

From Tolerance to Dialogue: A Muslim Perspective on Interfaith Dialogue with Christians

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This article is an introduction to interfaith dialogue between Muslims and Christians. It begins with some autobiographical information about how the author, a Canadian Muslim of Pakistani origins, came to be a professor of theology in a Jesuit university in Southern California. It then moves to a discussion of problematic verses in the Qur'an that would seem to discourage interfaith dialogue, followed by those verses that promote alliance between Muslims and Christians. Next, I mention inclusive and exclusive views in both Islam and Christianity before moving to an examination of Jesus as a focal point for dialogue between Muslims and Christians. The article ends with a description of pluralism and recent interfaith movements within the Muslim world.

This article is dedicated to the memory of Sr. Elizabeth, the Catholic nun who was the doctor that delivered me into the world at St. Raphael's Hospital in Faisalabad, Pakistan. From that beginning, I learned about the nuances of missionary life. The complexities of the good and bad of missionary work were introduced to me by one of my first teachers, Mr. Victor Hahn, who was my teacher for grades three to five at Oakwood Public School in Oakville, Ontario, Canada. It was at his funeral that I learned that he was a Baptist, a missionary before he became a teacher. Through him, I learned to love English literature, beginning with the wonderful Christian allegory of *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*. Because of the love of reading that he instilled in me, I continued to study English in high school, and then at the University of Toronto. It was through the study of English literature, specifically the work of the visionary artist William Blake, that I first became attracted to theology. You could not understand Blake's poetry or art without understanding the symbolic world that he had created, which in turn was deeply influenced by the Bible. In learning more about the Bible, I realized that I also needed to learn more about my own Muslim religious tradition. At the time that my family immigrated to Canada from Pakistan in 1970, there were some 30,000 Muslims in the entire country. There were very few mosques then, and fewer Islamic schools. Like many Muslim students, my first chance to learn about my own

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religious tradition was in a university classroom. In taking a number of courses in Middle East and Islamic Studies, I realized for the first time about the depth and breadth of my own religious tradition.

Through accidents of history and geography (what religious people call “grace”), I had the great privilege of being mentored by the greatest Canadian scholar of Islam (and one of the two or three greatest scholars of religion) of the past century, Professor Wilfred Cantwell Smith. Coincidentally, he was another missionary, who spent six years in Lahore some two decades before my birth. He and his wife Muriel had retired back to their native Toronto following his retirement from Harvard University.

I moved on to do a PhD with Professors Willard Oxtoby, Jane McAuliffe, and Michael Marmura, (respectively, a Presbyterian, a Catholic, and an Anglican) at what had been renamed as the Centre for the Study of Religion at the University of Toronto. There, I was privileged to do work in both the study of Islam, and in early Christianity. This allowed me to articulate in my academic life what I had been doing in my personal life, namely, interfaith dialogue. I realize the tremendous privilege that I have had, to be able to engage in interfaith dialogue for the past several decades.

Specifically, when it comes to Asian Christians and Muslims, there may be some interesting points of intersection. About 15 years ago, an uncle of mine moved from New Jersey to Texas, settling in a suburb of Houston. As a Muslim of Pakistani origin, he was concerned about how he would fit in with his new Baptist neighbours. I told him not to worry, and his transition was indeed a smooth one. Of course, at first, he was an anomaly to his Baptist neighbours, being ethnically and religiously different from them. But then they both realized that they had much in common. They were God-fearing men who prayed regularly, did not drink alcohol, had conservative family values especially when it came to sexuality and women’s roles, and believed in the important public role that religion could play in society. In doing so, they realized that they had more in common with each other than with more secular neighbours.

It is my hope that we can learn from each other. This, for me, is the key to interfaith dialogue. Not that we try to convert each other, but that we help each other to find what is meaningful in our own traditions. Let me begin with some of the more problematic verses in the Qur’an that would seem to discourage interfaith dialogue.

Problematic Verses

While Muhammad and his first followers were concerned mainly with the polytheism that was prevalent in pre-Islamic Arabia, tensions with Jews and Christians were also present. Not surprisingly, while the Qur’an says many positive things about these traditions, it also includes critiques. For example, the following verse speaks against taking non-Muslims as friends: “Oh you who

believe! Do not take the Jews and the Christians for friends; they are friends of each other; and whoever among you takes them for a friend, then surely he is one of them; surely God does not guide the unjust people” (5:51). Some Muslims have read this verse literally, and have chosen not to form friendships with Jews and Christians. However, this is clearly not the only way the verse can be interpreted, since many Muslims delight in their friendship with these people whom the Qur’an itself calls, respectfully, “People of the Book.” The key phrase in the verse is a warning against “unjust people,” suggesting that one should not befriend those who are unjust, whether they be Jews, Christians or Muslims.

A longer section from the Qur’an makes it clear that Muslims are to avoid those who are actively trying to cause them to compromise their faith in God or to distance themselves from their faith community. In the following quote are allusions to the polytheists who drove Muhammad and his community out of Mecca and to Abraham, who was called to leave his polytheistic family for the land of Canaan:

Oh you who believe! Do not take My [God’s] enemy and your enemy for friends: would you offer them love while they deny what has come to you of the truth, driving out the Messenger and yourselves because you believe in God, your Lord? If you go forth struggling hard in My path and seeking My pleasure, would you manifest love to them? And I know what you conceal and what you manifest; and whoever of you does this, he indeed has gone astray from the straight path. If they find you, they will be your enemies, and will stretch forth towards you their hands and their tongues with evil, and they ardently desire that you may disbelieve. Your relationship would not profit you, nor your children on the day of resurrection; God will decide between you; and God sees what you do. Indeed, there is for you a good example in Abraham and those with him when they said to their people: ‘Surely we are clear of you and of what you serve besides God; we declare ourselves to be clear of you, and enmity and hatred have appeared between us and you forever until you believe in God alone’ (60:1–4).

While the Qur’an upholds Abraham’s example, it also contains calls to Jews and Christians to uphold their own ideals. Again, it is important to understand the context in which the Qur’an was written. According to Islamic tradition, the Jews of Medina sought to work with the pagan Meccans to overthrow the Muslims. Thus, as the following quote shows, the people to be avoided are “those among” the Children of Israel who rejected their own faith:

Oh People of the Book! exceed not in your religion the bounds, trespassing beyond the truth, nor follow the vain desires of people who went wrong in times gone by – who misled many, and strayed from the

right way. Curses were pronounced by the tongues of David and of Jesus the son of Mary on those among the Children of Israel who rejected faith, because they disobeyed and persisted in excesses... You see many of them turning in friendship to the unbelievers. Evil indeed is that which their souls have sent forward before them, so that God's wrath is on them, and in torment will they abide. If only they had believed in God, in the Prophet, and in what had been revealed to him, never would they have taken them for friends and protectors, but most of them are rebellious wrong-doers (5:77–81).

This was not a blanket condemnation on all Jews, but simply a reminder that they had been warned in the past against disobeying God and following their own selfish desires: Again, people are judged by the things that they do. By contrast, the same passage goes on to praise Christians who – again in the context of the Arabian experience of the first Muslim community – seemed to share an affinity with the teachings of Muhammad:

Strongest among people in enmity to the believers will you find the Jews and Polytheists; and nearest among them in love to the believers will you find those who say, 'We are Christians': because among these are men devoted to learning and men who have renounced the world, and they are not arrogant. And when they listen to the revelation received by the Messenger, you shall see their eyes overflowing with tears, for they recognise the truth. They pray: 'Our Lord! we believe; write us down among the witnesses. What cause can we have not to believe in God and the truth which has come to us, seeing that we long for our Lord to admit us to the company of the righteous?' And for this their prayer God has rewarded them with gardens, with rivers flowing underneath, their eternal home. Such is the reward of those who do good (5:82 – 85).

Again, it is people who do evil works and who oppose the worship of the one God that are to be avoided, whether they be Jewish, Christian or Muslim. There are also passages that are critical of Muslims who show disregard for others. Chapter 107, "The Small Kindness," expresses this admonishment in a nutshell:

In the Name of God the Compassionate the Merciful
 Have you seen the one who calls the day of judgment a lie?
 That is the one who treats the orphan harshly,
 Who does not encourage the feeding of the needy.
 Woe to those who pray,
 Who are unmindful of their prayers.
 Those who would be seen,
 But refuse the small kindness.

It should be clear from these verses that everyone will be judged by God; no one group of people has a guaranteed ticket to heaven. Muslims must behave appropriately, and those who do not will be punished by God. Conversely, non-Muslims who do the right things, worship God, and observe their duties to the people around them will be rewarded by God.

Verses of alliance and dialogue

In a remarkable passage, the Qur'an speaks about the creation of humanity, and about which people are better than others: "O humanity! Truly We [God] created you from a male and a female, and made you into nations and tribes that you might know each other. Truly the most honoured of you in the sight of God is the most God-conscious of you. Truly God is Knowing, Aware" (49:13). There are four key points in this verse. First, the passage is addressed to all of humanity, not only to Muslims. Second, the passage mentions that the creation of humanity into distinct groupings comes from God and is a positive value. Third, it encourages people to transcend their differences and learn from each other. Finally, the passage does not say that Muslims are by definition better than other people, but that the best people are those who are aware of God.

The Qur'an affirms that interfaith relationships are possible, and offers some principles of interfaith behaviour. In 5:48, for example, God says: "For every one of you did we appoint a law and a way, and if God had pleased, God would have made you a single people, but that God might try you in what God gave you, therefore strive with one another to hasten to virtuous deeds; to God you will all return, so God will let you know that in which you differed." Again, in 2:147–148, "The Truth is from your Lord; so be not at all in doubt. To each is a goal to which God turns them; then strive together towards all that is good. Wherever you are, God will bring you together. For God has power over all things." Finally, 2:256 states that "there is no compulsion in religion, truth stands clear from error," clearly opposing forced or coerced conversion and in favour of interfaith dialogue among people who also worship one God.

People of the Book

In the Qur'an, Muslims are continually reminded of their relationship with the "People of the Book" (*ahl al-kitab*) – those who have received an earlier revelation from God. Most Muslims understand these people to include Christians, Jews, and Zoroastrians. The Qur'an allows that Muslims and the People of the Book may eat together, and that Muslim men may marry Jewish, Christian, or Zoroastrian women: "This day the good things are allowed to you; the food of those who have been given the Book is lawful for you and your food is lawful for them; and also the chaste from among the believing women and the chaste from among those who have been given the Book before you; when you have given them their dowries and married them, not fornicating

with them or taking them for secret concubines” (5:5). This verse speaks to the earlier mention of friendship. How can one think that Muslims cannot befriend Jews and Christians if they are encouraged to eat together and intermarry?

Another Qur’anic verse is even more explicit about the righteousness of faithful Jews and Christians and the reward of such righteousness: “Some of the People of the Book are a wholesome nation. They recite God’s signs in the watches of the night, prostrating themselves, having faith in God and the last day, bidding to honour and forbidding dishonour, and vying with one another in good deeds. They are among the wholesome. Whatever good they do, they will not be denied its reward” (3:113–115). The Qur’an, therefore, envisions a peaceful coexistence that comes from a common revelation and a common God. If they do come into conflict, then they should remember the common God that they worship. “Argue not with the People of the Book” we are told, “unless it be in a better way, except with such of them as do wrong; and say: ‘We believe in that which has been revealed to us and revealed to you; our God and your God is One, and to God do we surrender’” (29:46).

Polytheists

The Qur’an is not nearly as conciliatory toward people other than the People of the Book. Since Islam is a strictly monotheistic religion, Muslims believe that the most grievous sin is polytheism, or the worship of gods other than the one true God. Muslims have often had strained or hostile relationships with polytheists and atheists, just as Christians have in their history (for example, in their relationship with “pagan” indigenous peoples of North America). It was in the context of the warfare between the polytheists of Mecca and Muhammad’s community in Medina that the following verses were revealed: “But when the forbidden months are past then fight and slay the polytheists wherever you find them” (9:5). However, since those early years of establishing the Muslim community, Muslims and polytheists have managed to co-exist in many settings. The country with the largest number of Muslims is Indonesia, where the dominant religious traditions before Islam were Hinduism, Buddhism, indigenous traditions, and Dutch Christianity. The Muslims who spread Islam in Indonesia did not conduct a wholesale slaughter of “pagans” in the country. The country with the third-largest Muslim population is India. Both within India and between India and Pakistan, sectarian hatred and violence is a sad reality. However, much of the violence between Hindus, Muslims, Sikhs, and Christians in India shows religion being used as a powerful political symbol and force. As in other areas of sectarian violence, such as Northern Ireland, demagogues and other power-hungry political figures use religion to incite people against each other for what may be economic or political grievances.

The Qur’an is clear in commanding Muslims to always act out of justice, and not out of hate: “Oh you who believe! Be upright for God as witnesses to justice,

and let not hatred of a people incite you to not act equitably; act equitably, that is nearer to piety, and observe your duty to God. Surely God is aware of what you do” (5:8). Muslims are therefore called to treat people on the basis of how they behave, not because they identify themselves as Muslims, monotheists, or polytheists. While some Muslims have been extremely intolerant and violent towards other people – including other Muslims – it is important to remember that Muslims as a rule try to take seriously the call to coexist peacefully with their non-Muslim neighbours.

Exclusive and inclusive views

In both the Christian and Muslim communities there are large groups who believe that it is only in their particular faith that salvation is found. Some conservative Christians and Muslims have no interest in dialogue – only in debate and in conversion to their particular tradition. But one must be careful not to assume that all Christians and Muslims are of that mind. For example, since the Second Vatican Council, the Roman Catholic Church – while officially holding that there is not salvation outside the church – has taught that the Church rejects nothing that is true and holy in the great world religions. Indeed, it recognizes that their rules and teachings “often reflect a ray of that Truth which enlightens all men.”² One of the documents that came out of that council, *Lumen Gentium* (Light of Nations), specifically mentions Islam: “But the plan of salvation also includes those who acknowledge the Creator, in the first place among whom are the Muslims: these profess to hold the faith of Abraham, and together with us they adore the one, merciful God, mankind’s judge on the last day.”³

An even more inclusive vision is shared by the United Church of Canada, the largest Protestant Church in Canada. In 2004, the United Church published a study document entitled *That We May Know Each Other: United Church—Muslim Relations Today*. The subtitle of the document was indicative of its goal: “Toward a United Church of Canada understanding of the relationship between Christianity and Islam in the Canadian context.” This document was adopted by the United Church at its 39th General Council in 2006.⁴

North American Muslims have also pursued interfaith relationships. African American Muslims, who make up at least 25 percent of American Muslims, have been especially active. I cannot think of a single African American mosque that has not had substantial outreach to Christians. After the devastation of Hurricane Katrina in 2005, the mosque led by Imam Mahmoud Abdul Rauf in

² Second Vatican Council, *Nostra Aetate* (Declaration on the Relation of the Church to Non-Christian Religions), 2.

³ *Lumen Gentium* (Dogmatic Constitution of the Church), 16.

⁴ The document is available for free download from the following web page of the United Church of Canada: < <http://www.united-church.ca/sales/publications/400000126>>.

Gulfport, Mississippi, did substantial work with other communities of faith to help the victims. In the area of dialogue, I think of many examples. The American Islamic Congress, under the leadership of Harvard University Professor Ali Asani, publishes a "Guide to Muslim Interfaith Dialogue" which is distributed to Muslims through mosques. In Los Angeles, the Islamic Center of Southern California has also done a tremendous amount of interfaith work with Jewish and Christian communities. Early in 2006 when the Ismaili community in Los Angeles marked the birthday of the Prophet Muhammad, one of the event's keynote speakers was Karen Torjesen, a Christian who is the Dean of the School of Religion at Claremont Graduate University. In November of 2008, 40 mosques and 40 synagogues across the United States joined together in a weekend of twinning. This was supported by both the Islamic Society of North America and the Muslim Public Affairs Council, and coordinated by the Foundation for Ethnic Understanding.⁵

In 2007, a number of Muslim scholars, clerics and intellectuals issued a call to Christian leaders with the publication of the document *A Common Word Between Us and You*.⁶ That document calls Christians and Muslims into dialogue based on the two great commandments in each tradition, love of God and love of one's neighbour. The document was sponsored by Jordan, whose King Abdullah II has been a major proponent of interfaith dialogue in the Muslim world. In June of 2008, the Saudi King Abdullah sponsored a conference on dialogue among Muslims in Mecca. This was followed in July by an interfaith conference organized in Madrid. In January of 2009, Al-Azhar University in Cairo, one of the major seats of Sunni learning (and the oldest university in the world), organized a conference of Western Muslim scholars of Islam to dialogue with their scholars on interfaith and Islam in the West. Clearly, interfaith initiatives have found a home in the Muslim world.

Besides denominational statements and conversations over recent years, Christians and Muslims committed to social justice have often found common ground with each other. One thinks, for example, of the excellent work that Mennonite Central Committee (MCC) has done with Palestinians, both in North America and in Israel/Palestine. MCC has sponsored interfaith delegations among North Americans, Palestinians, and Israelis so that people can learn more about the conflict. They have helped to teach Palestinians (85 percent of whom are Muslim) about conflict resolution, and have helped to teach Israelis about the injustices that Palestinians have experienced. MCC has also helped with several relief projects in Palestine.

⁵ For more information see the web page of the FFEU at < http://www.ffeu.org/article_twinning.htm>.

⁶ Available on the web page: < <http://www.acommonword.com/>>. [Editor's Note: for A Common Word initiative, see Douglas Pratt's "An Uncommon Call: Prospect for a New Dialogue with Islam?" in this issue.]

On this continent, Muslims can be found serving Christians and serving alongside Christians in their works of social service and charity. In Toronto, they work in interfaith efforts to shelter the homeless during winter. In Los Angeles, the Islamic Center of Southern California has started a food bank to feed the homeless in the area, almost all of whom are non-Muslims. For many of the homeless who are served, it is their first time inside a mosque. It is these people, who do not simply engage in interfaith dialogue as an intellectual exercise, but also find themselves called to make a difference in the lives of others, who represent the inclusive spirit at work. Exclusive views can help some in our own community, while inclusive views can make for a more just world for all.

Jesus as a focal point

Another bridge toward inclusivity is the regard that both Christians and Muslims have for Jesus, Mary, John the Baptist, and Zechariah (the father of John), all of whom are mentioned in the Qur'an. Jesus, in particular, is an important prophet for Muslims, and is mentioned in 15 chapters and 93 verses of the Qur'an. It may surprise Christians that Muslims have collected more than 300 sayings of Jesus over the centuries. Tarif Khalidi's *The Muslim Jesus: Sayings and Stories in Islamic Literature* brings these together from "scattered works of ethics and popular devotion, belles-lettres, works of Sufism, anthologies of wisdom, and histories of prophets and saints."⁷ Many Muslims are familiar with several of these sayings. My own favourite is this one: "Jesus was asked, 'Spirit and Word of God, who is the most seditious of men?' He replied, 'The scholar who is in error. If a scholar errs, a host of people will fall into error because of him.'"⁸

Jesus therefore serves as a focal point for Christian-Muslim dialogue in a way that he does not in Christian-Jewish dialogue. Even though Jesus was Jewish, he is not recognized in any significant way by the Jewish tradition. Muslims, however, agree with Christians about the importance of Jesus, even though they differ greatly on what they believe about Jesus.

These differences are nevertheless points of discussion that can bring Christians and Muslims together in meaningful dialogue that, if done right, can be respectful and fruitful. There are some key points of convergence and divergence around their views of Jesus. Although Muslims believe that Jesus was born of Mary, a virgin, they do not believe this made him divine. The Qur'an is explicit on this point: "They disbelieve who say 'God is Christ, the son of Mary.' Christ said: 'Oh Children of Israel, serve God, my Lord and your Lord. Whoever joins other gods with God, God has forbidden them the

⁷ Tarif Khalidi, *The Muslim Jesus: Sayings and Stories in Islamic Literature* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2001), 3.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 61.

garden, their dwelling shall be the fire. There will be no helpers for those who do wrong” (5:72). While Muslims accept Christ as Messiah, they do not believe that he is divine. In this way, Muslims are like Jews, thinking that the Christian doctrine of the Trinity detracts from a pure monotheism. Some Muslims have misunderstood Christian doctrine to think that Christians worship three gods, but this is of course an incorrect interpretation of the Trinity.

In the Qur’an, Jesus is described by many names. Most often, he is referred to by his proper name, Jesus. The title “Son of Mary” occurs 23 times in the Qur’an, but only once in the New Testament (Mark 6:3). Other designations are: servant of God; prophet; messenger; word; spirit; sign; example; witness; a mercy; eminent; brought near to God; upright; and blessed. A number of miracles are also associated with Jesus. In addition to speaking from the cradle as an infant, he creates birds from clay and they come to life and fly away (reminiscent of a story from the apocryphal *Infancy Gospel of Thomas*). Jesus heals the blind and the lepers; raises the dead; and feeds his followers from a heavenly table. Eleven times, the Qur’an also refers to Jesus as “messiah.” or “anointed one” – a direct parallel with the same term in Hebrew. The word messiah is translated into Greek as Christ, and thus assumes divine significance. But the differences between Christian and Muslim usages of the term are significant.

Unlike Christians, when Muslims think of Jesus as “messiah” or “Christ,” they do not think of Jesus as God, or God incarnate. “The messiah, Jesus son of Mary, was only the messenger of God, and God’s word that God committed to Mary, and a spirit from God” (4:169). Naturally, then, Muslims do not believe that Jesus is our Saviour. Like Jews, Muslims do not believe in the notion of original sin, and so do not think that we need to be saved by Jesus’ death. Like Jews, Muslims also do not believe that someone else can atone for our sins, and so do not believe that Jesus was sacrificed for our sins. The Qur’an even denies that Jesus was crucified on the cross.

But like the New Testament, the Qur’an does portray Jesus as a prophet of social justice. This comes through in a charming story of how Mary was once criticized by some in her community who could not accept the virgin birth of Jesus. In the story, Mary points to the child, indicating that he should speak for himself. “But they said, ‘How shall we speak to one who is still in the cradle, a little child?’ Jesus said, ‘Behold, I am God’s servant; God has given me the book and made me a prophet. God has made me blessed, wherever I may be; and God has enjoined me to pray and to give alms so long as I live, and likewise to cherish my mother; God has not made me arrogant or unblessed. Peace be upon me the day I was born, and the day I die, and the day I am raised up alive” (Qur’an 19:30-35). Jesus thus reflects a call to action and social justice; one must pray and take care of the poor. Clearly, there are both points of agreement as well as substantial differences between Muslim and Christian understandings

of Jesus, as well as the relationship between Jesus and God. But the esteem in which both faith communities hold Jesus should keep them in dialogue.

Pluralism

The challenge of dialogue is closely related to what has become a key characteristic of Western society: pluralism. But let me be clear about what I mean by the word. First, pluralism is not the same thing as diversity. People from different religions and ethnic backgrounds may be present in one place, but unless they are involved in a constructive engagement with one another, there is no pluralism. In other words, pluralism is the positive value we place on diversity. Second, the goal of pluralism is not simply tolerance of the other, but rather an active attempt to arrive at an understanding. One can, for example, tolerate a neighbour about whom one remains thoroughly ignorant. Third, pluralism is not the same thing as relativism. Far from simply ignoring the profound differences among and within religious traditions, pluralism is committed to engaging the very differences that we have, to gain a deeper sense of each other's commitments.

North American Muslims are in a position to influence the rest of the Muslim world in a way that opens doors toward pluralism. In countries where Muslims are in the majority, people of other religious traditions often suffer restriction, and sometimes persecution. Baha'is in Iran and Christians in Pakistan, for example, have been harassed, had their property taken, and even imprisoned for their activities. It is easy to be taught to hate these groups when they are such small minorities. As a religious minority, we North American Muslims can show our co-religionists what pluralism is. Here, we can live safely and securely, practicing our faith without having to convert or torment our non-Muslim neighbours (or for that matter, Muslims who aren't "Muslim enough" for the self-righteous). The stereotypes that we may have learned (for example that Christians worship three gods and are therefore polytheistic) fall away when we are invited to a Christian worship service and realize that we are worshipping the same one God.

In order to do interfaith dialogue properly, one must have not only a deep understanding of one's own faith, but also an understanding and appreciation of the faith of the dialogue partner. This can only be done in a pluralistic context, where it is possible to have a deep knowledge of more than one faith. I believe that accepting pluralism is a sign of firm faith and confidence, not a sign of doubt. North American Muslims need to commit ourselves to pluralism, not because we have to but because we should. It is part of the vision imparted to us by the Qur'an and the example of the Prophet.

North American Muslims can also model dialogue within the Muslim community. All too often, this is a neglected aspect of religious dialogue. In Toronto, I as a Sunni had the profound privilege of sometimes saying the

Friday afternoon prayer side by-side with a Shi'a colleague in a mosque built by Albanians, led by a Bosnian imam. In other parts of the Muslim world, this would be almost unthinkable, especially where there is sectarian violence between Sunnis and Shi'as. Particularly in this era of frequent religious conflict, Muslims have a great opportunity to return to the pluralistic vision of the Qur'an, and to establish co-operative relations with other religious communities. As we have seen, the Qur'an declares that God deliberately chose not to create humanity with no differences. In fact, the Qur'an speaks about God willing our differences and our disputes: "We [God] have made some of these messengers to excel the others; among them are they to whom God spoke, and some of them God exalted by rank. And We gave clear miracles to Jesus the son of Mary, and strengthened him with the holy spirit. If God had pleased, those after them would not have fought one with another after clear arguments had come to them, but they disagreed; so there were some of them who believed and others who denied. And if God had pleased, they would not have fought one with another, but God brings about what God intends" (2:253). Our differences and ensuing disputes are not to be feared, denied or eradicated. God teaches us through our differences. It is through dialogue that we learn about ourselves, about others, and in so doing, perhaps also about God.

It is also through dialogue that North Americans will appreciate the important Islamic roots of Western civilization. Much of the Greek philosophical tradition was preserved by the Arab Muslim world. In the Middle Ages, Aristotle was known as the pre-eminent philosopher in Europe and the Muslim world, but an Arab Muslim named al-Farabi was the pre-eminent commentator on Aristotle. Muslim philosophers Ibn Rushd and Ibn Sina – Latinized as Averroes and Avicenna – are critical to understanding Western philosophy in the Middle Ages. Arabic translations of Greek texts were once more translated into Latin and read by the thinkers who would begin the Renaissance. One cannot understand the European tradition of lyric and epic poetry without examining the Muslim roots of that tradition. Muslim contributions to science, medicine, and mathematics are better known in the West than the Muslim preservation and continuation of the Greek philosophical tradition. Early Arab Muslim rulers brought together Muslim and non-Muslim scientists and scholars from various parts of the Muslim world in a common pursuit of knowledge. We call our numbers Arabic numbers, and we use them in place of Roman numerals. Arab Muslim mathematicians brought the concept of zero from India, and transmitted it to the European world. European medical schools used Arabic anatomy texts until the late middle ages. Algebra and algorithm are but two of the many scientific words that have their roots in the names of Muslim scholars. Muslims and Christians thus share a common civilization. Indeed, some Christians may have more in common theologically with some Muslims than with other Christians. The reverse is also true for Muslims who

may find the behaviour of their Christian neighbours to be more “muslim” (in the literal sense of living a life of submission to God) than that of some of their fellow Muslims. Through dialogue, we can begin to understand our common heritage, which can lead us to work together on a common future.

God reaches out to everyone

As mentioned earlier, I completed my PhD dissertation on Muslim communities in Toronto under the supervision of the late Professor Willard Oxtoby. In addition to being an academic, he was an ordained Presbyterian minister who also represented an inclusive view of Christianity. He ended one of his books, *The Meaning of Other Faiths* with the following words:

At no time have I ever thought of myself as anything other than a Christian. At no time have I ever supposed that God could not adequately reach out to me, to challenge and to comfort, in my own Christian faith and community. Yet at no time have I ever supposed that God could not also reach out to other persons in their traditions and communities as fully and as satisfyingly as he has to me in mine. At no time have I ever felt I would be justified in seeking to uproot an adherent of another tradition from his faithful following of that tradition. My Christianity – including my sense of Christian ministry – has commanded that I be open to learn from the faith of others.⁹

I would hope that we can all have something of Oxtoby’s openness, and that those of us who are religious can believe that God works not just in our own communities of faith, but in all others as well.

⁹ Willard Oxtoby, *The Meaning of Other Faiths* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1983), 111.