

FAITH MEETS FAITH

An Orbis Series in Interreligious Dialogue

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In the contemporary world, the many religions and spiritualities stand in need of greater communication and cooperation. More than ever before, they must speak to, learn from, and work with each other in order to maintain their vital identities and to contribute to fashioning a better world.

The FAITH MEETS FAITH Series seeks to promote inter-religious dialogue by providing an open forum for exchange among followers of different religious paths. While the Series wants to encourage creative and bold responses to questions arising from contemporary appreciations of religious plurality, it also recognizes the multiplicity of basic perspectives concerning the methods and content of inter-religious dialogue.

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FAITH MEETS FAITH SERIES

A MUSLIM VIEW OF CHRISTIANITY

Essays on Dialogue
by Mahmoud Ayoub

*Edited by
Irfan A. Omar*

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PART I

The Need for Dialogue

Setting the Context

1

The Need for Harmony and Collaboration between Muslims and Christians

A distinction is usually made in Christian circles between ecumenism and interfaith dialogue. Ecumenism is taken to mean dialogue among Christians—between Catholics, Protestants, and Orthodox—while interfaith dialogue means dialogue with people of other faiths. I would like to suggest that, as Christians and Muslims, we should re-examine what the term “revelation in faith,” or the trust which God has laid upon us, really means.

The old Greek use of *oikoumenē* (ecumenical) meant the inhabited earth, which was not inhabited only by Christians or Muslims. The *oikoumenē* was a religious civilized society. I look forward, therefore, to the time when “ecumenical” is used in its proper sense.

Whether we like it or not, we live today in a pluralistic world. Yet, we are not and cannot be an undifferentiated mass of humankind. Yes, we are one humanity, but we are also different peoples, cultures, and religious communities. The Qur’an repeats many times the idea that God created us all from one soul, and from that soul created its mate; and from the two He scattered many men and women. The other important and often-quoted verse related to this is the following Qur’anic challenge: “humankind we have created you from one male and one female and made you into different nations and tribes that you may know one another, surely the noblest view in God’s sight is the most righteous.” Humanity is one in essence and substance but diverse in culture and in race, that is, ethnic composition. Moreover, humanity is one in its quest to comprehend and do the will of God, for “surely the noblest in God’s sight is one who is the most righteous” (Q. 49:13).

For us to make sense of our two traditions today, we have to trace some of the important outlines of our history and our relationships. The first thing that we must understand is that both traditions were born in seclusion and

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in public. Christ, before embarking upon his ministry, spent forty days in the wilderness, alone with God but also with Satan. The Prophet Muhammad spent months of seclusion, one month every year, the month of Ramadan, when he contemplated God's creation and the plight of his own people. Islam was born not in the humdrum of a crowded city, the city of Makkah, but in the meditative solitude of one man with his Lord in the cave of Mount Hira.

This private and public character of our two faiths continues to dominate their development. Christianity arose at the time when religions proliferated in the Mediterranean basin, and the quest for the truth was clear indeed. Not everything written by early Christian polemicists about these religions is true. People were seeking a noble ideal by which to live. They sought this ideal in the mystery religions and in ancient Greek philosophies. Christianity came with a call to morality and with a synthesis of the truth that people were looking for. We see this searching very clearly in the career of St. Augustine, who moved from the ideal of his Latin culture to the Manichean religion of Iran and then to Christianity. Even then, St. Augustine was disillusioned with the treatment of the problem of evil "in the books of the Platonists."

In the same way, Islam was born at the time when many Arabs were convinced of the futility of their ancient religious practices and many were looking for meaning and truth. A whole class of people, the *ḥunafā'* (the pious ones), to which the Prophet Muhammad may have belonged, was thoroughly influenced by Jewish and Christian ideas and moral principles. The "pious ones," however, did not join either of the two communities because they thought that the Christians and the Jews were always at odds, accusing each other of infidelity. This is attested to by the Qur'an in the following words: "The Jews say the Christians have nothing on which to stand and the Christians say the Jews have nothing on which to stand, yet both of them read the scriptures" (Q. 2:113).

Islam remolded, as it were, aspects of Arab culture, such as the pilgrimage and animal sacrifices, and ideas from Jewish and Christian sources, into a new religious worldview. This worldview is both personal and universal. The Qur'an presents Islam as the first and primordial religion, the Islam of all the prophets, of all those who believe in the one and only God, creator and sustainer of all creation. Those who have that faith and obey God are Muslims in the broadest and most essential sense of the word. Yet the Qur'an, and this we see clearly in the career of the Prophet Muhammad, was also aiming at establishing a new world order (Q. 26:214). The earliest commands to the Prophet were to preach the faith to his nearest of kin. Then he was ordered to warn the mother of cities, Makkah (Q. 6:92).

The Qur'an declares in two interesting verses both the spiritual dimension of Muhammad's message and the historical dimension. Spiritually, Muhammad, the Prophet of Islam, was told, "we have not sent you except as a Mercy to humankind" (Q. 21:107). Muhammad as Mercy is a new spir-

itual guide to humankind, one sent to guard and to do good. In another verse the Prophet declares, “O humankind I am the Messenger of God to you all” (Q. 7:158; see also Q. 34:28); here, then, we see a move from the most particular to the most universal in Islam. Muhammad as a messenger to humankind is also a lawgiver and maker of civilization.

Christianity and Islam came with the claim that they are universal faiths, meant for all of humanity, and both claimed that all human beings are equal. This is an ideal that I believe was held both by the early church and also by the Muslim community. To be sure, it was often violated, but the ideal remains an ideal.

Two principles distinguish Islam and Christianity and serve as principles on which we can find a theological basis of harmony. But we can also recognize a basis of difference. The challenge for us is to listen to the way God has spoken to each of our two communities, to respect what God has said to them, and to recognize that it may be different and sometimes vastly different from what was said to us. (1) The scriptures of both communities state that God has always spoken to people. The beginning of the Epistle to the Hebrews declares, “At various times in the past and in various different ways, God spoke to our ancestors through the prophets; but in our own time, the last days, he has spoken to us through his Son [Jesus Christ] . . .” (Heb 1:1).

The Qur’an even more universally declares that there is not a nation but that God has sent to it a warner or a prophet speaking its language and calling it to God within its own historical context. Thus, Muslims are required by the Qur’an to believe in all the prophets of God, all 124,000 of them, even though the Qur’an names only twenty-one.

The two traditions also give prominence to community and revelation. But here comes the difference. The Muslim *ummah* was shaped by the Qur’an, while the New Testament is a product of the church. Where, then, is revelation in the two communities? For Islam, God revealed himself and His will in human words. Hence, the transcendent became human, that is to say, the transcendent and eternal word of God, preserved with Him in the well-guarded tablet, took on human words which we recite and we write in a book. Yet it is the Muslims themselves who shaped the Book when it was collected during the rule of the third caliph, Uthman. But the authority of the Qur’an was supreme, even at the time of the Prophet. We see this in the fact that the Qur’an often went against Muhammad’s decisions. In that sense, only during the life of Muhammad can we speak of the Islamic state as a true theocracy. Thereafter, the Islamic state becomes, what I would call, a nomocracy, a state or an order based on Islam or on commitments to obey the divine law.

Revelation in Islam is therefore a Book. To explain my point, let me read the first verses of the Fourth Gospel, both from an Islamic and from a Christian perspective, which will highlight the differences between the two traditions. John writes, “In the beginning was the Word.” So far Islam would

agree. “The Word was with God.” Yes, but Islam would not go on to say, “And the Word was God.” God transcends his revelation.

Then the Fourth Gospel affirms the Word to be the agent of creation. The Qur’an, however, is not the agent of creation, but rather of human history. Revelation is in history, and through it history is made. Revelation and creation go hand in hand, but the word of God, that is, the word of creation, is not the Qur’an. It is rather the word of command (*amr*) or the divine *fiat*. When God wishes to create something, He says to it, “Be,” and it is.

The crucial difference comes later in the prologue to the Fourth Gospel. John writes, “And the Word became Flesh and dwelt among us.” If we were to read this verse Islamically, we would read, “And the Word became Book and entered our history,” to be shaped by it and to shape it.

A parallel has often been made by both Western and Muslim scholars between Christ in Christianity and the Qur’an in Islam—both the Word of God. The parallel is useful if it is not carried too far. Muslims also say that Christ is the Word of God, but they do not mean it in the sense of the *Logos* of the Fourth Gospel or of any *Logos* christology of the church. Christ is, according to the Qur’an, a direct creation of God through His word of command, “Be” (Q. 3:59).

In Islam, revelation as scripture comes from an original heavenly source. The heavenly Book is an idea that goes back to the Babylonians. The Qur’an calls this heavenly source “Mother of the Book,” or the “well-guarded tablet.”

The essence or the truth of revelation is the Trust (*amānah*) that God offered to the heavens and the earth, to the mountains and the hills. But they all honored it, covered before it, and refused to bear it. But humankind accepted it. Humankind is foolish and self-destructive.

This Islamic understanding of revelation came to be superimposed on all revelations; thus Muslims could not, in the Qur’an or later, understand or accept the idea that God could reveal himself in a human person, that is to say, Jesus Christ. Rather, God revealed His will to Christ, in the Gospel. The Gospel becomes not the good news of the kerygma of faith that “Jesus is risen,” but rather a sacred text of moral and quasi-legal principles, in many ways resembling the Qur’an. Therefore, if a Muslim were to be asked, “Where is the Gospel of Jesus Christ?” he would say, “It is the parables of Jesus and the Sermon on the Mount and whatever in the Gospel that can be isolated as the teaching of Jesus, but it is not the story of the life, ministry, and passion of Christ.” We cannot, therefore, agree on the concept of revelation in either Islam or Christianity.

The expression “people of the Book” (*ahl al-kitāb*) can, in my view, be used as a unifying idea. In the Qur’an it is limited to Jews, Christians, and Muslims. The Muslims are “people of the Book” in the strictest possible sense. This concept was eventually broadened so as to include all communities possessing scriptures, for example, Hindus and Zoroastrians. In the Qur’an, however, this concept is limited to the family of Abraham.

Rarely does the Qur'an use the word *ahl* to characterize a community of people; rather, the Qur'an and the Arabic language in general use the word *ahl* to mean a person's husband or wife and children and so on. That is to say, *ahl* is one family. I am justified then in interpreting the Qur'anic expression *ahl al-kitāb* to mean "family of the Book." This concept too is one that can unite us. All the people of the Book are the spiritual and physical descendants of the monotheistic faith of Abraham, whose faith is basic to all our faiths and whose faith, as the Qur'an says, predates the Torah and the Gospel. In that sense, the Prophet Muhammad in the Qur'an insisted on calling people to the faith of Abraham.

In choosing Abraham, the Qur'an makes a good choice. He not only represents the father of faith of all the monotheistic peoples, but he also represents the rational person who spends much time and energy in quest of the knowledge of God.

This brings me to yet another basic principle that Islam formulates and presents in the Qur'an which is common to all humankind. It is the principle of the *fiṭrah*, or the original state of creation of all human beings. The Qur'an says, "Set your faith, that is to say, 'your person,' straight in the religion as a man of pure faith" (Q. 30:30). "Pure faith" is the faith of Abraham, who is often called in the Qur'an the "man of pure faith." The verse goes on to say, "This is the original creation upon which God fashioned all of humankind. There is no altering of God's creation."

A prophetic hadith explains this verse as follows: "There is not a child that he or she is born upon this *fiṭrah*, this original state of the knowledge of God. And his parents make him a Jew, a Christian, or a Zoroastrian." The hadith continues, "and if they are Muslims, a Muslim."

Here we come to an interesting distinction between Islam as an institution and Islam as inner submission to God, or, if you wish, between Islam and *īmān*, "faith." I have already mentioned Islam as a universal and primordial principle—God's way for all creation. But Islam is also on one level an institutionalized religion that was to distinguish one particular community from all other communities. We see this clearly in the *shahādah*, or witness, of Islam: "I bear witness that there is no God but God and I bear witness that Muhammad is the Messenger of God." The first part is universal, and, if we are open, we can understand it and even adopt it through our own unaided reason. But when a Muslim goes on to say, "I bear witness that Muhammad is the Messenger of God," he or she is affirming his or her commitment to follow the religion or law that God reveals to Muhammad—in other words, to be a Muslim in the institutionalized sense.

Here we come to a very important legal distinction between Muslims and non-Muslims that cannot be ignored. It is interesting to note that in one very important prophetic hadith the minimum that is expected from people is an affirmation of God. The Prophet says, "I have been commanded to fight with people until they say 'there is no God but God.' When they say this they protect from me their lives and their possessions. Accept what is due

from them in the *zakāh*, ‘legal almsgiving,’ and their final reckoning is with God.”

This is perhaps an early and very significant stage, and this is in total agreement with the Qur’anic challenge to Muslims and non-Muslims to “come to a word of common agreement to worship no other but God.”

I am convinced that the Prophet Muhammad and the Qur’an did not expect Jews and Christians to give up their religion and to become Muslims unless they wanted to but only to observe God’s continuous care for humankind and acknowledge that the revelation he gave to the Prophet Muhammad is a genuine revelation and that Muhammad is a genuine prophet. This is something that can be done. Once in an interfaith meeting, for example, the non-Muslim organizers wished to incorporate elements of the Islamic call to prayer in their final prayer service. “God is greatest, come to prayers, come to the good,” were the words they chose. They omitted the phrase, “I bear witness that Muhammad is the Messenger of God.” Had they included the reference to Muhammad, it would have meant a commitment to Islam. The original demand that the Qur’an made of Jews and Christians is simply to accept Muhammad as a Prophet and Islam as an authentic religion, without necessarily having to give up their faith.

The following verse occurs twice in the Qur’an in exactly the same way: “Surely those who have faith, those who are Jews and those who are Christians, and the Sabeans, whoever has faith in God, and the last day, and does good works, will have his reward with his Lord. No fear shall come upon them, nor will they grieve” (Q. 2:62; 5:69). Muslims have written much about the identity of the Sabeans. I would say that they represent all people who have no Book—that is, people who are not Jews and Christians but who have an idea of, and in some way worship, a transcendent Supreme Being, or God. There are few religious traditions, if any, that do not have some idea of a supreme being.

The early church always saw herself as an *ecclesia semper reformanda*, a church that is always in a state of reforming itself. This also characterizes Islam. Islam is a continuously self-reforming religion. In a commentary in the Qur’an on the meaning of animal sacrifices, we are told, “God does not receive either the fat or the blood of these animals, but what reaches Him from you is righteousness (*taqwā*)” (Q. 22: 37). It is not the sacrifices we offer but our intention behind them that eventually matters. Islam always tries to go beyond the institutionalization of religion in law and custom. We see this clearly in an important verse of the Qur’an, which in part reads as follows:

It is not righteousness that you turn your faces toward the East and the West [that is, in prayer]. True righteousness is this: to have faith in God and the last day, the angels, the scriptures, and the prophets; to give of one’s wealth, though it may be cherished, to the next of kin and the orphans, the destitute and the wayfarer, to the needy

and for the redemption of slaves; to observe regular worship and to give the obligatory alms. Those who fulfill their covenant having bound themselves by it and those who are patient in misfortune and adversity and in times of strife: these are true in their faith; these are God fearing. (Q. 2:177)

The essence of faith in both traditions is expressed in the Sermon on the Mount and in the parables of Jesus, in particular, the parable of the Good Samaritan and the apocalyptic parable in Matthew 25. Those who will be on God's right hand, the sheep as it were, will not be people who went to church every Sunday or prayed five times a day or who were bishops or popes; rather, it will be those who consoled the sorrowful, visited the sick, cared for prisoners, clothed the naked, and fed the hungry. Martin Luther may not like this, but this is what Jesus said.

In other sayings of Jesus, care for others is placed next to love of God. This, according to him, is the essence of the law and the prophets. Jesus, of course, was referring to the book of Leviticus. The idea that the best way to obey God is through care for our fellow human beings is essential to all three monotheistic faiths. Caring for the wayfarer in Islam, for example, can be translated in modern times into caring for those who have no home, who are always on the move, either as refugees or as homeless in our big cities, helping those who are in dire poverty, or who are sick. Obeying God means to clothe the naked, to care for the children, to do social work, in short, to work together toward achieving a just society.

On this we can all agree. This is work in God's cause, to which the Qur'an is calling Muslims, Jews, Christians, and all human beings. It is a call to worship God alone and to realize that part of the worship of God is to do good to His creatures.

As for the theological points, such as the question of revelation, the mystery of the Trinity, the divinity of Christ, the prophethood of Muhammad, these are points that need much patience and prayer. We cannot create harmony on the basis of these points. Perhaps in time Christians and Muslims will be able to relate to the ideas of the other without having to resort to a supermarket religion, where one can pick and choose the concepts one likes, or to compromise one's faith in any way. We must obey God as Muslims and as Christians, not as Muslims who are also Christians or Christians who are also Muslims. We are different, and it is God's will that we be different. God says in the Qur'an, "surely in the diversity of your languages and your colors [and that would include cultures as well], there is a divine sign if you can only understand" (Q. 30:22). Diversity is not bad; it is an act of divine mercy that we are different, that we can have a rich spirituality that takes different forms and different traditions.

We are also one humanity under God. Theological doctrines may divide us, but faith unites us. In faith, as Muslims and Christians trying to understand the will of God for our lives, we are all challenged by God to be Mus-

lims and Christians in the deepest possible sense. We are strangers in this world; in this we are together. We are together as strangers in faith, in a world that is dominated by brute power, materialism, and disunity. In Europe, in the Middle East, in South Asia, in South America, even in the American cities there is much poverty and pain.

What faith teaches us most, in my view, is humility before God. He is the king, and we are all His creatures. This is where the Islamic declaration *Allahu Akbar*, "Greater than all things is God," is a declaration that can have profound meaning for all of us, Muslims and Christians.

If we cannot be united on the basis of faith and liturgy or devotion, then we can at least try to understand why it is that our doctrines are different. We are different and we are what we are because it is God's wish. The Qur'an again states, "Had your Lord so wished he would have made all of humanity one *ummah*" (Q. 11:118). The challenge is this: "Vie with one another in the performance of good works. To God shall be your return and He will inform you of the things concerning which you have differed." Let us be grateful for our differences as they enrich our lives. But also, let us be humbly grateful for our similarities as members of one humanity. Faith itself is a stranger in the world. When wars that began while the Prophet Muhammad lay unburied tore the community apart, and when Christians killed one another during the centuries of the Inquisition and the period following the Reformation, faith was a stranger. We can perhaps find solace in the words of the Prophet Muhammad: "Islam came to the world stranger and it will return a stranger as it began. Blessed are the strangers."