"From Conversion to Conversation: Interfaith Dialogue in Post 911 America

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The twentieth-century witnessed a dramatic increase in the migration of Muslims to the American shores. In the last century, Islam became an integral part of the American religious landscape and gradually, Muslims became a visible part of the fabric of American society. Even though the Muslim community has been present in America since the late nineteenth century, there was limited integration with non-Muslims before the events of September 11, 2001.

However, in the past two years, Muslims have recognized that they cannot afford to live in impregnable, self-contained fortresses and that living in a pluralistic milieu requires an active engagement with the other. The events of September 11 also proved to the American Muslim community, as if any proof was needed, that pluralism in America is a social reality that it cannot escape from. In fact, many Muslims have become more visible, vocal, and extrovert while others have stressed their American rather than homeland identities. This indigenization of American Islam represents a silent revolution that many Muslims have been engaged in since September 2001.

Muslims have also realized that, due to the activities of terrorists, both their Islamic identity and American citizenship are at stake. The Muslim community has acknowledged that the silent majority syndrome has to end simply because Muslim acquiesce has encouraged an extremist expression of Islam. It is the extremists who have spoken on behalf of Islam as their acts of violence have drowned the silent voices of the Muslim majority. Furthermore, although many Muslim groups in America have

unequivocally denounced the violence perpetrated by Muslim terrorists, their voices and condemnations have been largely ignored by the media. As a matter of fact, many Americans have accused Muslims of tacitly approving the acts of Muslim terrorists. Thus, many Muslims have felt the need to integrate themselves in the mainstream American society so as to make their voices heard.

The Construction of an American Islamic Civic Identity

The process of the indigenization of American Islam is intertwined with the construction of a distinctly American Islamic civic identity. This process has expressed itself in different forms. Muslims have joined forces with various peace and anti-racist movements. Muslim groups have also engaged in various social programs like food drives and have sought to help homeless Americans.[1] For example, in October 2003, a new campaign called Ramadhan action for human rights was launched in Denver. In addition, since September 11, mosques have facilitated "open mosques" hours and have tried to become more "people friendly." Non-Muslims have been invited to visit the mosques at their convenience.

In some cases, Muslims have expressed their patriotism in more tangible ways. American flags have been visible outside mosques, Muslim houses and cars. The American Muslim civic identity can be also discerned from a recent advertisement placed by The Council of American Islamic Relations (CAIR) in some newspapers. It shows a Muslim girl, wearing a headscarf, stating quite proudly, "I am an American, I am a

[1] A good example of this is the social programs of the Muslim Intent on Learning and Activism (MILA), a group established in Denver in 2002. Providing food to indigent and homeless Americans are among the many community outreach activities it performs it also.

Muslim." Interestingly, the American identity precedes the Islamic. Rather than focusing on American foreign policy, Muslims now tend to concentrate more on reconstituting their identity as American Muslims. Increasingly, domestic rather than foreign issues have become very important for American Muslims. In all probability this is because as the second generation of Muslims in America identify with and assimilate in American culture, they develop a sense of patriotism leading to a greater politicization of the community and a sense of American national consciousness.

The History of Muslim-Christian Dialogue

In the sectarian milieu of seventh-century Arabia, Muslims encountered other monotheists like the Christians and Jews. These encounters generated inter-religious polemics, which are reflected in the Qur'anic verses, especially those that were revealed in Medina. In order to understand the Qur'anic pronouncement on and basis of interaction with the other, it is important to note that the Qur'an posits a universal morality for humankind that is conjoined to values ingrained in the conscience of all human beings (30:30). This suggests a universal, ethical language that all human beings can connect to and engage in. As the Qur'an states, "He (God) has inspired in [human beings] the good or evil [nature] of an act, whosoever has purified it (the soul) has succeeded, one who corrupts it has surely failed." (91:8-10). The Qur'anic concept of a universal moral order is thus grounded in the recognition of an innate disposition engraved in the human conscience. Through this notion, Islam embraced universal human values that could form the basis for interaction with a diverse "other."

The Qur'anic view of interaction with the other is interwoven to its view of a universal moral discourse that unites all human beings. Fundamental to the Qur'anic conception of peaceful co-existence is the view that human beings are united under one God (2:213). They are to strive towards virtuous deeds (5:48), for the most-noble person in the eyes of God is the one who is most pious (49:13). These and other verses command Muslims to build bridges of understanding and cooperation with fellow human beings so as to create a just social order.

In its discourse with Christians and Jews, the people of the book, the Qur'an invites them to this notion of a shared religious community based on the belief in one God. Thus, the Prophet Muhammad is instructed to tell them, "Say! O people of the book! Come to a word common between us and you, that we serve none but God, and that we associate not aught with Him, and do not some of us take others as Lords, apart from God. And if they turn their backs, say, 'bear witness that we are Muslims'" (3:64). The Qur'an envisioned a diverse community that was united under common moral values. Diversity and differences in faith were to be judged by God only since, "Isn't He (God) the best of judges"(95:8)?

The Qur'an also outlines the form that dialogue should take and the way in which it should be conducted. The Qur'an suggests that Muslim interaction with the other should not be restricted to an exchange of information. It should also reflect proper demeanor and attitude. As the Qur'an states, 'And discuss with them in the best way.' It further states, 'Do not discuss with the people of the book except in the best of ways, apart from those who are unjust among themselves' (29:46). Verses such as these reflect the Qur'an's response to those Muslims and non-Muslims who believe that the Qur'an

prohibits Muslims to interact with non-Muslims. Furthermore, verse states, 'God does not forbid you from establishing relations of generosity and just behavior with those who have not fought against you over your religion and who have not evicted you from your dwellings. God loves those who act fairly.'(60:8)

Historically, the Muslim encounter with Christians generated much debate, discussions, and even disputations between the two parties.[2] As the parties argued for the preponderance of their distinctive particular theological points and tried to refute the arguments of their interlocutors, early Muslim-Christian encounters took the form of polemics than dialogue.[3] For example, Timothy, who was head of the Nestorians in Iraq, had discussions with the 'Abbasid caliph al-Mahdi in 781.[4] In response to a question posed by the 'Abbasid Caliph, the Assyrian patriarch is reported to have said that Muhammad had walked in the path of the prophets.[5] John of Damascus, who held an administrative position under the Umayyads, refuted some Muslim beliefs. In particular, he questioned whether Muhammad was a true Prophet since he did not perform any

[2] Even the Prophet Muhammad is reported to have met and discussed with Christians from Najran. See Muhammad b. Ishaq, *The Life of Muhammad*, trans. A. Guillaume (London: Oxford University Press, 1955), 179.

[3] For a summary of Muslim polemics against Christians in the early history of Islam see Montgomery Watt, *Muslim-Christian Encounters*: Perceptions and Misperceptions (London and New York: Routledge, 1991), 65-66.

[4] Ibid. 63.

[5] David Kerr, "He Walked in the Path of the Prophets: Toward Christian Theological Recognition of the Prophethood of Muhammad" in *Christian-Muslim Encounters*, ed. Y. Haddad and Wadi Haddad (Gainsville: University Press of Florida, 1995), 426.

miracles.[6] In response to the Muslim charge that Christians worship the cross, John claimed that Muslims worship the black stone located at the Ka'aba.[7]

Most Muslim scholars were content to emphasize Christianity's deviation and corrupt beliefs and practices. Only a few scholars like al-Mas'udi and al-Shahrastani were well versed in Christianity and had read the Christian scriptures in great details. Ibn Hazm (d. 1064) wrote a polemical tract, refuting Christian doctrines especially pertaining to the divinity of Jesus.[8] Al-Ghazali also wrote a refutation of the divinity of Jesus.[9] Al-Shahrastani (d. 1153) refuted Christians in his work. He criticized Paul and other Christian doctrines.[10] As Hossein Nasr states, Jewish and Christian scriptures have rarely been studied seriously, and have often been subsumed under the category of abrogated texts or those which were interpolated by human beings.[11]

The encounters between Muslims and Christian were accompanied by stereotypical images regarding Islam and Muslims that were ingrained in the European psyche. Islam was depicted as false religion that deliberately perverted the truth. It was said to be a religion that was spread by the sword and was full of self-indulgence. The Prophet Muhammad was seen as the anti-christ and a false Prophet.[12]

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[6] Montgomery Watt, *Muslim-Christian Encounters*, 70.

[7] Ibid. 71. For details of recent see 'Izz al-Din, Ibrahim, "Islamic-Christian Dialogue: A Muslim View," in *Muslim-Christian Dialogue: Promise and Problems*, ed. M. Darrol Bryant and S. A. Ali (St. Paul: Paragon House, 1998), 16-17.

[8] Montgomery Watt, *Muslim-Christian Encounters*, 65, 72.

[9] Ibid, 67.

[10] Ibid. 69.

[11] Seyyed Hossein Nasr, "Comments on a Few Theological Issues in the Islamic-Christian Dialogue," in *Christian-Muslim Encounters*, ed. Y. Haddad, 461.

[12] See Maxime Rodinson, *Europe and the Mystique of Islam*, trans. R. Veinus, (London: Tauris, 2002).

The terrorist attacks of September 11 revived such prejudices of "Islam" as a religion that promotes violence and of Muslims as an inherently militant and irrational people. The actions of the terrorist have damaged the reputation and the future of Muslims worldwide have had to endure discrimination and even acts of violence perpetrated by fringe minority groups. As Armando Salvatore argues, 'the antagonisms are perpetuated by a growth industry of publications, audio-visual materials, internet sites, and pop cultures on both sides that frame the other as irrational and fanatical or imperialist and exploitative, respectively.[13] The more that Euro-American discourses and policies attack and distort Islam and Muslims, the more fuel this provides to Islamic extremists to generate their own anti-Western rhetoric and provocations.

In addition, the American global war on terror and the invasion of Iraq have revived the stereotypes and suspicions against Muslims, especially those of Middle Eastern origins. Furthermore, the vitriolic attacks on Islam and the Qur'an by some Christian fundamentalists have clearly exacerbated the current conflict in America. They have posited and projected Islam as inherently violent, and incompatible with western values and norms. Such attacks tend to destroy rather than build bridges and engender hatred. It therefore becomes imperative that Muslims engage in dialogue to counter such depictions of Islam and Muslims.

Dialogue since September 11, 2001

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[13] Armando Salvatore, *Islam and the Political Discourse of Modernity*, (Reading, NY: Ithaca Press, 1997), xvii.

Sulayman Nyang defines dialogue as 'a process by which members of the two religious communities try to build bridges between their respective groups as they jointly and separately grapple with the basic issues of life, individually and collectively, in the United States and seek to bring about greater understanding between the two communities not only in terms of their different definitions of self community, but also in terms of their attitudes toward each other's beliefs, rituals and festivals, and behavioral patterns.[14]

American Muslims have recognized the need to express themselves through a properly articulated intellectual discourse, so that they may be both physically and intellectually visible. They have sought to go beyond the history of hostility, caricature, and power struggles that have characterized relations between Christians and Muslims in the past. It is correct to state that the Muslims' struggle in America has been not only to co-exist with the other, but also to make themselves comprehensible in the American milieu, to de-mythify and de-code Islam and to challenge the negative characterization of Islam.

Especially since September 11, both Muslims and Christians in America have realized that it is better to speak with, rather than about, the other. The increased dialogue and interaction between Muslims and Christians represent a significant paradigm shift, from attempts at conversion of to those of conversation with the other. It has to be remembered that for most members of the Muslim community, dialogue between people of different faiths, in an environment of mutual respect and acceptance, is a relatively new phenomenon. In their own countries, Muslims did not, generally speaking, feel the

[14] Sulayman Nyang, "Challenges Facing Christian-Muslim Dialogue in the United States" in *Christian-Muslim Encounters*, ed. Y. Haddad, 328.

need to dialogue or converse with the other. Hence, engaging in dialogue with non-Muslims is a relatively new experience for most Muslims, since many of them are accustomed to preaching Islam and to refuting the beliefs of others.

The need to reach out and engage the wider American community has meant that the genre of religious programs offered at many Islamic centers has been re-structured to be more ecumenical and broad in outlook. For example, there is a greater emphasis on interfaith dialogue at the Islamic House of Wisdom (IHW) in Dearborn, Michigan. The IHW's ad book of 2001 carries a message from the Imam of the center, Muhammad 'Ali Ilahi. In this he states, 'Our friends and co-workers, the classmates of our children, our neighbors, our bosses, our elected officials – all these need to be educated to the truth and beauty of Islam in order that the Muslim community be effectively integrated into American life. We need to be educated ourselves, in order that we may distinguish between insulating ourselves from the secular influences of American society and isolating ourselves from the rest of the world. That we cannot do, because we have a responsibility to propagate our faith, which isolation makes impossible.'

The Nature of Inter-faith Dialogue

The purpose of interfaith dialogue is to negate caricatures and stereotypes of the other. Thus, it becomes a tool for a better understanding between different faith groups, and to promote peaceful co-existence.

However, dialogue needs to progress beyond negating misconceptions and understanding the beliefs and praxis of others. Dialogue is also interwoven with understanding in a fundamental way what it means to believe in a particular religious

tradition, and to attempt to enter the heart of the partner in dialogue. Muslims, for example, need to attempt to understand what it means for Christians to affirm Christ as the savior and the significant role that the doctrine of trinity plays in Christianity just as Christians need to comprehend the pivotal role of the Prophet and the Qur'an in the lives of Muslims.

Thus, those who engage in dialogue not only relate their tradition but also what is meaningful in it, how they experience and express what is sacred within their tradition. An essential component in dialogue is the willingness to reexamine one's faith in the light of how others relate to their tradition and the ability to strengthen or adjust one's own engagement and interaction with the sacred based on the experiences of the other. Understanding the faith of others should strengthen, rather than weaken, a person's commitment to his or her tradition.

For example, I recently read that when Professor Cantwell Smith was asked if he was a Christian he responded, "Ask my neighbor." That short, yet profound reply, made me reflect on my social responsibilities, especially in view of the fact that the festive season is approaching. We become enriched in our own faith tradition by interacting with the other. Dialogue between religions does not only entail relating the intensity or depth of our own faith but also to witness and grow in it while understanding and respecting the faith of the other. Students in my comparative religions class, which I offer at the University of Denver, have often remarked that their faith and commitment to their own religious tradition has been strengthened by learning about other traditions. At a personal level, the concept of a very loving, immanent, and personal deity was imbibed in me by

my Christian friends for, unlike them, I was bought up to conceive of God as a dictator and a chastiser.

Dialogue is also important as it provides the platform for each group to define itself. Each group is able to better express what it believes, and, in the process, to understand more deeply the meaning of what it means to be committed to a particular faith tradition. The process of self-definition requires that each group expresses itself based on its own terms and for the partner in dialogue to accept and respect that self-definition. In the process, our preconceived notions of the other are challenged and often dramatically altered. This is the first step to moving beyond the stereotypes and misrepresentations of the past.[15] It is improper for Muslims, for example, to assume that their often-distorted image and understanding of Christianity is how Christians understand themselves. The ability to change one's views and perceptions about the other is an important component if interaction between people of different religious background is to lead to a more peaceful co-existence between them. The purpose of engaging in interfaith dialogue is not to reach doctrinal agreement but to increase sensitivity to others. As the Parliament of the World's Religions affirmed in Chicago in 1993, "Earth cannot be changed for the better unless the consciousness of the individuals is changed first.[16]

As dialogue provides access to windows of understanding of how others define themselves and as it challenges us grow in our own faith through the experience of the other, dialogue further allows us to reevaluate how we have viewed the other. It also

[15] For rules on dialogue, see M. Darrol Bryant, "Overcoming History: On the Possibilities of Muslim-Christian Dialogue," in *Muslim-Christian Dialogue:* ed. M. Darrol Bryant and S. A. Ali , 34.

[16] David Chappell, "Interreligious Dialogue, Globalization, and Human Rights: Buddhist Reflections on Interdependence and the Declaration," in *Human Rights and Responsibilities in the World Religions*, eds. Joseph Runzo, Nancy Martin, and Arvinda Sharma, (Oxford: Oneworld, 2003), 191.

necessitates a shift in paradigm, asking us to embrace those we have previously excluded or demonized. The challenge for both Muslims and Christians when they converse is to seek opportunities for interpretations that can make a community see the enemy in a new way. It is essential that we move away from defining ourselves over and above an enemy "other." This is an important measure to establish peaceful relationship.[17] In this sense, I believe, that we need to go beyond tolerating or understanding the other.[18] More than ever, there is a need to embrace the other.[19] This suggests a different function of dialogue, one that can bring the hearts, rather than just the minds, of the people together. Especially after September 11, dialogue has become an effective act of affirmation, of listening, and of different hearts coming together. Muslims and non-Muslims have met to share their experience of faith, convictions, and to engage one another so as to help construct a more humane and just world.

Dialogue in the Community

One of the most important functions of an inter-faith meeting is to inform and be informed about the other. For religious dialogue to be fruitful, it should not be confined to close circles or groups of people. Most community members are not aware of the dialogues that occur or the results of the dialogue. It is also important that religious

[17] See the example cited by Marc Gopin, *Holy War, Holy Peace: How Religion Can Bring Peace to the Middle East* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 44.

[18] The root of the term tolerance comes from the medieval toxicology and pharmacology, marking how much poison a body could tolerate before it would succumb to death. See Omid Safi, "Introduction: The Times are A-Changin; - A Muslim Quest for Justice, Gender Equality, and Pluralism," in *Progessive Muslims: On Justice, Gender and Pluralism*, ed. Omid Safi, (Oxford: Oneworld, 2003), 24.

[19] See Miroslav Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace*, *A Theological Exploration of Identity, Otherness and Reconciliation*, (Nashville: Abingdon, 1996).

communities, rather than just scholars, talk to each other. When I am invited to dialogue, I encourage members of the Muslim community to join me. When refreshments are served after the dialogue, Muslims and Christians build bonds of friendship that are often renewed at various times during the year. Those who attend the dialogue are able to know members from another community in a deep and personal way, they become real people and not simply representatives of certain other religious traditions. Peaceful coexistence is only possible when we no longer see a group as the other but as a concrete human community with ancient values and norms. When communities interact and talk, the fruits of inter-faith dialogue can endure well past the event of the dialogue itself.

One of the most moving experiences that I had in an inter-faith dialogue gathering was when the Muslim community in Denver was invited to an Episcopalian Church (the Saint John's Cathedral). At the time for prayer, the call to prayer was recited in the Cathedral and a local imam led the prayer. Many of our Christian friends were visibly moved both by the *adhan* and the prayer and commented that witnessing Muslims pray in a Cathedral was a very spiritually experience for them.

Increasingly, dialogue takes place not only in the conferences but also in schools and work places and even in the neighborhood. Communities, not just scholars, talk about their religious beliefs and terrorism. It is important that those who dialogue are connected to their own communities otherwise the dialogue will be confined to a select group within a community. Many 'specialists' who engage in dialogue with different groups are disconnected from their own religious community. It is not possible to have a real understanding of religious traditions and the dynamics that permeate them if those who dialogue are not actively involved in their communities. One cannot influence believers if

the specialists' circle is isolated in an ivory tower and does not report back on the nature of its work to each of the respective religious communities. It is also essential that the participants of the dialogue relay the views of their partners in dialogue to members of their community.

In Denver, dialogue between the different religious groups is sometimes broadcast live on local television stations. This is an effective and important way to expose the local community to the beliefs and practices of other religious traditions. In some instances, viewers have even been invited to call in to the programs to voice their opinions or ask questions from the panelists.

The Challenges to Dialogue

Inter-faith dialogue is also fraught with challenges that need to be addressed. Essentially, trust is an important element when human beings meet to discuss and share their personal beliefs. Muslims have yet to be convinced that dialogue is a way for reconciliation or expressing their beliefs. Given the history of Christian missionary works in Muslim countries, many Muslims see dialogue as a subtle form of evangelization. For example, in January 2004 the Kanuga conference will be holding a Christian-Muslim reconciliation conference in North Carolina. To allay the fears of the local Muslim community, I was asked to write a letter assuring Muslims that the purpose of the conference was to reach a better understanding of rather than convert the other. Rather than treating their partners in dialogue as a threat that should be repudiated, it is important that Muslims treat them as a challenge that has to be understood. If Muslims

continue to see the outside world as a threat, they will search for excuses rather than solutions to their isolation in the American milieu.

Just as Muslims feel that they are misunderstood and need to propagate the "correct and true Islam," they, in turn, must undertake to understand the beliefs and practices of the other. When I initially offered a comparative religions class (called Judaism, Christianity, and Islam), I noticed that many Muslim students did not enroll in it for fear that they might be converted to or be influenced by the other monotheistic religions. It was only when I assured them that the class would educate them about other religions that some Muslim students felt comfortable in enrolling in this class. Interestingly, Christian and Jewish students showed no such apprehension.

One of the major obstacles to an understanding of the other is when we compare our ideals with the realities of the other. Viewed in this context, the violence perpetrated by members of one party is often contrasted with the ideals of peace and love of the other. A more appropriate basis of comparison is to contrast our ideals with theirs or our realities with the realities of those we dialogue. When communities compare their respective realities, they often discover that both of them have been unjust to each other, and, in the name of religion, have committed atrocious acts. Indeed, disputes between groups often arise when one party believes that it is the only injured group or victim and refuses to accept its role in the conflict. Dialogue provides the challenge and opportunity for both Muslims and non-Muslims to acknowledge that they have both inflicted and suffered much pain. For this to occur, dialogue needs to go beyond merely understanding the other; it has also to provide the platform for people to acknowledge and experience the pain of the other. Since September 11, Muslims often make others aware of what it

means to be a Muslim in America, and that the demonization of Islam, increasing surveillance of Muslims, and restriction of civil liberties especially of Arab Muslims has been extremely painful for many Muslims. As they relate their experiences in the past two years, the partners in dialogue have both communicated and internalized the pain. As a friend commented, "Dialogue should make me see the other as a brother."

In addition, other factors challenge the Muslim community's capacity to actively engage in dialogue. The arrival of newer migrants has impinged on the American Muslim community as it experiences Islam mainly through the phenomenon of 'imported Islam' and are highly resistant to change. Newer immigrants tend to revive traditional norms and impose a conservative and extraneous expression of Islam. Immigrants also emphasize the public demonstration of Islam, the segregation of sexes and a general disdain of American culture and norms.

In addition, immigrants also bring a more intense form of Islam, one whose discourse is frequently more polemic, re-asserting thereby the traditional demarcating lines between Islam and other religions. As I have discussed elsewhere, increased migration of the Muslim community has also engendered increased tensions between the Sunnis and Shi'is in America.[20] Resistance to engage in dialogue within the American Muslim community can also be attributed to the relatively young age of the centers. Since most religious centers in America have been established recently, Muslims have used their limited financial resources to establish and consolidate their centers rather than to build bridges outside the community. A recent report published by the Council on American-Islamic Relations (CAIR) indicates that half the mosques surveyed were

[20] Liyakatali Takim, "Foreign Influences on American Shi'ism" in *The Muslim World*, 90, (Fall, 2000).

founded by 1980 and the other half were founded after that. The vast majority of existing mosques (87 percent) have been established since 1970.[21]

This observation is corroborated from the Shi'i experience in America. A survey that I conducted in 1996 indicates that the mean years of existence of Shi'i institutions in North America is 10.28 years. This indicates that the Shi'i community in North America is a relatively young community. The survey further suggests that most institutions have limited financial resources as most members attempt to establish themselves financially. In response to a question, a center stated: 'Until recently, we had only 10-15 families from India and Pakistan. In the last 3-4 years many families arrived from Iran, Iraq and Afghanistan. Many are students from Iran and others are refugees from Iraq. Most of the population is young and struggling economically.'

In America, Shi'is have been more concerned with maintaining their distinct communal and sectarian identity than with engaging in dialogue with other faith groups. Moreover, since they form a small percentage of the wider Muslim community in America, the primary focus for the Shi'i community has been the preservation rather than extension of their spiritual boundaries. This is corroborated by a question posed in my survey. Few centers are involved in any extensive dialogue with other Muslim or non-Muslim communities. Instead, more stress is laid on providing basic religious services to members accentuating thereby the distinct beliefs and rituals of Shi'i Islam. It should be noted that since Shi'is do not engage in inter-faith dialogue in their own countries of origins, they have not been able to construct an effective medium of dialogue with non-Muslims in America. In their own countries, many Shi'is have been trained to vindicate

[21] See Council on American-Islamic Relations, *The Mosque in America: A National Portrait*, www.cair-net.org (April 2001) 3, 24.

the preponderance of Shi‘i faith and liturgical practices over corresponding Sunni praxis. The emphasis on sectarian polemics in their own countries has limited the exposure that Shi‘is have to other monotheistic religions.

Dialogue and the Challenge of Diversity

For dialogue to be meaningful, it is also important to convey to the other that religious space is contested by many factions and that there is a myriad of views within each religious tradition. Hence, the partners in dialogue represent just one, rather than all, of these positions. The Muslim community, for example, constitutes an assembly of diverse actors and agents, interests, beliefs, values, and ideas that often differ and disagree with each other. An exposition of the Islamic diversity will challenge the myth of a homogeneous and static Muslim world and will demonstrate the “rainbow nature” of Islam. Furthermore, acknowledging diversity and the plurality of views held within one’s own tradition is indicative of its ability to tolerate and accept views that are not considered normative.

Non-Muslim exposure to different interpretations within the Islamic world can educate not only about Islam but also about Muslims, the differences between them, and the hermeneutical tradition within Islam. It is crucial that those who dialogue describe and explain what they represent in their religious families — what trend, the extent of it, their relations with the wider community, etc. It is also important to know to whom one is speaking: it is no less essential to know to whom one is not speaking. Inter-religious dialogue should make it possible for each partner better to understand the various theories,

the points shared, the differences and conflicts that are present in other traditions.[22] Such an exposition destroys the idea of Islam as a singular and an undifferentiated phenomenon.

It is tempting to delude oneself into believing that when they are engaged in dialogue, Muslims are talking to Christians and that each group is faithfully representing its tradition. Thus, many believe that the *whole* of the Christian or Muslim world are represented in a dialogue. This is, of course, very misleading, because the majority group claims to represents the real or orthodox Islam. In fact, here lies the danger in dialogue, for it often marginalizes minority groups whose voices remain unheard in such conversations. Most of the dialogue in America occurs between Protestant Christians and Sunni Muslims, excluding the Catholics and Shi'is. Thus, the dissenting views of such groups remain unheard. It is common for one to continue to dialogue with a group that one feels comfortable talking to. This further perpetuates the conversation between dominant groups and alienates the voices of minority groups. One of the challenges of dialogue is to seek out and engage different groups, even though they may not represent the "official" or mainstream Islam. For a long time, the Ahmadis in America represented Islam and were viewed as the dominant group. Increased migration since the 1970s has meant that they have been largely marginalized and are not involved in dialogue in an extensive way.

Furthermore, it is also important to realize that not only are there different and nuanced interpretations of Islam, there are also a wide variety of Muslims in America. Whereas the early Muslims came mainly from the Arab world, post war immigrants

[22] Tariq Ramadan, *Western Muslims and the Future of Islam*, (Oxford, NY: Oxford University Press, 2004), 209.

represent a wide array of linguistic, cultural and national origins. Increased immigration from various parts of the world has resulted in the American Muslim community becoming more fragmented as bonds of common faith are replaced by efficacious ties to common origins, ethnicity and culture. The process of ethnicization involves the formation of associations that are bound by distinctive cultural and ethnic characteristics. These include shared language, cultural norms and the affirmation of a common history of a people. This tends to differentiate and even alienate Muslims from other Muslims who come from a different ethnic and cultural background.

Action-Oriented Dialogue

When people are engaged in dialogue, they soon realize that they hold a great number of convictions and values in common and face similar difficulties and challenges. Recognition of common values and human concerns allows a group to work with others. This is because peaceful relation between human beings is grounded on a community's construction of an order based on egalitarianism, justice, and a shared concern for the moral and social well-being of all its citizens. In their interaction with the other, Muslims need to take heed of the ecumenical and universal verses of the Qur'an and to engage Americans as part of the greater human family that has emerged from the same common origins. Principles of universal ethics and moral values as enunciated by the Qur'an entail that human beings unite in their civil roles, so that, inspired by shared principles, they jointly uphold human concerns, and express their desire for justice and dignity, moral standards so as to ensure that the rights of all be respected, that discrimination be outlawed, that human dignity be protected. As Khalid Abou el-Fadl

correctly points out, " A universal religion must be accessible or accountable to others so that it can remain pertinent to humanity at large."[23] The challenge for American Muslims is to translate and implement the universal ideals of the Qur'an to the contemporary American scene.

More than just conversations, collaborative actions have become more important since September 11 as Muslims have realized that their concerns cannot stop at their borders and that they have to embrace and integrate with the wider American community. Muslims have felt that conversations with their non-Muslim friends ought to lead to shared commitment so as to address humanitarian issues that concern both communities. This sense of shared commitment and concern to address humanitarian issues has resulted in dialogue in action rather than mere conversation.

As Tariq Ramadhan correctly states, 'One of the best testimonies that a religious or spiritual tradition can give of itself lies in acts of solidarity between its adherents and others. To defend the dignity of the latter, to fight so that our societies do not produce indignity, to work together to support marginalized and neglected people, will certainly help us know one another better, but it will, above all, make known the essential message that shines at the heart of our traditions: never neglect your brother in humanity and learn to love him or at least to serve him. More broadly, we have to act together so that the body of values that forms the basis of our ethics is not relegated to such a private and secluded sphere that it becomes inoperative and socially dead.'[24]

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[23] Khaled Abou El Fadl, " The Ugly Modern and the Modern Ugly: Reclaiming the beautiful in Islam," in *Progressive Muslims*, ed. Omid Safi, 41.

[24] Tariq Ramadan, *Western Muslims*, 212.

Muslims in America are more free to express themselves than those living in most Muslim countries. Thus, American Muslims need to take a stand with their co-religionists and speak out against injustices perpetrated by various Muslim governments against minorities, anti-Christian riots, and acts of violence in places like Nigeria and Pakistan. Muslims must also be more vocal against all acts of terrorism in different parts of the world and the suppression of the rights of women. Stated differently, Muslims need to go beyond the classical bifurcation of the abode of Islam and the abode of war. They need to articulate a theory of international relations that will incorporate notions of dignity, freedom of conscience, rights of minorities, and gender equality based on the notion of universal moral values. Muslims also feel that their Christian partners need to speak against injustices various Muslim groups, the occupation in Palestine, and the suppression of rights of Muslims and civil liberties in America after 911.

There are many examples of action-oriented dialogue. In Toronto, a local Shi‘a mosque was located next to a synagogue. Since the mosque and the temple had limited parking space, they decided to share their parking lots. The dividing line between the two lots was popularly known as the ‘Gaza strip’. In 1990, during the first gulf war, the shared parking arrangements led to the two communities visiting and talking to each other. They have even led to cooperation in various fields and projects. The communities participated in many humanitarian projects such as providing food and shelter for the homeless. Even the youths of the two communities started conversing with each other. They shared their experiences on how to deal with peer pressure, how to attract the youth back to their places of worship, and ways of engaging senior citizens within the respective communities. In fact, when some anti-Muslim graffiti was put on the walls of

the mosque, members of the Jewish community helped in erasing the offensive material. In 1995, to reflect and publicize the spirit of co-operation and collaborative action between the two communities, a documentary aptly called 'A Lot to Share' was broadcast across Canada. Action oriented dialogue that is constructed on the basis of kinship and collaborative works increases communal friendship and instills a sense of shared responsibility with others.

Themes in Dialogues

An important dimension in dialogue is the formulation of topics that address the needs and questions of the communities concerned. In Denver, as part of the Abrahamic Initiative, the St. John's Cathedral organized a series of meetings between Muslims, Jews and Christians. The themes covered were as diverse as they were fascinating. They covered issues like authority and scripture, mysticism, the law, challenges in the American milieu, the holy days, life cycle of a typical Jew, Christian and Muslim and fundamentalism in the three religions. The result was a truly enriching experience for the participants.

Given the common negative depiction of Islam in the media, it is also important, I feel, that the conversation emphasize the history of Muslim co-existence with the other so as to destroy the stereo-typical images and myths that many hold about Islam. It is important to remember that extremist strands exist in all major religious traditions and that just as the Reverend Jerry Falwell does not represent the whole of Christianity, Usama bin Laden does not speak on behalf of all Muslims.[25]

[25] On examples of violence in different religious traditions see Mark Juergensmeyer, *Terror in the Mind of God: The Global Rise of Religious Violence*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000).

There have been various occasions in Islamic history when Muslims not only tolerated but even protected minority groups, especially Jews and Christians, the people of the book. Baghdad was, at one point, home to the House of Wisdom *(bayt al-hikma)*. This institution was built by the Caliph Al-Ma'mun (d. 833) as a center of learning and translation for scholars from around the world. With a Hunayn ibn Ishaq, a Christian, as the director of the translation academy, the research institute was at the center of the movement to bring the philosophical heritage of the Greeks, Persians, and Indians within the fold of the Islamic quest for wisdom.

Spain is another fine example where Muslims not only co-existed peacefully with Christians and Jews, but also protected and shared their scientific accomplishments with their counterparts. Jewish and Christian scholars worked in conjunction with their Muslim counterparts in the construction of a truly great civilization.[26] Christians and Jews were also involved in the Royal Court and in the intellectual life Cordoba. Historically, there was also an Islamic presence in Southern France, Italy, and Sicily, with Arabic being a language known to the highly educated. Under Ottoman rule, there was a profound Muslim presence in Turkey, the Balkans, and Eastern Europe. For much of Islamic history, Muslim societies have been remarkably open to the outside world.[27]

The vast expanse of the Muslim world inevitably meant that it came to encompass a variety of civilizational and cultural forms. By the tenth and eleventh centuries, the Muslim-majority world showed a remarkable variety of institutional forms from North Africa to South Asia, up to and including the hinterland of the Chinese empire, and soon thereafter emerged as a dominant force in Southeast Asia. Historically, Islam has exhibited much tolerance to

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[26] roman catholics on maimoneds, Aquinas, legacy of spain etc

[27] Dale Eickelman, "Islam and Ethical Pluralism," in *Islamic Political Ethics: Civil Society, Pluralism and* Conflict, ed. Sohail Hashmi (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002), 118.

members of other faith communities such as in Spain, India, the holy lands, Turkey, Africa, and Indonesia. To portray Islam as intrinsically violent and incompatible with Western values is to ignore Muslim engagement with and contribution to Western civilization. The tendency to view Islam through violence and militant lens distorts the view that Islam has a rich cultural heritage and precepts that necessitate co-existence with the other. Recounting such anecdotes in Christian-Muslim encounters serve two purposes; they not only destroy the myth of Islam as an intrinsically violent and militant religion but also provide a paradigm for co-existence and collaborative actions between the people of the two faith groups.

An important dimension in dialogue is the integrity and honesty of the participants. It is vital that all the religious traditions be involved in a kind of self-criticism and indicate to their partners in dialogue that religious positions in their own traditions are continuously being reevaluated. Muslims, for example, need to show that, especially after the events of September 11, they are engaged in a process of self-critique and are confronted with the challenge of contextual hermeneutics in dealing with the pronouncements of the Qur'an on issues like warfare, human rights, and freedom of conscience and expression. Muslim scholars and jurists have to engage in hermeneutic and interpretive exercises to provide a coherent re-evaluation of classical formulations and to reassert the Qur'anic ecumenical and inclusivist vision of peace.

Muslims need to differentiate more clearly the sacred scripture and its later exegesis that is imbedded in many sacred texts. Scholars need to explain to the Muslim community that much of the exegetical literature was formulated when Muslims were in conflict with Christians. Thus, there is a need to reformulate or reinterpret the traditional exegesis otherwise Muslims will continue to perpetuate that conflict. This exercise is contingent on

recognizing that Muslims are not bound to erstwhile juridical or exegetical hermeneutics. Hence, there is a need for Muslims to separate the voice of God from the voice of human beings, and to differentiate between the Qur'anic vision and the socio-political context in which that vision was interpreted and articulated by classical and medieval exegetes.

The tension between the peaceful and militant strains of Islam can be resolved only through the reexamination of the specific contexts of the rulings and the ways in which they were conditioned by the times. This re-interpretive task demands that Muslims undertake the task of re-evaluating the classical and medieval juridical corpus even though some may construe this as a kind of disloyalty toward their own community.

Such topical issues, when discussed with non-Muslims, are important in conveying the view that far from being a static and rigid tradition, there is much discourse within the Muslim community and that the community is attempting to distance itself from the extremist articulation of Islam. The recently published book titled 'Progressive Muslims' is a clear attempt at seeking alternative interpretations of Islam and refuting the views of those who present a static and monolithic Islam.

Sharing spiritual experiences within one's traditions helps in the spiritual growth, emohasixing the spiritual dimensions present in all major faith groups, can relate to the spiritual experiences of the other, helps one to develop one's own spirituality.