RELIGIONS / ADYĀN

A Scholarly Journal Published by the Doha International Center for Interfaith Dialogue

Religions/Adyân is an annual and bi-lingual (English and Arabic) publication in interfaith studies published by the Doha International Center for Interfaith Dialogue and the College of Shariah at Qatar University with an emphasis on interreligious dialogue and the relations between Islam and other faiths.

In a world of religious misunderstandings, violence, and hijacking of religious faiths by political ideologies, Religions/Adyân intends to provide a welcome space of encounter and reflection upon the commonalities and shared goals of the great religions of the world. The title of the journal suggests the reality of a spiritual unity in religious diversity that may provide the keys to both a deepening of one's own faith and a meaningful opening to other creeds. The Qur'ân suggests a commonality of faith and a striving for the Truth within the context of religious diversity:

"To each among you have we prescribed a law and an open way. If Allah had so willed, He would have made you a single people, but (His plan is) to test you in what He hath given you: so strive as in a race in all virtues. The goal of you all is to Allah; it is He that will show you the truth of the matters in which ye dispute." (al-Ma'idah The Table Spread) 5:48, version of Yusuf Ali)

As a refereed international publication associated the Doha International Center for Interfaith Dialogue, Religions/Adyân finds its inspiration in the universal message of monotheism broadly understood, while engaging the various religious faiths that share common principles and values within this broadly defined context.

Religions/Adyân encourages comparative studies and interreligious exchanges in a spirit of dialogue and mutual enrichment. Its aim is to promote understanding between religious faithful of various traditions by exploring and studying the rich field of their theological and spiritual common grounds, their mutual and constructive relationships, past, present and potentially future, a better understanding of the causes of their conflicts, and the current challenges of their encounter with atheism, agnosticism and secular societies.

In addition, Religions/Adyân wishes to highlight and revive the universal horizon of Islam by fostering studies in the relationships between Islam and other religions and civilizations in history, the arts, and religious studies. This is also a way to revitalize intellectual discourse in Islam, within the context of an interactive and cross-fertilizing engagement with other faiths.

The essays published in Religions/Adyân exclusively engage the intellectual responsibility of their authors, and do not necessarily reflect the views of the DICID. They are published as part of an ongoing dialogue on religions, and should not be construed as the expression of the positions of any sponsoring organization.

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FOREWORD

In the Name of Allāh, the Most Gracious, the Most Merciful

We all know that the State of Qatar is progressing quickly and steadily toward a democratic system, a fact of which HH the Emir of the State has reminded us on many occasions, and for the realization of which HH has endeavoured incessantly by word and deed.

We all know that the essence of democracy, and its backbone, lies in rights and liberties, and that the safe and secure freedom of faith, thought and expression is first among these liberties.

No one would disagree that these liberties mean, from another point of view, plurality and difference. This plurality is a fact admitted by religion, recognized by reason, confirmed by fact and required by the social, cultural, political, economic and even health interests of humanity.

Religions acknowledge plurality, they acknowledge coexistence between peoples and nations. God has said in the Qur'ān:

"O mankind! We created you from a single pair of a male and a female, and made you into nations and tribes, that you may know one another. ..." (49 /13, The Inner Apartments)

The Qur'ān makes use of the expression "know one another", which means dialogue, understanding and becoming acquainted with one another. This means not excluding nor disqualifying the other, especially when he belongs to another religion.

Accordingly, the mission for which the Doha International Center for Interfaith Dialogue has been established is the acceptance of the other, and a dialogue with him in order to realize justice, tolerance, love and peace.

This journal, RELIGIONS, expresses this message and approach in its first issue. May it succeed in emphasising that dialogue is a necessity for human civilisation.

Aisha Yusuf Almannai
Dean, College of Shariah and Islamic Studies, Qatar University

EDITORIAL

In our world of distrust, misunderstanding and senseless violence, interfaith dialogue is one of the most crucial tasks before us. The very term "interfaith" clearly involves two aspects: faith and interaction, that is commitment to one's beliefs, on the one hand, and a willingness to communicate with others in view of understanding them, on the other. Faith is a commitment which is the backbone of any true, significant communication between people, cultures and religions. We have to be committed to our worldview in order to be able to truly communicate, exchange, and even respectfully argue with others. Without faith, communication can lose its meaningfulness. But the ability to communicate in order to understand others is also essential to faith, in one way or another, on one level or another. Faith is not afraid to engage other faiths, precisely because it is grounded in serious commitment, rooted in inner sincerity and resolve.

The current journal is engaged in furthering such a spirit of interfaith understanding. It emphasizes similarities and convergences over differences and oppositions. In fact, it is on the basis of the former that the latter can be best understood and best addressed. Some will even say, not without reason, that all world religions have the power to be inclusive without losing their identity. Genuine identity is always open to engaging with universal values and enriching itself in dialogue. As for differences, they should not be opportunities for conflict, but the very foundations of mutual enrichment and reciprocal teaching in view of the Good. As the Holy Qur'ân unequivocally states in one of its most inspiring passages:

For each We have prescribed a Law and a Way. And had God willed, He could have made you one single community. But [He made you as you are] so that He might test you by means of what he has entrusted to you. So vie with each other in Virtue. Unto God you will all return, and He will clarify your understanding about your differences. Surah al-Ma'idah, 5:48.

The problem of religious diversity, and its consequences in the form of religious conflicts and civilizational clashes between Islam and the West, among others, have been at the centre-stage of international affairs. On the other hand, globalisation and information technology have made widely available an unprecedented amount of primary and secondary sources about world religions and wisdom traditions. This information has suggested to some, often in a hasty and superficial manner, the possibility of the emergence of a trans-religious language of spirituality, as testified by the so-called New Age movement. By contrast, a number of contemporary collective identities have crystallized around religious concepts, and sometimes hardened into aggressively exclusivist, and even intolerant, movements. Hence the very pressing relevance of an examination of commonalities among world faiths, as well as the need for a clear understanding of the foundations of their differences.

The distinguished authors of the essays gathered in this first issues hail from five continents and a plurality of religious backgrounds. They address religious issues of commonalities, cooperation, oppositions and conflicts from a variety of disciplinary points of view, philosophical, theological, sociological, moral and political. It is our hope that this first issue will lay the foundations for a widening and deepening of interreligious efforts in view of a greater understanding of other faiths in a spirit of genuine attention to, and interest in, the diversity of religions and in view of peaceful coexistence.

Patrick Laude
Editor-in-Chief

INTERVIEW WITH DR. SEYYED HOSSEIN NASR

What do you see as the main challenges to religions today?

The main challenges are first of all the creation by and for modern man of a world that is based on the forgetting of God, a world that man has made and removed from virgin nature by means of a technology that is based on the quantification of the natural world, and therefore creation of spaces, of forms, in which people live every day and of sounds that they hear that are all cut off from the Divine Origin of things. Such a world therefore makes the reality of religion in a sense alien or unreal in everyday life, especially for those who live in urban environments, completely cut off from the world of nature, where the realities of religion are manifested in every natural form for those who can

see. This element is complemented by the domination over the modern and now post-modern world of the modernistic paradigm (to which also the post-modern world really belongs), that is, a worldview in which at best God is a deistic God, originator of things but now far away. And at worst, of course, His reality is denied completely.

The challenge to religion is a worldview in which everything is envisaged within a closed material universe independent of transcendence, you might say, that is, the presentation of the view of a universe that is expected to explain everything and encompass everything without opening unto transcendence. There is much to say about this matter philosophically that I cannot go into now, but let me just say that the paradigm, worldview, *Weltanschauung*,

as the Germans say, that was forged in Europe during the Renaissance and in the seventeenth century, and which became crystallized during the Age of Enlightenment, especially in France, this worldview has a relation of enmity *vis-à-vis* all authentic religions, because it is based on the self-sufficiency of the material, physical world. It does not see and therefore refutes the ontological dependence of the world in which we live upon the Divine Principle. And even if it accepts the Divine Principle, that Principle and its ontological independence are considered to be secondary and more or less irrelevant to man's everyday life. It is not accidental that Europe has produced the largest number of atheists as far as we know of any continent of the world, at least during the last two thousand years. It is difficult to give an exact account, you might say, of what was going on as far as quantitative estimates are concerned at the end of the Egyptian civilization and later developments of the Greek and Roman civilizations and the Mediterranean world, and to count heads. But certainly for the last two millennia, this has been the case.

What are the main contemporary opportunities, in your view, for religions to have their voice heard and their relevance recognized?

The most important opportunity that has arisen for religion in the modern world during the last century, including not only the West but also its spread into other parts of the globe, is the cracks that have appeared in the veneer of this modernistic worldview - that is, the gradual crumbling of the way of looking at things which itself has prevented people over several centuries in the West and a century or two in many other parts of the world from taking religion seriously. The idols of the new pantheon of atheism and agnosticism have to a large extent been broken. Of course we now see this virulent response of a new blatant atheism that has grown up in the last two or three decades in England and America. But that is, I think, more than anything else a kind of death-cry. It is not that serious; it is not going to last. The earth is now shaking under the feet of people who thought they stood on the earth without any need of Heaven. Therefore, many heads are now turning upward toward the sky. And this is a natural human response. This breaking of the idols of the new "age of ignorance" is, I think, the most important opportunity for religion to remanifest itself.

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There is also a second important opportunity, and that is the following: traditionally, each religion was a world unto itself. And when it talked about "the world," it meant *its* world. And its world was for its followers *the* world. When it talked about "humanity," it meant really its own followers. That is understandable and has been in fact throughout history the norm. There were exceptions, as when Islam and Hinduism met in Kashmir, or someplace like that, or Islam and Christianity and Judaism in Iberia; but by and large, that was the rule. Today

"other," which is other religions, can help to a great extent overcome the lethal effect of the first "other," that is, it provides the opportunity for a particular religion to find an ally in other religions of the world, speaking different languages, having different forms, different symbols, but nevertheless, confirming a spiritual view of existence. This is a very important opportunity in the world in which we live. It is in a deep sense a dispensation from God to compensate for the withering effect of the spirituality-denying worldview that has surrounded modern human beings for the last four centuries or five centuries in the West, and is now doing so more and more in other continents.

Do you perceive dangers in contemporary religious pluralism?

I do not believe there is any danger at all if this religious pluralism is understood in the metaphysical sense based on the doctrine that there is the Absolute, a single Divine Principle (whether considered objectively or subjectively) upon which all authentic religions are based. There is nothing pluralistic about this doctrine; there is nothing relative about it. There is one Divine Principle that manifests itself in different religious universes through which there is created religious pluralism. You have differences of religious forms, of sacred forms, of theologies and languages and so forth. These are, however, elements that contribute to the plenitude of the garden of religion rather than simply relativizing religion.

The danger comes in what has already been mentioned by Karl Marx and other opponents of religion, who have

that boundary has been broken to some extent. There are two forces that have penetrated into the previously homogenous space of various religions-first occurring in the West, but now it is also occurring more and more elsewhere. The first is the forces of secularism, rationalism, materialism, and the like: the whole atheistic, agnostic worldview. And the second is other religions. There now are two "others." And the second

pointed out that since there is more than one religion, all religions must be false. Seen in this way, religious pluralism has been taken as proof that there is nothing absolute in a particular religion and all religious truth claims are therefore relative. I believe that one of the great achievements in the twentieth century in the field of religion has been the very explicit and succinct formulation of the doctrine of the transcendent unity of religions made by Frithjof Schuon, and with another language by René Guénon, as well as by many others since those great figures appeared. I must also mention here Ananda Coomaraswamy who wrote many notable works about this truth. These great figures appeared in the mid- and late twentieth century. Since then, as a result of their achievement, we can turn the presence of more than one religion in our sight, in our experience - that is, what we call "religious pluralism" - into a very positive element, and avoid the danger of people equating pluralism with relativism. That is the danger that existed from the eighteenth century onward in the West, and it was made use of a great deal by opponents of religion to combat the claims of a particular religion, in this case primarily Christianity, to the truth.

When considering the disconcerting diversity of religious faiths among religions that range from monotheism to non-theistic and polytheistic, what can we see as common grounds?

What we can see as common grounds are many-much more than one would think. First of all, between theism and non-theism: what is common between them is, you might say, the *Urgrund*, the Supreme Ground of Being, the absolute Divine Reality, which might be seen only in an objective manner, or in a subjective manner, as in Buddhism. But in any case, in the case of religions such as Taoism, Buddhism or Confucianism It does not possess the aspect of person. In such traditions it is not *theos* in the usual sense that the Abrahamic religions and many schools of Hinduism understand the Divine Reality. Nevertheless, it is the absolute Divine Reality, the Source of all reality, the Source of Being, and so forth. I have no difficulty myself, whatsoever, in finding this common ground between the monotheistic and non-theistic expressions of the metaphysics at the heart of various traditional religions.

As for polytheists, there must be a distinction made between religions that speak of the gods but remain fully grounded in the doctrine of Unity (such as Hinduism) and the practice of polytheism based on the loss of the vision of Divine Unity, a kind of decadence that has taken place over and over again in human history, as we see in the ancient Babylonian religions. And once that occurs, of course, there is no longer any common ground between monotheism or non-theism and polytheism. However, polytheism in the Hindu sense must not be confused with the latter form

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of polytheism. Hinduism is based on the manifestation of one single Divine Principle in multifarious forms, which we in Islam do not accept in physical form, albeit one can say that the Divine Names in Islam are realities of different aspects of Divinity but not in physical forms whereas in Hinduism, especially in its popular dimension, these realities are envisaged in the physical forms of the gods. That is where the difference comes from. Nevertheless, polytheism of the Hindu kind is based on a single Divine Reality, and that single Divine Reality would be the common ground between monotheism, which denies any possibility of any *theos* other than the Divine Reality in Itself, and what we call "polytheism" in its non-decadent form.

I believe that the teaching of religion in academic settings - not in churches and synagogues and mosques and temples, but in academic settings - will have to deal more and more with religions as well as religion as such rather than just "my" religion.

Putting this metaphysical question aside, there is no doubt that in all authentic religions, whatever form they have externally, there is also a common ground as far as many ethical teachings are concerned, attitudes towards good and evil, towards nature, towards a vision of a spiritual reality that transcends the material, the possibility of spiritual wayfaring, spiritual realization, the sense of the sacred and many, many other elements which are remarkable when seen in their deeper similarities, cutting across the theological distinctions of monotheism, non-theism and polytheism.

How would you define the main goals of religion, or religions? Is it possible to define commonalities in this respect?

This question is somewhat ambiguous, but I think I understand to what it is alluding. You can talk about *religion*, and you can talk about *religions*. This is also a modern problem. If in the thirteenth century in Paris you talked about *religion*, that meant Christianity, and you did not speak about *religions*. Today it becomes more and more difficult to speak about religion without also considering other religions, and therefore having to speak in the plural. But it is still possible. For many ordinary believers in a more insulated Christian, Muslim, Jewish or Hindu community, it is still possible to speak about religion, and be speaking about the particular religion of those people without having to direct attention or make references to other religions. This becomes more and more difficult to the degree that insularity is removed. And in both cases, whether you speak of religion or religions, there are many common goals including the ultimate goal of human life, whether seen as salvation or deliverance that one finds in the teachings of religions as different as Mahāyana Buddhism and Kabbalistic Judaism.

There is also another issue that is involved here. In teaching *religion* in modern institutions of learning in the West today and now more and more in other places where modernism has spread, it is very difficult not to also speak about *religions* and to ignore other religions. One can teach about religion in two different ways: one is to speak about religion in general as a whole field of human experience, or experience of the Divine and of Divine manifestations, and elements common to religions. Let

us say, you can teach that religious people have a firm belief in God's will acting in their lives. Now, that sentence pertains to Jews, Muslims and Christians but it would have a different meaning in let us say in Buddhism. So, when you talk about *religion*, you talk about an element which is common in different religions but with different meanings and applications. But you can also teach about religion as my religion as they do in seminaries. In this case you can also be exclusivist and say, "This is the *only* religion." And that is where, of course, the problem for the world in which we live comes in. This exclusivist view is, however, being challenged more and more these days because you do have other religions and you can hardly deny that they *are* also religions if you want to be intellectually honest. And I believe that the teaching of religion in academic settings - not in churches and synagogues and mosques and temples, but in academic settings - will have to deal more and more with *religions* as well as *religion* as such rather than just "*my*" religion. Let us hope that also more and more the teaching of religion in Western academic settings will be done from the point of view of religion rather than a non-religious or anti-religious perspective as we find so often today.

What do you see as the specific function of Islam and Muslims in interreligious dialogue?

My view of the specific function of Islam and Muslims is not the same as some of my co-religionists who are not aware of the specific function that Islam has in interreligious dialogue. I believe that Islam is the final religion for the present humanity: the final plenar revelation. Fi-

nality always implies integration. That is why the Qur'ān is perhaps the most religiously universalist, and least exclusive, of all sacred scriptures. It keeps talking about other *religions* all the time. And even the definition of "faith" is *imān bi'llāh*, "faith in God," "His *books*" and "His *messengers*," and not in the singular, *book* and *messenger*. So to accept other prophets, other sacred scriptures, is part and parcel of Islam's definition of itself. This is extremely significant and also providential. I believe that Muslims have a providential role to play in bringing out the significance of interreligious dialogue, of accepting the books, prophets and messengers of God who preceded Islam, whether they are Christians or Jews or anybody else. The 124,000 prophets mentioned in a *hadīth* are also *our* prophets and messengers.
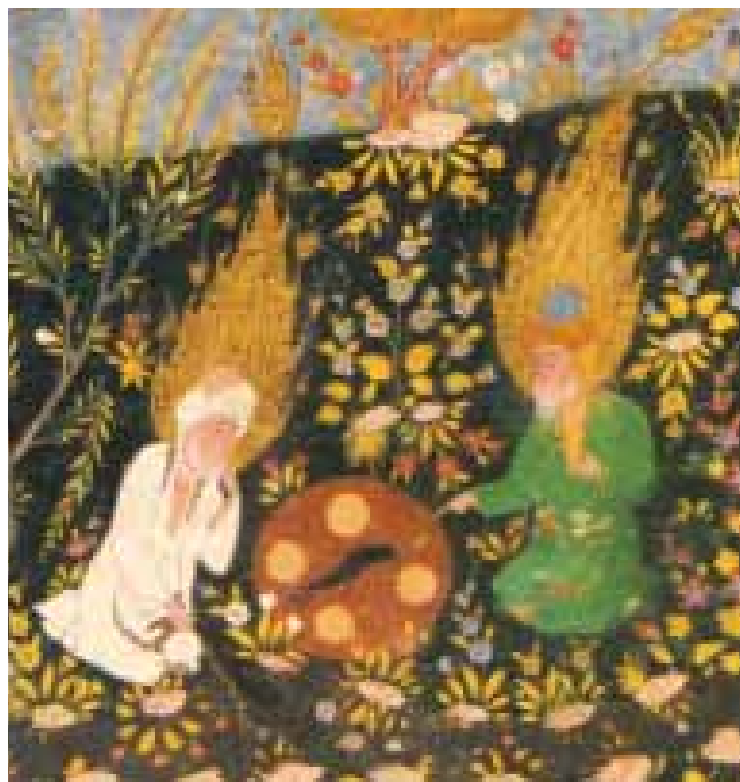
Islam also provides the universalist, metaphysical knowledge or worldview

which makes this acceptance possible. It is not by any means accidental that in the twentieth century the great expositions of the universality of revelation, which we see in the writings of traditional authors, came for the most part from an Islamic background, not completely to be sure for some also came from a Hindu background. Most of the great recent expositors of the doctrine of the universality of religion, however, have belonged to the Islamic tradition, starting with Guénon himself, who although he began with the exposition of Hindu doctrines - and there already he speaks of the universality of revelation - lived the last part of his life in Cairo as a Muslim and died as a Muslim. And this is not at all, by any means, accidental. But there are many Muslims today who do not understand this particular function of Islam to which Schuon has alluded in some of his writings. It is for scholars, for those who do understand, to make this matter better known in Islamic circles. One certainly does not become any less of a Muslim by taking the Qur'ānic message of universality seriously, when over and over again the Qur'ān asserts that "A messenger has been sent to every people" and other verses with the same message. The Qur'ān says that God could have created us all as a single nation, but He decided to create us as different people so that we could vie with each other in

The Qur'ān says that God could have created us all as a single nation, but He decided to create us as different people so that we could vie with each other in wisdom. A faithful Muslim cannot just admire that message asserted repeatedly in the Qur'ān without taking it to heart.

wisdom. A faithful Muslim cannot just admire that message asserted repeatedly in the Qur'ān without taking it to heart. Those like myself, who take this aspect of the Qur'ān very seriously, do not believe that we are in any way betraying Islam, to put it mildly, by remaining so faithful to the teachings of the Qur'ān on this matter.

What would you say to Muslims who are reticent toward interreligious dialogue?

What I say here concerns a large body of Muslims, who have in fact increased in number in recent times because of outside pressures which have threatened the very fabric of Muslim life and made them more exclusivist in self defense. When a creature is threatened from the outside, it usually withdraws unto itself. I believe that a century ago, ordinary Muslims praying together in mosques were a lot more universalist than their grandchildren. My advice to them is to become more aware of this reality and study more the Islam practiced by their traditional ancestors. Nevertheless, there are today many faithful people in the Islamic world who are becoming aware of the importance of interreligious dialogue, including a number of formal religious scholars (*'ulamā'*) such as muftis, theologians and the like. When you see the King of Saudi Arabia, a country which in its Islamic interpretation of things is Wahhābī, that most exclusive and closed of all schools of Islamic thought towards other religions, calling for interreligious dialogue, you understand that this is really a very deep need of the Islamic world.

What I would furthermore say to Muslims, who are reticent toward inter-

religious dialogue, is as follows: I would say to them that this is really what is called in Arabic *fard kifāyah*, that is, it is obligatory for the community as a whole, but not for a particular person, not like the daily prayers that are obligatory for each individual, *fard'ayn*. The carrying out of religious dialogue today is like the study of the science of *hadīth* that is obligatory for the Islamic community as a whole, but is not incumbent upon every individual. In the same way interreligious dialogue is not incumbent upon every individual. Some people do not understand it; some people are not comfortable with it. Fine. *Allāh ta'āla* does not expect it of everyone. And in the case of those people, what I would say to them is that they should leave judgment of other religions in the Hands of God, and not try to prejudge with their incomplete knowledge what God will ultimately judge. They should have the attitude of not being aggressively against other religions and interreligious dialogue, because they themselves do not feel comfortable dealing with other religions. They should follow Islam with sincerity and surrender to God and leave judging other religions in His Hands. As the Qur'ān says, *lakum dīnukum walī dīn*, that is, "to you, your religion, and to me, my religion." As for other groups of people who have the capability to participate meaningfully in dialogue, who can be enticed, or even transformed, you might say, by interreligious dialogue, one should make them understand first of all why interreligious dialogue is so important, why it concerns the very survival of religion in the future, why, if their children begin to go to a modern university, whether in the Islamic world or in the West, interreligious dialogue is the best

guarantee that they will remain interested in religion itself, and will not simply turn away from it altogether. There are many other issues of this kind that can be explained. There are many arguments that have to be made.

And also in this domain there is need for courage. People who are devoted to interreligious dialogue must have the courage to withstand the criticisms that will be made of them. I have experienced that many times in my own life and I speak from experience here. One has to have the courage to stand one's ground, to be honest, to be sincere, and to remain devout, so that interreligious dialogue does not dilute one's own devotion to one's own faith. This is what many people in the Islamic world fear, as do also many in the Christian and Jewish worlds. There are many Orthodox Jews who refuse to have dialogue; there are many Catholics and Protestants who refuse to have dialogue. It is not unique to Muslims. This is one of the consequences that they all fear. It is very important therefore that those who carry out interreligious dialogue do so religiously, and not simply as secular scholars in a university, so that they can demonstrate to their coreligionists that they have not become any less pious, whether they are Muslims or otherwise, because of carrying out interreligious dialogue and talking to followers of other faiths in order to gain deeper knowledge of and empathy for the other.

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What are the main obstacles to interreligious engagement in the Muslim world and in the West?

In the Islamic world, the main obstacles are not only theological but also political because in some Muslim countries these kinds of dialogues are usually guarded over carefully by political authorities, and certain types are encouraged, while certain kinds are discouraged. And there are also the obstacles coming from what are usually called "fundamentalist" groups - I do not like this term - but anyway from exclusivist groups, people who are strongly bound to only the external, exterior, exoteric teachings, forms and aspects of their religion without looking at the inward, the spiritual, the esoteric where real understanding of the other is to be found. They put an obstacle before interreligious engagement in many parts of the Islamic world, as you can see, in fact even discouraging individuals from such activities. You see that in Egypt, you see that in a country very different from Egypt, in Saudi Arabia, you see it in Pakistan, you see it in Iran in certain cases, and you see it all over the Islamic world.

But such opposition is not the same everywhere. There are many Islamic countries in which there are not insurmountable obstacles out there in the social and political order. Rather, the obstacles come from within, and from the fact that until now, most Muslims have not felt the need for interreligious engagement. Let us not forget the Muslim experience of the Ottoman-style system in which you had Christians and Jews living in peace in the community with their own laws and yet interacting with the Muslim majority. Of course that is a different kind of engagement with the "other" than what we are talking about now, when there is also the need of an interreligious dialogue that must be based on discussing theological issues and penetrating to some extent into the intellectual and spiritual world of the other side. But the historical memory of such a situation remains and makes many Muslims to feel that the presence of other religions is nothing new and therefore there is no need for interreligious dialogue on their part. It is true that this had not been necessary in traditional times with certain exceptions noted already, but it is now becoming more and more necessary. In many places such historical experiences whose memory survives are among the main obstacles. But there is also the fact that some people *feel* that there is an obstacle coming often from a kind of inertia or lack of need of dialogue resulting from earlier history of their family or their town, or people whom they knew, or the intellectual history that they follow. There are even some people who feel that religious dialogue is part of the Christian agenda with which Muslims need not be concerned. I repeat. I do not believe that serious and profound interreligious dialogue is meant to be carried out by every follower of Islam or other religions. Such an assertion would be absurd. The important thing is to cultivate a sense of respect of the other on the basis of the teachings of those who can provide keys for the understanding of the other, people who because of their virtue and knowledge of their own tradition can

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be a respected and trustworthy voice within their own community.

As for the West, the obstacles there are very different. In the West, there is no direct political obstacle to inter-religious dialogue or engagement. Or perhaps one should say that there is no political obstacle except in some fundamentalist circles in America. There are some religious constraints with a political dimension within certain Christian communities which would correspond to certain exclusivist groups in the Islamic world - some Protestant fundamentalists, or certain Catholic groups who are very strongly opposed to inter-religious dialogue with other religions, especially Islam, but even Judaism. Also within Judaism, there are many Orthodox and very serious Jewish groups who are opposed to dialogue but by and large, there is no political opposition to serious dialogue in the West. The much more subtle obstacle that exists in the West is that there has developed this century-old school or discipline of the study of religion and religions, what the Germans called *Religionswissenschaft* based on a non-religious or even anti-religious and secularist study of religion. This academic approach to the study of religion is based on historicism or a phenomenology that pays no attention to the noumena, to the inner reality of things. It has dominated religious studies in the West and especially in universities in recent times. That is why many of the interreligious dialogues that have been carried out have also been combined with a dilution or rejection of the traditional formulations of various religions. This is a very serious obstacle, because it will end ultimately in either this kind of least-common-denominator idea of the goal of religious dialogue

which is so much around us today, or even in the dissolution of the idea of the sacred, which is at the heart, of course, of all religions.

We modern men tend to look at the past in a somewhat stereotyped way, as ages of exclusiveness and intolerance, while there are actually historical precedents for interreligious engagement from which we may learn.

Not only are there lessons or historical precedents from which we can learn, but I would say that in fact in older days, there was a great deal less exclusivism and intolerance than there is today, if you consider the amount of knowledge that people had of the "other." While this may not have been true of much of Western Christianity, it is certainly true of the Islamic world, which is located in the middle of globe, and in which there was a lot more knowledge of Christianity and Judaism on the one hand, and Hinduism and Buddhism on the other hand, with Zoroastrianism and Manichaeism in the middle, than one finds in the pre-modern West of other religions. Even today, I think a simple villager near the city of Shiraz in Iran has more knowledge and awareness of other religions than many people do in certain parts of the United States. I have seen that from experience. So yes, there is certainly a very unfortunate stereotyping of ages gone by.

But in addition to that, we have some remarkable instances of the deepest kind of interreligious engagement before modern times which can serve as models for us. Let me just mention a few cases. The first - let us start from the West - is the case of Andalusia. In

the Iberian Peninsula, but especially Andalusia where Christians, Jews and Muslims lived side by side, there were a lot of interactions, too many to enumerate, but that world produced, on the one hand, a figure such as Muhyī al-Dīn ibn 'Arabī, who is one of the greatest expositors of the metaphysics of religious diversity, especially in his book *Fusūs al-hikam, The Bezels of Wisdom*. And on the other hand it led to the rise of a person, such as St. John of the Cross on the Christian side, who although a Christian saint, was deeply influenced by Sufi poetry. We can see that truth as we study more fully his relation to Islam.

Then we have in the Ottoman world many instances of this harmonious engagement of religions, at least the Abrahamic ones. In Iran it has been the same way with Zoroastrianism being added to the list of minority religions living in an Islamic community. Between Iran and the Turkish world we have the figure of Jalāl al-Dīn Rūmī, who lived most of his life of course before the Ottoman Empire was established, but in what became the heart of the Ottoman world, that is, Turkey. In the writings of Jalāl al-Dīn Rūmī we have some of the greatest and most beautiful expositions of what Schuon called the "transcendent unity of religions," the doctrine that all authentic religions come from God, and their differences are based on differences of perspective and the formal order and how each looks at that one Divine Reality on which they are all based. In fact the whole of Sufi literature and tradition, going back to Hallāj, and especially Persian Sufi literature, is impregnated and full of references to this transcendent unity, from Bābā Tahir

'Uryān to Sana'i to Jalāl al-Dīn Rūmī, to many others, all of whom speak of the unity of the essence of religions and diversity of religious form.

Then there is the example of India where we see numerous meetings between Sufis and Hindu yogis and pandits and their interreligious discourses. It was in India where some four centuries ago there took place a major event, the translation of the *Upanishads* from Sanskrit into Persian, which finally brought this text through Anquetil-Duperron to Europe when he translated the Persian text into Latin and presented it to Napoleon in 1804, and from there the *Upanishads* became well known in Europe. There are many instances like that which have not even been fully studied. I find in my humble study of both the philosophical and gnostic mystical traditions within Islam remarkable instances of this interreligious engagement - not to talk about all the theological discussions held in Islam, but in the context of many religions, such as in the book *al-Milal wa'l-nihal*, of Shahrastānī, etc. Certainly our ancestors have left us many historical, theological and metaphysical precedents of the greatest importance which could act as a guide for us today, as a model for us in our search for profound and serious interreligious dialogue and understanding.

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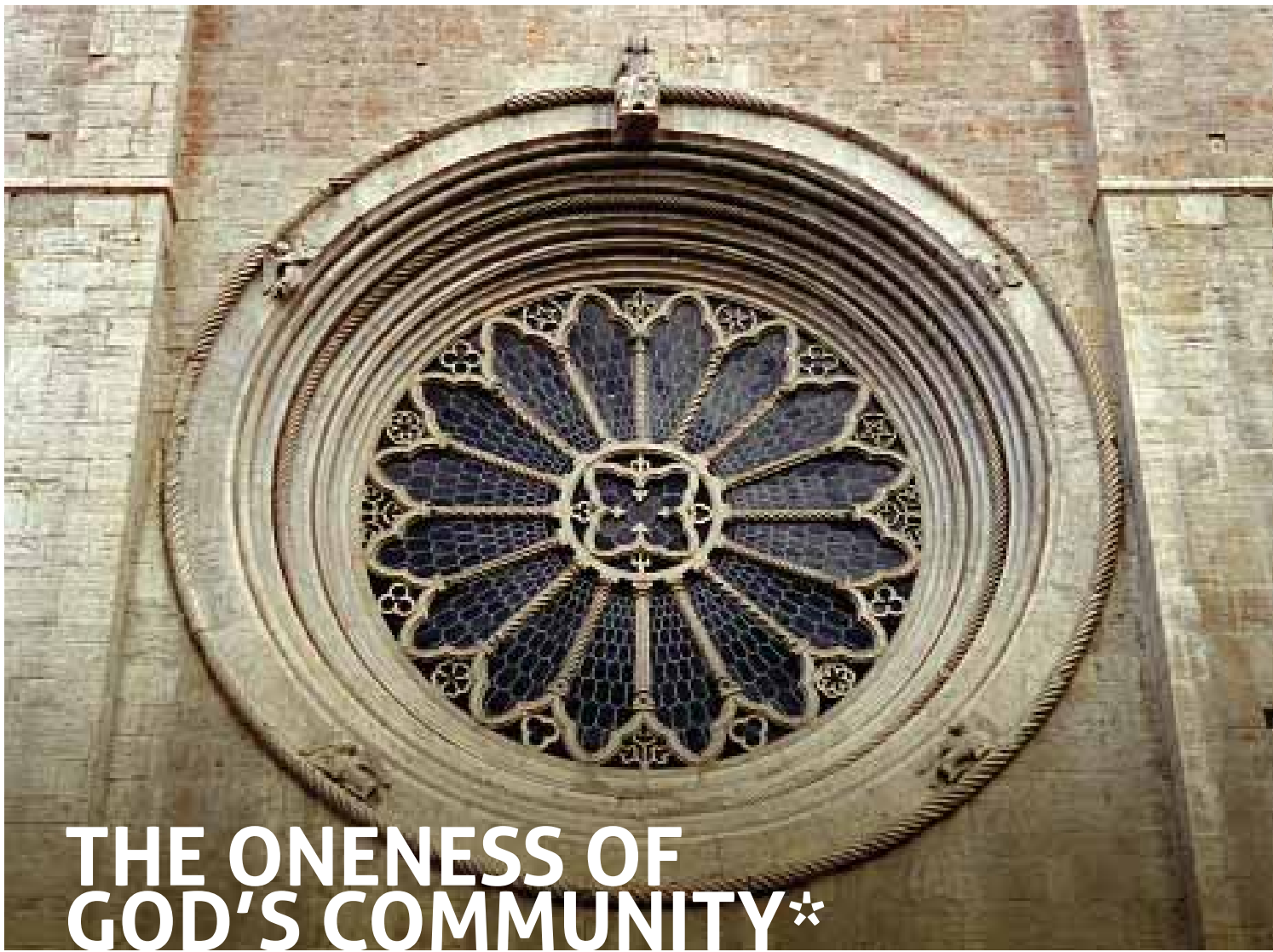
THE ONENESS OF GOD'S COMMUNITY*

by Bishop George Khodr
Translated from Arabic by Mark Farha

Why is Abraham considered to be our common father? It is because our Lord told him: "Leave your country and your kinsfolk and your father's house for the land which I will show you" (Genesis 12:1). Faith is the departure from man-made idols to the spiritual abode in which you settle to behold the face of God who fashions you at will. Faith is always an exodus, that is to say a leaving behind of what you were immersed in your terrestrial world, so that you may receive what you hope to be bestowed on you from on high.

In the Semitic orbit Abraham appears as the first monotheist in history. This is confirmed by the Qur'ān in which

Abraham avers: "Verily, I have turned my face toward Him who created the heavens and the earth, and I am not of the polytheists" (Surat al-Anaam, 79).

The designation "the community of Abraham" may be taken as a reference to a unified religious group anteceding Moses. This would cohere with Paul's affirmation in the letter to the Romans and the Galatians that it is Abraham who is the bearer of the faith, vindicating him prior to the descent of the Ten Commandments to Moses.

Yet the term "the religious community of Abraham" in fact carries wider implications than to be confined to the followers of the Qur'ān. After all, the latter ascribes to Joseph in the words:

"And I followed the religion of my fathers Abraham and Isaac and Jacob" (Surat al-Yusuf 38). All these men came before the message of Muhammad. The expression "Community of Abraham" appeared as a reference to the Abrahamian family lineage in the work of the orientalist Louis Massignon[1], and became known as such in Western circles several for decades even though it refers to the Jews, Christians and Muslims alike.

Affirming the Abrahamic pedigree then is nothing other than an affirmation of the proclamation of faith in one God. And God's most fundamental truth is nothing other than his oneness which prompts me to employ the expression of "the different monotheistic religions" whose perspective differs from the religions of the Far East. To be sure, to speak of the kinship between these three faiths implies the existence of distinctions without which these religions would have merged completely. A concise study of these religions, their respective temperament and singularity is bound to reveal differences, underscoring that each faith has abolished what was before it even as it has claimed to complete its predecessor. In broaching the issue of religious beliefs, there is no escape from agreement, differentiation and clash between them. And yet, by ways of a disciplined, religious, existential, spiritual and methodological taming of your ego you may be able to arrive at the discovery of mutual [confessional] affinities. You may then interpret these seeking to approach and embrace the other so that you will find yourself standing firmly on your ground and on the ground of the other with a complete love. This does not at all push you into the pitfall of relativism in which the faiths are mixed and confounded, nor does it come at the expense of your integrity or make you succumb to a suspicious lassitude.

We shall first seek to fathom the contours of this kinship in each of the three conceptions of the Divinity. In the Old Testament, the first historical entreaty to God, the testimony to Him is

as follows: "Hear o Israel, the Lord our God is one" which likewise appears in Mark 12:29-30 and is reiterated a second time in Deuteronomy 6:4. This is not to mean that He is a God of the Hebrew tribes. Rather, it is the idea of a people unified [in God]. The author of the psalms longs that all and sundry give Him praise: "kings of the earth and all people, princes and all the rulers of the earth" (Psalms 148:11). This is echoed by the Qur'ān's assertion that He is the God of the Two Worlds [i.e. of the entire universe].

This universal supremacy and unity of God is underscored by Christianity: "There is no God but the one God" (Corinthians 8:4). This verse corresponds verbatim to the first profession in Islam (with the addition of the adjective "the one" in Paul). And so too the Creed of the Nicean Council of 325 begins with the invocation: "I believe in the one God." It is a well-known fact that the first Christian martyrs were killed by Roman Empire for their belief in the one God at a time in which the constitution of the Empire mandated the worship of the Caesar [as a deity].

There is no room to cast any doubt on the monotheism of Christianity despite its association with the trinity. The Church, in its proclamation of the trinity, fully recognizes that there are no three gods but one Divine essence. It views the three personages [of the trinity] from the perspective of God's unity. Indeed, the insistence on the unity of God is salient throughout the New Testament, the teachings of the ecumenical councils and the patristic fathers as well as their successors and followers. In fact, the Qur'ān itself does not contain a single phrase charging the Christians with polytheism. Those that are

branded with heresy – the "Nasara" or "Nazarenes"- are not confounded by the Qur'ān with the Christians who did not call themselves "Nazarenes."

Just who then are these Nazarenes to whom the Qur'ān attributes these beliefs? Did they stem from the Church whose creeds were formulated prior to Muhammad's mission, or are they a different phenomenon altogether? It is clear that they are not identical with the Christians of Najran. Nor does the biography of the Prophet indicate that he was acquainted with the other Christian communities of the Arabian peninsula which excavations in Qatar and Bahrain have revealed.

Muhammad was an adolescent on a caravan going to Damascus when he was received by the monk Buhayra in the Syrian town of Busra. But this encounter cannot be taken as evidence that Muhammad was influenced by Buhayra. The Qur'ān refuted the accusation of the Prophet having been influenced by human teaching: "We know well that they claim that a man has taught him. The tongue of those who utter such apostasy is garbled and foreign, while his speech is pure and lucid Arabic" (al-Nahl 103).

Yet there is no doubt that the Prophet did entertain close relations with Waraqa Ibn Nawfal, the cousin of his wife Khadija. Even so, there is nothing to indicate that the latter was a Christian priest residing in Mecca. In my estimate he was a Nazarene. These were a community of pre-Islamic monotheists who did not belong to any recognized

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Christian church and themselves were divided. What is more, we do not find any organized Christian community in the Hejaz in the era of the Prophet as Fr. Henri Lammens has demonstrated in a decisive way in his famous monograph on Mecca prior to the Hijra.[2] Perhaps more significant than all this is that the ecclesiastic history of the Church does not know of any Christian structure in the entire Arabian Peninsula other than in Yemen. Nor did the Church enjoy any civilizational relation with the Hijaz other than what is hinted at in terms of the image of the Quraysh travelling in "seasons of winter and summer."

If the Surat al-Ikhlas states that God is not begotten and does not beget, so too Christianity emphasizes that the Divine essence is indivisible and neither begets nor is begotten by another.

Thus we are constrained to acknowledge - without accepting all its arguments, entire thesis and dearth of sources - some of the truth of what Professor Haddad has claimed in his book "The Qur'ān: A Nazarene Gospel." For the aforementioned Nazarenes were but a splinter group of a Judaized Christianity.

What makes this thesis more plausible is that the Gospel of the judaized Ebionites ["the poor ones"] was well-known in Church history and in the lost book on the Elkasaites which was disseminated east of the Jordan river in the fourth century. The significance of this group is that they were expecting the mission of a new prophet.

All this is alien to the traditional forms of Christianity which we know from the Najran or the Ghassanides and the ongoing debate in the Arabian Peninsula. None of these Christian groups appear in the biography of the Prophet except for the invitation to a mutual imprecation (Mubahala) by the Prophet with the Christians of Najran which the latter rejected (3: 61)[3].

Furthermore, how is it conceivable to designate the Christians as Nazarenes when their book/scripture says: "It was in Antioch that the disciples for the first time were named 'Christians'" (Acts 11:26). The term "Nazarenes" was first used for the followers of Jesus the Nazarene at the dawn of Christianity in the Fertile Crescent even though

this designation fell completely out of use by the seventh century. So how did the Nazarenes become the Arabic "Nasara" and in which of the Aramaic dialects did it find its way into the covers of the Qur'ān?

If our hypothesis is true then all of the Christians of the entire period between the descent of the Qur'ān down to our present day are not the point of reference when the Qur'ān speaks about the "Nasara," except as regards the few point of overlap. And this holds true for every verse which contains such declarations. It is not permissible to argue in reverse, i.e. "you Christians say this and that because the Qur'ān says this about you." Rather, the correct inference must be the other way: "If you Christians claim this and that, you are the intended objects of the Qur'ān." The premise cannot simply be: "The Nasara are the Christians." This was the claim of the exegetes who wrote in the lands of the Islamic conquest; they got to know the Christians and reached the conclusion that they must be one and the same with the Nasara mentioned in the revelation.

And when we come across the line: "They say that the Most Merciful has begotten a son" (Mariam 88) and similar verses, we cannot understand this as a repudiation of the Christianity which we know and which equally rejects such begetting, that is to say the elevation of a created being to the status of a deity. The heresy that Christ was elevated to that divine status was known as adoptionism. It was also propounded by the Gnostics who went so far as to say that God made Christ his son during the baptism in the river Jordan. If the Surat al-Ikhlas states that God is not begotten and does not beget, so too Christian-

ity emphasizes that the Divine essence is indivisible and neither begets nor is begotten by another. If we wanted to understand the meaning of divine birth and begetting by God according to the Qur'ān, would it not be closer to the scriptural context to say that what the Qur'ān rejects is angels being daughters of the God: "And they ascribe to God almighty daughters as they wish" (al-Nahl 57). Al-Jalalayn's exegesis of this verse reads: "He does not beget due to the absence of anything like Him, and He is not begotten, due to the impossibility of anything acting upon Him."[4] The text therefore does allude to declaring the Christians heretics due to their belief in the pre-eternal filiation of Christ to God. The Surat al-Ikhlas does not point to this since the transcendence of [Christ's] birth is tantamount to the trascendence of God above any sexual el-

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ement. This is precisely the standpoint of Christianity. It is also supported by verse 101 of the Surat al-Anaam: "How can He have a child if He has no consort?" This is decidedly not the concept of Christ's filiation to God amongst Christians who completely reject out of hand the notion of a transcendent and wholly ineffable God having any physical relation with Mary. Rather, the filiation of Christ and God refers to the eternal relationship between God and the Word prior to the latter having taken on a human form. This unique relationship is even alluded to in the Qur'ān which refers to Jesus alone amongst all prophets as the "Word of God" (3:46; 4:171).

The Qur'ān's stance on the trinity is governed by the verse: "O Jesus, son of Mary! Did thou say to people: `take me and my mother as gods besides God?" (al-Maida 211). This verse to my mind provides us with an image of the astral trinity as it was current amongst the Arabs worshiping a greater deity. In the Yemen it was the moon which gave birth to the radiating sun so that amongst the polytheistic Arabs there were two small gods below the supreme deity. Upon closer examination, we find the prototype of a grand trinity, but the supreme deity here is Baal Shamin, the god of the Heavens. It was sex which governed the relationship of all the male and female deities in the ancient civilizations of the Middle East, Greece and Rome.

There is a unique aspect in which the Quran and the Gospels find themselves in accord, and that is the status of veneration according to Mary in the two books which creates as a common bond between Christians and Muslims.

It is the particular trinity ascribed to the Nazarenes which is the reference point for Maida 211 according to Jalalayn[5]. And when the verse appears: "Do not say there are three deities. Desist! It is better for you. God almighty is only One (Surat al-Nisa, 171-2)," it becomes evident that the trinity here pertains to Jesus, Mary and God as it does in Surat al-Nisa 73: "They disbelieve who say that God is one of three in a trinity." Jalalayn' s commentary is unequivocal: "The trinity here refers to deities, one of which being God, the other Jesus and the third his mother Mary. 'They' refers to the Nasara."

The Imam Bidawi has purported that the Christians worship Jesus and his mother as two deities as if they were worshiping God himself, thereby committing blasphemy. It is clear that he mistook Mary's intercession, and her supplication to God. For this honouring of Mary and her intercessionary role never, not once, amounted to her Divinity or worship as God in the Church. As for the Imam Razi, he interprets the verse by claiming that the *Nasara* took the creator of the miracles of Jesus and Mary to be Jesus and Mary themselves, and that God had not created them, and that Mary and Jesus were therefore considered as two deities. Clearly such talk contradicts what we find amongst the Christians, for Christ never ascribed to himself the power to perform deeds independently from God. "I cannot do anything of myself" (John 5:30). It is equally clear that the Church does not ascribe to Mary and the saints any autonomous power apart from God. "Two deities without God" remains a phrase of the Arab apostasy [erroneously] affixed to the Christian trinity.

We only know of one Arabic faction, mentioned by Saint Epiphanius the Cypriot in the forth century, which offered devotions to Mary.[6] Cognizant of the considerable mystery which still surrounds this sect, we condemn its divinization of Mary. And yet after this period, that is to say between the fourth century and the beginning of Islam we do not find evidence substantiating the continuation of this movement in the Arab peninsula. Be that as it may, the fact remains that the Church did not know anything about such matters; the trinity which the Qur'ān repudiates is simply not the Trinity of the Church.

Regular Christians who know the basics of their faith will not feel targeted in the verses on the Nasara which we have cited here. It is natural that Christianity conceives of itself as the fi-

nal religion even as Judaism saw itself as final, yet this is on the creedal level. In the official Christian sources and references I do not find a single Christian text confronting Islam.

The intellectual encounter will be facilitated if you seek to comprehend Islam from its sources and Christianity from its own references. Each religion should speaks for itself. Yet this necessitates a historical reading of the holy scriptures since each and every revelation emanates within a set of historical circumstances which illuminate understanding. What we lack is that Christianity clarifies its core pillars in a plain, lucid Arabic vocabulary, that is to say that it discloses itself by itself and speaks to the Arab mind rather than merely speaking to its own flock in the terminology it inherited from the Greeks and Syriacs. It is regrettable that the Christian theology has not yet been arabized, i.e. it has not faced the Islamic consciousness in a dialogical approach to make itself clear and to seek clarification of Islam as well.

And it is this clarification of one's own stance, and the quest to gain a more accurate image of the other, which are the fundamental premises for a free and unperturbed meeting of minds.

What remains to be discussed is the name which pervades the scriptures of both religions more than any other, some 1052 times in the Qur'ān: the name of God. It is He upon whom rests the entire body of religious thought. It is He who is the mainspring of monotheism in Judaism, Christianity and Islam alike. And there is the matter of the Divine attributes. Whatever the debate may be surrounding the 99 beautiful names of God, we can generally say that the followers of these religions view God from one perspective, whether they believe that they are His people or his family (ummah) or his sons or his servants. And it is from this vantage point that they regard their faith and their subservience to God.

The paramount importance of the pervasive supremacy of God in the scriptures of the monotheistic religions calls for a review of the beautiful names whose implications share much in common. Furthermore, there must be a juxtaposition of the Christian axiom that "God is Love" with the name of "God the Merciful" in the Qur'ān so that we can properly asses the development of the theological conception of God in both religions. For the notion of "God is Love" appears in a passage rich of connotations in John's first letter:

"So let us love one another dear friends: for love is of God; and every one that loves is born of God, and knows God. He that does not love does not know God; for God is love. And God manifested his love towards us by sending his only, that we might live through him" (1 John 4:7-9). It becomes clear in this passage that God moves towards humanity through his love for it. They, in turn, receive this love and love him and each other in return. And yet it is not sufficient to consider the expression "God is Love" as a mere description of God. Rather, God essentially makes love his own nature, it is His innermost being, and, consequentially, the reason for his continual, dynamic

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activity so that each believer receives God's power which enables him to love.

Perhaps "the Compassionate" in the Qur'ān is the closest analogue to the New Testament's description of God as the lover. It denotes the abundance of compassion, and the Arabic inflection (al-Rahman) accentuates the surfeit of mercy while the similar attribute of the merciful (al-Rahim) connotes permanence and staying power[7].

Tabari writes in his commentary on the Qur'ān: "The scope of the compassionate (al-Rahman) is wider than that of the merciful (al-Rahim). It is customary to gradually ascend from the lower to the higher, because the compassionate (al-Rahman) encompasses the fruits of divine bounty and its roots, while its peripheral extensions to the merciful are like a completion of what

has been refined and soothed by him.[8] We thus do not find the interpreters of the Qur'ān making any great distinction between the two forms compassion and mercifulness; both refer to the relationship between God and man and creation. By contrast, the love referred to in the Epistle of John, even if the author connects it to man in terms of its application, he also establishes it as the nature of God rather than merely one of his attributes. The depth of Christian theology allows for this.

The question then remains: are the Qur'ānic notions of mercifulness and compassion synonyms of the evangelical notion of love? We need to more closely examine the Qur'ānic verses dealing with compassion (al-Rahman) in order to determine whether the two concepts of compassion and love have the same sig-

nificance or similar implications.

There is a unique aspect in which the Qur'ān and the Gospels find themselves in accord, and that is the status of veneration accorded to Mary in the two books which creates as a common bond between Christians and Muslims. It is a bond which softens the hearts and discloses an astonishing affinity between the devotees. For example, if we read the verses of the Sura Mariam dealing with Zakharias and his son John – who corresponds to John the Baptist in the Gospel of Luke – we find an astounding similarity. Likewise, you find a remarkable similarity between the people of Imran and the Gospel of Luke which ascribes to Gabriel the words: "Rejoice! [or Peace be upon you!] Ye who is full of grace, the Lord is with thee" (Luke 1:28) whereupon is added: "Blessed art thou amongst women" (Luke 1:42). These then are two verses which correspond to the Qur'ānic verses in Sura al-Umran 24: "And thus the angel said: God has selected you Mary and your chastity, and He has selected you amongst all the women of the world." The Christian belief in the immaculate chastity of the Virgin reverberates in Mary's pronouncement in the Qur'ān: "Far be it that I bear a child while no man has touched me" (al-Imran, 54). The sanctification and the glorification of Mary in both verses cannot be impugned.

Besides the creeds in God and his unity we must look at the Beautiful Names to highlight in their gamut the kinship between Islam and Christianity. I will confine myself here to only a few quick deliberations of the Lord's relationship to man. Amongst the most important of these encounters is kindness. In point of fact, the issues of kindness and agreement and serenity all overlap.

They all usher from the commandment which is a work of God as he charges his servants to assume their duty. The Muatazalites held that he who is charged to observe the commandments, by being kind to God, thereby obeys Him. There is a concordance between the divine command, on the one side, and the kindness which God dispenses on man so that he may act virtuously, on the other.

We may equate the notion of kindness in Islam with the notion of grace in Christianity, the indispensible divine blessing without man cannot assume any virtuous task. In the Christian formulation, the person who accepts the Divine blessing becomes sanctified by God and moves towards Him. The core of this notion of grace in Christianity is akin to the state of contentment and satisfaction in the Islamic terminology: the self on whom God has dispensed his favour and blessing is the calm, serene self.

Even in the commiseration of God with man the favour returns to God, its initiator. For He is the beginning and the end, the Alpha and the Omega.

Man is the recipient, yet in Islam he is an active, free subject because he is a responsible agent. After a long disputation between the theologians and the philosophers in Islam, the case for freedom won out in Islamic society. This too is a common juncture shared with Christianity where John Calvin propounded the thesis of the double predestination in determining man's fate in heaven or hell until this aspect of this confession came to an end in the modern age. In

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all denominations of Christianity, there must be a cooperation between Divine grace and human effort are needed for salvation to come to pass. And if the particular notion of a "cooperation between God and man" may not be customary in Islam, it remains the case that the individual Muslim contributes to his salvation and may not perish in the afterlife, except for the unbelievers.

I am of the conviction that the dicusion of the true relationship between God and man remains one of the most important points in Islamic-Christian dialogue.

Is there a permanent relationship between the Being which we call God and the other, human being? Can we conceive of an intimate conjunction between the Creator and the created in a reasonable way without being idolatrous? Needless to say, all this requires a discussion of belief first and foremost.

The Muslim minority in the West for instance needs time until the reciprocal acculturation between them and the indigenous French population expands further. This has little to do with a religious problematic in a country in which a great many have distanced themselves from their erstwhile faith.

The relation of man to man is simpler when viewed from a contractual perspective. Even so, the spiritual interconnectedness of man is a result of man's God-inspired regard for his fellow man.

In an exceptional testament to dialogue, 138 Muslim scholars from all over the world sent a declaration of reconciliation to the spiritual heads of the Christian churches on the occasion of Ramadan in the year of 1428 h. or October 13, 2007. The importance lies in the affirmation of these scholars that Christians are monotheists; they thereby laid the basis for the famous Qur'ānic call to come to a common word of agreement.

The significance of this document was not the concern for any scientific approach but rather the quest for peace in the world based on the presumption that a recognition of kindred beliefs would aid the cause of peace.

The drafters of the document saw that the common ground of Islam and Christianity lay in man's love for God and his love for his neighbour. It is such love which is affirmed in one of the first verses to descend in the Qur'ān: "Mention the name of your Lord and devote yourself to Him with full devotion" (al-Mazmal 73:8).

The undersigning scholars further expound on this dialectic of love in Christianity. When a legal expert asked the lord in order to trap him: "Oh teacher, which commandment is the greatest in the law?" And Christ answered him: "That you love your Lord with all your heart and all your being and all your thought. This is the first and greatest of the commandments. And the second is like it: Love your neighbour as yourself. On these two commandments rest all the law and prophets." (Mathew 22: 40-43).

Further shedding light on the common ground, the signatories of this letter add: "As Muslims we tell the Christians that we are not against you, and that Islam is not opposed to them." After this creedal exposition and the affirmation of reconciliation on a global level, the thinkers issue a call for a burying of hatred and dissension so that mutual respect, equity, justice and cordial friendship may prevail instead.

The most important element in this document is the appeal to the communities of these two religions to live

together without resorting to the habitual mode of interaction between them under the headings of "majority" and "minority."

The document does not resolve all issues but it does, if pursued, pave the way for a new seriousness of correspondence which could, in turn, prepare for an uprooting of the roots of division and mutual animosity. This fresh atmosphere in turn could enter us into a face to face encounter with the powers that be so that we might recognize kinship in matters in which we share a lot in common and which we tended to ignore in the days of confrontational discourse which could even reach the degree of verbal violence.

Two things promise to make the mutual encounter of Christians and Muslims living at a level of depth a genuine one:

1. Each party finds a lot to approve and appreciate amongst the other, be it in word or deed, be it consciously or unconsciously.

2. Terms enter from other languages along with their associated concepts. To take an example, the Christians of this country rejoice in the advent of Ramadan while the spiritual heads will understand the Fast of Ramadan as the equivalent to their Fasting, both being an effort to approach God and flatter Him.

Many Christians derive pleasure from the Muslim call to prayer and the recitation of the Qur'ān. There is at least one salient emanation of a civilized Islam which is comparable to a parallel Christian evolution of customs and refinement.

Yet there are things which are more valuable than tradition. In the countries of the Levant, you will find amongst the Muslims a genuine relishing of the concept of love as it is manifested in the Gospel and as it is borrowed from the relationship between man and woman as you will find greater respect shown to monks and nuns due to the long experience of living side-by-side (and not just on account of the Qur'ānic text).

This is reflected in thought and discourse. Without any undue generalization and simplification, it may be said that intellectual probity and the appreciation of the values of the other are in the process of spreading, especially amidst those who live their faith and have not fallen under the spell of syncretism which has come to dominate quarters of the naïve, the aware and the extremist alike.

Intimate knowledge of the texts does not always lead to love of the other. For love is a divine grace which often can dispense with a lot of knowledge. Insofar as the Christians are Arabs, Islamic civilization reveals to them something of their mental constitution so that they devote themselves to its study in their school curricula and colleges of the social sciences. It is regrettable that Christianity in the Middle East does not enter the curricula of any school or university so that the Muslims might in turn catch something of it from their foreign perusals.

In conversations amongst intellectual circles, Christians do not necessarily appear superior in their command of foreign languages. In the francophone summits Muslims are no less prominent than Christians. I happen to know that Salah Stetie, a Muslim, dictated the Lebanese during the universal francophone summit. The Lebanese have come to reach full parity intellectually in literature and the sciences, including spe-

cialized fields of medicine. Moreover, due to demographic intermixing, we often find in Lebanon an overwhelming Muslim majority in Christian secondary schools without there being the slightest trace of evangelization. Nor is this phenomenon new to the Near East.

The foreign missionaries who undertook the schooling were not intent on summoning the Muslim students to Christianity but rather aimed at the dissemination of knowledge which they considered as their Christian commitment to serve man whatever his colour or creed.

We are left to address what is hidden beneath the text and the talk. In general, you will not find many traces of the religious debate, or even the mere talk which reveals differences, in the ordinary life of society. Many a time this person will refer to that book to discover the shared vision and to supplicate the face of God. The fundamental divergences go unmentioned and are eschewed for the sake of the mildness of the meeting. This may be on account of some timid diffidence at times, but most of the times it is on account of sheer ignorance of the other and his belief.

What remains is the unifying invocation of God along with the premonition that our counterpart too is seeking God's goodness and lives through and from it. Many times one is humbled and touched when one espies the radiant glow on the face of the other, and each person opens to the other, taken by the momentum of love which renders the religious institution redundant. The formation of this spiritual union in communal gatherings is the condition for peace in them.

Politics corrupts everything in this virtuous journey in that it fashions a path of dichotomy. This is what happens in the sectarian clash of politics. Despite this, a friend may continue to exchange affection with his friend in personal discussion, whilst they close in on themselves when it comes to political talk. To be sure, this phenomenon is destined to disappear as sects intermingle and ideologies shared by members of different sects arise and compete with each other. Likewise, authoritarian systems may put a lid on sectarianism.

This is what may be observed in the Arab East insofar as Christians and Muslims partake of one Arabic culture and set of customs, having been trained by time to live side by side.

It is not so when disagreements arise from racial difference. The Muslim minority in the West for instance needs time until the reciprocal acculturation between them and the indigenous French population expands further. This has little to do with a religious problematic in a country in which a great many have distanced themselves from their erstwhile faith; rather, it is an ethnic problem revolving around the lingering doubt that the alien brown or black person is capable of integrating into French society. You cannot seek to insert yourself into a society in a few years. And if you venture to do so, you want to preserve the identity of your ancestors, i.e. you want to remain a civilized Muslim while becoming a civilized French citizen while pondering the points of divergence between the two identities. Often enough, globalization and cultural individualism appear at odds with one another, and perhaps you will refrain from practicing religion deeply lest you set yourself in opposition to the other. You are against the total and genuine

assimilation on account of which the other might welcome you with joy.

It is my sense that the Muslims are Muslims forever and likewise the Christians. Each party may lose a number of devotees for various reasons, yet a large core constituency will remain. I thus harbour no great practical hopes of great changes brought about by proselytizing, however perspicacious. I am not saying that we are predestined to live together. It is equally inappropriate to just have a quantitative proliferation without meaning. What I do hope is that the growing numbers of adherents of both faiths can live next to each in an understanding and loving way in order to afford a constructive and new human model.

Rather than a mere national cohesion, an intelligent reciprocal familiarization will evolve, one which we hope will be grounded in the freedom and development which is congruent with the common good of all of us.

I have the impression that the societies governed by the pure, loyal and courageous love of God breathe life into such familiarization of different communities.

The most important of all freedoms is the freedom of faith, including idolatry. You accept me when you accept the form of my existence with my brethren in faith as we understand this existence. There is room here to delve into details, but any feeling of oppression stems from oppression and not from fantasy. There is therefore no space here to renew the inquisitorial courts and mentality of the Middle Ages just as there is no ground to portray Christians as if they are still *"dhimmi"* protected subjects after the Ottoman Empire suspended this category some 150 years ago. Civil free-

doms are established in all advanced countries. Those social segments who are at ease with their faith will not fear the sweeping tide given that their house is not made of glass which anyone can pelt.

The age of imperialism has passed and nobody is attached to it. We Orientals see our trust increased in each of us. May this trust be supported by a respect for the other and his articles of faith? I dare say that we monotheists have become a family of God which finds itself in agreement on much of what we know of Him. And we yearn for the other in order to embrace God with humility and sincerity.

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NOTES

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[4] *Jalal al-Din Muhammad al-Mahali, Tafsir al-Jalalayn bi Hamish al-Qur'ān al-Karim, Beirut: M. al-Risala, 1995.*

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[8] *Abu Jafar Bin Jarir al-Tabari, Tafsir al-Tabari : al-musamma Jami' al-bayan fi ta'wil al-Qur'ān. Beirut: Dar al-Kutub al-'Ilmiyah, 1997*

ABSTRACTS
of the articles in Arabic

Aisha Almannai, "The Image of God in Islam: Accord and Divergence with other Heavenly Religions"

In this article the author emphasises the agreement between the three Abrahamic religions: i.e. Islam, Christianity and Judaism on the belief that the affirmation of the existence of God is the essence of religion. The article also touches upon divergences between the three religions as far as the image of God is concerned. Unlike Islam Judaism tends to give to God material attributes while Christianity believes in the idea of the Trinity: the union of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit as one God. The article concludes with a call not to use religion as a means for aggression and oppression but for the good of humanity.

Eric Geoffroy, "Pluralism or the Consciousness of Alterity in Islam"

Pluralism is inscribed into the very definition of Divine Unity in Islam. This Unity is not opposed to, but rather subjacent to, the world of multiplicity in which we live. Islam perceives and integrates diversity on the cosmic, ethnic, linguistic and religious levels. Even though the history of the hermeneutics of the Quran oscillates between inclusivist and exclusivist interpretations of the Book in relation to other faiths, the author makes the case that inclusiveness and tolerance are inherent to the Quranic perspective whereas the exclusivist and intolerant interpretations are mainly contextual and circumstantial.

George Traboulsi, "Religiousness and Extremism"

Religion can be approached in a different manner from one study to another. Some may consider that the true religion is the one that unites through a belief in monotheism, while others make reservations, as if it were an exclusive monotheistic description that shows signs of pride and a sense of superiority. Moreover, the world knows no borders anymore with intricate civilizations and

cultures, where people hope to be able to achieve equality, protect their free-doms and guarantee their political, socio-economic, cultural and religious rights. Thus, in which context can adepts of various religions live in peace? Here lies the problem.

Tayeb Chouiref, "The Universality of the Qur'ān"

This article is an introduction to the Algerian Sheikh 'Ahmad al-'Alawī's (1869-1934) commentary, in his Bahr al-masjûr, on the Qur'ānic verse 2, 62:

"Those who believe (in that which is revealed unto thee, Muhammad), and those who are Jews, and Christians, and Sabaeans - whoever believeth in Allah and the Last Day and doeth right - surely their reward is with their Lord, and there shall no fear come upon them neither shall they grieve."

This verse that the Sheikh al-'Alawî characterizes as enigmatic (lughz) essentially enunciates the universal perspective of the Qur'ān on different levels of consideration.

Frithjof Schuon, "Religio Perennis"

What is the fundamental common ground among religions? Although the diversity and complexity of world faiths defy facile simplifications, it is not impossible to reduce them, intellectually and spiritually, to an essential schema. This quintessence of all religious is encapsulated in the two motions of descent and ascent from the Divine to the human, and back to the Divine. The Divine descends into the human multiplicity, both microcosmically and macrocosmically, so that the latter could be reunited to the former. The various world religions enunciate this metaphysical cycle and this spiritual mystery in their respective theological languages.

SOURCES OF TOLERANCE AND INTOLERANCE IN ISLAM
The Case of the People of the Book

by Ibrahim Kalin

Islam's encounter with other religions is as old as Islam itself. The two sources of Islam, i.e., the Qur'ān and Hadith, contain extensive discussions, narrations, and injunctions on the various religious traditions before Islam and especially Judaism and Christianity. The Muslim awareness of the multiplicity of faith traditions is evident not only in the Qur'ān but also in the sayings of the prophet Muhammad as well as in the later Islamic scholarship. Historically, the first Muslim community came into being within a fairly diverse society where Jews, Christians, pagans, polytheists, monotheists, fire-worshippers (Magians or Majus), and others lived together across the Arabian Peninsula. The major and minor religions that the Islamic world encountered from its earliest inception to the modern period make up a long list: the religious traditions of the pre-Islamic (*jahiliyyah*) Arabs, Mazdeans in Mesopotamia, Iran, and Transoxania, Christians (of different communions like Nestorians in Mesopotamia and Iran, Monophysites in Syria, Egypt and Armenia, Orthodox Melkites in Syria, Orthodox Latins in North Africa), Jews in various places, Samaritans in Palestine, Mandaeans in south Mesopotamia, Harranians in north Mesopotamia, Manichaeans in Mesopotamia and Egypt, Buddhists and Hindus in Sind, tribal religions in Africa, pre-Islamic Turkic tribes, Buddhists in Sind and the Panjab, and Hindus in the Panjab.[1] In short, Islam is no stranger to the

challenge of other religions. The fact that Islam is the last of the three Abrahamic faiths puts it in a special relationship with Judaism and Christianity. On the one hand, the Qur'ān defines Jews and Christians as the People of the Book (*ahl al-kitab*) and gives them the status of protected religious communities (*ahl al-dhimmah*) under the provision of paying a religious tax called *jizya* (compare the Qur'ān, al-Tawbah 9:29). Within this legal framework, the People of the Book are accorded certain rights, the most important of which is the right of religious belief, i.e., no forced conversion. On the other hand, the Qur'ān engages the People of the Book head-on as the primary counterparts of a serious dialogue on the unity of God, the Abrahamic tradition, some biblical stories, salvation, the hereafter, and the nature of Jesus Christ. The Qur'ān is explicit and occasionally harsh in its criticism of certain Jewish and Christian themes because no serious dialogue is possible without raising the most fundamental issues.

In relation to the treatment of non-Muslims, we thus see a tension between what we might loosely call the requirements of law and theological doctrine. Islamic law grants certain rights to non-Muslims including freedom of religion, property, travel, education, and government employment. These rights extend not only to Jews and Christians but also to other faith traditions such as the Manicheans, Hindus, and Buddhists. Muslims encountered these latter communities as the borders of the Islamic world expanded beyond the Arabian Peninsula. One of the major legal adjustments in this process was the enlargement of the concept of the People of the Book to include those other than Jews and Christians. This, however, was complemented by an economic system that allowed non-Muslims to move freely across the social strata of Muslim societies in which they lived. Following the vocation of Prophet Muhammad, Muslims always encouraged free trade and, therefore, unlike Christianity, did not have to discriminate against Jews as international merchants or money-lending usurers. Socially, there was nothing in the Islamic tradition similar to the Hindu caste system that would have led to the treatment of Hindus in discriminatory manners. Instead, Muslims treated Hindus as members of a different socio-religious community whose internal affairs were regulated by Hindu, not Islamic, laws. Politically, Muslim rulers were more or less pragmatic and used relatively lenient legal provisions to ensure the loyalty of their non-Muslim subjects. Forced conversion or economic discrimination was not in the interest of the state or the Muslim communities. This socio-economic and legal framework, thus, played a key role in the rapid spread of Islam and facilitated the development of a "culture of coexistence" in Muslim societies that had considerable non-Muslim populations from the Balkans and Anatolia to the subcontinent of India.

Legal protection, however, is not a licence to theological laxity. The Qur'ān sharply criticizes the Meccan polytheists and accuses them of failing to understand the true nature of God. Jews and Christians are not spared from criticism, some of which are general and some specific. The primary reason for the Qur'ān's constant dialogue with them is its unflinching effort to hold

them up to higher moral and religious standards than the Meccan pagans. As the two heirs or claimants to the legacy of Abraham, Jewish and Christian communities are expected to uphold the principles of monotheism and accept the new revelation sent through the prophet Muhammad. The Qur'ān calls upon them to recognize Islam as part of the Abrahamic tradition: [2] "Say: O People of the Book. Come to a word [*kalimah*] common between us and you: that we shall worship none but God, and that we shall ascribe no partners 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)." [3] (al-i 'Imran 3: 64)

The tension between theological certitude and legal protection is further complicated by another tension between the unity of the essential message of religions and the multiplicity of socio-religious communities. The tension is real with theological and political consequences. The problem is how to explain and then reconcile the discrepancy between the unity of the divine message and the diversity of faith communities to which the divine message has been sent. As I shall discuss below, the Qur'ān seeks to overcome this problem by defining the plurality of socio-religious communities as part of God's plan to test different communities in their struggle for virtue and the common good (*al-khayrat*).

The universality of divine revelation is a constant theme in the Qur'ān and forms the basis of what we might call the Abrahamic ecumenism of monotheistic religions. As the father of monotheism, Abraham is assigned a central role to represent the universalist

nature of the divine revelation: he is the most important figure to unite Jews, Christians, and Muslims, despite the fact that Moses, Jesus, and Muhammad are also accorded special places in the Islamic tradition. While Abraham represents the pinnacle of this ecumenism, other prophets are seen as bearers of the same message, i.e., believing in the unity of God, worshipping him alone, and leading a virtuous life. "And before thy time We never sent any apostle without having revealed to him that there is no deity save Me, - [and that,] therefore, you shall worship Me [alone]!" (al-Anbiya 21:25).

The Qur'ān presents this claim to universality as a trait of not only Islam

things, which we see in some Qur'ānic verses (compare al-Rahman 55:1–18; Isra 17:44), is of particular significance since it establishes "surrendering to God" (*islam*) as both a cosmological and human-religious principle. The universality of divine message extends beyond revealed books all the way to the natural world. This universalism, however, is always qualified by a reference to true faith in God and His decision to send messengers to warn those who are mistaken. "Say: "We believe in God, and in that which has been revealed unto us, and that which has been revealed unto upon Abraham and Ishmael and Isaac and Jacob and their descendants, and that which has been vouchsafed by their Sustainer unto Moses and Jesus and all the [other] prophets: we make no distinction between any of them. And unto Him do we surrender ourselves [literally "we're *muslims* to Him"]." (al-i 'Imran 3:84)

These specific references to the prophets of Abrahamic monotheism shows Islam's specific interest to have a constant dialogue with the People of the Book and form a kind of religious alliance with them against the Meccan polytheists. If the prophet Abraham is understood correctly as the father of monotheism, then the theological differences between Jews, Christians and Muslims can be negotiated. The Qur'ān is, thus, absolutely uncompromising on the fundamental Abrahamic principle, i.e., surrendering oneself to the one God alone: "For, if one goes in search of a religion other than surrendering to God (*al-islam*), it will never be accepted from him, and in the life to come he shall be among the lost" (al-i 'Imran 3:85). Commenting on the verse, Ibn Kathir says that "whoever follows a path

but also other Abrahamic faiths and calls upon Jews and Christians specifically to renew their bond with the father of monotheism. The true religion is "islam" (with a small "i") in the sense of "surrendering oneself to God" fully and unconditionally. Once this common denominator is secured, ritual differences and even some theological disparities can be overcome. The Qur'ān calls all to *islam* without making a distinction: "Do they seek a faith other than in God [*din Allāh*], although it is unto Him that whatever is in the heavens and on earth surrenders itself [*aslama*], willingly or unwillingly, since unto Him all must return?" (al-i 'Imran 3:83; compare also al-Ra'd 13:15). The reference to the cosmological order of

other than what God has ordained, it will not be accepted."[4] Fakhr al-Din al-Razi quotes Abu Muslim as saying that the expression "we surrender ourselves to Him" (*muslimuna lahu*) means that "we submit to God's command with consent and turn away from all opposition to Him. This is the quality of those who believe in God and they are the people of peace [*ahl al-silm*]."[5] Despite the narrow interpretation of some classical and contemporary Muslims, this reading of the verse supports our rendering of *islam* as "surrendering to God."

The universality of divine revelation is a constant theme in the Qur'an and forms the basis of what we might call the Abrahamic ecumenism of monotheistic religions.

This emphasis on the unique nature of the Abrahamic tradition underlies Islam's attitude towards other religions. It is by virtue of this linkage that Judaism and Christianity receive more attention in the Islamic sources than any other religion besides, of course, polytheism, which the Qur'ān rejects unconditionally. Islam recognizes the reality of other religions but does so with a critical attitude in that all religious communities are called upon to (re)affirm and appropriate the main thrust of Abrahamic monotheism. Any claim to religious belief short of this is denounced as an aberration, metaphysical error, schism, and affront to God.

In what follows, I shall analyze the applications of these general principles and discuss the grounds and limits of tolerance and intolerance towards other religions in the Islamic tradition. The focus will be Judaism and Christianity, leaving aside other religions such as Hinduism and Buddhism for another discussion. I shall claim that, while Islam does not claim a monopoly on belief in God and leading a virtuous life, it sets strict conditions for accepting a faith as a legitimate path that one can follow to reach salvation. The tensions between the oneness and universality of the divine message on the one hand and the multiplicity of human communities on the other will also be discussed. The following verse is the anchor point of our discussion: "Unto every one of you We have appointed a [different] law [*shir'atan*] and way of life [*minhajan*]. And if God had so willed, He could surely have made you all one single community [*ummah wahidah*]: but [He willed it otherwise] in order to test by means of what He has vouchsafed unto you. Vie, then, with one another in doing good works!" (al-Ma'idah 5:48; see also Hud 11:118). I shall discuss the extent to which the call for "vying for the common good" can form the basis of an Islamic notion of religious tolerance.

Universal Revelation and Abrahamic Ecumenism

The Qur'ān presents revelation (*wahy, kitab*) as a universal phenomenon. Whether it talks about the creation of the universe or the stories of the prophets, it refers to revelation as having both historical continuity and claim to universal truth. Revelation is historically universal for God has revealed his message to different societies to remind them of faith and salvation and warn against disbelief: "Verily, We have sent thee with the truth, as a bearer of glad tidings and a warner: for there never was any community [*ummah*] but a warner has [lived and] passed away in

its midst" (al-Fatir 35:24). The same principle is stated in another verse: "And for every community there is a messenger [*rasul*]; and only after their messenger has appeared [and delivered his message] is judgment passed on them, in all equity" (Yunus 10:47). In both verses, the word *ummah* is used to refer to different communities to which messengers have been sent.[6] While *ummah* has come to denote specifically the Muslim community in the later Islamic scholarship, it is used in the Qur'ān and the Hadith to describe any faith community whether Jewish, Christian, or Muslim. The word *ummah* is also used for humanity in general (compare al-Baqarah 2:213).

While all revelation comes from God, revelation in the specific sense such as a revealed book originates from what the Qur'ān calls the "mother of the book" (*umm al-kitab*). Like all other revelations, the Qur'ān originates from this "mother book," which is the "protected tablet" (*lawh mahfuz*) in the divine presence[7]: "Consider this divine book, clear in itself and clearly showing the truth: behold, We have caused it to be a discourse in the Arabic tongue, so that you might encompass it with your reason. And, verily, [originating as it does] in the source, with Us, of all revelation, it is indeed sublime, full of wisdom" (al-Zukhruf 43:2–4). The word *umm*, literally "mother," means origin and source.[8] The word *kitab*, book, in this context refers not to any particular revealed book but to revelation as such. This comprehensive meaning applies to all revelation: "Every age has its revealed book [*kitab*]. God annuls or confirms whatever He wills [of His earlier messages]; for with Him is the source of all revelation [*umm al-kitab*]"

(al-Ra'd 13: 38–39). The Qur'ān, thus, considers the history of revelation as one and connects the prophets from Adam and Noah to Jesus and Muhammad in a single chain of prophetic tradition. The continuity of divine revelation links different socio-religious communities through the bondage of a common tradition. The following verse, while making a strong case against religious communalism and ethnic nationalism, which was rampant in the pre-Islamic Arabia, points to what really unites different communities: "O humans! Behold, We have created you all out of a male and a female, and have made you into nations and tribes so that you might come to know one another. Verily, the noblest of you in the sight of God is the one who is most deeply conscious of Him. Behold, God is all knowing, all-aware." al-Hujurat 49:13

Commenting on the above verses, Fakhr al-Din al-Razi points out that human beings are born in total equality. They acquire the qualities that distinguish them from others as inferior or superior only "after they come into this world; and the noblest among these qualities are the fear of God [*al-taqwa*] and closeness [*al-qurb*] to Him."[9] All "nations and tribes" are called upon to posses these qualities and honour the primordial covenant they have made with God to worship him alone and "turn their face [i.e., whole being] to God." This "turning towards God" is also the essence of the natural disposition or state according to which God has created human beings: "And so, set thy face steadfastly towards the [one ever-true] faith [*al-din*], turning away from all that is false [*hanifan*], in accordance with the natural disposition [*fitrah*] which God has instilled into

man. No change shall there be in God's creation [*khalq*]. This is the established true religion [*al-din al-qayyim*] but most people know it not." (al-Rum 30:30)

Two words require our attention here. The word *hanif(an)*, translated by Asad as "turning away from all that is false" and by Pickthall as "upright," is used in the Qur'ān twelve times (two times in the plural) and derived from the verb *hanafa*, which literally means "inclining towards a right state." A *hanif* is a person who turns towards God as the only deity. In pre-Islamic Arabia, there was a group of people called *hanifs*, who were neither polytheists nor Jew or Christian. Their theological lineage went back to Abraham, who is mentioned seven times in the twelve verses that have the word *hanif* in them. Abraham is presented as the perfect example of those who are upright and turn their whole being towards God: "Verily, Abraham was a nation [*ummatan*] by himself, devoutly obeying God's will, turning away from all that is false [*hanifan*], and not being of those who ascribe divinity to aught beside God: [for he was always] grateful for the blessings granted by Him who had elected him and guided him onto a straight way" (al-Nahl 16:120–21). Another verse stresses the same link between Abraham and monotheism: "Say: God has spoken the truth: follow, then, the creed [*millah*] of Abraham, who turned away from all that is false [*hanifan*], and was not of those who ascribe divinity to aught beside God" (al-i 'Imran 3:95). *Millat Ibrahim*, "Abraham's community," represents the transnational community that believes in the pure and simple unity of God in tandem with one's primordial nature. Muslims are urged to be Abraham's

community today and, thus, go beyond both Judaism and Christianity.[10]

In this sense, Abraham does not belong to any of the particular faith traditions: "Abraham was neither a 'Jew' nor a 'Christian,' but was one who turned away from all that is false [*hanifan*], having surrendered himself unto God [*musliman*]; and he was not of those who ascribe partnership to Him [*mushrikin*]" (al-i 'Imran 3:67). Commenting on the word *hanif*, Ibn Kathir describes Abraham as "turning away from polytheism [*al-shirk*] to faith [*ali iman*]."[11] The commentators Jalal al-Din al-Mahalli and Jalal al-Din al-Suyuti interpret it as "turning away from all other religions towards the one firmly established religion" (*al-din al-qayyim*; compare Qur'ān, al-Tawbah 9:36, al-Rum 30:30, al-Mu'min 40:12). It is only when commenting on 3:95 that they use the word *al-Islam*, meaning the religion of Islam.[12] The famous Andalusian commentator Qurtubi concurs: the word *hanif* means "turning away from abhorrent religions [*al-adyan al-makruhah*] towards the true religion of Abraham."[13] In the Qur'ānic reading of biblical history, the adjective *hanif* places all prophets including Moses and Jesus in a position beyond any particular religion including Judaism and Christianity. *The Religious Dialogue of Jerusalem*, a ninth-century polemic between a Christian monk and Abd al-Rahman, the supposed amir of Jerusalem, quotes the Muslim interlocutor as saying that "you have accredited Christ with idolatry because Christ was neither Jew nor Christian but *hani*f, surrendered to God (Muslim)."[14]

Another key term that points to the universal nature of belief in God is the word *fitrah*, translated as natural

disposition or primordial nature. *Fitrah* is the noun form of the verb *fatara*, which literally means to fashion something in a certain manner. It denotes the specific nature or traits according to which God has created human beings. In a famous hadith of the Prophet narrated by both Bukhari and Muslim, the word *fitrah* is used as the presocial state of humans: "Every child is born in this natural disposition; it is only his parents that later turn him into a 'Jew,' a 'Christian,' or a 'Magian.'" It is important to note that the three religious traditions mentioned here are also the three religions that are considered to be the People of the Book. The Hadith states the same principle outlined in the above verses: while belief in one God (and acting in accord with it) is universal and the revelations are sent to confirm it, it is through the multiplicity of human communities that different theological

languages develop and come to form one's religious identity as Jew, Christian, Magian, or Muslim.

In relation to the People of the Book, the Qur'ān makes specific references to the Abrahamic tradition and asks Muslims as well as Jews and Christians to recognize and appreciate the underlying unity between their religious faiths. "In matters of faith [*al-din*], He has ordained for you that which He had enjoined upon Noah - and into which We gave thee [O Muhammad] revelation as well as that which We had enjoined upon Abraham, and Moses, and Jesus: Steadfastly uphold the [true] faith, and do not break up your unity therein" (al-Shura 42:13). This is usually interpreted as referring to the doctrine of *tawhid*, unity of God, which is the same doctrine revealed to other prophets before Muhammad.[15] According to al-Razi, the warning about breaking

up "your unity" pertains to disunity resulting from worshipping deities other than God.[16] The term *al-din*, translated conventionally as "religion," refers not to any particular religion and certainly not to "institutional religion" but to the essence of *tawhid*. The life of Abraham and his followers is a testimony to the robust monotheism of the Abrahamic faith: "Indeed, you have had a good example in Abraham and those who followed him, when they said unto their [idolatrous] people: "Verily, we totally dissociate ourselves from you and of all that you worship instead of God: we deny the truth of whatever you believe; and between us and you there has arisen enmity and hatred, to last until such a time as you come to believe in the One God!" (al-Mumtahina 60:4)

Abraham does not belong to any of the particular faith traditions: "Abraham was neither a 'Jew' nor a 'Christian,' but was one who turned away from all that is false [hanifan], having surrendered himself unto God [musliman].

Since both Judaism and Christianity trace their origin to Abraham, the Qur'ān returns to him over and over again and invites Jews and Christians to think of Abraham not within the narrow confines of their respective theologies but in light of what he represents in the history of divine revelations. The Qur'ān makes a special note of the disputes among Jews and Christians about Abraham: "O People of the Book! Why do you argue about Abraham, seeing that the Torah and the Gospel were not revealed till [long] after him? Will you not, then, use your reason?" (al-i 'Imran 3:65). Abraham, whom "God has taken as a sincere friend (al-Nisa 4:125), is the "forefather" (*abikum*) (al-Hajj 22:78) of monotheism and, thus,

cannot be appropriated by a particular religion or community. His mission is universal as his legacy: "Behold, the people who have the best claim to Abraham are surely those who follow him - as does this Prophet and all who believe [in him] - and God is near unto the believers" (al-i 'Imran 3:68). The Qur'ān goes even further and describes all prophets after Abraham as neither Jew nor Christian: "Do you claim that Abraham and Ishmael and Isaac and Jacob and their descendants were 'Jews' or 'Christians'?" Say: "Do you know more than God does? And who could be more wicked than he who suppresses a testimony given to him by God?[17] Yet God is not unmindful of what you do" (al-Baqarah 2:140). According to the Islamic sources, this is a reference to the fact that Judaism and Christianity came into being long after Abraham and other prophets. Their claim to call Abraham Jew or Christian is, therefore, supported neither by scripture nor history.[18]

The figure of Abraham is central not only for the universal proclamation of divine unity but also for Muslims as the youngest members of the Abrahamic tradition. In the following verse, Abraham is presented as the "forefather" of all those who believe in one God and follow his "path" (*millah*): "And strive hard in God's cause with all the striving that is due to Him: it is He who has elected you [to carry His message], and has laid no hardship on you in [anything that pertains to] religion, [and made you follow] the path [*millah*] of your forefather Abraham. It is He who has named you in bygone times as well as in this [divine writ] - "those who have surrendered themselves to God" [*al-muslimun*], so that the

Messenger might bear witness to the truth before you, and that you might bear witness to it before all mankind. Thus, be constant in prayer, and render the purifying dues, and hold fast unto God." (al-Hajj 22:78)

This verse establishes an unmistakable link between Abraham and the Prophet of Islam. The Qur'ān narrates the story of Abraham to confirm the divinely sanctioned authority of prophet Muhammad as the last messenger. The Prophet's legitimacy is, thus, underlined by linking him to Abraham. Yet the verse also indicates to the newly established Muslim community where they agree and part ways with the followers of the earlier revelations. On the one hand, Abraham unites all monotheist believers since he is the most important figure on whom Jews, Christians, and Muslims can agree. Despite the obvious differences in theological languages and historical narratives, his message of divine unity is essentially the same in the three traditions. On the other hand, Jews and Christians are divided over Abraham, each calling him heir own "forefather." The Qur'ān seeks to overcome this impasse by declaring Abraham neither Jewish nor Christian but *muslim*, i.e., "he who surrenders himself to God."

This is where the prophet Muhammad joins Abraham, and the Qur'ān invites the People of the Book to recognize the continuity between the two. The Prophet of Islam is asked to reassert the essential unity of all revelations but to do so with a sense of compassion and respect: "Because of this, then, summon [all mankind], and pursue the right course, as thou hast been bidden [by God]; and do not follow their likes and dislikes, but say:

'I believe in whatever revelation God has bestowed from on high; and I am bidden to bring about equity in your mutual views. God is our Sustainer as well as your Sustainer. To us shall be accounted our deeds, and to you, your deeds. Let there be no contention between us and you: God will bring us all together - for with Him is all journeys' end.'" (al-Shura 42:15)

While the Qur'ān presents Abraham as the unifying father of monotheism and emphasizes the essential unity of the Abrahamic tradition, it also recognizes the multiplicity of "nations and tribes." As we shall see below, this multiplicity is presented as part of God's plan to test different communities in their effort to attain goodness. Yet the tension between the unity of the divine message and the plurality of different communities remains as an issue taken up by the later scholars of Islam. Whether the plurality of human communities is a natural state to be accepted or a state of disorder and confusion to be overcome would occupy the Islamic religious thought up to own day. Those who see plurality as chaos and detrimental to the unity of the community would reject all lenient measures and argue for radical orthodoxy. The Qur'ān and the Sunnah, however, present different possibilities, to which we now turn.

Plurality of Human Communities: A Paradox for Religions?

According to the Qur'ān, each prophet has been sent to a particular community with a particular language while the essence of that message is the same.[19] The Qur'ān accepts the multiplicity of human communities as part of God's

creation: "Now had God so willed, He could surely have made them all one single community" (al-Shura 42:8). Multiplicity is presented as contributing to the betterment of human societies whereby different groups, nations, and tribes come to know each other and vie for the common good. "O humans! Behold, We have created you all out of a male and a female, and have made you into nations and tribes so that you might come to know one another" (al-Hujurat 49:13). Underlying all this diversity is the same message embodied in the figure of Abraham: believing in one God and leading a virtuous life. In addressing the question of plurality, the Qur'ān uses the word *ummah* in both the singular and the plural forms. *Ummah* signifies a socio-religious community bound together by a set of common beliefs and principles. Within the pagan context of pre-Islamic Arabia, it is contrasted with such communal bonds as family, group, tribe, and nation. All of these associations are based on lineages other than what makes different communities an *ummah*. According to Ibn Qayyim, an *ummah* is "a single group [*sinif wahid*] held together by a single goal [*maqsad wahid*]."[20] The Qur'ān says that "all mankind were once but one single community [*ummah wahidah*], and only later did they begin to hold divergent views. And had it not been for a decree that had already gone forth from thy Sustainer, all their differences would indeed have been settled [from the outset]" (Yunus 10:19). The essential unity of humankind has been broken because of the inevitable differences that have arisen among people in the long course of history. The Qur'ān does not explain what these differences are, but it is not difficult to see that

they pertain primarily to the essential matters of religion and faith.[21] Prophets have been sent to address these differences and invite their communities back to their original faith in one God: "All mankind were once one single community (*ummah wahidah*).[22] [Then they began to differ] whereupon God raised up the prophets as heralds of glad tidings and as warners, and through them bestowed revelation from on high, setting forth the truth, so that it might decide between people with regard to all on which they had come to hold divergent views." (al-Baqarah 2:213)

The plurality of socio-religious communities is accepted as divinely decreed because God has willed to make humanity composed of different "tribes and nations": "And had thy Sustainer so willed, He could surely have made all mankind one single community [*ummah wahidah*]: but [He willed it otherwise, and so] they continue to hold divergent views" (Hud 11:118). These and similar verses display a constructive ambiguity about the delicate relationship between the plurality of human communities and the differences of opinion about God. It is not clear which comes first and what it implies for the history of religions. Are the differences of opinion a natural result of the existence of different communities or have different communities come about as a result of holding divergent and often conflicting views about God? It is hard to state with any degree of certainty that the Qur'ān completely endorses or abhors the plurality of "divergent views" held by different communities.

At any rate, unity is not uniformity and the Qur'ān tries to overcome this tension by calling all communities to

renew their covenant with God and seek guidance from him. "For, had God so willed, He could surely have made you all one single community; however, He lets go astray him that wills [to go astray], and guides aright him that wills [to be guided]; and you will surely be called to account for all that you ever did" (al-Nahl 16:93). In another context, the "plurality factor" underlies one's attitude towards other communities. While it is true that God has willed communities to be different, it is also clear that the goal is to regulate plurality in such a way to reach a desirable level of unity. The absence of unity in the sense of religious consensus or social cohesion does not nullify the good deeds of those who believe in God and seek virtue: "Verily [O you who believe in Me,] this community of yours is one single community, since I am the Sustainer of you all: worship, then, Me [alone]! But men have torn their unity wide asunder, [forgetting that] unto Us they all are bound to return. And yet, whoever does [the least] of righteous deeds and is a believer, his endeavour shall not be disowned: for, behold, We shall record it in his favour." (al-Anbiya 21: 92–94)

That plurality is not a case for disunity is highlighted in the verses that talk about diverse laws and paths given to different communities. There is no doubt that Islam, like all other religions, would like to see a unity of believers built around its main pillars. The exclusivist believer sees anything short of this as an imperfection on the part of the community of believers and even an affront to God. This is where theologies of intolerance arise and lead to sole claims of ownership over religious truth. Oppositional identities based on narrow interpretations of core religious teachings threaten to replace the universal message of faith

traditions. Yet to look for perfect unity in a world of multiplicity is to mistake the world for something more than what it is. The following verse sees no contradiction between the oneness of God and the plurality of ways and paths leading upto Him: "Unto every one of you have We appointed a [different] law [*shir'atan*] and way of life [*minhajan*]. And if God had so willed, He could surely have made you all one single community: but [He willed it otherwise] in order to test you by means of what He has vouchsafed unto you. Vie, then, with one another in doing good works! Unto God you all must return; and then He will make you truly understand all that on which you were wont to differ." (al-Maidah 5:48)

It is important to note that the word *shir'a(tan)* is derived from the same root as the word *shar'iah*. Even though the word *shari'ah* has come to mean Islamic law, it essentially indicates the totality of the moral, spiritual, social, and legal teachings of Islam (or any religion for that matter). Even if we understand the *shari'ah* as law specific to a religion, the above verse adds the word *minhaj(an),* implying that the combination of the two gives us a a belief system, a code of ethics and a way of life. In this context, each socio-religious community has been given a "clear path in religion to follow."[23] According to Qurtubi, "God has made the Torah for its people, the Gospel for its people and the Qur'ān for its people. This is in regards to laws [*shara'i*] and rituals [*'ibadat*]. As for the principle of divine unity (*tawhid*), there is no disagreement among them."[24] He then quotes Mujahid as saying that "the law [*shari'ah*] and the way of life [*minhaj*] are the religion of Muhmmad; everything else has been abrogated."

According to Ibn Kathir, God has certainly sent different paths and "traditions" [*sunan*] for people to follow but all of them have been abrogated after the coming of Islam.[25] While this is invariably the position of the most of the classical Islamic scholars and can be seen as a clear case of theological exclusivism, it does not appear to have invalidated the policies of tolerance and accommodation towards other religions and particularly the People of the Book.

This is borne out by the fact that the treatment of the plurality of human communities in the Qur'ān is not merely general or abstract. The Qur'ān is deeply conscious of the presence of Jews and Christians in Mecca and Medina and sees them closer to Muslims than other communities. It is this historical and theological proximity that creates a sense of theological rivalry as to who is best entitled to the legacy of Abraham. A large number of verses talk about specific Jewish and Christian objections against the new revelation and the prophet Muhammad. Even though they focus on specific arguments, they provide general guidelines about Islam's attitude towards the People of the Book. And they display both inclusivist and exclusivist tones. They contain ele-ments of inclusivism because Islam relates itself to Judaism and Christianity through the figure of Abraham, the story of Noah, the story of creation, and the stories of Solomon, Joseph, Moses, Mary, Jesus, and other prophets who are common to the Bible and the Qur'ān. The moral and eschatological teachings of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam can also be included in this category of teachings. The focal point of such verses is the recognition of the truth of the new religion and its prophet by

acknowledging their common lineage that goes back to Abraham. Instead of rejecting *in toto* the earlier revelations and the religious communities that subscribe to them, the Qur'ān invites them to agree and eventually unite on the fundamental principles of the Abrahamic tradition.

Besides specific theological arguments that contain elements of inclusivism, it should also be mentioned that Islam did not have to quarrel with the People of the Book in the way Christianity did with Judaism. Since Islam was neither the fulfilment of a Judaic or Christian prophecy nor was the prophet Muhammad the messiah, Muslims did not have to contest Jews or Christians on issues specific to the theological traditions of these two communities. Furthermore, there was no ground for a blood libel between Islam on the one hand and Judaism and Christianity on the other. Even though Islam quarrelled with these two religions on many theological issues, it started out with recognizing and accepting their existence. Since Islam was ethnically diverse and culturally plural from the very beginning, it did not have any reason to oppose or defame Jews on account of their ethnic identity. In short, Islam did not need to establish itself at the expense of its Judaic or Christian predecessors. This explains to a large extent why there was no demonization of Jews or Christians by Muslims despite the rich literature of intense polemics, bitter arguments, and counterarguments.

Yet, despite the legal and socio-political factors that have facilitated the policies of tolerance towards the People of the Book, the Qur'ān also contains elements of exclusivism, for it calls itself

with a specific name, *Islam*, and invites its followers to be *Muslims*. No religion can be entirely inclusivist because this would destroy the spiritual integrity of any tradition. In this sense, Islam could not have called itself simply the *religion of Abraham*; it had to distinguish itself from the other contenders in a way that would give its followers a non-ambiguous sense of allegiance and integrity. This has not prevented the Qur'ān from approaching the People of the Bo-

The plurality of socio-religious communities is accepted as divinely decreed because God has willed to make humanity composed of different "tribes and nations".

ok with differing degrees of critical engagement while calling upon them to understand the essential meaning of religious faith.

A good example of this is the treatment of non-Islamic rituals in the Qur'ān. Putting aside the polytheistic rituals of the pagan Arabs, which Islam rejects unequivocally, the Qur'ān discusses a number of ancient ritual practices and asks what purpose they are meant to serve. In its anthropological analyses of rituals, the Qur'ān draws attention to their fundamental meaning and invites non-Muslims to look for what is essential in the Muslim rituals.

I will pick up two examples to illustrate this point. The first example is from the Meccan polytheists. To show that true piety is not to perform blindly certain rituals but to seek proximity to God, the Qur'ān refers to the Meccan custom of "entering houses from the rear." The Meccans used to dig up holes and stay in them during the time of pilgrimage. As part of the customary ritual, they also used to enter their houses from the backdoors.

When the Meccans asked the prophet Muhammad about the significance of the "new moons" and the time of pilgrimage, he was told to give the following answer: "They will ask thee about the new moons. Say: 'They indicate the periods for [various doings of] mankind, including the pilgrimage'" (al-Baqarah 2:189). While this answer addresses the specific question about the "new moons" (*ahillah*), it shifts the focus from a specific ritual to the general question of what constitutes piety and God-consciousness (*al-taqwa*), which is the essence of all rituals. The remainder of the verse refers both to a specific ritual during pilgrimage and to the larger meaning of an act deemed to be pious: "However, piety [*al-birr*] does not consist in your entering houses from the rear [as it were] but truly pious is he who is conscious of God. Hence enter houses through their doors, and remain conscious of God, so that you might attain to a happy state" (al-Baqarah 2:189). The verse disapproves of the act of "entering houses from the rear" yet gives no specific reason for it. But it also uses a metaphorical language, for the expression "enter(ing) houses through their doors" has the meaning of doing something properly. *Al-birr*, thus, points to the spiritual meaning of ritual acts and invites the Meccan polytheists as well as the People of the Book to go beyond the narrow perspectives of their respective traditions. The second example is related to facing the Ka'ba as the direction of prayers. In the early years of the revelation, the prophet Muhammad had instructed Muslims to pray towards Jerusalem while facing the Ka'ba at the same time.[26] While this had certainly gained the favour of the Jews of Mecca and Medina especially against the Christians, it has also led them to boast of the fact that Muslims were facing *their qiblah*. This seems to have caused some concern for the Prophet leading him to pray to God for a new direction of prayer for Muslims: "We have seen thee [O Prophet] often turn thy face towards heaven [for guidance]: and now We shall indeed make thee turn in prayer in a direction which will fulfil thy desire. Turn, then, thy face towards the Inviolable House of Worship [*masjid al-haram*]; and wherever you all may be, turn your faces towards it [in prayer]" (al-Baqarah 2:144).

This change was probably expected because, according to the Qur'ān (al-i 'Imran 3:96), the Ka'ba is the first sanctuary devoted to the worship of

God to which Abraham (and his sons) turned (al-Baqarah 2:125–29).[27] The incident appears to have caused a rift between Muslims and certain members of the Jewish and Christian communities in Medina. The Qur'ān accuses them of not being sincere in their hardened positions: "And, verily, those who have been given the book aforetime know well that this [commandment] comes in truth from their Sustainer, and God is not unaware of what they do" (al-Baqarah 2:144). The People of the Book are expected to welcome such a change because they know the meaning of praying towards a certain direction: "They unto whom We have given the book aforetime know it as they know their own children: but, behold, some of them knowingly suppress the truth" (al-Baqarah 2:146). The prophet Muhammad is asked to endure any criticism or ridicule that may come from the Arabian Jews and Christians. He is also advised to distinguish his *qibla* from theirs and accept it as a fact: "... even if thou were to place all evidence before those who have been given the book, they would not follow thy direction of prayer [*qiblah*], and neither mayest thou follow their direction of prayer [*qiblah*], nor even do they follow one another's direction. And if thou shouldst follow their errant views after all the knowledge that has come unto thee, thou wouldst surely be among the evildoers." (al-Baqarah 2:145)

The Qur'ān addresses the *qibla* incident to give assurances to the Muslim community in Medina on the one hand and draw attention to the futility of taking rituals to be an absolute indicator of piety on the other. Against religious sectarianism, God asks all believers to put aside their petty differences: "... every community faces a direction of its own, of which He is the focal point.[28] Vie, therefore, with one another in doing good works. Wherever you may be, God will gather you all unto Himself: for, verily, God has the power to will anything" (al-Baqarah 2:148). The expression "every community faces a direction of its own" gives a similar meaning stated in al-Maidah 5:48, quoted above. Just as Muslims accept the *qiblah* of Jews and Christians, they also should recognize the Muslim *qiblah* as valid for turning towards God during ritual prayers. The Qur'ān chastises those who ridicule the Prophet of Islam for turning towards Ka'ba after praying towards Jerusalem: "The weak-minded [or the foolish, *sufaha*] among people will say 'What has turned them away from the direction of prayer which they have hitherto observed?' Say: 'God's is the east and the west; He guides whom He wills onto a straight way'" (al-Baqarah 2:142–43).

In these and other verses, the Qur'ān warns against the danger of causing friction on the basis of differences in ritual acts. While this is an attempt to safeguard the newly established Muslim community against the accusations of the Jews and Christians of Medina, it is also a call for transcending religious and sectarian differences. The following verse makes a strong point about this: "True piety [*al-birr*] does not consist in turning your faces towards the east or the west. But truly pious is he who believes in God, and the Last Day; and the angels, and revelation, and the prophets; and spends his substance - however much he himself may cherish it - upon his near of kin, and the orphans, and the needy, and the wayfarer, and the beggars, and for the freeing of

human beings from bondage; and is constant in prayer, and renders the purifying dues; and [truly pious are] they who keep their promises whenever they promise, and are patient in misfortune and hardship and in time of peril: it is they that have proved themselves true, and it is they, they who are conscious of God." (al-Baqarah 2:177)

The word *al-birr*, translated as virtue and righteousness, signifies a virtuous act conducted with the fear and consciousness of God. The person who has the *birr* is the person who is in constant vigilance and mindfulness of God.[29] The Qur'ān defines true piety as having full consciousness of God, believing in his books and prophets, and doing such virtuous acts as praying, almsgiving, and helping the poor and the needy.[30] Virtue requires constant vigilance, and the believers are not excepted: "[But as for you, O believers] never shall you attain to true piety [*al-birr*] unless you spend out of what you cherish yourselves; and whatever you spend, verily God has full knowledge thereof" (al-i 'Imran 3:92). The People of the Book are also reminded: "Do you enjoin other people to be pious while you forget your own self; and yet you recite the Book [*al-kitab*]" (Al-Baqarah 2:44).

In addressing specific rituals, the Qur'ān does not belittle their significance but points to what is essential in them. As later Muslim scholars and especially the Sufis would elaborate, this generic rule holds true for all ritual practices. The Qur'ān insists that true piety and goodness (*al-birr*) are the ultimate goal of religious acts and that all communities should seek to attain it. Furthermore, vieying for piety and goodness is a solid basis for an ethics of co-existence: " ... help one another in furthering virtue [*al birr*] and God consciousness, and do not help one another in furthering evil and enmity" (al-Mai'dah 5:2).

Religious Tolerance and the People of the Book

There are no other two religions on which the Qur'ān spends as much time as on Judaism and Christianity. Given Islam's claim to be the last revelation and completion of the Abrahamic tradition, this should come as no surprise. A large number of verses speak about various Jewish and Christian themes. These Qur'ānic conversations concentrate, among others, on three issues. The first is the disputes among Jews and Christians about issues such as Abraham, revelation, salvation, and the hereafter. Some verses describe these disputes as futile, selfish, and ignorant (al-Baqarah 2:111), referring, at the same time, to the stiff opposition of Jewish and Christian leaders to the prophet Muhammad. The second is the political alliances which the Jews and some Christians of Medina had formed with the Meccan polytheists against the newly established Muslim community. The most severe statements in the Qur'ān and the Hadith collections against the Jews pertain to this historical fact. The only incident in the history of Islam where a particular group of Jews has been ordered to be killed is related to the violation of a treaty of political alliance between certain Jewish tribes and Muslims in Medina. The third issue is the recognition of the validity of the new revelation and the prophet Muhammad, which remains a difficult issue for Christians up to our

own day. The Qur'ān brings up the disputes between Jews and Christians to indicate to them that while claiming to be heirs to the legacy of Abraham, they are engaged in destructive quarrels and petty fights. With such bitter disunity and bickering, they cannot be proper models of what Abraham stood for. The Qur'ān seems to imply that the intractable opposition of Jews and Christians of Madina to the prophet Muhammad is similar to their internal disputes and thus cannot serve as a basis for a serious dialogue: "Furthermore, the Jews assert, "The Christians have no valid ground for their beliefs," while the Christians assert, "The Jews have no valid ground for their beliefs" and both quote the Book! Even thus, like unto what they say, have [always] spoken those who were devoid of knowledge; but it is God who will judge between them on Resurrection Day with regard to all on which they were wont to differ." (al-Baqarah 2:113)

Following this line of argumentation, the Qur'ān addresses Jews and Christians directly because they are different and more special from the polytheists, Magians, or Zoroastrians. In some cases, they are described as behaving worse than the disbelievers of Mecca. It is usually these verses that Muslim exclusivists take up as a basis for classifying the People of the Book together with the Meccan polytheists. The Qur'ān, however, does not fail to make a distinction between those who have completely turned against God and those whose hearts are filled with reverence for God among Jews and Christians. There is also a distinction between those who have betrayed the Prophet and his community and those who have honoured their promises.

The following verse, for instance, is extremely harsh on the People of the Book: "Overshadowed by ignominy are they wherever they may be, save [when they bind themselves again] in a bond with God and a bond with men; for they have earned the burden of God's condemnation, and are overshadowed by humiliation: all this [has befallen them] because they persisted in denying the truth of God's messages and in slaying the prophets against all right: all this, because they rebelled [against God], and persisted in transgressing the bounds of what is right." (al-i 'Imran 3:112)

"True piety [al-birr] does not consist in turning your faces towards the east or the west. But truly pious is he who believes in God, and the Last Day; and the angels, and revelation, and the prophets."

This is followed by another verse which reflects the careful discernment of the Qur'ān regarding the People of the Book: "[But] they are not all alike: among the People of the Book are upright people [*ummah*], who recite God's messages throughout the night, and prostrate themselves [before Him]. They believe in God and the Last Day, and enjoin the doing of what is right and forbid the doing of what is wrong, and vie with one another in doing good works: and these are among the righteous. And whatever good they do, they shall never be denied the reward thereof: for, God has full knowledge of those who are conscious of Him." (al-i 'Imran 3: 113–15)

While the classical commentators usually read this verse as referring to Jews and Christians who converted to Islam, there is no compelling reason that we should accept it as abrogated (*mansukh*). In fact, it would not make

sense to call them the People of the Book if they had already converted to Islam. Such subtle distinctions are not hard to find in the Qur'ān. Yet in al-Maidah 5: 82:84, we find a clear favouring of Christians over Jews: "Thou wilt surely find that, of all people, the most hostile to those who believe [in this divine writ] are the Jews as well as those who are bent on ascribing divinity to aught beside God; and thou wilt surely find that, of all people, they

Even though the Qur'an's harsh treatment of Jewish tribes in Medina has not been lost to the Prophet and his followers, it has not led to an anti-Semitic literature in the Islamic tradition.

who say "Behold, we are Christians" come closest to feeling affection for those who believe [in this divine writ]: this is so because there are priests and monks among them, and because these are not given to arrogance. For, when they come to understand what has been bestowed from on high upon this Apostle, thou canst see their eyes overflow with tears, because they recognize something of its truth; [31] [and] they say: "O our Sustainer! We do believe; make us one, then, with all who bear witness to the truth. And how could we fail to believe in God and in whatever truth has come unto us, when we so fervently desire that our Sustainer count us among the righteous?" (al-Ma'idah 5:82–84)

The "closeness" to which the verse refers is a reference to both the social and political proximity which the Christian communities of the period felt towards Muslims. The famous expedition of a group of companions of the Prophet to the Christian king of Abyssinia and the warm welcome they had received can also be seen as a factor in this clearly favourable description of Christians.

As a number of early Muslim historians have noted, Muslims were hoping for the eventual success of the Byzantine Empire over the Persians because the former were Christian.[32] Furthermore, the Christians of Medina had remained loyal to the Medinan Treaty against the Meccans, thus gaining the favour and affinity of Muslims. Commenting on the verse above, Ibn Qayyim quotes al-Zujjaj as saying that Christians are paised for they have been "less inclined towards the Meccans than the Jews."[33]

The harsh assessment of the Jews is, thus, a response to the political alliance of the Jews of Medina with the Meccan polytheists and in violation of the Medinan Treaty to which we referred above. According to the treaty, the Jewish tribes in Medina and Muslims had agreed to defend each other against aggressors, i.e., the Meccans. It is clear that the prophet Muhammad was concerned to secure a strong political alliance with the Jews and Christians of Medina against the Meccans. While the Christians remained mostly loyal to the agreement and did not fight or plot against Muslims, the Meccans were able to get some prominent Jewish leaders on their side in their military campaigns against Muslims.[34] Those who violated the treaty and thus betrayed the Muslim community included not only Jews but also those whom the Qur'ān calls the "hypocrites" (*al-munafiqun*). The Qur'ān uses an extremely harsh language against them because they claim to be part of the Muslim community while forming alliances with the Meccan polytheists. The Qur'ān is so stern on this point that the prophet Muhammad is banned from praying for their soul.

Even though the Qur'ān's harsh

treatment of Jewish tribes in Medina has not been lost to the Prophet and his followers, it has not led to an anti-Semitic literature in the Islamic tradition. Since the Jewish communities, unlike Christianity, did not pose a political threat that had, at least by association, the backing of the Byzantine Empire, they were hardly part of political conflicts in later centuries. For both political and theological reasons, the great majority of Muslim polemical works in the medieval period have been directed against Christianity more than Judaism.[35] The socio-political and economic structure of Muslim societies has been conducive to a largely successful integration of Jewish communities. As I mentioned above, the Jewish merchants were never ostracized for their profession or prevented from practicing it because the economic system of Muslim societies allowed greater flexibility for international trade and finance. Furthermore, the Jews in the Near East where Muslims came to rule were the indigenous communities of the area, not immigrants as they were in Western Christendom. This has given them a right of property and communal freedom that we do not see in Europe. In fact, this can be compared only to the position of Hindus after India came under Muslim rule. Finally, the ethnic composition of Muslim societies was so diverse that the Jewish communities did not have to stand out as different or "strange."[36]

Even though the Qur'ān approaches Christians more favourably than Jews, it does not shy away from criticizing them for introducing a number of "inventions" or "corruption" (*tahrif*) into their religion. As mentioned before, there are many such criticisms the most important of which concern the nature of Jesus Christ and the Christian claim that he was the son of God. This is not the place to go into a discussion of the place of Jesus in Islam. It suffices to say, however, that the Qur'ān and the prophetic tradition reject (compare al-Nisa 4:171–73 and al-Ma'idah 5:72–77) the divinity of Jesus as formulated by the later Christian doctrine. Besides theology, one specific practice for which the Qur'ān criticizes the Christians is "monasticism" (*rahbaniyyah*). Christians are praised for their fear and veneration of God but criticized for going to the extreme of inventing a monastic life not enjoined by God: "And thereupon We caused [other of] Our apostles to follow in their footsteps; and [in the course of time] We caused them to be followed by Jesus, the son of Mary, upon whom We bestowed the Gospel; and in the hearts of those who [truly] followed him We engendered compassion and mercy. But as for monasticism [*rahbaniyyah*]; We did not enjoin it upon them: they invented it themselves out of a desire for God's goodly acceptance. But then, they did not [always] observe it as it ought to have been observed: and so We granted their recompense unto such of them as had [truly] attained to faith, whereas many of them became iniquitous." (al-Hadid 57:27)

The underlying principle behind the attitudes of accommodation is that the overall interests of human beings are served better in peace than in conflict.

The classical commentators interpret this verse as pointing to the harsh conditions of early Christians to protect themselves against the persecutions of the Roman rulers. Monasticism (and celibacy, we should add) could be seen as a temporary solution in

times of extreme measures but cannot be a general rule for attaining piety because religions are meant to save not just the elect but everyone. It is also important to note that the mainstream Islamic tradition does not posit any intermediaries between God and the ordinary believer. There is no need for a monastic institution to train spiritual leaders to provide religious guidance for the average person. The commentators, thus, take this opportunity to stress that Islam has come to establish a balance (*wasatah*) between worldly indulgence and extreme asceticism. This point is reiterated in the following verse: "And ordain Thou for us what is good in this world as well as in the life to come: behold, unto Thee have we turned in repentance!" [God] answered: "With My chastisement do I afflict whom I will - but My grace overspreads everything: and so I shall confer it on those who are conscious of Me and spend in charity, and who believe in Our messages those who shall follow the [last] Apostle, the unlettered Prophet whom they shall find described in the Torah that is with them, and [later on] in the Gospel: [the Prophet] who will enjoin upon them the doing of what is right and forbid them the doing of what is wrong, and make lawful to them the good things of life and forbid them the bad things, and lift from them their burdens and the shackles that were upon them [aforetime]. Those, therefore, who shall believe in him, and honour him, and succour him, and follow the light that has been bestowed from on high through him-it is they that shall attain to a happy state." (al-A'raf 7:156–57)

While Jews and Christians are usually thought to be the People of the Book, the Qur'ān also mentions several other communities as part of the non-Islamic religious traditions under protection. The mention of "Sabians" in the following shows that the concept of the People of the Book was set to be flexible and ever-expanding from the very beginning: "Verily, those who have attained to faith, as well as those who follow the Jewish faith, and the Christians, and the Sabians[37]; all who believe in God and the Last Day and do righteous deeds shall have their reward with their Sustainer; and no fear need they have, and neither shall they grieve" (al-Baqarah 2:62).[38] It is important to note that the status of "no fear" mentioned in the above verse legally refers to the protection of the People of the Book as part of *ahl al-dhimmah*. While the *dhimmi* status was initially given to Jews, Christians, Sabians, and Zoroastrians, its scope was later extended to include all non-Muslims living under Islam especially in the subcontinent of India.[39] This is exactly what happened in India when Muhammad b. al-Qasim, the first Muslim commander to set foot on Indian soil in the eighth century, compared Hindus to Jews, Christians and Zoroastrians and declared them as part of the *ahl al-dhimmah*.[40] This decision, which was later sanctioned by the Hanafi jurists, was a momentous event in the development of the Muslim attitude towards the religions of India.

That the People of the Book were accorded a special status is not only attested by the various Qur'ānic verses but also recorded in a number of treatises signed by the prophet Muhammad after his migration to Medina in 622. The "Medinan Treatise" (*sahifat al-madina*), also called the "Medinan Constitution," recognizes the Jews of Banu 'Awf,

Banu al-Najar, Banu Tha'laba, Banu Harith, and other Jewish tribes as distinct communities: "The Jews of Banu 'Awf are a community [*ummah*] together with Muslims; they have their own religion, properties and lives, and Muslims their own except those who commit injustice and wrongdoing; and they only harm themselves."[41] Another treatise signed with the People of the Book of Najran reads as follows: "They [People of the Book] shall have the protection of Allāh and the promise of Muhammad, the Apostle of Allāh, that they shall be secured their lives, property, lands, creed, those absent and those present, their families, their churches, and all that they possess. No bishop or monk shall be displaced from

his parish or monastery no priest shall be forced to abandon his priestly life. No hardships or humiliation shall be imposed on them nor shall their land be occupied by [our] army. Those who seek justice, shall have it: there will be no oppressors nor oppressed."[42] 'Umar ibn al-Khattab, the second caliph of Islam, has given a similar safeguard (*aman*) to the people of Jerusalem when he took the city in 623: "In the name of God, the Merciful and Compassionate! This is the safeguard granted to the inhabitants of 'Alia [Jerusalem] by the servant of God, 'Umar, commander of the faithful. They are given protection of their persons, their churches, their crosses - whether these are in good state or not - and their cult in general. No constraints

will be exercised against them in the matter of religion and no harm will be done to any of them. The inhabitants of 'Alia will have to pay the *jizya* in the same way as the inhabitants of other towns. It rests with them to expel the Byzantines and robbers from their city. Those among them the latter who wish to remain there will be permitted on condition that they pay the same *jizya* as the inhabitants of 'Alia."[43]

The poll tax called *jizya* was imposed on *ahl al-dhimmah* as compensation for their protection as well as for their exemption from compulsory military service. Contrary to a common belief, the primary goal of *jizya* was not the "humiliation" of the People of the Book. While most contemporary translations of the Qur'ān render the words *wa hum al-saghirun* (al-Tawbah 9: 29) as "so that they will be humiliated," Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyyah, who has written the most extensive work on the People of the Book, reads it as securing the allegiance of the People of the Book to laws pertaining to them (*ahkam al-millah*). According to Ibn Qayyim, *wa hum al-saghirun* means making all subjects of the state obey the law and, in the case of the People of the Book, pay the *jizya*.[44] Despite Ibn Qayyim's relatively lenient position, his teacher, the famous Hanbali scholar Ibn Taymiyya, takes a hard position against non-Muslims and calls for their conversion or submission.[45] Yet, Abu Yusuf, the student of Abu Hanifa, the founder of the Hanafi school of law, advises the Abbasid caliph Harun al-Rashid (d. 803) to "treat with leniency those under the protection of our Prophet Muhammad, and not allow that more than what is due to be taken from them or more that they are able to pay, and that nothing should be confiscated from their properties without legal justification."[46] To substantiate his case, Abu Yusuf narrates a tradition in which the Prophet says that "he who robs a *dhimmi* or imposes on him more than he can bear will have me as his opponent." Another well-known case is the Prophet's ordering of the execution of a Muslim who had killed a *dhimmi*. In response to the incident, the Prophet has said that "it is most appropriate that I live up fully to my (promise of) protection."[47]

While these examples show the complexities of Islamic history, the underlying principle behind the attitudes of accommodation is that the overall interests of human beings are served better in peace than in conflict.[48] In dealing with the People of the Book, the prophet Muhammad is instructed to take a special care: "Hence, judge between the followers of earlier revelation in accordance with what God has bestowed from on high" (al-Mai'dah 5:49). Yet he is also warned against the temptation of compromising his mission in order to gain their favour: "And do not follow their errant views; and beware of them, lest they tempt thee away from aught that God has bestowed from on high upon thee. And if they turn away [from His commandments], then know that it is but God's will [thus] to afflict them for some of their sins: for, behold, a great many people are iniquitous indeed" (al-

While we can find divergent policies of tolerance and intolerance in the Islamic religious tradition and social history, the contemporary Muslim world has to confront the challenge of religious pluralism in a way that would avoid the extremes of intolerant exclusivism on the one hand and a rootless pluralism at the expense of all orthodoxy on the other.

Ma'idah 5:49). None of these measures would have made sense had they not been complemented by a clear rule about the problem of conversion. It is one thing to say that people are free to choose their religion, but it is another thing to set in place a legal and social system where the principle of religious freedom is applied with relative ease and success. This is what al-Baqarah 2: 256 establishes with its proclamation that "there is no compulsion in religion." The verse and the way it states the principle are crucial for understanding the policies of conversion that have developed in early and later Islamic history. Both the overall attitude of the Qur'ān and the Prophet toward non-Muslims and the legal injunctions regarding the People of the Book stipulate against forced conversion. Furthermore, the Arabic command form *la ikraha* can be read not only as "there is no compulsion" but also as "there should be no compulsion." The subtle difference between the two is that, while the former implies that the proofs and foundations of Islam are clear and therefore the non-believer should accept its truth without difficulty, the latter states that no non- Muslim can be forced to convert even if the proofs are clear to him or her. Like Christianity, Islam encourages its followers to spread the word and argue with peoples of other faiths "in the best possible way" so that they understand and, it is hoped, embrace the message of Islam. This leads us to yet another tension in Islam between claims to universality and policies of protection and accommodation. Furthermore, some later jurists have claimed that Baqarah 256 has been abrogated by other verses after the

conquest of Mecca.[49] According to Qurtubi, Sulayman ibn Musa has defended this argument because "the Prophet of Islam has forced the pagan Arabs into Islam, fought them and refused to accept from them anything but professing the Islamic faith."[50] The second view is that the verse has not been abrogated because it has been sent specifically for the People of the Book. This interpretation is supported by the famous incident, for which Baqarah 256 has been revealed, when Bani Salim b. 'Afw, one of the companions of the Prophet from Medina, had forced his Christian sons to accept Islam.[51] According to Ibn Kathir, the verse is a command "not to force anyone to enter the religion of Islam because it is clear and evident."[52] Another incident cited by Qurtubi involves Umar ibn al- Khattab, the second caliph of Islam, who asks an old Christian woman to embrace Islam. The old lady responds by saying that "I am an old lady and death is nearing me." Upon this answer, Umar reads the verse Baqarah 256 and leaves her.[53]

Fakh al-Din al-Razi opposes com- pulsion of any kind on intellectual grounds. According to him, not just the People of the Book but no one should be forced to believe because "God has not built faith upon compulsion and pressure but on acceptance and free choice." Even though al-Razi considers this "free will defence" to be the position of the Mutazilites, to whom he is always opposed, he rejects al-Qifal's argument that, since all of the proofs of the true religion have been made clear to the disbeliever, he may be forced to accept it. For al-Razi, compulsion in matters of faith annuls the principle of free will (*taklif*) and goes against God's

plan to try people.[54]

The last point I will take up here concerns the verse al-Ma'idah 5:51, which has led many Western students of Islam to claim that the Qur'ān advises Muslims against developing friendly relationship with Jews and Christians. The verse reads as follows: "O you who have attained to faith! Do not take the Jews and the Christians for your *awliya'*: they are but *awliya'* of one another. Whoever among you takes them as his *wali* is one of them." The word *awliya'* is the plural of *wali,* which is rendered in most of the English translations of the Qur'ān as "friend." According to this interpretation, the verse reads as "do not take Jews and Christians as friends." Even though the word *wali* means friend in the ordinary sense of the term, in this context, it has the meaning of protector, legal guardian, and ally. This rendering is confirmed by al-Tabari's explanation that the verse 5:51 was revealed during one of the battles (the battle of Badr in 624 or Uhud in 625) that the Muslims in Medina had fought against the Meccans. Under the circumstances of a military campaign, the verse advises the new Muslim community not to form political alliances with non-Muslims if they violate the terms of a treaty they had signed with them.[55] It is important to note that Muslims, Jews, or Christians to whom the verse refers represent not only religious but also socio-political communities. The meaning of "ally" or "legal guardian" for *wali/awliya'* makes sense especially in view of Ibn Qayyim's explanation that "whoever forms an alliance with them through a treaty [*'ahd*] is with them in violating the agreement."[56]

Relations with Non-Muslims

The Islamic code of ethics for the treatment of non-Muslims follows the overall principles discussed so far. As far as the Islamic attitude towards Judaism and Christianity is concerned, there is a delicate balance between treating them with respect and refusing to compromise the essential features of the Abrahamic tradition. Among the non-Muslim communities, the only exception is the Meccan polytheists, which Islam rejects *in toto*. The "sword verses" of the Qur'ān that aim at the Meccans are misinterpreted as a declaration of war on all non-Muslims. The fact is that the Qur'ān calls upon Muslims to take up arms against the Meccans and explains the reasons in nonambiguous terms:

And fight in God's cause against those who wage war against you, but do not commit aggression - for, verily, God does not love aggressors. And slay them wherever you may come upon them, and drive them away from wherever they drove you away - for oppression [*fitnah*][57] is even worse than killing. And fight not against them near the Inviolable House of Worship unless they fight against you there first; but if they fight against you, slay them: such shall be the recompense of those who deny the truth. But if they desist - behold, God is much-forgiving, a dispenser of grace. Hence, fight against them until there is no more oppression and all worship is devoted to God alone; but if they desist, then all hostility shall cease, save against those who [wilfully] do wrong. (al-Baqarah 2:190–93)

According to Ibn Hisham, there are primarily two reasons for Islam's

extremely hostile attitude towards the Meccan pagans. The first is the impossibility of reconciling paganism and polytheism with the central Islamic doctrine of divine unity (*tawhid*). Numerous Qur'ānic verses and prophetic traditions describe the ignorance and arrogance of Meccan polytheists in vivid detail. Their lack of respect for God and human dignity and such social evils as slavery, infanticide (compare al-Mumtahinah 60:12; al-Takwir 81:8–9), and tribal racism are results of their fundamental theological error: taking partners unto God (*shirk*). The second reason, which Ibn Hisham emphasizes more than the first, is their total denial of the messenger of God and the political plots they created to destroy the new Muslim community. Early Islamic history is filled with incidents of the inhuman treatment of Muhammad and his followers. That the Meccans tried to kill the Prophet of Islam has only added to the sense of outrage and hostility towards them.[58] Abu Hanifah and others have pointed out that the only community that will not receive mercy on the day of judgment are the Meccan polytheists to whom the last Prophet has been sent. According to the majority of the classical commentators, the famous "slay them …" verse refers exclusively to pagan Arabs who fought against the Prophet and his followers.[59] While military combat is not completely ruled out but kept as a last resort, war, when it becomes inevitable, has to be conducted under certain restrictions.[60]

That the verses of war are specifically for those who have declared war against Muslims is also confirmed by the verses al-Mumtahinah 60:8–9. It is important to note that the chapter cites two main reasons for taking up arms against the Meccan polytheists: suppression of faith and expulsion from homeland.[61] Both actions were taken against the early Muslim community in Mecca and later in Madina. Muslims are ordered not to take the Meccans as allies or protectors (*awliya'*) and show them any "kindness": O you who have attained to faith! Do not take My enemies - who are your enemies as well - for your allies, showing them affection even though they are bent on denying whatever truth has come unto you, [and even though] they have driven the Apostle and yourselves away, [only] because you believe in God, your Sustainer! If [it be true that] you have gone forth [from your homes] to strive [*jihad*] in My cause, and out of a longing for My goodly acceptance, [do not take them for your friends,] inclining towards them in secret affection: for I am fully aware of all that you may conceal as well as of all that you do openly. And any of you who does this has already strayed from the right path. al-Mumtahinah 60:1

The verses bring up the example of Abraham who had a similar experience with his community. Abraham is mentioned to have prayed for his father: "I shall indeed pray for [God's] forgiveness for thee, although I have it not in my power to obtain anything from God in thy behalf" (al-Mumtahinah 60:4). This reminder was presumably meant to give moral support to the first Muslims who were persecuted and expelled from their homeland. In fact, the verses draw attention to the weakness of some among them for their desire to approach the Meccans to protect their children and relatives who were still in Mecca. Yet the Qur'ān also warns that the enmity in which they

find themselves is not unconditional: "[But] it may well be that God will bring about [mutual] affection between you [O believers] and some of those whom you [now] face as enemies: for, God is all-powerful and God is much-forgiving, a dispenser of grace" (al-Mumtahinah 60:7). These provisions and examples are summed up in the following verse, which lays the ground rules for dealing with non-Muslims in times of war and peace:

"As for such [of the unbelievers] as do not fight against you on account of [your] faith [*al-din*], and neither drive you forth from your homelands, God does not forbid you to show them kindness and to behave towards them with full equity: for, verily, God loves those who act equitably. God only forbids you to turn in friendship towards such as fight against you because of [your] faith, and drive you forth from your homelands, or aid [others] in driving you forth: and as for those [from among you] who turn towards them in friendship; it is they, they who are truly wrongdoers!" (al-Mumtahinah 60:8–9)

According to Ibn al-Qayyim, the verse "permits [*rukhsah*] to have good relations with those who have not declared war against Muslims and allows kindness towards them even though they may not be allies."[62] Al-Tabari interprets the verse along similar lines: "The most credible view is that the verse refers to people of all kinds of creeds and religions who should be shown kindness and treated equitably. God referred to all those who do not fight the Muslims or drive them from their homes without exception or qualification."[63] In granting permission to Muslims to fight against the Meccans, the Qur'ān stresses that the kind of fight Muslims are allowed to engage is not only for themselves but for all those who believe in God:

"Permission [to fight] is given to those against whom war is being wrongfully waged and, verily, God has indeed the power to succour them - those who have been driven from their homelands against all right for no other reason than their saying. "Our Sustainer is God!" For, if God had not

enabled people to defend themselves against one another, [all] monasteries and churches and synagogues and mosques - in [all of] which God's name is abundantly extolled - would surely have been destroyed [ere now]." (al-Hajj 22: 39–40)

Thus, putting aside the Arab pagans during the time of the Prophet, the Qur'ān proposes a number of lenient measures for the treatment of the People of the Book and other non-Muslim communities. One verse states this as follows: "Call thou [all mankind] unto thy Sustainer's path with wisdom and goodly exhortation, and argue with them in the most kindly manner" (al-Nahl 16:125). The Jews and Christians are mentioned specifically as partners of a serious and respectful dialogue:

"And do not argue with the People of the Book otherwise than in a most kindly manner - unless it be such of them as are bent on evildoing and say: "We believe in that which has been bestowed from on high upon us, as well as that which has been bestowed upon you: our God and your God is one and the same, and it is unto Him that We [all] surrender ourselves." (al-'Ankabut 29:46)

While we can find divergent policies of tolerance and intolerance in the Islamic religious tradition and social history, the contemporary Muslim world has to confront the challenge of religious pluralism in a way that would avoid the extremes of intolerant exclusivism on the one hand and a rootless pluralism at the expense of all orthodoxy on the other. Reading our foundational texts and history must be guided by a set of principles that would remain true to the spirit of the tradition while having enough

suppleness to deal with the current challenges. We can cite countless cases from the military conquests of the Ottomans to the employment of Jewish and Christian professionals in various positions across the Islamic world. We can remind ourselves that Muslim empires have had periods of peace and stability as well as conflict and disorder. There have been many confrontations between Muslim and Christian communities in the Balkans, Asia Minor, or North Africa. There is no doubt that all of these factors have had an impact on the development of the Islamic legal tradition and shaped the framework of socioreligious practices in the Muslim world. The historical and contextual reading of Islamic law is, therefore, indispensable for distinguishing between what the contemporary scholar Taha Jabir Alwani calls the "fiqh of conflict" and the "fiqh of coexistence."[64]

A case in point is the question of apostasy in Islam. The classical jurists have usually ruled that apostasy in Islam is punishable by death. The Qur'ān does not mention any penalty for the apostate but warns of divine punishment on the Day of Judgment (compare al-Baqarah 2:217; al-Ma'idah 5:54). The ruling for death penalty is based on the hadith in which the Prophet says to "kill those who change their religion." At its face value, this is an extremely harsh statement and goes against the principle of free choice in Islam. The hadith, however, makes perfect sense when we understand the context in which it has been said. The hadith refers to changing one's political alliance and betraying the Muslim community especially during times of war. This includes taking arms against

the Muslim state. That is why the Hanafi jurists have ruled that women apostates cannot be killed because they are not considered soldiers in the army.[65] Contemporary Muslim scholars have applied this approach and concluded that the classical rulings on the death penalty for apostasy are based on socio-historical circumstances and do not apply today.[66]

Based on the textual evidence gathered from the Qur'ān and prophetic traditions, we can assert that other religions, and especially Judaism and Christianity, play a significant role in Islam. Islam's self-view as the seal of the Abrahamic tradition links it to the Jewish and Christian faiths in a way that we don't find in relation to any other religion. Much of the interreligious dialogue we find in the sacred sources of Islam is addressed to these religions. Islam acknowledges the plurality of human societies and faith traditions but insists on reaching a common ground between them. As we discussed above, each socio-religious community is recognized as an *ummah*, as potentially legitimate paths to God, but invited to reassert the unity of God and commit themselves to upholding the principles of a virtuous life. Different communities and thus different religious paths exist because God has willed plurality in the world in which we live. This should not be a concern for the believer because the ultimate goal of multiplicity is a noble one: different communities vying for the common good of humanity.

While this is a solid basis for a theology of inclusivism, it does not necessarily lead to moral laxity and social incoherence. Each socio-religious community is bound to have some level of exclusivism theologically, ritually, and socially; otherwise, it would be impossible to maintain the integrity of any religious tradition. Each religious universe must claim to be complete and absolute in itself; otherwise, it cannot fulfil the purpose for which it stands. A genuine culture of tolerance and accommodation is possible only when the principles of respect are observed without compromising the integrity and orthodoxy of a religion. This is in no way far from the infinite mercy that God has written upon himself: "And when those who believe in Our messages come unto thee, say: 'Peace be upon you. Your Sustainer has willed upon Himself the law of grace and mercy - so that if any of you does a bad deed out of ignorance, and thereafter repents and lives righteously, He shall be [found] much-forgiving, a dispenser of grace.'" (al-An'am 6:54)

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NOTES

[1] Cf. **J. Waardenburg**, "World Religions as seen in the Light of Islam" in Islam Past Influence and Present Challenge, eds. A. T. Welch and P. Cachia (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1979), 248–49. See also J. Waardenburg, Muslims and Others: Relations in Context (Berlin and New York: Walter de Gruyter, 2003).

[2] All translations of Qur'ānic verses are from **Muhammad Asad**'s The Message of the Qur'ān. I have occasionally made some revisions in the translations.

[3] **As Fakhr al-Din al-Razi** points out, the verse refers to some Christians groups that have had veneration for their clergy to the point of worshipping them. Cf. al-Tafsir al-Kabir (Beirut: Dar Ihya al-Turath al-Arabi, 2001), 3:252. Qurtubi makes the same point; cf. Abu Abdullah Muhammad ibn Ahmad al-Ansari al-Qurtubi, al-Jami' li'l-Ahkam al-Qur'ān (Riyadh: Dar al-'Alam al-Kutub, 2003), 2:106. As I shall discuss below, the Christian tendency to extreme monasticism is criticized in several verses of the Qur'ān.

[4] **Ibn Kathir,** Tafsir (Beirut: Dar al-Ma'rifah, 2006), 290. According to Mujahid and al- Suddi, this verse was revealed for al-Harith b. Suwayd, the brother of al-Hulas b. Suwayd, one of the companions of the Prophet. Al Harith was one of the ansar (Muslims of Medina); then, he left Islam and joined the Meccans. At that time, this verse was revealed. Upon hearing the verse, al-Harith sent a message to his brother and expressed his regret for leaving Islam and joining the Meccans. Cf. Qurtubi, al-Jami', 2:128.

[5] **Al-Razi**, Tafsir, 3:282.

[6] Cf. Ibid., 6:261.

[7] Ibid., Tafsir, 9:617.

[8] In 3:7, the expression umm al-kitab refers to the clearly established and nonallegorical verses of the Qur'ān (ayat muhkamat). This is contrasted to the allegorical ones (mutashabihat), which may create confusion and lead some astray: "Those whose hearts are given to swerving from the truth go after that part of the book [al-kitab] which has been expressed in allegory, seeking out [what is bound to create] confusion, and seeking [to arrive at] its final meaning [in an arbitrary manner]; but none save God knows its final meaning." When confronted with such a situation, the believers are asked to follow the example of those "who are deeply rooted in knowledge [who] say: We believe in it; the whole [of the divine book] is from our Sustainer - albeit none takes this to heart save those who are endowed with insight." Only those whose hearts are pure can comprehend the whole of the Qur'ānic verses whether allegorical or not because the Qur'ān is ultimately a well-protected book: "Behold, it is a truly noble discourse [conveyed unto man] in a well-guarded book (kitab maknun) which none but the pure (of heart) can touch" (56: 78–79). Fakhr al-Din al-Razi provides an extensive analysis of these points with his usual precision; cf. Tafsir, 3:137–148.

[9] **al-Razi**, Tafsir, 10:113.

[10] Cf. **Waardenburg,** Muslims and Others, 99–101.

[11] **Ibn Kathir**, Tafsir, 285.

[12] **Tafsir al-Jalalayn** (Beirut: Mu'assasat al-Risalah, 1995), 62.
[13] Qurtubi, al-Jami', 2:109. cf. also pp. 139–140 where Qurtubi says that "Abraham was called hanif because he turned to the religion of God, which is Islam."

[14] The Religious Dialogue of Jerusalem, in The Early Christian-Muslim Dialogue: A Collection of Documents from the First Three Islamic Centuries (632–900 A.D.) Translations with Commentary, ed. N. A. Newman (Hatfield, PA: Interdisciplinary Biblical Research Institute, 1993), 285.

[15] **Ibn Kathir**, Tafsir, 1414; Tafsir al-jalalayn, 484.

[16] al-Razi, Tafsir, 9:587.

[17] According to **M. Asad**, this is "a reference to the Biblical prediction of the coming of the Prophet Muhammad, which effectively contradicts the Judaeo-Christian claim that all true prophets, after the Patriarchs, belonged to the children of Israel." M. Asad, The Message of the Qur'ān (Gibraltar: Dar al-Andalus, 1980), 29.

[18] **Ibn Kathir**, Tafsir, 285. This point is reiterated in almost all of the classical commentaries. Cf. Qurtubi, al-Jami', 2:107 where Qurtubi quotes al-Zujjaj as saying that "this is the clearest proof against Jews and Christians. The Torah and the Gospel were revealed after him (Abraham) and the name of these religions is not mentioned in them. But the name Islam is in all the books." Fakhr al-Din al-Razi adds that "the religions brought by prophets cannot be different in principles." Tafsir, 3:254.

[19] This is a theme repeated throughout the Qur'ān: "Never have We sent forth any apostle otherwise than [with a message] in his own people's tongue" (14:4).

[20] Cf. I**bn Qayyim al-Jawziyyah**, Zad al-Masir fi ilm al-tafsir (Beirut: al-Maktab al-Islami, 2002), 1335.

[21] I**bn Qayyim** says that they pertain to "matters of religion"; Zad al-Masir, 124.

[22] Some early scholars interpret this as referring to Adam alone because he is the first man and the source of all later genera-

tions. Others, however, insist that it refers to both Adam and Eve. The underlying idea is that we are all children of Adam and Eve. Cf. Qurtubi, al-Jami', 2:30.

[23] Tafsir al-Jalalayn, 116.

[24] **Qurtubi,** al-Jami', 2:211. Cf. al-Razi, Tafsir, 4:373, and Muhammad al-Ghazali, A Thematic Commentary on the Qur'ān (Herndon, VA: International Institute of Islamic Thought, 2000), 102. See also Ibn Qayyim, Zad al-Masir, 388.

[25] Ibn Kathir, Tafsir, 506.

[26] As Fazlur Rahman points out, this was also due to the fact that, while in Mecca, Muslims were not allowed to pray in the Ka'ba. There was no reason for them not to face the Ka'ba when they migrated to Medina. The argument that the change of direction came after the so-called "Jewish-Muslim break out" is, therefore, unsubstantiated. Cf. Fazlur Rahman, Major Themes of the Qur'ān (Minneapolis, MN: Bibliotheca Islamica, 1989), 147–48.

[27] **Ibn Qayyim**, Zad al-Masir, 93.

[28] **Pickthall** translates wa li-kullin wijhatun huwa muwalliha as "and each one hath a goal toward which he turneth," interpreting huwa as referring to the person who prays, not God to whom one turns in prayers. Yusuf Ali translates as "to each is a goal to which Allāh turns him." Other translations give different interpretations. While all these readings are linguistically possible, Asad's rendering of huwa as "He", i.e., God seems to be in keeping with the classical commentaries. Tafsir Jalalayn renders huwa as "his direction in ritual prayer" and "his Master"; cf. p. 23. Cf. Ibn Qayyim, Zad al-Masir, 94.

[29] The plural abrar refers to those who have attained salvation because of their godly acts. See the references in the Qur'ān: 3:193, 197, 56:5, 82:13, 83:18, 22.

[30] Ibn Qayyim, Zad al-Masir, 102.

[31] According to **Ibn 'Abbas,** the verse is a reference to Najashi, the king of Abyssinia. Cf. Ibn Kathir, Tafsir, 521. As a Christian king, Najashi had received a delegation of Muslims from Mecca before the migration of the Prophet to Medina and given them asylum, despite the demands of the Meccans for their deportation. See also Ibn Qayyim, Zad al-Masir, 401.

[32] Cf. **al-Ghazali,** A Thematic Commentary, 111–12.

[33] **Ibn Qayyim**, Zad al-Masir, 402.

[34] Cf. **Ibn Kathir**, Tafsir, 521.

[35] Cf. **Waardenburg**, Muslims and Others, 176. This is not to deny the existence of the relatively rich literature of Jewish–Muslim polemical works. Cf. Camilla Adang, Muslim Writers on Judaism and the Hebrew Bible: From Ibn Rabban to Ibn Hazm (Leiden: Brill, 1996) and Moshe Perlmann, "The Medieval Polemics Between Islam and Judaism," in Religion in a Religious Age, ed. Solomon dob Goitein, 103–138 (Cambridge, MA: Association for Jewish Studies, 1974).

[36] For a well-informed discussion of these points, see **Mark Cohen**, "Islam and the Jews: Myth, Counter-Myth, History," in Jews among Muslims: Communities in the Pre-colonial Middle East, eds. Sholomo Deshen and Walter P. Zenner, 50–63 (New York:

New York University Press, 1996).

[37] The exegetical tradition has identified the Sabians in various ways. Imam Shafi'i considers them a Christian group. Cf. Ibn Qayyim, Ahkam, 1:92. al-Razi mentions several possibilities: a group from among the Magians; a group that worships angels and prays to the sun; still, a group that worships the stars (a reference to the Sabians of Harran). Cf. al-Razi, Tafsir, 1:536. They have also been described as Mandaeans, a Baptist sect of Judaeo-Christian origin. The etymology of the word s-b-` gives the meaning "baptizing." Cf. "Sabi'a," Encyclopaedia of Islam (2), VIII, 675a. For other interpretations, see J. D. McAuliffe, "Exegetical Identification of the Sabiun," The Muslim World 72 (1983): 95–106. It is a notorious fact that the Harranians, an obscure religious sect with gnostic inclinations from the Harran region, have identified themselves as Sabians during the time of the Abbasid caliph al-Ma'mun. They have traced their origin back to the prophet Enoch (Idris in the Islamic sources) and claimed to have been related to the Hermetic tradition. Cf. Seyyed Hossein Nasr, Science and Civilization in Islam (Cambridge: Islamic Texts Society, 1987), 31.

[38] Another verse makes the same point, but this time criticizes the People of the Book for their obstinacy: "Say: 'O followers of the Book! [ahl al-kitab]. You have no valid ground for your beliefs - unless you [truly] observe the Torah and the Gospel, and all that has been bestowed from on high upon you by your Sustainer!' Yet all that has been bestowed from on high upon thee [O Prophet] by thy Sustainer is bound to make many of them yet more stubborn in their overweening arrogance and in their denial of the truth. But sorrow not over people who deny the truth: for, verily, those who have attained to faith [in this divine writ], as well as those who follow the Jewish faith, and the Sabians, and the Christians - all who believe in God and the Last Day and do righteous deeds - no fear need they have, and neither shall they grieve" (al-Ma'idah 5:68–69).

[39] There is a consensus on this in the Hanafi and Maliki schools of law as well as some Hanbali scholars. For references in Arabic, see Yohanan Friedmann, Tolerance and Coercion in Islam: Interfaith Relations in the Muslim Tradition (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 85–86. For the inclusion of Zoroastrians among the People of the Book, see Friedmann, Tolerance and Coercion, 72–76.

[40] The incident is recorded in Baladhuri's Futuh al-buldan. Cf. Friedmann, Tolerance and Coercion, 85.

[41] al-Sirat al-Nabawiyyah li-Ibn Hisham, (Beirut: Dar al-Kutub al-'Ilmiyyah, 2004), 255. The full text of the Medinan Treatise is also published in Muhammad Hamidullah, Documents sur la Diplomatie a l'Epoque du Prophete et des Khalifes Orthodoxes (Paris, 1935), 9–14. For an English translation, see Khadduri, War and Peace, 206–209.

[42] Quoted in **Khadduri**, War and Peace in the Law of Islam, 179. The original text of the Najran treatise is quoted in Abu Yusuf's Kitab al-kharaj and Baladhuri's Futuh al-buldan.

[43] From the Treaty of Capitulation of Jerusalem (633) recorded by al-Tabari, Tarihk alrusul wa'l-muluk, quoted in Youssef Courbage and Philippe Fargues, Christians and Jews under Islam, translated from the French by Judy Mabro (London/New York: I. B. Tauris Publishers, 1998), 1. Another treaty of safeguard given to the people of Damascus follows the same rules: "In the name of Allāh, the compassionate, the merciful. This is what Khalid ibn al- Walid would grant to the inhabitants of Damas-

cus if he enters therein: he promises to give them security for their lives, property and churches. Their city wall shall not be demolished; neither shall any Moslem be quartered in their houses. Thereunto we give to them the pact of Allāh and the protection of His Prophet, the caliphs and the believers. So long as they pay the poll tax, nothing but good shall befall them." Baladhuri, Futuh al-buldan, quoted in Philip K. Hitti, History of the Arabs, 7th ed. (London: Macmillan and Co Ltd, 1960, 150.

44 **Ibn Qayyim**, Ahkam ahl al-dhimmah, 1:24. For the amount of jizya and the treatment of Jews and Christians in Islamic history, see my "Islam and Peace: A Survey of the Sources of Peace in the Islamic Tradition," Islamic Studies 44, no. 3 (2005): 327–62.

45 Cf. **Ibn Taymiyyah**, al-Siyasat al-Shar'iyyah (Beirut: Dar al-Rawi, 2000), 127–28.

46 **Khadduri**, War and Peace, 85.
47. Quoted in Friedmann, Tolerance and Coercion, 40.

48 Contemporary applications of this can be followed from the growing literature on Islam, nonviolence, and conflict-resolution. For an overview, see Muhammad Abu-Nimer, "Framework for Nonviolence and Peacebuilding in Islam," in Contemporary Islam: Dynamic, not Static, eds. A. Aziz Said, M. Abu-Nimer and M. Sharify-Funk, 131–172 (London/New York: Routledge, 2006).

49 Cf. **Ibn Qayyim**, Zad al-Masir, 157.

50 **Qurtubi**, al-Jami', 2:280.

51 **Ibn Kathir**, Tafsir, 239–40.

52 Ibid., 239.

53 **Qurtubi**, al-Jami', 2:280.

54 **Al-Razi**, Tafsir, 3:15.

55 For an analysis of this point, see **David Dakake**, "The Myth of a Militant Islam," in Islam, Fundamentalism and the Betrayal of Tradition, ed. Joseph Lumbard (Bloomington, IN: World Wisdom, 2004), 5–8.

56 **Ibn Qayyim**, Zad al-Masir, 390.

57. The word fitnah has a wide range of meanings: trial, calamity, disorder, civil strife, sedition, and even persecution in the particular verse above.

58 Cf. al-Sirat al-Nabawiyyah li-Ibn Hisham, 332

59 For full references, see **David Dakake**, "The Myth of a Militant Islam," 9–11.

60 For "just war" (jus ad bellum) and conditions of war (jus in bello), see my "Islam and Peace," 342–50. Not surprisingly, Osama bin Laden quotes the "slay them . . ." verse in his infamous 1998 fatwa for the "killing of Americans and their allies - civilian and military." For the text of this fatwa and its critique based on the Islamic sources, see Vincenzo Oliveti, Terror's Source: The Ideology of Wahhabi-Salafism and its Consequences (Birmingham, AL: Amadeusbooks, 2002).

61 War is also waged to defend the rights of "those who are weak, ill-treated, and oppressed among men, women, and children, whose cry is: 'Our Lord! Rescue us from this town whose people are oppressors'" (al-Nisa 4: 75).

62 **Ibn al-Qayyim**, Zad al-Masir, 425. Qurtubi has a similar interpretation; cf. al-Jami', 10:43.

63 Quoted in **Taha Jabir al-Alwani**, Towards a Fiqh for Minorities (London/Washington: The International Institute of Islamic Thought, 2003), 26.

64 Ibid., 11. Numerous studies have been undertaken by contemporary Muslim scholars to address the question of how to engage Islamic law in the face of the contemporary challenges the Muslim world faces. Imam Shatibi's concept of the "purposes of Islamic law (maqasid al-shari'ah), which he has developed in his al-Muwafaqat, has been the subject of many studies in recent years. One fine example is Ahmad al-Raysuni, Imam Shatibi's Theory of the Higher Objectives and Intents of Islamic Law, trans. Nancy Roberts (London/Washington: The International Institute of Islamic Thought, 2005). Taha Jabir al-Alwani has dealt with the sources and development of Islamic jurisprudence in his Source Methodology in Islamic Jurisprudence, 3rd ed., trans. and ed. Yusuf Talal Delorenzo and Anas al-Shaykh Ali (London/ Washington: The International Institute of Islamic Thought, 2003). Another contemporary scholar Yusuf al-Qaradawi has adopted a similar point of view in his Approaching the Sunna: Comprehension and Controversy, trans. Jamil Qureshi (London/Washington: The International Institute of Islamic Thought, 2006). Other works with a similar approach and scope include Shaykh al-Tahir ibn Ashur, Maqasid al-Shari'ah al-Islamiyyah (Tunis: al-Dar al-Tunisiyyah, 1972), and Yusuf al-'Alim, Maqasid al-Shari'ah (Herndon, VA: IIIT, 1991).

65 **Abu Bakr ibn Sahl al-Sarakhsi**, al-Mabsut (Istanbul: Cagri Yayinlari, 1983), 10:109.

66 Cf. **Taha Jabir al-Alwani**, La ikraha fi'l-din: ishkaliyat al-riddah wa'l-murtaddin min sadr al-islam ila'l-yawm, 2nd ed. (Cairo/Herndon VA: IIIT and Maktab al-Shuruq al-Duwaliyyah, 2006).

HEALING INTERRELIGIOUS RELATIONSHIPS

by Leo D. Lefebure

Jesus taught his followers two principles for reflecting on evil: "Why do you see the speck in your neighbor's eye, but do not notice the log in your own eye? Or how can you say to your neighbor, 'Let me take the speck out of your eye', while the log is in your own eye? You hypocrite, first take the log out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to take the speck out of your neighbor's eye" (Mt 7:3-4). It is so easy to note what is wrong with someone else's behavior and so difficult to be honest about our own failings. Jesus also instructed his disciples: "When you are offering your gift at the altar, if you remember that your brother or sister has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother or sister, and then come and offer your gift" (Mt 5:23-24). For Christians to approach God in worship, we need to ask the forgiveness of those brothers and sisters whom they have offended.

In the spirit of Jesus' teaching, I would like to explore some aspects of the history of Christian intolerance and discuss some strategies to shape healthier relations as we look ahead. Christianity has had a tragic and violent relationship to all of the world's religious traditions, and this is particularly true of those religions with whom it is most closely bound in history and belief: Judaism and Islam. These three religions share many important beliefs and values, but for centuries Christians have repeatedly vilified and demonized Jews and Muslims. In more recent centuries, when increasing numbers of Christians came into contact with Native Americans, Buddhists, and Hindus, all too often Christians repeated often the age-old patterns of intolerance,

defamation and violence in new contexts. These actions are profoundly contrary to the spirit and teaching of Jesus himself, and challenge Christians to undertake a critical reexamination of the tradition.

Christian Origins

Jesus and his first followers were Jews, and Christianity emerged from a Jewish matrix.[1] Conflicts described in the Christian scriptures would have a long and tragic influence on later Christian intolerance towards Jews. The Christian scriptures present both John the Baptist and Jesus as sharply criticizing Jewish leaders of the time. In the gospel of Matthew, John the Baptists excoriates the scribes and Pharisees as "a brood of vipers" (Matt 3:7), and later in the same gospel Jesus attacks the scribes and the Pharisees as hypocrites, blind guides, and murderers (Matt 23:13). John the Baptist and Jesus himself were, of course, Jews; and these criticisms of other Jewish leaders in their original context continue the tradition of the Hebrew prophets, who repeatedly challenged the religious and political leaders of their day. This prophetic heritage is one of the great contributions of Judaism to the world's religious history. On the lips of John or Jesus, these charges are not anti-Jewish. They were Jews calling other Jews to fidelity to the covenant. However, later Christians who were not Jewish would later interpret the harsh language of John the Baptist and Jesus as indicting all Jews at every time and place. The polemical language in the Christian gospels tragically prepared the way for centuries of anti-Jewish attitudes and practices.

The conflict between Jesus and other Jewish leaders came to a climax in the decision to have him crucified. Crucifixion was a Roman punishment designed to instill terror in those who would disturb the peace of the empire.[2] Only the Roman authorities could impose it. According to both the canonical gospels and the first-century Jewish writer Josephus, some Jews sought the death of Jesus.[3] The gospel writers place special responsibility on the Jewish leaders who are said to have pressured a reluctant Pontius Pilate to have Jesus crucified. We know from other sources that Pilate was an unusually violent ruler.[4] The higher Roman authorities removed Pilate from office a few years after Jesus' death because of his excessive use of violence. The portrait of his supposed reluctance probably arose from a later Christian desire to convince Roman authorities that Christians were not a threat to the peace of the empire.

According to the Gospel of Matthew, there is a dramatic moment in the decision to execute Jesus. Pilate wants to release Jesus, in part because his wife had a dream that said Jesus was innocent, but he fears a riot from the crowd that wants Jesus' death. Pilate washes his hands before the crowd and says: "I am innocent of this man's blood; see to it yourselves" (Matt 27:24). The evangelist then presents the crowd in Jerusalem as crying out: "His blood be on us and on our children" (Mt 27:25). It is highly unlikely that this scene ever took place. If Jewish leaders had advised Pilate that Jesus was a troublemaker, it is much more probable that Pilate would have ordered his execution without a second thought.

In its original context, the Gospel

of Matthew indicts a limited number of Jews in Jerusalem for advocating the death of Jesus and threatens them and their children with punishment, which the evangelist understands to be the destruction of the city by the Romans in 70 C.E.[5] In later centuries, however, Christians blamed each successive generation of Jews in every region for the death of Jesus, and interpreted the voice of the crowd in the Gospel of Matthew as inviting retribution upon each generation of Jews. Thus Christian Good Friday celebrations in Europe often led to attacks on Jewish communities.

After the death of Jesus, some Jews persecuted some early followers of Jesus, who were themselves also Jews. According to the Acts of the Apostles, a Jewish crowd stoned the deacon Stephen to death (Acts 7:1-60), and shortly afterward the young Saul sought out followers of Jesus with murderous intent, reportedly with authorization of the high priest in Jerusalem (Acts 9:1-2). Later Christians interpreted these incidents not as part of an inner-Jewish dispute but rather as signs of the perfidy of all Jews. In later centuries, when most Christians were not Jewish, they often understood the New Testament's criticisms of Jewish leaders and the violent acts of some Jews again followers of Jesus to justify a wholesale condemnation of all Jews at all times and places.

Christian Tradition

In the second century, Christians begin to vilify Jewish worship and practice. The Epistle to Barnabas, written about 130-140 C.E., charged that the Jewish people were not worthy to understood the revelation given through Moses (14:4), and claimed they were seduced by an evil spirit into their legal observances. According to Barnabas, Moses gave the commandments of the Mosaic Law in a spiritual sense, but the Jews misunderstood them and took them literally. Barnabas further claims that the covenant made at Mt. Sinai now belongs to Christians because the Jews broke it as soon as they had received it (4:7). Another second-century Christian document, the Epistle to Diognetus, views Jewish sacrifices as being on the same level as pagan worship of idols (3.5) and rejects the observance of the Sabbath as being a ridiculous superstition.

The early hostile attitudes of Christians toward Jews set a pattern for later centuries and influenced the way Christians viewed other religions as well.[6] The rise of Islam in the seventh century posed new challenges for Christians. For over a millennium Muslim and Christian armies repeatedly engaged each other on the battlefield and the sea. Christian images of Muhammad and Islam were overwhelmingly negative. A few Christians, such as Peter the Venerable and Robert of Ketton in the eleventh century, had a reasonably accurate understanding of the teachings of Islam; but most Christians in the Middle Ages learned an extremely biased and distorted caricature.[7] Muhammad was often described as an epileptic who embarrassed his wife Khadijah. To sooth her, Muhammad allegedly invented the story that he gazed upon the Archangel Gabriel. Other Christians charged that Muhammad was actually possessed by an evil spirit. Still others viewed Muhammad as a magician who deceived the credulous Arabs

with fake miracles. He was accused of being licentious and ambitious and of having fabricated revelations to further his desires. Christian mothers would threaten their children that if they were not good, Muhammad would come and capture them. Often Christians viewed Islam as a heresy of Christianity, a deviation from Christian faith, which was taught to Muhammad in distorted form by a heretical Christian monk named Sergius. The hostile attitudes came to a bloody climax in the sack of Jerusalem in the summer of 1099. After the Crusaders had defeated the Muslims soldiers, they went on a rampage that lasted a week, killing Muslim and Jewish civilians by the thousands. One Crusader historian reports that they killed 70,000 in the area of the al-Aqsa Mosque.[8] The memory of this event would live for centuries in Muslim consciousness.

Intolerance was not the entire history of the Middle Ages. Despite the name-calling and military campaigns, in many regions during the Middle Ages, Jews, Christians, and Muslims did manage to live peacefully together. In or around 781, there were peaceful discussions between the Christian Patriarch Timothy and the Muslim Caliph Mahdi engaged in a theological dialogue in Baghdad. Each partner maintained his own beliefs, but the Patriarch Timothy generously praised Muhammad for his teachings. Even though the debate was held on Muslim territory, there was no clear winner and no threat of violence. During this period, for about a century from 750 to 850, Christian scholars from the Church of the East shared their knowledge of classical Greek culture with the new Muslim rulers. This transmission would pave the way

for Muslims to share the Greek heritage with Christians in Spain a century or two later. During the tenth and eleventh centuries, C.E., in Spain, Jews, Christians, and Muslims shared their scholarship and learned from each, other enriching the entire Mediterranean world and beyond and offering an example of a community of religions in dialogue. These exchanges made possible the flowering of Christian scholarship and culture in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. Later European Christians, however, tended to repress the memory of how much Christians in the early Middle Ages had learned from Jewish scholars and from a superior Muslim intellectual culture and viewed them as the constant enemy.

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The fifteenth century marked the beginning of the age of discovery. Christians who came to new lands in the Americas, Africa, and Asia often reflected on their discoveries in light of the Hebrew Bible's narratives of conquest of the land of Canaan. Frequently Christian explorers and settlers understood themselves to be carrying out a divine mission to bring the true faith around the world. Christians sometimes viewed the inhabitants of these areas as Canaanites who had no right to their own lands because of their religious beliefs.

In 1452, as the Portuguese were inaugurating their journeys of discovery and conquest, Pope Nicholas V granted to the king of Portugal the right to enslave the entire non-Christian world:

"In the name of our apostolic authority, we grant to you the full and entire faculty of invading, conquering, expelling and reigning over all the kingdoms, the duchies .... of the Saracens, of pagans and of all infidels, wherever they may be found; of reducing their inhabitants to perpetual slavery, of appropriating to yourself those kingdoms and all their possessions, for your own use and that of your successors."[9] This grant of authority shaped the Portuguese and Spanish conquest of South and Meso-America, as well as certain regions in Africa and Asia.

In the seventeenth century, Christians in New England saw themselves as on a divinely commanded errand in the wilderness on the model of the Israelites coming out of Egypt to a new land. The city on a hill, the New Jerusalem, was set up in what was thought to be a world of darkness. The Puritans in New England saw the inhabitants as lacking humanity and thus having little claim to the land in which they had always lived.[10] The Native Americans' supposed backward state and different religious practices were thought to deprive them of all rights. Remembering that the ancient Israelites were instructed to destroy other tribes lest they tempt them to worship other gods (e.g., Deut 20), so Christian settlers viewed Native Americans as temptations to sin and sought to exterminate them or, at least, contain them in separate areas.[11] For centuries Euro-Americans would despise Native Americans because of their different religious beliefs and customs and would break one treaty after another with them, killing them or forcing them into destitution.

When European Christians encountered Hindus and Buddhists in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, they generally had little understanding or appreciation of their traditions. These Europeans were not the first Christians, however, to come to South and East Asia. Centuries earlier Christians from the Church of the East, based in the Persian Empire, had journeyed along the Silk Road through Central and East Asia. The monk and probably bishop Aloben and his companions were welcomed at the Chinese court in Tang Dynasty Xian. The Chinese Emperor established a Christian monastery close to one of the leading Taoist monasteries of the day. From the seventh century on, Christians in Central Asia and China wrote new sutras that presented the teachings of Jesus in a form that Buddhists and Taoists could appreciate. For example, *The Sutra of Jesus Christ* tells us: "The Messiah was orbited by the Buddhas and arhats. Looking down he saw the suffering of all that is born, and so he began to teach" (1:5).[12] In some sutras, the content of Jesus' teaching is shaped by the Taoist practice of *wu-wei*, non-action that is beyond the opposition between acting and not acting. At least for a time, Buddhists, Taoists, and Christians in China flourished together and learned from each other.[13]

When the later European Christians arrived in South and East Asia, however, they often had only disdain for the religions they encountered. The Portuguese in Sri Lanka (Ceylon) tried to destroy the island's national-religious Buddhist identity. As a symbol of their triumph, the Portuguese claimed to have taken a relic of the tooth of the Buddha, a traditional symbol of royal legitimacy to Goa in India, and destroyed it. The Sinhalese contested the claim.[14] The Portuguese forced students at mission

schools to adopt a Christian personal name, and they coerced families to abandon their traditional Sinhalese family and clan traditions and adopt Portuguese family names.

In India, Christianity had been practiced for centuries by the Thomas Christians, named for Thomas the Apostle who according to tradition landed on the coast of Kerala in 52 C.E. The Thomas Christians had established relationships of mutual respect within Hindu society; but a new era opened with the coming of European Christians in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. The attitudes of the European missioners towards Hinduism were often extremely negative. The entire range of Hindu thought and practice was usually dismissed summarily as pagan and heathen. As British traders gradually took control of India during the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, Hindus were subjected to the indignities and oppressions of a colonial empire.

Understanding Toxic Othering

While no one model can fully account for the horrors of human history, violence can be seen as a type of symbolic expression arising from experiences of shame. James Gilligan, who served as director of the Center for the Study of Violence at Harvard Medical School, sees violent action as a form of symbolic language and maintains that shame is a dominant factor in calling forth violence. Noting that Freud understood thoughts and fantasies as symbolic representations of actions, Gilligan insists on the opposite dynamic as well: "*Actions are symbolic representations of thoughts*. That is, actions can precede

and serve as substitutes for conscious thoughts... Understanding violence ultimately requires learning how to translate violent actions into words."[15] Working with some of the most violent criminals in prisons, Gilligan learned to understand their horrendous acts of mutilation and murder as expressing a logic of shame, "the form of magical thinking that says, 'If I kill this person in this way, I will kill shame - I will be able to protect myself from being exposed and vulnerable to and potentially overwhelmed by the feeling of shame."[16] Gilligan cites the work of criminologist Jack Katz, who found that murderers frequently view their action as a "righteous slaughter" defending communal values, even "eternal, collectively shared values."[17] Gilligan

interprets European anti-Semitism in both its earlier Christian forms and in Nazism in light of the dynamic of shame and envy.

René Girard has explored how communities find a temporary cohesion by directing violence at surrogate victims, or scapegoats. The animosities within a group can be channeled through rituals that discharge tension through allegedly "good" violence.[18] Girard explains: "By a scapegoat effect I mean that strange process through which two or more people are reconciled at the expense of a third party who appears guilty or responsible for whatever ails, disturbs, or frightens the scapegoaters. They feel relieved of their tensions and they coalesce into a more harmonious group."[19] In entering the cycle of violence, people may think they can transcend it because they are initially outside it, but they risk being "drawn unwittingly into the structure of violent reciprocity."[20] One need not accept the entire Girardian proposal of mimetic theory, which is profoundly problematic in certain regards, to see the force of his insight into the power of mimesis and the scapegoat mechanism.[21]

Girard stresses how much of religious history has been dominated by scapegoating. He finds resources in the Bible for overcoming it. Throughout the Bible God repeatedly takes the side of the victim, as in the case of the Suffering Servant in the second part of the Book of the prophet Isaiah. The kings of the earth surround the suffering servant of the Lord and mock him. He is despised

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and rejected and thought to be accursed by God. But God is on his side, and thus he bears the sins of his oppressors.

Girard reads the New Testament as continuing the process of unmasking the patterns of scapegoating. Throughout the gospels Jesus enters into situations where there is violence and scapegoating, but he refuses to accept the process. One example is the story of a woman caught in adultery and dragged in public for punishment (Jn 8:2-11). Her male partner is not there, apparently having escaped. The situation of the crowd demanding vengeance for her infidelity while the man is absent represents graphically the bias of a society that condemns the woman to death while allowing her male partner to escape unharmed. Jesus writes in the sand and then challenges the person who is without sin to cast the first stone. He then forgives the woman. It is not only a personal act of forgiveness of one woman; it is an exposing of the scapegoat mechanism itself, the pattern of blaming women one-sidedly for sexual misconduct and allowing men to evade responsibility.

The center of the teaching of Jesus, for Girard, is the revelation of God, who is alien to violence and who wishes us to abandon violence. Jesus teaches his followers to love their enemies, to pray for those who persecute them so that they can be children of God in heaven, who makes the sun rise equally on the evil and the good and sends rain on the just and the unjust (Mt 5:43-48). In Jesus, God endures human violence without striking back. This is the way God appears in the world: "a non-violent deity can only signal his existence by having himself driven out by violence - by demonstrating that he

is not able to establish himself in the Kingdom of Violence."[22]

To become a follower of Jesus is to learn to see through the patterns of scapegoating and violence. The prototypical experience of this is Paul. The one who breathes murderous threats against his victims thinks he is doing God's will, but in his conversion he realizes he is attacking Jesus Christ and opposing God (Acts 9:3-9).

Towards Healing

If the long history of Christian violence and disrespect toward members of other religious traditions were the final word, there would be little hope for future Christian interreligious relations. Fortunately, this is not all there is in the Christian tradition. Followers of Jesus read the history of the Christian tradition critically in light of the teaching of Jesus himself. It is clear that his teaching condemns the intolerance and the horrendous violence so often done in his name and challenges his disciples to seek out more constructive ways of relating to members of other traditions. The parable of the Good Samaritan makes clear that Jesus called his followers to view all people, including members of different religious and ethnic traditions who were commonly despised at the time, as their neighbors. To love our neighbor requires that we know our neighbor. If our neighbor practices a different religion than our own, the command to love our neighbor includes the responsibility of getting to know our neighbor's religious practices.

The Bible itself contains numerous examples of positive contacts with persons from different religious backgrounds. According to the First Book of Kings, the Queen of Sheba came to examine the wisdom of Solomon, and was favorably impressed (1 Kgs 10:1-11). One section of the Book of Proverbs (22:17-24:22) is an adaptation of an Egyptian wisdom text, the Wisdom of Amenope, demonstrating the respect that ancient Israelite wisdom teachers had for the wisdom of other religions and cultures. In the Gospel of Luke, Jewish elders ask Jesus to cure the servant of a Roman centurion "because he loves our people and even built our synagogue for us." After receiving a message from the centurion that humbly acknowledges Jesus' authority and power even at a distance, Jesus praises the Roman lavishly for his faith (Lk 7:1-10). Of ten lepers who are healed, the one who returns to give thanks to God is a Samaritan (Lk 17:11-19). Jesus himself learns from his encounter with the Syro-Phoenician woman who challenges him to heal her daughter and include her and her daughter in the community of salvation as well (Mt 15:21-28; Mk 7:24-30). The Prologue of the Gospel of John tells us that the Word of God through whom all things were created enlightens all persons throughout the world, even prior to the incarnation of the Word in Jesus of Nazareth (Jn 1:9).

In the later history of Christianity as well, there are repeated examples of Christians, inspired by the example of Jesus, who did not accept the dominant hostile attitudes but developed positive relationships of respect with other religions. As we

Jesus teaches his followers to love their enemies, to pray for those who persecute them so that they can be children of God in heaven, who makes the sun rise equally on the evil and the good and sends rain on the just and the unjust (Mt 5:43-48).
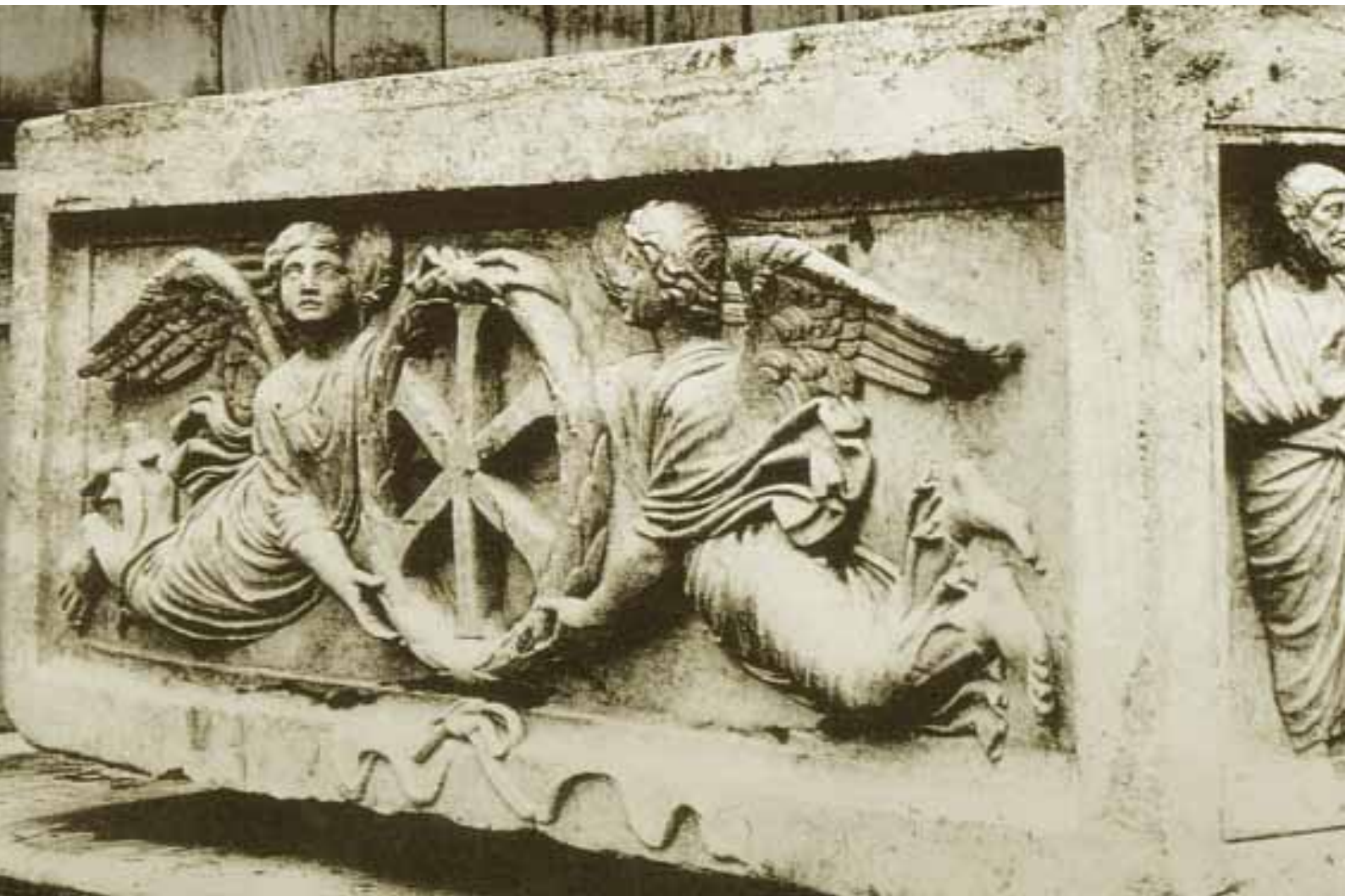
Pope John Paul II challenged Christians to go through a purification of memory, reading the history of our tradition critically in light of the teaching of Jesus himself and asking God's forgiveness for the crimes done by Christians against members of other religious traditions.

have seen, Buddhists, Taoists, and Christians in eighth-century China learned from each other. Muslims and Christians in eighth-century Baghdad created a community of learning in which they could share their knowledge. Jews Muslims, and Christians in Spain engaged in conversations that would shape the cultural and intellectual history of Europe. In the fifteenth century, at the very time when Pope Nicholas V was declaring yet another Crusade on Muslims after the Fall of Constantinople, John of Segovia and Nicholas of Cusa argued that warfare was not appropriate for followers of Jesus Christ and called for a new form of dialogue with Muslims called *contraferentia* (conference or dialogue) based upon principles of peace and mutual respect.[23]

In 1965 the Second Vatican Council condemned the long and tragic history of Antisemitism and declared that Christians cannot blame his death on all Jews at the time of Jesus, let alone on Jews of later generations for his death. The Council repeated the teaching of the Apostle Paul that "because of their ancestors the Jews still remain very dear to God, whose gift and call are without regret" (*Nostra aetate* 4).[24] The Council also clearly affirmed right of all humans to religious freedom and condemned all forms of discrimination, whether based on religion, race, color, or condition in life (*Nostra aetate* 4-5). The Council condemned governmental efforts to control or restrict religious faith and practice (*Dignitatis humanae* 3), and it acknowledged that Catholics had acted in ways directly contrary to the spirit of the Gospel (*Dignitatis humanae* 12).

In recent years, Pope John Paul II has challenged Christians to go through a purification of memory, reading the history of our tradition critically in light of the teaching of Jesus himself and asking God's forgiveness for the crimes done by Christians against members of other religious traditions. Pope John Paul has also reached out to leaders of other traditions. In 1986, Pope John Paul II journeyed to India and prayed at the Samadhi, the memorial of Mahatma Gandhi in New Delhi and addressed an interreligious audience at Indira Gandhi Stadium. He told the audience: "As Hindus, Muslims, Sikhs, Buddhists, Jainists, Parsees, and Christians, we are gathered here in brotherly love. In proclaiming the truth about man we insist on the fact that the quest for temporal and social well-being and for human dignity corresponds to the profound longing of our spiritual

nature."[25]

The Pope was encouraged by the positive reception in India, and so later in 1986 he invited religious leaders from all the world's traditions to come to Assisi in October and pray for world peace, for deliverance from threat of nuclear destruction and the end of the cold war. Representatives of a wide array of religious traditions attended - Jews, Muslims, Buddhists, Hindus, Native Americans, traditional African religious leaders, animists, Shintoists, as well as many other traditions, participated. As the Pope entered the gathering, he spoke of the need for Christians to remember past crimes towards members of other traditions and to ask God's forgiveness and seek understanding and reconciliation. No such gathering had ever taken place on this scale before in the history of the world.

In 2000 Pope John Paul journeyed to Jerusalem and prayed at the Western Wall and inserted a prayer asking God's forgiveness for the horrible crimes that Christians have committed against the Jewish people. In May 2001 he became the first pope to enter a mosque, the Grand Mosque of Omayyadi in Damascus. Two weeks after the attacks on September 11, Pope John Paul II visited the Central Asian republic of Kazakhstan and stressed the importance of Muslim-Christian dialogue. A few months later, in January 2002 he invited religious leaders from around the world to come to Assisi and pray for peace

In contrast to the long history of blaming entire groups of opponents, the rituals of the Abra-hamic traditions at their best can challenge rigid models of self-righteous vengeance and frus-trate the scapegoating mechanism by demand-ing that believers accept responsibility for their own actions.

in this time of widespread distrust and hostility. Such steps are merely a beginning, and clearly much remains to be done. Interreligious dialogue and understanding and joint efforts are more necessary than ever in the current time of conflict. Christians need to reach out to members of all religious traditions to contribute to shaping a community of religions that can stand together against atrocities. Christians also need to be alert to the wisdom that other traditions have to offer that can enrich and transform our own following of the Gospel path.

Healing Memories

Memories of violence risk calling forth more violence in retaliation, locking believers into a logic of shame and a repeated cycle of scapegoating. Miroslav Volf, shaped by the conflicts in the Balkans, warns: "In my memory of the other's transgression the other is locked in unredemption and we are bound together in a relationship of nonreconciliation. The memory of the wrong suffered is also a source of my own nonredemption... A remembered wound is an experienced wound."[26] Volf notes the promise of God through Jeremiah: "I will forgive their iniquity and remember their sin no more"

(Jeremiah 31:34).[27] For Volf this is an eschatological hope that challenges history.

Similarly, Rabbi Marc Gopin, who has been a leader in seeking peace between Israelis and Palestinians, warns of the danger of "perpetuated memory," keeping old wounds forever open and asking God to punish our enemies. He notes that prayers that protest one's innocence and ask help against one's foes, represented by some of the Psalms, run throughout not only the Jewish tradition, but Christianity and Islam as well; and he suggests there are analogues in other religious traditions as well. At times, such prayers may well be anchored in very real attacks on undeserving victims, but he explains the danger:

"The trouble with prayer, devotion, and the construction of universes of meaning that become deeply embedded is that they tend not only to explain the vicissitudes of life, and thus give comfort and reassurance, but also to *create* reality by forming the mindset of the adherent, and thus make it hard to change reality. ...Comfort in the discovery of meaning seems always to come at the price of rigid conformity to that very meaning system which, at least sometimes, is perpetuating some form of self-imposed misery in the

guise of martyrological theological and mental constructs".[28]

Gopin suggests that self-examination is a key element in turning from violence. On the one hand, victims may truly be innocent; on the other hand, persons who need to take an honest look at their own sins can find refuge in claims of innocence that block genuine self-awareness.[29] In contrast to the long history of blaming entire groups of opponents, the rituals of the Abrahamic traditions at their best can challenge rigid models of self-righteous vengeance and frustrate the scapegoating mechanism by demanding that believers accept responsibility for their own actions. Indeed, each of the Abrahamic traditions has a strong sense of human sinfulness and a tradition of calling its followers to an honest examination of conscience and repentance for sin. The tragedy for each religious tradition is that in seeking God's forgiveness it has usually focused more intently on sins against other members of the same community and has commonly either neglected or completely ignored sins committed against members of other religious communities. Despite the long history of excluding others, each of the Abrahamic traditions also contains visions of a broader community that embraces all human beings under God.

Recently, Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, Chief Rabbi of the United Hebrew Congregations of the British Commonwealth, has called for respect for "The Dignity of Difference." He expressed the challenge facing every religious tradition today: "The test of faith is whether I can make space for difference. Can I recognize God's image in someone else who is not in my image, whose language, faith, ideas, are different from mine? If I cannot, then I have made God in my image instead of allowing him to remake me in his."[30] Sacks notes that every great religious tradition has "abrasive" aspects that lead to "narrow particularism, suspicion of strangers, and intolerance"; each tradition also has more generous principles that lead to shaping new communities across old boundaries of animosity. We are responsible for which aspects we use to interpret and critique the others and which we place in the center of our religious practice.[31] The violence of our past challenges every religious tradition to reflect critically on its sacred texts and rituals, discerning what leads to hatred and division and what leads to healing.

Dr. Lefebure is the author of four books, The Buddha and the Christ: Explorations in Buddhist - Christian Dialogue, Life Transformed: Meditations on the Christian Scriptures in light of Buddhist Perspectives, and Toward a Contemporary Wisdom Christology: A Study of Karl Rahner and Norman Pittenger. His most recent book, Revelations, the Religions and Violence, (Orbis Books) won the Pax Christi USA 2001 Award. Dr. Leo Lefebure is the editor-in-chief of Chicago Studies and is an editor-at-large for The Christian Century. He has served as a member of the research committee of the Council for a Parliament of the World's Religions and is an advisory member of the Board of Monastic Interreligious Dialogue, and is currently Professor and Matteo Ricci Chair of Theology at Georgetown University.

NOTES

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[15] **James Gilligan**, Violence: Reflections on a National Epidemic (New York: Vintage Books, 1997), 61, 62.

[16] **James Gilligan**, 65-66.

[17] **Jack Katz**, Seductions of Crime: Moral and Sensual Attractions in Doing Evil (New York: Basic Books, 1988), 18; cited by Gilligan, 77, 277-78.

[18] **René Girard**, Violence and the Sacred, trans. Patrick Gregory (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1979), 36-37.

[19] **René Girard**, The Girard Reader, ed. James G. Williams (New York: Crossroad Herder Book, 1996), 12.

[20] **René Girard**, Violence and the Sacred, 69.

[21] For a summary and critique of Girard's theory, see **Leo D. Lefebure**, Revelation, the Religions, and Violence (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2000), 16-23.

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[23] **James E. Biechler**, "A New Face Toward Islam: Nicholas of Cusa and John of Segovia," in Nicholas of Cusa in Search of God and Wisdom, ed. Gerald Christianson and Thomas M. Izbicki (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1991), 191-200.

[24] Decrees of the Ecumenical Councils, ed. **Norman P. Tanner**, Volume Two: Trent to Vatican II (London: Sheed & Ward/Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 1990), 970.

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[28] **Marc Gopin**, Holy War, Holy Peace: How Religion Can Bring Peace to the Middle East (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 93.

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Disagreeing to Agree:
A CHRISTIAN RESPONSE TO A COMMON WORD

by James Cutsinger

Is it possible for us to "come to a *common word*"[1] with each other? I certainly believe that it is. I agree in other words that it is entirely appropriate, and indeed highly desirable, for traditional Christians and traditional Muslims to seek common ground. But I also believe that this search, rather than neglecting or downplaying our differences, should insist they be treated as the very key to our unity. What this means, however, is that any "common word" or agreement between us must be of a metaphysical rather than a theological order.

Simply put, metaphysics is to theology what absoluteness is to relativity. Now of course, the theologian is also concerned with what he rightly regards as absolute and eternal Truth. But his understanding of this Truth is inevitably colored by the revealed forms in which, he believes, it has found its most definitive religious expression.[2] This is obviously the case with Christian theology, where the doctrine of God is ineluctably tied to the saving events of Christ's life, but the general principle applies to each of the Semitic traditions, and *mutatis mutandis* to all religions. Compared to Christianity, where the revelational weight is placed on the incarnate presence of God at a particular moment of time, Islam accentuates what God has revealed to all His prophets across the ages. Nonetheless Islamic theology (*kalām*) remains bound in its own way to the conceptual

categories with which it articulates the Message behind all the messengers. No less an authority than al-Ghazzali goes so far as to say that "spiritual knowledge (*ma'rifa*) cannot be attained by the science of theology", for theology is like a "veil" (*hijāb*) and a "barrier" (*māni'*).[3] By contrast, metaphysics is the science of absoluteness as such, or more precisely of the Absolute as such, and the metaphysician is the person who knows that this Absolute must by its very nature transcend every form, even the relatively absolute forms in which it has revealed itself in his religion. This is obviously not the place for a justification or defense of this science. Fellow scholars of religion who have managed to convince themselves that no one can know anything except relativities will no doubt remain *unconvinced* by what I say here, and so will fellow religious believers, whether Christian or Muslim, who are intent upon treating their doctrines about God as if they were God Himself. I am not addressing either of these groups at the moment. I am speaking instead to those who have already realized that, without at least some incipient knowledge of a Reality transcending all form, the very concept of form would be meaningless, and I am inviting them to look *through* the forms of their religious traditions, treating them as open windows and not opaque works of art.[4]

But what if we take a step back from these dogmatically divisive formulations, not to dismiss or abandon them certainly, but to envision them in a new perspective?

Let us remind ourselves of the challenge we face. We have before us two great world religions whose defining doctrines are mutually exclusive, or so at least they would appear. Either "God became man that man might become God", or else "there is no god but God"; either Jesus Christ is the uncreated Son of God, or else He is a created human being; either sharing in God's nature is the very pinnacle of holiness, or else it is the abyss of sin. As I noted near the start of this paper, if our traditions are placed within a single plane of theological reference - a plane defined, in other words, by the dogmatic formulations of Christianity alone, or alternatively those of Islam alone - then confrontation or compromise will be our only options. If the Christian is right, the Muslim is wrong; if the Muslim is right, the Christian is wrong. And in each case he who is wrong must either modify his doctrinal claims or be prepared to face condemnation.

But what if we take a step back from these dogmatically divisive formulations, not to dismiss or abandon them certainly, but to envision them in a new perspective? Let us picture our religions as circles of equal sizes but placed in different planes. And let us position these planes in such a way that the circles intersect through their diameters and along the axis of a single sphere. Suppose we ascend above the north pole of this sphere and then descend beneath its south pole, taking turns looking down and then up along the axis. What might we see? What might our apparent oppositions together be pointing us toward? Metaphysics, as I am using the term here today, is precisely this stepping back, this positioning of planes, and this looking along a shared diameter. As I see it, there are three basic steps to this process.

First, we must try to understand

why "God became man that man might become God" if in fact it is nonetheless true that "there is no god but God"; what deep truth within the Christian doctrine of the incarnation is revealed if, but only if, we also profess the *shahādah*?

Second, we must try to understand why "there is no god but God" if in fact it is nonetheless true that "God became man that man might become God"; what deep truth within the Islamic prohibition of *shirk* is revealed if, but only if, we also accept *kenosis*, *theosis*, and *koinōnia* as real possibilities?

And third, we must try to understand how these deepened insights into our defining doctrines might *together* aid us in better knowing the Reality whom Christians and Muslims are both called to love; what deepest truths about God will we glimpse if, but only if, we transcend a merely planimetric ecumenism?

Please understand: there can be no question of somehow solving these three riddles today! What follow are merely a few scattered hints and provocations.

Step One

As you can see, Step One is going to require that Islamic doctrine be accorded a certain priority. Without of course giving up their belief that Jesus Christ is the divine Son of God and the saving means whereby others may come to share in God's nature, Christians who take this step must be willing to grant that "there is no god but God" - in other words, metaphysically speaking, that *the Absolute is incomparable to anything else*. In order to do this, however, they must be prepared to rise

above the north pole of my imagined sphere in order to look down its axis toward their accustomed immanence by way of transcendence.

Now at least on one level even the most faithful and serious of Christians should be willing to adopt this perspective, whether they are metaphysicians or not. Certainly Eastern Orthodox Christians, notwithstanding their emphasis on deification, yield to no one in their apophatic insistence that the true God transcends every possible category, even that of divinity itself, and that He therefore remains asymptotically forever beyond His creation. Saint Maximus the Confessor speaks about *theosis* with greater authority and confidence than perhaps any other Father of the Church, and yet he especially is quick to explain that "God is ...incomprehensible... altogether excluding notions of when and how, inaccessible to all... He is undetermined, unchanging, and infinite, since He is infinitely beyond all being".[5] This is precisely why the Christian East accentuates the primacy of the Father in relation to the other two Trinitarian Persons, for in spite of the fact that *the only begotten Son, who is in the bosom of the Father, hath declared Him*, it remains the case - even "after" the incarnation - that *no man hath seen God at any time* (John 1:18). This is also why the doctrine of deification is almost always presented with an important disclaimer. Yes, says the Orthodox theologian, we are called to participate in the very life of God, but this participation extends only as far as His uncreated energies, and not to His essence.[6]

Hence there need be no opposition, at least in principle, between the

Muslim's conviction concerning God's incomparability and the Christian's conviction concerning the divinity of Christ and the deification of man. But metaphysical dialogue involves a great deal more than a half-grudging, half-apologetic acceptance of minimally compatible truths. In taking Step One, we Christians are not being asked to affirm the transcendence of the divine Absolute *in spite of*, or even *in addition to*, our continued belief in the incarnation. On the contrary, we are being invited to plumb the depths of our Christological teachings *by means of* the apparently contradictory doctrine that "there is no god but God". And the question, as I have said, comes down to this: What deep truth may be revealed in our claim that "God became man that man might become God" if, but only if, we also profess the *shahādah*?

If nothing else, granting dialogical priority to this Islamic doctrine should help Christians see that whatever the incarnation and deification may involve on the human side, they entail absolutely no change, and certainly no diminution, on the part of God. Christian theologians have always known this, of course; they have known - to quote again the words of Saint Maximus - that God is "unchanging" and beyond all "notions of when and how", and they have therefore known as well - in the classic formulation of

the Athanasian Creed - that to "believe rightly in the incarnation of our Lord Jesus Christ" is to understand that it came about "not by the conversion of the Godhead into flesh, but by the taking of the manhood into God". But even theologians can very easily forget this fact; even they sometimes talk as if something actually happened in Heaven in the year 0 A.D. The impact of the *shahādah* is such as to remind anyone, whether Muslim or Christian, that God simply *is* and that the relativities of the world and the apparent movements of time have no effect whatsoever upon Him. "There is no god but God" means that God is eternal and hence that His acts are all *now* - or rather that He does not truly "act" at all insofar as action entails change and becoming. But what this means in turn is not only that the world is *still* being created and that the Second Coming has *already* occurred;[7] it also means that God has *always* been man, and man *always* God.

Can Christians accept the "common word" of such insights? Are we willing to grant that the operative power of the incarnation "for us men and for our salvation" (Nicene Creed) depends on the metaphysical fact that *God begetteth not nor was begotten, and there is none comparable unto Him* (*Sūrah* 112:3-4)? Can we admit, in other words, that the south would not be fully south without north?

Step Two

In this case the tables are to be turned and Christian doctrine prioritized. Without of course giving up their belief that "there is no god but God", Muslims who take this step must be willing to grant that "God became man that man might become God" - in other words, metaphysically speaking, that *the Absolute is necessarily Infinite, and that being Infinite it cannot but radiate*. In order to do this, however, they must be prepared to descend beneath our sphere in order to gaze upward toward their accustomed transcendence by way of immanence. The first step required Christians to position themselves in such a way as to envision their most important belief from the "northern" perspective of the Islamic *shahādah*. Now I am asking Muslims to return the favor - to position themselves in such a way as to envision their most important belief from the "southern" perspective afforded by the Christian doctrines of incarnation and *theosis*.

Unless I am mistaken, this second step will present more of a problem for most Muslims than will Step One for most Christians. While bringing the *shahādah* into direct contact with the doctrine of the incarnation is certainly a strange thing to do, and though it cannot but lead to a "de-temporalized" - and to this extent unfamiliar - understanding of what is meant when we read that *the Word became flesh and dwelt among us* (John 1:14), there is certainly nothing intrinsically problematic from the Christian perspective in saying "there is no god but God". The situation in this second case is very different, however, and Muslim exoterists will almost certainly be scandalized. For taking Step Two means accepting the idea that the divinity

If nothing else, granting dialogical priority to this Islamic doctrine should help Christians see that whatever the incarnation and deification may involve on the human side, they entail absolutely no change, and certainly no diminution, on the part of God.

of the one and only true God is in no way threatened or compromised, but is instead most profoundly affirmed, in being *shared*.

Emphasizing the primacy of God the Father in relation to the other two Persons of the Holy Trinity is essential when it comes to Step One. But it would be a mistake for our discussions to stop there, for it is clear in the Gospel that everything the Father has - and is - has been fully given to the Son. Though Jesus Himself testifies to the primacy of the Absolute in saying that *the Father is greater than I* (John 14:28), He at the same time makes a point of insisting that *He that hath seen Me hath seen the Father* (John 14:9) and that *I and my Father are one* (John 10:30). Emphasizing the transcendent incomparability of the divine essence in relation to human beings is likewise essential to the first step of this dialogue. But again it would be a mistake to stop there, for it is also clear in the Gospel that everything the Son has received from the Father He means to give us as well, which is why He can pray - why He who *is* God can nonetheless pray *to* God - that we men be empowered to enter into Their union. John 17 records His potent words:

"Neither pray I for these alone, but for them also which shall believe on Me

through their word, that they all may be one, as Thou, Father, art in Me, and I in Thee, that they also may be one in Us... The glory which Thou gavest Me I have given them, that they may be one, even as We are one: I in them, and Thou in Me, that they may be perfectly one." (John 17:20-23)

For Christians, the perfect *unity* of God is inseparable from man's own perfect *union* in Him, which is why we believe *God is love* (1 John 4:16) and not only the Loving. But what this means - dare I say it? - is that a God without partners is not really God; interpenetration among the Persons of the Trinity, on the one hand, and the promise and possibility of our own participation in the eternal life of that Trinity, on the other, are essential in Christianity to God's being God.

As I have noted already, most Muslims will be thoroughly scandalized by the seeming *shirk* of this claim, and theologically they *should* be scandalized. But unless I am mistaken the Sufis in our midst will be more amenable, drawing as they do on the insights of their esoteric traditions, including an understanding of the divine *tawhīd* or oneness that accentuates "union" and not only "unicity".[8] But whether or not there are Sufic approximations to the distinctively Christian doctrines I have stressed in this paper is not the question. The question is whether the parties to our dialogue are willing to adopt, and not just concede, each other's perspectives. In taking Step One, I did not ask my fellow Christians to give a merely provisional nod to the *shahādah*; I asked them to permit this distinctive Islamic doctrine to deepen their understanding of the incarnation.

And in just the same fashion I am now inviting my Muslim interlocutors to accept the incarnation of God and the deification of man, not *in spite of*, or even *in addition to*, their conviction that "there is no god but God", but *as a means of* plumbing the depths of the divine incomparability. Muslims can - in fact they must - affirm the radiance of the divine Infinite, for *whithersoever ye turn, there is the Face of God* (*Sūrah* 2:115), and *We are nearer to [man] than his jugular vein* (*Sūrah* 50:16). No faithful Muslim, whether Sufi or otherwise, can object to the proposition that God is amidst us and in us. But what about the reverse formulation? Is it possible for there to be something *amidst* and *in* God - others than God within God who are "God" nonetheless, ourselves among them?

I am eager to know what my readers think about this distinctively Christian paradox. Are they willing to grant that *no one hath ascended up to heaven but He that came down from heaven* (John 3:13) and that it is therefore possible to be *born, not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God* (John 1:13)? Can they admit, in other words, that the north can still be north in the south?

Step Three

This third step is going to be the most difficult by far. For here it is no longer a question of simply bringing the central teachings of our religions into contact with each other, however intimate and

> *Muslims can - in fact they must - affirm the radiance of the divine Infinite, for whithersoever ye turn, there is the Face of God (Sūrah 2:115), and We are nearer to [man] than his jugular vein (Sūrah 50:16).*

fructifying this contact might be, nor of visualizing our defining doctrines from above or beneath the "poles" of each other's perspectives. We cannot simply look toward immanence by way of transcendence or toward transcendence by way of immanence. The challenge at this point is to envision our respective teachings in complete coincidence, as if they had been reduced not just from their divergent planes to a single line but from that line to a point - as if in fact the sphere had collapsed and north and south had met in the center.

Steps One and Two entail rethinking the meaning of our most essential doctrines, and in each case our understanding of those doctrines, under pressure as it were from their theological opposites, must undergo a certain modification. Without denying the southern truth that God became man in Jesus Christ, the Christian remembers, or perhaps realizes for the first time, that God is nonetheless *beyond all becoming* and that the incarnation is therefore not, or not only, an event in time but an eternal state of being. And without denying the northern truth that there is nothing comparable to God, the Muslim remembers, or perhaps realizes for the first time, that there is nonetheless *nothing not comparable* to God since whatever is - to the measure it is - must be He.

Thus summarized, however, it may sound as if a metaphysical dialogue were no better able than its planimetric counterparts to avoid the dangers of compromise or capitulation. It may seem that each party to our conversation has been obliged to sacrifice at least a part of what makes his religion distinctive: the Muslim at least some of the transcendence implicit in the *shahādah* and the Christian at least some of the immanence implicit in the doctrine of *theosis*. But this is not so, or rather, though it would perhaps be an indirect and unintended result of our dialogue if we stopped short at this point, the aim of Step Three is precisely to reinstate and accentuate our exoteric and theological differences in order to demonstrate how, precisely *as* differences, they point toward an esoteric and metaphysical unity. If we are successful in this quest, Muslims will come to see their transcendence, not *through* or even *in*, but *as* the deepest immanence; and Christians will come to see their immanence, not *through* or even *in*, but *as* the highest transcendence.

I shall not presume to try to work this out from the Muslim side. But perhaps I can give you just a hint as to what Step Three might involve for us Christians by invoking the authority of one of my tradition's greatest spiritual masters, Saint Gregory Palamas. I have in mind a short passage from his most seminal work, a three-fold collection of treatises written "In Defense of the Holy Hesychasts" of Mount Athos and often simply referred to as *The Triads*. Here is what he says:

The divine Maximus [the Confessor] taught that [*theosis*] is not only en-hypostatic but also unoriginated - and not merely uncreated - as well as indescribable and supra-temporal, and that those who attain it become thereby uncreated, principial, and indescribable, even though in their own nature they come from what is not.[9]

I invite my Muslim interlocutors, those at least who are sympathetic to my goals in this dialogue, to suggest in turn what might happen when north meets south in the center.

The words "indescribable" (*aperi-grapton*) and "supra-temporal" (*hyper-chronon*) speak for themselves, while the term "enhypostatic" (*enu-postaton*) underscores the fact that deification involves an ontological transformation: in the language of Sufism, *theosis* is a permanent "station" (*maqām*), not just a passing "state" (*hāl*). But the most important words in this passage - and they are nothing short of astonishing - are the adjectives "unoriginated" (*agenēton*) as applied to deification and "principial" (*anarchos*) as applied to deified human beings. They are astonishing because they appear to crack the glass ceiling that my Orthodox tradition is otherwise so careful to maintain between God's uncreated energies on the one hand, in which deified men are permitted to share, and God's essence on the other hand, which is said to remain forever beyond even them. What is perhaps most surprising is that of all the Fathers of the Church Gregory was himself one of the most indispensable in transmitting, and arguably the most assiduous in preserving, this classic distinction.

But now look what he has gone and done! In defending the methods and exalting the attainments of his fellow Athonite monks, he has ended up attributing to the greatest of these brethren a level of realization - to make use of the Anselmian formula - "than which nothing greater can be conceived".[10] First he goes out of his way to insist that deification is more than "merely uncreated" (*aktiston monon*), though transcending the created order would clearly be astounding enough.[11] *Theosis*, however, is something higher: it is "unoriginated" (*agenēton*), which appears to mean that it transcends all becoming.[12] And yet even this word fails to capture the incomparability of those who have arrived at this station, and in "indescribably" describing them Gregory is therefore compelled to stretch for a loftier term yet. Like

deification, the deified man can be called "uncreated" (*aktistos*), but he is nonetheless more, and the more in this case takes us beyond even the level of the "unoriginated" - and thus, we may assume, beyond such transcendent realities as the *logoi* or divine "ideas", which though eternal still depend upon God. Wonder of wonders, deified human beings exceed even these, whereas they themselves are exceeded by nothing; for according to Gregory they are now *anarchos*, which means - indeed it could mean nothing else - that they have no "principle" (*archē*), whether temporal or eternal. But if this is true, it seems we have no choice but to conclude that such men have paradoxically "become" their own Principle, having realized their identity with God as such.[13]

Please understand: I am not suggesting that the author of *The Triads* would himself have endorsed this startling - and some will say blasphemous! - reading. As his well-known disparagement of Plato proves, Gregory Palamas was a theologian, not a metaphysician, and as Archbishop of Thessaloniki he would in any case have been obliged *ex officio*, whatever his personal insights, to guard the dogmatic frontiers of the Orthodox tradition. Nonetheless, words mean what they mean, and they are worth taking seriously, especially when they are the words of so important a saint, writing in what was historically so important a treatise. And their meaning in this case, however staggering, appears indisputable. To be deified is to become identified with the very highest Reality, the one and only pure Principle, whom Christians call "Father" and Muslims *Allāh*. It is here precisely - at this supreme level of Being, or rather at a "level" Beyond-even-Being - that the greatest saints find themselves.[14] Were we Hindus, we could easily cut to the chase at this point and simply say, *Tat tvam asi*, "Thou art That!"[15]

But since this is an exchange between the faithful of two Semitic traditions, I shall sum things up instead by saying that this is how the deepest immanence looks when it is perceived as the highest transcendence; this is what happens, in other words, when south meets north in the center.

I invite my Muslim interlocutors, those at least who are sympathetic to my goals in this dialogue, to suggest in turn what might happen when north meets south in the center and what the highest transcendence might look like when it is perceived as the deepest immanence. If they will do this - if they will disagree with me theologically in order to agree metaphysically - I am confident that we may indeed "come to a common word", not only "between us and you", but *within* us as *I*.

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NOTES

¹ This article is excerpted from a paper delivered at the University of South Carolina on 27 March 2009 as part of a symposium on A Common Word Between Us and You" jointly sponsored by the University of South Carolina and Zayed University.

² One recalls the expression of the **Sufi Abu al-Qasim al-Junayd**: "The water takes on the color of its cup"; see William C. Chittick, The Sufi Path of Knowledge: Ibn al-Arabi's Metaphysics of Imagination (Albany, New York: State University of New York Press, 1989), 341.

³ The Revival of Religious Sciences; see **Reza Shah-Kazemi**, "God as 'The Loving' in Islam", Sophia: The Journal of Traditional Studies, Vol. 14, No. 2 (Winter 2008-2009), 81.

⁴ See the closing pages of my article "Hesychia: An Orthodox Opening to Esoteric Ecumenism"; published in my Paths to the Heart: Sufism and the Christian East (Bloomington, Indiana: World Wisdom, 2002), it is also available here: http://www.cutsinger.net/scholarship/articles.shtml.

⁵ Two Hundred Texts on Theology and the Incarnate Dispensation of the Son of God, First Century, 1, 2; The Philokalia, Vol. 2, 114.

⁶ "The saints do not become God by essence nor one person with God, but they participate in the energies of God, that is to say, in His life, power, grace, and glory.... The energies are truly God Himself - yet not God as He exists within Himself, in His inner life" (Bishop Kallistos Ware, The Orthodox Way [Crestwood, New York: St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1995], 125-26). The same principle is involved in Saint Gregory of Nyssa's signature teaching concerning epektasis, a perpetual "stretching forward" or unending progress toward a goal one never reaches; according to Gregory, participation in God entails continual growth in virtue, but man will never understand, let alone attain, God's transcendent perfection. The saint therefore writes, "Whoever pursues true virtue participates in nothing other than God.... Since this good has no limit, the participant's desire itself necessarily has no stopping place but stretches out with the limitless. It is therefore undoubtedly impossible to attain perfection" (**Gregory of Nyssa**: The Life of Moses, trans. Abraham J. Malherbe and Everett Ferguson [New York: Paulist Press, 1978], 31 [Sections 7-8]).

⁷ The Qur'ānic "Be!" (Sūrah 3:47, 19:35) and the Biblical fiats (Gen. 1:3, 6, 14), like all imperatives, do not have tense. In the Anaphora of the Divine Liturgy, the trans-temporal reality of the Second Coming is acknowledged when the priest offers thanks to the Father, "who didst bring us from non-existence into being, and when we had fallen away didst raise us up again, and didst not cease to do all things until Thou hadst brought us back to heaven, and hadst endowed us with Thy kingdom which is to come".

⁸ I am thinking, for example, of Ibn al-'Arabī's precision with regard to the divine infinitude: "Do not declare [God] nondelimited and thus delimited by being distinguished from delimitation! For if He is distinguished, then He is delimited by His nondelimitation. And if He is delimited by His nondelimitation, then He is not He" (**William C. Chittick**, The Sufi Path of Knowledge, 112). For Saint Gregory the Theologian and other Greek-

speaking Fathers, divine unity is a function of henōsis, which is the "union" or "unification" among the three Persons of the Trinity, and not merely hen, which is the oneness of an arithmetical "unit". The Sufi doctrine of the "unity of being" (wadat al-wujūd) is clearly pertinent here.

⁹ The Triads, 3, 1, 31 (my translation); for the Greek text, see the critical edition: **Grégoire Palamas**: Défense des saints hésychastes, ed. Jean Meyendorff (Louvain: Spicilegium Sacrum Lovaniense, 1959), Vol. 2, p. 617.

¹¹ Saint Anselm defines God as "that than which nothing greater can be conceived" (Proslogion, 2).

¹⁰ One is reminded of the hadīth: "The Sufi is not created" (al-ūfī lam yukhlaq).

¹² There is, admittedly, a terminological puzzle here. Beginning with Saint Athanasius, Greek Patristic tradition observed a subtle distinction between agenēton (with one n) and agennēton (with two n's), the former being taken to mean "uncreated" and the latter "unbegotten"; according to this usage, employed by Athanasius in his refutation of the Arians, only God the Father is agennēton, while the "only-begotten" (John 1:18) Son of God is agenēton, which is more or less the equivalent of ou poiēthenta ("not created") in the Nicene Creed. For Gregory, however, agenēton must mean something more, something perhaps closer to agennēton, since he sets it in contrast to his own preferred term for "uncreated", aktiston.

¹³ Of course the noun archē can also be translated as "rule", and the adjective anarchos could therefore be taken to mean only (!) that the deified are "a law to themselves". But given the ontological trajectory suggested by other words in this passage, it seems much more logical to construe this key term in a metaphysical, rather than an ethical or political, sense - though it is difficult to know quite how to put this sense into one English word; "anarchical", to say nothing of "unprincipled", will clearly not do! Since what has no principle must in some sense be its own principle, possessing the divine property of aseity, "principial" seems the least inadequate solution.

¹⁴ John Meyendorff, the Orthodox editor and translator of the critical French edition of The Triads cited above (note 31), as well as the editor of an English translation of the work, himself notes - though with surprising reserve! - that Saint Gregory has expressed "a bold thought: The deified saints ... are to be described by the apophatic adjectives appropriate to the divine transcendence" (The Triads, ed. John Meyendorff [Mahwah, New Jersey: Paulist Press, 1983], 144). Elsewhere Father Meyendorff emphasizes, as have I in the second part of this paper, that "the Father is the 'cause' (aitia) and the 'principle' (archē) of the divine nature that is in the Son and the Spirit" (Byzantine Theology: Historical Trends and Doctrinal Themes [New York: Fordham University Press, 1974], 183). Putting two and two together, we are obliged to reason, however strange it may sound, that in becoming anarchos the deified man attains a station that in some mysterious sense is beyond even that of the Second and Third Persons of the Trinity.

¹⁵ Chandogya Upanishad, 6.8.7.
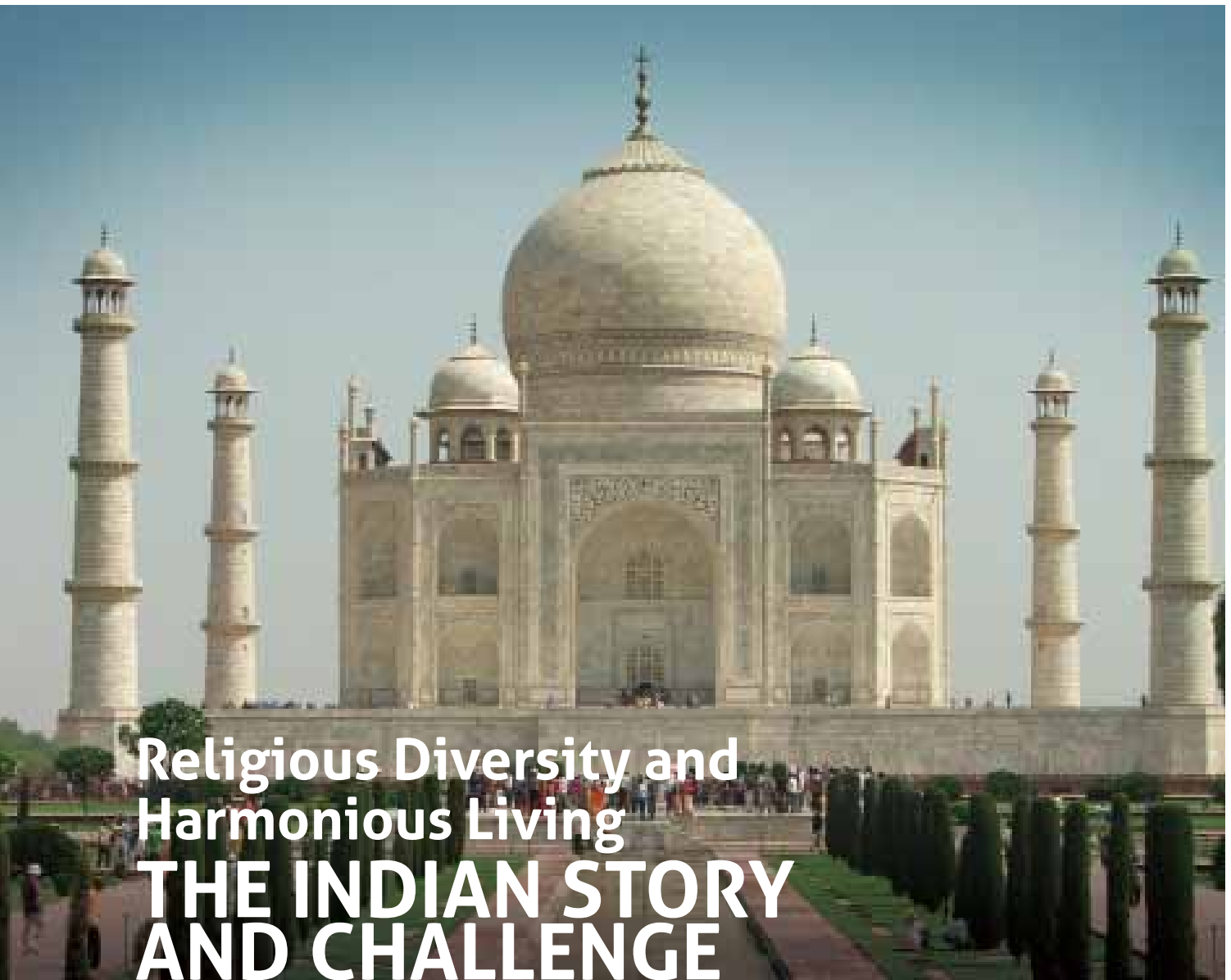
Religious Diversity and Harmonious Living
THE INDIAN STORY AND CHALLENGE

by Michael Amaladoss, S.J.

Looking around the world we can see religious groups engaged in open or hidden conflict almost everywhere. The pre-dictions of Samuel Huntington seem to have come true.[1] We also have a feeling that the religions themselves, because of their exclusive character, may be partly responsible for such a situation. And yet this need not be. All religions consider peace as a value: *Shanti, Shalom, Salaam*. Besides a spirit of the 'holy war', there is also a current of non-violence in the major religions. Yet harmonious living in a world of religious diversity may seem an unattainable ideal. But religious pluralism is a fact of life all across the world. People too are striving to live in peace. Would their efforts succeed? I think that the Indian story suggests that it is possible. I shall evoke this story briefly and indicate how India is trying to meet this challenge. This might provoke others elsewhere to think about their own challenges creatively in their particular situation and mobilize their resources.

The Tradition

Hinduism had been present in India for over a thousand years before

the Buddha founded Buddhism in the 6th century BCE. It spread rapidly in the country. In the third century BCE Emperor Ashoka was moved to embrace Buddhism after witnessing a massacre in the battle field. However he was supportive of all religions. In one of his rock edicts he says:

King Priyadarsi honours men of all faiths, members of religious orders and laymen alike, with gifts and various marks of esteem. Yet he does not value either gifts or honours as much as growth in the qualities essential to religion in men of all faiths. This growth may take many forms, but its root is in guarding one's speech to avoid extolling one's own faith and disparaging the faith of others improperly or, when the occasion is appropriate, immoderately.

The faith of others all deserve to be honoured for one reason or another. By honouring them, one exalts one's own faith and at the same time performs a service to the faith of others. By acting otherwise, one injures one's own faith and also does disservice to that of others. For if a man extols his own faith and disparages another because of devotion to his own and because he wants to glorify it, he seriously injures his own faith. Therefore concord alone is commendable, for through concord men may learn and respect the conception of Dharma accepted by others.[2]

This harmonious vision is astounding in a period when the relations between Hinduism and a 'heretical' or 'protestant' Buddhism were not very smooth.

From the 8th century ACE onwards the Muslims start invading India for plunder and after the 11th century they settle down to rule. The Emperor Akbar (1543-1605) was a model monarch from an inter-religious point of view. He sought to promote fellowship among religions. Besides the Hindu and Muslim theologians whom he had at his disposal, he also asked the Portuguese in Goa to send him some Christian theologians and a couple of Jesuits were at his court.[3] He animated dialogues between them. He even sought to found a new religion – *Din-i-Ilahi* – integrating the best elements from the different religions.

A generation before Akbar lived a saint-poet Kabir (1440-1518) who, born a Muslim but guided by a Hindu guru, sought to promote fellowship between religions. He sings:
O servant, where does thou seek Me?
Lo! I am beside thee.
I am neither in temple nor in mosque: I am neither in Kaaba nor in Kailash:
Neither am I in rites and ceremonies, nor in Yoga and renunciation.
Hindus and Muslims alike have achieved that End, where remains no mark of distinction.

Guru Nanak (1469-1539) founded Sikhism which sought to integrate Hinduism and Islam. He abolished image worship and made *Guru Granth Sahib* – a collections of devotional hymns written by Hindu and Muslim saints - the centre of Sikh worship. Here is a poem[4]:
He is the One in many
Countless are His shapes and forms
He pervades all that exists
Wherever I look He is there
Such a vision roots unity in pluralism.

In the twentieth century came Mahatma Gandhi (1869-1948) who sought to promote integration between the various religious groups in India, though he remained a staunch Hindu. The group of socio-political volunteers

in his ashram came from all religions. He also held multi-religious prayer meetings with readings from various scriptures and hymns from different religions. One of his well known songs praised the God of all: "Praise to you, O Ram! (Hindu) Ishwar (Christian) and Allāh (Muslim) are your names!" He was actually shot by a Hindu fanatic on his way to such an inter-religious prayer meeting. This is the tradition of harmony which we have inherited in India and which had guided the Fathers who wrote our Constitution.

The Constitutional Framework

When the British were planning to give political independence to India, the Muslims, afraid of being a minority in a new India, claimed a separate homeland. India was divided into India and Pakistan in 1947. Though the founder of Pakistan, Mohammed Ali Jinnah, wanted it to remain a secular country, it soon turned Muslim. But India chose to be, thanks to the inspiration of Gandhi and the leadership of Jawaharlal Nehru, not a Hindu state, but a secular democratic republic. India still has more than 13 million Muslims – the third largest Muslim country in the world, after Indonesia and Pakistan. Secularism was built into the Constitution. Liberty, equality, fraternity and justice were for all. Every one enjoyed fundamental rights which included the freedom to practice and propagate any religion of his/her choice. The minority religious groups enjoyed special protections. In the civil sphere of marriage and inheritance they could follow their own legal systems like the Shariat or Canon law. They could have their own educational and cultural institutions to protect and promote their special cultural and religious identities. The Constitution did suggest that the country could move towards a common civil code. But this has not been done for nearly sixty years respecting the sensitivity of the minorities. Underlying this framework is the supposition that India has a Hindu majority. The Indian parliament felt free to amend the Hindu civil code, though it has not touched the Muslim and Christian civil codes. When there is a clash between a particular civil code and the fundamental rights guaranteed to all citizens and also public order the courts will uphold rights and order.

This Constitution makes space for religious pluralism within the unity of the republic. It is not a religion-free secularism like that of France, where religion is privatized and religious symbols (Muslim head scarves, Sikh turbans or big crosses) are banned from the public space like government schools, but a secularism that respects the identity of each religion and treats all of them as formally equal. It is a vision of a community-in-pluralism.

The Practice

But building such a community-in-pluralism in India has not proved easy. We are still far from it. There have been Hindu-Muslim conflicts even before independence. There was a conflagration at the time of independence itself with a transfer of populations between India and Pakistan. After independence there have been periodic conflicts, though localized in

He is the One in many
Countless are His shapes and forms
He pervades all that exists.

particular areas. (In Kashmir, however, the confrontation has continued for more than fifty years. It is symbolic in a way. For Pakistan, it must belong to it because the majority of the population is Muslim. For India the identity of a country or region is not determined by the religion practiced there.) The division between the Hindus and Muslims has been intensified by the growth of the Hindutva (Hindu identity) movement. This claims that India is culturally Hindu. Every Indian must consider India, not merely his/her Motherland, but also his/her holy land. It considers Muslims and Christians as foreigners, having their roots (their holy lands) elsewhere. The Hindutva movement started in the 19th century. Its followers remained a small group before and after independence. But in the eighties of the 20th century it developed political, cultural, religious and agitational branches. The political wing – the Bharatiya Janata Party – came to power at the centre in a wide coalition 1998. It is still in power in some states like Madhya Pradesh, Karnataka, Chattisgarh and Rajasthan. The Hindutva forces have also attacked Christians in recent years in states like Gujarat, Orissa and Karnataka.

Superficially, these conflicts seem like purely religious conflicts. But a closer look shows that they have many dimensions. Our Institute studied a Hindu-Muslim conflict that happened in Coimbatore, a city in South India, in 1998-1999. We found that there was *economic* rivalry between the two groups. There was also *political* competition between the Hindu nationalist party and the Muslims supported by a regional party. The people's enmity had been nourished by prejudices and propaganda.

Socially they were living in ghettoes geographically, through there was some economic interaction. *Culturally* they were two groups apart. In the past Islam had been adapting itself to various local cultures in South and Southeast Asia. But there has been an attempt at 'purification' in recent decades leading to what some consider as a growing Arabization shown by practices like the use of skull caps and veils for women. *Religiously* the other was seen as an enemy. Religion was used, both as a tool to bring and weld a crowd together and also to inspire and motivate them for self-defensive aggression. The *media* by spreading rumours or biased information can fan the flames. Finally, there is *historical memory* with one confrontation leading to another, people keeping alive their memory of suffering and loss. While the police force is largely Hindu and tends to support the Hindus in any conflict, the Muslims as a minority are always at the receiving end of any large-scale social violence, both during the violence and the legal follow-up afterwards. So inter-religious conflict is a complex phenomenon. It should not be seen as a purely religious affair. On the other hand, there is no doubt that religion abets the conflicts.

In the last few years, the violence has taken terrorist overtones. It is not merely the confrontation between two mobs, triggered by some planned or unplanned incident. It is the well-planned setting off bombs to cause maximum and significant damage to well chosen targets. Both Muslims and recently Hindus too have taken to this

Religion was used, both as a tool to bring and weld a crowd together and also to inspire and motivate them for self-defensive aggression.

type of bombings. While some foreign involvement need not be excluded, except the Kashmir conflict and the bombings in Mumbai in November 2008, the other bombings are locally managed. It is also to be noted that international groups like the Al Qaeida have not spread their tentacles here in India. After the Mumbai bombings in 2008, the Indian Muslims manifested their protests in many places to distance themselves from such terrorist action.

The fundamentalists in each religion affirm that their religion is exclusive and looks on other religions as enemies. But all religions, according to their scriptural and theological tradition, have a notion of God who is inclusive.

What is the present situation? There are some religiously fundamentalist groups in all religions. In Hinduism and Islam they are also politically organized. In both communities there is a wider group of sympathizers, especially of the middle class, who will not actively get involved in the violence, but who will be supportive of it in various ways – at least by not criticising it openly, trying to find reasons to explain it and supporting it in the media. The large majority of Indians seem secular minded. They showed this in the recent national elections of April-May 2009 by voting for the more secular Indian National Congress, while rejecting the Hindu Bharatiya Janata Party. There is certainly an uneasy peace between the different religious communities. The historical memory will not too quickly or too easily disappear. Social healing will not be easy. An clear example will be the destruction of the Babri Masjid, an unused mosque in Ayodhya. The Hindutva group claimed that it was built over a temple marking the birth place of Ram. No

one has proved this yet. But a national Hindu movement resulted in its illegal destruction on December 6, 1992. A judicial inquiry report was given to the government only in July 2009, after 17 years and remains unpublished. Till something is done about it the event will remain without closure. My fears are that for political reasons and after 17 years nothing will be done. It will remain an unhealed, festering wound. This can be said of most other violent confrontations: judicial commissions produce belated reports blaming generally rowdy elements in society and no concrete action is taken. How can we promote harmonious living in such circumstances?

I shall try to answer this question at two levels. As we are approaching this issue from the point of view of the religions I shall try to see first of all what religions can do to encourage peace. I shall do so in two stages. It is the task of religions to provide a deep moral and religious foundation for the goal that humanity has to follow and show the way of doing it. In a multi-religious society the religions have to do it together in dialogue. I shall then show that the religions do have a positive view of other religions so that such a collaboration is possible. Secondly I shall explore what can actually be done to promote harmonious living in practice.

The Role of Religions in Society

The role of religion in society is prophetic. While economy pursues profit, politics searches for power and society looks for stability and peace, it is religions that roots values, challenges the community to change and grow and provides the motivation

and inspiration for transformation. In a multi-religious society, it will be ideal if all the religions together can provide such an ethico-spiritual foundation for society. Dialogue between religions can offer mutual learning and challenge to change and lead to a conversion of hearts. Christianity has an official social doctrine. In India itself Dalit, Tribal and Feminist theologies offer liberation perspectives. Starting with the idea that humans are created in the image of God, human and social rights and freedoms are exposed and defended. In Hinduism modern leaders like Raja Ram Mohan Roy (1774-1833), Swami Vivekananda (1863-1902), Sri Narayana Guru (1856-1928), Mahatma Gandhi (1869-1948), and Vinoba Bhave (1895-1982) have provided the religious roots for the secular tradition promoting equality, social justice and harmony, basing themselves on the doctrine of *Advaita* or non-duality according to which all humans are equal and one in the Absolute. In Islam Sayyid Abul A'la Mawdudi (Indian-Pakistan: 1903-1979) and Ashgar Ali Engineer (India:1939-) have interpreted the Qur'an to offer a modern vision of society that is focused on equality, democracy and justice. The *tawhid* or unity of God provides the foundation for the unity and equality of all the humans under Allāh and for the notion of trusteeship since the earth belongs to Allāh and so to all humans equally. In Buddhism, Dr. Bhimrao Ambedkar (1891-1956) found support for the social equality of all humans.[5] The independence and later liberative movements in India have brought together people of all religions to collaborate in the pursuit of freedom, equality and social justice. Though each religion starts with its own doctrinal foundations it agrees with others on affirming common human and social values that characterize modern democracy.

An Inclusive God

The fundamentalists in each religion affirm that their religion is exclusive and looks on other religions as enemies. But all religions, according to their scriptural and theological tradition, have a notion of God who is inclusive. Religions

are different, but God is one and it is the same God that all religions seek and worship. The common enemies of all religions are not other religions but egoism and pride, desire and attachments.[6]

In Hinduism, the text from the Rig Veda is well known: "Being is one; the sages call it by various names." (1.164.46) In the Bhagavad Gita, Krishna, the human manifestation of God Vishnu, tells Arjuna the devotee: "In whatever way men approach me, in the same way they receive their reward... Even those who, devoted to other gods, sacrifice filled with faith, even they sacrifice to me alone." (4:11; 9:23) The Hindu saint Ramakrishna of the 19th century said:

"God himself has provided different forms of worship. He who is the Lord of the universe has arranged all these forms to suit different men in different stages of knowledge... God can be realized through all paths. All religions are true. The important thing is to reach the roof. You can reach it by stone stairs or wooden stairs or by bamboo steps or by a rope."[7]

In order to move away from denominational affiliations, Mahatma Gandhi named God Truth and said that non-violence or *ahimsa* is the only way of experiencing the Truth or God.

In Christianity, Jesus tells the Samaritan woman that God is Spirit and can be worshiped anywhere "in spirit and truth." (John 4:23-24) He reaches out to the Roman centurion (Mt 8:10) and the Canaanite woman. (Mt 15:28) Peter is admonished in a vision not to consider any of God's creation as unclean. (Acts 10:15) Paul tells the Romans: "God will give glory,

honour, and peace to all who do what is good, to the Jews first, and also to the Gentiles. For God judges everyone by the same standard." (Rom 2:6-11) John speaks of the Word of God in whom everything is created and who enlightens every one coming into the world. (Jn 1:3, 9) This inclusiveness is affirmed in a different way by Jesus himself. When he describes the final judgement the criterion is not what religious rituals they have done, but whether they helped the poor and the needy. (Mt 25:31-46) In modern times John Paul II asserted the presence and action of the Spirit of God in all cultures and religions.

"The Spirit manifests himself in a special way in the Church and in her members. Nevertheless, his presence and activity are universal, limited neither by space nor time (DEV 53)... The Spirit's presence and activity affect not only individuals but also society and history, peoples, cultures and religions... Thus the Spirit, who "blows where he wills" (cf. Jn 3:8), who "was already at work in the world before Christ was glorified" (AG 4), and who "has filled the world,... holds all things together (and) knows what is said (Wis 1:7), leads us to broaden our vision in order to ponder his activity in every time and place (DEV 53)... The Church's relationship with other religions is dictated by a twofold respect: "Respect for man in his quest for answers to the deepest questions of his life, and respect for the action of the Spirit in man."[8]

In Islam, in the Qur'ān, together with the affirmation "There is no God but Allāh!" is the insistence: "There must be no coercion in matters of faith." (2.256) The Qur'an says further: "If it had been thy Lord's will they would have all believed, all who are on earth! Wilt though then compel mankind against their will, to believe?" (10:99) Speaking of the 'People of the Book' (Jews and Christians) the Qur'an says: "Do not argue with the People of the Book unless it is in the most courteous manner, except with those of them who do wrong. And say: We believe in the Revelation which has come down to us and in that which came down to you. Our God and your God is one, and to Him we submit." (29:46) The Sufi saint Jalal ad-Din Rumi says: "Though the ways are various, the goal is one. Do you not see that there are many roads to the Qaaba? ...So if you consider the roads the variety is great and the divergence is infinite; but when you consider the goal, they are all of one accord and one."[9]

The basic principle in such an acceptance of religious pluralism as we have seen above is the freedom of God to reveal God self in any way and to any one whom God wants. I can be positive about what God has revealed to me. I may even feel privileged. But I must accept the possibility that God may have spoken to others at other times in other ways. It is through dialogue that religions can coordinate God's various self-revelations. God's revelations are not so much about what God is, but rather how we should live in this world in order to reach the goal that God has set for us. Our obstacles in this path are not other religions, but egoism and desire. All religions see them as evil and to be overcome. It is possible that we can do it together though we may

On the road where I live I pass every day a wall adorned by the pictures of the Buddha, Jesus, a Hindu God and the image of the Kaaba in Mecca side by side.

each give reasons for the task according to his/her own religious tradition. This is the basis for interreligious dialogue and collaboration. But is collaboration possible in the present conflictual circumstances? How can we promote such collaboration? Rather than speculate in answering these questions I shall refer to what is being tried in South Africa and India.

Reconciliation

In a situation of ongoing conflict and violence what we should try to do is conflict resolution and reconciliation. The principles on which reconciliation should be based are truth, justice and forgiveness. Our model here is what happened in South Africa when it became a democracy.[10] The government established a *Truth and Reconciliation Commission* (TRC) under the chairmanship of Bishop Desmond Tutu. First of all, it is essential that the truth of what really happened should be established as far as possible. The usual tendency is to pass off half truths or indulge in false propaganda. The way that the TRC attempted to bring out the truth is to welcome victims to tell their story and also invite perpetrators to confess to their violent deeds under the possibility of an amnesty. The TRC did not get at the whole truth. Many of the real leaders behind the scenes did not confess. Some who confessed did not show repentance. But the overall structure of violence did come out into the open. The TRC

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tried to promote, not retributive, but restorative justice. The goal of justice was not revenge and retribution, but the restoration of broken community. There was an attempt on the part of the government to make up for the losses sustained by the victims: building a house, helping to set up a business, giving a job to a survivor, etc. There was no insistence on revenge, though the possibility remained for the government to follow up some cases through legal procedures in the courts. The focus was on forgiveness. Forgiveness is twofold. Forgiving another I free myself from the feelings of bitterness, revenge and victimhood and attain inner peace. When the other recognizes his/her guilt and accepts to be forgiven there is reconciliation. A human relationship is then restored. What happened at the TRC was a public, social symbolic gesture. It was an attempt to bring to an end a painful history and start anew rebuilding the community on the basis of a functioning democracy. The memory of the past would remain as a warning, but it would not determine the future which will be a new creation. I should confess that such a process of reconciliation has not taken place in India. Life continues. There is a superficial calm – an absence of active violence. But historical memory, especially of the victims, is alive and can exacerbate any future conflict. There is an atmosphere of continuing mistrust and fear. The dominant group continues to manifest their domination in subtle ways. When foreign terrorists struck Mumbai in November 2008, the local Muslims made it a point to dissociate themselves from the attack publicly though processions.

Networking

Asutosh Varshney studied riot behaviour in six Indian cities over a period of more than fifty years.[11] He chose three pairs of cities with a similar mix of Hindu and Muslim populations. In one set riots were soon controlled or did not happen. The study showed that where there was some sort of relationship between the two communities riotous situations were brought under control quickly. In Lucknow, for instance, the lace trade was the economic backbone of the city. The managers and entrepreneurs of the trade were the Hindus. The workers were the Muslims. They were dependent on each other for a successful trade. Their leaders were in constant touch.Violence would not originate in their own area. But if there was a risk that it might spread from another area the leaders ensured that it was quickly arrested. Similarly in Kerala in the South the Muslims were nearly 20% of the population and were actively involved in politics and had their own party. In places like Kozhikode they were even more numerous. This brought them into shifting alliances and coalitions with many other parties. Any type of communal conflict would be detrimental to their political interests. So they made sure, together with the leaders of their coalition partners, that riot situations did not develop. Bhiwandi is a suburb of Mumbai, often disturbed by riots. An enlightened police officer brought together the leaders of various ethnic and religious groups – not rich and self-styled, but real ones – and formed them into an association together with the police and government officials. This group met periodically. It made sure that there was communal peace in the area, even when there were riots elsewhere. Slowly the group began to show interest in other developmental issues like light, water, sanitation, and order

that affected the area. These are concrete models of what is possible elsewhere. One of the consequences of rioting is ghetto formation. People of a particular community tend to live together in the same area geographically for reasons of self defence and protection, especially of the women and children. But this produces 'We' and 'They' groups and an atmosphere where mutual ignorance, prejudice and distrust reign. Where immediate mixing of populations is not possible, constant contact between leaders can improve communication.

Dialogue between Religious Groups

Being a secular person who is open to other religions is an attitude that one can learn and grow into. In India popular religious shrines are visited by people of other religions. It is unfortunate that, in some cases, fundamentalists are interfering with this practice today. Festivals of different religions become community celebrations in some areas. In my own parish, the week after Christmas sees a common get-together around cake and coffee of people of all religions in the area. I have participated in common celebrations of a 'festival of light' in early December bringing together Muslims celebrating Ramazan, Christians remembering Christmas and Hindus commemorating the festival lights. Catastrophes like an earthquake or a tsunami have brought different religious groups to pray together in sympathetic support of the suffering people. Inter-religious fellowship is particularly pro-nounced among the poor, working people. On the road where I live I pass every day a wall adorned by the pictures of the Buddha, Jesus, a Hindu God and the image of the Kaaba in Mecca side by side. In the

Tamil daily that I read there are four quotes everyday on the central page: one each from Hinduism, Islam and Christianity and a fourth from a text in Tamil, older than the Common Era, which is universally considered secular – the *Thirukkural*. A groups of Hindus and Christians have been meeting once a month for over thirty years in my city of Chennai to study the various scriptures and explore theological questions together. There are similar groups elsewhere in the country. A Christian Newsletter called *Fellowship*, published from Delhi, refers to sixteen different inter-religious meetings, some of them intellectual encounters, that the reporter had attended in a six-month period (July-December, 2008) in various parts of the country.

The Indian tradition can also boast of a deeper dialogue at the level of spirituality. Sikhism was born out of a deep encounter between Islam and Hinduism. Hindu-Christian encounter has been personalized by Hindu-Christians like Keshub Chandra Sen (1838-1884) and Mahatma Gandhi (1869-1948) and Christian-Hindus like Brahmabandab Upadyaya (1861-1907), Swami Abhishiktananda (1910-1973) and Raimon Panikkar (1918-)[12]. The present government at the Centre in New Delhi has six Muslims and four Christians in a group of 79 ministers of various ranks.

Conclusion

There are many important lessons that we can learn from the Indian experience. One is a new way of looking at secularism in a multi-religious society. Secularism in Europe, especially in France, is anti-religious, reducing

religion to the domain of private life. But for true believers, their faith affects, not only their private life, but also their public life and their economic and socio-political options. The State must be neutral with regard to the religions. But religious groups could have an active role in civil society and in the public space. Secondly, contemporary political theory is based on the ideal of human rights. They are rather individualistic, based on the dignity of the human person. The Indian experience shows that human groups like cultures and religions also can have their rights. Besides, rights must go hand in hand with duties. The state and the others must respect the identity and rights of various cultural and religious groups. Community must emerge, not through a suppression of difference in the name of a pale and reductive rationality, but through an interaction between different groups leading to a convergence. Minorities in such a situation even enjoy special protections against the possible inroads of a dominant majority.

So secularism as a positive attitude to all religions is alive and well in India, though small fundamentalist groups are not lacking. The Indian tradition has welcomed and integrated migrant groups with various cultures and religions throughout its history. That tradition is still alive, though occasionally contested by small groups claiming narrow identities. It is a sign of hope that the majority of Indians are still secular and will build India into a secular democratic republic where different religious believers can live and work together in harmony and peace. There is indeed work to be done. All forms of interreligious violence have to be stopped, reconciliation has to be

promoted at least symbolically among community leaders through rituals of mutual forgiveness and people have to learn to work together economically and politically. What is encouraging is that this is happening already and can be further promoted. India, as the cradle of world religions like Hinduism, Buddhism and Sikhism and a host to other world religions like Christianity and Islam, not to mention smaller groups like Zoroastrianism from Persia, can be a laboratory to show that believers of different religions can live together without fighting each other and build communities of peace and harmony.

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NOTES

[1] *Samuel P. Huntington*, The Clash of Civilization and the Remaking of World Order. London: Touchstone Books, 1996.

[2] *Rock Edict XII in N.A.Nikam and Richard Mckeon* (eds), The Edicts of Ashoka (Mumbai, 1962), pp. 49-50

[3] *The Jesuits in Akbar's court were Rudolf Acquaviva, Francis Henriques and Anthony Monserrate*

[4] *From the Songs of the Saints from the* **Adi Granth**. *Translated by Nirmal Dass (Albany, NY: SUNY, 2000), p.29.*

[5] *For a more elaborate presentation of liberation perspectives from different Asian religions see* **Michael Amaladoss**, *Life in Freedom. Liberation Theologies from Asia. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1997.*

[6] *See* **Michael Amaladoss**, *Making Harmony. Living in a Pluralist World. Chennai: IDCR, 2003, pp.117-144.*

[7] *The Gospel of Ramakrishna, pp. 5, 39*

[8] *Nos. 28-29.*

[9] *Quoted in* **Seyyed Hossein Nasr**, *Sufi Essays. New York: Schocken, 1977, p. 149.*

[10] *Desmond Mpilo Tutu*, *No Future without Forgiveness. New York: Doubleday, 1999.*

[11] *Ashutosh Varshney*, *Ethnic Conflict and Civic Life. Hindus and Muslims in India. Delhi: Oxford, 2002.*

[12] *Michael Amaladoss*, *"Double Religious Identity: Is it Possible? Is it Necessary? The Indian Experience", Vidyajyoti Journl of Theological Reflection 73 (2009) 519-532.*

Jews and Muslims:
WHY THEY HAVE MORE IN COMMON THAN THEY REALIZE

by Robert Eisen

One of the most difficult tasks in bringing about reconciliation between enemies is getting them to see inside the mind of those on the other side of the conflict and empathize with their reality. Certainly, one can bring about peace between enemies without performing this exercise. Enemies will often make peace because of practical considerations, not because they have achieved a deep understanding of each other. However, this type of peace is not true reconciliation, and it always runs the risk of unraveling because the underlying issues that gave rise to

the conflict in the first place have not been properly addressed. For genuine reconciliation to take place and for peace to be long-lasting, an effort must exerted at gaining familiarity with the inner life of the other. And yet, gaining access to another person's perspective is never easy to do, especially when that person is one's enemy. The challenge becomes immeasurably greater when we are dealing with conflicts involving large populations and extending over generations, if not centuries. In such situations, rage toward the enemy has become such a part of group identity and has festered over such a long period

of time that it is nearly impossible to get the two sides to appreciate the inner life of the other.

In the world today, we have many conflicts that fit this description, and in the following pages, I would like to examine one in particular. For several years now, I have been involved in dialogue and peacemaking efforts between Jews and Muslims throughout the world. There are great tensions between the two groups because of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and I have argued both consistently and emphatically that in order to resolve those tensions, great effort must be exerted by both sides to truly understand what the other side is thinking and feeling. Thus far, it has been an uphill battle. Jews and Muslims are so mired in their own respective senses of victimization, that they are often unable to relate to the other side. When they come together in dialogue, the discussion tends to focus on practical matters involving the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, such as the contours of borders of a future Palestinian state, or the problem of Palestinian refugees. It is not that these issues are unimportant. It is just that, to my mind, there is so much more to the conflict than these issues alone. The Israeli-Palestinian conflict can be properly understood only by gaining a deep understanding of the respective psychologies of Jews and Muslims and how their ways of thinking have been shaped by centuries of history. The conflict between Jews and Muslims, in short, has a much larger context than is generally acknowledged.

Moreover, I have discovered remarkable similarities between the two histories, and this too has not been generally acknowledged. Therefore,

if each group could just get inside the mindset of those on the other side of the conflict, they would discover much that is familiar to them. This could help them move not only toward peace but toward actual reconciliation.

I will argue my case by recounting the two histories of the Jewish and Muslim communities, how they have impacted on the psychologies of the two groups, and the similarities they share. This exercise will require some patience from my readers. It may not be clear until the end of my presentation when I conduct the comparison between the two histories, what Jews and Muslims have in common. However, my hope is that the results of my efforts will make the exercise worthwhile.

I must emphasize that my recounting of the two histories will be highly selective. It is impossible to summarize them in any depth in an essay of this sort, nor do we need to. My intention will be to highlight only those events that have shaped the way each group thinks about the other. My interest, after all, is not so much in pure history, but how history has shaped the psychological make-up of Jews and Muslims and brought them into conflict in modern era. I will also be making generalizations about Jewish and Muslim perspectives in full recognition of the fact that the perspectives of these groups are not monolithic and are far more complex than those being presented here. My reader should therefore understand that when I speak of the viewpoints of Jews and Muslims on any given issue, I will be describing only "tendencies" in their thinking, tendencies that I have discovered both in my academic research and through my experiences in interfaith dialogue.

I must also acknowledge that as a Jewish scholar, it is far easier for me to conduct this exercise for Jewish history than it is for Islamic history. And yet, my whole point is that is it indeed possible to come to an understanding of a worldview not one's own. Furthermore, my attempt to understand how Muslims think is not limited to the time spent composing this essay. It has occupied a great deal of my energy in recent years. As an academic, I have studied Islamic religion, Islamic history, and I have a rudimentary reading knowledge of Arabic (I should emphasize, *very* rudimentary). I have also spent years getting to know Muslims, listening to their views, and making every effort to understand their grievances. Whether I have succeeded, I will leave for my readers to judge. I can only give assurance that my attempt to probe the mindset of Muslims comes from considerable effort and the best of intentions.

I will argue my case by recounting the two histories of the Jewish and Muslim communities, how they have impacted on the psychologies of the two groups, and the similarities they share.

In order to understand the Jewish side of the conflict, we must understand the phenomenon of Zionism. As is well-known, Zionism has been vilified throughout the Arab and Muslim world since its inception, and in recent years it has received much criticism in certain sectors of the Western world as well. And yet, I have found in my own experience that many of the critics of Zionism make little attempt to understand it. I would therefore ask that such critics perform the exercise that lies at the center of the present essay, which is to make every effort to get inside the mind of the other. It is imperative that those outside the Jewish community understand why Jews are so devoted to Zionism.

Zionism has to be analyzed against the background of the entirety of Jewish history which goes back three thousand years. For the first thousand years or so, Jews lived in the land of Israel, and that land was central to their identity not just as a people but as a religious community.[1] In the Bible, the entire covenantal relationship between God and the Jewish people is focused on the land of Israel. The possession of the land is highlighted in God's very first communication with Abraham in Genesis 12. God informs Abraham that he will become the forefather of a chosen people and that they will reside in a chosen land, which at this point of the biblical narrative is referred to as the land of Canaan. As the covenant evolves later on in the Torah, the land continues to be key. God's covenant with the Jewish people is predicated on the agreement that if they obey His laws, they will prosper in the land, and if they do not, they will be exiled.

Jews lost their sovereignty in the land relatively early on in their history. Their kingdom was destroyed in the sixth century B.C.E. by the Babylonians who exiled them to Babylon. After their return almost forty years later, they were dominated for several centuries by a succession of empires. A major turning-point in Jewish history came about when the Jews were under Roman rule in the first centuries of the common era. In this period, the Jews rebelled twice against the Romans, and the rebellions were brutally crushed. With those defeats came the loss of any hope on the part of the Jews that they

would regain sovereignty in their land any time soon.

Throughout the Middle Ages, Jews lived mostly under Christian and Muslim rule. There is consensus among Jewish historians that the Christians were far worse in their treatment of the Jews than the Muslims. Christian theology regarded Jews as pariahs because they did not accept the message of Christ and were eventually responsible for his death. Jews were therefore subject to discriminatory laws. Entire communities were often expelled from their homes when they were no longer tolerated by the local monarch. In some instances, Jewish communities were subjected to physical violence. The Crusades are often seen as a watershed when it comes to the victimization of Jews by Christians. Thousands of Jews were killed in central Europe as the marauding Crusader armies worked their way across Europe en route to the Holy Land.

In the centuries that followed, there were many other instances of violence against the Jewish communities in Europe. Perhaps the most notorious occurred in Eastern Europe in 1648-9 when Ukrainian Cossacks went on a rampage that killed 100,000 Jews and wiped out 300 Jewish communities. One does not want to over-emphasize the suffering of Jews in medieval Christian Europe; there were many periods and places in which Jews flourished. However, one does not want to minimize it either. A perpetual insecurity hung over the European Jewish community in the Middle Ages because they were not masters of their own fate.

In Islamic lands, Jews were treated much better. Jews were one of the

"peoples of the book" (*ahl al-kitab*) in being a scriptural religion and were therefore a protected minority along with Christians and several other groups. Instances of Muslim violence against Jews were uncommon. However, it is a common myth that Jews experienced no difficulties under Muslim rule. Jews were subject to discriminatory legislation, such as the requirement to pay the poll tax (*jizya*). Even more important, Jews in Islamic lands were consistently aware of their second-class status compared to Muslims, a perception reflected in medieval Jewish literature. Jews knew

they would be treated well so long as they did not forget their inferior place in Muslim society. And there occasionally was violence against Jews in Muslim lands. For instance, in the twelfth century, the Almohad invasion of Spain sent Jews fleeing so as to avoid being converted to Islam at the point of a sword. The great medieval Jewish thinker, Maimonides, was among the refugees who left Spain.[2]

Jews regarded the exile from their land and their lowly condition among foreigners as punishment for their sins. They also believed that God would eventually send a messiah who would bring them back to their homeland to restore their sovereignty. In the messianic era, God would also take revenge on the enemies of the Jews.

The situation of Jews in Christian Europe improved dramatically at the beginning of the nineteenth century. In this period, momentous changes occurred in western and central Europe. The Enlightenment inspired many European countries to establish democratic government and implement human rights. As a result, Jews became citizens of European countries for the first time.

These events elicited a wide range of reactions among Jews. Some Jews were so eager to become Europeans that they left Judaism, converted to Christianity, and joined European society. Ultra-Orthodox Jews had the opposite response. They insisted on living exactly as they had for centuries by continuing to adhere to the strictures of Jewish law and residing in separate communities. Yet, most Jews attempted to find a middle ground between these extremes. They attempted to hold on to

their Jewish identity but recognized that Judaism would have to be rethought in light of the new situation. This reaction, in turn, was expressed in several variations which eventually became solidified in a number of denominations that are still in existence today: Reform, Conservative, and modern Orthodox Judaism.

By the end of the nineteenth century, there was yet another reaction to the relationship of the Jewish community to European society. In the 1880's, anti-Jewish hatred made a comeback throughout Europe. The worst example of this was in eastern Europe and Russia where, over the course of the next three decades, tens of thousands of Jews were killed in pogroms, organized attacks against Jewish communities. In light of these events, many Jews throughout Europe experienced profound disillusionment. They had become convinced that the era of intolerance and violence against Jews was behind them, but the pogroms indicated that this was by no means the case. They therefore concluded that there was no hope for Jews in Europe and that they must return to their ancient homeland to establish an independent Jewish state. The movement which formed around this way of thinking was Zionism, and its followers immediately set out to buy up land in Palestine and build Jewish settlements there with the intent of realizing their goal.

For some Zionists, Zionism was a rebellion against religion. Secular Zionists believed that the suffering of Jews had proven that neither God nor His messiah would come to rescue them, and they therefore saw nationalism as a replacement for religion. In fact,

most Zionists were in this camp. For other Zionists, Zionism was the highest expression of religion. According to these religious Zionists, the settling of the ancient homeland was, in fact, the beginning of the messianic redemption. If Jews demonstrated their faith in the messianic period by emigrating to Palestine, God would respond by bringing about the final redemption. But all Zionists were united in the belief that a Jewish state would give Jews refuge from persecution, and, just as important, it would give them back their dignity after two millennia of exile. In short, a Jewish state would allow Jews to recapture the glories of the biblical era when they had been a free and independent nation.

The Zionist enterprise became much more urgent in light of the Holocaust. With the murder of six million Jews in World War II - fully one third of the Jewish people in the world at the time - the need for a Jewish state was felt even more keenly by Jews throughout the world. Finally, in 1947 the state of Israel was brought into existence by a vote in the United Nations that partitioned Palestine into Arab and Jewish sectors.

Jews regarded the creation of Israel as a great triumph, and yet it quickly became clear that the new Jewish state would not solve the problem of Jewish insecurity - at least, not in the near future. In fact, in some ways it made Jews *more* insecure. The early Jewish settlers in Palestine had already discovered that the indigenous Arab population and the surrounding Arab countries viewed them as invaders. The relationship between the early Zionists and the Arab Palestinians was therefore plagued by frequent eruptions of violence. When the state of Israel was created, several Arab nations waged war against it, and even though they were defeated, several more wars would be fought between Israel and its neighbors in the coming decades.

From a Jewish perspective, the Arabs looked like all the other non-Jewish enemies the Jews had faced throughout history. The Arabs were no different from the Babylonians, Romans, medieval Christians and Muslims - or the Nazis for that matter - in being determined to persecute Jews. Anti-Jewish hatred was viewed as an age-old sickness in the non-Jewish soul that was incurable. The Jewish state therefore became the focal-point for Jews in redressing the wrongs they had experienced throughout the centuries.

At present, the insecurity that Jews feel is as great as at any time since the founding of the state of Israel. Gaza is ruled by Hamas, which is sworn to the destruction of Israel, and it has launched thousands of rockets into Israel. Hezbollah resides on Israel's northern border and it is also sworn to Israel's destruction. It is strongly suspected that Iran is developing nuclear weapons and its President has recommended that Israel be "wiped off the map." Jews, therefore, feel that their country is surrounded by enemies and they worry about its very survival. Moreover, there are only 14 million Jews in the world, and almost half of them live in Israel. Therefore, the destruction of Israel would be akin to a second Holocaust.

In sum, Jewish history began with the Jews being sovereign in their

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continent in the other, and the establishment of this empire was viewed by Muslims as a sign of divine favor. In the centuries that followed, divine favor seemed to shine on the Islamic empire in other ways as well. Throughout most of the medieval period, the Islamic world was superior to Christian Europe in military and economic strength. It was also more advanced in a range of intellectual pursuits, most notably science and philosophy. In the ninth and tenth centuries, the Abbasid caliphs commissioned the translation into Arabic of a large body of works of ancient Greek science and philosophy. Thinkers such as Alfarabi, Avicenna, and Averroes, wrote lengthy commentaries on these works that would become essential for Muslims in their pursuit of scientific and philosophical wisdom. Moreover, these works would later be used by Jews and Christians when they re-discovered Greek science and philosophy through the Muslim commentators.

However, by the early modern period, the superiority of the Islamic empire began to erode. Christian Europe experienced rapid growth in economic power as European trade expanded into Asia and the New World, and its military might also increased. It also made great progress in the sciences as the Renaissance and the Protestant Reformation inspired a new dynamism

own homeland. However, after the Babylonian exile, Jews have struggled for more than two thousand years to get back the independence and dignity of that bygone era. The creation of the state of Israel was meant to accomplish that, but it has not really succeeded. Israel exists in a hostile environment and its physical survival is therefore in question.

Let us now look at the Muslim perspective.[3] As with Jews, Muslims began their history in a triumphant mode. The first two centuries of Islamic history saw the rapid expansion of Islam from the Arabian peninsula throughout North Africa in one direction, and across a large portion of the Asian

and creativity in Western learning.

I should emphasize that the decline in the fortunes of the Islamic empire was a decline only with respect to the material realm, and it says nothing about the realm of the spirit. In the areas of religion, values, and ethics, one could argue that the Islamic world in the early modern period was no worse than the Christian world. Certainly, when it came to intra-religious conflict, Christian Europe in this period was far more violent than the Islamic world as it contended with continuous warfare between Protestants and Catholics. Still, the important point for our purposes is that in the early modern period the Islamic world began losing ground to Christian Europe, at least from a material standpoint.[4]

The causes of this phenomenon have been debated. Some have tried to tie the erosion of Islamic power to outside factors, such as the Mongol invasion of the fourteenth century which devastated large portions of the Islamic world. Others have blamed factors internal to the Islamic world itself, including the influence of religion. Yet, this dispute is not relevant to our concerns here. What is important for our purposes is that by the beginning of the nineteenth century, a decisive shift had occurred in the balance of power between Christian Europe and the Islamic world.

Equally significant for our purposes is that in the nineteenth century the growing strength of Christian Europe allowed it to exert influence over large parts of the Islamic world through colonial expansion. By the end of the nineteenth century, the French dominated North Africa, Lebanon, and Syria; the British dominated parts of the Middle East from Palestine to Iraq, and the Dutch dominated Southeast Asia. This domination was formalized in the wake of World War I when the Ottoman empire, which had been on the losing side of the war, was divided into pieces that were distributed to the victorious European countries.

The relationship of Europeans with the Islamic lands that they ruled was both exploitative and paternalistic. The European powers enriched themselves economically by controlling the natural resources of the regions over which they had power. They also ruled their Muslim subjects with the belief that the latter would benefit from being educated in the ways of a "superior" European culture.

A wide range of reactions greeted the encroachments of Europe on the Islamic world. Some Muslims were eager to adopt European ways. Thus, even before their defeat in World Word I, the Ottomans began to modernize their military and implemented a government bureaucracy similar to that of Western countries. In Egypt, leaders in the late nineteenth century, such as Muhammad Ali and Khedive Isma'il, instituted a wide range of reforms intended to impose Western ways on their society. Secular school systems were set up in opposition to Muslim schools. Court systems were established that were based on French law, and the jurisdiction of Islamic law was restricted to family law.

Other Muslims wanted to find a compromise between European and Islamic culture. This approach was

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represented by Islamic reformers and modernists, such as Jamal a-Din al-Afghani and Muhammad 'Abduh, who flourished in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. These thinkers rejected colonial rule and domination but they saw great value in Western learning - the sciences, in particular - and believed that it was fully compatible with Islam. In fact, they argued, science was very much part of the Islamic heritage.

Still others in the Islamic world rejected European culture and values and decried the imposition of European ways on their society. In fact, throughout the last two centuries, most ordinary Muslims took this position. It was generally the elite who pushed for compromise and accommodation with the West. It was only in middle of twentieth centuries that a number of Muslim thinkers, including Sayyid Qutb and Abu al-'Ala al-Mawdudi, began to place the rejectionist viewpoint on a more sophisticated intellectual footing. A common belief among these thinkers was that the Islamic empire had declined because Muslims had not been sufficiently faithful to their religion and that they had allowed it to be corrupted by foreign elements. If Muslims could just get back to a pure Islamic way of life, they would gain independence from the West.

Events since the middle of the twentieth century have strengthened the hand of this last group. The U.S. has replaced Europe as the leading source of Western influence in the Islamic world - militarily, economically, and culturally - and its involvement in the Islamic world has bred enormous resentment in all sectors of Muslim society. Palestine has been a flash-point for this resentment. By the second half of the twentieth century, Muslims won back their independence from Western colonial powers almost everywhere but Palestine, and Zionism and the creation of the state of Israel were widely viewed by Muslims as an attempt by the West to maintain its hold on the Islamic world. Thus, for Muslims, opposition to Israel has become synonymous with their continuing fight for independence and dignity. The U.S. invasion of Iraq has only strengthened Muslim suspicions regarding the intentions of the West.

And yet, despite all this, it is commonly noted that in the Islamic world negative feelings about the West in general and the U.S. in particular are often mixed with positive ones. Polls regularly show that while Muslims throughout the world dislike the policies of Western countries toward the Muslim countries, many Muslims still admire the West. Large numbers of Muslim young people continue to seek entry into the U.S. and European countries in order to attend their educational institutions, and Western popular culture is absorbed with great interest throughout the Muslim world, especially among the youth.[5]

What does this selective survey of Jewish and Muslim history prove? I would like to make the case that there are remarkable parallels between the two histories. First, both Jews and Muslims have faced similar challenges. For centuries, Jewish history was defined by insecurity and humiliation, of Jews being dominated by others, and their

Both sides feel they have fallen short of their goals and continue to be victims of those intent on dominating them, and Israel-Palestine has been the focal-point of these concerns.

worst experiences were in Christian Europe. Since the early modern period, Muslims have also had to grapple with insecurity and humiliation primarily as a result of being dominated by Christian Europe.

Second, both Jews and Muslims have focused on similar solutions for reasserting their independence and dignity. Jews have attempted to return to their ancient homeland to establish a Jewish state with the goal getting back what was lost during the initial era of Jewish history in which Jews were a free and independent nation. Muslims have also attempted to throw off foreign rule in order to recapture the freedom and independence of the initial era of their history when they were a triumphant empire.

Third, both sides feel they have fallen short of their goals and continue to be victims of those intent on dominating them, and Israel-Palestine has been the focal-point of these concerns. On the Jewish side is the belief that the well-being of world Jewry is intimately tied in with the survival of the state of Israel, and Jews are in a life-and-death struggle to defend it from its enemies. And even though the enemies are now Muslims, not Christians, Jews see anti-Jewish hatred as a perennial sickness in the non-Jewish soul, so that as far as Jews are concerned there is a continuity between the anti-Semitism of medieval Christians and that of modern Muslims. Yet, Muslims feel that it is they who are the victims. The West still dominates the Muslim world by meddling in its affairs, and Palestine remains in the hands of the Jews because of the military backing of the U.S. In addition, Jews are able to exert influence because they are a powerful people politically and economically with much clout both in the U.S. and the international arena. Therefore, Jews, Christians, and the Western world as a whole are united in suppressing Islamic civilization.

Finally, both groups have com-plicated views of the West. Jews have

Dome of the Rock. Built by Abd'al Malak. Jerusalem, Israel/Palestine. 691.

been very attracted to the West, and that is true nowadays more than ever. However, one must not forget the mixture of reactions that Jews had toward emancipation in Europe in the nineteenth century, and that a sector of the Jewish community rejected integration with European society. Most important, Zionism arose because many Jews lost hope in Christian Europe as a place where Jews could live peacefully. Certainly, most Israelis today identify strongly with the West; however, ambivalence toward the West can be found among religious Zionists who have become a significant political force in Israel and represent a formidable obstacle to peace between Israelis and Palestinians. They feel that the non-Jewish world in general is inherently anti-Semitic and is not to be trusted. Even the U.S. is guided only by its own interests. Muslims also have had mixed feelings toward the West. In the midst of the era of European colonialism, a sector of the Islamic world wanted to adopt European ways, while others viewed the Europeans as invaders and wanted nothing to do with their culture. Nowadays, Muslims have great antipathy toward the West in the political arena, and yet many are still attracted to elements of Western culture.

However, despite the similarities outlined here, dialogue between Jews and Muslims, in my experience, rarely deals with these basic issues because there is too much focus on the more immediate political concerns of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Yet, if Jews and Muslims do not deal with the fears and

indignities that are deeply embedded in their respective psychologies, if they do not come to terms with the humiliation they have experienced in the course of their long histories, it is unlikely that the more immediate conflict between Israelis and Palestinians will ever be resolved. Even if a peace agreement is eventually signed by the two sides, distrust and hatred are likely to continue simmering beneath the surface, and this in turn will lead once again to open conflict. And the irony is that the underlying psychologies of Jews and Muslims are remarkably similar on key issues. Each side should be able to relate to the other side because each is, in many respects, a mirror-image of the other.

I do not want to minimize the differences between Jews and Muslims and their respective historical experiences. Yet, the similarities should not be minimized either, and my interest here is in emphasizing them so that they can serve as a bridge between the two groups. I also do not want to minimize the inner divisions within the Jewish and Muslim communities which have not been fully represented in this essay. However, I believe my description gives a reasonable account of the common tendencies of thought within those communities.

I also expect that my Jewish and Muslim readers will point to differences between their respective historical experiences in order to magnify the suffering of their own people will minimizing the suffering of the other side. In fact, this is precisely what happens when I raise the issues discussed in this essay in dialogues with Jews and Muslims. Jews often argue that they have been victimized more than Muslims because Muslims have never been landless as Jews were for two thousands years, nor did Muslims ever experience anything as bad as the Holocaust. Muslims often argue that at present they are being victimized more than Jews because the U.S. and Israel are far more threatening to the Muslim world than vice versa due their military might, and Jews in general have great influence within the U.S. and the international arena.

But to argue in this fashion is to miss the point. What is being called for here is that Jews and Muslims understand each other in the other's *own terms.* When people are consumed by such emotions as fear and humiliation - as is the case on both sides here - there is little point in convincing them that they should get over it because someone

else has had it worse. For Jews and Muslims, fear and humiliation have become all-encompassing experiences that define the realities of each side. Therefore, each group must accept the testimony of the other regarding its own experiences and make every attempt to put themselves into the shoes of the other. And once again what they will discover is that they ultimately have a great deal common, more than they realize. If indeed Jews and Muslims are both willing to make an effort to see the world as the other side does, it may be possible to move forward toward a more peaceful relationship.

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NOTES

[1] Technically, the term "Jew" is inappropriate here because it is applicable only after the Babylonian exile in the sixth century B.C.E. For the period prior to this event, scholars generally use the term "Israelite." However, for the sake of consistency and clarity, I will use the first term.

[2] A comparison between the treatment of Jews in Christian and Muslim lands in the medieval period can be found in the excellent study of Mark R. Cohen, Under Crescent and Cross: The Jews in the Middle Ages (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008). The fact that Muslims often do not recognize the difficulties that Jews experienced under their rule in the medieval period reflects a common problem. Those who are in power often are unable to recognize the indignities and suffering of those they rule. In fact, in modern-day Israel, Jews have the same problem. For decades, Jewish Israelis believed that Israeli-Palestinians were content living in Israel. Only recently have they begun to recognize that this is not at all the case.

[3] I will be speaking about the Islamic world here in very general terms without drawing distinctions between Arab Muslims and non-Arab Muslims. I will also be glossing over the fact the Islamic world also includes within large numbers of non-Muslim groups - Christians in particular.

[4] These observations point to a major flaw in Bernard Lewis's study, What Went Wrong? The Clash Between Islam and Modernity in the Middle East (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002). Lewis gives an insightful and learned analysis of the decline of the Islamic Middle East by comparison with Christian Europe. However, he assumes that the decline of the former in military and economic strength constituted an all-around failure of the entire culture; hence the title, What Went Wrong? Lewis does not recognize that military and economic strength are only one way to judge the success of a culture. A comparison between the Islamic Middle East and Christian Europe with respect to religion, ethics, and values might yield a completely different perspective.

[5] See, for instance, the polling date presented in Islam and the West: Annual Report on the State of Dialogue (Geneva: World Economic Forum, 2008), pp. 23-4.
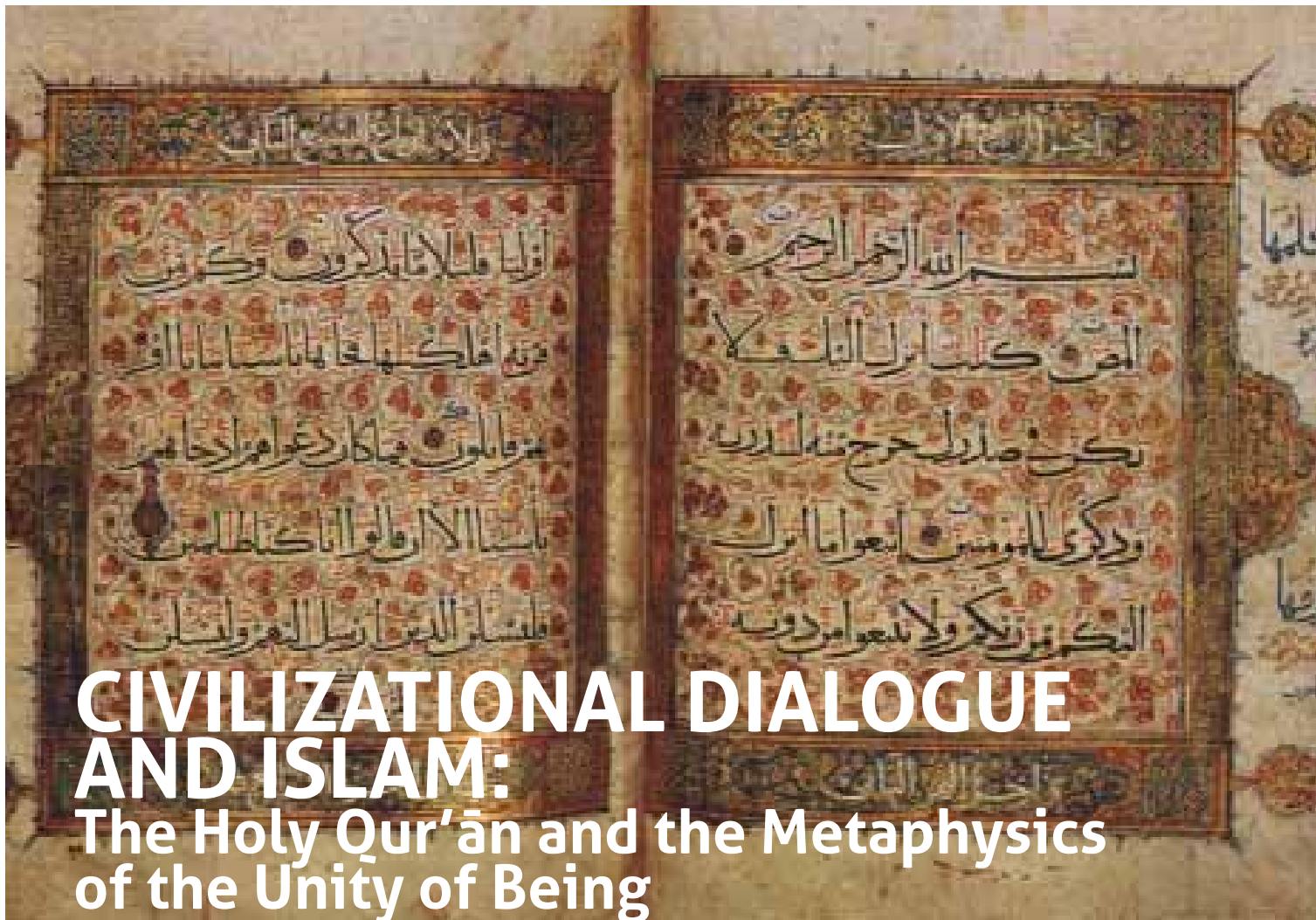
CIVILIZATIONAL DIALOGUE AND ISLAM:
The Holy Qur'ān and the Metaphysics of the Unity of Being

by Reza Shah-Kazemi

1. 'Civilized Dialogue' and the Holy Qur'ān

The notion of 'civilizational dialogue' has been proposed in recent years as an antidote to the poison disseminated by the sensational prophecy of 'the clash of civilizations' made by Samuel Huntington. What is meant by a dialogue between civilizations is of course simply 'civilized dialogue', that is, a mode of dialogue between individuals of different cultures and religions which seeks to accept the Other within a civilized framework; a mode of dialogue which respects diversity and difference, and upholds the rights of all individuals and groups to express their beliefs and to practise their faith without hindrance.

In the Holy Qur'ān one finds a clear enunciation of the manner in which civilized dialogue should take place in a context of religious diversity; it does so in several verses, some of the most important of which we shall cite here as the essential background against which one should view the metaphysical perspectives on the Other opened up by Ibn al-'Arabī, verses to which we will return in the course of presenting these perspectives:

For each of you We have established a Law and a Path. Had God willed, He could have made you one community. But that He might try you by that which He hath given you [He hath made you as you are]. *So vie with one another in*

good works. Unto God ye will all return, and He will inform you of that wherein ye differed. (5: 48)

*O mankind, truly We have created you male and female, and have made you nations and tribes that ye may know one another. (*49: 13)

And of His signs is the creation of the heavens and the earth, and the differences of your languages and colours. Indeed, herein are signs for those who know. (30: 22)

Truly those who believe, and the Jews, and the Christians, and the Sabeans - whoever believeth in God and the Last Day and performeth virtuous deeds - surely their reward is with their Lord, and no fear shall come upon them, neither shall they grieve. (2: 62)

Say: We believe in God, and that which was revealed unto Abraham, and Ishmael, and Isaac, and Jacob, and the tribes, and that which was given unto Moses and Jesus and the prophets from their Lord. We make no distinction between any of them, and unto Him we have submitted. (2: 136)

And do not hold discourse with the People of the Book except in that which is finest, save with those who do wrong. And say: We believe in that which hath been revealed to us and revealed to you. Our God and your God is one, and unto Him we surrender. (29: 46)

Call unto the way of thy Lord with wisdom and fair exhortation, and hold discourse with them [the People of the Book] *in the finest manner.* (16: 125)

It is on the basis of such verses as these that Martin Lings asserted that, whereas the universality proper to all true religions can be found within each religion's mystical dimension, or esoteric essence, one of the distinctive features

of Islam is the fact that universality is indelibly inscribed within its founding revelation - as well as within its esoteric essence. 'All mysticisms are equally universal ... in that they all lead to the One Truth. But one feature of the originality of Islam is what might be called a secondary universality, which is to be explained above all by the fact that as the last Revelation of this cycle of time it is necessarily something of a summing up.'[1]

The extent to which the religions of the Other are given recognition, and indeed reverence, in the Qur'ān does indeed render this scripture unique among the great revelations of the world. It is thus a rich source for reflection upon the most appropriate way to address the various issues pertaining to dialogue with the religious Other. The Qur'ānic message on religious diversity is of particular relevance at a time when various paradigms of 'pluralism' are being formulated and presented as a counter-weight to the 'clash of civilizations' scenario. In the last of the verses cited above, 16:125, 'wisdom' (*hikma*) is given as the basis upon which dialogue should be conducted. The whole of the Qur'ān, read in depth and not just on the surface, gives us a divine source of wisdom; imbibing from this source empowers and calibrates our efforts to engage in meaningful dialogue and to establish authentic modes of tolerance; it thus provides us, in the words of Tim Winter, with a 'transcendently-ordained tolerance.'[2] Wisdom is a quality and not an order: it cannot be given as a blue-print, a set of rules and regulations; it calls for human effort, a readiness to learn, it needs to be cultivated, and it emerges as the fruit of reflection and action. As the

words of verse 16:125 tell us, we need wisdom and beautiful exhortation, and we also need to know how to engage in dialogue on the basis of that which is *ahsan* 'finest' 'most excellent', or 'most beautiful' in our own faith, if we are to authentically invite people to the path of the Lord. In other words, we are being encouraged to use wisdom, rather than any pre-determined set of instructions, in order to discern the most appropriate manner of inviting people to the 'way of thy Lord', thus, how best to engage in *da'wa*. But we also need wisdom in order to discern that which is 'most excellent' in the faith of our interlocutors in dialogue. This creative juxtaposition between *da'wa* and dialogue indicates implicitly that, rather than being seen as two contrasting or even antithetical modes of engaging with the Other, these two elements can in fact be synthesized by wisdom: if one's dialogue with the Other flows from the wellsprings of the wisdom of one's tradition, and if one makes an effort to understand the wisdom - that which is 'most excellent' - in the beliefs of the Other, then this kind of dialogue will constitute, in and of itself, a 'most beautiful' form of *da'wa*. For one will be making an effort to allow the wisdom of one's tradition to speak for itself; to 'bear witness' to one's faith will here imply bearing witness to the wisdom conveyed by one's faith-tradition, that very wisdom which, due to its universality and lack of prejudice, allows or compels us to recognize, affirm and engage with the wisdom contained within and expressed by other faith-traditions. For, as the Prophet said, 'Wisdom is the lost camel (*ālla*) of the believer: he has a right to it wherever he may find it'.[3]

If wisdom is the lost property of the believer, this means that wherever wisdom is to be found, in whatever form, in whatever religion, philosophy, spirituality or literature - that wisdom is one's own. It is thus an inestimable tool in the forging of an authentic civilization. One has to be prepared to recognize wisdom, as surely as one would recognize one's own camel, after searching for it. This translates into the attitude: whatever is wise is, by that very fact, part of my faith as a 'believer': my belief in God as the source of all wisdom allows or compels me to recognize as 'mine' whatever wisdom there is in the entirety of time and space, in all religions and cultures. This does not mean that one appropriates to one's own self - whether individual or social or religious - the wisdom of the Other; rather, it means that one recognizes the wisdom of the Other as being an expression of the wisdom of God, the one and only source of wisdom, however it be expressed. How, then, is it 'mine'? Insofar as one's identity is defined by one's relationship with God as the source of all truth, beauty and wisdom, one's 'self' will be, in that very measure, inextricably bound up with the wisdom one perceives, however alien be the context or culture in which it is expressed. On the specifically Islamic level, such an approach produces this open-minded attitude: that which is wise is - by its essence if not its form - 'Islamic'. It 'belongs' to us, and we identify with it. This contrasts with the prejudiced attitude: only that which is Islamic - in its form - is wise.

The universal vision of wisdom was at its strongest when Islamic civilization was at its most authentic and confident.

One should note that the universal vision of wisdom was at its strongest when Islamic civilization was at its most authentic and confident - witness the extraordinary assimilation and transformation of the various ancient forms of wisdom in the early 'Abbāsid period; this was an exemplification of the calibrated appropriation and creative application of wisdom - from the intellectual legacy of the Greeks, and the Persians, Indians and Egyptians, Mesopotamians, Assyrians, etc. - on a grand, civilizational scale, transforming and enriching Muslim philosophy, science, and culture.[4] By contrast, it is the exclusivist, prejudiced approach to wisdom that prevails today, when Islamic 'civilization' can hardly be said to exist anywhere. It would also appear to be the case that when Islamic civilization existed, *da'wa* was not invested with the emotional intensity which it has acquired in our times. Modernism - with its highly developed tools of propaganda, its tendencies of ideologization, bureaucratization, and uniformalization - has influenced Muslim thought and behaviour and made Muslim *da'wa* much more like Christian missionary movements; in traditional Islam, the *da'wa* that existed was far more low-key, personal and took the form of preaching through personal example - it is not accidental, that, as Thomas Arnold's masterly study reveals, the main 'missionaries' of traditional Islam were mystics and merchants.[5] The emotional intensity with which *da'wa* is invested in our times would appear to be, on the one hand, a function of the very weakness of Islamic culture, a defensive reflex used to disguise one's 'civilizational' deficiencies; and on the other, it is a kind of inverted image of the missionary Christian movements to which the Muslim world has been subjected in the past few centuries, a mimetic response to one's erstwhile colonizers.

One cannot deny, however, that *da'wa* has always played a role in Muslim culture, and that it has a role to play today. To ignore *da'wa*, within a Muslim context, is to render questionable one's credentials as a 'valid interlecuter' on behalf of Islam. But one ought to be aware of the kind of *da'wa* that is appropriate in our times, and to seek to learn from the most subtle and refined spirituality of the Islamic tradition in order to make wisdom the

basis of one's *da'wa*. The kind of *da'wa* being proposed here is one which seeks to be true to the wisdom which flows from the Qurhanic message of religious diversity, a message read in depth, according to spiritual hermeneutics, and in particular the metaphysics of Ibn al-'Arabī.[6] This would be a form of *da'wa* which contrasts sharply with the kind of triumphalist propaganda with which we are all too familiar in our times: a disdainful and arrogant call, issuing from harshly exclusivist attitudes which manifest the claim that 'my' religion is alone right and all others are wrong. A dialogue based on wisdom would also be a form of dialogue which contrasts quite sharply with a relativistic pluralism which, by reducing all religious beliefs to a presumptuous lowest common denominator, ends up by undermining one's belief in the normativity of one's religion - a belief which is so central to the upholding of one's faith with integrity. The kind of *da'wa*-as-dialogue being proposed here charts a middle path, avoiding two extremes which are in fact closer to each other than is immediately obvious: a fundamentalist type of *da'wa* which alienates the Other on account of its blatant exclusivity, and a pluralistic mode of dialogue which corrodes the Self on account of its thinly veiled assault on normativity. An effective, realistic, and practical mode of dialogue must do justice both to the Self which one ostensibly represents, and to the Other with whom one is in dialogue; there has to be room for the expression of one's belief in the normativity of one's tradition - the belief that one's religion is the best religion, failing which, one would not adhere to it.[7] The right of the Other to bear witness to his faith should, likewise, be respected.

The question might then be asked: how can these competing truth-claims be reconciled with the needs of dialogue - will the result not simply be two mutually exclusive monologues engaging in an unseemly type of competitive religion rather than respecting each other in an enriching dialogue of comparative religion? There is an existential argument one can make, whatever be the faith adhered to, on behalf of this 'exclusivist' claim, and this argument is based on the fact that religion is not simply a conceptual schema, it is a transformative power. In the 'clash' between rival religions, one is not only confronted by competing, mutually exclusive truth-claims; one is also presented with alternative paths to realization of a Reality which radically transcends all conceptually posited truths. One's perception of the 'truths' which fashion and delineate one's path to Reality will be deepened, and the truth-claims will be correspondingly corroborated, in proportion to one's progress along that path: therefore the claim that one's religion is 'more true' than other religions is a claim about the transformative power which one has directly experienced, and it is this which bestows an existential certainty - rather than any kind of logical infallibility - about one's claim on behalf of the spiritual power of one's religion, a degree of certainty which is absent from a purely conceptual truth-claim one might make on behalf of the dogmas of one's religion. Religion is more about realization than

Religion is more about realization than conceptualization; or rather, it is about an initial set of concepts which call out for spiritual action, and which find their consummation in spiritual realization.

conceptualization; or rather, it is about an initial set of concepts which call out for spiritual action,[8] and which find their consummation in spiritual realization.[9]

The Buddhist notion of doctrine - all doctrine - as an *upaya*, a 'saving strategy' is an example of a wise doctrine which we might use here to help explain this point. This notion means, essentially, that all doctrines are veils which transmit some aspects of the truth while obscuring others: the communicable aspect of the truth in question is transmitted, but at the price of obscuring its incommunicable dimension, if it be taken too seriously, that is: if the communicable aspect of the truth be taken as the whole truth. The key spiritual function of doctrine is to point to a reality beyond itself, and is likened, within Buddhism, to a finger pointing at the moon: one is urged to look at the moon indicated by the finger, and not focus exclusively on the finger.[10] This reduction of the spiritual end to the conceptual means is what fanatical dogmatism does; by contrast, a more supple approach to dogma results in seeing it as a means to an end: the dogma as theory leads to spiritual praxis, and moral transformation, thanks to which the 'eye of the heart' is opened up, enabling it to 'see' that Reality to which the dogma bears witness, but which it cannot encompass or exhaust.

In regard to the function of language in the search for truth, Rumi makes this point, which resonates with the idea of an *upaya*, and which highlights the need for spiritual action as an accompaniment to doctrinal learning:

'Someone asked: Then what is the use of expressions and words?

The Master [i.e. Rūmī] answered: The use of words is that they set you searching and excite you, not that the object of the quest should be attained through words. If that were the case, there would be no need for so much striving and self-naughting. Words are as when you see afar off something moving; you run in the wake of it in order to see it, it is not the case that you see it through its movement. Human speech too is inwardly the same; it excites you to seek the meaning, even though you do not see it in reality.'

Rumi then reinforces the point, stressing the incommensurability between the kind of learning that comes through reading, on the one hand, and the understanding that arises from the spiritual discipline of self-transcendence, on the other:

'Someone was saying: I have studied so many sciences and mastered so many ideas, yet it is still not known to me what that essence in man is that will remain forever, and I have not discovered it.

The Master answered: If that had been knowable by means of words only, you would not have needed to pass away from self and to suffer such pains. It is necessary to endure so much for yourself *not* to remain, so that you may know that thing which *will* remain.'[11]

Similarly, another great Persian poet 'Abd al-Rahmān Jāmī (d.1492), who masterfully synthesised the esoteric teachings of the school of *wahdat al-wujūd* in his masterpiece, *Lawāhih*,

How, then, can the Muslim engaged in dialogue cultivate that wisdom which perceives the truth, the holiness, and the beauty that is contained within the religions of the Other, whilst simultaneously upholding the normativity of his faith, and the specificity of his identity?

expresses succinctly the transcendence of this higher wisdom, in terms of which thought - all thought, including the mentally posited conceptions of the dogmas of religion - is not just surpassed, it is even rendered 'evil':

'O heart, how long searching for perfection in school?

How long perfecting the rules of philosophy and geometry?

Any thought other than God's remembrance is evil suggestion.'[12]

It is this perspective which enables one to reconcile competing truth claims within a unique Reality which transcends all such claims, that Reality to which the 'truths' bear witness, to which they lead, and from which they receive all their value. The following words of the Qur'ān bear witness to the unique Reality from which all religions derive: *Our God and your God is One* (29: 46); as for leading back to the same Reality: *For each of you We have established a Law and a Path* (5: 48).

If the paths revealed by God are different and divergent, then they cannot but be accompanied by divergent truth-claims, that is, claims pertaining to ways of conceiving and realizing the truth; but insofar as this truth is but the conceptual expression of an ultimate Reality, and insofar as this Reality is posited as the alpha and omega of all things, the divergent conceptual claims to truth converge on a unique Reality - that of God, the ultimate truth, the ultimate Reality - both truth and reality being in fact synthesised in one of the most important names of God in Islam, *al-Haqq*, 'The Real/The True'. If the source and the summit of the divergent paths is a single, unique Reality, it is this oneness of the Real which must take ontological precedence over the competing 'epistemological' claims to truth. In other words, Being precedes thought; thought is consummated in Being.[13] The mutually exclusive truth claims, in their purely conceptual form, might be seen as so many unavoidable shadows cast by the divinely-willed diversity of religious paths; these diverse paths, in turn, can be envisaged as so many 'lights' emanating from the one and only Light, this unique Light being refracted into different colours by the prism of relativity, and these differently coloured lights then crystallising in the forms of the various religions, according to this symbolism.[14]

Red, blue and yellow lights remain lights even while of necessity excluding each other: no light can be identified with another, except insofar as each is identified with light as such, and not as such and such a light. Here, the Essence of the Real, or the Absolute, is represented by light as such, and the religions can be seen as colours adding to that light something of their own relativity, even while being the vehicles of that light. As will be seen below, this means of reconciling outwardly divergent religious forms within a unitive spiritual essence evokes Ibn al-'Arabī's image of the cup being coloured by the drink it contains. The water - standing here for the Absolute - within the cup - the particular religion - becomes 'coloured' by the colour of the cup; but this is so only extrinsically, and from the human point of view; for intrinsically, and from the divine point of

The capacity to recognise other religions as valid, without detriment to the commitment to one's own religion, evidently requires a certain spiritual suppleness; minimally, it requires a sense of the sacred and an inkling of the universality of revelation; at its most profound, it is the fruit of spiritual vision.

prerequisite for anyone who wishes to engage in dialogue on behalf of a particular faith: to represent that faith must mean to 're-present' it, to present its wisdom, beauty - but also, its *normativity*, failing which one will not be seen as a 'valid interlocutor' within the tradition one seeks to represent.

It might be objected here: it is impossible to meet every type of criterion which the different schools of thought within any given religious tradition may propose for one to be deemed a 'valid interlocutor' on behalf of that faith. Whilst this is true, it is nonetheless worth making the effort to reduce as far as possible the basis upon which one's credentials as a valid interlocutor would be rejected by one's co-religionists. And one of the main bases for this rejection is, without doubt, the perception that those engaged in dialogue are so intent on reaching out to the Other that they do not sufficiently respect the integrity of the Self - that is, they inadequately uphold the normativity of the tradition ostensibly being represented in dialogue. This is a factor which cannot be ignored if one is concerned with a dialogue that aims to be effective, not just in the debating halls of academia, but also in the wider world, wherein the overwhelming majority of believers within the various religions believe deeply in the normativity of their particular religion.

How, then, can the Muslim engaged in dialogue cultivate that

view - *sub specie aeternitatis* - the water remains colourless.

Returning to the idea of *da'wa*-as-dialogue, in the Christian context, those most opposed to the reductionistic tendencies of the kind of pluralism associated with John Hick argue forcefully that a Christian has both the right and the duty to 'bear witness' to his faith: to some degree at least, and in some manner, implicit or explicit, it becomes one's duty to invite others to study and investigate the wisdom that is available within one's own faith. As mentioned above, this is a crucial

wisdom which perceives the truth, the holiness, and the beauty that is contained within the religions of the Other, whilst simultaneously upholding the normativity of his faith, and the specificity of his identity?[15] The perception of the validity of other, alien forms of religious belief acquires a particular acuteness in the light of the following strongly authenticated saying of the Prophet; it is transmitted by Abū Sa'īd al-Khudrī.

God appears to the Muslims on the Day of Judgement and declares:

'I am your Lord.' They say: 'We seek refuge in God from you, and do not associate anything with God.' They repeat this twice or thrice, such that some of them would be about to return. God asks: 'Is there any sign between you and Him, by means of which you would recognise Him?' They reply: 'Yes'; then the reality is laid bare … Then they raised their heads and He transformed Himself (*tahawwala*) into the form (*sūra*) in which they had seen Him the first time. He then said: 'I am your Lord'. They said: 'You are our Lord'.[16]

How, then, is one to recognize the divine 'face' in the traditions of the Other; how does one recognize this 'lost camel' - the wisdom contained within the religions of the Other? For this wisdom may well be expressed in forms of divine self-manifestation which are not only alien, but, in addition, so unlike one's own received wisdom that one takes refuge from them in one's own 'God'. If believers on the Day of Judgement are unable to recognize God in anything other than the 'sign' furnished by their own beliefs, through the blinkers of their own prejudices, how can believers, here and now,

ensure that they do not fall into this same trap?

Evidently, prejudice is one of the main obstacles in the path of any dialogue which aims at discovering the wisdom of the Other; however, one of the principal problems arising out of the removal of prejudice towards the Other is the weakening of the identity of the Self.[17] How can we reach out to the Other in an unprejudiced manner, without this absence of prejudice diluting or subverting our own sense of identity? Or again: How can we be universalist in our spiritual vision, without sacrificing the specificity of our faith and praxis?

It is our contention here that in the Islamic tradition, the metaphysical school of thought associated with Muhyī al-Dīn Ibn al-'Arabī, known as 'the greatest shaykh' (al-Shaykh al-Akbar)[18] can be of considerable value in helping to cultivate the wisdom which synthesizes the two principles in question here: an unprejudiced, universalist, supra-confessional view of spirituality, on the one hand; and a normative approach to the specificity and particularity of one's own faith, praxis, and identity on the other. It is possible to arrive at an inclusive perspective, one which, however paradoxically, includes exclusivism; this is a perspective which transcends the false dichotomy, so often encountered in our times, between a fanatical exclusivism which disdains all but one's own faith, and a relativistic inclusivism which fatally undermines the integrity of one's own faith. Upholding the integrity of one's faith is difficult if not impossible without a definitive, clearly delineated identity, which in its very specificity and particularity cannot but

exclude elements of the Other on the plane of religious form; by 'religious form' is meant not just legal and ritual forms but also conceptual and doctrinal forms. However, all such forms are radically transcended, objectively, by the divine essence of the religions; and all the modes of identity commensurate with these forms are just as radically dissolved, subjectively, within the consciousness of one whose soul has been effaced within that essence. These are natural corollaries of Ibn al-'Arabī's complex and challenging perspective on the dynamics of religious consciousness.

One is instructed to turn towards one's particular goal, in a particular direction, and this is despite the fact that the Qur'ān tells us that Wherever ye turn, there is the Face of God (2: 115).

This metaphysical - or supra-confessional - perspective of Ibn al-'Arabī should be seen as the result of following faithfully and unreservedly certain spiritual trajectories opened up by the Qur'ān, and not simply as the product of his own speculative genius, however undeniable that genius is. Within this perspective there is a clearly defined relationship between form and essence; as will be demonstrated below, his elaboration on this basic distinction flows from the clear distinction established in the Qur'ān between the essence of religion - which is unique - and its forms - which are diverse. Verses such as the following should be borne in mind as the rest of this paper proceeds:

He hath ordained for you of the religion (min al-dīn) *that which He commended unto Noah, and that which We reveal to thee* [Muhammad]*, and that which We commended unto Abraham and Moses and Jesus, saying: Establish the religion, and be not* *divided therein …* (42: 13)

Say: We believe in God and that which is revealed unto us, and that which is revealed unto Abraham and Ishmael and Isaac and Jacob and the tribes, and that which was given unto Moses and Jesus and the prophets from their Lord. We make no distinction between any of them, and unto Him we have submitted. (3: 84)

Naught is said unto thee [Muhammad] *but what was said unto the Messengers before thee.* (41: 43)

It is that essential religion (*al-dīn*) which was conveyed to all the Messengers, whence the lack of differentiation between them on the highest level: the Muslim is not permitted to make an essential distinction between any of them: *we make no distinction between any of them* (3: 84; 2:285, et passim)

Understanding this distinction between the essence of religion and its forms is crucial for those engaged in dialogue; a correct understanding of this fundamental distinction enables one to engage in dialogue with wisdom, and on the basis of a principled universality; this, in contrast to an unprincipled or rootless syncretism, and in contrast to a well-meaning but ultimately corrosive relativistic pluralism. Syncretistic universalism stems from a sentimental and superficial assimilation of the sacred; it thus has no intellectual or metaphysical principle which can discern authentic religion from spurious cults, on the one hand, and, on the other, maintain a total commitment to one's own religion whilst opening up to the religions of the Other. In syncretism, indiscriminate

openness to all sacred forms in general - or what are deemed to be such - cannot but entail a disintegration of the specific form of one's own religion. Principled universality, by contrast, leads to an intensification of commitment to one's own religion; the sense of the sacred and the need to follow the path delineated by one's own religion not only coexist, but each may be said to be a *sine qua non* for the transformative power of other. For effective access to the sacred is granted, not by an abstract, purely discursive conception of the sacred in general, but by entering into the concrete, specific forms of the sacred which are bestowed by the grace inherent within one's own sacred tradition. From this spiritual process of plumbing the depths of the sacred emerges the comprehension that there is no access to the essence of the sacred, above all religious forms, except by means of those authentic formal manifestations of the Essence: the divinely revealed religions. Such a perspective flows naturally from reflection upon the meaning of the verses from the Qur'ān cited above, and in particular, 5: 48: *For each of you We have established a Law and a Path. Had God willed, He could have made you one community. But that He might try you by that which He hath given you* [He hath made you as you are]. *So vie with one another in good works …*

This minimal definition of authenticity - 'true' religion being that which is divinely revealed - derives from the Qur'ān and is reinforced by what Ibn al-'Arabī says about obedience to God determining one's salvation: 'He who prostrates himself to other than God seeking nearness to God and obeying God will be felicitous and attain deliverance, but he who prostrates himself to other than God without God's command seeking nearness will be wretched'.[19] We are using this criterion to distinguish true from false religion, in the full knowledge that authenticity or orthodoxy as defined within each true religion will have its own distinctive and irreducible criteria. In this connection it is worth noting that there was never any central ecclesiastical authority in Islam, comparable to the Church in Christianity, charged with the duty of dogmatically imposing 'infallible' doctrine. According to a well-known saying in Islam: 'The divergences of the learned (*al-'ulamāh*) are a mercy'.[20] This saying can be seen as manifesting the ecumenical spirit proper to Islam; orthodoxy qua doctrinal form has a wide compass, its essence being the attestation of the oneness of God and of Muhammad as His messenger, these comprising the *shahādatayn*, or 'dual testimony'. Accordingly, in Islamic civilization, a wide variety of theological doctrine, philosophical speculation, mystical inspiration and metaphysical exposition was acceptable so long as the Sharī'a, the Sacred Law, was upheld. We might speculate here that the principle of the saying quoted above can also, by transposition, be applied to the religions themselves: the divergences of the religions constitute a 'mercy'. This mercy is expressed in the divine will for religion to be characterised by a diversity of paths: *Had God willed, He could have made you one community.*

The capacity to recognise other religions as valid, without detriment to

Religious diversity expresses a particular mode of divine wisdom, which man must grasp if he is to do justice both to the formless Essence of religion, and the irreducible uniqueness of each religious form.

the commitment to one's own religion, evidently requires a certain spiritual suppleness; minimally, it requires a sense of the sacred and an inkling of the universality of revelation; at its most profound, it is the fruit of spiritual vision. With the help of Ibn al-'Arabī's doctrine, itself evidently the fruit of just such vision,[21] we can arrive at a conception of a principled universality, that is, an awareness of the universality of religion which neither violates the principles of one's own religion, nor dilutes the content of one's own religious identity.

2. Universality and Identity

The relationship between the perception of religious universality and the imperatives of one's identity is brought into sharp focus by Ibn al-'Arabī in his account of his spiritual ascension (*mi'rāj*), an account describing one of the spiritual peaks of his inner life.[22] In this spiritual ascent - distinguished from that of the Prophet, which was both bodily and spiritual - he rises up to a spiritual degree which is revealed as his own deepest essence. But one can hardly speak of personal pronouns such as 'his' at this level of spiritual experience: whatever belongs to him, whatever pertains to 'his' identity, is dissolved in the very process of the ascent itself. At the climax of this ascent, he exclaims: 'Enough, enough! My bodily elements are filled up, and my place cannot contain me!', and then tells us: 'God removed from me my contingent dimension. Thus I attained in this nocturnal journey the inner realities of all the Names and I saw them returning to One Subject and One Entity: that Subject was what I witnessed and that Entity was my

Being. For my voyage was only in myself and pointed to myself, and through this I came to know that I was a pure "servant" without a trace of lordship in me at all.'[23]

It is of note that immediately following this extraordinary revelation of the deepest reality of 'his' selfhood within the divine reality, Ibn al-'Arabī should proclaim, not the secret of oneness with God, or his 'Lordship' in the manner of a Hallāj who declared ecstatically declaring *anā'l-haqq* (I am the Truth), but the very opposite: he came to know through this journey that he was a pure servant (*'abd*), without any trace of lordship (*rubūbiyya*). The highest realization is accompanied by the deepest humility. Self-effacement, rather than self-glorification, is the fruit of this degree of spiritual station, the very opposite to what one might have imagined. It is the essence or *sirr* - 'secret' or 'mystery' - of consciousness within the soul of the saint that, alone, can grasp the truth that it is not conditioned by the soul. The consciousness *within* the soul knows that it is not *of* the soul - this being one of the reasons why this inmost degree of consciousness is referred to as a 'secret': its immanent, divine identity is veiled from the soul of which it is the conscious centre.

The particular dynamics of being within the ontology of Ibn al-'Arabī helps us to understand why specificity and self-effacement should be the natural expressions of universality and self-realization; these dynamics also help us to see the intimate relationship between the deconstruction of identity and the perception of the universality of religion, as well as the necessity for the reconstruction or restitution of identity within a specific religious matrix. These

'religious' corollaries of Being will be explored later in this section. For the moment, attention is to be focused on the fact that at the very summit of this spiritual ascent to ultimate reality and self-realization, Ibn al-'Arabī receives from that Reality the verse of the Qur'ān (cited above):

Say: We believe in God and that which is revealed unto us, and that which is revealed unto Abraham and Ishmael and Isaac and Jacob and the tribes, and that which was given unto Moses and Jesus and the prophets from their Lord. We make no distinction between any of them, and unto Him we have submitted. (3: 84)

He then adds these words: 'Henceforth I knew that I am the totality of those (prophets) who were mentioned to me (in this verse)'; and also: 'He gave me all the Signs in this Sign'.[24]

Since the word for 'sign' is the same as that for 'verse' (*āya*), this can also be taken to mean that all revealed verses are implicitly contained in this verse which establishes the universality and unity of the essence of the religious message, despite the outward differentiation of its formal expression. This last point is clearly implied in another account of a spiritual ascent, in which Ibn al-'Arabī encountered the Prophet amidst a group of other prophets and is asked by him: 'What was it that made you consider us as many?'

To which Ibn al-'Arabī replies: 'Precisely (the different scriptures and teachings) we took (from you)'.[25]

Heavily implied in the Prophet's rhetorical question is the intrinsic unity of all the revelations. This principle is expressed in the following verse of the Qur'ān (cited above), which Ibn al-'Arabī quotes and then comments upon:

He hath ordained for you of the religion (min al-dīn) *that which He commended unto Noah, and that which We reveal to thee* [Muhammad]*, and that which We commended unto Abraham and Moses and Jesus, saying:*

Establish the religion, and be not divided therein. (42: 13)

Then he quotes from another verse, mentioning further prophets, and concluding: *Those are they whom God has guided, so follow their guidance.* (6: 90) He comments as follows:

'This is the path that brings together every prophet and messenger. It is the performance of religion, scattering not concerning it and coming together in it. It is that concerning which Bukhārī wrote a chapter entitled, "The chapter on what has come concerning the fact that the religions of the prophets is one". He brought the article which makes the word "religion" definite, because all religion comes from God, even if some of the rulings are diverse. Everyone is commanded to perform the religion and to come together in it ... As for the rulings which are diverse, that is because of the Law which God assigned to each one of the messengers. He said, *For each of you We have established a Law and a Path. Had God willed, He could have made you one community.* (5: 48). If He had done that, your revealed Laws would not be diverse, just as they are not diverse in the fact that you have been commanded to come together and to perform them.'[26]

One sees clearly that Ibn al-'Arabī is suggesting here a distinction between religion as such, on the one hand, and such and such a religion, on the other; it is religion as such that warrants the definite article (*al-dīn*). But such and such a religion, far from being marginalised in this perspective, is endowed with an imperatively binding nature by virtue of the absoluteness of its own essence, that is, by virtue of being not other than religion as such. For, on the one hand, religion as such, *al-dīn*, is the inner substance and inalienable reality of such and such a religion; and on the other, it is impossible to practise religion as such without adhering to such and such a religion. Apprehending the universal essence of religion, far from precluding particularity and exclusivity of formal adherence, in fact requires this adherence: to attain the essence one must grasp, in depth, the form by which the essence reveals itself. This is why, in the passage quoted above, Ibn al-'Arabī continues by stressing the specific path proper to the final Prophet. It is that path 'for which he was singled out to the exclusion of everyone else. It is the Koran, God's firm cord and all-comprehensive Law. This is indicated in His words, "This is My straight path, so follow it, and follow not diverse paths, lest they scatter you from its road" (6: 153)'.[27]

This 'straight path' both excludes and includes all other paths: excludes by way of specific beliefs and practices, and includes by virtue of the single Essence to which the path leads, and from which it began. But one cannot reach the end of the path without traversing its specific trajectory, without keeping within its boundaries, and thus making sure that one does not stray into other paths: *And each one has a direction (wijha) toward which he turns. So vie with one another in good works ...'* (2: 148). One is instructed to turn towards one's particular goal, in a particular direction, and this is despite the fact that the Qur'ān tells us that *Wherever ye turn, there is the Face of God* (2: 115). The ubiquity of the divine Face, then, does not imply that, in one's formal worship, the direction in which one turns to pray is of no consequence. For the Qur'ān also says: *Turn your*

face toward the sacred mosque, and wherever you may be, turn your faces toward it [when you pray]. (2: 144)

For Ibn al-'Arabī, such combinations of principial universality and practical specificity are paradoxical expressions of a principle that goes to the very heart of his ontology, his understanding of the nature of reality: for 'part of the perfection or completeness of Being is the existence of imperfection, or incompleteness within it - failing which Being would be incomplete by virtue of the absence of incompleteness within it.[28] This is an example of the bringing together of opposites (*jam' bayn al-hiddayn*) which is emphasised repeatedly in the writings of Ibn al-'Arabī, pertaining to the paradoxes required on the level of language, if one is to do justice to the complexities of existence. Just as completeness requires and is not contradicted by incompleteness, so the incomparability (*tanzīh*) of God requires and is not contradicted by comparability (*tashbīh*), universality requires and is not contradicted by particularity, inclusivity requires and is not contradicted by exclusivity, and nondelimitation (*i-hlāq*) requires and is not contradicted by delimitation (*taqyīd*).

Returning to the direction in which one must pray: on the one hand, the instruction to turn in a specific direction 'does not eliminate the property of God's Face being wherever you turn.' On the other, the fact that God is there wherever one turns nonetheless implies the bestowal of a specific 'felicity' (*sa'āda*) as the consequence of turning in a particular direction for prayer. 'Hence for you He combined delimitation and nondelimitation, just as for Himself He combined incomparability and similarity. He said; "Nothing is like Him, and He is

the Hearing, the Seeing" (42:11).'[29]

Nothing is like Him: this denial of similarity, this expression of pure *tanzīh* or transcendence, is immediately followed by an apparent contradiction of this very incomparability, for 'He is the Hearing, the Seeing'. As human beings also hear and see, this statement inescapably entails establishing modes of similarity or comparability between man and God. Ibn al-'Arabī, however, does not allow the mind to be restricted by this conceptual antimony, but rather takes advantage of the appearance of contradiction, using it as a platform from which to rise to an intuitive synthesis between these two opposing principles: the divine incomparability is perfect only when it is not conditioned by the very fact of being unconditioned by similarity, and vice versa. The divine nondelimitation is only properly grasped in the light of delimitation, and vice versa. This paradox is powerfully delivered in the following passage:

'He is not declared incomparable in any manner that will remove Him from similarity, nor is He declared similar in any manner that would remove Him from incomparability. So do not declare Him nondelimited and thus delimited by being distinguished from delimitation! For if He is distinguished then He is delimited by His nondelimitation. And if He is delimited by His nondelimitation, then He is not He.'[30]

Without possessing or manifesting an aspect of finitude, God cannot be regarded as infinite; without assuming

The Qur'ān excludes this kind of chauvinistic exclusivism by virtue of an implicit, and occasionally explicit, inclusivism; but it also includes its own mode of exclusivism, both implicitly and explicitly, in affirming the need to follow the particular religion of Islam.

a mode of delimitation He cannot be nondelimited; without the relative, He cannot be Absolute. Without the innumerable manifestations of these apparent contradictions of His own uniqueness, without such multiplicity within unity, and unity within multiplicity, 'He is not He'. The very infinitude of the inner richness of unicity overflows as the outward deployment of inexhaustible self-disclosures; this process is described as the *tajallī* or *zuhūr* (theophanic revelation/manifestation). It is a process wherein no repetition is possible (*lā tikrār fi'l-tajallī*); each phenomenon is unique in time, space and quality. In this complex and subtle conception of *wujūd*, there is no contradiction between asserting the uniqueness of each phenomenon - each distinct locus for the manifestation of Being, each *mazhar* for the *zuhūr* or *tajallī* of the one and only Reality - and the all-encompassing unity of being which transcends all phenomena. Multiplicity is comprised within unity, and unity is displayed by multiplicity.

This ontological perspective is to be applied on the plane of religion: there is no contradiction between asserting the uniqueness of a particular religion, on the one hand, and affirming the all-encompassing principle of religion which transcends the forms assumed by religion, on the other. The transcendence in question leaves intact the formal differences of the religions; for, these differences, defining the uniqueness of each religion, are by that very token irreducible; the formal differences can only be transcended in spiritual realization of the Essence, or at least, an intuition of this Essence. They cannot be abolished on their own level in a pseudo-esoteric quest for the supra-formal essence. For these differences are divinely willed; religious diversity expresses a particular mode of divine wisdom, which man must grasp if he is to do justice both to the formless Essence of religion, and the irreducible uniqueness of each religious form.

Ibn al-'Arabī's conception of *al-dīn*, or religion as such, a religious essence that at once transcends and abides at the heart of all religions is in complete accord with the Qur'ānic perspective on religious diversity; it helps one to see that an orientation towards this quintessential religion does not in the least imply a blurring of the boundaries

between religions on the plane of their formal diversity. For one does not so much conceptually posit as spiritually intuit this essence of religion - in other words, one sees this 'heart' of religion with one's own 'heart', rather than one's mind:

'My *heart* has become capable of every form: it is a pasture for gazelles and a convent for Christian monks,

And a temple for idols and the pilgrim's Qa'ba and the tables of the Tora and the book of the Koran.

I follow the religion of Love: whatever way Love's camels take, that is my religion and my faith.' (emphasis added)[31]

The defining spirit of principled universality thus pertains to inner vision and does not translate into any modification of one's outer practice. It is on the basis of this religion of love, perceived by spiritual intuition, not formulated by rational speculation, that Ibn al-'Arabī can issue the following warning to narrow-minded exclusivists:

'Beware of being bound up by a particular creed and rejecting others as unbelief! If you do that you will fail to obtain a great benefit. Nay, you will fail to obtain the true knowledge of the reality. Try to make yourself a Prime Matter for all forms of religious belief. God is greater and wider than to be confined to one particular creed to the exclusion of others. For He says: 'To whichever direction you turn, there surely is the Face of God' (2: 115).[32]

One should note that this counsel resonates with a Qur'ānic warning to the same effect. This verse comes just before 2: 115, quoted in the previous citation from Ibn al-'Arabī. Here, the attitude of religious exclusivism is censured, and the Muslim is told

transcend the level of inter-confessional polemics and focus on the essential pre-requisites of salvation: not belonging to such and such a religion, but submitting to God through one's religion, and manifesting the sincerity of that submission through virtue:

And they say: None entereth Paradise unless he be a Jew or a Christian. These are their own desires. Say: Bring your proof if ye are truthful.

Nay, but whosoever surrendereth his purpose to God while being virtuous, his reward is with his Lord; and there shall be no fear upon them, neither shall they grieve.' (2: 112)

The Qur'ān excludes this kind of chauvinistic exclusivism by virtue of an implicit, and occasionally explicit, inclusivism; but it also includes its own mode of exclusivism, both implicitly and explicitly, in affirming the need to follow the particular religion of Islam. The Akbarī principle of paradoxical synthesis of two apparently contradictory principles can clearly be seen at this level of revelation, and is indeed the ultimate source of Ibn al-'Arabī's elaborate metaphysics. In keeping with the spirit of this metaphysical perspective, one must assert: it is only on the basis of the vision of the religion of love that one can be 'liberated' from the limitations of one's own faith, for then, the escape is upwards, towards the essence of one's own, and every, faith; any attempt to loosen the bonds of one's own belief system, in the absence of this upwardly and inwardly essentialising movement of consciousness, is tantamount to simply dissolving the roots of one's religious identity, and leaving nothing in its place on the level where one cannot do without a sense of identity, that is, the human personality. The

consciousness which is alone capable of transcending the formal limitations of religion is supra-personal: it has nothing to do with the empirical ego.

In passing, one might note that it is this dissolution which postmodern deconstruction engenders, deliberately or otherwise; one aspires to be liberated from the 'constructions' of belief, language, history, tradition, etc. by systematic demolition of these elements. But, in stark contrast to the spiritual 'deconstruction' of an Ibn al-'Arabī, there is no reconstruction of thought, belief and identity on a higher plane of being.[33] Here it would be appropriate to return to the spiritual ascent, or *mi'rāj* of Ibn al-'Arabī mentioned earlier. It is important to note that in the course of this ascent, he undergoes a process of dissolution by means of which he is divested of various aspects of his being, such that he becomes aware that 'his' consciousness is no longer 'his', and the Real is realized as the essence of all consciousness and being. The degrees leading up to this unitive state are given in a description of the 'journey' of the saints to God, within God. In this journey the composite nature of the saint is 'dissolved', first through being shown by God the different elements of which his nature is composed, and the respective domains to which they belong; he then abandons each element to its appropriate domain:

'[T]he form of his leaving it behind is that God sends a barrier between that person and that part of himself he left behind in that sort of world, so that he is not aware of it. But he still has the awareness of what remains with him, until eventually he remains with the divine Mystery (*sirr*), which is the "specific aspect" extending from God

to him. So when he alone remains, then God removes from him the barrier of the veil and he remains with God, just as everything else in him remained with (the world) corresponding to it.'[34]

The constitutive elements of human nature are 'dissolved' (or deconstructed) through being absorbed by those dimensions of cosmic existence to which they belong. Consciousness becomes rarified, purified and disentangled from matter and its subtle prolongations. As seen above, the 'culminating revelation' coming just before the experience of extinctive union, was given in relation to the essence of all religions. Just as this realization of the essence of all religions does not entail any diminution of adherence to the form of one's own religion, likewise, as regards consciousness as such, the realization of the essence of the Real in no way entails any diminution of one's slavehood before the Real: 'The slave remains always the slave', according to a saying often repeated in Ibn al-Arabī's works. The ego remains always the ego, and this level of personal specificity cannot but entail what Ibn al-'Arabī refers to as *'ubūdiyya*, slavehood.

In other words, in this process of spiritual ascent there is both *tahlīl* and *tarkīb*, dissolution and reconstitution, dissolution of all elements pertaining to the ego, and then reconstitution of this same ego, but on a higher plane: that of a conscious realization of one's actual nothingness. The higher the plane reached by essentialized consciousness, the deeper one's awareness of one's slavehood. In contrast to deconstruction, this dismantling of specificity and identity in the movement towards universality and transcendent Selfhood is accompanied by a return to specific

identity, which is now vibrant with the spirit of the ultimate Self: the individual sees the Face of God everywhere, because of the very completeness of his self-effacement; and, on the plane of religion, the specific form of his religion resonates with the universality proper to its essence. One grasps religion as such within such and such a religion; the absolute, nondelimited essence of religion is revealed by and within the relative, delimited religion, just as the Self of the Real (*nafs al-Haqq*) subsists as the ultimate reality within the soul of the individual, who now comes to understand that he is both 'He' and 'not He'. Each religion is both a form,outwardly, and the Essence, inwardly; just as man is 'the transient, the eternal'.[35]

The religion of love, or the religion of the 'heart', thus re-affirms and does not undermine one's particular religion, or any other revealed religion; rather, this conception of 'the religion' or religion as such presupposes formal religious diversity, regarding it not as a regrettable differentiation but a divinely willed necessity. The infinite forms of existence are integrated, 'made one', according to the unitive principle of *tawhīd*, in the very bosom, and not despite, this infinite unfolding of Being; we observe an analogous synthesis between multiplicity and unity on the level of religious phenomena: the dazzling diversity of religious forms manifest the principle of inexhaustible infinitude, just as the degree proper to 'the religion', or religion as such, is the expression, in religious mode, of the principle of absolute oneness. This synthesis between infinity and oneness on the religious plane implies, then, both diversity of revealed forms,

and the uniqueness of each specific revealed form. Each revealed religion is totally unique - totally 'itself' - while at the same time being an expression of a single, all-encompassing principle, that of Revelation, a principle within which all religions are integrated, or 'made one', in the rigorously metaphysical sense of *tawhīd*.

To conclude: It is clear that for Ibn al-'Arabī the unity of religions lies in the unity of Revelation, and that this position is rooted in the message of the Qur'ān:

Say: We believe in God, and that which was revealed unto Abraham, and Ishmael, and Isaac, and Jacob, and the tribes, and that which was given unto Moses and Jesus and the prophets from their Lord. We make no distinction between any of them, and unto Him we have submitted. (2: 136)

Each particular religion vehicles the Absolute, even while being distinct from It: the absoluteness of a religion resides in its supra-formal, transcendent essence, while, in its formal aspect, the same religion is necessarily relative.

The following verse might well be read as an allusion to the mystery of this unity of the celestial cause and the diversity of terrestrial effects:

And in the earth are neighbouring tracts, and gardens of vines, and fields sown, and palms in pairs, and palms single, watered with one water. And we have made some of them to excel others in fruit. Surely herein are signs for a people who understand. (13: 4)

The 'water' of Revelation is simultaneously one in its substance and multiple in its forms. In terms of the image of the water and the cup, briefly alluded to above: the cup might be seen to symbolize the form taken by Revelation, while water stands for

the essence of that which is revealed, and not just its forms, will recognize this 'water' in receptacles other than his own, and will be able to judge all such receptacles according to their content, rather than be misled into judging the content according to the accidental properties of the container.

To accept God fully, therefore, means to accept His presence and reality in all forms of His Self-disclosure, all forms of revelation, all beliefs stem-ming from those revelations; while to limit Him to one's own particular form of belief is tantamount to denying Him: 'He who delimits Him denies Him in other than his own delimitation … But he who frees Him from every delimitation never denies Him. On the contrary, he acknowledges Him in every form within which He undergoes self- transmutation …'[36]

Nonetheless, the ordinary believer who may thus 'deny' God by adhering exclusively to his own belief is not punished because of this implicit denial: since God is Himself 'the root of every diversity in beliefs', it follows that 'everyone will end up with mercy'.[37] Also, in terms of the water/cup image: the water in the cup, however delimited it may be by the container, remains water nonetheless, hence the ordinary believer benefits from his possession of the truth; even if this truth be limited by the particularities of his own

the Essence of Revelation. Water, in itself, is undifferentiated and unique, whilst undergoing an apparent change of form and colour by virtue of the accidental shape and colour of the receptacles into which it is poured. The receptacles, the forms of Revelation, are fashioned according to the specificities of the human communities to which the specific revealed message is addressed: *And We never sent a messenger save with the language of his folk, that he might make the message clear for them* (14: 4). Just as human communities differ, so must the 'language' of the 'message' sent to them: the cups can-not but differ. However, the one who knows 'water' as it is in itself, that is,

conception, it adequately conveys the nature of That which is conceived, but which cannot be attained by concepts alone. Thus one returns to the principle that all 'religions' are true by virtue of the absoluteness of their content, while each is relative due to the particular nature of its form.

Each particular religion vehicles the Absolute, even while being distinct from It: the absoluteness of a religion resides in its supra-formal, transcendent essence, while, in its formal aspect, the same religion is necessarily relative; and this amounts to saying, on the one hand, that no one religion can lay claim, on the level of form, to absolute truth, to the exclusion of other religions, and on the other hand, that each religion is true by virtue of the absoluteness of its origin and of its essence. One continues to conform to the dictates of one's own religion, and does so, moreover, with a totality that is commensurate with the absoluteness inherent in the religion;[38]and at the same time one is aware of the presence of the Absolute in all those religions that have issued from a Divine Revelation, this awareness being the concomitant of one's recognition of the formal and thus relative aspect of one's own religion; and this recognition, in turn, arises in proportion to one's ability to plumb the metaphysical implications of the first testimony of Islam, 'There is no god but God': only the Absolute is absolute.

This kind of approach to the question of religious diversity and interfaith dialogue ensures that the formal integrity and distinctness of each faith will be respected, and at the same time establishes the proper level at which we can say that all religions are at one. It is not on the level of forms that they are one; rather, they are one in God as their source, and they are as one in respect of the substance of their imperative to man: namely to submit to the Divinely Revealed Law and Way. Principles such as these, expounded with subtlety and depth in the metaphysical perspective of Ibn al-'Arabī, can help greatly in avoiding both the pitfalls of bridge-building between faiths and cultures, on the one hand, and the dangers of religious nationalism, on the other: that is, it can help to prevent a fragmentary sense of the sacred from arbitrarily or indiscriminately assimilating apparently 'religious' forms out of sentimental desire; and, inversely, it can help prevent an over-zealous sense of orthodoxy from summarily anathematising alien religious forms out of dogmatic rigidity. Such a perspective shows that there is no incompatibility between believing absolutely in one's particular faith and cultivating reverentially a universal sense of the sacred.

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NOTES

¹ **M. Lings**, *What is Sufism* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1975), pp.22-23. For further discussion of this theme, see our *The Other in the Light of the One - The Universality of the Qur'an and Interfaith Dialogue* (Cambridge: Islamic Texts Society, 2006).

² **Tim Winter**, 'Islam and the Threat of Europe' in *World Faiths Encounter*, no.29, 2001, p.11.

³ This saying, cited in the collections of al-Tirmidhī and Ibn Mājah, complements other well-known sayings of the Prophet concerning the need to search for knowledge from the cradle to the grave, even if the knowledge be in China, etc. See al-Ghazālī's collection of such sayings, together with Qur'ānic verses and sayings of the sages, in his *Kitab al-'ilm*, the first book of his monumental *Ihyā 'ulūm al-dīn* ('Enlivening of the sciences of religion') translated by N.A. Faris as *The Book of Knowledge* (Lahore: Sh. Muhammad Ashraf, 1966).

⁴ See the masterful work by **Seyyed Hossein Nasr**, *Science and Civilization in Islam* (Cambridge: Islamic Texts Society, 1987, 'Introduction', pp.21-40.

⁵ See **Thomas Arnold**, *The Preaching of Islam* (London: Luzac, 1935).

⁶ See for a more extended discussion of **Ibn al-'Arabī**'s principles of exegesis, in the context of mystical and postmodern hermeneutics, *The Other in the Light of the One*, chapter 1, 'The Hermenutics of Suspicion or of Sufism?', pp.1-73. See also our forthcoming paper, 'Beyond Polemics and Pluralism: The Universal Message of the Qur'ān', delivered at the conference: 'Al-Azhar and the West - Bridges of Dialogue', Cairo, 5 January, 2009.

⁷ As **Frithjof Schuon** observes: 'Every religion by definition wants to be the best, and "must want" to be the best, as a whole and also as regards its constitutive elements; this is only natural, so to speak, or rather "supernaturally natural".' 'The Idea of "The Best" in Religions', in his *Christianity/Islam - Essays on Esoteric Ecumenism* (Bloomington: World Wisdom Books, 1985), p.151.

⁸ 'Knowledge calls out for action', says **Imam 'Alī**; 'if it is answered [it is of avail], otherwise it departs.' Cited in the compilation by '**Abd al-Wāhid Āmidī**, *Ghurar al-hikam wa durar al-kalim* (given together with the Persian translation, under the title, *Guftār-i Amīr al-mu'minīn 'Alī*, by Sayyid usayn Shaykhul-Islāmī) (Qom: Intishārāt-i Anariyān, 2000), vol.2, p.993, no.21.

⁹ In the words of **Frithjof Schuon**: 'The true and complete understanding of an idea goes far beyond the first apprehension of the idea by the intelligence, although more often than not this apprehension is taken for understanding itself. While it is true that the im¬mediate evidence conveyed to us by any particular idea is, on its own level, a real understanding, there can be no question of its embracing the whole extent of the idea since it

is primarily the sign of an aptitude to understand that idea in its completeness. Any truth can in fact be understood at different levels and according to different "conceptual dimensions", that is to say according to an indefinite number of modalities which correspond to all the possible aspects, likewise indefinite in number, of the truth in question. This way of regarding ideas accordingly leads to the question of spiritual realization, the doctrinal expressions of which clearly illustrate the "dimensional indefinity" of theoretical conceptions.' *The Transcendent Unity of Religions* (Tr. Peter Townsend) (London: Faber and Faber, 1953) p.17.

¹⁰ After mentioning this analogy, **Sakyamuni Buddha** continues: 'Words are the finger pointing to the meaning; they are not the meaning itself. Hence, do not rely upon words.' Cited by Eisho Nasu, '"Rely on the Meaning, not on the Words": Shinran's Methodology and Strategy for Reading Scriptures and Writing the Kyōgōshinshō' in *Discourse and Ideology in Medieval Japanese Buddhism* (eds. R.K. Payne and T.D. Leighton) (New York: Routledge, 2006), p.253.

¹¹ *The Discourses of **Rūmī*** (*Fīhi mā fīhi*) (tr. A.J. Arberry), (London: John Murray, 1961), p.202.

¹² This is from **William Chittick**'s translation of the *Lawāhih*, in *Chinese Gleams of Sufi Light*, Sachiko Murata (Albany: SUNY, 2000), p.138.

¹³ This is the very opposite of the **Cartesian axiom**: 'I think, therefore I am'. Here, thought trumps being, individual conceptualisation precedes universal reality. Subjectivism, individualism, rationalism - all are contained in this error, and reinforce its basic tendency, which is to reverse the traditional, normal subordination of human thought to divine Reality.

¹⁴ **Schuon** refers to the distinction between metaphysics and ordinary religious knowledge in terms of uncoloured light, and particular colours: 'If an example may be drawn from the sensory sphere to illustrate the difference between metaphysical and religious knowledge, it may be said that the former, which can be called "esoteric" when it is manifested through a religious symbolism, is conscious of the colourless essence of light and of its character of pure luminosity; a given religious belief, on the other hand, will assert that light is red and not green, whereas another belief will assert the opposite; both will be right in so far as they distinguish light from darkness but not in so far as they identify it with a particular colour.' *Transcendent Unity*, p.10.

¹⁵ This is one of the central questions which we posed and tried to answer in *The Other in the Light of the One*, pp.117-139; 185-209; 234-266.

¹⁶ This is part of a long saying concerning the possibility of seeing God in the Hereafter. It is found in the 'sound' collection of **Muslim**, *sahīh Muslim* (Cairo: 'Īsā al-alabi, n.d.), vol.1, p.94.

[17] Self is given in capitals only as a parallel to the use of the capital O for 'Other'; what is meant here is the empirical self, the individual as such, and its communitarian extension, and not the universal Selfhood of the Real (nafs al-haqq, as Ibn al-'Arabī calls it), at once transcendent and immanent.

[18] For the most comprehensive biography of this seminal figure, see **Claude Addas**, *Quest for the Red Sulphur* (Tr. Peter Kingsley) (Cambridge: Islamic Texts Society, 1993); for a concise overview of Ibn al-'Arabī's thought, see **Seyyed Hossein Nasr**, *Three Muslim Sages* (Lahore: Suhail Academy, 1988 repr), ch. 3, 'Ibn 'Arabī and the Sufis', pp. 83–121.

[19] Cited in **William C. Chittick**, *The Sufi Path of Knowledge - Ibn al-'Arabī's Metaphysics of Imagination* (Albany: SUNY, 1989) p.365.

[20] **Ikhtilāf al-'ulamāh rahma**. This is often cited as a hadīth, but is more authoritatively ascribed to al-Shāfi'ī.

[21] **Ibn al-'Arabī** claims that everything he wrote was contained in his first vision of the 'glory of His Face'; all his discourse is 'only the differentiation of the all-inclusive reality which was contained in that look at the One Reality.' *Sufi Path*, op.cit., p.xiv.

[22] The following pages contain reflections on material which can be found elaborated in greater detail in our *Paths to Transcendence - According to **Shankara, Ibn 'Arabi** and **Meister Eckhart*** (Bloomington: World Wisdom, 2006), pp.69-129.

[23] **James Morris**, 'Ibn al-'Arabī's Spiritual Ascension', in M. Chodkiewicz (ed.), *Les Illuminations de La Mecque/The Meccan Illuminations* (Paris: Sindbad, 1988), p.380. One is reminded by the words 'my place cannot contain me' of Rumi's lines: 'What is to be done, O Muslims? For I do not recognise myself? I am not Christian, nor Jew; not Zoroastrian, nor Muslim.' This is a succinct expression of the transcendence of all religious identity in the bosom of the unitive state, which is alluded to later in the poem:
'I have put duality aside ... One I seek, One I know, One I see, One I call.
He is the First, He is the Last, He is the Outward, He is the Inward'. [paraphrasing 57:2].
Selected Poems from the Dīvān-i Shamsi Tabriz (Ed. And Tr. R.A. Nicholson [translation modified]) (Cambridge: CUP, 1977), pp.125, 127.

[24] Quoted in **J.W.Morris**, 'Ibn al-'Arabī's Ascension', p.379.

[25] Quoted in **J.W. Morris**, 'The Spiritual Ascension: Ibn al-'Arabī and the Mi'rāj', *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, vol.108, 1988, p.75.

[26] Cited in **Sufi Path**, p.303 (translation modified).

[27] Ibid.

[28] Ibid., p. 296.

[29] Ibid., p.11.

[30] Ibid., p.112.

[31] **The Tarjumān al-Ashwāq** - *A Collection of Mystical Odes* (tr. R.A. Nicholson) (London: Theosophical Publishing House, 1978), p.52.

[32] Cited by **Toshihiko Izutsu**, *Sufism and Taoism - A Comparative Study of Key Philosophical Concepts*, Berkeley/London: University of California Press, 1983), p.254. With modifications, see note 15 above.

[33] Some have tried to see similarities between this type of spiritual self-denouement and postmodern deconstructionism. See our *The Other in the Light of the One*, pp.23-58, for a presentation of the irreconcilable differences between the two approaches to reality.

[34] **James W. Morris**, 'Ibn al-'Arabi's Spiritual Ascension', p.362.

[35] This is from **Ibn al-'Arabī's** *Fuū al-hikam*, translated by R. Austin as *Bezels of Wisdom* (New York: Paulist Press, 1980) p.51.

[36] The reference here is to God's capacity to transform Himself in keeping with the 'signs' by which the believers can recognise Him, as expressed in the hadīth cited earlier in this article, and which **Ibn al-'Arabi** cites several times in his works. *Sufi Path*, pp.339–340.

[37] *Sufi Path*, p.338.

[38] And, as seen earlier, one can conform to one's religion in the sincere belief that it is the best religion, without this detracting from the universality of one's perspective.

SYMBOLS OF FAITH WITHIN THE JEWISH, CHRISTIAN AND MUSLIM TRADITIONS

by Ori Z. Soltes

I Religion and the Development of the Abrahamic Traditions

Humans have believed, as far back as we can trace ourselves, that some Other created us. We also believe that It has the power to destroy us: (the) God(s) can help or harm, further or hinder, bless or curse us. In our need to make Divinity more accessible, and to understand what It wants from us so that we *are* blessed and not cursed, humans have evolved religious systems. Broadly speaking religion is the instrument used to bind us to divinity;[1] different religions are distinguished from each other by the particulars through which they do this.[2]

Somewhere near the beginning of the second millennium before the Christian era (BCE), a man we call Abraham[3] left Haran for Cana'an, inspired by a divinity the understanding of which already distinguished Abraham from his contemporaries: for he conceived of one God, conventionally inexpressible yet, paradoxically, accessible via thought and word. As an itinerant who grazed his flocks from place to place Abraham is referred to in the language of the Hebrew Bible as an *'Ivri*.[4] As the first individual to commit himself to embrace

that God-concept and to serve that God, he might also be termed, in the Arabic of the Qur'ān, the first *muslim*.[5]

By about 1000 BCE Abraham's descendants, called Israelites (for reasons beyond this discussion) were unified into a kingdom under Saul and David - chosen to be kings by God Itself and anointed (*mashiah* in Hebrew; *christos* in Greek) by God's priest/ Prophet Samuel. David's son Solomon caused a Temple to the Israelite God to be built in Jerusalem in about 960-950 BCE. Jewish, Christian and part of the Muslim tradition locates the Temple on Mount Moriah, where, according to Genesis 22, Abraham offered his son Isaac to God.[6]

A thousand years later, the surviving Judaean remnant of that Israelite community[7] would experience a schism with respect to the nature of God and the figure of Jesus of Nazareth. What divided them was not only the question of whether or not God would or did assume human form, but what the term *mashiah/christos*; (in English: Messiah, Christ) really *means* - among other issues.[8]

Jews and Christians shared five basic elements and disagreed regarding how to understand those elements. Thus belief in a single God - perceived with or without a physical, indeed a human, avatar - and a sense of peoplehood;[9] parallel yet not identical senses of texts serving as the umbilicus between God and the People;[10] and parallel but not identical senses of what place on the planet is most propitious for engaging the divine-human relationship. Finally, for Christianity the messianic idea not only attached itself to Jesus as the Christ, but he was understood to be God Itself assumed human form,

whereas for Judaism the messianic idea remained non-divine, and ultimately vague: who will the messiah be - or will there be a messianic era that is not a function of an individual at all?

By the early seventh century, the Prophet Muhammad, perceiving a single, invisible, all-powerful God communicating with him began to shape the principles of Islam - meaning "submission/commission [to the will of God]." Within a generation after his death in 632 the words articulating that will had been written down as the *Qur'ān* (meaning "recitation"). The central pillars of that articulation, in terms both of belief and of accompanying action are termed the Five Pillars: the *shahada*, or credo; the obligation to pray formally (*salat*) five times a day; the obligation to fast (*sawm*) from sunrise to sunset during the seventh month, *Ramadan*; the obligation to help others through *zakat* or *sadakah* (charity); and the obligation to make the *hajj* - the pilgrimage to Makka and Madina - at least once in one's lifetime, if at all possible.

Thus Islam offers elemental foundation stones which are the analogues of those one finds in Judaism and Christianity. The concept of an invisible, intangible, all-powerful, all-knowing and ultimately merciful *God - Allāh* - is virtually identical to the Jewish concept of God, differing from Christianity's belief in the Incarnation. A concept of *peoplehood* - its sense of inclusivity closer to the peoplehood idea of Christianity than to the exclusive shape of peoplehood in traditional Jewish thinking as it evolved after the fourth century.

God and people are connected by a *text*, the *Qur'ān*.[11] The concept of sacred

land for Islam focuses on three places: Makka, Madina and Jerusalem (called in Arabic *al'Quds* – "the Sacred").[12] And over the course of its history there also develops a messianic concept: the *mahdi*, ("guided one") who will initiate an age of perfection in the future. The concept is more closely related to the Jewish than to the Christian concept, as the vision of the future to which it points is less extreme and less clear than that which the Second Coming of the Christ anticipates, and because it is not universally accepted throughout the *dar al-Islam*.

II Religion, Art and Symbols

Rites and rituals within all religions govern the border between humanity and divinity. We have evolved accounts of how the power(s) beyond ourselves brought order out of chaos, creating the world. These are recorded by prophets, priests and poets to whom such information regarding the beginning of time and space as we understand them has been revealed by divinity itself.

These accounts, together with prayers, are the primary verbal instruments of religion. But myth and prayer and all the words that make them up are limiting and form only part of the arsenal of how religion addresses divinity. Visual expression - from the very beginnings of art - also addresses the gods as an instrument of religion. But just as differences of time, place and circumstance have engendered different religions, so each has transformed the details of art into specific expressions. Faith reverberates in sibling patterns across history and geography, each pattern in turn begetting variant, sibling symbols.

What *are* symbols? The term - from the Greek *symballein*, meaning literally "to throw together" - referred originally to the exchange of objects between the representatives of two contending forces. As they waged peace, each threw into the situation an object - a *symbolon* - that represented the good will of the giver in a concrete manner, visible and tangible to all.[13] In art, the term comes to refer to images or aspects of images that stand for something other than themselves.

Thus in Christian art a lamb represents - is a *symbol* of - Jesus, because we impute innocence to lambs and because of their association with sacrifice, and due to the association of innocence and sacrifice with Jesus. Similarly, since in telling the story of Christ's life and earth-bound death, the early Christian traditions found the particular narrative associated with the evangelist Luke to be most exemplary of Christ's sacrificial nature, the symbol that came to represent Luke and his Gospel was the ox/bull - another prototypically sacrificial animal. By contrast, the Gospel according to Mark - and thus Saint Mark in general - is symbolized by a lion, king of beasts, since his Gospel is understood to represent most distinctly the royal nature of Christ as descended from the house of David. The Gospel according to Matthew is said to most fully emphasize the human aspects of Christ, and so its symbol is a winged man. And John is noted for its strong oratory, and so is symbolized by a soaring eagle.

Often abstract symbols are found in Christian art, in spite of its rich use of figurative representation. Geometric

forms, certain colors and particular numbers, for example, are a common feature. The number five exemplifies the five wounds in Christ's body. This might be expressed directly by means of the depiction of the crucified Christ with his wounds on display, or obliquely in the form of a pentagon within a given painting, or in the construction of five doorways in the front façade of a large church.

In the visual traditions of Judaism and Islam, figurative representation is far rarer and abstract or semi-abstract symbols are even more necessary, since God is emphatically conceived in Judaism and Islam as lacking visual figurative form. Not only the type of image used to symbolize an idea but the idea conveyed by a given symbol will often differ among the three traditions. For Jews the number five suggests the five books of Moses, the Torah which is the beginning of the Hebrew Bible. For Muslims that number is associated with the Five Pillars summarizing the fundamental principles of Islam. Both of these may be represented by a pentagon or by a five-pointed star - or by a seemingly endless series of stars or pentagons, in which case the infinitizing aspect of God is also symbolically suggested.

These associations may be expressed not only through the absolutely abstract image of the pentagon or the five-pointed star, but also through the semi-abstract image of the upraised hand. The emphasis on its abstract aspect is furthered when, as often happens, the hand is stylized into symmetry, with thumb and pinky identical in size and configuration, flanking the three middle fingers. It is *semi*-abstract in

being ultimately both part of, and yet depicted as completely disconnected from, a body; and it is used in particular as a protective symbol. In such usage it also exemplifies the tendencies of visual symbols to have multiple meanings even *within* and not only *across* traditions.

For the universal idea of an upraised hand to shield one's self is wedded to the specific notion of "fiveness" as inherently protective (and so in much of the Muslim and Judeo-Muslim world the hand is called a *hamseh*, meaning "five" in Arabic). That protective symbolism is not only a function of the idea of the Torah or the Five Pillars.[14] In addition, because of the configuration of the hand (even *when* the artistically stylized representation actually alters this configuration) as a thumb connected to yet separate from four other fingers, it symbolizes the relationship between God and ourselves. Our reality, with its four directions, is symbolized by the four fingers, and God as singular, is symbolized by the thumb, both connected to and separate from us.

The history of art is overrun with symbols and Western art is full of elements that stand for aspects of Divinity and its concomitants. Nor do those symbols as they are variously used in Jewish, Christian and Muslim art necessarily begin with - nor are they limited to - any of these three traditions. They are often part of the visual vocabulary of the religious contexts of antiquity in which these faiths were born.

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Ceramic Bowl with Bulls and Tree of Life. Kermenshah Cave, Iran. 12th-11th century BCE.

III The Transformation of Symbols - From Pagan to Abrahamic Art

Over the centuries, the Abrahamic visual traditions have all inherited visual terms from the worlds of pagan antiquity; they have absorbed, adopted and adapted imagery, symbols and visual ideas from each other; and they have initiated new ideas and interpretations that distinguish their respective vocabularies from each other. To these traits one must add a fourth, universal principle: that symbolic imagery can transform visual particulars while preserving the underlying meaning and message across time and space.

Consider a late Bronze Age ceramic bowl from Iran, in which we see a pair of bulls disposed in a rampant position to either side of a tree - the centering tree of reality, the tree of life. Over the cyclopean doorway at late Bronze Age Mycenae in Greece, that tree has been stylized as a column with frond-like de-tailing for its capital. Flanking the column is a pair of lions that serve as "guards."

The king, whose gateway is protected by lions, is the protector of the people and thus is represented by lions. He is also a bringer and maintainer of order, who mediates between his constituents

and the forces of the unknown, be they wild animals, enemies or nefarious gods. So he is represented not only by the lions but by the tree that centers the lions and therefore "tames" their wild, chaotic being into something under control and perfectly ordered as is expressed by the their perfect symmetry.

Such a king is believed by his constituents to be god-descended or god-favored. So, too, is the epic hero - from Gilgamesh to Aeneas. The inlay of the soundbox of a lyre from Ur offers elements from the Sumerian mythic tradition, but the centerpiece, reflected on the upper register of the soundboard, is the story of Gilgamesh. We see him with his arms around the upper torso of a pair of identical beasts, with the bodies and horns of bulls and human faces. As such he occupies the position elsewhere held by tree or column and functions as the order-maintaining center. The Greeks would later refer to such a figure as the "Master of the Beasts."

Still different from these but analogous to them is a ca 2600 BCE representation from 'Ubaid, depicting the storm god, Umdugud presiding as the master of beasts. He is a *border figure* - contrived of two realms that don't coincide in the natural world of our familiarity, with the body of a majestic eagle-like bird and the head of a feline; his wings are spread over a pair of wild stags, with impressive antlers, disposed in perfect symmetry with their bodies in profile and their heads turned out toward the viewer. There is an inherent logic in depicting a creature contrived of different realms, as Umdugud is - one whose very physical constitution suggests category intermediation - as a symbol of controling chaos and mediating between realms.

Ivory and Wood Inlaid Harp Soundbox. Queen Pu'abi's tomb, Sumerian Ur (Iraq). Ca 2500 BCE.

Fifth-century sarcophagus from Ravenna, Italy

The supreme instance of a border being as paganism yields to Christianity is Jesus. In early Christian art, diverse symbols of Jesus as a soteriological being, fully human and fully divine, appear. One observes, for instance, on a sarcophagus from a late fifth-early sixth-centuries Constantinople,[15] two winged figures - linear descendants of the relief-carved personifications of victory that typically embellished the spandrels of Roman arches of victory - flanking a central wreath image (see p.76-77).[16] Encased within the wreath - a perfect circle - is a pair of Greek letters: *khi* and *rho*. That is: the "x" is the Greek letter *khi*, and what appears to be a staff with a tiny pitcher at its peak is the Greek letter *rho*. These are the first two letters of the word *kh-rh-i-s-t-o-s*. So Jesus, who is the hero/priest/pillar/tree-of-life - the God-man - is represented by the first two letters of the word that sums him up.

An analogous message speaks forth from a fifth-century sarcophagus from Ravenna, on which the central image offers a pair of peacocks flanking and drinking from a fountain overflowing with water. The tree of life as source of life has been transformed as a *source* in the French sense of that word: an entity from which water bursts forth, without which human life cannot last. Moreover, as much as the fountain symbolizes Christ as the Source of eternal life it is also associated with the Virgin Mary as the source of that Source, connecting to the passages from biblical Song of Songs 4:12 ("…my sister, my bride; a

spring closed up, a fountain sealed") and 4:15 ("…a well of living waters") and Psalm 36:10, which speaks of "the fountain of life in [whose] light we see light."

Meanwhile, the peacock offers a series of symbolic meanings in Christian art. It was associated with the Greek goddess Hera in pagan antiquity, who is the Queen of Heaven - and that symbolism has been transferred to the Virgin Mary as the Queen of Heaven. The eyes on the peacock's tail represent the all-seeing quality of the Church. An ancient Egyptian tradition asserted that the flesh of the peacock does not rot at death - and so for Christians it became a symbol of everlasting life - and its odd cry came to be analogized to the cries of early Christian martyrs. And in drinking thirstily from the fount of water, it also offers the general symbolism of the bird as the soul - as an image, this can be traced to ancient Egyptian art - eagerly deriving sustenance from the source of eternal life, Christ.

The idea of a tree of eternal life that grows in paradise is expressed in a splendid tiled panel from ca 1574/75 Ottoman Turkey (see p.12). It was commissioned by Sultan Murad III for the chamber adjacent to the imperial baths in the Harim of the Topkapi Palace in Istanbul. Here the primary visual distinction is between the blue of heaven and the earthy burnt sienna that Ottoman potters added to the coloristic vocabulary of Islamic ceramics, together with white. The frame is marked by a positive-negative play with the stylized leaves known as *rumi* leaves - the sort that one finds only in idealized gardens of paradise. This contrasts, in turn, with spandrels offering stylized clouds derived from Chinese art by way of

Persia. The niche is dominated by a magnificent vegetal and floral growth: this is the tree of eternal life that grows at the center of the Garden of Paradise conceived as an infinitizingly patterned plant that grazes the edges of its limiting frame and is stylized into perfect regularity. Put otherwise, the niche toward which one looks, like the *mihrab* toward which, in a mosque, one would pray,[17] offers a visual foretaste of heaven.

The idea of paradise within the heaven-earth relationship brings us to the ultimate abstract symbol for Christ, the cross.[18] This image arises in Christian art in the course of the sixth through eighth centuries, in an increasing range of media and sizes. The cross is the perfect symbol for Jesus not only as an expression of his self-sacrifice for humankind. But as a horizontal beam superimposed over a vertical beam, it suggests the meeting of opposites, and symbolizes the meeting of heaven and earth, Divinity and humanity. By the eighth century, a profusion of large crosses invaded the British Isles. One of these, the Ahenny Cross (from south Ireland, near Tipperary), is an eleven-foot-tall work of mid-century (see p.164).

The horizontal/vertical meeting point is enveloped by a circle. Indeed, if the cross represents the meeting of realms, on the other hand, in pushing out in four directions it symbolizes the four-directional, stop-and-start, finite reality of which Jesus was humanly part, just as the circle represents the without-stop-or-start, infinitely perfect reality of

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which he was divinely part. Five spheres adorn the arms of the cross and its centering point, corresponding to the five wounds in Christ's self-sacrificial body.

The idea of the cross is also expressed in architecture. The idiom often used for entering a church is that one "enters the body of Christ." As the architecture of the church evolves and emerges in distinction from both its pagan predecessors and its synagogue predecessors and contemporaries, its floor plan is typically conceived in cruci-form. The Greek cross, (all four arms equal in length), dominates eastern Christian topography, and the Latin cross (the lower arm longer than the other three; in architectural terms thus offering a longer nave and shorter transept arms and apse) the West. What they share in common is their symbolic intention: that as one enters such a space, one enters the instrument of Christ's self-sacrifice and one resides within the body of Christ implied by that instrument. Thus, as we have noted, the five doorways that often lead into a church symbolize the five wounds into Christ's body.[19]

As one enters such a space, one enters the instrument of Christ's self-sacrifice and one resides within the body of Christ implied by that instrument.

Within that body, one moves to the "head": the bulbous apse that presses the end of the structure - usually the eastern end, facing toward Jerusalem - opposite the doorway. The apse is inevitably overrun with images.

The central motif of the twelfth-century apse mosaics of the upper church of San Clemente in Rome is a cross (see p. 86).[20] The cross is embellished with the figure of the Crucified Christ, as well as twelve doves - symbolizing the twelve Apostles - and flanked by the figures of the Virgin and John the Evangelist, gesturing in counterpoint. As the Tree of Eternal Life it rises from an acanthus plant. The acanthus is an evergreen and thus a symbol of eternal life - used by the ancient Egyptians, who were the first to make use of its symbolism in the capitals of their columns, and by the Greeks and Romans, whose Corinthian capitals continued that tradition.

But the structure of the apse also has a dual history. On the one hand the semicircular termination of a building was not unusual for Roman judicial and legislative structures. At its furthermost point the judge or governor, seated on a throne, would await those approaching to plead their case or seek his assistance.

The second source for the apse is the Torah niche of the early synagogue. The Torah niche is invariably decorated with scenes that speak of God's soteriological interventionist role in the past (and by implication, in the messianic future), just as the apse décor overwhelms the viewer with visual reminders of God's salvational intervention on our behalf.

The Torah niche alludes specifically to the Israelite Temple built by the Tyrians for King Solomon. That structure was internally divided into three parts as the Canaanite longhouse temples were. The edifice possessed an outer foyer - with its entrance flanked by two columns, referred to as *Yakhin* and *Boaz* - a large middle hall and a Holy of Holies. The entrance to the latter was covered by a decorated curtain, called a *parokhet*, through which only the High Priest might pass to enter the Holy of Holies. Even he might do so only once a year, on the Day of Atonement. Within the Holy of Holies were kept the Tablets

of the Law, symbol of the Covenant established between God and Israel at Mount Sinai.

Later, the Second Temple was modeled on Solomon's Temple, but the details must have been Perso-Babylonian in style. With the eventual destruction of the Second Temple and the shaping of Judaism and Christianity out of the Hebrew-Israelite-Judaean tradition, synagogues and churches began to proliferate. Within the evolving architecture of the synagogue the focal point of prayer was the niche in which the Torah scrolls (referred to as "a Tree of Life to them that hold fast to it") were kept - at first temporarily, during the service, eventually permanently. Among many instances from the first few centuries after Christ, the lushly decorated ca 250 CE synagogue at Dura Europus on the Euphrates River offers a Torah niche oriented toward Jerusalem, with painted decoration that underscores the ongoing focus on the Temple of the past and the hoped-for rebuilding of it in the messianic future (see p.107).[21]

Above the Dura niche is a schematized representation of the front façade of the Temple. So, too, the most prominent object in the temple, the seven-branched candelabrum - about which more will be said shortly - is depicted. Most important is the schematized depiction of Abraham at Mt. Moriah, with Isaac stretched out on an altar and the "hand of God" intervening to stay the patriarch's hand from slaying his son. This moment will become an extremely popular one in Jewish art, expressing the idea of redemption at the last moment through faith and divine intervention.

The Torah niche offers an earlier, more modestly scaled version of what the larger-scaled church apse will become - and they share both orientation toward Jerusalem and decoration that, in the variously Jewish and Christian dialects, speaks the language of salvation. A third visual dialect of the same language is spoken by Islam and Islamic art.

For, a second outgrowth of the Torah niche will be the eventual focus, within the mosque, toward the *mihrab*, a niche in the wall known as the *qibla* - direction or orientation - wall facing Makka. Its purpose is analogous to that of the church apse and the Torah niche: to orient the faithful toward the central point of contact between earth and heaven. For Jews and Christians that point is Jerusalem (for different, parallel reasons); for Muslims that point is the *Ka'aba* in Makka. Muhammad originally demanded of his followers that they pray toward Jerusalem, but by 627-628 or so - by which time he was in the process of conquering Makka - he instructed them to face toward the city of his birth.[22]

The *mihrab* is almost inevitably decorated in a manner that, like the Torah niche and the apse, underscores the redemptive presence of God in our world. For instance, the tenth-century *mihrab* of the Great Mosque in Cordoba, Spain offers five features in particular that we might immediately notice (see p.47). The first is the manner in which the lower, more earthbound

It is important to isolate a spot that is symbolically separate from the earth around. For Muslims this is in part a practical matter: Jews ordinarily do no more than bow the head in prayer; Muslims fall to their knees and bring their foreheads to the ground in submitting to God. Thus a distinct area is a practical desideratum.

part of both the niche and its outer frame is separated and visually different from the upper, more heavenward part. The second is that the upper part is overrun with both infinitizing patterns that are finitized by frames and that there is a contrastive range of such patterns. In the bands that immediately frame the niche, positive and negative as well as vegetal and geometric imagery is explored in ten different ways within the confines of red, black and gold colors.

Monumental and minute, infinite and finite, colouristically and formally contrastive, yielding both abstract imagery and the even greater abstraction of the letters that convey the Word - all of these are features that repeat again and again in the broad geography and history of Islamic art to convey the relationship between Allāh and ourselves.

Variations on the same visual ideas mark the upper part within the niche itself. In fact - and this is the third particularly noteworthy visual element - the interior of the niche is faceted, contrived of five surfaces, corresponding in number to the pillars of Islam. The fourth element that draws the eye is the pair of pilasters flanking each interior blind arch - that echo the pair of double columns marking the entry into the niche. Columns flanking a doorway of some central symbol (particularly a Torah niche), allude to *Yakhin* and *Boaz*, and thus, by synecdoche, to the Temple in Jerusalem, in Jewish art and architecture. The *mihrab* at Cordoba directs the worshipper toward Makka but also reminds him of Jerusalem, *al'Quds* (the sacred), where Solomon built his Temple, and whence Muhammad ascended to heaven to converse with Allāh on our behalf.

The fifth noteworthy element of the Cordoba *mihrab* is what marks the separation between the upper and lower parts of the *mihrab* frame: a lengthy inscription from the Qur'ān. The word that intermediates between God and ourselves, Allāh's word spoken through the Prophet, intermediates between the earthbound and heaven-directed parts of the structure. And the script in which the words are written is different from the script with which other words frame the outermost frame of the *mihrab*: another level of contrastive intermediation.

These issues and ideas repeat themselves along various stylistic paths through different parts of the Muslim world across the centuries. But directing one's prayers toward Makka five times a day offers an interesting practical problem. Hurrying to the mosque so often would be even more disruptive than running to the synagogue three times a day! Both Muslims and Jews need not do that - they may pray alone wherever they can find a quiet spot and a quiet moment. But it is important to isolate a spot that is symbolically separate from the earth around. For Muslims this is in part a practical matter: Jews ordinarily do no more than bow the head in prayer; Muslims fall to their knees and bring their foreheads to the ground in submitting to God. Thus a distinct area is a practical desideratum.

The isolated space offers a sacred territory in which to engage God. This can be accomplished in the simplest of ways: a large piece of newspaper or paper towel can serve. But one of the developments in Islamic art is the prayer rug, that offers a transportable sacred space on which and in which to pray, and is typically characterized by offering a framed *mihrab* as its central design, in which the devotee kneels. In a ca 1550 prayer rug made for Ottoman Sultan

Suleiman the Magnificent we recognize five distinctive sorts of decorative motifs (see p.120).

With regard to the frame a *limitless, infinitizing* series of contrasting floral and geometric patterns forms that very element the purpose of which, as a frame, is to *limit* - we are thus presented with a paradox. The central band of the multiple frame is conceived as a kind of endless garden, which is flanked by two bands made up of an ongoing series of eight-pointed stars, the symbolism of which, like that of the octagon, is intended to suggest the paradoxic nature of the relationship between Allāh and ourselves (as alike and yet utterly opposite to each other).[23] And ultimately we count a total of seven components to the frame-configuration: one kneels surrounded by the seven heavens of perfection and completion.

One kneels flanked by the pair of columns that allude to Solomon's Temple (and, given the name of the Sultan for whom this carpet was made, offers a pun on his name and his God-connected role) and to the rock at the Temple site of Muhammad's ascent to and return from heaven in a single night. One kneels and one's head comes to rest at the point marked by the stylized image of a lamp - the sort of lamp that hangs in a mosque within the *mihrab*. On the one hand we can recognize the sharing of the idea of a lamp with Judaism and Eastern Christianity - before the Holy Ark, or before the iconostasis with the apse beyond

it. In all three Abrahamic faiths the lamp is intended to suggest the presence of God, whose goodness illuminates the world. On the other hand, the lamp in the *mihrab* derives specifically from Qur'ān 9:29, refering to the world as a

Pantheon (interior); built by Hadrian. Rome. Ca 120 CE.

niche and Allāh as a light shining within it.

One can follow the prayer rug in an oblique direction toward a seventeenth-century Cairene synagogue carpet - that is, not a floor rug but a *parokhet* that hung before the Holy Ark (see p.108). The most obvious evidence for this is the Hebrew inscription across its upper part - "This is the gate of the Lord; the righteous shall enter here" - one of several typical texts found by the late medieval period above or to the sides of a synagogue Ark. The hanging looks like a Muslim prayer rug, with a *mihrab*-form surrounded by seven borders and with a pair of double "Temple columns." The hanging lamp image has multiplied, as lamps would, in either a mosque or a North African synagogue. The number nine refers to the Jewish festival of light, Hanukkah,[24] which records the rededication of the Temple after the Judaeans defeated the Seleucids in 165 BCE.

So the synagogue Torah Niche that yielded the church apse and the mosque *mihrab* also yielded the Holy Ark - permanent residence for the Torah scrolls within the synagogue by the medieval period. The *mihrab* inspired the Muslim prayer rug which has inspired a synagogue *parokhet*, this term an allusion to and thus a reminder of the curtain that hung before the Holy of Holies in the ancient Jerusalem Temple. The church apse is visually accessed through an arch that is ultimately inspired by the Roman arch of victory. But what of Judaean or Roman influence on the overall structure of synagogues, churches and mosques, and in Abrahamic art in general?

On the one hand we recall that the Temple in Jerusalem was a flat-roofed, long-house structure. On the other hand one of the most spectacular roman architectural innovations was the three-dimensionalization of the arch as a dome, the first and most famous of which, as a free-standing structure, was the second-century Pantheon - the Temple to all the Gods.[25] The interesting thing is that by the medieval period Christian (and later, Jewish) artists invariably conceived of the *Jerusalem Temple* as domed, or quasi-domed. One can see this, for example, in the 1481 fresco by Perugino in the Sistine Chapel of "Christ Handing the Keys to St. Peter." (see p.68) The setting is the Temple courtyard and the Temple is a quasi-domed structure.

At first perhaps this mode of Temple imagery - which predates Perugino by several hundred years and continues another several hundred - seems odd, as it apparently turns to Rome instead of to Jerusalem for inspiration, until we consider the Jerusalem skyline that has been in place for more than thirteen centuries. That skyline is dominated by the first example of monumental architecture in the Islamic world, the Dome of the Rock (see p.114-115). This extraordinary edifice was built by the Umayyad caliph Abd'ul Malak around 691 CE. Abd'ul Malak's Dome would rise over a rock already acquiring a profound significance in the early Muslim tradition with regard to the divine-human relationship, for which the new edifice offered a decisive visual confirmation.

Everything about the structure and its décor bespeaks the simultaneously

For while art and its symbols assist religion in its engagement of divinity, throughout history, religion - and therefore art - has served politics.

simple and complex relationship between God and ourselves. The dome itself, a microcosmic echo of the dome of heaven, rests on an octagonal structure which in turn sits upon a squared base raised above ground level and approached by a sweep of staircases. The earth might well be symbolized by such a base, its four sides emblematic of the four directions, its stops and starts a reference to the stops and starts of human existence - by contrast to the circular dome with its without-beginning-and-without-end form, that emulates not only the heavens but the perfect realm of Divinity. The octagon intermediates, its geometry speaking of the divine-human relationship, as we have seen, suggesting simultaneous identity and distinction.[26]

The décor of the monument further underscores these issues.[27] For the glistening dome itself is an undifferentiated expanse of color, a vast coloristic singularity that is consistent with the sense of God, in comparison with ourselves who are multifarious and minute. The dome body thus contrasts with the myriad tiny details that overrun the upper half of the octagon and the lower part of the drum. Further, these details have an infinitizing quality to them; it is virtually impossible to parse them into beginning and end points - so that they connote God's infinitude, even as their minuteness conveys our minuteness. Moreover, many of those details, while infinitizing in aspect are actually finitized - cut off - by the frames of the various blind arches that ring the upper half of the octagon and echo the form of the dome (and are in turn echoed by arcades that partially frame the square base). That is: the frames finitize the infinitizing patterns - that

also contrast with each other in being curvilinear or rectilinear, geometric or vegetal.

Detail by detail visual oppositions express the contrasts and commonalities between God and ourselves. the adornment is a rich interweave of coloristic concerns: the blue of the sky and the green of the grass and trees are complemented by the gold of ultimate truth and the white of purity of purpose - rising within a natural environment in which color is blanched by the sun to tawny virtual colorlessness throughout most of the year. Finally, the word serves as decor. The upper reaches of the octagon and the lower reaches of the dome, just before they yield to its monumental golden crown, are overrun with a text that flows around the structure: without beginning and end, even as the astute reader of Arabic, his eye attuned to its calligraphy, might discern where these passages from the Qur'ān start and where they conclude.

Monumental and minute, inifinite and finite, coloristically and formally contrastive, yielding both abstract imagery and the even greater abstraction of the letters that convey the Word - all of these are features that repeat again and again in the broad geography and history of Islamic art to convey the relationship between Allah and ourselves.

But the Dome of the Rock and subsequent similar structures, from the Taj Mahal in India to the Sultanahmet Mosque in Istanbul, ultimately have a pre-Islamic and pre-Abrahamic starting point. The enormous and perfectly spherical dome of the Roman Pantheon was the first edifice designed to emulate the dome of heaven to which it was connected by the opening - the

oculus (eye) - at the peak of the sphere. Subsequently, in the sixth century, Justinian the Great - perhaps the most important of all the Byzantine emperors - rebuilt the Church of Holy Wisdom, (*Haghia Sophia*), in Constantinople as a domed structure.[28] Justinian's church emulated the Pantheon. There are differences between the two cupolae. For us the most important one is that, instead of rising to a single oculus, the dome of the Haghia Sophia rests - or seems, rather, to float above - openings that completely ring it and connect it to as they disconnect it from the walls below. One might say that the strong emphasis in Christianity on the soul that connects us to God is addressed by an interior ablaze from the light of heaven that streams through myriad openings, rather than moving starkly, as a single image, along the dome interior as it does in the Pantheon. If the eyes are the windows to the soul, in the Haghia Sophia the windows are like the eyes that in their multiplicity suggest the all-seeing God, filling that interior with the light that connects those within to God without.

Thus the Dome of the Rock viewed by Christian artists as the image of the Temple was inspired by the Haghia Sophia, which was inspired by the Roman Pantheon. Nor should it be a surprise, when Bramante was called upon in 1506 to contribute a new design for the Church of St. Peter in Rome - a project in process from the mid-fifteenth to late seventeenth centuries - that the master's notion for that structure was that it be crowned by a dome. For Rome had become, in Christian thought, the New Jerusalem - emphatically for Catholicism after the 1054 schism between the Eastern and Western churches.[29] And St Peter's church was viewed as the New Temple.

Similarly, in the aftermath of the development of Reform Judaism in the early nineteenth century, larger synagogues began to appear, often with domed roofs.[30] For part of Reform ideology was to reject the traditional Jewish notion of being in exile from the Holy Land, awaiting the messianic era to return and rebuild the Temple. Thus Reform synagogues are typically called "temples" - understood to be equal in their times and places to the Jerusalem Temple in its time and place - and as an architectural articulation of this idea, many came to be capped by domes.

But let us recall an important detail from the first dome: the ascent to the Pantheon oculus from the ground by a seven-part series of visual levels. We have observed the importance of sevenness expressed in Muslim prayer rug frame patterns. We can find that same number expressed in Christian art, alluding, among other things to sevenfold gifts of the Holy Spirit or to the seven deadly vices. And in virtually every synagogue there stands a seven-branched candelabrum just as that symbol is present across Jewish art - as over the Torah Niche at Dura Europus.

Within the main hall of the Jerusalem Temple stood a seven-branched *Menorah* [candelabrum] to remind the Israelite-Judaean community of the Covenant, its obligations and promises. Prominent among the commandments to the Israelites in the wilderness had been the injunction to keep every *seventh* day as a day of rest. This injunction was related to the Hebrew biblical account of Creation, wherein God rested on the seventh day, after Creation. And in the wilderness

sanctuary there stood a seven-branched candelabrum shaped in accordance with divine prescription. Thus the *Menorah* in the Temple was both a continuation of the wilderness sanctuary *Menorah* and, via its sevenness, a symbol of the Sabbath-centered Covenant. And the synagogue menorah in turn alludes to all of this.

But the Egyptians viewed the soul has having seven aspects, each with a different name. And the Mesopotamians understood the reality of the gods to be sevenfold. For they observed that against the "sphere" of heaven sprinkled with countless stars that move together as a "sphere of fixed stars" - and different from occasional celestial visitors, such as one-time visitors (meteors) and variously periodic visitors (comets) - there are seven entities that move with a recognizable periodicity by night or day. These are the sun, the moon and the five planets that we see with the naked eye.

All seven of these were referred to in antiquity as "wanderers" - the word "planet" derives from the Greek verb *planeo*, meaning "to wander" - and were associated with divinities. Each, associated with one of seven heavenly spheres revolving around us, was called by the name of a god, as most still are today, albeit by way of Latin (Roman) names: Mercury, Venus, Mars, Jupiter, Saturn, together with the Moon and the Sun.

Thus the idea of sevenness as associated with divinity, completeness, and perfection had a nearly three-thousand-year history by the time of the Pantheon, and may have been adopted and adapted by the Israelites just as it was passed on to the Persians, Greeks and Romans. The sevenfold cycle of creation in Genesis may derive from this.[31] That transformation in significance having been established, the subsequent articulations in Jewish, Christian and Muslim thought and art followed.

IV Religion, Politics and Visual Symbols Throughout History

One might turn the screw of visual expressions one last twist. For while art and its symbols assist religion in its engagement of divinity, throughout history, religion - and therefore art - has served politics. The divinization of a pharaoh or a shah or a king - or the ascription to them of a divine connection - in theory makes it easier for them to maintain their power: we are less likely to rebel against a ruler with divine imprimature than against one whose power is humanly derived. Thus the depiction, ca 2625-2600 BCE, of the pharaoh Chefren (Khafra) with the hawk falcon representing the god Horus behind him, its wings extended to embrace him around the shoulders, reminds his constituents of the divine basis of his rule.

Differently, on the *Stele of Hammurabi*, above the lengthy cuneiform text offering the laws associated with the monarch's name, is an image justifying the decree of those laws. It represents Hammurabi receiving them from the sun god, Shamash, himself. The seated divinity extends his right hand to present to Hammurabi a scroll which presumably contains the laws delineated on the stone below.

Thirty-five centuries later, the image of a medieval Christian king, enthroned and being crowned by Jesus, or flanked by acolytes in a manner

calling to (perhaps unconscious) mind the image of Christ enthroned and flanked by angels, encourages the viewer (perhaps unconsciously) to associate that king with Christ and thus with God.

The Dome of the Rock is built, in part, to enhance Abd-ul Malak's political leadership by aggrandizing a spiritual center much closer to his Damascus capital than are Makka and Madina. Even with regard to certain everyday objects, like the ceramic plates and bowls from the Ottoman Sultan's kitchens - the most banal of objects can be venues of visual symbolism alluding to the divine-human relationship intermediated by the Sultan.[32]

Nor does this interwoven story end when one approaches the modern era. On the one hand, the capital building of the United States of America - a by definition secular state - was designed at the end of the eighteenth century to suggest a conceptual connection for the nascent state both to the democratic ideals of the Roman republic and to the ethical principles associated with Jerusalem: its dome connotes both.[33] On the other hand, an ever-expanding array of Jewish, Christian and Muslim artists with varying degrees of subtlety or straightforwardness have incorporated religious imagery into works that interweave the issue of aesthetics with the matter of politics and social commentary, as art and its symbols have swept through the twentieth century and into the twenty-first.[34]

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LIST OF FIGURES

8 Painted Synagogue Torah Niche. Dura Europus, Syria. Ca 250 CE.

9 Painted and Relief-carved Mihrab (Prayer Niche). Cordoba, Spain, 10ᵗʰ century.

10 Prayer Carpet. Ottoman Turkey. 16ᵗʰ century.

11 Parokhet (Synagogue Ark Hanging). Cairo. 17ᵗʰ century.

12 Fresco by Perugino: "Giving the Keys to St. Peter." Sistine Chapel, Vatican, Rome, Italy. 1481.

13 Dome of the Rock (detail). Built by Abd'al Malak. Jerusalem, Israel/Palestine. 691.

14 Haghia Sofia (interior); built by Justinian. Constantinople (Istanbul, Turkey). Ca 540.

15 Pantheon (interior); built by Hadrian. Rome. Ca 120 CE.

NOTES

¹ Religio, in Latin, is built on the root lig- meaning "binding." The same root will be found in words like "ligament" (that binds muscle to bone) or "ligature" (that binds up a wound), for instance.

² Some are polytheistic, believing in the existence of many different gods; dualistic systems, such as Zoroastrianism, suppose a pair of opposed forces contending for control of reality; monotheism embraces a single God, all-powerful as well as all-knowing and all-good, at least as Judaism, Christianity and Islam traditionally understand God.

³ In Hebrew he is called 'Avraham and in Arabic, 'Ibrahim.

⁴ From the Hebrew root '-v-r, meaning "to pass" and thus "one who passes [from place to place]."

⁵ The root of the words "Islam" and "Muslim" - s-l-m - means "submission" or "commission" [to the will of God]. So Abraham is understood to be the first to submit/commit himself in a fully articulated way to the will of God.

⁶The centuries' long debate in Islam was a double one: was it Isaac or Ishmael who was offered? - the Qur'an simply refers to "our son" - and was the offering made on Mount Moriah or down in the 'Arav on Mount 'Arafat?

⁷ The community had divided within five years of Solomon's death. The north, which continued to be called Israel was swallowed up by the Assyrians in 720 BCE and disappeared from history. The south, called Judah, survived the Assyrians, was subsequently defeated and its leadership exiled by the Babylonians in 586 - when Solomon's Temple was destroyed - and was invited back by the Achaemenid Persian conquerors of the Babylonians, in 538, to rebuild the Temple. This the Judaeans did, but the community was divided within itself along many different lines.

⁸ These included the matter of which day should serve as a Sabbath, what festivals and life cycle events to celebrate, and what constitutes God's absolute written Word.

⁹ Both began with an inclusive ethos, but by the end of the fifth century, as Christianity became the official religion of the waning Roman Empire, it became illegal and dangerous for Jews to proselytize; the response was to turn inward, to think more exclusively, whereas the Christian state by definition pushed outward, inclusively.

¹⁰ Thus what for Jews is the entirety of such texts, and called the Hebrew Bible is for Christians called the Old Testament and understood to be a prelude to the New Testament; and Orthodox and Catholic Christians include intertestamental texts as part of the canon that are rejected as such by Protestants

(and Jews). There is also a sea of interpretative literature, to wit the rabbinic texts of Judaism and the Patristic and Scholastic texts of Christianity.

[11] Beyond the Qur'an - God's word spoken through the Prophet Muhammad - the Hadith, sayings about or attributed to Muhammad in his own capacity are not as canonical as are, say, the Prophets and Hagiographa for Jews or the Acts of the Apostles, Epistles and Book of Revelation for Christians, but closer to the Qur'ān than rabbinic or patristic and scholastic commentaries are to their respective textual traditions. Some hadiths are regarded as more reliable than others, depending on the alleged source and the chain of transmission from that source to the time of its writing down. Over the centuries Islam also developed entire seas of commentary on the Qur'ān and Hadith organized into various schools that are the analogue of Jewish rabbinic and Christian patristic and scholastic commentaries

[12] While the veneration of Makka and Madina derive from the long-term roles they played in the life of the prophet, Jerusalem's sanctity is based both on inherited pre-Islamic traditions and on one extraordinary moment. As with Judaism and Christianity, the sacred city is associated by some Muslims with Abraham - his offering of his son to God - and by all Muslims with the placement there of Solomon's Temple. More importantly, it is the place, according to an important hadith, from which Muhammad is said to have ascended to heaven - the ascent is called 'isra - on his steed Buraq (lightning) and to which he descended therefrom after an audience with Allāh, in the extraordinary night journey, called the Mir'aj, that began and ended in Makka.

[13] Within Western literature, one of the earliest and most moving examples of this is found in Iliad VI: 119-236. There the Achaean (Greek) Diomedes and the Trojan Glaukos, realizing that their grandfathers had established a "host-guest" friendship, determine not to fight each other, and instead exchange gifts - symbola for all to see of the ethos that their decision represented.

[14] In connecting them to God, such five-based ideas of "an umbilical text" or of "pillars" by definition protect Jews and Muslims respectively in parallel but not identical ways.

[15] As the city was called at that time. It has been called Istanbul since the mid-fifteenth century, of course.

[16] Thus the inspiration for the images of Christian angels and of Islamic genii and angels is these paired, relief-carved Roman victory images, which in turn derive from the fully three-dimensional victory figures in Greek art that swoop down onto the tops of victory columns or stand on the outstretched hand of the goddess of war, Athena.

[17] See below.

[18] The cross was not part of Christian art, at first - it is nowhere in evidence in the catacombs, for example - for an obvious reason. The Romans crucified tens of thousands of criminals who were deemed politically subversive. That Jesus was believed by them to be another of these is suggested by the inscription apparently placed above his head, and repeated in endless numbers of representations of the Crucifixion (as we shall shortly see), indicating his crime. "Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews", in the operative languages of Judaea at that time – Aramaic, Greek and Latin – indicated that his execution was due, according to the pagan Roman authorities, to that self-assertion, which, by definition, meant opposition to the Roman order of things. It would hardly do, then, particularly early on, when the faith itself was regarded as a superstitio and very much at risk, and even for some time thereafter, when the memory of its key figure's death could still be associated with the commonplace accusation of such subversion, to memorialize him by means of the humiliating instrument of his execution. Later, as that memory would fade and as the faith ascended toward dominating triumph and The Crucifixion could be plausibly separated as a unicum from the history of crucifixions, it became not only more possible but logical to focus on that instrument as a symbol of Jesus as the Christ. By then the latter term had long ceased to mean merely "anointed"; it offered the connotation of savior.

[19] By the eighth century, the abstract cross is beginning to yield to the figurative image of Christ himself on the cross.

[20] Named for the third successor to the Throne of St Peter, San Clemente's 12th-century basilica was built not only above an earlier church but, on what, further below, was a third-century Mithraic temple, reminding us of the principle that once a point of contact between heaven and earth has been established it usually remains as one, even as the form of spirituality and thus the sense of how heaven and God are configured may change.

[21] In fact all of the surviving walls of the Dura synagogue are overrun with imagery - figurative imagery

that, when the synagogue was uncovered in the mid-1930s, shot down the popular argument that Judaism always and everywhere eschews figurative visual representation - that offers a range of salvational subjects based on various biblical texts.

[22] There, rather than destroying the ka'aba - which would have meant destroying the shrine most central to the faith of his ancestors - he reoriented the understanding of the black stone that marks it. Rather than worshipping it as a manifestation of divinity he taught his followers that, having been thrust from heaven to earth it was the tangible manifestation of contact between heaven and earth offered by the intangible God who might be worshipped through venerating the ka'aba.

[23] Our four-directioned reality may be symbolized by a square. God is utterly other than what we are - yet if God made us, we must in some way be like God, who must therefore in some way be like us. So if we take a square and allow it to symbolize God's reality (like ours) but rotate it 45 degrees (so that it is not like ours) and place it against the first square, the result is an eight-pointed star, the interior of which is an octagon - symbolizing the divine-human relationship.

[24] The word "Hanukkah" means "dedication."

[25] The Romans were often, as here, inclined to use Greek. Pan = "all" and theon = "of the gods."

[26] See above, fn 23.

[27] Note that the Dome of the Rock is a monument, not a mosque - although its form (a dome on a cube, or on an octagon on a cube) will inspire subsequent mosques, as well as tombs, and like these other structures it serves as an intermediation point between heaven and earth.

[28] Earlier versions of the church were destroyed by fire, the circumstances of which carry beyond this discussion.

[29] The project of the dome culminated with Michelangelo's redesign after 1547, by which time Rome's assertion of its role as the New Jerusalem was even more emphatic due to and the Protestant Reformation that spilt the Western church apart in the 1520 and 1530s.

[30] The process of Emancipation for the Jews of Western Christendom that took place between about 1780 and 1870 made possible larger synagogues that were no longer required to hide unobtrusively among other buildings.

[31] Even if the spiritual revolution of that narrative is clear: the number is harnessed to the creative effort of one God, beyond nature, and not to struggles to shape our world by diverse gods who are part of nature.

[32] Thus a centralized image from which eight-pointed stars emanate in contrasting colors, yielding to visual arcades contrived in alternating positive and negative configuration and ringed by an inscription can suggest that relationship and intermediation.

[33] It is perhaps ironic that the Pantheon was built long after the Roman republic had given way to the Roman Empire, and also that the secular American state adopted as one of its mottos and a key element in its pledge of allegiance the phase, "one nation under God."

[34] I am thinking - by way of two contrastive examples - of the post-Holocaust color field paintings of Barnett Newman where the symbolism is not obvious to the untutored eye; and to the post-Iranian revolution paintings of Houssein Zenderoudi, where traditional Islamic imagery is clearly combined with contemporary aesthetics to provide directed commentary.
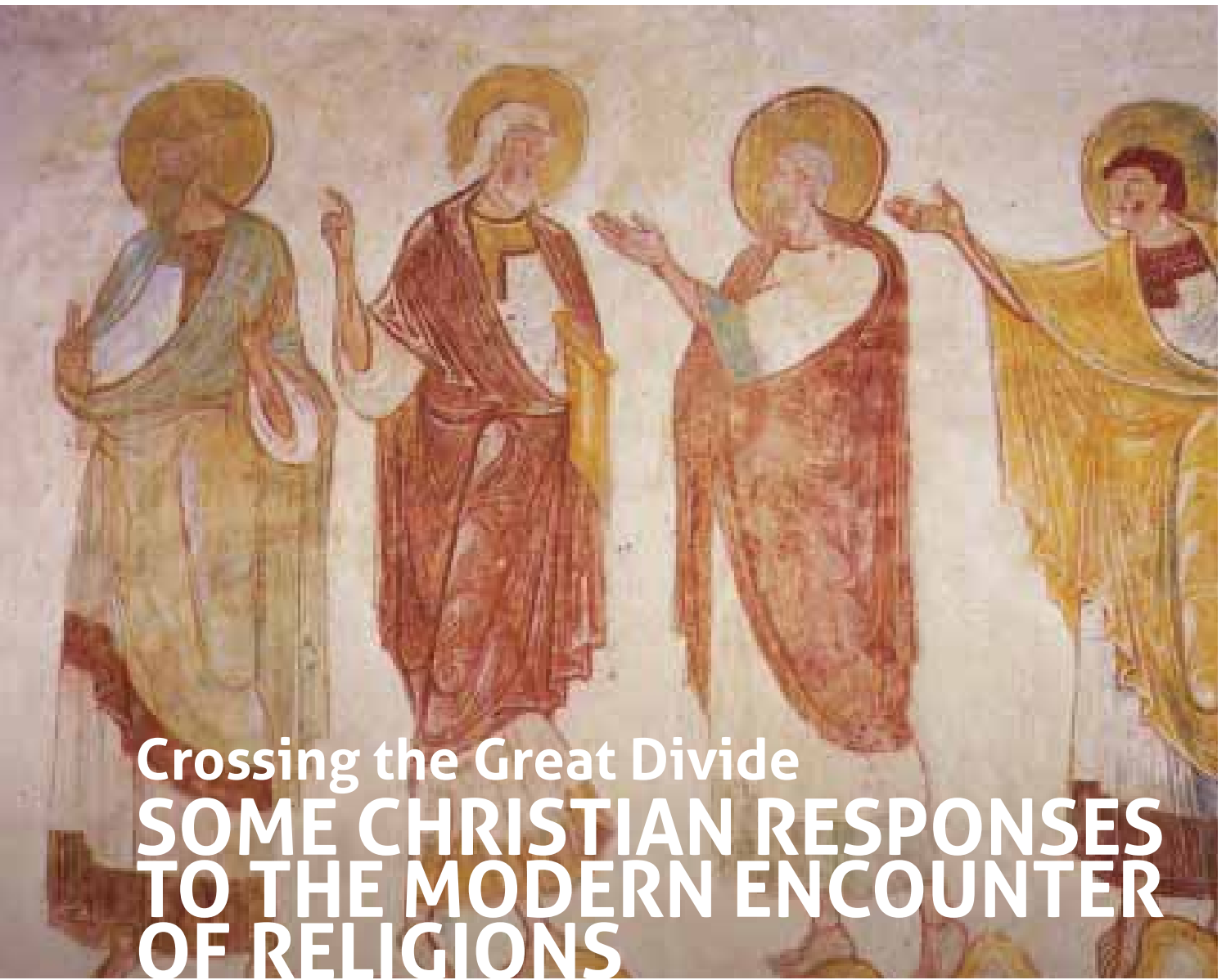
Crossing the Great Divide
SOME CHRISTIAN RESPONSES TO THE MODERN ENCOUNTER OF RELIGIONS

by Harry Oldmeadow

We in the West now realize that we have no monopoly of religious truth. We must in honesty change our attitude towards other faiths, for our watchword must be 'Loyalty to truth'. This changed attitude, however, does not weaken, but rather, instead, reinforces one's faith in God, for He is seen to be not a small or partial being but the Great God who is working throughout all times and places and faiths.

(Rudolf Otto)[1]

...understanding, at least in realms as inherently noble as the great faiths of mankind, brings respect; and respect prepares the way for a higher power, love - the only power that can quench the flames of fear, suspicion, and prejudice, and provide the means by which the people of this small but precious earth can become one to one another.

(Huston Smith)[2]

Today different religious traditions are everywhere colliding, sometimes in violent conflict, often in mutual incomprehension. We find ourselves in an unprecedented and highly volatile landscape, characterized by both inter- and intra-religious strife and discord. The media flood us with apocalyptic scenarios envisaging 'the clash of civilisations', new 'holy wars' and 'crusades' against 'terrorists' or 'infidels'. A persistent motif is the highly charged confrontation of militant religious fundamentalism and the forces of modernity. The most conspicuous locus of these scenarios is the Middle East and the smouldering confrontation of 'Islam' and 'the West'. Whilst the Middle East remains a highly visible powder-keg there are many other parts of the world where religion is seen, quite understandably, as an explosive and divisive force. To restrict ourselves to flashpoints where Islam is involved we might mention the on-going Hindu-Muslim hostilities in the subcontinent, Christian-Muslim antagonisms in Africa, central Asia and south-east Asia, or the acute social tensions arising out of the settlement of Muslim communities in the West. Since 7/11 the Western media have been awash with 'news', 'opinion', 'commentary', 'analysis' and the like, much of it issuing from politicians old and new, recycled CIA agents, defence personnel, so-called terrorism experts, and Cold War veterans. Much of this material might better be described as propaganda - the continuation of politics by other means, one might say - obfuscating rather than clarifying the issues at hand. Ideological heat and rhetorical excess is the order of the day! No doubt the same might be said for various media networks within the Islamic world.

Here I do not want to launch any analysis of the role of religious factors in contemporary geo-politics, nor indeed to explore the political infiltration of the religious domain itself - significant and interesting as these subjects are.[3] My subject, rather, is the inter-relations of the religions, considered from a trans-religious viewpoint and within the context of the modern encounter of 'East' and 'West'. More particularly I want to focus on creative responses to this phenomenon by Christian scholars and practitioners, and to consider several interesting intersections within the Christian churches and in the Anglophone academic world. Nonetheless, it is important to take note of the fraught political framework within which much contemporary discussion of inter-religious relations now takes place.

Any inquiry into the inter-relations of the religions, today and into the future, must take account of three modern developments: the radically altered situation, in the last two centuries, of religions *vis-à-vis* each other; the apparent triumph of anti-religious and anti-traditional forces in the West; and, thirdly, the consequent emergence of both religious fundamentalism (in both East and West) and religious liberalism (principally in the West). After briefly considering these developments I will turn to the question of finding a way towards an inter-religious *rapprochement* which might defuse some of these tensions

The homogeneity of Christian civilisation has long since been ruptured, and Europe has itself been the agent for the disruption and extirpation of traditional cultures the world over.

and contribute to a more harmonious global community.

Since antiquity there has always been some intercourse in ideas and influences between the great religious civilisations; think, for instance, of Alexander the Great's conversations with the 'gymnosophists', as the Greeks called the scantilyclad sages of the East. Or recall the ways in which the teachings of the Buddha were taken to the Far East. Nonetheless, each civilisation formerly exhibited a spiritual homogeneity untroubled, for the most part, by the problem of religious pluralism. For the vast majority of believers in a traditional civilisation the question of the inter-relationship of the religions was one which was either of peripheral concern or one of which they remained unaware. Martin Lings puts the matter this way:

"Needless to say our ancestors were aware of the existence of other religions besides their own; but dazzled and penetrated as they were by the great light shining directly above them, the sight of more remote and - for them - more obliquely shining lights on the horizons could raise no positive interest nor did it create problems. Today, however those horizons are no longer remote; and amidst the great evil which results from all that has contributed to bring them near, some good has also inevitably stolen its way in."[4]

The last few centuries have witnessed radical changes making for a 'smaller' world, for 'the global village' - the spread of new technologies of transport and communication, the un-precedented migrations of peoples, international economic and political developments which pay no heed to national and cultural boundaries, the emergence of various dangers which now threaten humankind as a whole. The homogeneity of Christian civilisation has long since been ruptured, and Europe has itself been the agent for the disruption and extirpation of traditional cultures the world over: the juggernauts of imperialism, 'modernization' and 'globalization' have created a world raven with new tensions and antagonisms.

Closely related to many of these developments is the ascendancy, in the modern West and increasingly in other parts of the globe, of a modernist world-view. 'Modernism' is an umbrella term which covers the assumptions, values and attitudes of the reigning world-view, the outlook shaping the temper of the times.[5] Lord Northbourne typifies modernism as 'anti-traditional, progressive, humanist, rationalist, materialist, experimental, individualist, egalitarian, free-thinking and intensely sentimental',[6] while Seyyed Hossein Nasr identifies the defining characteristics of the modern outlook as anthropomorphism (i.e., a false humanism), evolutionist progressivism, the absence of any sense of the sacred, and an unrelieved ignorance of metaphysical principles.[7] Although its historical origins are European, modernism is now tied to no specific area or civilization. Its symptoms can be detected in a wide assortment of inter-related ideologies and intellectual movements, sometimes cooperatively co-existing, sometimes at loggerheads, but always united by the same underlying principles. Scientism,

The comparative reticence of Easterners in sponsoring inter-religious dialogue may stem from a post-colonial wariness of the colonizing and universalizing tendencies in Western thought.

rationalism, relativism, materialism, empiricism, positivism, historicism, psychologism, individualism, humanism, atheism - some of the prime reductionist trends of the modernistic thought which prevails in the liberal-secular West - are all ramifications of the same underlying worldview. This family of ideas can be traced back through a series of intellectual and cultural disruptions in European history and to certain vulnerabilities in Christian civilization which left it exposed to the subversions of a profane science.[8] The Renaissance, the Scientific Revolution and the Enlightenment all incubated ideas and values which first decimated Christendom and then spread throughout the world. Behind the proliferating ideologies of the last few centuries we can discern an ignorance of spiritual realities and an indifference, if not always an overt hostility, to the eternal verities conveyed by religious traditions. In this climate it is not surprising that so many Western commentators are anxious to seize on anything which can be exploited to further discredit the claims of religion. Nor is it surprising that many people in the non-Western world should have sometimes reacted violently to the depredations of modernity, witnessing as they do the rapid corruption or destruction of the institutions, customs and values vouchsafed by tradition.

Within the religious domain itself we can discern two extreme reactions to the ravages of modernism. On the one hand, the emergence of an aggressive *fundamentalism* - that 'blind lunge towards simplification', as George Steiner described it - characterized by theological literalism and exclusivism, an often sclerotic exoterism and

religious xenophobia; on the other hand, a religious *liberalism* wherein 'anything goes' as long as it lays some claim to an ill-defined 'spirituality'. Each of these symptoms of an underlying spiritual malaise are on full display in much of the modern West whilst it is the former phenomenon which is most evident in parts of the Islamic world. These two developments seem to be antagonistic but, while they are mutually exclusive, from a certain point of view they are actually two sides of the same counterfeit coin which has only come into circulation because of the canker of modernity. They both stand as formidable obstacles to any authentic inter-religious dialogue and ecumenicism.

Altogether these developments pose very real threats to the religious traditions of both East and West. It is all too easy to envisage developments entailing: (a) the *erosion* of religion by modernism, signalled by popular indifference, apathy and 'tolerance', and by a more active animus towards religion in the prevailing 'orthodoxies' of the Western 'intelligentsia';[9] and/or (b) the *violent destruction* of religious traditions by external forces (imperialism, modernization, globalization, ideologically-fuelled repression, and the 'narcissistic fanaticisms' of unbridled nationalism, in which religious institutions all too often become entangled) and from within (internecine and inter-religious warfare); and/or (c) the *dilution and corruption* of religion by

The growth of comparative religion as a discipline amongst whose practitioners one frequently finds an allegiance to the development of a 'true cosmopolitanism', a 'global culture' or a 'planetary humanism' which revisions the world community, leaving behind the religious and cultural provincialism of the past.

an ersatz 'spirituality', bogus syncretisms or an insipid religious universalism, those 'false idealisms' which 'annex and adulterate religion'.[10] Indeed, it would be sanguine to imagine that these processes are not already well advanced in many quarters. In this context, the question of the relationships of the religions and the imperatives of mutual understanding take on a new urgency for all those concerned with fostering a harmonious world community.

Hitherto I have painted a rather bleak picture of the contemporary situation - but there are also grounds for hope. It may be that in the West we are in a period of what historian William McLoughlin has called an 'awakening':

Awakenings - the most vital and yet most mysterious of all folk arts - are periods of cultural revitalization that begin in a general crisis of beliefs and values and extend over a period of a generation or so, during which time a profound reorientation in beliefs and values takes place.[11]

Between the Chicago World's Parliament of Religions (1893) and the imminent Parliament in Melbourne (2009) there have been many initiatives aimed at promoting reciprocal understanding between the adherents of different religious traditions. A variety of attempts to create international cross-religious institutions have come and gone in the intervening century while individuals and religious groups continue to search for common ground where the suspicions and enmities of the past might be dissolved. Today there is a veritable 'religious dialogue' industry in the West, with any number of conferences, seminars, symposia, workshops, retreats and the like. There is no doubt that much of the ignorance and prejudice of past eras has been dispelled and that those so disposed are now much better situated to appreciate traditions other than their own. Despite the resurgence of various forms of religious fundamentalism and a hardening of exclusivist attitudes in some places we may rest assured that amongst religious folk in the West, particularly amongst the well-educated, there has been a growing acceptance of the validity of the non-Christian

traditions and more widespread attitudes of respect and openness. Amongst scholars and theologians, clergy and religious, an awareness of Eastern traditions has penetrated quite deeply - one might say that the psyche of contemporary Christianity has been profoundly and irreversibly affected by the presence of both Islam and the East. One sign among many is the revision of the Roman Church's posture during Vatican II, evident in the decree *Nostra Aetate*. The comparative religionist Geoffrey Parrinder echoes many other thinkers when he suggests that the encounter with the East is 'one of the most significant events of modern times', amounting to another Reformation within the Christian world.[12] Nonetheless, the question must be asked whether we are very much closer to finding a philosophical/metaphysical basis for inter-religious harmony, one that can take us past high-minded intent, neighbourly good will and the repudiation of the grosser forms of ignorance, prejudice and suspicion.

Let us turn to some developments which have aimed to promote deeper inter-religious understanding. Our discussion will primarily concern the responses to the Eastern traditions of Christian thinkers and practitioners, sensitive to religious pluralism, who wish to engage in creative dialogue and for whom the new Eastern presence in the West presents itself as a challenge and an opportunity rather than as a threat to be repulsed. Whilst many Asian scholars and practitioners have studied in the West it is generally the case that most of the initiatives in inter-religious dialogue have come from the Christian side. This may be related to the keener

sense in this tradition of some deficiency which might be remedied by creative intercourse with Eastern traditions. Dialogue may also be felt, perhaps subconsciously, as an atonement for the historical ignominies of triumphalist missionizing and Western colonialism, or as a counter to the embarrassing excesses of current day Christian fundamentalists.[13]

More positively these out-reaching initiatives may derive from certain dynamic and frontier-seeking tendencies in Christianity and in the Western *mythos* generally. On the other side, the comparative reticence of Easterners in sponsoring inter-religious dialogue may stem from a post-colonial wariness of the colonizing and universalizing tendencies in Western thought. Then, too, there is the fact that many Asian adherents feel no dissatisfaction with their own tradition such as might impel initiatives in this direction. Those Asians who *are* enthusiastic proponents of dialogue have themselves often been exposed to a Western education. Of course, these are somewhat facile generalities to which one can find many exceptions. Certainly, many prominent Asian religious leaders and scholars - D.T. Suzuki, the Dalai Lama and Thich Nhat Hanh are conspicuous examples - have readily engaged in serious inter-religious dialogue.[14] We can distinguish several distinct, sometimes over-lapping 20th century movements which, in various ways, have been directed towards inter-religious understanding. Here is a loose schema:

> *The religious representatives at Snowmass were acutely conscious of the 'violence, injustice and persecution' to which religious sectarianism and bigotry have given rise and affirmed the obligation of the world religions to play a decisive role in the cause of world peace.*

(1) the growth of *comparative religion* as a discipline amongst whose practitioners one frequently finds an allegiance to the development of a 'true cosmopolitanism', a 'global culture' or a 'planetary humanism' which revisions the world community, leaving behind the religious and cultural provincialism of the past, and which provides a frame in which the different religious traditions may find new modes of creative coexistence and mutual enrichment. Thus, for instance, Mircea Eliade: 'The history of religions can play an essential role in this effort toward a planétisation of culture; it can contribute to the elaboration of a universal type of culture.'[15] (In this context one may also mention such scholars as Joachim Wach, Joseph Kitagawa, Huston Smith, Ninian Smart, Wilfrid Cantwell Smith, Klaus Klostermaier, W.T. Oxtoby, Eric Sharpe, Arvind Sharma and Diana Eck.[16])

Genuine ecumenism requires the communication and sharing, not only of information about doctrines which are totally and irrevocably divergent, but also of religious intuitions and truths which may turn out to have something in common... Ecumenism seeks the inner and ultimate spiritual 'ground' which underlies all articulated differences.

(2) the emergence within the general field of comparative religion of *comparative mysticism* as the arena in which the formal and institutionalized differences of the various religions may be at least partially reconciled, sometimes under the rubric of the perennial philosophy (Rudolf Otto, W.T. Stace, Aldous Huxley, William Johnston), and of *comparative philosophy* (East-West Philosophy Conferences, Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan, John Hick), *comparative theology* (Henri Dumoulin, Karl Rahner, Hans Kung, Paul Knitter, John Cobb), and *comparative psychology* (William James, C.G. Jung, Joseph Campbell and the Eranos constellation, Ken Wilber), all of which compare and contrast and/or synthesize Eastern and Western understandings within a particular theoretical framework or field of practice.

(3) the creation of *supra-religious universalist movements* which seek to synthesize or syncretise elements from many different religions and which claim to offer a new global 'super-religion' or 'spiritual way' which subsumes the religious differences of the past, and which often draws on 'esoteric' doctrines from different traditions (Theosophy, neo-Hindu Vedanta, Baha'i, some forms of 'ecosophy'); subsets of this group include those who construct systems purporting to meld esoteric religion and modern science (Blavatsky, Gurdjieff, Rudolf Steiner), iconoclasts who lay claim to some sort of 'spiritual' teaching (Krishnamurti), eclectic free-for-all 'gurus' (Bhagwan Rajneesh), and New Age 'teachers' with a vaguely 'spiritual' orientation (Deepak Chopra, Eckhart Tolle) - but whether any of these types should come under the canopy of 'inter-religious understanding' is, to say the least, highly doubtful!

(4) the various attempts to establish *trans-religious international institutions and forums* such as the World Parliament of Religions, Francis Younghusband's World Congress of Faiths, Rudolf Otto's 'Religiöser Menschhietsbund', and the like, as well as organisations with more modest aims, such as the Fellowship of Reconciliation or the International Association for Religious Freedom.

(5) the cultivation of *inter-faith religious dialogue*, usually about matters of doctrine and spiritual practice but often also encompassing cross-religious responses to problems such as social injustice, political oppression or ecological calamity, conducted by religious adherents who remain faithful to their own tradition but who wish to share their ideas and experiences and to learn from participants of other religious faiths (Paul Tillich, Klaus Klostermaier, Thomas Merton, Raimundo Pannikar, Diana Eck, David Steindl-Rast, Thomas Keating; journals such as *Buddhist-Christian Studies*, *Dialogue & Alliance*, *Studies in Formative Spirituality*, *Ching Feng*, *Hindu-Christian Studies Bulletin, Inter-Religious Bulletin* and *Studies in Inter-religious Dialogue*).
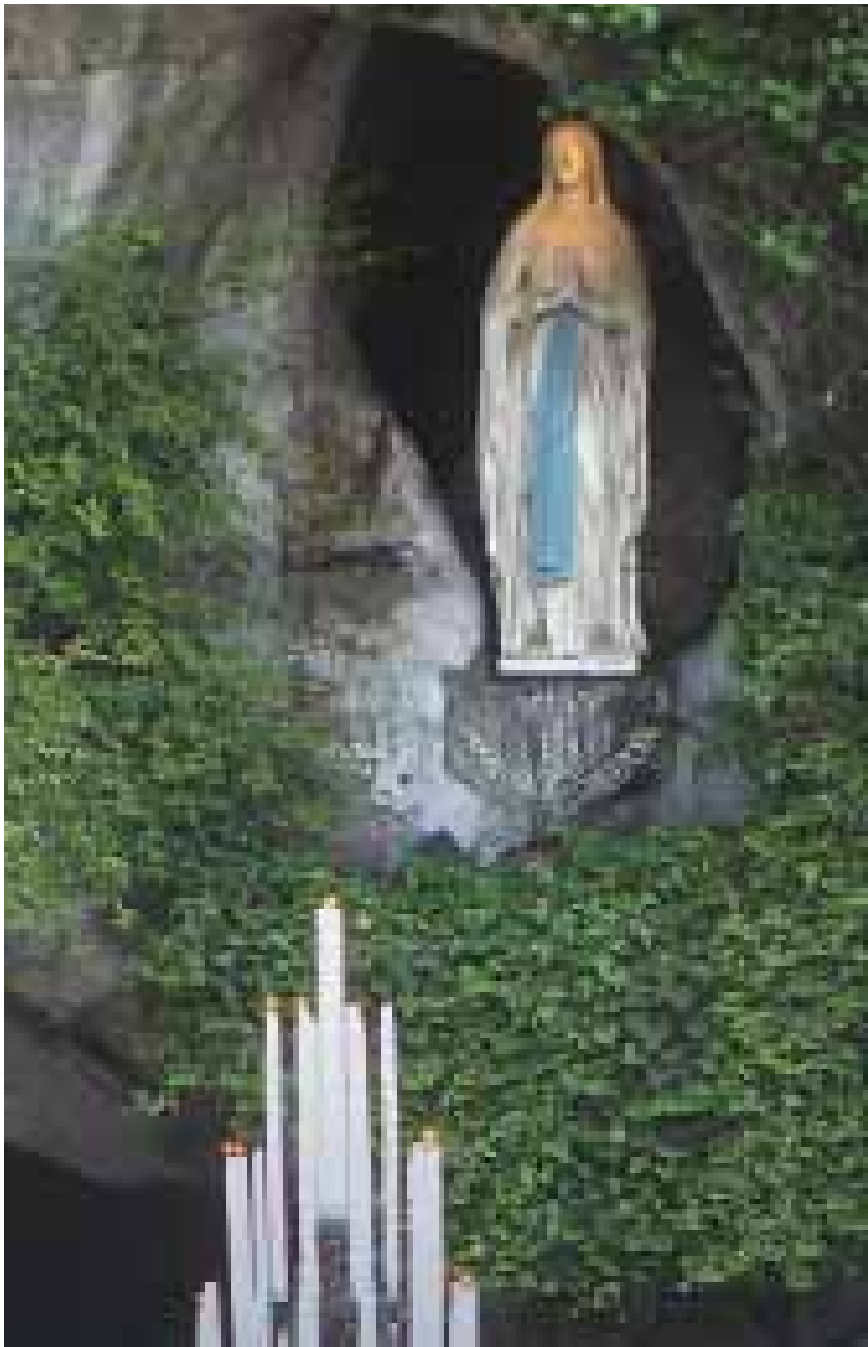
(6) *existential engagements in a bi-traditional spiritual practice* which is firmly anchored in a particular tradition (usually Christianity) but which self-consciously and reflexively incorporates teachings and disciplines from another tradition in an effort to revitalize or reform a spiritual life which has in some respects atrophied (Bede Griffiths, Henri Le Saux, 'Christian Zen', Pascaline Coff), and *inter-religious encounters aimed at mutual transformation* (John Cobb, Ruben Habito, Frederick Streng).

(7) *the traditionalist exposition of the 'religio perennis'* and the explication of the metaphysical basis from which *both* the inner unity and the outer diversity of the religious traditions derive (Ananda Coomaraswamy, Frithjof Schuon, Titus Burckhardt, Marc Pallis, Seyyed Hossein Nasr; journals such as *Studies in Comparative Religion*, *Sophia*, *Sacred Web*, *Vincit Omnia Veritas, Eye of the Heart*).

From the maze of developments over the last century let me isolate one small but illustrative episode. In 1984 representatives of all the major religions gathered at St Benedict's Monastery in Snowmass, Colorado, to 'meditate together in silence and share their personal spiritual journeys'[17] as well as deliberating on those elements of belief and practice which their traditions shared. Out of this gathering and subsequent meetings emerged a list of points of agreement. It is worth considering this list as an example of the kinds of convergences which can be discerned by adherents working together in a spirit of cooperative fellowship and dialogue. The Snowmass meeting proved less vaporous than many attempts at dialogue and produced the following list of elements common to all the major religions:
• The world religions bear witness to the experience of Ultimate Reality to which they give various names….

formation, blessedness, nirvana - is present in every human person.

• Ultimate Reality may be experienced not only through religious practices but through nature, art, human relationships and service to others.

• As long as the human condition is experienced as separate from Ultimate Reality, it is subject to ignorance and illusion, weakness and suffering.

• Disciplined practice is essential to the spiritual life… Humility, gratitude and a sense of humour are indispensable in the spiritual life.

Father Thomas Keating pointed out that each of the participants in this dialogue were long-standing practitioners with a thorough grasp of their own tradition. Furthermore, they were able to discuss creatively their differences as well as points of agreement; indeed, as Keating observed, the open ventilation of differences created even stronger bonds than the discovery of similarities. Participants were also alert to the dangers of any facile admixing of spiritual doctrines and practices such as would compromise the integrity of the distinct religious traditions. Keating also suggests that this kind of dialogue can only usefully proceed in an atmosphere of trust where people are able to speak from the heart, and to share their spiritual

• Ultimate Reality cannot be limited by any name or concept.

• Ultimate Reality is the ground of infinite potentiality and actuality.

• Faith is opening, accepting and responding to Ultimate Reality…

• The potential for human wholeness - or in other frames of reference, enlightenment, salvation, trans-

experience rather than engaging in academic debate about doctrinal divergences.

Meetings of this kind, large and small, have been taking place all over the globe for many decades now and signal the search not only for some sort of inter-religious theological and philosophical understanding but for moral solidarity. In an age of rampant secularism and scepticism the need for some kind of inter-religious coalition also makes itself ever more acutely felt. The religious representatives at Snowmass were acutely conscious of the 'violence, injustice and persecution' to which religious sectarianism and bigotry have given rise and affirmed the obligation of the world religions to play a decisive role in the cause of world peace:

"…the world religions will have to give the witness of mutual respect and understanding to the world community if political, ethnic, and nationalistic divisions are to be overcome or at least held in check."

They stressed that such an agenda would not be served by any attempt to blur the differences between the traditions:

"While emphasizing our common values and uniting in social action, however, the world religions must at the same time accept their diversity and cherish the integrity of each other's traditional spiritual paths. Genuine dialogue on this level is the catalyst that would facilitate harmony and cooperation on all the other levels of ever-increasing global interaction."[18]

People of good will must surely applaud such initiatives which can only result in greater mutual understanding and the formation of a common front against those many forces in the modern world which count against the spiritual life as well as against the attainment of a more peaceful international order. Such endeavours also throw into sharp relief those impulses and attitudes within the religious traditions which obstruct the possibilities of creative dialogue. Of these the most recalcitrant is a blind clinging to the belief that one's own tradition is the *exclusive* custodian of the Truth and provides the *only* path to salvation/enlightenment. This kind of exoteric exclusivism constitutes a very partial view but is not altogether unjustified, often arising out of a fierce commitment to the Truth as its has been revealed by the lights to which one has been exposed: in the words of Swami Abhishiktananda, 'Every *dharma* is for its followers the supreme vehicle of the claims of the Absolute'.[19] In some respects exclusivism is to be preferred to a sentimental 'tolerance' which actually holds fast to nothing whatsoever and which can easily cloak an insolent condescension on one side or, worse, an impious indifference to each and every religion on the other. 'Tolerance' often signifies nothing more than a vacuum of any firmly-held beliefs or pieties. As Coomaraswamy remarked, 'the very implications of the phrase "religious tolerance" are to be avoided: diversity of faith is not a matter for 'toleration', but of divine appointment.'[20] Recall, too, Joachim Wach's telling observation that, 'There is something pathetic about the modern historian of religion who uses strong words only to convince us that he has no strong convictions.'[21] Nonetheless, global circumstances are now such that an obdurate commitment to any rigid exclusivism will, in the end, amount to a

kind of suicide.

Klaus Klostermaier has borrowed Niels Bohr's principle of complementarity to argue against three earlier Christian models of religious pluralism (fundamentalist exclusivism, eirenic universalism, and fulfilment theory) and suggested four principles which, we can reasonably surmise, would be widely accepted by many contemporary participants in inter-religious dialogue:

1. The acknowledgement of real paradox in the relation between different traditions, e.g., the categories of one tradition cannot explain the other, and vice versa.

2. The acceptance of true mutuality between religious traditions…[i.e, each can illuminate the other]

3. The firm refusal to reduce one religion to another…

4. The admission of the fragmentary and 'incomplete' nature of each tradition…[22]

The philosophical (or more precisely, metaphysical) question of the inter-relationship of the religions and the moral concern for greater mutual understanding are, in fact, all of a piece.

This is but one of many recent models and is adduced only to indicate the general movement away from Christian exclusivism in what might be called the international dialogue community.

That Christian scholars and dialogists have abandoned the condescending models of earlier times is heartening. The kind of inter-religious dialogue exemplified by the Snowmass gathering is also certainly to be welcomed. As Thomas Merton pointed out,

"…genuine ecumenism requires the communication and sharing, not only of information about doctrines which are totally and irrevocably divergent, but also of religious intuitions and truths which may turn out to have something in common… Ecumenism seeks the inner and ultimate spiritual 'ground' which underlies all articulated differences. A genuinely fruitful dialogue cannot be content with a polite diplomatic interest in other religions and their beliefs. It seeks a deeper level…"[23]

However, of itself, this kind of dialogue cannot neutralize the negative effects of exoteric dogmatisms on whose survival the religious traditions actually, and somewhat paradoxically, depend. For a resolution of this problem we must turn to the perennialist school whose pre-eminent spokesman in recent times has been Frithjof Schuon.

Many years ago Ananda Coomaraswamy's claimed that

"…the only possible ground upon which an effective *entente* of East and West can be accomplished is that of the purely intellectual (i.e, metaphysical) wisdom that is one and the same at all times and for all men, and is independent of all environmental idiosyncrasy."[24]

If the malignant possibilities outlined earlier in this article - the erosion, destruction and/or dilution of the religious traditions - are to be averted we need a proper understanding of what Schuon has called 'the transcendent unity of religions'. Crucial to any recognition of this unity is the ability to distinguish the exoteric and esoteric dimensions of the great traditions, and thus to forestall the terrible excesses which can arise out of religious literalism. In the present circumstances, this passage from Frithjof Schuon's *The Transcendent Unity of Religions*, written more than half a century ago, takes on a new resonance:

"The exoteric viewpoint is, in fact, doomed to end by negating itself once it is no longer vivified by the presence within it of the esoterism of which it is both the outward radiation and the veil. So it is that religion, *according to the measure in which it denies metaphysical and initiatory realities and becomes crystallized in literalistic dogmatism*, inevitably engenders un-belief; the atrophy that overtakes dog-mas when they are deprived of their internal dimension recoils upon them from outside, in the form of heretical and atheistic negations."[25]

It is precisely this insight which is so often overlooked by fundamentalist groups and movements, wherever they are found.

Exoterism consists in identifying transcendent realities with the dogmatic forms, and if need be, with the historical facts of a given Revelation, whereas esoterism refers in a more or less direct manner to these same realities.[26]

At a time when the outward and readily exaggerated incompatibility of divergent religious forms is used to exploit all manner of anti-religious prejudices the exposure of the un-derlying unity of the religions is a task which can only be achieved through a *trans-religious* and *esoteric* understanding. The open confrontation of different exotericisms, the vandalism visited on traditional civilisations every-where, and the tyranny of profane ideologies all play a part in determining the peculiar circumstances in which the most exigent needs of the age can only be answered by a recourse to traditional esotericisms wherein we find the *sophia perennis*, that timeless and immutable wisdom which informs all religions. Moreover, "The need to recover a vision of the Centre becomes ever more urgent for Western man as the illusory world he has created around himself in order to forget the loss of the transcendent dimension in his life begins to reveal ever more fully its true character. In such a situation, the response cannot, of course, come from anywhere but sacred tradition in all its authentic forms."[27]

The *philosophical* (or more precisely, *metaphysical*) question of the inter-relationship of the religions and the *moral* concern for greater mutual understanding are, in fact, all of a piece. We can distinguish but not separate questions about *unity* and *harmony*; too often both comparative

religionists and those engaged in 'dialogue' have failed to see that the achievement of the latter depends on a metaphysical resolution of the former question. A rediscovery of the immutable nature of man and a renewed understanding of the *Sophia perennis* must be the governing purpose of the most serious comparative study of religion.

"Human nature in general and human intelligence in particular cannot be understood apart from the religious phenomenon, which characterizes them in the most direct and most complete way possible: grasping the transcendent - not the 'psychological' - nature of the human being we thereby grasp the nature of revelation, religion, tradition; we understand their possibility, their necessity, their truth. And in understanding religion, not only in a particular form … but in its formless essence, we also understand the religions, that is to say, the meaning of their plurality and diversity; this is the plane of *gnosis*, of the *religio perennis,* where the extrinsic antinomies of dogmas are explained and resolved."[28]

These words, written some years ago, are all the more compelling in the current climate.

It has not been my purpose here to expound the fundamental tenets of a properly constituted perennial philosophy, a task undertaken in several other places.[29] Interested readers are directed to the works of the great perennialists - René Guénon, Ananda Coomaraswamy, Frithjof Schuon, Titus Burckhardt and Seyyed Hossein Nasr, to mention only the most authoritative - who have explicated the metaphysical foundations of the 'transcendent unity of religions', thus allowing us unequivocally to affirm the 'profound and eternal solidarity of all spiritual forms'[30] and to 'present a singular front against the floodtide of materialism and pseudo-spiritualism'[31] which threatens all integral religions.

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NOTES

[1] **Rudolf Otto**, 'Parallelisms in the Development of Religion East and West', 1912, quoted in P. Almond, 'Rudolf Otto and Buddhism', in Aspects of Religion: Essays in Honor of Ninian Smart, ed. P. Masefield & D. Wiebe, New York: Peter Lang, 1994, 69.

[2] **Huston Smith**, The World's Religions, San Francisco: Harper, 1991, 390.

[3] For some discussion of these issues in the immediate wake of 7/11 see **Rodney Blackhirst & Harry Oldmeadow**, 'Shadows and Strife: The Confrontation of Islam and the West', Sacred Web: A Journal of Tradition and Modernity, 8, December 2001, 121-136.

[4] **Martin Lings**, Ancient Beliefs and Modern Superstitions, London: Allen & Unwin, 1980, 70.

[5] It will already be clear to the reader that we are not here using 'modernism' in its restricted meaning, designating various experimental movements in the arts in the early 20th century, but in a much more wide-ranging sense.

[6] **Lord Northbourne**, *Religion in the Modern World*, London: J.M. Dent/Perennial, 1963, 13.

[7] **Seyyed Hossein Nasr,** 'Reflections on Islam and Modern Thought', *The Islamic Quarterly*, 23:3, 1979,119-131.

[8] For a profound analysis of this process see S**eyyed Hossein Nasr**, *Man and Nature*, London: Allen & Unwin, 1968, esp. Chapters 1 & 2. See also Wolfgang Smith, *Cosmos and Transcendence*, San Raphael: Sophia Perennis, 2008, and Philip Sherrard, *The Rape of Man and Nature*, Colombo: Sri Lanka Institute of Traditional Studies, 1987.

[9] One sign of this anti-religious bias is the steady proliferation of 'critiques' of religion by writers such as **Richard Dawkins** and **Christopher Hitchens**, following in the wake of figures such as Marx, Nietzsche, Freud, Bertrand Russell and suchlike or, to trace the pedigree back further, the philosophes of the 18th century. An anti-religious posture is almost de rigueur in many university departments in the contemporary West - even in many Religious Studies departments.

[10] **Frithjof Schuon**, *To Have a Center*, Bloomington: World Wisdom, 1990, 30.

[11] **McLoughlin** quoted in **Richard Wentz**, 'The Prospective Eye of Inter-religious Dialogue', *Japanese Journal of Religious Studies*, 14:1, 1987, 8.

[12] **Geoffrey Parrinder** quoted in J.J. Clarke, *Oriental Enlightenment*, London: Routledge, 1997, 130.

[13] See **Harold Coward**, 'Hinduism's Sensitizing of Christianity', *Dialogue & Alliance*, 7:2, 1993, 77. The oppressive sense of the West's often aggressive presence is evident in a passage such as the following in which Fr Henri Le Saux (who became known in India as Swami Abhishiktananda) is reflecting on Christian missionizing in India: 'I am thinking of all the harm that is done to the Gospel here, when it is preached by people who have behind them all the prestige, money, science, and technology of the west.' (Letter of 24.10.66, in *Swami Abhishiktananda: His Life Told through His Letters*, ed. James Stuart, Delhi: ISPCK, 2000, 186).

[14] We cannot here consider the significant resistances and reactions against the Eastern religions within the Christian churches (nor in the other Occidental religions). However, mention might be made of the re-affirmations of Christian exclusivism by theologians such as Karl Barth, Hendrik Kraemer and Pope John-Paul II. We might also note the imperviousness to any Oriental influences of fervid evangelical movements thriving in many Western countries.

[15] **Mircea Eliade**, *The Quest: History and Meaning in Religion*, Chicago; Chicago University, 1969, 69.

[16] For more information on these figures, and those subsequently noted parenthetically, see Harry Oldmeadow, *Journeys East: 20th Century Western Encounters with Eastern Religious Traditions*, Bloomington: World Wisdom, 2004

[17] Thomas Keating, 'Meditative Technologies: Theological Ecumenism' in *The Other Half of My Soul*, ed. Beatrice Bruteau, Wheaton: Quest, 1994, 115.

[18] **Thomas Keating**, 'Meditative Technologies', 122-123.

[19] **Abhishiktananda**, *The Further Shore*, Delhi: ISPCK, 1975, 25.
[20] Ananda Coomaraswamy, 'Sri Ramakrishna and Religious Tolerance', *Selected Papers 2: Metaphysics*, ed. R. Lipsey, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1977, 42.

[21] **Joachim Wach**, *The Comparative Study of Religion*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1958, 8. One might also recall Frithjof Schuon's observation that 'the Christian saint who fights the Moslems is closer to Islamic sanctity than the philosopher who accepts everything and practices nothing'; *Logic and Transcendence*, London: Perennial Books, 1984, 182n.

[22] **Klaus Klostermaier**, 'All Religions Are Incomplete: Complementarity as Theoretical Model to Guide the Praxis of Inter-religious Dialogue', *Dialogue & Alliance*, 7:2, 1993, 74.

[23] **Thomas Merton**, *Mystics and Zen Masters*, New York: Farrar, Strauss & Giroux, 1967, 204.

[24] **Ananda Coomaraswamy**, 'The Pertinence of Philosophy' in *Contemporary Indian Philosophy*, ed. S. Radhakrishnan & J.H. Muirhead, London: Allen & Unwin, 1952, 160. Cf.: 'I am in fullest agreement about the necessity of recognizing a common basis of understanding, but see no basis...other than that of the philosophia perennis...'. Letter to H.G.D. Finlayson, December 1942, *Selected Letters of Ananda Coomaraswamy*, ed. Rama P. Coomaraswamy & Alvin Moore Jr, New Delhi: Indira Gandhi National Centre, 1988, 285-286.

[25] **Frithjof Schuon**, *The Transcendent Unity of Religions*, Wheaton: Quest, 1993, 9.

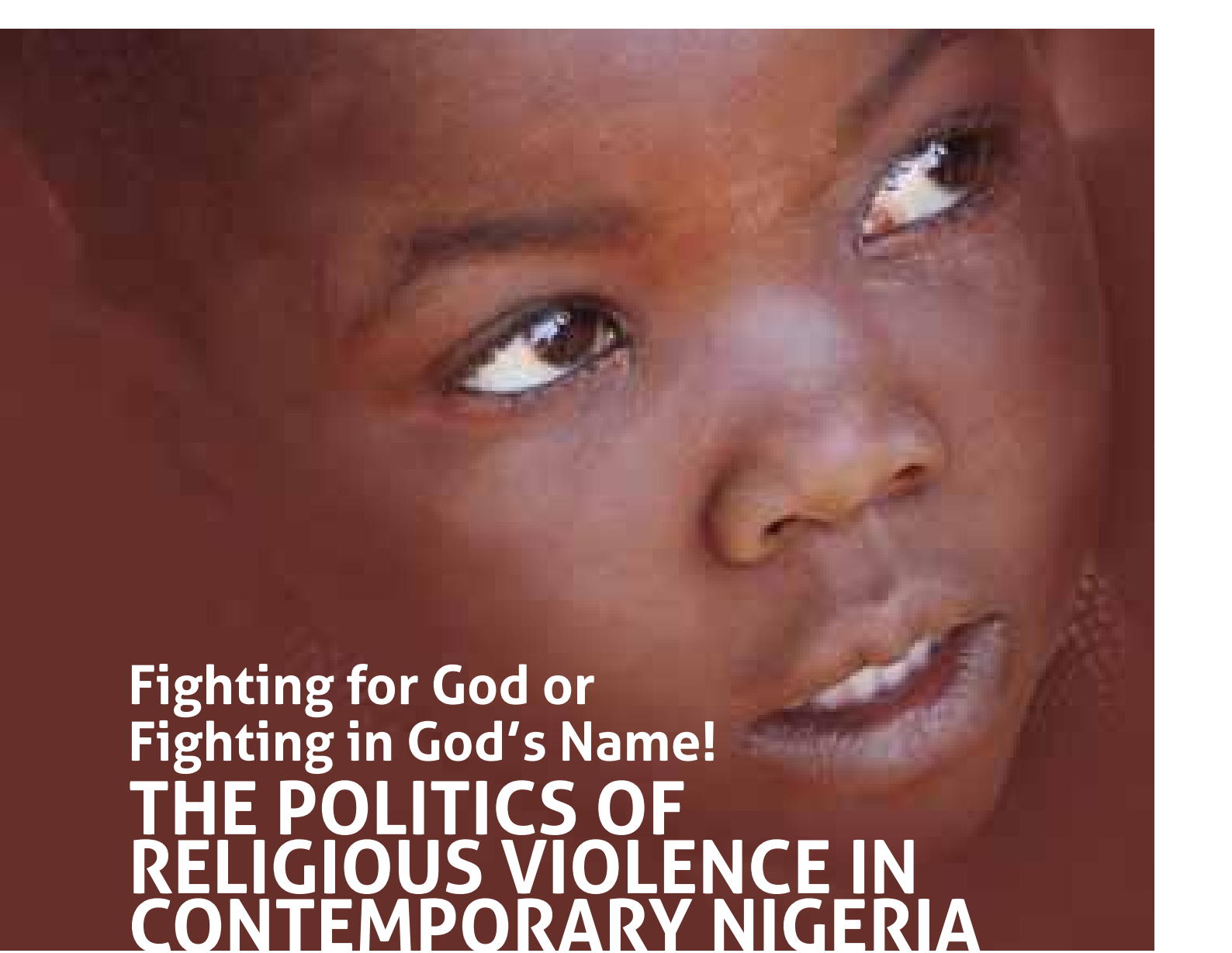[26] **Frithjof Schuon**, *Logic and Transcendence*, 144.

[27] **Seyyed Hossein Nasr**, 'The Spiritual Needs of Western Man and the Message of Sufism', in *Sufism: Love and Wisdom*, ed. Jean-Louis Michon & Roger Gaetani, Bloomington: World Wisdom, 2006, 179.

[28] **Frithjof Schuon**, *Light on the Ancient Worlds*, London: Perennial Books, 1966, 125.

[29] See **Kenneth Oldmeadow,** *Traditionalism: Religion in the light of the Perennial Philosophy*, Colombo: Sri Lanka Institute of Traditional Studies, 2000. For a short introduction to the perennialist perspective on some of the specific issues raised by the present article, see Harry Oldmeadow, 'Formal Diversity, Essential Unity: Frithjof Schuon on the Convergence of Religions', *Sacred Web: A Journal of Tradition and Modernity*, 5, and 'The Heart of the Religio Perennis: Frithjof Schuon on Esotericism', in Edward Crangle (ed), *Esotericism and the Control of Knowledge*, Sydney: Sydney University, 2004, 146-179.

[30] **Frithjof Schuon**, *The Transcendent Unity of Religions*, xxxiv.

[31] **Frithjof Schuon**, *Gnosis: Divine Wisdom*, London: Perennial Books, 1959, 12.

Fighting for God or Fighting in God's Name!
THE POLITICS OF RELIGIOUS VIOLENCE IN CONTEMPORARY NIGERIA

by Afe Adogame

Introduction

On the fateful day of 25 July 2009, just as I was putting finishing touches to the present paper, Nigeria and the world at large was once again awoken by the sudden, unprecedented news of yet another incidence of religious violence in parts of Northern Nigeria. The relative calm, peace that had pervaded Northern Nigeria, at least in the last several months, was shattered when an alleged Islamic group, Boko Haram (Hausa phrase literally meaning 'western education is prohibited'), launched attacks on un-suspecting citizens in four northern states (Bauchi, Yobe, Borno and Kano). The group self-styled 'Taliban' are opposed to any forms of western education and intent on imposing, enforcing Sharia law in all states in Nigeria. They had unleashed mayhem that left several scores of people dead; thousands of people displaced; and public buildings, police stations, churches, shops destroyed. Although the alleged leader of the group, Mohamed Yusuf and some of his followers escaped the brunt of law enforcement agents, several members were however apprehended and or killed. While combined military and po-

lice troops were drafted by the Nigerian federal government to restore law and order in the affected areas and prevent its spread, the situation has remained nevertheless tense, thus generating fear, insecurity and uncertainty among the populace. Such incessant events of conflict have come to characterize the religious topography of northern Nigeria that therefore necessitates further pondering on the intricate politics of religious violence in Nigeria. Are those who initiate or engage in religious violence or conflict really fighting for God or defending God? If not, then why are they fighting in God's name?

Any consideration of religious violence and conflict on the local Nigeria scene or in global contexts should necessarily commence with some caveats. First, we must take cognisance of our definitional specificity of religion and the ambivalent role of religion in terms both of its inherent functionality and dysfunctionality at the same time. Emile Durkheim's (1995) general theory on religion suggests that religion involves the practice of a community of believers who affirm both their idealized vision of society and their own social relations through ritual action in relation to positive and negative cults of the sacred. As John Hall remarks, this sacralisation process described by Durkheim is open as to its contents, and thus, war and martyrdom potentially can become sacred duties. Beyond explaining the sacralisation of violence, Durkheim's model of ritual offers a more general template for theorizing the fundamental embeddedness of violence in religion (Hall 2003). The understanding and usage of religion here spans its substantive and functional conceptualization, in which case we juxtapose religion in terms of

what it is or claims to be, its 'essence' and meaning; and what it does, its varied functions. These double perspectives, in themselves exemplify the ambivalence of religion in that depending on how this meaning and function is interpreted, conveyed, who conveys it (agency) and for what purposes, sometimes manipulated by religious or political entrepreneurs for selfish, ulterior ends, religious trends may either lean towards brokering peace and or engineer conflict, violence.

On the one hand, it is perhaps safe to assert that no religion, whether extant or living, ancient or modern, promotes and gives ample space for violence in its central tenets, theology and praxis. At the same time, all religions seem to advocate for peace at individual, societal levels. This pointer to the fact that no one religion has the exclusive preserve for peace or violence raises the enigmatic role and nature of religion. It thus leaves us pondering over how to comprehend the violent currents of religion in contradistinction to its peaceful, solemn streams. One conjecture is that what we term 'religion' may be intrinsically 'good' or 'bad' depending on its instrumentalization or operationalization. This raises the crucial question of religious agency, religion as a social agency, and the intricacies of boundary negotiations, a point to which I shall return.

Second, it is expedient at the onset to delineate violence, religious violence and contextualize the relationships between religion and violence. In this sense, a distinction must be made between religious violence in a specific sense and violence that may have religious dimensions, but can be also explained in other terms. In Nigeria we should pay atten-

tion to the religious dimension of most violent conflicts including ethnic conflicts, environmental related conflicts such as the Niger Delta oil crisis. Forms of religious conflict have included intercommunal violence. John Hall (2003) presents an extensive analysis of the relatively understudied theoretical and empirical links between religion and violence. As he elaborates, there is "an incontrovertibly real connection between religion and violence". The negative aspects and consequences of religion, however, should not obfuscate the potential emancipatory property of religion and the resources it provides in struggles against institutional and social inequality (Dillon 2003: 9). Hall proposes an exploratory typology to characterize the range of "cultural logics" that underpin the possibility of religious violence. He discusses the importance of such factors as nationalism, colonialism, the presence of religious regimens, interreligious competition, and establishment repression of countercultural religious movements. Arguing that "there is no firewall between religion and other social phenomena", Hall notes that while violence in many sociohistorical instances is independent of religion, religion, nonetheless, often becomes "the vehicle for" and "not merely the venue of" the violent expression of social aspirations (Dillon 2003: 13). I do not intend to engage theoretical discussions of conflict and violence within the limited scope of this paper; nevertheless, Hall's (2003) remarks are useful here as he teases out two of several points on which general theories of violence hinge. On the one hand, he remarks that some religious violence may be explicable in the same terms as non-religious violence. He maintains on the other hand that religion can amplify violent processes that have their central causes elsewhere. Generally, social theories of violence acknowledge the significance of religion to a reasonable degree; they fail however in neither grasping religious meanings nor theorizing mechanisms involving religion.

Most discourses about violence usually revolve around the use of physical force to cause injury, pain to persons, and sometimes, damage to lives and property as we have indicated above. Such a conventional definition may lead one to forget that the exercise of force may not always be violent. Undoubtedly, certain intentional practices that do not involve the use of force may result in physical injury, although some would hesitate to classify them as violent. Force is not an intrinsic feature of violence, and physical injuries are not its only consequences. An appropriate definition of violence has remained a vexed enigma and a number of considerations are thus essential for tackling the puzzle of religious violence. In fact, while there may be universal forms, symbolic actions and kinds of violence including self-inflicted, written and verbal acts, generally what constitutes violence or some forms of violent acts may be relative, in some sense culturally and religiously defined. The endurance of torture, pain, assault through religious persecution; martyrdom; self-inducement to suicide (suicide-bombing) and poisoning; the choreography of the passion for Christ symbolized by the suffering, torture and nailing to

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the crucifix of volunteering religious adherents depict sacred duties, religious virtue, and faithfulness in the religious traditions where such symbolic actions are legitimized, sometimes erroneously in obedience to divine injunctions and sanctions. Conversely, non-adherents will be quick to wave off such as self-inflictions or on others as gruesome acts of violence. These considerations are in no way very different from religious iconoclastic activities, Crusades and Jihad both represented as 'holy wars' within Christian and Islamic religious traditions. Mark Juergensmeyer (2000) argues that religious violence sometimes involves symbolic and performative pursuit of a war that cannot be won, in which defeat nevertheless is unthinkable'. Any given acts of violence may simultaneously have symbolic and other consequences. Thus, purely physical violence or extreme violence seldom occurs in isolation from other forms of aggression, coercion, symbolic violence and organised social repression (Hall 2003; cf. Jackman 2001). As Hall aptly summarises it, 'violence, then is a problem for some, a tool for others'.

Third, what we deem to be specifically religious violence or violence that may have religious dimensions rarely operate in a social vacuum. As the adagium 'No smoke without fire' holds some truth, it is very improbable that we can adequately grasp the complexity of religious violence in a specific local or even global context without first and foremost undertaking a historical backdrop and understanding the socio-political, religious, economic and cultural context(s) in question and in turn relating it to external factors that may impinge, shape such developments. 'Religious violence is embedded in moments

of history and structures of culture' (Hall 2001: 9). Contemporary events and in history attest to the fact that religion and violence are hardly strange 'bedfellows', they are often interwoven in the tapestry of human history. Violence will take different forms, shapes and sizes according to the circumstances of its experience and expression. This hydra-headed nature of violence requires a multidimensional rather than a single general theory linking religion and violence, though space does not permit a detailed treatment here. Nevertheless, these brief caveats will serve as fillers to my exploration of the history and politics of religious violence in contemporary Nigeria through the prism of boundary making and negotiation; religious expansion and competition.

Historicizing Religious Conflicts and Violence in Nigeria

A brief history of religious conflicts is expedient for an understanding of the politics of violence in contemporary Nigeria. Three broad phases of religious conflict can be discerned: the pre-colonial, colonial and postcolonial era. The pre-colonial era in which several states and kingdoms, such as the Yoruba, Igbo, Hausa, Fulani, Edo and the numerous minority ethnic groups that now form the nation, Nigeria, was relatively the least competitive on the platform of religion, but perhaps one in which the various forms of indigenous religions co-existed and interacted most peacefully. These were ethnic-based, non-missionizing religious traditions in which people are born but not converted into. They are dynamic religions that were open and receptive to change and transformation as a result of migra-

tion, intermarriages, trade, interethnic wars. Through these processes, each indigenous tradition adapted to new changes, took on new elements and discarded others. The nature and extent of their reception, negotiation and accommodation of other forms of external religions is exemplified by how they encountered Islam and Christianity subsequently, but most importantly how they have remained the least aggressive and confrontational in the religious competition and rivalry that ensued.

In spite of wide-ranging differences, the indigenous religions of the various Nigerian societies share common affinities in their religious ideas, rituals, and worldviews, thus constituting a distinctively indigenous pattern of religious thought and action. The emergence and expansion of Islam, Christianity, Eastern and Western-related spiritualities saw the introduction of new religious ideas and practices into indigenous religions. The encounter transformed indigenous religious thought and practice but did not supplant it; indigenous religions preserved some of their beliefs and ritual practices but also adjusted to the new socio-cultural milieu. Owing to social changes, aspects of indigenous beliefs and rituals were either abandoned, transformed or reinvented due to the impingement of European, Arab and Asian cultures, religions and spiritualities. The change also led to the revivification of other aspects of indigenous religions and cultures. In many cases, Islam and Christianity became domesticated on the Nigerian soil. The contact produced new religions, with some appropriating indigenous symbols and giving them a new twist. Thus, the historical and cultural significance of indigenous religious traditions is partly discerned in their plurality and multivocality both in Nigeria and the Nigerian diaspora. Generally, in various parts of Africa, the indigenous religions have encountered other religious forms and responded to social change leading to revitalization of indigenous religions and in some contexts synthesis, reinvention and change.

The historiography of new religions in what became modern day Nigeria spans the penetration of Islam in the 11th century, the introduction of mission Christianity from the 15th and 19th centuries, through to the colonial era from the early 20th century to the contemporary period. The emergence of religious conflict and violence can partly be understood in terms of the legacy of colonial conquest and occupation, neocolonialism, and the introduction of Arab Islam and European Christianity. The period in which virtually all Nigerian

societies were subjugated under colonialism coincided with when the indigenous religions re-encountered Christianity, Islam in a much more dynamic way. Although Islam and Christianity were introduced to various parts of Nigeria much earlier, it was from the colonial historical phase that there emerged a renewed religious encounter, interaction and competition.

Islam penetrated sub-Saharan Africa long before the advent of European Christianity. It spread through North Africa by conquest, but the situation differed considerably in sub-Saharan Africa where it took on the insignia of trade and commerce. Islam vigorously pursued a conversion policy that became successful in several sub-Saharan countries over the centuries. Its spread to sub-Saharan Africa, including Northern Nigeria revealed its commercial and sometimes military outlook. The old caravan routes now carried Muslim merchants, teachers, and mystics who settled among the African peoples and states. Until about 1450, Islam provided the major external contact between sub-Saharan Africa and the world. The Islamization process also served to link sub-Saharan Africa more closely internally through trade, religion, and politics. West Africa, for example, experienced both the cultural influence of Islam and its own internal dynamic of state building and developments. The formation of the powerful empires, such as the Kanem Bornu, Fulani and Hausa States, depended more on military power and dynastic alliances than on ethnic or cultural unity. Prior to the introduction of Islam, there existed many flourishing cultures and dealing with those cultures made significant changes in Islam. It is often said that West Africa has a brand of Islam that is 'very African'. One distinctive feature of this Arabized Islam is the manner in which it was integrated into local cultural life. New religious, economic, and political patterns developed in relation to the Islamic surge, but great diversity remained.

The earliest missionary efforts in what became known as Nigeria was in the 16th and 17th centuries when Spanish Capuchin Fathers arrived in Warri in 1515, and Portuguese Augustinian Monks from Sao Tome entered Benin in 1570. Thus, the period witnessed the activities of Catholic missionaries in Warri and Benin Kingdoms. At this point the Catholic missionaries were alone in the mission field in most parts of Africa. Aside from this religious activity, they we-re not unmindful of the economic (i.e. trade in slaves) and political gains inherent in this venture. Wherever the Portuguese flag was hoisted, the Jesuits and other missionaries were close behind and established missions. This early attempt at sowing the seed of Christianity left very scanty footprints in these areas. With the re-Christianization in mid-19th century, a remarkable impact was witnessed from then onwards. The modern phase of the missionary enterprise in Nigeria began with the foundation of mission boards and societies. This enterprise commenced through the pioneering efforts of Methodism and Anglicanism respectively. The planting of Anglicanism in Nigeria was actually initiated and nurtured by the Church Missionary Society (CMS) missionaries in 1842. At their inception,

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the evangelical missions demonstrated a level of mutual cooperation. The story, however, turned sour in the mission field where there often existed an element of rivalry between some mission bodies. From the first decade after independence till present day, Nigerian Christianity has continued to witness intense rivalry and competition between the mission churches, the African Independent Churches (AICs) and the newer pentecostal/charismatic churches. Such intra-faith competition has undoubtedly produced some forms of violence and conflict.

The Berlin Conference of 1884-5 began the heyday of European imperialism in Africa in which the continent was partitioned into artificial geographical zones of European influence, exploitation and expropriation. This formalization of the European scramble and partition of Africa brought in its wake a dramatic expansion in the number of missionaries in Africa, missionaries some of whom support the imperial ambitions of their compatriots. The partition had tremendous impact on missionary activities in Nigeria and the continent at large. As Ogbu Kalu (2003: 344) aptly remarks, the Berlin conference "introduced virulent forms of European nationalism into the continent … the mission churches embellished this spirit with denominational stripes". The action led to the breakdown of inter-denominational co-operation that existed between missions in Africa and also divided the countries along denominational lines. As Akinwumi (2008) argues, the Berlin Conference institutionalised denominationalism and sectarianism in Africa. It marked the beginning of competition between the missions, between the Catholics and
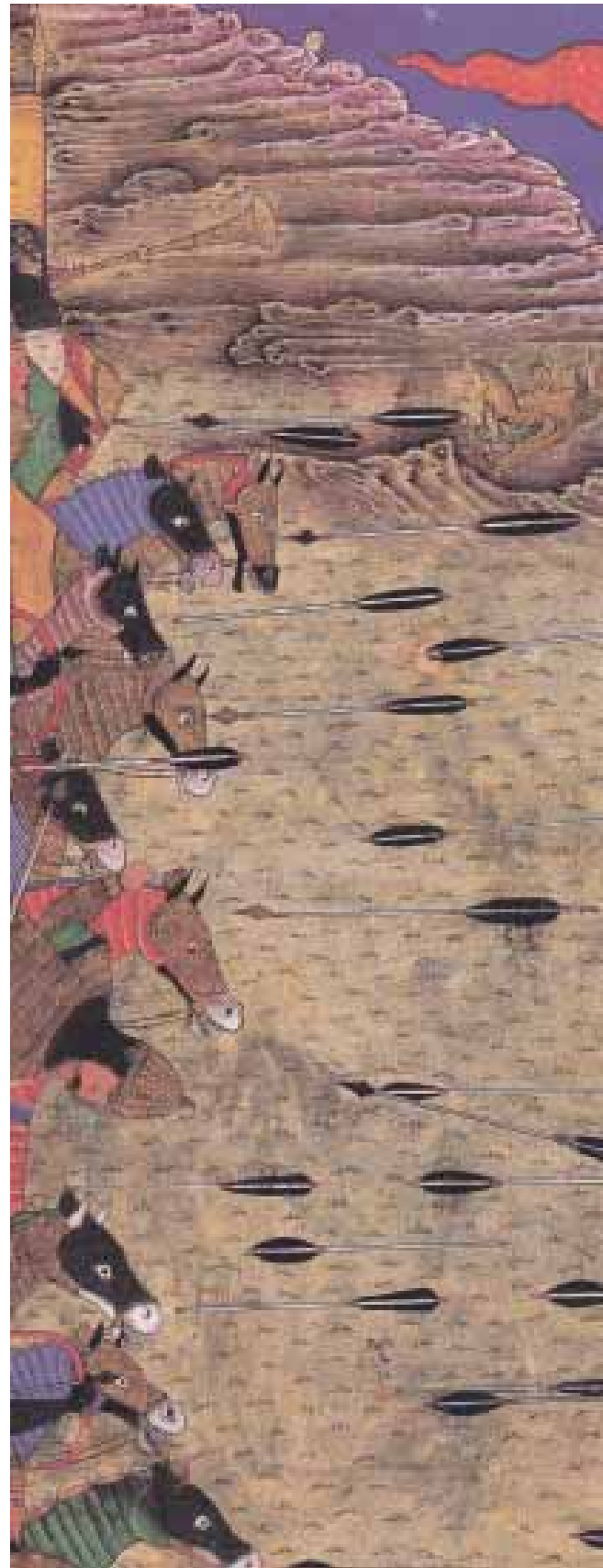
Protestants on one hand, and on the other hand, between the different Protestant Missions. The competitive spirit was aptly expressed by a Catholic father in Nigeria in 1907. The Catholic Father was quoted to have said that "we have been in an atmosphere of war and of conquest, war with the Protestant… war with the pagans, war with enemies in different forms" (Akinwumi 2008: 18). Thus, the partition adversely affected interdenominational co-operation between the missions, sometimes resulting in unhealthy rivalry between missions, and in some cases open conflicts. I contend that one legacy of the scramble and partition is the fact that it unleashed violence and conflict on African societies as families, kith and kin, clans and ethnic groups were caught in the partition trap resulting from the artificial national and geographical constructions. An ethnic group became split into two or more states adopting new, different national languages such as English, French, and German. Contemporary national, ethnic conflicts and wars on land demarcation and boundary maintenance is remotely connected with the negative effects of the Berlin conference. Former ethnic communities and kinship groupings became strange bedfellows engaged in the scramble for land, physical and mineral resources.

Mission and imperialism became widely understood as but 'two sides of the same coin'. The missionizing task became synonymous with the transplantation of western civilization. A kind of violence was unleashed on African societies with the conscious denigration of their indigenous religions and cultures, reinforced with iconoclasm. African converts were taught to repudiate their indigenous cultures and re-

ligions in its entirety and assume new status as 'Europeanized Africans'. This quandary that lay at the very core of the missionary enterprise symbolized a kind of violence and conflict in which many African Christian converts were consciously estranged from their 'kith and kin', blood kinship relations on the basis of religion. The demarcation of public space in terms of the creation of 'missionary quarters' in which missionaries and their new converts were separated, insulated from the rest of the local community has dire implications for understanding the politics of boundary formation, reconstruction, and maintenance then and now. At least such demarcation appears to reify a tendency of 'not being equally yoked with unbelievers', separating the holy from the unholy, the Christian from the heathen, the civilized from the barbaric. This compartmentalization of physical space, albeit religious ones, has also been reinforced within Muslim-dominated societies, particularly Northern Nigeria, in ways that have crucial implications for place making and socio-religious emplacement.

The appropriation of religion to secure political office and the established convention of allocating important political and administrative offices on the basis of religious persuasion have become firmly ingrained in the Nigerian polity.

The Berlin conference was both a political and spiritual partition in which imperial powers nationalised mission bodies and denominations along colonial spheres of influence. Established mission works and denominations in some regions prior to the conference were constrained to switch 'goal posts' and discontinue their activities in such regions that lacked the embrace of their national governments. In a way this generated rivalry rather than interdenominational co-operation between the various missions in Africa. Till date, the legacy of this boundary formation along religious lines is still visible within the physical geography of Nigeria and other parts of Africa. For instance, it is common in Nigeria to locate the demographic threshold of Anglicanism and Methodism in the Southwest, Presbyterianism and Catholicism in Southeast, ECWA and COCIN in the Northern and Middle Belt regions of the country. This artificial boundary definition transcends intra-denominational into inter-religious levels, with the oft-exaggeration and declaration of North and South as Islam and Christian strongholds respectively. Such a blanket generalisation undermines the demographic complexity of Nigeria's religious landscape, a feature that is often taken for granted. In a sense, this illusion has played into the public negotiation of physical, religious, economic and political boundaries or spaces.

The influence of religion in politics is a growing phenomenon all over the world. In the case of Nigeria, ethnic and religious pluralism have been the most influential factors. As a result, religion has assumed political significance and generated tension in Nigeria due to its plurality. While there are three major religions in Nigeria, religious and political conflicts have revolved largely around the activities of, and the interrelationships between, Islam and Christianity. The history of religious feelings and involvement in regional-national politics is aptly illustrated by their activities in post-independent Nigerian politics. The quest and scramble for political power has partly occurred within the framework of religion in ways that reinforced ethnic and regional antagonism. Thus,

religious identification at both the individual and the societal levels is in contestation with other loyalties such as ethnicity, class, and gender, in ways that further exacerbates the polarity between Islam and Christianity and the question of political control in Nigeria. I have argued elsewhere (Adogame 2004) that this tension has a clear connection with the growth of uncompromising Muslim and Christian activism which has led to a growing culture of religious violence particularly in northern Nigeria. The impact of religion on politics has resulted in an atmosphere of mutual distrust and suspicion to an extent that virtually all national issues are approached through religious lenses.

We have provided a concise historical overview of religious politics elsewhere (Adogame 2004) and do not wish to rehash it here owing to space constraints, but suffice it to mention that the first, second, third republics in Nigeria have been confronted with a reasonable dose of religious politics. I have demonstrated that the socioeconomic and political imperatives have a strong influence on both the politicization of religion and the religionization of politics in Nigeria. The scramble for political power has partly occurred within the framework of religion in ways that magnify ethnic and regional antagonisms and exacerbate misunderstandings between Islam and Christianity. For instance, the political crisis of Nigeria's first republic (1960-1978) under Tafawa Balewa is partly blamed on religious factors. As soon as Nigeria achieved political independence in 1960, the premier of Northern region, Sir Ahmadu Bello and then, the Sarduana of Sokoto, embarked on a religious "crusade" that became the foundation

stone for religious politics in the nascent nation. The ruling Northern elite were accused of indirectly pushing Islam to enlarge the Sokoto Caliphate (Kukah 1993) From the First Republic till the most recent experiments in democratic rule, intra- and inter-religious violence looms large, with several incidents of religious conflicts often unleashed on unsuspecting public. The spate of increasing religious politics is leading to new fears of reprisals and marginalization. It is against this backdrop that the resurgence of the Sharia law and the "Shariazation" of many Northern States are seen to have political rather than religious undertones.

Religion continually assumes an enigmatic stance in Nigeria in a fashion that ethnic politics is almost being supplanted by religious politics. Islam perceives state power as quintessential in the advancement and propagation of religion. The perceived domination of power by Muslims and the inequitable distribution of national resources have led to a scramble for public space by Christians. The mutual suspicion and distrust engendered by religious functionaries and the evolution of religious and ethnic bigotry affects the overall security and health of the nation. It is glaring that the interplay of religion and politics in Nigeria is intricately linked with the virulent competition for national resources. One characteristic of this kind of religious politics is that every action of the government as well as the actions of religious groups is watched, highlighted and analyzed. It is within this purview that the Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN) emerged as counteracting force to checkmate the activities of Islamic organizations including the Supreme Council for Islamic Affairs (SCIA) and the

Jama'atu Nasril Islamiyya (JNI).

The history of religious politics in Nigeria is one that is undoubtedly characterized by complex, controversial issues of a wide-ranging nature. For instance, past census data have been deeply politicized on religious grounds—that is in terms of which religious tradition is numerically and geographically the largest. The politicization of census on ethnic and religious grounds has resulted in unreliable religious and ethnic demographic data in Nigeria. The official population statistics are often manipulated for political, economic and religious reasons, because these figures partly form the basis for the sharing of national revenue and other resources. That partly explains why the religion indices are now completely excluded in recent national census process. A closely related theme that has enhanced the polarization of religious cleavages in Nigerian politics is the inherent tensions that emerge from the desire of Nigeria's Muslim population to shape and define Nigeria as a religious state and the Christian counterpoise that defines Nigeria as secular. This tendency that resonates between theocracy and secularism, foreground the volatility and polemics that characterize issues such as

the Sharia and Nigeria's membership of the OIC.

Another issue of contention concerns religious representation in governance and the modalities for sharing political offices. Ethno-religious grievances over the distribution of power and privileges remain one basic theme in the agenda of religious politics. The appropriation of religion to secure political office and the established convention of allocating important political and administrative offices on the basis of religious persuasion have become firmly ingrained in the Nigerian polity. A further strand of controversy hinged on the control of Nigerian educational system. This has often taken two dimensions with Christians in the North accusing Northern state governments of taking over Christian mission schools and the Islamization of the educational system. On the other hand, Muslims in the South-west have opposed the ownership and control of schools by Christian missionaries since independence. With the recognition that education remains a potent tool for religious proselytization, both Christians and Muslims have established crčches, Bible or Koranic schools and colleges, and more recently, universities, in order to further their religious agendas. Thus, the recent proliferation of religiously sponsored universities may be interpreted as an integral feature of the ongoing politics of mutual checkmating. The appropriation of new media technologies as a propaganda machinery is intricately tied up with the politics of space-time allocation to Muslims and Christians in both federal and state owned electronic media. The use of the media as an engine of religious agitprop not only heightened already existing tension and rivalry between Christians and Muslims, but it also promoted what Ogbu Kalu calls "the geography of religious expression in Nigeria."

Another highly contested issue in public space is the role of government in sponsoring pilgrimages as well as its foreign policy on issues that have religious bearing. The impact of religion in the conduct of external relations in such areas as the definition of national interests, the preference of the North for Islamic countries, the role of foreign missionaries and relations with the West and Israel has often generated inter-religious conflict and outcry. The visible government participation in and sponsorship of Islamic pilgrimages to Mecca, and the setting up of the Pilgrims Board spurred Christians to ask for their own Board and gave birth to state sponsored Christian pilgrimages to Jerusalem and Rome (Falola 1998: 173-174). It is apparent, however, that both civilian and military political leaders have often ridden on the crest of religion both to attain power as well as legitimize their positions. As this was carried out often with selfish intentions, the consequences are usually not far to seek. They are reflected in the religious violence which has characterized relations between Muslims and Christians. It is also reflected in the increasing appearance of political figures in public religious functions as a form of self-identification of religious organizations.

I have briefly sketched above the history and evolution of religious politics in Nigeria demonstrating on the one hand how conflict could be out of the struggle over scarce resources arising over competing goals between two or more ethnicities. Ethnicity and religion are tools used to galvanize support for

violent conflicts between groups, which frequently have little to do with religion and more to do with power. Common is the tendency in Nigeria to use religion to form cohesiveness with own groups and divisions between own group and other groups. The motivation is usually not only religion but ethnic, political, economic and nationalistic. It should be borne in mind that conflict is not a problem in itself when it is properly managed, but when management fails violence can ensue. Institutional mechanisms for conflict management include rule of law, treaties, negotiations, voting and authority figures. These are many of the institutions which constitute the broadest level of social capital – the institutions which facilitate civic engagement, reduce transaction costs and minimize risks. In the next two sections we shall explore the politics of religious violence through the prism of boundary formation, reconstruction and maintenance on the one hand; but also social and religious capital and the ambivalences of conflict and order in Nigerian public spheres.

Religious boundary formation, reconstruction and maintenance

A critical overview of the texture and fluidity of religious boundaries deserves a consideration of the changing social, cultural and political contexts of such transformative processes. Gary Bouma (2007) aptly indicates that the facts of religious resurgence, increased religious diversity and increasing religious conflict raise issues about the nature, construction and negotiation of the boundaries between and within religious groups. Appleby (2000) eulogizes a more realistic assessment of

interreligious relations and a renewed exploration of the nature and transformation of religious boundaries. There is remarkable evidence of religious expansion and resurgence in Nigeria (Africa) within Christianity and Islam, but also in forms of indigenous and exogenous religions. In fact, the popular recognition of the shift in the centre of gravity of Christianity from the Northern to the Southern hemisphere is truer in the case of Nigeria as in other parts of the non-Western world (South). This religious revitalization is also witnessed within Islam and the indigenous religions in Nigeria. As Bouma (2007: 188) notes, this increasing wave of religious mobility and resurgence can be linked to a number of causal factors including reaction against the failure of secularised, liberal and formally organised forms of religion to meet their religious needs.

A second source of religious resurgence is found in continued failures of justice, the inability to achieve a fair distribution of goods and services, including food and health. It is also a reaction against the failure of the secularist humanist paradigm to deliver peace and prosperity with justice, and to provide satisfactory explanations for evil, inequality and pain. Moreover, migration moves people, and with them religions and religious ideas around the globe. Migration has increased religious diversity of many societies and as a result has increased interreligious contact. These factors apply to the Nigerian situation to a large extent as the brief historical overview of religious politics above would suggest. The forms of this religious resurgence or revitalization found in Christianity and Islam in Nigeria include increased intensity of commitment (social/religious capital), increased

salience of religious identity, the rise of puritanical extremes and a return to political engagement to apply faith such as in the establishment of Sharia law to deal with criminal cases, and the radicalization of some brands of Pentecostalism particularly in Northern Nigeria and the Middle Belt.

Contestation intensifies religious self-definitions that in turn thicken and escalate conflict. The formation and maintenance of identities is a crucial factor contributing to conflict and violence. Increased religious competition and conflict arises not only from increased diversity and religious resurgence, but also involves internal conflicts within religious groups. Scholars often overlook these intrareligious conflicts and violence to emphasize the interreligious conflicts. Resurgence often brings conflict between the more liberal and more conservative (fundamentalist) positions within religious groups. This can occur in at least two levels, intra-faith such as in the case of Shia versus Sufi groups in Islam; mission churches versus Pentecostal Christianity; and inter-faith such as between Christians and Muslims or between Christians and adherents of the indigenous religions. Resurgence is also associated with more emotive and charismatic forms of spirituality and worship (Bouma 2007). There is often a mutual impact in that as the more intense forms of religiosity make themselves more evident, there is some evidence of the rise of newly articulate voices from more liberal streams. This sometimes results in friction owing to violent utterances or acts.

A direct result of increased religious commitment and practice will be an increase in religious competition. The

increased number of religious groups in a society can and often does lead to competition (Finke and Stark 1988). This nexus between religious plurality, competition and religious vitality is very complex. Religious conflict can be treated as a subset of religious competition. Religious conflict seeks to overcome, eliminate, or convert the 'other' to extinction. With increased diversity, increases in competition can be expected; whether this competition will flow on to conflict depends on how boundaries are defined and how these boundaries are viewed by social policy makers (Bouma 2007: 190). In another vein the religious imagery employed by leaders and adherents could be offensive, demonizing and thus leading to violence. Such rhetoric mirror the identity of a common, external enemy, and the internalisation process that privileges an internal sense of 'us' against 'them'. Conflicts between Christian and Muslim groups in Nigeria are partly over the implementation of their religious ethics in social policy and the religious tone of the nation.

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Bouma (2007: 192) remarks that resurgent religion and the attendant increases in religious competition and conflict raise issues of boundaries. Conflict presupposes the existence or declaration of boundaries. The definition of boundaries is also connected with power dynamics. Boundaries are both defined within and outside the group, including by the State, as well as by social, political and economic stakeholders. As Bouma argues, this requires knowing who the 'Other' is, identifying the enemy and declaring the boundary between 'us' and 'them'. Competition and conflict both require the drawing of lines, taking offence at someone or something, and declaring 'other' to be wrong, normally inferior, or theologically in error. Much of current religious conflict is within group conflict involving the (re)defining of boundaries between subsets of larger religious groups. While often intensely internal, some of this conflict spills over into international and global crises.

The 'imagined other' is constructed as rhetoric for defining boundaries, in this case religious boundaries. Boundary definition and maintenance within and beyond religious groups as well as between them and the larger society is often assisted by a creation of an 'imagined other'. Bouma was right that this goes beyond stereotyping; it is the creation of imagined communities of otherness. The use of imagined others in the definition of boundaries is a product of the rhetoric used in competition and conflict, and often has no basis in the actual interactions between the groups involved (2007: 194). The role of imagination in boundary creation and maintenance is apparent in conflicts, especially with the use of media such as posters, slogans etc. The creation of the imagined other is often used to fuel mistrust and hostility. It is commonplace that religions in Nigeria, particularly Islam and Christianity, construct rhetoric of otherness and engage in mutual demonization. When such religious sentiments are whipped beyond tolerance levels, then the obvious results is violence and conflict. The trajectories of events of conflicts and violence in Northern Ni-

geria are indicative of this trend. In the final section, we shall demonstrate the ambivalence of social/religious capital either in the sense in which shared values and norms can reduce or reinforce the level of violence and conflict; and in some cases how violence can impair social/religious capital.

Social/religious capital and the ambivalences of conflict and order

Religious institutions play a distinctive role within the specific local contexts of Nigeria because those constituencies such as governments, trade unions, blue-collar workplaces, cultural associations and families that previously generated trust and sustained broad social networks have deteriorated. It is within this context that we interrogate how and to what extent religious groups in Nigeria generate religious and social capital (Bourdieu 1986; Putnam 1995; Coleman 1988) while in the midst of social and cultural flux. In this sense, religious capital is understood as the amalgamation of the norms, values, languages, and social practices that sustain and transform the religious groups in relation to the specific contexts they find themselves. Religious capital, mainly a sociological concept, is the investment an individual makes into his or her religious faith. The investment is the time and physical work involved with the religious faith, as well as the personal investment in ideology, doctrine, and practice. The concept of religious capital is similar to the more general concept of social capital because it's a resource based on relationships that individuals and faith groups can access for their personal wellbeing,

but can also 'donate' as a gift to the wider community. The central idea of social capital is that social networks are a valuable asset (Field 2003: 12). Social capital refers to connections among individuals – social networks and the norms of reciprocity and trustworthiness that arise from them. Therefore, both religious capital and social capital include investments and participation in networks and activities. The impact and influence of social networks on continued participation within religious communities is large indeed.

Not enough attention, as yet, has been devoted to the unique role that religion may play in building social and religious capital. What role does religious involvement play in promoting social or religious capital? In what ways is religious/social capital important in the context of conflict and violence and what form does it take? Much more attention needs to be given to the unique dynamics of religion in building social capital. A social capital approach is better adapted to understanding the outcomes of religion on other parts of life, for instance in areas of voluntarism, economic development and civic engagement. Attendance at religious events is associated with increased volunteering, and religious beliefs can influence the meaning of volunteering in people's lives.

I would contend that in the context of violence and conflict in Nigeria, there is an intricate relationship between religious commitment, participation and volunteerism.

Churches, mosques and other religious organizations act as communication networks that foster religious and civic volunteerism. People are more likely to give money and time, even to secular efforts, if they are church mem-

bers or members of the mosque.

Nevertheless, the advocates of the concept of social and religious capital often overemphasize its benefits in a way that understates its negative dimensions. Thus, the functional dimensions of religion are prioritized over and against its dysfunctional attributes. Some examples of social capital include churches, mosques, fraternal organisations, internet networks and other groups that create exclusionary but also inclusionary social capital and their attendant positive and negative effects. It is these negative dimensions that we will briefly focus on here especially in connection with religious conflict and violence in Nigeria. Alejandro Portes (1998) has identified four negative consequences of social capital: exclusion of outsiders; excess claims on group members; restrictions on individual freedom and downward levelling norms. He believes that these consequences and the unequal nature of access to social capital must be balanced against the

optimistic view if social capital is to be useful as a tool for societal analysis and transformation. All these groups can help build and break societies because of their bridging/bonding behaviour (Putnam 1995). If the amount of human interaction increases, people are more likely to help one another and later become more politically, religiously and socially involved.

Xavier Briggs (2004) discusses two faces of social capital, social capital as an individual good and social capital as a collective good. He suggest that the dark side of social capital, especially the potential for exclusion, is very evident in social capital as a collective good, a resource possessed by a social system that helps the system as a whole to solve problems. For instance, community norms can be tied to religious beliefs and symbols, and to ethnicity, in ways that exclude or imagine others. What is more, networks and norms are often pervaded with political interests and with opportunities to exert political influence, to exercise political power, to represent particular groups and particular interests, often to the detriment of other groups and other interests. Bonding social networks can reinforce and deepen ethnic and religious distinctions and conflicts. So there is high potential for exclusion in relation to social capital. Earlier, Quibria (2003) explores the downside of social capital identifying four potentially destructive dimensions of networks, norms and reciprocities, especially focusing on urban and ethnic communities. First, social capital that opens up opportunities for the members of the network, which is often based on ethnicity, religion, language, and profession, can at the same time constitute an enormous barrier to entry

for others outside the network. Second, while a close-knit group can be a source of economic dynamism for its membership, it can also dilute personal incentives to work hard, as in the case of a community that is substantially supported by welfare. Moreover, group membership of the community can enforce strict conformity when it infringes on individual freedoms, and can thus create pressure for submission to mediocrity. Network and group coordination can often lead to the establishment of negative norms and values that are self-reinforcing.

In conclusion, I would contend that in the context of violence and conflict in Nigeria, there is an intricate relationship between religious commitment, participation and volunteerism. These resources generated within the religious groups as social and religious capital produces viable reservoirs for mobilizing members either to facilitate or prevent violence and conflict. Depending on how these resources are understood and interpreted by religious adherents, when adverse situations arises it leads them either to choose to fight for God or to fight in God's name. In the case of Nigeria, I would argue that religious and political entrepreneurs have often hijacked these resources and mobilized particularly the vulnerable towards achieving selfish ends. Undoubtedly, religion and politics are hardly mutually exclusive entities but mutually influence and shape each other positively or in ways detrimental to the corporate existence of a pluralistic society like Nigeria. We have explored the evolution of religious politics in Nigerian history, demonstrating to what extent religion and politics are often manipulated by individuals and religious groups in

ways that often sustain religious strife, violence and ethnic bigotry. Contestation of power, boundaries and space continue to generate an atmosphere of mutual distrust and suspicion, thus hampering meaningful inter-faith dialogue and coexistence. When religious politics is geared towards meaningful and sustainable development rather than selfish ends, this may pave the way towards the attainment of a virile, civil Nigerian society.

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CAN MUSLIMS TALK TO HINDUS?

by Arvind Sharma

I.

A question such as the one being raised here, namely: Can Muslims talk to Hindus? – can be addressed at several levels. One could, for instance, ask what kind of a Muslim are we talking about: an "orthodox" Muslim; a Sūfī Muslim or "folk" Muslim, by which I mean a Muslim sharing a folk-culture with Hindus. Even these three levels are capable of further sub-division. The categories are admittedly loose and may overlap. It is virtually impossible to do justice to all these levels. Hence in this paper I shall avail of only one category, called "orthodox" Islam. Far be it for me, however, to try to determine what is orthodox in Islam. What I shall do is to look at the Qur'ān, as a text which is bound to figure in any definition of Islamic orthodoxy, and ask of it the question: Can Muslims talk to Hindus according to the Qur'ān, and, if so on, what basis?

I shall now present three arguments, in the hope that each will reveal progressively unambiguous grounds for Muslims and Hindus to talk to each other.

Hindus were to be treated not as Kafirs but Zimmis and this seems to have been the general practice during Islamic rule in India.

II.

Before such an exercise can be undertaken, however, one extreme view must be considered, that Muslims cannot talk to Hindus because Hindus are idolaters, and the only choice open to them is to convert to Islam, just as the only choice open to the Arabs in Arabia, in the early days of Islam, was to convert to Islam, if they did not happen to be Jews and Christians. The potential strength of the argument can be gauged from the fact that "Muslim legends developed the theme that the idol of Somnāt, destroyed by Mahmud of Ghazna, was brought from Ka'ba in the days of Arab *jāhiliyya* and planted in Gujarat".[1] From this it is but a step to equate the Hindus with the Arabs

during *jāhiliyya*. However, while such an equation might explain iconoclasm directed at the Hindus in India[2], it did not provide the basis for dealing with the Hindus. Thus although the Hindus could theoretically be equated with the pre-Islamic Arabs, they actually came to be equated with People of the Book. The Arab conquest of Sind by Muhammad ibn Qasim in 712 resulted in what is known as the Brahmanabad settlement, which spells out the administrative arrangement put in place in the wake of the Arab conquest:

The basic principle was to treat Hindus as "the people of the book," and to confer on them the status of the zimmis (the protected). In some respects the arrangement was even more liberal than those granted to "the people of

the book" by later schools of Islamic law. For example, according to later opinion the zimmis could not repair their place of worship, although existing ones were allowed to stand. The question of repairing a damaged temple came up before Muhammad, who referred the matter to Hajjaj. The latter, having consulted the ulama of Damascus, not only grated permission asked for, but declared that so long as non-Muslims paid their dues to the state they were free to live in whatever manner they liked. "It appears," Hajjaj wrote, "that the chief inhabitants of Brahmanabad had petitioned to be allowed to repair the temple of Budh and pursue their religion. As they have made submission, and have agreed to pay taxes to the Khalifa, nothing more can properly be required from them. They have been taken under our protection, and we cannot in any way stretch out our hands upon their lives or property. Permission is given them to worship their gods. Nobody must be forbidden and prevented from following his own religion. They may live in their houses in whatever manner they like."[3]

In other words, Hindus were to be treated not as Kafirs but Zimmis and this seems to have been the general practice during Islamic rule in India. The Arab conquest of Persia may have provided the model for this, for after its conquest the "Muslims handled the Zoroastrians theologically, like the Christians and the Jews in Arabia, as the pre-existing scriptural monotheists, 'the People of the Book'."[4] It is worth noting that "these developments were not inevitable" and "Zoroastrianism could have been proscribed"[5]. The same could be said of Hinduism.

The acceptance of the Hindus as "people of the book" does provide a basis on which Hindus and Muslims could talk to each other, but it should be remembered that this acceptance was more in the nature of an administrative arrangement than theological acceptance. It did ultimately lead, during the Monghul Empire, to some interaction between the Hindus and Muslims at the intellectual level, but that was significantly after the *jizya* has been abolished. So although the acceptance of Hindus as "people of the book" does provide a basis of administrative co-existence, it is not entirely clear how far it provides a basis for Muslims to talk to the Hindus[6].

It is also not entirely clear if such an acceptance will provide a firm basis for dialogue, because as we look around we hardly find 'the people of the book' unambiguously so called - the Jews, the Christians and the Muslims, talking to each other!

One may now turn to an examination of some other approaches to the issue.

III.

According to the Qur'ān (35.23; 57.25) prophets have been sent to all the peoples of the world. And according to the same Qur'ān - and this is crucial - believing Muslims should make no distinctions among the prophets (II.136) but treat them all on par. Obviously, then, Muslims can not only talk to Hindus but do so on the basis of equality, rather than on the basis of treating them either as a "protected people," or "people with a book," in the conventional sense. Lest the reader feel that one is being too

Although, according to the Qur'ān, prophets were sent to all the peoples, the names of all of them are not mentioned in the Qur'ān.

innovative in proposing this position, permit me to cite Prof. Fazlur Rahman on this point. He writes:

"There is no mention of any fixed religious communities in the earlier part of the Qur'ān. True, different prophets have come to different peoples and nations at different times, but their messages are universal and identical. All these messages emanate from a single source: "the Mother Book" (43, 4, 13, 39) and "the Hidden Book" (56:78). Since these messages are universal and identical, it is incumbent on all people to believe in all divine messages. This is why Muhammad felt himself obligated to believe in the prophethood of Noah, Abraham, Moses and Jesus, for God's religion is indivisible and prophethood is also indivisible. Indeed, the Prophet is made to declare in the Qur'ān that not only does he believe in the Torah and the Gospel but "I believe in whatever Book God may have revealed" (42:15). This is because God's guidance is universal and not restricted to any nation or nations: "And there is no nation wherein a warner has not come" (35:24) and "For every people a guide has been provided" (13:7). The word "Book" is, in fact, often used in the Qur'ān not with any reference to any specific revealed book but as a generic term denoting the totality of divine revelations (see 2:213, for example)."[7]

This promising passage however also poses a problem. While the conclusion one would be tempted to draw from such a passage is that Muslims, if they believe in Prophet Muhammad, must equally believe in the other prophets, Professor Fazlur Rahman, to whom I must ultimately defer, moves the interpretation in the opposite direction and goes on to say: "If Muhammad and his followers believe in all prophets, all people must also and equally believe in him. Disbelief in him would be equivalent to disbelief in all, and this would arbitrarily upset the line if prophetic succession."[8] The promise of the passage from our point of view is only partially realized when it is interpreted this way.

Its potential in our context is also compromised in another way. Although, according to the Qur'ān, prophets were sent to all the peoples, the names of all of them are not mentioned in the Qur'ān (IV.164; II.106; XIII.39). A number of them are mentioned, but the list of prophets actually mentioned in the Qur'ān is self-admittedly not exhaustive. This creates an ambiguity in relation to the Hindus, for neither they, nor their scriptures, or prophets, find *explicit* mention in the Qur'ān. The ambiguity may be stated as follows: because they are *not* mentioned in the Qur'ān one cannot *categorically* claim that prophets are found among them, but because the enumeration of the prophets in the Qur'ān is not exhaustive, the possibility cannot be denied either. One can neither assert nor deny the point in relation to the Hindus.

Such ambiguity also compromises this line of argument. It might be worth noting that a similar ambiguity arises within Hinduism in an allied context. Kumārila, usually placed within the seventh century, writes as follows in the Tantravārttika, regarding the status of the Smṛti texts:

"In as much as these Smṛtis have

> *Because they are not mentioned in the Qur'ān one cannot categorically claim that prophets are found among them, but because the enumeration of the prophets in the Qur'ān is not exhaustive, the possibility cannot be denied either.*

emanated from human authors and are not eternal like the Veda, their authority cannot be self-sufficient. The Smṛti of Manu and others are dependent on the memory of their authors on the truthfulness of its sources; consequently the authority of the not a single Smṛti can be held to be self-sufficient like the Veda; and yet, inasmuch as we find them accepted as authoritative by an unbroken line of respectable persons learned in the Veda, we cannot reject them as absolutely untrustworthy. Hence it is that there arises a feeling of uncertainty regarding their trustworthy character."[9]

IV.

There is however another passage in the Qur'ān which seems to provide a more solid basis for a Muslim to talk to a Hindu. A verse (V. 48) in the fifth Sūrah of the Qur'ān runs as follows in the translation offered by Martin Lings:

For each of you we have appointed a law and a way
And if God had willed He would have made you one people
But He willed it otherwise in that He may put you to the test in what He has given you
So vie with one and other in good works.
Unto God will ye be brought back,
And He will inform you about that wherein ye differed. [10]

This verse has the merit of putting metaphysical or eschatological issues on hold, as it were, among the various religious communities. And it also alludes to the people being judged by the revelation received *by* them. This creates more room for dialogue. Professor Fazlur Rahman identifies this verse of the Qur'ān as the Qur'ān's "final answer to the problem of a multi-community world."[11] Professor Seyyed Hossein Nasr also seems to share this view.

This verse however also involves the fact of each community having received a revelation, which is mediated through the prophets. And we saw earlier that some doubt in this respect could be raised in relation to Hinduism. This verse also does not throw open the door fully for a dialogue between the Muslim and the Hindu, although conceivably the door could be opened - though not without some creaking - depending on how liberal a view one was prepared to entertain in this context.

Oh mankind! Lo! We have created you male and female, and we have made you nations and tribes that ye may know one another. Lo! The noblest of you in the sight of Allah, is the best conduct. Lo! Allah is Knower, Aware.

V.

I would now like to discuss a third option provided by Verse 13 of Sūrah 49, which runs as follows in the translation by Pickthall:

"Oh mankind! Lo! We have created you male and female, and we have made you nations and tribes that ye may know one another. Lo! The noblest of you in the sight of Allah, is the best conduct.

Lo! Allah is Knower, Aware."[12]

This verse seems to offer the clearest mandate for the Muslim to talk to the Hindu. The verse, a Medina verse, is addressed specifically to humanity, not just Muslims and in this verse the diversity not just of peoples but of sexes is clearly alluded to. Note that no revelations have been sent in terms of the division of humanity by sex, but rather to the peoples. Not only is diversity of the peoples alluded to, there are no qualifications attached to it, such as that they be Jews or Christians or Sabaens. Moreover, the purpose of this diversity is also identified. It is to provide an occasion for the people to know each other - or to put in the modern idiom - engage in dialogue, so that it might bring out the best in them. Hence Muslims and Hindus can talk to each other not (only) because revelation is universal but because *diversity is universal* - a pervasive feature of the human condition. In other words, the diversity being celebrated here is "radical," in its etymological sense of pertaining to the roots, and as providing a root metaphor of the human condition. I would therefore propose that it is possible for the Muslims to talk to the Hindus, without this possibility having to be mediated through the category of *ahl al-kitāb*; which is to say that Muslims can talk directly to the Hindus just because they constitute two different communities and that this difference is meant to enable them to come to know each other. The Qur'ān provides what we might call an anthropological basis here, as distinguished from a revelatory basis, for the Muslims to talk to the Hindus.[13]

Dr. Arvind Sharma has been a member of the faculty of Religious Studies at McGill University since 1987. He has held fellowships at the Center for the Study of World Religions, the Center for the Study of Values in Public Life, and the Center for Business and Government, John F. Kennedy School of Government, at Harvard University; and at the Brookings Institute. He also received a Maxwell Fellowship and was elected Fellow of the Royal Asiatic Society, London. He is the author of Are Human Rights Western? (2006) and Religious Studies and Comparative Methodology (2005).
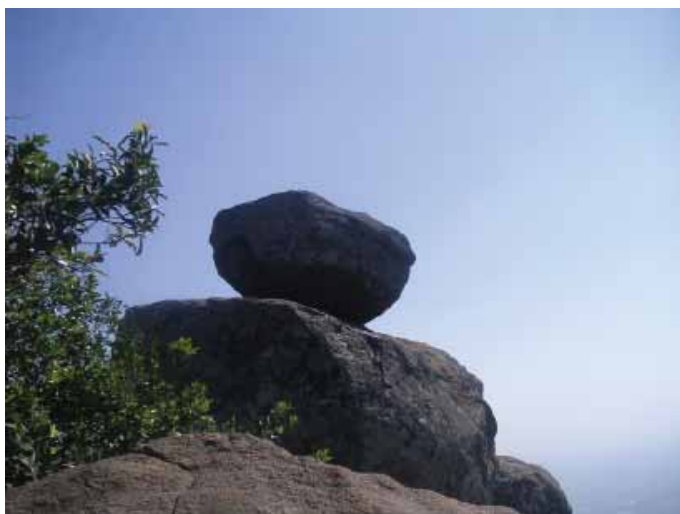
NOTES

[1] ***Aziz Ahmad***, *Studies in Islamic Culture in the Indian Environment (Oxford: Clarendon Press 1964), p. 86.*

[2] *Ibid.*

[3] ***S. M. Ikram***, *Muslim Civilization in India (New York: Columbia University Press, 1965), pp.11-12.*

[4] ***Willard G. Oxtoby***, *"The Zoroastrian Tradition" in Willard G. Oxtoby, ed., World Religions: Western Traditions (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1996), pp. 185-186.*

[5] *Ibid., p. 186.*

[6] *For a useful discussion of this point see **Yohanan Friedmann**, "Medieval Muslim Views of Indian Religions," Journal of the American Oriental Society Vol. 95, No. 2 (Apr-Jun., 1972) pp. 214-221.*

[7] ***Fazlur Rahman***, *Major Themes of the Qur'ān (Chicago and Minneapolis: Bibliotheca Islamica, 1900), pp. 163-164.*

[8] *Ibid., p. 164.*

[9] *Cited in **S. Radhakrishna**, Religion and Society (New Delhi: Indus, 1995), p. 109 note 6.*

[10] ***Seyyed Hossein Nasr***, *"Religion, Globality, and Universality", in Arvind Sharma and Kathleen Dugan, eds., A Dome of Many Colors: Studies in Religious Pluralism, Identity and Unity (Harrsiburg, Pennsylvania: Trinity Press International, 1999), p. 154.*

[11] ***Fazlur Rahman***, *op cit., p. 167.*

[12] ***Mohammed Marmaduke Pickthall***, *The Meaning of the Glorious Koran (New York: The New American Library, 1972), p. 369.*

[13] *That "ethic and cultural diversity are part of God's plan, as the Qur'ān confirms (49:13)" was a fact accepted by Ibn Taymiyya (d. 1328), see Tamara Sonn, A Brief History of Islam (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2004), p. 127. The verse however is cited here in the context of internal diversity within Islam.*
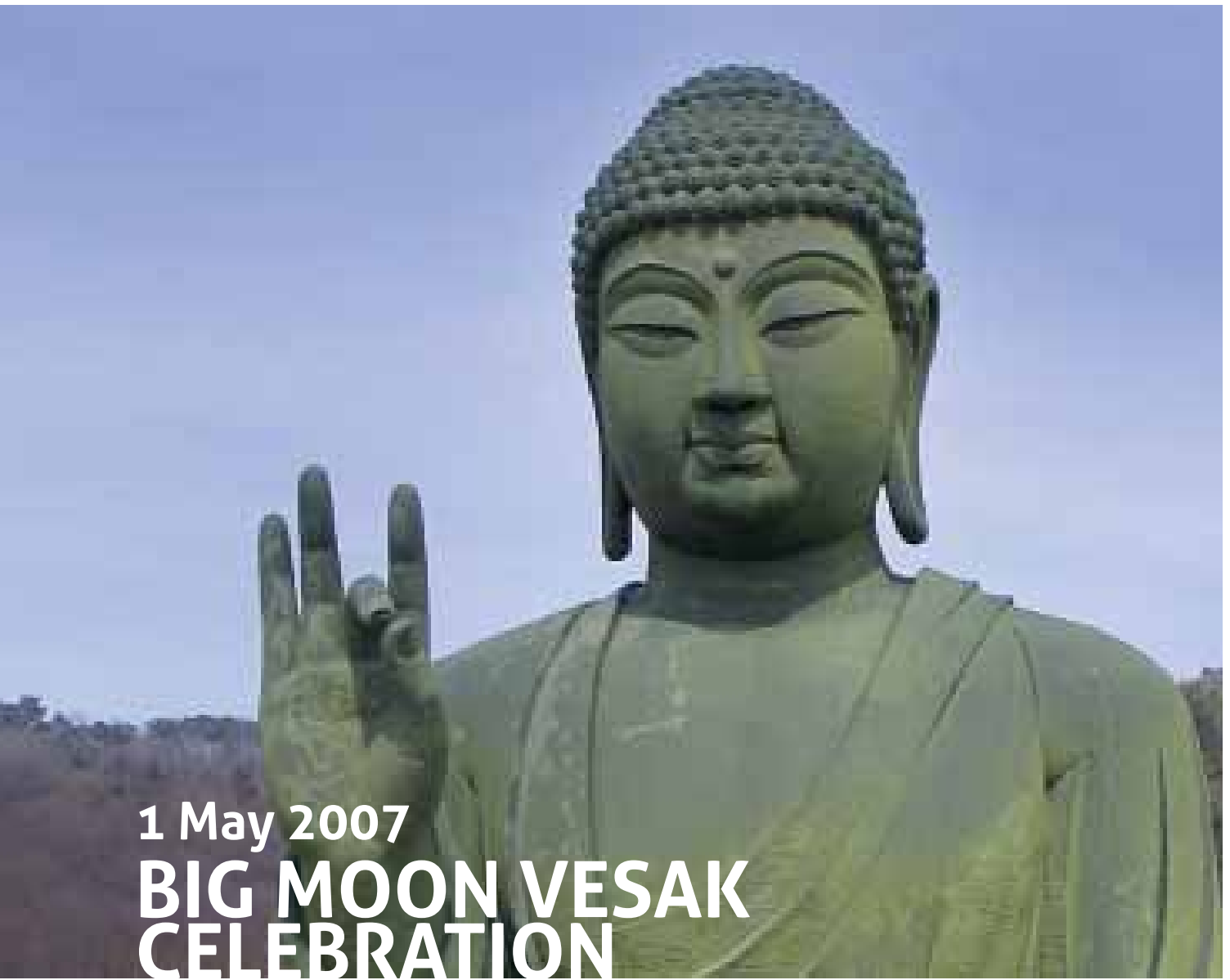
1 May 2007
BIG MOON VESAK CELEBRATION

by Peter Fortunato

Big Moon Vesak celebration, Buddha's Birthday, his enlightenment, and Parinirvana (when he died and left behind his earthly body) all rolled into one, the Sri Lankans do it first full moon of May, and here in Doha Mr. T. at the riding school asks me if I want to come. "Doctor, you are a Buddhist. You are interested to see?"

Yes, yes, I am. Also I am moved that this gentle, conscientious man upon whom so much depends to keep the riding school running - he's the administrative manager, keeps everybody's schedule of classes and payments in line, as well as ordering everything from

bales of hay to staplers for the offices - he reaches out to me across the boundaries of employment, class, and ethnicity that condition so many of one's interactions in Qatar.

Mr. T. whom I had praised a few days earlier, telling him that in the midst of the commotion (construction outside the school now literally at its front door) and the heat, and the goings and comings of trainers, I had said to him, "Mr. T., Doctor M. and I think your calmness keeps things running smoothly around here. Three cheers for Mr. T.!" To which he replied after a suitable pause, his pay raise had not gone through as

yet after weeks of being told his checks would reflect it; he has had to learn a new computer program to request even the most basic of supplies for the stable; and his direct supervisor refuses to get him assistance, essentially telling him that he should be able to solve his problems himself. No wonder the guy has looked so tired recently. And the heat has increased considerably from the sun and sky - even though Mr. T. gets to work in a little office with A.C., still his working conditions are nowhere near as comfortable as mine.

So he tells me all of his complaints. I listen sympathetically. I do a little professional coaching with him, making suggestions about how he could assert himself appropriately and request some help. He says he understands, and then smiling replies, that he knows that as a Buddhist, he should not make trouble. He should try to stay peaceful. I reply that a little assertiveness on his own behalf could include ways to help his supervisor, so that everybody is happy with a change. According to the way I frame my suggestions, he would be helping others to do their jobs. He smiles and nods: I have no way of knowing whether or not he will take my advice - nor do I plan to instigate anything, since I too recognize the limitations I am faced with here, and I would never want to do anything to create trouble for this truly gentle soul. I do see that these ten minutes I've spent with him, listening, considering how I might help him helps in some way to ease his discontent. It's a familiar type of malaise, experienced by people working in every sector: things in the Middle East don't happen the way they do back home, whether that's the USA or Sri Lanka. Nor is it clear much of the time how to get help, to whom to complain, etc. that sort of organization - chain of command and responsibility, if you will - is often obscure. And don't forget, we're all guests in this country … don't make trouble, or draw too much attention to yourself.

It's at my next riding class, about a week later that he invites me to Vesak, not knowing exactly when or where the celebration will take place, and then over the course of the next few days piecing it together for me

Sunset is approximately 6:30 pm, and moon rise nearly the same when the moon is full - at twilight I'm gridlocked amid three lanes of cars heading into the downtown area of the city.

on the telephone: it will be at the embassy. He gives me a few minimal directions for finding the place. He says he will meet me there. I have a vague idea of which section of the city we're talking about.

The first thing I do is to consult the internet for a map. Nothing. And the Sri Lankan embassy appears on none of my paper Doha maps. India, yes. Nepal, yes. They are in the general neighbourhood I'm combing. Still, I've been in this city long enough to have the pluck and where-with-all to head off in a particular direction, be patient about getting lost, ask for directions from somebody who might not speak English along the road - and if I can't to get where I want to go, well, giving up, having made my best effort - another "Doha thing." (Roads are signed only inconsistently, and many a road sign only points to the destination where the road eventually arrives - whether on the other side of the peninsula or the next nearest place name within the city of Doha.)

That May First evening starts out with a visit after work to the apartment

of a friend, listening to her travails, discussing issues related to both our jobs - she yearning for a swim in the pool and me deciding that I will work out in the gym, clarify my mind, martial my energy, and then decide how adventurous I'm feeling. It's not a question of being devout. As a "Buddhist" I don't subscribe to anything like the Holy Days of Obligation that shaped the ecclesiastical calendar of my Roman Catholic childhood. Indeed, one of the early attractions of Zen Buddhism for me was the iconoclasm that animated the heart of the practice. "If you meet the Buddha on the road, kill him!!" That shocking statement spoken by a Chinese master centuries ago, intended to send shivers into idolaters and the pretentiously pious who want to identify themselves with a messiah or a god rather doing what the Buddha actually taught: find your own light within; try the technology he codified; determine if the Buddha way - the Dharma - actually works or not to answer your most important questions.

It's when I'm on the treadmill in the gym collecting my energy, saying mantras, recuperating my "wind horse" that I make the decision. I will follow the moon to the Buddha's birthday party tonight, May Day, rolling up whatever is to come into one of my own Buddhist-shamanist-pagan-once-upon-a-time-catholic holidays. And make it sacred - in my heart.

I give myself plenty of driving time, departing home almost an hour before the announced 7 pm start for the festival. I'm punctual, always a little nervous about being late, about disappointing others, and I've not been able to acclimatize to Doha time, a casualness that everybody else seems to grasp except

for me. Then again, I usually get a convenient parking place and a good seat at public events. That night the Corniche is incredibly crowded with traffic. Sunset is approximately 6:30 pm, and moon rise nearly the same when the moon is full - at twilight I'm gridlocked amid three lanes of cars heading into the downtown area of the city. I am relaxed however, committed to remaining calm, open to the moment, watchful, heart-centred in my response to whatever experience I am having. That is my Buddhist practice.

At dark, I'm turning off the main byways into a maze of streets where I have been once before, trying to maintain my sense of direction vis-à-vis the main road. I catch myself turning in the wrong direction, and head into a "Road Works" area: no streetlights, construction chaos on either side of the single lane, huge palaces looming over me, all of them dark - where the owners? Who the owners? You can never know such things unless you yourself have been invited into palatial residences like these. This opulence, this anonymity, these sorts of private walled spaces are very much a part of life in the Middle East. I spy a "juice stall" - the term for little sandwich and fresh-squeezed juice selling stores -- and three Indian guys sitting outside on lawn chairs next to the road smoking cigarettes. I pull off, jump out of my car, ask them if the Sri Lankan embassy is nearby. One speaks enough English to carry my query indoors and consult with somebody behind the counter. In a minute he smilingly gives me directions: I am apparently very near: left, then left again, and you'll see it. Of course, you have to have faith when you're given such directions in the dark.

It's hard for Westerners to imagine the construction and road-works so ubiquitous not only in Doha, but also in nearby Dubai. Both of them booming, boom towns. Not only the economic dimension of the ceaseless digging and building, but also the noise: growling cement mixer trucks, back-up beepers, clanking dozers, diggers, giant rock-chopping tractors, gigantic dump trucks bearing tons of sand and gravel and boulders broken out of the tough desert. Open ditches, excavations, road-beds eroded away by heavy machinery in transit. Roped off trenches eight feet deep alongside a street, with a plank laid across - if you so dare to walk it. You actually get used to this; it is a form of life on the frontier.

And so when I pull up behind a stopped cement truck on a tiny alley (my second of the two left turns) I slow down, hoping the driver knows my tiny Lancer is behind him, he won't back over me, and I'm surprised there is a guy on foot flagging traffic safely around. On my right, I see four women who look Sri Lankan - very dark skin, very attractive people from a big island south of India, another war-torn place that could be a paradise on Earth if ethnic and religious quarrelling were quelled - I realize they must be going where I'm going. I pull my car off the road -- you do this often in Doha, just pull off onto a sand lot, you're in the desert, there is a sense of openness about this - but before I can ask directions, they're gone. I jump out, lock the car, follow on foot, and turning a walled corner, I am unmistakably at the embassy.

It's a modest place by local standards: a walled enclosure with a plain building in the middle, the Sri Lankan lag flying overhead: it's a gold back-ground for bars of green and orange on the left, and facing it, within a maroon rectangle, cornered with pipul leaves (i.e. of the "Bo" tree under which Gautama, the Buddha, received enlightenment) a golden lion passant presenting a sword in its right forepaw. (How Important is Sri Lanka to Qatar? It's a source of cheap labour. There are plenty of construction workers from that island, once called Ceylon, helping to build this country; there are some English speaking educated people like Mr. T. doing managerial jobs or shop keeping or being "drivers." There are many private taxi's or "limo" services in this country, and the wealthy usually have full-time drivers to shepherd their children around in Land Cruisers. Their situation here is representative of the other cheap labour forces that migrate throughout the East: masses from Indonesia, Malaysia, Indian, Nepal, and the Philippines.) Tonight the place is festooned with strings of coloured lights.

Outside the main entrance to the compound, a man is holding a basket of white and pink flower petals. I'm told to take off my sandals, leave them outside the wall before I enter.

I move into my own essential space. This idea of making the sacred is very important to me - it's the poet in me, mythologizing life, intentionally choosing my allegiances, weaving together meaning. You can't have a true feeling of the sacred unless it originates in the heart. You can be observant of cultural custom and ritual, of your own people's collective Sabbath, whatever culture you have been born to or adopted, without necessarily *feeling* at that moment the sacred, without necessarily feeling the presence of the transcendent dimension - but unless there is a certain resonance, a vibration, if you will, that tunes your heart and mind and ultimately your physical behaviour with Essence, you will probably end up experiencing "significance" rather than sacredness, as I am defining it. "How interesting that human beings require and devise such patterns of activity! Let us be sure to protect their rights to do so!" That is an intellectual and moral position, representative of secular humanism; I think it lacks the dimension of spirituality.

The public space is a smooth, paved courtyard, spread with several very large carpets in the centre, on which there are perhaps fifty young women and teenaged girls sitting peacefully and happily. Everyone has on good clothes, but these are the working class, and Buddhists are by nature modest people, and this is their holy day, so the dress is plain, rather like what Western school girls might wear: dark skirts and white blouses, long black hair combed down, uncovered heads, for example. An occasional touch of colour: shawls, a quiet print dress. Around the edges are the single men and some married couples with children. The compound actually has some shrubs on a sandy, slightly landscaped area just beyond a very low wall of bricks. A few people spread carpets on the sand and sit. Single men preponderate: slim,

of medium height (with a few very tall individuals, I must say) dressed in clean khakis and white or dark sport shirts, a few with earrings, or long hair - they look like guys in their twenties from just about anywhere in the East. There is a calmness, a casualness abut the crowd, a willingness to meet my eyes when I smile hello, but nobody makes an attempt to engage me in conversation, and as for me, I'm content to keep my own peace, to blend and observe and participate in whatever way feels appropriate. I feel comfortable here, sure of my tradition, of my connection with the historical Buddha.

I will have to try to find a place to sit: the low brick wall is my best choice. Gone are the days when I might have sat in lotus posture or half-lotus on the ground, nor can I sit "Indian-style" with my legs lightly crossed in front of me, my back curved throughout an evening length program. A moment after I find a spot, I glance over to the side of the embassy building, and notice what must be a shrine. A fellow sitting next to me observes my interest, and puts his palms together and says to me "Pray," and as if inviting me, juts his chin over toward the Buddha shrine. "I can go?" I ask. He nods, and I do.

Alongside the main building is a small outdoor enclosure. Perhaps it is always used as a shrine room with altar, housing a statue of the Buddha? Perhaps it is special for tonight - and several smaller statues have been placed near the largest one, a modest meter tall. It's the traditional Southern or Theravada style Buddhist image: the historical Buddha, Sakyamuni seated in meditation posture. Difficult to determine what the material might be, but in keeping with the ambience, it is modest - nothing gold or excessively large. Just outside the shrine room, men are lighting bundles of incense sticks, and there's an iron rack, designed to hold many votive candles and sticks of incense, just now being lit up. I feel as if I've arrived at the beginning of things, and when I ask permission to enter the shrine room, I'm happily waved in. I am alone.

I make my bow before the altar, palms together in what the Japanese call gassho, bending from the waist - just as I was first taught so many years ago in Sharon Springs New York at the beginning of my formal Zen training. Then with palms together, Tibetan-style, touching the crown of my head, my throat, and my heart - with Body, Speech and Mind symbolically offering Three Vajras silently reciting Om AH HUM, the essence of mantra, three times. I have clarity. I have the mind of the Buddha. All beings already are Buddha - this is what Sakyamuni taught. Wake up to that and right now and you're liberated from ignorance, anger, and desire.

When I leave to find my way back to my seat, naturally, it has been taken. Okay. I will find another segment of wall, somewhere I can perch and look out for Mr. T. I sit my buttocks down on the six inch wide brick wall, amid guys less than half my age, working guys whom I have seen in other situations, sweating in their construction coveralls, heads wrapped in cotton scarves, mak-

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ing a seat out of a piece of broken brick to wait at the curb of a busy street for the big bus that will pick them up after work and deliver them to their camp barracks out on the fringes of the city. I dissolve into that space.

Buddhist literature refers often to the image of space or of boundless sky to find a metaphor to suggest the unobstructed openness and clarity of Buddha Mind or Buddha Nature. But space as we perceive it through the senses is always populated - if by nothing else, the presence of our own physical form. The emptiness of Buddhism, sunyata, should not be taken to mean "an absence of form" or a denial of life - as if you could literally have "space" devoid of all forms, or as if the existence of forms should be denied. The concept of the Void, rather, has to do with the freedom of all forms, of all "dharmas," from limitation: nothing is fixed, no form is unchanging, and furthermore, because all things are composite in nature, they ultimately break apart. Their Essence, however, is "unmanifest," or "unborn" - Buddha Nature is not a "thing", and therefore it never comes into being nor passes away. At the same time, it freely manifests the world of changing forms, the world of beginnings and endings. Bridging this non-logical gap is both an act of faith, and an act of realization, of gnosis. It is not simply a matter of a belief - a hoped for truth - or contingent on logical proof. It is liberation

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from doubt and fear and craving.

When I emerge from my meditation, I see how many human forms continue to fill the courtyard, which is perhaps 50 meters by 30 meters in size. When I arrived an hour earlier, there were perhaps a hundred people present, and now we are at least a thousand. A steady stream of people passes through the main gate into the courtyard, and almost all of the floor space is occupied. These are mostly working men, being delivered by the same buses on which they ride to their jobs each day. There are also some wives and children, however; a long line of little girls in white dresses and some little boys are escorted within the embassy building for a purpose I will understand a little later. Many of those who arrive are carrying bouquets of flowers, bowls of fruit, sticks of incense - offerings for the altar. I see how people are now being filed inside through the embassy and out the side door to the shrine, and how crowded the shrine room is now with supplicants making their offerings and prayers to Lord Buddha. I let go of the possibility of meeting Mr. T. I have scanned the crowd several times in hopes of seeing him, but even if he were here, how would I ever get over to him, or sit near him?

A small stage has gradually been put into order. With red drapery behind it, a large, throne-like wooden chair in the middle. I had been told a monk would come and chant prayers and sutra, and now he arrives: a very tall, shave headed man, wearing a draped red robe. He sits, and a microphone is placed before him. He carries a broad ritual fan. He says nothing. An unusual sculpture is brought out of the embassy: it looks like a large "soft" sculpture of a jet plane on a stand, about as tall

as a standing person is. It is wrapped in coloured lights, which are plugged in now, and like a lit up Christmas tree, it is placed near the monk on the stage. How simply playful and wonderful!
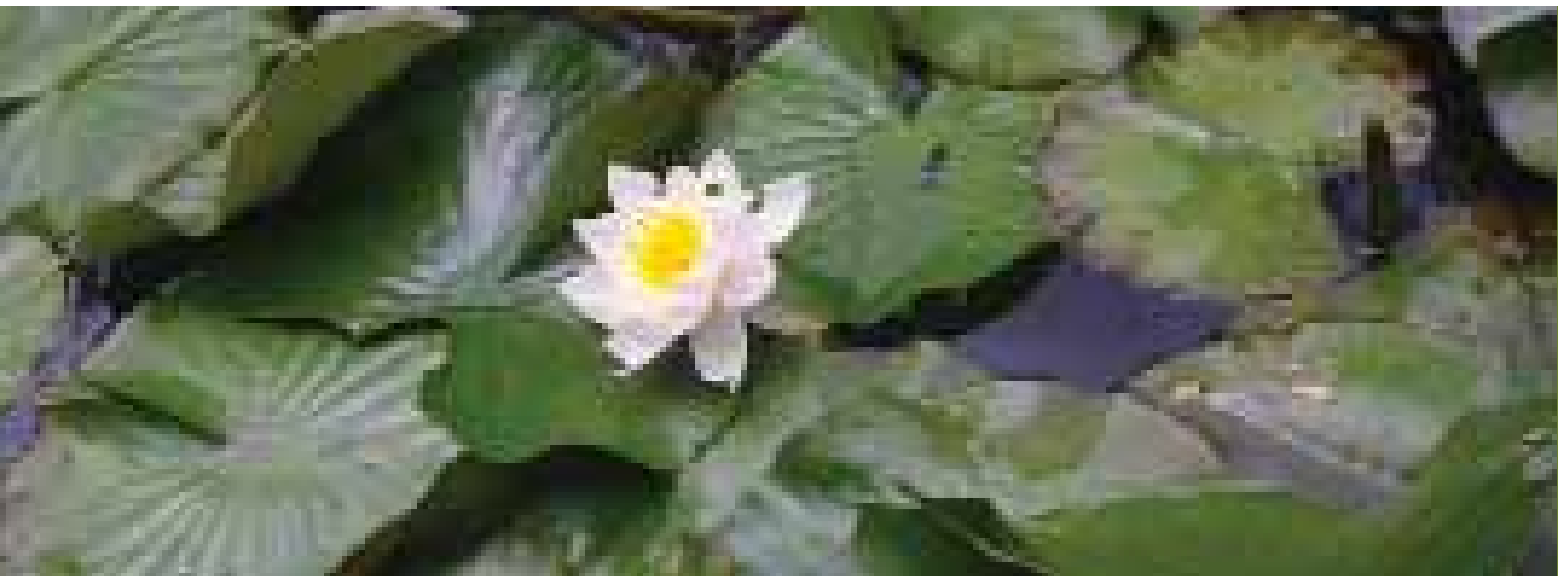
A recording of chants is being broadcast - the speakers are right behind me. Now, an older man in neat casual clothing takes a microphone and begins a hymn or prayer. (The language is surely Sinhala, that of the 74 % ruling majority, the Buddhists of Sri Lanka, in contrast to the Tamil language of the 18% Hindu minority, some of whom want to break away into their own state.) As he chants, another man moves among the crowd, coaxing people into rows; calmly they open up space, and as the chanting finishes, the most beautiful part of the festival commences.

From within the embassy comes a long line of children and some adults holding before them what I presume to be the offerings that had been made to the Buddha in the shrine room. A very small boy leads the way, with an adult man behind him, hands on shoulders to steady and guide the little fellow. He holds before him a basket of flowers. His eyes are dark and bright, glittering in the ambient lighting of the courtyard, his pace very steady. It's Buddha's Birthday! It's a children's holiday! A whole line of children are following, bearing baskets and bouquets of flowers and flower petals, carrying candles and bowls of fruits, all of them blessed - and as they pass before us, palms pressed to-

gether, we touch the basket or the offering itself, and bring our palms back to our heart centres, carrying the blessings there, saying *"Saad, saad, saad"*- holy, holy, holy. Innocence and purity - the emotion reaches me, and I feel its warmth in my breast, the moistness in the back of my throat, the glitter coming into my own eyes. I feel blessed. My own devotional nature, illuminated.

The procession ends, people continue to arrive at the main gate, some filing directly through the embassy to the shrine with their offerings, others finding a sitting place. There must now be well over a thousand people crowded into the courtyard - it is a very Asian experience, and there is a very different sense of "personal space"- people squeeze into the tiniest of openings without any friction. It is peaceful. By now the monk has begun to chant what I can discern to be sutras. I recognize a few Sanskrit sounding words or formulas. He goes on and on, reaching the end of a verse, pausing with *"Saad, saad, saad*." More people arrive. I am

beginning to grow weary and hungry. I am beginning to feel somewhat claustrophobic, in way that I have on one other occasion in Doha, when jammed into a crowd of frenzied Indians seeking entry to a tennis match that featured the Indian Moslem female sensation, Sania Mirza during the Asian games. I have given up hope of meeting Mr. T. - it's okay that we didn't meet, I'll tell him when I see him at the riding school. Now that I've decided to go - it has become a physical need - I need to wait for the right moment to stand and carefully thread my way through non-existent space between my fellow Buddhists. A crazy thought occurs to me, that my sandals might well be buried among the hundreds of pairs that have been shed since I arrived. No matter if I can't find them. I will walk barefoot to my car if I have to. As soon as I stand and move, another man hustles onto my brick. I pat him on the shoulder in a brotherly way. (I am the only white man here; I am one of only several people, male or female, with gray hair on their heads. So what?)

At last I make my way to the small aisle just inside the gate. When I look up, Mr. T. is standing there, having just arrived with his darling 18 month daughter in his arms. He looks beautiful holding her like a blessing. I greet him and hug him, cheek to cheek, explaining how good it is to be with here with him, what a wonderful evening it's been, that I'll see him tomorrow at my riding lesson. When I leave through the main gate, I find that my sandals are exactly where I had left them, and that around them, behind them, laid out like a carpet on the roadside sand before the embassy are hundreds of pairs of sandals and shoes in neat rows. *Saad, saad, saad.*

Peter Fortunato holds a Master of Fine Arts degree in creative writing from the University of North Carolina, Greensboro. Mr. Fortunato is a poet and performer and the founder of two poetry and performance theater groups in the US – Spideroot Theater and Spirit Horses. He has published collections of poetry, essays and short stories, and worked as a holistic counsellor and life coach. His awards include the Emily Dickinson Prize of the Poetry Society of America and the Pablo Neruda Prize of the Oklahoma Arts Council.

DOHA INTERNATIONAL CENTER FOR INTER-FAITH DIALOGUE

was established as a result of a recommendation of the Fifth Doha Interfaith Conference on May 2007 in Doha. The center was opened officially in May 2008.

The main role of the centre will primarily be to spread the culture of dialogue, the peaceful coexistence of humanity and the acceptance of others.

MISSION

We strive for constructive dialogue between followers of different faiths towards better understanding and harnessing of distinct religious principles and teachings to the benefit of all humanity, on the basis of mutual respect and acknowledgement of differences and through cooperation with related individuals and organizations.

VISION

To be a leading model in achieving peaceful coexistence between followers of different faiths and an international reference for interfaith dialogue.

GOALS

The Doha International Center for Interfaith Dialogue aims to achieve the following:

1. Become a center for advocating peaceful tolerance and acceptance of others.
2. Activate religious values in finding solutions to problems and issues that concern humanity.
3. Broaden the scope of dialogue to include aspects of life that interact with religion.
4. Increase the network of those involved in dialogue to include researchers, academics and those who are concerned with the relationship between religious values and real life issues.
5. Become an authority that provides academic, educational and training information in the field.

Contact information:

P.O. BOX: 19309 Doha QATAR

Tel: +974 486 46 66 +974 486 55 54
Fax: +974 486 32 22 +974 486 99 00

www.dicid.org

The sixth conference took place in Doha 13th-14th June, 2008 under the title:

RELIGIOUS VALUES BETWEEN RECONCILIATION AND RESPECT FOR LIFE

200 guests from different countries were invited to discuss a range of topics such as: Life and its values, violence and self-defense, interreligious reconciliation, abortion, denigration of religious symbols as well as the perspectives of the three Abrahamic faiths.

The organizers of the conference intended to reach common denominators and harmonious cooperation and expressed a genuine desire to establish the foundations for global peace. Assisting us in this effort was a group which believes in dialogue as a way to solve problems, rejects confrontations and seeks to return rights to their owners.

The fifth annual interfaith dialogue conference under the title *"Spiritual Values and Global Peace"* was launched at the Marriott Hotel on 7/5/2007.

The conference lasted for three days and shed light on dialogue between religions as well as their shared spiritual dimension, and its impact on peaceful coexistence and comportment in accordance with the spirit of religious faiths.

Additionally, a further session took place under the title *"Scientific suggestions for a spiritual interaction between the faiths."*

Each of the sessions was enriched by the participation of a large number of religious scholars, Muslim, Christian and Jewish men of religion and intellectuals from all around the world along with 150 personalities from the Arab world.

The opening address was delivered by *Mohammad Ibn Mubarak Al-Khulaifi*, the President of the Qatar Shura Council. His Excellency mentioned that this was the fifth time the conference was taking place in Qatar with the design to find a sound basis for mutual understanding and encounter between the followers of the three Abrahamic faiths, Islam, Christianity and Judaism. He further underscored that the peaceful coexistence of the adherents of these three religions remains a critical issue of utmost importance. He said it is incumbent upon all of us to affirm such coexistence in an effective way, and to protect and develop it in an environment of respect for the truth, and a sense of commitment. This commitment is shared among humans seeking to draw benefit from civil rights and the rule of law, which highlights the role of the citizen, his duties and rights in modern civil societies and constitutions. In this way, religious difference is not a hindrance to citizenship, nor does it impede interactions with citizens from other religions and other countries.

"HUMAN SOLIDARITY"
20TH - 21ST OCTOBER 2009 DOHA – QATAR

Opening Session, October 20th

Patron's Speech by **H.E. Ahmed Bin Abdullah Al-Mahmoud**, *Minister of the State for Foreign Affairs, Member of The Council of Ministers of the State of Qatar*

Moderator:

• *Prof. Aisha Yousuf Al-Mannai*
  Dean – College of Sharia and Islamic Studies - Qatar University

Speakers:

• *Prof. Ibrahim Al-Naimi*
  DICID Chairman
• *Dr. Akmaludheen Ihsan Üglo*
  Secretary General of the Organization of the Islamic Conference
• *Rabbi René Samuel Sirat*
  Former Chief Rabbi of France and Past President of the Council of European Rabbis
• *H.E. Pierluigi Celata*
  Bishop and Secretary General Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue

Themes of the Conference:

• Human Solidarity and Interdependence in Response to Wars

• Achieving Unity and Solidarity through Spiritual Values

• Religious Responses to Natural Disasters and Famines

• Solidarity and Economical Interdependence

• Religious Analysis of the Economic Crisis and Its Consequences

• Solidarity in Defense of Religious Rights and Freedom

• Solidarity in Support of Holy Sites

INTERFAITH DIALOGUE CONFERENCES IN QATAR

For the last six years, Qatar has been a center for interfaith dialogue among religious groups from around the world. The first two interfaith dialogue conferences were confined to two major religions, Islam and Christianity. However, representatives from the three monotheistic religions were invited to the third conference in parallel to a notable increase in the number of attendees.

Previous Conferences

1. The Second Interfaith Dialogue Conference:

The Muslim - Christian Dialogue (Building Bridges), Doha 7th-9th April 2003

2. The Second Doha Interfaith Conference:

The Muslim - Christian Dialogue (Religious Freedom), Doha 27th-29th May 2004

3. The Third Interfaith Dialogue:

The Role of Religions in the Construction of Human Civilization, Doha , 29th-30th June 2005

4. The Fourth Interfaith Dialogue:

The Role of Religions in Building Man, Doha, 25th-26th April 2006

5. The Fifth Interfaith Dialogue:

Spiritual Values and World Peace, Doha, 6th-7th May 2007. One of the key and most important recommendations of the Fifth Conference was a call for the establishment of the Doha International Centre for Interfaith Dialogue.

6. The Sixth Interfaith Dialogue:

Religious Values between Peace and Respect for Life, Doha, 13th-14th July 2009

7. The seventh Interfaith Dialogue

shall convene in Doha on 20th-21st October 2009 organized by the Doha International Centre for Interfaith Dialogue (DICID).

The conference will host more than 250 guests from 50 countries, representing the three major monotheistic faiths, Islam, Christianity and Judaism. A selected group of religious scholars, academics and researchers in this field will meet to discuss and establish common grounds between religions, as well as problems related to this issue.

The conference, held on 20th-21st October with its main focus on 'Human Solidarity' will address a number of themes and issues including:

- Spiritual Values and Achieving Unity & Solidarity - Religious Responses to Natural World Disasters & Famines
- Religious Views regarding Human Solidarity in response to World Disasters (Wars)
- Human Action in response to Wars & Disasters
- Spiritual Values and Achieving Unity & Solidarity
- Religious Responses to Natural World Disasters & Famines
- Human Solidarity and Interdependence in Response to Humanitarian Disasters (Wars)
- Solidarity & Economical Interdependence; Religious Financial Systems Towards and the Economic Crisis
- Solidarity & Economical Interdependence: Religious Analysis of the current Economic Crisis and Its Consequential Problems
- Solidarity in Defence of Religious Rights & Freedoms
- Solidarity in Defence of Holy Places
- Solidarity & Economic Interdependence: Proposed Religious Solutions to the Financial Crisis
- Proposed Solutions for Defending Religious Rights & Freedoms
- Proposed Religious Solutions in Defending Holy Places