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Salaam

Quarterly to Promote Understanding

Editorial

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By Emily Palmer

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By Lesly John Louvis

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By Salah Aboujaoude, SJ

ISLAMIC STUDIES ASSOCIATION

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"..... that they..... may be one....."

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CONTENTS

Editorial 171

My Catholic Journey through Dialogue with Islam 177
By Emily Palmer

Makhdum Sahib Maneri: His Life and Thoughts 182
By Lesly John Louvis

Pope Francis and Muslims 186
By Jay-ar D. Pasado

The Experience of Interfaith Dialogue 190
By Roberto Catalano

Awareness of the Eternal Afterlife 205
By B. Dolsy

Interference of Religion in Politics: The Lebanese Case 210
By Salah Aboujaoude, SJ

The Church regards with esteem also the Moslems. They adore the one God, living and subsisting in Himself; merciful and all-powerful, the Creator of heaven and earth, who has spoken to men; they take pains to submit wholeheartedly to even His inscrutable decrees, just as Abraham, with whom the faith of Islam takes pleasure in linking itself, submitted to God.

Though they do not acknowledge Jesus as God, they revere Him as a prophet. They also honor Mary, His virgin Mother; at times they even call on her with devotion. In addition, they await the day of judgment when God will render their deserts to all those who have been raised up from the dead. Finally, they value the moral life and worship God especially through prayer, almsgiving and fasting.

Since in the course of centuries not a few quarrels and hostilities have arisen between Christians and Moslems, this sacred synod urges all to forget the past and to work sincerely for mutual understanding and to preserve as well as to promote together for the benefit of all mankind social justice and moral welfare, as well as peace and freedom.

Vatican Council II, *Nostra Aetate*, No. 3

Editorial

I write this editorial on the anniversary of my priestly ordination. I was ordained 22 years ago in Trichy, Tamil Nadu. On the day of my ordination (25-11-2000), I felt that I was ordained and sent among Muslims. During my formation years, I discerned the will of God in my life, as a Jesuit. My spiritual directors taught me that discernment is not an exercise independent of 'common sense' but a search in the light of the Spirit of the Lord. It is pondering and noticing interior movements in one's heart. Discernment involves prayer and weighing of facts and feelings about the several good choices which ultimately leads to a choice about what is the best fit for an individual in the sight of God. It is the gift of the Holy Spirit. St. Paul teaches us: "Whoever does not have the Spirit cannot receive the gifts that come from God's Spirit" (1 Cor 2: 14-15). The fact of being ordained and sent among Muslims enlivened my heart and brought energy and consolation. On the day of my 22nd ordination anniversary, I am grateful to God: for the for the unmerited gift of life and faith, for a call to Jesuit commitment, and a personal vocation to be a Jesuit among Muslims. Over the years, I have deeply recognised that this gift is given through the Church, as I am a servant of the Church in the *Missio Dei*.

What does it mean to be in the mission of God among people of other faiths? J. M. Gaudeul has noted that the Church in her mission to the people of other faiths, must imitate Christ: in the hidden life of Nazareth, in the public life of preaching and healing, in his death on the Cross as a priest and victim. He writes: "strangely enough, this message has reached the Church through people who had first an experience of mission life and inter-religious dialogue with Islam."

My engagement with Muslims took me to Lucknow, Aligarh, and Delhi where large populations of Muslims live. I met Muslims in their mosques, madrasas, and in classrooms of the universities: Aligarh Muslim university where I gained a Masters in Islamic Studies and Jamia Millia Islamia where I received my PhD. One of the first lessons that I learnt is relationship is at the heart of Christian-Muslim relations This relationship is founded on love: sincere love for Muslims. Christian W. Troll and Chris Hewer write that Love for Muslims demands: "Do to others as you would have them do to you" (Lk. 6:31). Seek to understand others as you would have them seek to understand you. Teach about others as you would have them teach about you.

In close contacts with Muslim brothers and sisters, I became deeply aware that I am living in a religiously pluralistic world, and I cannot afford to live in isolation. Human vocation is a call to live for one another; neither against one another nor in isolation from one another. Further studying Christian theology in the context of engagement with Muslims helped to recognise that faith, hope, and charity opens the way for my personal relations with God and the same theocentric act opens me to relate with all, especially my Muslim brothers and sisters. I learnt in the field that my attitude towards Muslims is not one of judgement or condemnation of their faith, but I am called to give witness to my faith among Muslims and to pray for and pray with them.

Giving witness to our faith among Muslims does not mean to give 'example', or 'preach silently' or 'show' how to live among Muslims as a 'good Christian'. It is said that Gandhiji told his Christian friends that if they wanted others to feel the aroma of Christianity, they must copy the rose. The rose irresistibly draws people to itself, and the scent remains with them. A rose does not need to preach. It simply spreads its fragrance. The fragrance is its own sermon. To be a witness does not

consist in engaging in propaganda nor even in stirring people up, but in being a 'living in love' with mystery.

The experience of Christian witness is mystical and a Trinitarian one. To witness means to give testimony of the Father, to reveal him, to lead to him, and to manifest him. The Holy Spirit alone can witness to the Father. There is no witness outside/independent of the Holy Spirit. The Christian can only be a witness if he/she is identified with Christ, united with him (John 6: 57), so that Spirit in him is free, able to speak, to pray, to glorify, and to witness to the Father. Christian witnessing consists in becoming transparent, to allow the Spirit to shine, to act, to witness through us.

I am glad to present a few activities of Islamic Studies Association here that aims at enhancing theological conversations between Christians and Muslims. On 30th August, Islamic Studies Association (ISA) organized two sessions on Christian-Muslim relations for the first-year students of Theology (Vidyajyoti College of Theology, Delhi). In the first session Ms. Naaz Khair, a scholar-activist on Indian Muslims made a presentation on the status of the Pasmanda Muslims. It was an eye opener for most of the students. In the afternoon, the same day, there was a great mehfil of spiritual conversation with Sister Gerardette. Sister Gerardette spoke on 'Meeting Muslims: What have I learnt?' She shared with us some of her beautiful experiences with Muslims. On the occasion ISA honoured Mr. Masroor Ahmed for his continued service to ISA as a collaborator. He recently returned after performing his Hajj, the fifth pillar of Islam.

On 2nd September, ISA organised a symposium on Islam in the Modern World conducted by the members of Centre for Peace and Spirituality. Retd. Professor Farida Khannum and Maulana Omeri Sahib presented the program for the first-year students of Theology. On 3rd September, a little booklet titled

Journeying With Muslims: Listening, Praying and Working Together by Cardinal Michael Louis Fitzgerald, published by Islamic Studies Association, New Delhi was released by Emeritus Professor Akhtarul Wasey in a program jointly organized by Indialogue Foundation (New Delhi), Indian Social Institute (New Delhi) and Islamic Studies Association (New Delhi) at Indian Social Institute. On 5th September the Jesuits Among Muslims In Asia (JAMIA) published a book titled: "*Journeying with Muslims the Ignatian Way*". Both books seek to contribute to the theological discourse on Christian-Muslim dialogue through the teachings of St Ignatius of Loyola, particularly the Spiritual Exercises, and how Ignatian Spirituality is lived and shared in the 21st century by Jesuits and companions with their Muslim friends.

Dr Shahriar, the Secretary General of the World Forum for the Proximity of Islamic Schools of Thought, Tehran, along with his delegation visited Vidya Jyoti Institute of Religious Studies on Thursday 8th September 2022. They engaged with the second-year students of Theology on wide ranging issues connected with Christian-Muslim Relations. On 12th September ISA collaborated with the Department of History and Cultures at Jamia Millia University in organising a lecture of Fr. Michael Calabria on 'The Spirituality of the Taj Mahal'. On that occasion Professor Michael Calabria OFM (Professor of Islam and Arabic Studies, St. Bonaventure University, USA) and Edwin had an opportunity to discuss with Professor Najma Akhtar, the Vice-chancellor of Jamia Millia Islamia on Christian-Muslim relations. In the afternoon the duo (Edwin and Michael) discussed 'Persianate Culture' of Delhi with Professors Khurshid Khan (Delhi University).

Finally, I would like to draw the attention of the readers to an important aspect of Christian-Muslim dialogue. Recently I wrote to a Dominican nun working in Nigeria inviting her to write for a proposed publication. She agreed to tell her

story with a caveat. She wrote: “I must admit that our daily experiences of Muslims in the past few years in terms of persecution of different forms, of Christians especially in Nigeria has made me question the usefulness of engaging in formal projects of Christian-Muslim dialogue especially in Nigeria”. How do we deal with a situation like this?

We find an important insight from the essay by Roberto Catalano (See The Experience of Interfaith Dialogue: An Answer to a Wounded and Vulnerable Word, p. 190) Roberto Catalano tells us that from the “Christian viewpoint, we can well define this phase as a *kenotic process*, which must be part of any interfaith experience. In the Christian perspective, it is deeply connected with the divine *kenosis.* In fact, the real breakthrough of God’s kingdom takes place on Calvary in the moment of the highest annihilation that history has witnessed and that has involved the very intimacy of God, which found its expression in Jesus’ cry: “*My God, my God why have you forsaken me*”. This ‘*forsakenness*’ gives meaning to interfaith dialogue. A deep Christian theological insight we must ponder upon.

Joseph Victor Edwin SJ

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Islamic Studies Association elects President

Divine Word Missionary Father Pushpa Anbu was elected the President of Islamic Studies Association (ISA), Delhi in the General Body Meeting on Saturday, 8 October 2022 at St Xavier's School.

ISA was established in 1979 by a group of Christian scholars on Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations to promote study, research and teaching regarding the history, religion, culture, socio-economic conditions, and other aspects of Islam and to work towards promoting relations among Muslim, Christian, Hindu, and other religious and social communities in India.

ISA over the years remained committed to promote national integration of all Indian cultural, social, and religious groups and support Government programs for this purpose.

Fr Anbu who holds a doctorate in Islamic Studies from Jamia Millia Islamia is also the General Secretary for Formation and Education in the Order of Divine Word Missionaries.

On being elected as President, he thanked the General Body for electing him to his new role and emphasized the relevance of the mission of ISA in our times as ambassadors of Christ promoting peace and reconciliation (cf. 2 Cor. 5:20) in the present context of hatred and fear. Ignorance is a fertile ground where hatred and fear spread like wildfire, he said, and ISA will organise programs to bring people of different faith traditions so that they learn to esteem the faith of the other.

ISA also elected Joseph Victor Edwin SJ, Lecturer, theology and Christian Muslim Relations, Vidyajyoti Institute of Religious Studies, Delhi as Secretary, and veteran missionary Jesuit Father Varkey Perekatt SJ as Treasurer.

MY CATHOLIC JOURNEY THROUGH DIALOGUE WITH ISLAM

By Emily Palmer

Islam and Muslims were often part of religious or political conversations in my small, rural community as I grew up in Central New York. These discussions took place among people who had never known a Muslim and had never seen even the outside of a mosque, and I only learned that their talking points were inaccurate when I was fifteen years old and taking a global history class in secondary school.

After our unit on Islam in this class, I was baffled by the simplicity of the answers to ignorant questions and open-ended jibes from my community and family members towards one of the largest faiths in the world and its believers. How could all of these adults have no idea about what they were discussing, and yet actively hate the subject? How could they claim that "all Muslims are terrorists and believe in a false god" and "Islam is trying to overthrow America" with such confidence when they were unable to cite even the "five pillars" of Islam? How could they claim to prove how "awful" Islam is by referring to hot-topic keywords from the Qurʾan, and yet they did not know what or where Mecca was? At that point, I was determined to learn more in order to properly educate my family and community (and any others who have been disillusioned to what Islam truly is and means) and to open a door for interfaith dialogue whenever I found a chance.

Nearly ten years after this realization, the most important concept I have learned is how to understand people today based on their history, culture, spirituality, and relationships with others—context is everything. I have not only expanded my knowledge—I have also expanded my worldview, my knowledge of my self, and my understanding and appreciation for my Muslim brothers and sisters throughout the world. I

have been blessed in many ways on this journey: I completed a BA with a minor in Arabic and Islamic Studies and a MA in Middle East Studies with a specialization in Arab and Islamic Studies, traveled across Morocco on an educational, interfaith pilgrimage, and taught a conversation-based course on American English to Muslims and Copts of varying ages in Egypt.

During my undergraduate studies at Saint Bonaventure University (New York, USA), I grew in my Catholic faith and learned I identified closely with the Franciscan charism. I also grew in my knowledge of and appreciation for Islam, with a similar affinity for Sufism. I explored the multifaceted language of Arabic in its standardized written form, its classical Qur'anic form, and its Egyptian colloquial form. I was blessed with creating relationships with a wonderful Muslim community both within and beyond my university, and was invited to prayer, presentations, and *iftar* (breaking of the fast during Ramadan) at the local mosque.

I have had the incredible opportunity to experience histories and religion of places and people other than my own from textbooks and classrooms come alive before me in many forms. Traveling to Morocco on a mission of presence and interfaith dialogue allowed for an immersion into a multitude of facets of Moroccan and Islamic culture while traversing a large portion of the country. We learned the history of the kingdom and the culture of Moroccans as well as the native Amazigh people, experienced UNESCO World Heritage sites and visited with/listened to the story of the now-departed Jean-Pierre Schumacher (at the time, the last-surviving monk of the massacre at the Algerian monastery of Thibirine) at the Notre-Dame de l'Atlas monastery in Midelt. We met with friars in a refugee/migrant center, which doubled as an education operation, and learned about the daily Christian-Muslim efforts to support and tend to Moroccans and foreigners alike who

were sent back from the Spanish border with severe injuries. We visited inspiring Muslim women who ran an equity-focused women's educational and professional development center and were also blessed with the opportunity to share a traditional home-cooked meal on a Friday with a Muslim family in their home. The architectural beauty of, and reverence towards, historical religious sites such as the Mosque of Ibn Tulun, the grand University of al-Azhar, the monastery of St. Anthony and other notable places of wonder across Egypt kept me in a constant state of awe of the presence of God in the physical world.

During my MA program at the University of Exeter (Exeter, England), I was able to expand my knowledge of Islam through intensive studies with professors of varying faith and cultural backgrounds and (virtually) meet and attend seminars hosted by notable figures. One such seminar, hosted by Noam Chomsky and Ilan Pappé, regarded Israel's colonization of Palestine. This event supplemented my studies and personal relationships involving the vast amounts of misinformation regarding Judaism, Christianity, and Islam and how they relate to Palestine. I was fortunate to have stimulating discussions and build relationships with my Muslim classmates from across the world (Egypt, Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia, Pakistan, etc.).

What I have recounted are only some of the incredible experiences and opportunities I was blessed with during my time studying through St. Bonaventure's and Exeter's Center(s) for Arab and Islamic Studies. All of these events (and many more) have invaluably shaped my introspective cultivation of my knowledge of myself and how to relate to the "other." I often noted to my family and friends throughout my five years of studies and travels that learning about Islam and building relationships with Muslims have made me a better follower of God in my Catholicism—and, I hope, a better person overall. The piety, charity, hospitality, and God-consciousness (among many other attributes) of many

Muslims are truly testaments to their faith and religious path, but also testaments to what humanity itself can and should aspire to be.

While studying at Exeter, I wrote an essay titled "Hospitality in Islam and Catholicism"—a topic which has remained close to my heart in both matters of daily life and inter-religious dialogue. The paper was inspired by the biblical and Qur'anic figures of Jesus, Husayn, Mary, and Fatima, as well as other academic and religious persons, including: Mansur al-Hallaj (858–922) of Iraq, ʿAbdullah Ansari (1006–1089) of Afghanistan, and French Islamicists Louis Massignon (1883–1962) and Serge de Beaurecueil (1917–2005). My research and essay point to hospitality as a significant and core aspect of both religious traditions:

Islam and Catholicism raise the secular conceptions of hospitality to a level of having a sacred characteristic which is irreplaceable as well as non-negotiable: one must take care of the 'other,' despite identity or creed.

In the same work, I went beyond the concept of the word "despite" in the quote above and further argued that one cannot properly fulfill their sacred duty of hospitality without authenticity. Through this authenticity, "Sacred hospitality also necessitates a total commitment to seeing the other as an equal rather than recognizing one set of beliefs as essentially superior". Holding hospitality as a sacred duty should be a top priority in interfaith discussions and relationships, as it is the essence of holding a space for the "other" that is open, caring, and non-judgmental in disposition. Most would recognize the importance of this disposition during a discussion with a family member or friend about how to better understand each others' needs and to resolve conflicts. I have experienced being on the receiving end of this sacred hospitality from countless Muslims and Christians in the United States, Morocco and Egypt, and am of the personal conviction that it should be

applied to all interfaith and inter-cultural dialogues for fruitful growth in all participating.

The process of researching for and writing the hospitality essay (among many other essays) expanded my understanding of how much is truly shared between Islam and Catholicism. Even more-so, this experience highlighted how much should be truly *cherished* between followers of these two faiths. Both Islam and Catholicism separately have had such rich and multifaceted histories. The times their followers have interacted and connected in a way that allowed them both to flourish have impacted the world since—we can never forget the meeting of St. Francis and Sultan al-Malik al-Kamal of Egypt in 1219, and the precedent these two deeply faithful men set for all future instances of inter-faith and inter-cultural dialogue.

Of all the blessings I have shared, one of the greatest was the realization which occurred to me while I was studying at Exeter: the four years I spent learning about Islam while at a Catholic university named after St. Bonaventure was God's purposeful catalyst for my ability to discover, cultivate, and combine my two strong, faith-based interests of Franciscan and Sufi mysticism. This process and combination greatly impacted my life and worldview as well as led to my MA dissertation, titled: "Finding God in the Inner Sanctum of Self: A Comparison of Sufi and Franciscan Mystical Journeys to the 'Divine Within.'" In both Sufi and Franciscan spheres, a significant concept is that one may find God in all things, big and small, and that all life (and all *of* life) is a blessing. If we all keep this concept of God's all-encompassing presence in mind and practice our duty of sacred hospitality, we can transform boundaries into bridges—as well as transform ourselves and others—through interfaith dialogue, studies and work.

MAKHDUM SAHIB MANERI: HIS LIFE AND THOUGHTS

By Lesly John Louvis

Sharfuddin Maneri (Muslims refer to him with reverence as 'Makhdum Sahib', and so, henceforth in this essay we call the Sufi saint from Bihar in this same manner) was born in 1290 in Maner, present-day Patna, the capital of Bihar. He was probably the second of four sons and had one sister. His parents, Yahya Maneri and Bibi Razia were followers of the Sufi path. And so, he grew up in an atmosphere of Sufi piety. When Makhdum Sahib was 33 years of age, he travelled to Delhi with his elder brother in search of a Sufi spiritual guide. There he met Najibuddin Firdausi, who became his spiritual guide. His many years of serious study under the guidance of Najibuddin and his sincere efforts inspired him to lead a life alone with alone in the jungles of Bihiya in Bihar.

Some Teachings of Makhdum Sahib and Their Parallels in Christianity

Repentance

Makhdum Sahib penned many letters through which he propagated his teachings. The long years of experience in the jungles of Bihiya made Makhdum Sahib realize the progressive nature of repentance. This he speaks in one of his letters. He describes the actual meaning of repentance as 'turning back'. As far as possible, the preliminary step is to repair whatever damage one's sins have wreaked. It depends upon the actions of the repentant person.

Makhdum Sahib's teachings on repentance go, in some way, very well with the teachings of Christ. In Christianity, repentance is the stage where a believer turns away from their sinfulness and returns to God. Those who repent turn

their backs on sin and seek God in sincerity. Repentance is essential to receive God's forgiveness. The Bible also tells us that true repentance will result in a change of actions. A person who has genuinely repented of his sin and has exercised faith in Christ will give evidence of a changed life.

Reconciling With Offended Parties

Makhdum Sahib's understanding of repentance also involves taking practical steps to reconcile with someone one may have offended. This shows his grasp of the interpersonal nature of sin as offending someone. He says that as far as possible, one should make peace with everyone who has a grudge against oneself. If one cannot do this, one must turn to God, humbling oneself before Him, crying out for help from a righteous heart so that God Himself might be happy with the person on the Day of Resurrection.

Reconciling with the offended person is reflected in the teachings of Christ too. Jesus says, "Therefore if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your sibling has something against you, leave your gift there in front of the altar. First, go and be reconciled to them; then come and offer your gift." (Mt 5:23-24). Christianity teaches that one's broken relationship with others can hinder one's relationship with God. That is why one needs to reconcile with the offended person before coming to God.

Purity

Makhdum Sahib speaks about different forms of purity. These include external purity, internal purity from base qualities and purity from anything that is not God. He calls it a holy secret and genuine purity. Maneri is of the view that genuine mystical knowledge of the Lord without purity of heart is impossible. One must acknowledge God's activity in a purified heart rather than focusing exclusively on the human effort.

Jesus Christ exalts purity to the spirit realm, a type of purity far greater than the ritual purity of ceremonial cleansing. We read in the Scriptures that Jesus says, “Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you are like whitewashed tombs which on the outside appear beautiful, but inside they are full of dead men’s bones and all uncleanness. So, you, too, outwardly appear righteous to men, but inwardly you are full of hypocrisy and lawlessness”(Mt 23:27-28).

Hence, those who are pure of heart will enjoy a favourable position with God and have the most fortunate state of existence.

Spiritual Guidance

Makhdum Sahib insists on some form of spiritual guidance. According to him, a novice should seek a spiritual guide after undergoing genuine repentance. The spiritual guide should be excellently well versed in the vicissitudes of the way and firmly established in his high state.

Why does a beginner require a spiritual guide? Makhdum Sahib answers this question by saying that when a novice passes through the pilgrim stages, he might undergo diverse types of mystical experiences. Some of these might come from God, and some might be satanic. The novice’s ego might produce some. This is entirely new to the novice. He cannot discern the source of these spiritual experiences. And so, the novice needs the assistance of a well-versed guide in discerning these.

Makhdum Sahib’s teaching on spiritual guidance resonates with the Christian understanding of spiritual guidance. Spiritual direction is a feature of the Christian tradition. St. Ignatius, for instance, stresses the importance of a spiritual guide in the discernment process. When a person is encountering consolation and desolation in his spiritual life or struggling

with some challenges, the spiritual guide helps him to discern the spirit. A spiritual guide directs the person to know from which spirit the consolation arises.

Conclusion

In this brief paper, I have attempted to reflect on some aspects of the teachings of Makhdum Sahib, a figure considered by a vast number of Muslims in Bihar, India, to have been a noted Sufi and to note their resonance within Christianity. This common ground is something that can help Sufi-oriented Muslims and Christians understand each other better.

POPE FRANCIS AND MUSLIMS

By Jay-ar D. Pasado

Interreligious dialogue between Christians and Muslims plays an important role in building fraternity, love and peace with each other regardless of diversity of religious beliefs. Dialogue is a way for Christians and Muslims to treat each other as God's children. Pope Francis' dialogue with Muslims is an example for us Christians to take as a step to open our hearts to our Muslim brothers and sisters all over the world. Pope Francis in his constant conversation with people of other religions encourages us to do the same, to converse with our brothers and sisters around us because it is through communication that we can get to know each other well and learn to respect each other's beliefs. Our relationship with our Muslim brothers and sisters should continue to grow in the love of God as the source of our unity and peace. God is the prime mover of our dialogue with Muslims. It is God that initiates brotherhood of His people through His instruments, including Church leaders headed by Pope Francis and some Muslim figures.

Pope Francis' approach to our Muslim brothers and sisters shows us that even if we have different religious views, we can unify ourselves as God's Children through dialogue. The many visits of Pope Francis to Muslim countries and his conversations with Muslims for peace and harmony in the world is a beautiful model for all of us. By word and deed, Pope Francis emphasizes that the era of polemics and debate should be over and that we need to live in an era of dialogue. His meetings with Muslims inspire us to love our Muslim brothers and sisters with God's unconditional love, indicating that it is time to concretely accept each other without imposing our own beliefs upon the other and respecting each other. In this way, we can share things for the common good of all.

One of the many purposes of Christian-Muslim dialogue is to build peace between Christians and Muslims. Dialogue is pivotal in order to have peace to promote compassion and mercy, not hatred and war, because hating one another does not serve our purpose in life. As Pope Francis says in *Evangelii Gaudium* (no. 250) "interreligious dialogue is a necessary condition for peace in the world, so it is a duty for Christians as well as other religious communities. This dialogue is in the first place a conversation about human existence or simply, as the bishops of India, have put it, a matter of being open to them, sharing their joys and sorrows. In this, we learn to accept others and their different ways of living and speaking … A dialogue which seeks social peace and justice, is beyond all merely practical considerations, an ethical commitment which brings about a new social situation."

Pope Francis highlights what he believes the Christian approach to other religions should be through the way he wants us to interact with Muslims with open-mindedness, always ready to listen and collaborate. He guides us to be Christians who are open to dialogue and relationships with adherents of other religions in the world. Accordingly, this dialogue must be sincere and friendly.

Pope Francis affirms in *Evangelii Gaudium* that our relationship with Muslims has taken on great importance since they are now significantly present in many traditionally Christian countries, where they can freely worship and become fully a part of society. The religious writings of Islam have retained some Christian teachings; Jesus and Mary receive profound veneration in these writings, and it is admirable to see how Muslims both young and old, men and women, make time for daily prayer and take part in religious services. It is also enriching to know that Christians and Muslims have similarities such as believing in the Virgin Mary and the miracles performed by Jesus. It is true that at the theological

level, Christians and Muslims also have differences, but a main point of dialogue is to seek to live in peace and unity. Both Christians and Muslims must be instruments of God, channels of hope by giving hope to the hopeless, loving the unlovable and healing wounded hearts. God invites us to be aware that no matter what religion we belong to, we need to love others, because God is love. Pope puts dialogue on a firmer foundation when he says: "Our relationship with God is founded on a gift, and the gift is God himself. The entire history of salvation can be looked at as an ongoing dialogue between God and people" [cf. Robert Lauder E, *Pope Francis' Spirituality and Our Story* (New Jersey: Totowa, Catholic Book, Publishing Press; 2014). 58].

Our dialogue with God should strengthen our bond with our Muslim brothers and sisters. We should take our conversation with God through our prayers as a foundation to continue engaging in dialogue with Muslims. It is very necessary to keep this dialogue as a route to communion. Establishing a broad communion with our Muslim brothers and sisters can make us realize the essence of creation, as the book of Genesis says that we are equally created in the image and likeness of God.

This interreligious dialogue is also a means for evangelization, to share essential values that have a positive impact on society, a society that listens to the Word of God, a society that does not discriminate against the poor, a society that promotes solidarity, justice, respect the rights of its people, works for the common good of all.

Pope Francis highlights that "Evangelization also involves the path of dialogue, for the Church today, three areas of dialogue stand out where she needs to be present in order to promote full human development and to pursue the common good: dialogue with states, dialogue with society, including dialogue with cultures and the sciences, and dialogue with the

believers who are not part of the Catholic Church. (*Evangelii Gaudium: The Joy of the Gospe*l, 138)".

The Catholic Church is open for dialogue to all people of God, to bring people closer to God. The teaching of the Church guides us to work for the growth of the society, to work with love, purity, hope, faith, etc. in dialogue with our brothers and sisters, even those who are of a different faith, because we are born to be relational. As Pope Francis said, To be relational is the nature of the person. To be a person is to be open to, present to, and in dialogue with our neighbours.

THE EXPERIENCE OF INTERFAITH DIALOGUE AN ANSWER TO A WOUNDED AND VULNERABLE WORLD

By Roberto Catalano

Introduction – Towards a dialogical mission

Interfaith dialogue is, still today, a debated topic and although there is a growing number of stimulating and successful initiatives and experiences in this field, some crucial issues have not yet found a satisfactory answer. Speaking from the Christian point of view, it appears still problematic to reconcile a self-comprehension and a self-evaluation of Christianity in relation to other religions and to the prevailing religious pluralism. Several points remain open in connection with the meaning and implications of the universal mission of the Church based on Jesus' mandate to the apostles and the typical Christian claim of possessing the ultimate Truth.[1] The main challenge is the one-off proving if and how Christianity, more specifically the Catholic Church, with its two millennia long rich tradition,[2] is capable of entering a stable positive relationship with other religions and their followers. In order to do so, the Christian community has to become fully aware, on the one hand of its own riches and, on the other, of the concrete possibility for its faith and tradition to act in a dialogical way with the convictions and traditions of other religions.

The road ahead appears still long and steep. Notwithstanding the remarkable openings experienced during and, especially, after the Second Vatican Council, a sense of uncertainty

[1]See Perry Schmidt-Leukel, *Zur Klassifikation religionstheologischer Modelle,* in *Catholica*. *Jahbuch fürKontroverstheoligie (Münster)* – Cath (M) 47 (1993), 163-185, 163 in Bertram Stubenrauch, *Pluralismo anzichè cattolicità* ? *Dio, il cristianesimo e le religioni*, (Brescia: Queriniana 2019), 22.

[2]Bertram Stubenrauch, *Pluralismo anzichè cattolicità* ? *Dio, il cristianesimo e le religioni*, (Brescia: Queriniana 2019), 23.

remains in the Christian world when the issue of dialogue in the context of the growing religious pluralism at the global level comes to the fore.[3] Often, in fact, even in recent times, we still notice a skepticism – which at times reaches the point of a clear refusal - towards the possibility of an experience of dialogue between Christians and people of other religions. We cannot also ignore the temptation, equally dangerous, of reducing dialogue to an attempt to pull other believers towards Christianity. It is necessary to grow closer to other believers and their traditions while acknowledging that they are different and cannot be absorbed into Christianity or, even worst, homologated.[4] The others' religions deserve respect and need to be considered as coherent realities in themselves, which we cannot expect to absorb or to see as something which has to merge with our tradition. We Christians are called to look at and consider the other religions with the same respect we consider Christianity. In this sense, we may find useful guidelines in borrowing a true dialogical Sprit from the Golden Rule: "*To look at the other religions as we look at our own*" and "*To treat believers in other traditions as we deal with those with whom we share the same faith*". At the same time, we need to be aware that we can give witness to and live only according to our own religion.[5] Based on this attitude, to formulate our own faith in front of others while letting them to express their tradition in the same way unavoidably helps to become friends of those men and women. This contributes to generate what Pope Francis defines as a 'culture of encounter', a fundamental paradigm for dialogue.

In this connection, in order to prove that all this is possible, I would like to present briefly a success-story of dialogue

[3]Ibid., 23.
[4]Ibid., 148.
[5]Ibid., 159.

and mission which has taken place between Christians and Muslims in Algeria.

Christians and Muslims beyond dialogue

The context of this experience, which is almost half a century old, is the city of Tlemcen in northern Africa. From 1966, a small community of Catholic men, members of the Focolare Movement, established its residence in the monastery Saint Benoit. In the following years, they succeeded in transforming the place into a centre of spirituality and interfaith encounter, later named "Dar-Es-Salam".[6] This place is part of a geographical context – the area in and around Tlemcen - rich in history and in Islamic Sufi mystical heritage. Here a unique experience was born which, in the Christian perspective, is the result of living mission in and through a spirit of dialogue.

The starting point of this 'mission', in fact, in the Algerian context was an experience of a patient dialogue of life as one of the protagonists recalled: "*The relationship with the Muslims was born above all through simple everyday contacts established with neighbours, shopkeepers, carpenters* (…)."[7] They were contacts cultivated with much care that led to profound relationships: in a teaching environment, between a member of this Catholic community and his students; in the services provided by another one who was a handyman and who readily made himself available to the local community as a mechanic or electrician, depending on what was needed.

[6]One year later, in 1967, the women's Focolare centre was opened in the capital city of Algiers, 600 km. away from Tlemcen.

[7]Matilde Cocchiaro, *Nel deserto fiorisce la fraternità. Ulisse Caglioni fra i mussulmani* (Roma: Città Nuova, 2006), 49. (My own translation from original in Italian) This book provides details of the experience of the Focolare and the Muslims in Algeria. The book focuses on the life of Ulisse Caglioni, one of the pioneers of the Focolare in Maghreb. It also contains facts and details of the developing relationship with Muslim sisters and brothers, along with a preface by Archbishop Henry Tessier of Algeria.

What started as a friendship became a relationship based on mutual esteem.

We can sum up the core element of this initial stage in the category of 'witness', a term which represents a great value for mission and dialogue, especially in the perspective proposed by Pope Francis. In order to be 'witnesses', Christians are called to show, in their daily life, their faith in a consistent way, through concrete love, charity and joy. In a world full of vulnerabilities, inequalities and globalised indifference, people need to see witnesses, who, through their life and words, may appear credible and imitable. This clearly points out at giving witness before, or even rather than, preaching. Already Benedict XVI maintained that the Church grows through attraction and through witness.[8] In fact, in Tlemcen the initial experience of a group of Catholics giving witness of their faith in concretely living the Gospel eventually grew into attracting a group of young people who were the students of one of them. They often visited the monastery which housed the Catholic community of the Focolare.

The communitarian dimension of witness

The coming together of the group offered a possibility for providing spiritual formation to the young people. One of them recalls what follows:

> The most beautiful moments were those occasions in which we could share our impressions and experiences. Our relationship became more profound; each one was ready to listen and to make space for the other. It was an extraordinary

[8]See Pope Francis, *Address to the Meeting of Priests, Religious, Consecrated Persons and Ecumenical Council of Churches*, Rabat (Morocco), 31st March 2019. (http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2019/march/documents/papa-francesco_20190331_sacerdoti-marocco.html) (accessed on 28th February 2020).

group to be a part of. We could all count on each other, and our circle of friends grew more widely.[9]

After years of silent witness and daily living next to people in Tlemcen, the Catholic group started organising a summer meeting, inviting these new Muslim friends. It was a new experience for everyone.[10] Through the years, this experience grew and developed in Algeria, bringing to the fore "the very vocation of the Church, which at the same time is also the vocation of the Focolare," as Msgr. Henri Tessier, former Archbishop of Algiers, stated.[11] What evolved from this relatively small community were meetings held every year with an increasing number of participants, above all Muslims. From a personal witness this experience developed in a community testimony, first only among Catholics, and, later, started including Muslims. In fact, Christian communities capable of living a truly evangelical life are capable of conceiving, giving shape to and organising missionary programmes which have an effective impact around them,[12] and they are capable of engaging people of other religious traditions.

Mission and dialogue without proselytising

All programmes and activities took place in a Catholic monastery where a Catholic community lived. Nevertheless, from the very beginning there was a genuine effort to use a language and to have attitudes which could be respectful of the Muslim identity of the overwhelming majority of participants. There was a foundational twofold commitment: on the one side, keeping away from imposing the Christian message, and, on the other side, respecting Islam and its traditions. There was no attempt of pulling others towards the Catholic

[9]Cocchiaro, Nel deserto fiorisce la fraternità, 49.
[10]See Fondi and Zanzucchi, Un popolo nato dal Vangelo, 391.
[11]Henry Tessier, "Prefazione", in Cocchiaro, Nel deserto fiorisce la fraternità., 7-8
[12]See Bertram Stubenrauch, *Pluralismo anzichè cattolicità* ? *Dio, il cristianesimo e le religioni*, 178.

Church, and, at the same time, no special effort was made to water down the Christian message for the sake of pleasing the other. As a result, protagonists of this experience were able to maintain their respective identities. Nevertheless, all this was happening in a specific context – Algeria - where the prevailing atmosphere was somehow different. On one side, already at that time, Muslims in contact with Christians were unacceptable to the Algerian milieu, and, on the other side, being immersed in an Islamic world, the tiny Christian community tended to be on its own to save its faith. Due to these conditions prevailing around them, some people were afraid and got discouraged, but others continued to build the relationships that became ever more profound and based on the truth. Consequently, mutual trust grew.

A local imam - Imam Hadj Ahmed Barkat - played a key role in the process. He was the father of one of the young Muslims who attended activities with the Catholic community. This is his witness:

> My father, at a certain moment, noticed that I often went to the house of these Catholics and attended meetings and activities with them. He asked me what it was all about. Since I found it difficult to explain it, I proposed to invite my friends over for dinner. He was enthusiastic about the evening, and he accepted to animate, along with them, some of our session where we spoke about Christianity and Islam. He was a sort of a guarantee for us who were involved with people who we did not know.[13]

The life of his son's Catholic friends deeply impressed Imam Barkat, together with his whole family. He wanted to know more about them and, ultimately, engaged himself in

[13]From an interview in «*L'Ideale dell'unità. Contributi dall'Algeria per realizzare la fraternità universale*». Documentary movie.

the dialogue experience between the two communities. His example encouraged other people who joined meetings on the Word of Life as found in the Gospel and in the Qur'an.[14] The same happened on the Christian side, thanks to the constant support and presence of the Catholic bishops of Oran and Algiers, as it appears clear from what Bishop Tessier stated a few years ago:

> All our Christian communities in Algeria are called to position themselves in an Islam-Christian encounter that goes beyond the present diffidence, the past prejudices, and the dogmatic oppositions, to establish a genuine day-to-day communion among the people.[15]

The kenotic dimension of mission and dialogue

A long period of silence and of what we can call of *kenosis* followed the initial encouraging stage of this experience. After a few years, because of studies or other family reasons, the majority of people involved in the first phase spread throughout Algeria. Some even moved abroad or actively engaged in politics. At the same time, the Catholic community, while continuing the daily experience of dialogue of life, started studying Arabic and Islam. It was an important decision as Christian attitudes towards people of other religions should not be limited only to respect or dialogue of day-to-day life. It has to go further to the point of knowing others in depth.[16] It has to reach also the theological level.

The experience of dialogue initiated in Tlemcen experienced a

[14]See Didier Lucas, «Joint experience in Algeria», Centre for Interreligious Dialogue of the Focolare Movement (ed. by), *Chiara and the World Religions*. *Together Towards the Unity of the Human Family*, (Bengaluru-India : Asian Trading Corporation, 2016), 164.

[15]Arch. Tessier, documentary movie

[16]See Bertram Stubenrauch, *Pluralismo anzichè cattolicità* ? *Dio, il cristianesimo e le religioni*, 195-196.

period of darkness, at another level. At one stage, even mutual suspicion of the sincerity of the other's attitude emerged, along with the question whether was there any sense in living such a deep and closely connected experience of dialogue. It was a truly testing period, which required on both sides a serious process of deep self-discernment. A Muslim lady from Algiers recalls:

> We asked ourselves this very crucial question: 'Can we really live a lifestyle that comes to us from Christians?' And for their part, the focolarini also had a basic question: 'Is it possible to have unity with Muslims?' In fact the question for us was: 'Are we Muslim friends of the movement or are we Muslims who belong to the Focolare?' That period of discernment was lived by the whole community together in Algeria as a trial permitted by God. Yet, the experience of living in unity, sharing this suffering, allowed each of us to grow, to progress and to mature.[17]

From the Christian viewpoint, we can well define this phase as a *kenotic process*, which has to be part of any interfaith experience. In the Christian perspective, it is deeply connected with the divine *kenosis.* In fact, the real breakthrough of God's kingdom takes place on Calvary in the moment of the highest annihilation that history has witnessed and that has involved the very intimacy of God,[18] which found its expression in Jesus' cry: "My God, my God why have you forsaken me". This 'forsakenness' gives meaning to interfaith dialogue. More specifically, it guarantees that Christians

[17]Ferroudja Belaidi and Others, «Joint experience in Algeria», Centre for Interreligious Dialogue of the Focolare Movement (ed. by), *Chiara and the World Religions*. *Together Towards the Unity of the Human Family*, (Bengaluru-India : Asian Trading Corporation, 2016), 168.

[18]See Bertram Stubenrauch, *Pluralismo anzichè cattolicità* ? *Dio, il cristianesimo e le religioni*, 125.

do not fall into the temptation of a sense of superiority and triumphalism and, therefore, that they keep away from the tendency of imposing their faith on others. In mission and dialogue, in fact, Christians are called to give themselves to the others following God's example. He has offered Himself totally to the world by becoming man. This means that He fully emptied Himself.[19] The same attitude is crucial in the mutual commitment to dialogue.

For several years, while going through at times painful experiences, both Catholics and Muslims maintained personal rapports. This is a fundamental point in interfaith dialogue, where relationship is vital at all times. Dialogue, in fact, never takes place among religions but always among men and women who follow their respective faiths and, at the same time, establish personal human relationships.

The new season. Full reciprocity in dialogue with clear identities

Towards the mid-eighties of last century, some of the young people who were part of the original group of students around the Catholic community of the Focolare came back in contact with this experience. They did it along with their families and children. Starting from this time, a consistent community began to take shape with Muslims and Catholics, who live according to their traditions but in spiritual communion with each other. This generated a profound sense of belonging to the same spiritual family, as is well portrayed by a young Muslim doctor:

> My first strong impression [when I met this group] was the one of having found a family, a second family. I was welcome in a very natural way, and this first impression remained with me until now.

[19]See David Jensen, *Emptying Christ*, *A Christological Approach to Interfaith Dialogue.,* in *Studies in Interreligious Dialogue*, 11 (2001), 5-24, 12

> Probably I do not have this family-like bond even with my own biological family.[20]

In the course of time it was no longer just an experience of dialogue which took shape but, rather a life together, in a spirit of mutual love, capable of offering a witness of universal brotherhood. This appears even more evident in the sharing of one of the early protagonists, who, after years of political involvement and of personal discernment as a Muslim, renewed his contact with the community in Tlemcen:

> This experience was extraordinary for me. It generated a new life oriented to the denial of the self, out of the love for God. I rediscovered my faith [Islam], and this [Christian] spirituality helped me to rebuild it, to purify it and to consolidate it. It gives wisdom and a greater openness towards others, allowing me to live in unity with myself and in harmony with others.[21]

Doubts on identities and their solution

Obviously, doubts about the respective identities of the two communities – Christians and Muslims – kept on emerging, along with a frequent questioning about the possibility of continuing the experience without running the risk of compromising on the respective faiths and traditions. One of the protagonists of the experience who has lived in it and for it since the late 60's expressed well the crux of the problem:

> The difficulty we have in living this spirituality can be expressed in this question: "Am I losing my faith as a Muslim?" The experience we live is that if we abandon ourselves to the Will of

[20]From an interview in «*L'Ideale dell'unità. Contributi dall'Algeria per realizzare la fraternità universale*». Documentary movie.
[21]Ibid.

> God, everything becomes clearer and our way of thinking changes.

The experience which has emerged from this long pilgrimage has gone beyond this description of dialogue and is expressed in a life lived together, in communion. After getting to know the experience of Chiara Lubich, the founder of the Catholic Movement, and seeing the witness of the Focolare communities in Tlemcen and in Algiers, *"the Muslims in Algeria adhered fully and with pride to this way of life".*

> The Focolare way of life teaches us to love our neighbour with the goal of building unity. What could be more exhilarating for a Muslim? God in his uniqueness calls all men and women to unity. We can accomplish unity in God without worrying about our differences. God is the one who will be the judge … We can say that today Muslims have taken this way of life as their very own. We started to live it together, in mutual love, solidarity and respect for our different religious traditions. This reality is symptomatic of a movement that comes from God and goes beyond the expectations of human beings. In fact at the beginning we started by trying to build brotherhood and sisterhood, but God instead has made us experience true unity among Christians and Muslims. [22]

Common Challenges: Facing the Civil War Together.

During the 1990's, terrorism was rampant in Algeria. It was a very dark decade, a terrible trial for all people in the country, including the Christians and Muslims in Tlemcen. During that time, the bond of mutual friendship grew stronger and deeper.

[22]Schéhérahzad Mesli and Others, «Joint experience in Algeria», *Together Towards the Unity of the Human Family*, 167.

> We Muslims often felt guilty for not being able to spare our Christian brothers and sisters the cruelty of our inner fights. Because of this suffering, witness of our experience of fraternity was even stronger. Sharing our pains and sorrows made us feel closer to one another. At every new tragic event, we were spontaneously driven to look for each like members of the same family. Unity was greatly strengthened thanks and through these bitter and tragic suffering and, together, we started looking at the future with serenity and optimism.[23]

Notwithstanding what was happening around, it was a time of deepening relationships of friendship and trust. As a fruit of their mutual loyalties during the civil war, this experience 'beyond dialogue' grew in Tlemcen, in Algiers, and in Orano, on the west coast, and then in the Sahara, at Beni Abbes, and then reached the neighbouring countries of Tunisia and Morocco. At present, a good number of young people has taken this spirit as their own. They live it, involving other youth who are fascinated by this way of life. A group of families is enthusiastic and meets regularly. Still, challenges continue to emerge.

Conclusion. Muslims and Christians together: a *Missio cum gentibus*?

Since 1998, an Algerian group of Sunni Muslims has become the nucleus of participants in the international conferences of Islamo-Christian dialogue organised by the Focolare Movement in Rome. In these conferences, people present were Shi'as and Sunnis but also Alevites, Turks and African-American Muslims. Although the experience in Tlemcen remains unique, there are other strong bonds of dialogue

[23]Matilde Cocchiaro, *Nel deserto fiorisce la fraternità. Ulisse Caglioni fra i musulmani,* 92-93.

established between Christians and Muslims elsewhere.[24] In these conferences, the witness given by the group of Muslims and Catholics from Algeria showed that this spirit of a Catholic reality can be lived by Muslims too without confusion and misunderstanding, making sure that the respective identities are always respected and enriched.

In June 2011, for the first time an international congress of Muslims took place in Tlemcen. It was an opportunity for Muslims from other parts of the world to meet a whole Focolare community of Muslims. It also marked a new beginning that reinforced the inner conviction that this way of life is made for everyone. Obviously, time has given the opportunity to understand how this can happen.

> For a Muslim must necessarily be seen in the context of the proclamation of adoring one God and Him alone, without adding any other. At the same time, it is necessary to proclaim that every human being is unique in his or her relationship with all other human beings, without the least sense of superiority on the part of anyone. The Koran prescribes for us that we are to enter into discussion with the 'People of the Book' in the best possible way, always telling them: 'We believe in the revelation which has come down to us, and in that which came down to you. Our God and your God are one, and it is to Him that we submit ourselves' (29:46). Every dialogue that has as its principle the desire for the truth is a dialogue, which means having respect for each one. Hearts have to be open and souls search for the light, and 'Allah offers his mercy to them'. This is the condition on which dialogue can be built in every

[24]Sull'esperienza con l'Afro-American Muslim Society, vedi P. Coda (1997), anche Th. Masters and A. Uelmen 2011). Una sintesi e evaluazione provvisoria sui Focolari e l'Islam troviamo anche in R. Catalano (2010).

> aspect of human life, both in our relationship with God and with one another[25].

In recent years, many people – Christians and Muslims – have been deeply touched by the experience of fraternity lived by the community of the Focolare Movement in Algeria. Many Catholics were reconciled with the idea that interfaith dialogue is possible also with Muslims and several Muslims realized the richness of living their faith in spiritual sharing and communion with Christians. We can say that this group has a missionary vocation in the true sense of this term. In fact, it shows that followers of the two religions can be brothers and sisters remaining faithful to their respective traditions while appreciating and respecting those of the other. Moreover, apart from projects of collaboration at different levels and a common spiritual growth in their respective traditions, they were able to experience God's presence among them. This reminds one of the very vocation of mission and dialogue. John Paul II, in Chennai (Madras) India in 1986, prophetically expressed it in front of religious leaders:

> The fruit of dialogue is union between people and union of people with God, who is the source and revealer of all truth and whose Spirit guides men in freedom only when they meet one another in all honesty and love. By dialogue, we let God be present in our midst; for as we open ourselves in dialogue to one another, we also open ourselves to God.[26]

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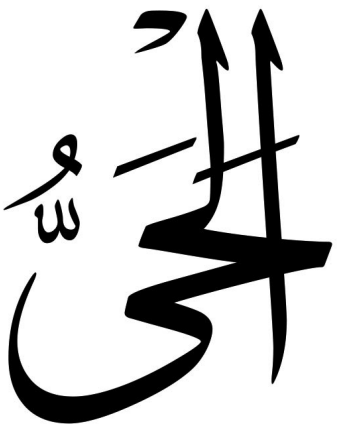
[25]See Farouk Mesli and Others, «Joint experience in Algeria», *Chiara and the World Religions. Together Towards the Unity of the Human Family*, 166.
[26]John Paul II, *Address to Leaders of non-Christian Religions* (Chennai Madras) India, 5th February 1986. (http://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/speeches/1986/february/documents/hf_jp-ii_spe_19860205_religioni-non-cristiane.html) (accessed on 9th March 2020)

This explains the impact the experience of this community of Christians and Muslims of Algeria had and continues to have on people around them and in other countries and parts of the world.

This can truly make us reflect on the fact that Christians and Muslims, despite their differences, can be witnesses – together – of a spiritual experience with fruits also visible in the social context. This might offer grounds to reflect on the possibility of a common mission towards other human beings. We Christians are called to reflect on the fact that dialogue can truly offer a new dimension and opening to the reality of mission, helping to broaden the *missio ad gentes* not only into a *mission inter gentes* but even towards a *mission cum gentibus*, which may involve brothers and sisters of other religions.



AWARENESS OF THE ETERNAL AFTERLIFE CAN HELP PROMOTE HARMONY BETWEEN COMMUNITIES

By B. Dolsy

Despite their differences in terms of dogma and practice, one thing that all religions have in common is the belief that our life does not come to an end with the death of our physical body, but, rather, continues even after that. This belief is based on the idea that we are not the physical body that we happen to inhabit for the short period of our earthly sojourn, but, rather, something other than it. According to various religions, even after the body we have inhabited dies, we continue to live, moving to another realm or living in some other dimension or form.

In other words, all religions believe in life after death, or the Hereafter, although the way this is understood differs from one religion to another.

According to various religions, the afterlife is eternal, the real 'we' being eternal. Again, according to various religions, our fate in the eternal afterlife will be determined by the way we had conducted ourselves during the relatively short span of time while we journeyed on Earth. Various religions also teach that in the Hereafter, we will face the consequences for the deeds (thoughts, words and actions) that we did while on Earth. They tell us that our eternal Hereafter depends on the overall record of our actions in the earthly realm.

Accordingly, it can be said that our life on Earth is like an examination. Just as a student's performance in a school examination will determine his academic future, our performance in the examination of life (the record of all our deeds—mental, verbal and physical—during our stay on

Earth) will determine our eternal future (our fate in the eternal Hereafter).

According to certain theistic traditions, God, the Creator and Lord of the universe, is keeping a record of all our actions, and on our death (or on the Day of Judgment), He will cause us to be sent to Hell or Heaven, depending on the record of our actions, the former being a place of painful torment, the latter a place of great bliss. According to some non-theistic traditions, an impersonal law (rather than a personal God) oversees the process through which the soul's afterlife is determined, but even here, it is the record of one's actions while on Earth that determines whether one's afterlife will be pleasant or painful.

These two factors—*(1) that life does not stop at the death of the body but, rather, continues even after that, stretching on into eternity* and *(2) that our eternal afterlife crucially depends on the record of our actions, good and evil, during our brief stay on Earth* underscore how critically important it is for us to be aware of the significance of every action we perform, because each action, no matter how insignificant it may seem, will play a role in shaping our eternity after our death, the phase of our life that will stretch on forever. If we wish to live in bliss for all time to come after our physical death, we need to be constantly aware that every action of ours—good or evil—while we are on Earth will have its corresponding consequence for how our eternal afterlife unfolds.

If this consciousness is deeply rooted in us, we will want to abstain from doing evil, on the one hand, and to do good, on the other, knowing that evil leads to torment in the eternal afterlife while goodness conduces to a blissful Hereafter that carries on forever.

This consciousness, rooted in the reality of the eternal Hereafter that will be shaped by the nature of the actions that

we committed while on Earth, is perhaps the most powerful deterrent to engaging in evil and also perhaps the most powerful facilitator for engaging in goodness. One could say that heedlessness of the reality of the eternal afterlife and of the fact that one's eternal afterlife will be determined by the record of one's actions during one's relatively brief stay on Earth is at the root of evil in the world committed by individuals and entire social groups (who are only collections of individuals). Awareness of the reality of the eternal afterlife and of the fact that one's eternal afterlife will be determined by the record of one's actions during our earthly sojourn, one could say, is a most powerful motivational force for engaging in goodness and for abstaining from evil.

Consciousness of the Reality of the Eternal Hereafter and Its Implications for Inter-Community Relations

If one is truly aware of the reality of the eternal afterlife and of the fact that one's eternal afterlife will be determined by the record of one's deeds while on earth and if one wishes to spend one's eternity after death in bliss, one will, as the discussion above suggests, try to abstain from engaging in evil actions (mental, verbal and physical) and will also be attracted to doing virtuous actions, knowing that one's choices in these matters will have a key impact on one's eternal Hereafter. One will want to avoid engaging in evil actions against others, knowing that such actions may grievously harm and seriously jeopardize one's own prospects in the eternal afterlife. Conversely, one will want to do good, if and when possible, for others, knowing that this will benefit one's own prospects in the Hereafter that carries on forever.

The implications of this awareness for inter-community relations can be easily understood. If one is aware that evil actions, driven by negative emotions such as hate, anger, revenge and supremacism, directed against another person (no matter what their religion, ethnicity, nationality, skin colour,

ethnicity, etc.) will harm and may completely ruin one's own prospects in the eternal afterlife, that one may have to face very painful consequences for such behaviour after one dies which might last forever, it may act as a very powerful deterrent, preventing one from engaging in such actions. If one is aware that hating another person simply because they belong to a community that follows a different religion, that committing violence against someone simply because they have a different skin colour or that discriminating against someone simply because they happen to have been born in another part of the world will seriously negatively harm one's own prospects in the eternal Hereafter, one will abstain from such behaviour if one truly wants to avoid facing torment in the afterlife that might continue for all time to come. One will then prevent oneself from falling prey to baseless incendiary propaganda, jingoistic slogans and politically-inspired sinister maneuvers against people who are projected by hate-driven forces as 'the other', knowing that such actions will have seriously negative consequences for one's own eternal afterlife. Possibly only a very self-destructive person would engage in such actions despite knowing that they could result in their having to face a very painful torment in the afterlife, possibly for all time to come.

Conversely, if one is aware that engaging in virtuous actions driven by positive emotions such as love, empathy and compassion that benefit others (no matter what their religion, ethnicity, nationality, skin colour, ethnicity etc.) will also benefit oneself in terms of one's prospects in the eternal afterlife, it may serve as a powerful motivation to relate kindly with others, including with people who may be from a social group or community other than the one might happen to identify with. A person who is genuinely concerned about one's own well-being in the eternal Hereafter would seek to do good to all beings, including those who are different from them in matters such as religion or ethnicity, knowing that goodness

done to others will benefit themselves too, in their eternal afterlife.

From this discussion it is clear how awareness of the reality of our eternal afterlife , which will be determined by the record of our actions during our relatively brief stay on Earth, can serve to overcome conflict and to promote good relations between people from different backgrounds—different religions, different ethnicities, different skin colours, different nationalities, different cultural communities, and so on.

Awareness that every action of ours, good and bad, will have consequences for our eternal future after we die can shape the way we choose to lead our lives in a very major way, including in how we relate to people who may subscribe to a religion or belief system different from ours, who may look different from us or who may happen to live in a different part of the world. Knowing that doing evil to others, including to those who may be different from us with regard to this or that marker of social identity, will negatively impact on our own eternal afterlife and that doing good to them will positively impact on it can encourage us to abstain from evil and to engage in goodness in our approach to and interactions with them. In this manner, every single individual, based on this awareness, can play a significant role in helping improve relations between members of entire communities and societies—simply by abstaining from harmful actions and by doing good, in the form even of so-called 'little' acts of kindness, while relating to people from different religions, belief systems, ethnicities, nationalities and cultural communities whom they might happen to meet or otherwise interact with.

INTERFERENCE OF RELIGION IN POLITICS: THE LEBANESE CASE

By Salah Aboujaoude, SJ

Saint-Joseph University of Beirut, Lebanon

Let's start with a brief overview of what constitutes the specificity of Lebanon, namely confessionalism. The term *ta'efa* in Arabic, or "confession" in English, refers in Lebanon to the 18 *tawaëf* (plural of *ta'efa*) duly recognized by the Lebanese Constitution (12 Christian, 5 Muslim and 1 Jewish). In the beginning, these *tawaëf* were active religious communities which evolved into what is known today by sociologists as "supra-functional" groups, in the sense that they attribute to themselves all possible functions and not merely ritual practices. Under the Ottoman Empire, that ruled the eastern Mediterranean from the sixteenth until the twentieth century, the confessional political arrangements for Christian, Jewish and some Muslim heterodox groups was codified in what was known by the "*millet* system". That system contributed efficiently to transforming the *tawaëf* into autonomous and officially recognized entities. Accordingly, confessional identity became part of judicial and administrative structures of the State; religious leaders became the official representatives of their respective *tawaëf* to the authorities; and each confession had the power to manage its own affairs related to religious issues, personal status and even educational and welfare services. The allegiance to the *ta'efa* became consequently primary in contrast to the allegiance to the State or to other acquired identities as professional status. In fact, the State as a legal entity was never designed to interfere in internal confessional affairs.

Although Lebanon is a parliamentary democratic republic according to its Constitution, the political confessionalism has always been overlapped with democratic principles. Thus,

for example, the highest positions in the State are reserved for representatives of the most numerous and prominent *tawaëf*: The President of the Republic must be a Maronite Christian, the Prime Minister a Sunni Muslim, the Speaker of the Parliament a Shiite Muslim, and so on. This system based mainly on confessional affiliation fosters nepotism, clientelism, favouritism and corruption. Today, a great number of Lebanese, who are suffering of successive crises of all kinds since decades, aspire to establish a real democratic State which respects human rights. What Lebanon badly needs is a national vision for a modern democratic State.

Many obstacles prevent the realization of this objective, including the interference of religion in politics. What is the gravity of this situation? The intertwining of religion and politics creates in local confessions a theological-political affiliation that negatively employs religious beliefs in political action and the formation of social ties. The theological content of any religion represents in the eyes of its followers the complete truth. Ipso facto, the truths held by other religions are considered to be either partial or misleading. When this background is translated politically, it generates a negative vision of the political and national scene. That is because its theological-political nature does not allow to go beyond the "juxtaposition" of religions existing in the society and prevents a positive approach to diversity so that it can develop the spirit of a single national belonging on the basis of equality of rights and duties under the law and the common good; that is, the set of principles embodied by the modern State.

In other words, the theological background overlapping with politics thwarts pluralism that enriches debate in society for the good of all citizens, regardless of their religious affiliation. In the name of the preservation of the particularity of confessions, but also out of fear of the 'other', the theological-political basis continues to sustain sectarianism. The debacles

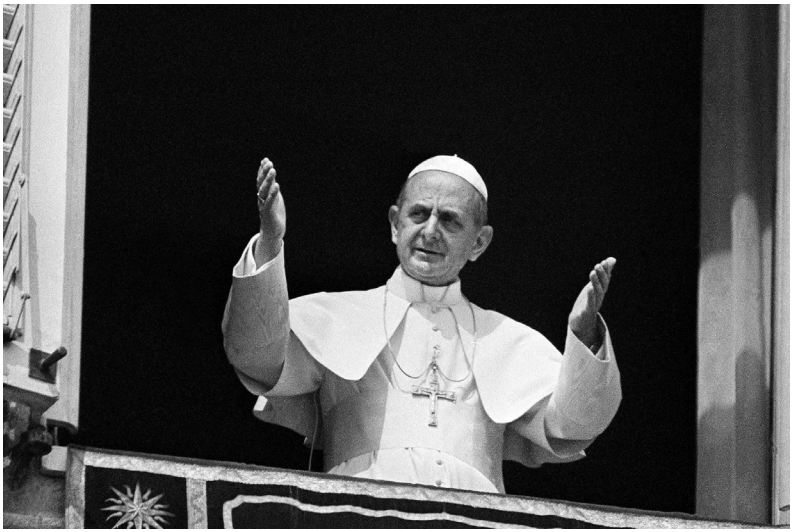
currently raging in the country are only the consequences of this sad reality. This prevents the development of healthy social ties that are the foundation of the modern State, including the voluntary union of individuals on the basis of common interests and humanitarian and national values and principles allowing solid social cohesion under the aegis of a strong rule of law. It follows that these social ties are different from the natural bond of family or religious character.

The prevailing situation thus prevents the meeting of citizens as individuals given the power of confessional affiliation. This latter continues to be nourished by religious celebrations which have often political character and by the confessional discourse which focuses almost exclusively on defending the interests of the confessions and their particularities. As a result, the establishment of a strong State capable of developing a feeling of a unique national belonging and a citizenship based on equality between citizens becomes literally blocked. Modern political action requires a national vision that transcends sectarian loyalties and a dynamism in reflection and planning in order to serve the good of all Lebanese.

In addition, the drift of religion into politics has harmful impacts on religion itself, not only because it loses its universal dimension by linking itself to a particular group within a restricted society but also because political action creates an environment where negotiations, maneuvers, compromises and lies take place. This means that religion, once entangled in the political arena, loses seriously its credibility. In fact, the very truth that religion carries becomes a mere political topic subject to all kinds of exploitation. In his book “The Republic”, Plato says: “If really lying is useless to the gods, but useful to men in the form of a remedy, it is obvious that the use of such a remedy must be reserved for doctors, and that the profane must not touch it” (Book III, No. 389 b). It is obvious

the political arena can never be safe from lies and false and misleading promises. This in itself is a sufficient reason to dissociate religion from politics.

It is incumbent on religious references to protect the greatness of the divine message entrusted to them from politics and to occupy their rightful place within the society, namely, a reference which awakens the conscience to the ultimate objective of life: Fraternity under the gaze of the single God who loves humankind.



Paul VI, address to the Islamic communities of Uganda, August 1, 1969

In our prayers, we always remember the peoples of Africa. The common belief in the Almighty professed by millions calls down upon this continent the graces of his Providence and love, most of all, peace and unity among all its sons. We feel sure that as representatives of Islam, you join in our prayers to the Almighty, that he may grant all African believers the desire for pardon and reconciliation so often commended in the Gospels and in the Qur'an.

Our pilgrimage to these holy places is not for purposes of prestige or power. It is a humble and ardent prayer for peace, through the intercession of the glorious protectors of Africa, who gave up their lives for love and for their belief. In recall the Catholic and Anglican Martyrs, We gladly recall also those confessors of the Muslim faith who were the first to suffer death, in the year 1848, for refusing to transgress the precepts of their religion.

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Editor, SALAAM
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23, Raj Niwas Marg,
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