairs, visited Saudi Arabia and carried a message from John Paul II to King Faisal. In October 1974 a delegation of the ulama from Saudi Arabia visited the Vatican and was warmly received by the Pope. This meeting paved the way for a meaningful dialogue between Muslims and Christians, who together comprise nearly half of the world's inhabitants. Pope John Paul II made sincere and sustained efforts to foster greater understanding between Muslims and Christians. He was the first pope in 2,000 years to have visited a mosque in Syria in 2001.

Relations between the Vatican and Muslims came under strain following a speech given by Pope Benedict XVI at a university in Regensburg, Germany on September 13, 2006, in which he quoted a 14th-century Byzantine emperor as saying that Islam had only brought evil to the world and that it was spread by the sword. Following world-wide protests by Muslims, the Pope later said he regretted the misunderstanding that his speech had caused among Muslims.

Pope Benedict tried to make amends for his unfortunate statement at Regensburg by visiting Turkey in November 2006 where he prayed, along with Mustafa Cagrici, the head of religious affairs, at Istanbul's famous Blue Mosque. He was the second pope, after John Paul II, to have visited a mosque. In March 2008, he decided to restore the power and prestige of Vatican's Pontifical Council for Inter-religious Dialogue, which he had downgraded in March 2006.



Pope Benedict XVI praying at Istanbul's Blue Mosque

On October 13, 2006, 38 Islamic scholars from around the world, representing all denominations and schools of thought, joined together to respond to the Pope's observations on Islam in his Regensburg speech in a spirit of open intellectual exchange and dialogue. In their *Open Letter to the Pope*, Muslim scholars spoke about the true teachings of Islam. In a declaration *A Common Word Between Us and You*, they emphasized the common ground between Christianity and Islam. The letter, copies of which were sent to the Archbishop of Canterbury, Dr Rowan Williams and other prominent Christian leaders, stated: "Let our differences not cause hatred and strife between us. Let us vie with each other only in righteousness and good works". The final draft of the letter was presented at a conference in

Jordan September 2007 held under the auspices of the Royal Aal a-Bayt Institute for Islamic Thought. (A summary of the declaration is appended at the end)

In March 2008 the Vatican and Muslim leaders agreed to establish a regular official dialogue to improve relations between the two religions. The first meeting of the Catholic-Muslim Forum is expected to take place in Rome in November this year, in which 24 religious leaders and scholars from each side will participate.

A Common Word Between US and You Summary

In the Name of God, the Compassionate, the Merciful

Muslims and Christians together make up well over half of the world's population. Without peace and justice between these two religious communities, there can be no meaningful peace in the world. The future of the world depends on peace between Muslims and Christians.

The basis for this peace and understanding already exists. It is part of the very foundational principles of both faiths: love of the One God, and love of the neighbour. These principles are found over and over again in the sacred texts of Islam and Christianity. The Unity of God, the necessity of love for Him, and the necessity of love of the neighbour is thus the common ground between Islam and Christianity. The following are only a few examples:

Of God's Unity, God says in the Holy Qur'an: *Say: He is God, the One! / God, the Self-Sufficient Besought of all! (Al-Ikhlās, 112:1-2)*. Of the necessity of love for God, God says in the Holy Qur'an: *So invoke the Name of thy Lord and devote thyself to Him with a complete devotion (Al-Muzzammil, 73:8)*. Of the necessity of love for the neighbour, the Prophet Muhammad said: *"None of you has faith until you love for your neighbour what you love for yourself."*

In the New Testament, Jesus Christ said: *'Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is One. / And you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind, and with all your strength.' This is the first commandment. / And the second, like it, is this: 'You shall love your neighbour as yourself.' There is no other commandment greater than these.*" (Mark 12:29-31)

In the Holy Qur'an, God Most High enjoins Muslims to issue the following call to Christians (and Jews—the *People of the Scripture*):

Say: O People of the Scripture! Come to a common word between us and you: that we shall worship none but God, and that we shall ascribe no partner unto Him, and that none of us shall take others for lords beside God. And if they turn away, then say: Bear witness that we are they who have surrendered (unto Him). (Aal 'Imran 3:64)

The words: *we shall ascribe no partner unto Him* relate to the Unity of God, and the words: *worship none but God*, relate to being totally devoted to God. Hence they all relate to the *First and Greatest Commandment*. According to one of the oldest and most authoritative commentaries on the Holy Qur'an the words: *that none of us shall take others for lords beside God*, mean 'that none of us should obey the other in disobedience to what God has commanded'. This relates to the Second Commandment because justice and freedom of religion are a crucial part of love of the neighbour.

Thus in obedience to the Holy Qur'an, we as Muslims invite Christians to come together with us on the basis of what is common to us, which is also what is most essential to our faith and practice: the *Two Commandments* of love.

A COMMON WORD BETWEEN US AND YOU

In the Name of God, the Compassionate, the Merciful, Call unto the way of thy Lord with wisdom and fair exhortation, and contend with them in the fairest way. Lo! thy Lord is Best Aware of him who strayeth from His way, and He is Best Aware of those who go aright.

(The Holy Qur'an, *Al-Nahl*, 16:125)

(I) LOVE OF GOD

LOVE OF GOD IN ISLAM

The Testimonies of Faith

The central creed of Islam consists of the two testimonies of faith or *Shahadahs*ⁱ, which state that: *There is no god but God, Muhammad is the messenger of God.* These Two Testimonies are the *sine qua non* of Islam. He or she who testifies to them is a Muslim; he or she who denies them is not a Muslim. Moreover, the Prophet Muhammad r said: *The best remembrance is: 'There is no god but God'*

The Best that All the Prophets have Said

Expanding on *the best remembrance*, the Prophet Muhammad also said: *The best that I have said—myself, and the prophets that came before me—is: 'There is no god but God, He Alone, He hath no associate, His is the sovereignty and His is the praise and He hath power over all things'.* The phrases which follow the First Testimony of faith are all from the Holy Qur'an; each describes a mode of love of God, and devotion to Him.

The words: *He Alone*, remind Muslims that their hearts must be devoted to God Alone, since God says in the Holy Qur'an: *God hath not assigned unto any man two hearts within his body (Al-Ahzab, 33:4).* God is Absolute and therefore devotion to Him must be totally sincere.

The words: *He hath no associate*, remind Muslims that they must love God uniquely, without rivals within their souls, since God says in the Holy Qur'an: *Yet there are men who take rivals unto God: they love them as they should love God. But those of faith are more intense in their love for God (Al-Baqarah, 2:165).* Indeed, *[T]heir flesh and their hearts soften unto the remembrance of God (Al-Zumar, 39:23).*

The words: *His is the sovereignty*, remind Muslims that their minds or their understandings must be totally devoted to God, for *the sovereignty* is precisely everything in creation or existence and everything that the mind can know. And all is in God's Hand, since God says in the Holy Qur'an: *Blessed is He in Whose Hand is the sovereignty, and, He is Able to do all things (Al-Mulk, 67:1).*

The words: *His is the praise* remind Muslims that they must be grateful to God and trust Him with all their sentiments and emotions. God says in the Holy Qur'an:

And if thou wert to ask them: Who created the heavens and the earth, and constrained the sun and the moon (to their appointed work)? they would say: God. How then are they turned away ? / God maketh the provision wide for whom He will of His servants, and straiteneth it for whom (He will). Lo! God is Aware of all things. / And if thou wert to ask them: Who causeth water to come down from the sky, and

therewith reviveth the earth after its death ? they verily would say: God. Say: Praise be to God! But most of them have no sense. (Al-'Ankabut, 29:61-63)

For all these bounties and more, human beings must always be truly grateful:

God is He Who created the heavens and the earth, and causeth water to descend from the sky, thereby producing fruits as food for you, and maketh the ships to be of service unto you, that they may run upon the sea at His command, and hath made of service unto you the rivers; / And maketh the sun and the moon, constant in their courses, to be of service unto you, and hath made of service unto you the night and the day./ And He giveth you of all ye ask of Him, and if ye would count the graces of God ye cannot reckon them. Lo! man is verily a wrong-doer, an ingrate. (Ibrahim, 14:32-34)

Indeed, the *Fatihah*—which is the *greatest chapter in the Holy Qur'an*—starts with praise to God:

*In the Name of God, the Infinitely Good, the All-Merciful. /
Praise be to God, the Lord of the worlds. /
The Infinitely Good, the All-Merciful. /
Owner of the Day of Judgement. /
Thee we worship, and Thee we ask for help. /
Guide us upon the straight path. /
The path of those on whom is Thy Grace, not those who deserve anger nor those who are astray. (Al-Fatihah, 1:1-7)*

The *Fatihah*, recited at least seventeen times daily by Muslims in the canonical prayers, reminds us of the praise and gratitude due to God for His Attributes of Infinite Goodness and All-Mercifulness, not merely for His Goodness and Mercy to us in this life but ultimately, on the Day of Judgement when it matters the most and when we hope to be forgiven for our sins. It thus ends with prayers for grace and guidance, so that we might attain—through what begins with praise and gratitude—salvation and *love*, for God says in the Holy Qur'an: *Lo! those who believe and do good works, the Infinitely Good will appoint for them love. (Maryam, 19:96)*

The words: *and He hath power over all things*, remind Muslims that they must be mindful of God's Omnipotence and thus fear God. God says in the Holy Qur'an:

... [A]nd fear God, and know that God is with the God-fearing. / Spend your wealth for the cause of God, and be not cast by your own hands to ruin; and do good. Lo! God loveth the virtuous. / (Al-Baqarah, 2:194-5)...

[A]nd fear God, and know that God is severe in punishment. (Al-Baqarah, 2:196)

Through fear of God, the actions, might and strength of Muslims should be totally devoted to God. God says in the Holy Qur'an:

...[A]nd know that God is with those who fear Him. (Al-Tawbah, 9:36)

O ye who believe! What aileth you that when it is said unto you: Go forth in the way of God, ye are bowed down to the ground with heaviness. Take ye pleasure in the life of the world rather than in the Hereafter? The comfort of the life of the world is but little in the Hereafter. / If ye go not forth He will afflict you with a painful doom, and will choose instead of you a folk other than you. Ye cannot harm Him at all. God is Able to do all things. (Al-Tawbah, 9:38-39)

The words: *His is the sovereignty and His is the praise and He hath power over all things*, when taken all together, remind Muslims that just as everything in creation glorifies God, everything that is in their souls must be devoted to God:

All that is in the heavens and all that is in the earth glorifieth God; His is the sovereignty and His is the praise and He hath power over all things. (Al-Taghabun, 64:1)

For indeed, all that is in people's souls is known, and accountable, to God:

He knoweth all that is in the heavens and the earth, and He knoweth what ye conceal and what ye publish. And God is Aware of what is in the breasts (of men). (Al-Taghabun, 64:4)

As we can see from all the passages quoted above, souls are depicted in the Holy Qur'an as having three main faculties: the mind or the intelligence, which is made for comprehending the truth; the will which is made for freedom of choice, and sentiment which is made for loving the good and the beautiful. Put in another way, we could say that man's soul knows through *understanding* the truth, through *willing* the good, and through virtuous emotions and *feeling* love for God. Continuing in the same chapter of the Holy Qur'an (as that quoted above), God orders people to fear Him as much as possible, and to listen (and thus to understand the truth); to obey (and thus to will the good), and to spend (and thus to exercise love and virtue), which, He says, is better for our souls. By engaging *everything* in our souls—the faculties of knowledge, will, and love—we may come to be purified and attain ultimate success:

So fear God as best ye can, and listen, and obey, and spend; that is better for your souls. And those who are saved from the pettiness of their own souls, such are the successful. (Al-Taghabun, 64:16)

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In summary then, when the entire phrase *He Alone, He hath no associate, His is the sovereignty and His is the praise and He hath power over all things* is added to the testimony of faith—*There is no god but God*—it reminds Muslims that their hearts, their individual souls and all the faculties and powers of their souls (or simply their *entire* hearts and souls) must be totally devoted and attached to God. Thus God says to the Prophet Muhammad r in the Holy Qur'an:

Say: Lo! my worship and my sacrifice and my living and my dying are for God, Lord of the Worlds. / He hath no partner. This am I commanded, and I am first of those who surrender (unto Him). / Say: Shall I seek another than God for Lord, when He is Lord of all things? Each soul earneth only on its own account, nor doth any laden bear another's load.... (Al-An'am, 6:162-164)

These verses epitomize the Prophet Muhammad's complete and utter devotion to God. Thus in the Holy Qur'an God enjoins Muslims who truly love God to follow this example, in order in turn to be loved by God:

Say, (O Muhammad, to mankind): If ye love God, follow me; God will love you and forgive you your sins. God is Forgiving, Merciful. (Aal 'Imran, 3:31)

Love of God in Islam is thus part of complete and total devotion to God; it is not a mere fleeting, partial emotion. As seen above, God commands in the Holy Qur'an: *Say: Lo! my worship and my sacrifice and my living and my dying are for God, Lord of the Worlds. / He hath no partner.* The call to be totally devoted and attached to God heart and soul, far from being a call for a mere emotion or for a mood, is in fact an injunction requiring all-embracing, constant and active love of

God. It demands a love in which the innermost spiritual heart and the whole of the soul—with its intelligence, will and feeling—participate through devotion.

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None Comes with Anything Better

We have seen how the blessed phrase: *There is no god but God, He Alone, He hath no associate, His is the sovereignty and His is the praise and He hath power over all things*—which is the best that all the prophets have said—makes explicit what is implicit in *the best remembrance (There is no god but God)* by showing what it requires and entails, by way of devotion. It remains to be said that this blessed formula is also in itself a sacred invocation—a kind of extension of the First Testimony of faith (*There is no god but God*)—the ritual repetition of which can bring about, through God’s grace, some of the devotional attitudes it demands, namely, loving and being devoted to God with all one’s heart, all one’s soul, all one’s mind, all one’s will or strength, and all one’s sentiment. Hence the Prophet Muhammad r commended this remembrance by saying:

He who says: ‘There is no god but God, He Alone, He hath no associate, His is the sovereignty and His is the praise and He hath power over all things’ one hundred times in a day, it is for them equal to setting ten slaves free, and one hundred good deeds are written for them and one hundred bad deeds are effaced, and it is for them a protection from the devil for that day until the evening. And none offers anything better than that, save one who does more than that.

In other words, the blessed remembrance, *There is no god but God, He Alone, He hath no associate, His is the sovereignty and His is the praise and He hath power over all things*, not only requires and implies that Muslims must be totally devoted to God and love Him with their whole hearts and their whole souls and all that is in them, but provides a way, like its beginning (the testimony of faith)—through its frequent repetition—for them to realize this love with everything they are.

God says in one of the very first revelations in the Holy Qur’an: *So invoke the Name of thy Lord and devote thyself to Him with a complete devotion (Al-Muzzammil, 73:8).* ^

LOVE OF GOD AS THE *FIRST AND GREATEST COMMANDMENT* IN THE BIBLE

The *Shema* in the Book of Deuteronomy (6:4-5), a centrepiece of the Old Testament and of Jewish liturgy, says: *Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one! / You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength.*

Likewise, in the New Testament, when Jesus Christ, the Messiah, is asked about the Greatest Commandment, he answers u:

But when the Pharisees heard that he had silenced the Sadducees, they gathered together. / Then one of them, a lawyer, asked Him a question, testing Him, and saying, / “Teacher, which is the great commandment in the law?” / Jesus said to him, “ ‘You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind.’ / This is the first and greatest commandment. / And the second is like it: ‘You shall love your neighbour as yourself.’ / On these two commandments hang all the Law and the Prophets.” (Matthew 22:34-40)

And also:

Then one of the scribes came, and having heard them reasoning together, perceiving that he had answered them well, asked him, “Which is the first commandment of all?” / Jesus answered him, “The first of all the commandments is: ‘Hear, O Israel, the LORD our God, the LORD is one. / And you shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind, and with all your strength.’ This is the first commandment. / And the second, like it, is this: ‘You shall love your neighbour as yourself.’ There is no other commandment greater than these.” (Mark 12:28-31)

The commandment to love God fully is thus the *First and Greatest Commandment* of the Bible. Indeed, it is to be found in a number of other places throughout the Bible including: Deuteronomy 4:29, 10:12, 11:13 (also part of the *Shema*), 13:3, 26:16, 30:2, 30:6, 30:10; Joshua 22:5; Mark 12:32-33 and Luke 10:27-28.

However, in various places throughout the Bible, it occurs in slightly different forms and versions. For instance, in Matthew 22:37 (*You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind*), the Greek word for “heart” is *kardia*, the word for “soul” is *psyche*, and the word for “mind” is *dianoia*. In the version from Mark 12:30 (*And you shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind, and with all your strength*) the word “strength” is added to the aforementioned three, translating the Greek word *ischus*.

The words of the lawyer in Luke 10:27 (which are confirmed by Jesus Christ u in Luke 10:28) contain the same four terms as Mark 12:30. The words of the scribe in Mark 12:32 (which are approved of by Jesus Christ u in Mark 12:34) contain the three terms *kardia* (“heart”), *dianoia* (“mind”), and *ischus* (“strength”).

In the *Shema* of Deuteronomy 6:4-5 (*Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one! / You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength*). In Hebrew the word for “heart” is *lev*, the word for “soul” is *nefesh*, and the word for “strength” is *me’od*.

In Joshua 22:5, the Israelites are commanded by Joshua u to love God and be devoted to Him as follows:

“But take careful heed to do the commandment and the law which Moses the servant of the LORD commanded you, to love the LORD your God, to walk in all His ways, to keep His commandments, to hold fast to Him, and to serve Him with all your heart and with all your soul.” (Joshua 22:5)

What all these versions thus have in common—despite the language differences between the Hebrew Old Testament, the original words of Jesus Christ u in Aramaic, and the actual transmitted Greek of the New Testament—is the command to love God fully with one’s heart and soul and to be fully devoted to Him. This is the *First and Greatest Commandment* for human beings. ˘

In the light of what we have seen to be necessarily implied and evoked by the Prophet Muhammad’s r blessed saying: *‘The best that I have said—myself, and the prophets that came before me—is: ‘There is no god but God, He Alone, He hath no associate, His is the sovereignty and His is the praise and He hath power over all things’, we can now perhaps understand the words ‘The best that I have said—myself, and the prophets that came before me’ as equating the blessed formula ‘There is no god but God, He Alone, He hath no associate, His is the sovereignty and His is the praise and He hath power over all things’ precisely with the ‘First and Greatest Commandment’ to love God, with all one’s heart and soul, as found in various places in the Bible. That is to say, in other words, that the Prophet Muhammad r was perhaps, through inspiration, restating and alluding to the Bible’s First Commandment. God knows best, but certainly we have seen their effective similarity in meaning.*

Moreover, we also do know (as can be seen in the endnotes), that both formulas have another remarkable parallel: the way they arise in a number of slightly differing versions and forms in different contexts, all of which, nevertheless, emphasize the primacy of total love and devotion to God.

(II) LOVE OF THE NEIGHBOUR

LOVE OF THE NEIGHBOUR IN ISLAM

There are numerous injunctions in Islam about the necessity and paramount importance of love for—and mercy towards—the neighbour. Love of the neighbour is an essential and integral part of faith in God and love of God because in Islam without love of the neighbour there is no true faith in God and no righteousness. The Prophet Muhammad said: “*None of you has faith until you love for your brother what you love for yourself.*” And: “*None of you has faith until you love for your neighbour what you love for yourself.*”

However, empathy and sympathy for the neighbour—and even formal prayers—are not enough. They must be accompanied by generosity and self-sacrifice. God says in the Holy Qur’an:

It is not righteousness that ye turn your faces to the East and the West; but righteous is he who believeth in God and the Last Day and the angels and the Scripture and the prophets; and giveth wealth, for love of Him, to kinsfolk and to orphans and the needy and the wayfarer and to those who ask, and to set slaves free; and observeth proper worship and payeth the poor-due. And those who keep their treaty when they make one, and the patient in tribulation and adversity and time of stress. Such are they who are sincere. Such are the pious. (Al-Baqarah 2:177)

And also:

Ye will not attain unto righteousness until ye expend of that which ye love. And whatsoever ye expend, God is Aware thereof. (Aal ‘Imran, 3:92)

Without giving the neighbour what we ourselves love, we do not truly love God or the neighbour. ^

LOVE OF THE NEIGHBOUR IN THE BIBLE

We have already cited the words of the Messiah, Jesus Christ u, about the paramount importance, second only to the love of God, of the love of the neighbour:

This is the first and greatest commandment. / And the second is like it: ‘You shall love your neighbour as yourself.’ / On these two commandments hang all the Law and the Prophets. (Matthew 22:38-40)

And:

And the second, like it, is this: ‘You shall love your neighbour as yourself.’ There is no other commandment greater than these.” (Mark 12:31)

It remains only to be noted that this commandment is also to be found in the Old Testament:

You shall not hate your brother in your heart. You shall surely rebuke your neighbour, and not bear sin because of him. / You shall not take vengeance, nor bear any grudge against the children of your people, but you shall love your neighbour as yourself: I am the LORD. (Leviticus 19:17-18)

Thus the Second Commandment, like the First Commandment, demands generosity and self-sacrifice, and *On these two commandments hang all the Law and the Prophets.* ⁻

(III) COME TO A COMMON WORD BETWEEN US AND YOU

A Common Word

Whilst Islam and Christianity are obviously different religions—and whilst there is no minimising some of their formal differences—it is clear that the *Two Greatest Commandments* are an area of common ground and a link between the Qur'an, the Torah and the New Testament. What prefaces the Two Commandments in the Torah and the New Testament, and what they arise out of, is the Unity of God—that there is only one God. For the *Shema* in the Torah, starts: (Deuteronomy 6:4) *Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one!* Likewise, Jesus u said: (Mark 12:29) *“The first of all the commandments is: ‘Hear, O Israel, the LORD our God, the LORD is one’”*. Likewise, God says in the Holy Qur'an: *Say: He, God, is One. / God, the Self-Sufficient Besought of all. (Al-Ikhlās, 112:1-2)*. Thus the Unity of God, love of Him, and love of the neighbour form a common ground upon which Islam and Christianity (and Judaism) are founded.

This could not be otherwise since Jesus u said: (Matthew 22:40) *“On these two commandments hang all the Law and the Prophets.”* Moreover, God confirms in the Holy Qur'an that the Prophet Muhammad r brought nothing fundamentally or essentially new: *Naught is said to thee (Muhammad) but what already was said to the messengers before thee (Fussilat 41:43)*. And: *Say (Muhammad): I am no new thing among the messengers (of God), nor know I what will be done with me or with you. I do but follow that which is Revealed to me, and I am but a plain warner (Al-Ahqaf, 46:9)*. Thus also God in the Holy Qur'an confirms that the same eternal truths of the Unity of God, of the necessity for total love and devotion to God (and thus shunning false gods), and of the necessity for love of fellow human beings (and thus justice), underlie all true religion:

And verily We have raised in every nation a messenger, (proclaiming): Worship God and shun false gods. Then some of them (there were) whom God guided, and some of them (there were) upon whom error had just hold. Do but travel in the land and see the nature of the consequence for the deniers! (Al-Nahl, 16:36)

We verily sent Our messengers with clear proofs, and revealed with them the Scripture and the Balance, that mankind may stand forth in justice.... (Al-Hadid, 57:25)

Come to a Common Word!

In the Holy Qur'an, God Most High tells Muslims to issue the following call to Christians (and Jews—the *People of the Scripture*):

Say: O People of the Scripture! Come to a common word between us and you: that we shall worship none but God, and that we shall ascribe no partner unto Him, and that none of us shall take others for lords beside God. And if they turn away, then say: Bear witness that we are they who have surrendered (unto Him). (Aal 'Imran 3:64)

Clearly, the blessed words: *we shall ascribe no partner unto Him* relate to the Unity of God. Clearly also, worshipping *none but God*, relates to being totally devoted to God and hence to the *First and Greatest Commandment*. According to one of the oldest and most authoritative commentaries (*tafsir*) on the Holy Qur'an—the *Jami' Al-Bayan fi Ta'wil Al-Qur'an* of Abu Ja'far Muhammad bin Jarir Al-Tabari (d. 310 A.H. / 923 C.E.)—*that none of us shall take others for lords beside God*, means 'that none of us should obey in disobedience to what God has commanded, nor glorify them

by prostrating to them in the same way as they prostrate to God'. In other words, that Muslims, Christians and Jews should be free to each follow what God commanded them, and not have 'to prostrate before kings and the like'; for God says elsewhere in the Holy Qur'an: *Let there be no compulsion in religion.... (Al-Baqarah, 2:256)*. This clearly relates to the Second Commandment and to love of the neighbour of which justice and freedom of religion are a crucial part. God says in the Holy Qur'an:

God forbiddeth you not those who warred not against you on account of religion and drove you not out from your homes, that ye should show them kindness and deal justly with them. Lo! God loveth the just dealers. (Al-Mumtahinah, 60:8)

We thus as Muslims invite Christians to remember Jesus's words in the Gospel (Mark 12:29-31):

... the LORD our God, the LORD is one. / And you shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind, and with all your strength.' This is the first commandment. / And the second, like it, is this: 'You shall love your neighbour as yourself.' There is no other commandment greater than these.

As Muslims, we say to Christians that we are not against them and that Islam is not against them—so long as they do not wage war against Muslims on account of their religion, oppress them and drive them out of their homes, (in accordance with the verse of the Holy Qur'an [Al-Mumtahinah, 60:8] quoted above). Moreover, God says in the Holy Qur'an:

They are not all alike. Of the People of the Scripture there is a staunch community who recite the revelations of God in the night season, falling prostrate (before Him). / They believe in God and the Last Day, and enjoin right conduct and forbid indecency, and vie one with another in good works. These are of the righteous. / And whatever good they do, nothing will be rejected of them. God is Aware of those who ward off (evil). (Aal-'Imran, 3:113-115)

Is Christianity necessarily against Muslims? In the Gospel Jesus Christ says:

He who is not with me is against me, and he who does not gather with me scatters abroad. (Matthew 12:30)

For he who is not against us is on our side. (Mark 9:40)

... for he who is not against us is on our side. (Luke 9:50)

According to the *Blessed Theophylact's Explanation of the New Testament*, these statements are not contradictions because the first statement (in the actual Greek text of the New Testament) refers to demons, whereas the second and third statements refer to people who recognised Jesus, but were not Christians. Muslims recognize Jesus Christ as the Messiah, not in the same way Christians do (but Christians themselves anyway have never all agreed with each other on Jesus Christ's nature), but in the following way: *.... the Messiah Jesus son of Mary is a Messenger of God and His Word which he cast unto Mary and a Spirit from Him.... (Al-Nisa', 4:171)*. We therefore invite Christians to consider Muslims *not against* and thus *with them*, in accordance with Jesus Christ's words here.

Finally, as Muslims, and in obedience to the Holy Qur'an, we ask Christians to come together with us on the common essentials of our two religions *... that we shall worship none but God, and that we shall ascribe no partner unto Him, and that none of us shall take others for lords beside God ... (Aal 'Imran, 3:64)*.

Let this common ground be the basis of all future interfaith dialogue between us, for our common ground is that on which hangs *all the Law and the Prophets* (Matthew 22:40). God says in the Holy Qur'an:

Say (O Muslims): We believe in God and that which is revealed unto us and that which was revealed unto Abraham, and Ishmael, and Isaac, and Jacob, and the tribes, and that which Moses and Jesus received, and that which the prophets received from their Lord. We make no distinction between any of them, and unto Him we have surrendered. / And if they believe in the like of that which ye believe, then are they rightly guided. But if they turn away, then are they in schism, and God will suffice thee against them. He is the Hearer, the Knower. (Al-Baqarah, 2:136-137)

Between Us and You

Finding common ground between Muslims and Christians is not simply a matter for polite ecumenical dialogue between selected religious leaders. Christianity and Islam are the largest and second largest religions in the world and in history. Christians and Muslims reportedly make up over a third and over a fifth of humanity respectively. Together they make up more than 55% of the world's population, making the relationship between these two religious communities the most important factor in contributing to meaningful peace around the world. If Muslims and Christians are not at peace, the world cannot be at peace. With the terrible weaponry of the modern world; with Muslims and Christians intertwined everywhere as never before, no side can unilaterally win a conflict between more than half of the world's inhabitants. Thus our common future is at stake. The very survival of the world itself is perhaps at stake.

And to those who nevertheless relish conflict and destruction for their own sake or reckon that ultimately they stand to gain through them, we say that our very eternal souls are all also at stake if we fail to sincerely make every effort to make peace and come together in harmony. God says in the Holy Qur'an: *Lo! God enjoineth justice and kindness, and giving to kinsfolk, and forbiddeth lewdness and abomination and wickedness. He exhorteth you in order that ye may take heed (Al Nahl, 16:90)*. Jesus Christ said: *Blessed are the peacemakers(Matthew 5:9)*, and also: *For what profit is it to a man if he gains the whole world and loses his soul? (Matthew 16:26)*.

So let our differences not cause hatred and strife between us. Let us vie with each other only in righteousness and good works. Let us respect each other, be fair, just and kind to another and live in sincere peace, harmony and mutual goodwill. God says in the Holy Qur'an:

And unto thee have We revealed the Scripture with the truth, confirming whatever Scripture was before it, and a watcher over it. So judge between them by that which God hath revealed, and follow not their desires away from the truth which hath come unto thee. For each We have appointed a law and a way. Had God willed He could have made you one community. But that He may try you by that which He hath given you (He hath made you as ye are). So vie one with another in good works. Unto God ye will all return, and He will then inform you of that wherein ye differ. (Al-Ma'idah, 5:48)

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