

COMMITTEE VII

In Search for Understanding
Among the Monotheistic
Religions

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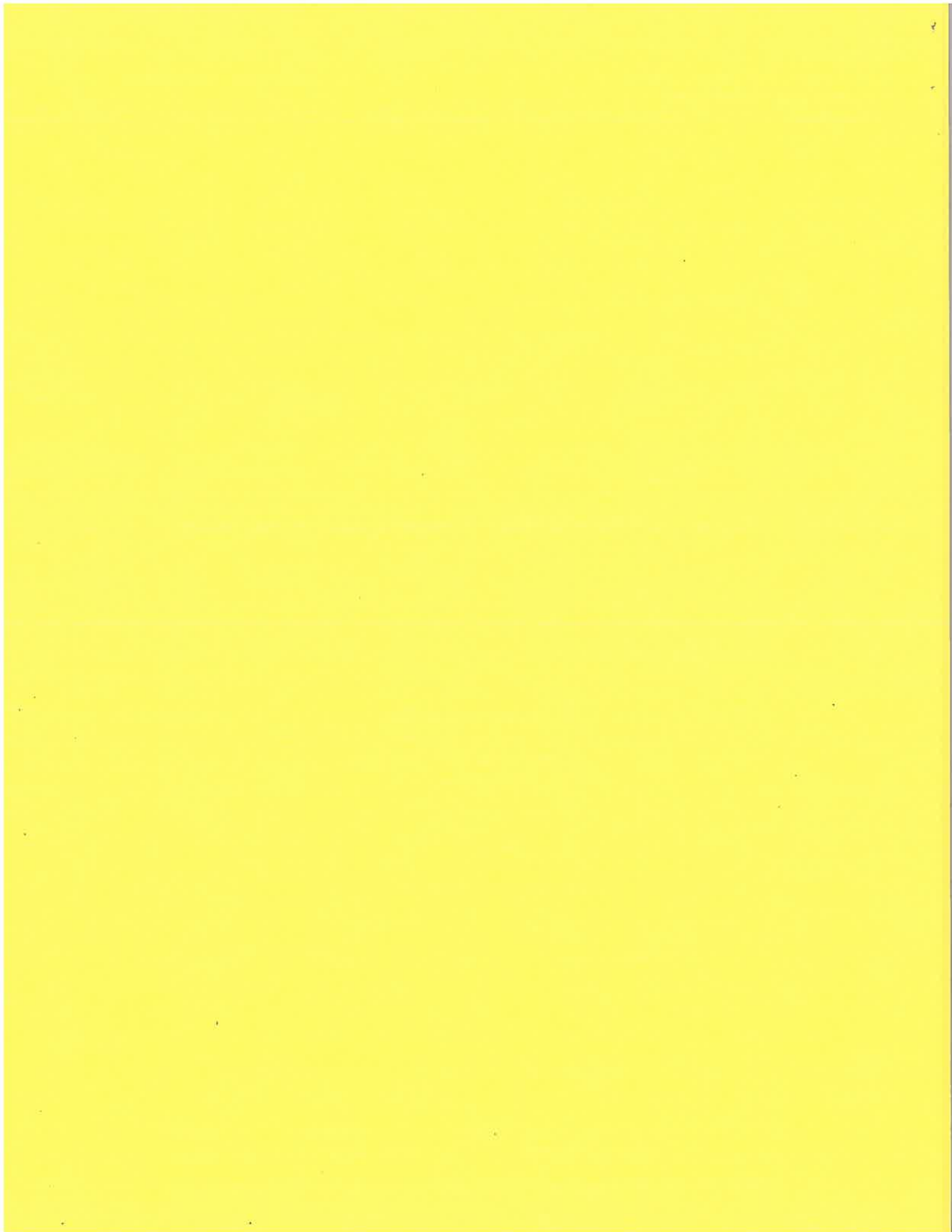
ISLAM: A PERSPECTIVE ON HUMANITY AND OTHER FAITHS

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Sadek J. Sulaiman
Senior Fellow
The Middle East Institute
Washington, D. C.

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It is in the nature of every religion - as a self-contained system of ritual, tradition, doctrine, values and goals - to be constantly conscious of its own distinctive identity vis-a-vis the other religions. Strictly speaking, each living religion would seem to admit of but one true or superior religion:

itself. From its standpoint, the other belief systems are either pseudo-religion, or once authentic, divinely revealed faiths subsequently corrupted over the passage of time.

Among the three monotheistic religions - Judaism, Christianity, and Islam - perceptions are asymmetrical: none views the other(s) as the other(s) views it. The oldest, Judaism, proceeds on the assumption that it alone has been the true, God-given religion; it hence considers both Christianity and Islam as without divine authenticity. Christianity, coming at the chronological center, considers Judaism as superseded by its own (Christian) message, and considers Islam as divinely unauthoritative and, therefore, redundant. Islam, the last to follow, views both Judaism and Christianity as only preceding phases of Islam itself, therefore, updated, and thereby, superseded, by its own (Islamic) message. Religions with

non-theistic, polytheistic, and pantheistic views, on the other hand, have shared a longstanding mutual theological estrangement with each and all of their monotheistic counterparts. In the background lies a long and often turbulent history of cultural rivalry, power struggle and pursuit of economic and political dominance, giving rise to, and perennially feeding, a habitual mistrust by one religion of the others.

Religio-centrism, as such, in one form or another, would appear to be intrinsic to all religious systems. Its nature and premise, however, may vary from one religion to another, and also from one view to another held within the one religion. An extreme religio-centric standpoint would, by definition, be one in which a religion sees itself as the only form or center for true religious experience, and summarily dismisses the other religions and their belief-content as without divine provenience. A somewhat less extreme position may rest more upon a claim of greater authenticity or comprehensiveness, than upon one of exclusive authenticity; nevertheless, it, too, would rate one's own religion as a priori superior to all the rest. Both standpoints, when stressed, present difficulty in terms of building a fair and open-minded dialogue towards interreligious understanding; the one would preclude the possibility of having such a dialogue in the first place, the other would preclude its success in any significant measure if a dialogue were to be held.

Religio-centrism in the three monotheistic religions apparently feeds on one or the other of these two standpoints;

a realistic approach to dealing with it with a view to minimizing its negative impact on interreligious understanding would, therefore, have to begin with a thoughtful examination of the creeds of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam to see if, in essence, there does (or does not) exist in each of the three, a basic and inherent universal orientation that allows for a doctrinal position that is distanced from excessive claims of either exclusivity or unqualified superiority, and that provides for the doctrinal expansiveness to recognize truth to be variously present in all three religions, as, indeed, in all faiths centered in the cognizance of the absolute unity, transcendence and ultimacy of God and in the commitment to righteous living. With such an approach, the question would not have to be as to how might these religions dissolve their doctrinal differences (a feat no one realistically expects them ever to accomplish) in order to achieve interreligious understanding, but rather as to how might they, notwithstanding their perennial differences, realize that objective by allowing for a free, fair and enlightened airing of the insights and interpretations offered in each system of belief concerning questions of both speculative and practical nature that have been and are of common and continuing interest to people everywhere.

This paper presents an Islamic perspective. It draws on an exposition of the relevant doctrines, as understood directly from the Quran, that shape Islam's conception of (a) the absolute unity of God, (b) the integrated unity of humankind, (c) the

essential unity of the divine message, and (d) the bonding relationship between the Islamic message and the messages of Judaism and Christianity, as well as of the other faiths, in the historical development of the monotheistic creed among humankind. It further proposes to show that, within this conceptual Islamic framework a definitive position exists that requires the Islamic U'mmah to (a) maintain just peace and ethical harmony with peoples of all backgrounds, (b) respect all faiths based on belief in One God and commitment to righteous works, and (c) preserve, beyond that all, an essential concord with the People of the Book.

This position and its conceptual framework develop from the essence and integrated thrust of the three all-encompassing, key understandings (U'sul) of the Islamic creed: (1) that God is One (Tawhid); (2) that God gives special guidance to humankind through the medium of men chosen as His apostles (Nubuwwah); and (3) that all human beings (as all Creation) ultimately return to God, each individual self to account for its lifetime conduct on earth (M'aad).

UNITY OF MANKIND; UNITY OF MESSAGE

Tawhid is the key understanding in Islam. It constitutes the conceptual essence that pervades all Islamic thought. That essence is conceiving God as One - Absolute, Transcendent, and Ultimate. It is the Quranic contention that the first vision that humans had of God was one of divine unity, the vision of an unseen great being who must have created all that humans can

sense about and around them, and that this vision gradually began to undergo a change marking a sort of retrogression expressing itself in the concept of multiplicity, or of associating with God the things of creation. So basic is Tawhid in the Islamic creed that no commitment to God is considered genuine or potent that does not emanate from a frame of mind essentially centered in Tawhid. The opposite of Tawhid, Shirk, - or associating other gods with God, or attributing to others absolute qualities which belong to none other than God - is so intensely antithetical to the Islamic faith that it is cited as the only sin that God will not forgive any person - "God forgiveth not that partners should be set up with Him; but He forgiveth anything else, to whom He pleaseth; to set up partners with God is to devise a sin most heinous indeed." (Q.4/48).

The centrality of Tawhid in Islam derives from the Islamic thesis that in failing to develop a quintessential consciousness of the Oneness of God a human being also fails to develop a rational, cohesive and integrated understanding of his/her world; then with a fragmental view of life, society, and one's own role and priorities, one loses one's rational and ethical moorings, drifts into inconsistent attitudes and conduct, and ultimately fails to realize a wholesome and integrated living experience both on the individual and social scales.

A crucial flaw that thus arises from a lack of the Tawhid consciousness is the distortion that afflicts one's view of the unity of humankind. In the Tawhid consciousness, all humanity

stands one and basically undifferentiated in the sight of the One God: all humans being equally free and independent of one another and all equally dependent on Him. Removed from it, one's view of the human status degenerates, giving way to all kinds of irrational, self-limiting, and antisocial behavior, on both the individual and collective levels, resulting in injustice, coercion, exploitation, racial prejudice, and a false sense of a priori superiority over others. "Behold, Luqman said to his son by way of instruction: 'O my son ! Join not in worship (others) with God; for false worship is indeed the highest wrong-doing.'" (Q.31/13)

From this Tawhid nucleus of the Islamic faith, and as a corollary to it, it follows that humanity is one; that it as a whole, and not any particular people, is the focus of God's attention; that, therefore, God's message to humanity is one; and that the values by which one grows to be a better person in the measure of God are the same for all humankind. "O humankind!" commands the Quran, "Reverence your Guardian Lord, who created you from a single person, created of like nature his/her mate, and from them twain scattered (like seeds) countless men and women; Reverence God, through Whom ye demand your mutual (rights), and reverence the wombs (that bore you); for God ever watches over you" (Q.4/1). In another place, augmenting this theme of the unity of humankind, the Quran enjoins various communities to get to know one another, and declares the universality of the criteria by which God judges human beings.

Says the Quran: "O humankind! We created you from a single (pair) of a male and a female, and made you into nations and tribes, that ye may know each other (not that ye may despise each other). Verily the most honored of you in the sight of God is (he/she who is) the most righteous of you, and God has full knowledge and is well acquainted (with all things)" (Q.49/13). Both verses, we note, are addressed to all humankind and not only to the Muslims. Before God they are all one, all children of Adam (and Eve) whom "...We have honored ... and given them for sustenance things good and pure; and conferred on them special favors, above a great part of Our Creation" (Q.17/70). Diversity, as long as it is not detrimental to, and destructive of, each group's particularities, is not demeaned as an aberration, but rather taken as a norm from which peoples of different backgrounds may complementarily come together to form a more perfect society. In the words of Dr. Adil Ozdemir, the whole message of the Quran revolves around the theme of unity in God. The Quran tells us, he points out, that there is no higher impulsion to unify humanity than God. It tells us that God is the most comprehensive reality to actualize unity. Thus, Muhammad's mission is addressed to all humankind - "We did send you but as mercy for the worlds," (Q.21/107) - and declared as one that confirms all previous monotheistic faiths - "When a messenger from God came to them confirming that which they have..." (Q.2/89). In the final analysis, every individual person's salvation depends on his/her own enlightenment and

righteous conduct, regardless of one's background or group affiliation - "By the Soul, and the proportion and order given to it, and its enlightenment as to its wrong and its right; - truly he/she succeeds that purifies it, and he/she fails that corrupts it (Q.91/7-10).

Thus, in its fullness, Tawhid encompasses all aspects of the Islamic faith, from metaphysics to matters practical, and all the basic conceptions of the Islamic overview of reality. By its core conception of unity, it asserts that not only God is One, but that His message is one, that humanity is one, standing undifferentiated in the sight of God except in the measure of righteousness attained by each individual, and each society, in thought, word, and action; that the best potential for growth in righteousness is assured when an individual, or society, is centered in an integrated overview of reality implicit in Tawhid. By its conception of rationalism, Tawhid comprehends the human mind as inherently endowed with the power of judgment, with the capacity to discriminate between right and wrong; its thrust, as such, is not to limit or undermine reason, but rather to infuse the mind with divine consciousness that would enhance its reasoning faculty for cognizance of truth wherever it is present. Reason and revelation being inherently compatible in Tawhid, where contradiction appears it merely reflects a contemporaneous shortcoming in our intellectual grasp of that essential compatibility. The Quran, using such phraseology as "Do you not reason? Do you not understand? Do you not remember?;

For those who reflect; For those who understand; For those who see (the truth) (Q.2/44-7376;32/27;39/42;40/58) repeatedly appeals to reason for rectification of detrimental human behavior and resolution of contradictory views and attitudes; even in calling to belief in revelation it seeks out the rational rather than the emotional response. The thrust of the Quranic emphasis on reason denotes also repudiation of myth and rejection of inherency of paradox in nature; it demands acquiescence to proof and evidence, and openness to and pursuit of new, verified knowledge as an essential element in the intellectual and moral development of the human personality and in the progress of the human civilization on earth.

By its conception of tolerance, reflected in the terms Sa'ah (expansiveness) and Yusr (facility), Tawhid is cognizant of the fact that diversity of religions is due to environment and history, and that while the basic principles of God's law remain the same, its form, expression and application have varied from time to time; therefore, beyond religious diversity, one must not fail to perceive al_Din_al_Hanif, the primordial religion of God with which all human beings are born, in which they remain essentially rooted, and from which they derive sustenance and direction in their lives. Yusr states that adherence to religion need not involve undue hardship, that "God intends every facility for you; He does not want to put you to difficulties..."

(Q.2/185) - the purpose of all true religion being to facilitate moral and intellectual growth of individual and society and not

merely to insist on ritual and sacrament, which, devoid of essence, hardly serve any useful purpose.

ONE MESSAGE, MANY MESSENGERS

Nubuwwah is the second key understanding in Islam. It denotes the medium through which God has time and again sent special and timely guidance to humankind. Many individuals have served as that medium - individuals chosen among others to bring God's truth and guidance, which they received through Revelation, into greater focus for all fellow human beings to see and live by.

Nubuwwah, or prophecy, as such, is comprehended in Islam as a universal phenomenon. The Quran mentions by name the more widely known among the prophets, but emphatically reminds Muhammad that there are other prophets of whom he has not been told. "There are some whose story We have related to thee; and some whose story We have not related to thee," (Q.40/78); but they all form one brotherhood, serve the One True God, and owe their duty to Him and Him alone (23/52). Muhammad belongs in the succession of that great company of humans, and "...is no more than an apostle: many were the apostles that passed away before him. If he died or were slain, will ye then turn back on your heels?" (Q.3/144) asks the Quran pointing to the distinction between the transience of the messenger and the permanence of the message. And lest his people perceived him and his mission in some superstitious light, Muhammad is commanded: "Say: I am but a human being like yourselves, (but) the inspiration has come to

me that your God is One God: whoever expects to meet his Lord, let him work righteousness, and, in the worship of his Lord, admit no one as partner" (Q.18/110).

The oneness and universality of God's message is iterated throughout the Quran. From Adam and Eve to posterity, God's message is indivisible and universally suitable for every society, at any time and place. The Quran calls it Islam, - surrender in peace and harmony to God's Plan, - finally revealed in complete and perfect form to Muhammad Ibn Abdulla, in the heartland of Arabia, some 600 years after the lifetime of Jesus Christ.

"Abraham was not Jew nor yet a Christian; but he was true in Faith (a Muslim) and joined not gods with God," says the Quran (Q.3/76) of this common ancestral patriarch of the People of the Book. Raising the foundations of the Ka'ba (the holy shrine in Mecca), he and his son Ismail pray: "... Our Lord! make of us Muslims, bowing to Thy (Will), and of our progeny a people Muslim, bowing to Thy (Will)" (Q.2/128). And again, "And this was the legacy that Abraham left to his sons, and so did Jacob: O my sons! God hath chosen the Faith for you; then die not except in the Faith of Islam" (Q.2/132).

By the same token, Islam mandates belief not only in Muhammad as a messenger of God and in the Quran as divine revelation but also in the messengers of God who came before him and in the scripture revealed to them. "Say ye," commands the Quran, "We believe in God, and the revelation given to us, and to

Abraham, Ismail, Issac, Jacob, and the Tribes, and that given to Moses and Jesus, and that given to (all) Prophets from their Lord; we make no difference between one and another of them; and we bow to God (in Islam)" (Q.2/136). For the Muslims, then, there have been many messengers, both those known to Judaism, Christianity and Islam and those others not known to them; but there has been only one standard message, Islam, whether preached by any of those prophets unknown to us, or by Abraham, Moses, or Jesus,... or by Muhammad in its final phase.

GUIDANCE AND JUDGEMENT

From the understanding of M'aad (The Ultimate Return), it follows (a) that God has deemed it incumbent upon Himself to reveal His Truth and give His Guidance to human beings in this life, before He would judge them on their return unto Him in the Hereafter; and (b) that in His Justice, He will judge all individuals with equality, with the same criteria, for their conduct in this life.

According to the Quran, God's guidance is availed to humans in three distinct, yet complementary ways. In the first place, as turned out from the creative hand of God, a human person is essentially good, inclined to right and virtue, and endued a basic understanding about his/her own position in the Universe, about what is good or bad for him/her, and about God's goodness, wisdom, and power. The Quran refers to this pristine condition of humans at birth by "...the pattern on which He has made humankind, ... that, indeed, is the Standard Religion"

(Q.30/30). Next, guidance may come to humans by way of observing and reflecting on God's Signs in the Universe, for all things in nature by their very existence proclaim God's truth; and from his/her own experiencing of life, i.e. by meditation on self.

"Soon will We show them Our Signs in the (furthest) regions (of the earth), and in their own souls, until it becomes manifest to them that this is the truth..." (Q.41/53). Finally, humans may know the truth through the medium of Divine Revelation as embodied in the Scripture descended upon the prophets, the most complete of which, the Quran, "Verily ...doth guide to that which is most right (or stable), and giveth the glad tidings to the Believers who work deeds of righteousness, and they shall have a magnificent reward" (Q.17/9).

From the Quranic perspective, the teaching of a religion is two-fold: one constitutes its essence, the other its outward manifestation. The former is primary in importance, the latter secondary. In the Quranic terminology, the first is called Din; the second, Shariah or Minhaj, and Nusuk. Shariah and Minhaj mean the path, though in practice Shariah has come to mean the law. Nusuk means the ceremonial or form of devotion or worship. The differences which exist between one religion and another, that relate only to Shariah and Nusuk, and do not impinge upon Din - the basic provision of faith in One God and commitment to righteous living - should neither lead to conflict nor stand in the way of understanding and cooperation among peoples of different faiths.

Din, or the real religion, is devotion to God and righteous works. It is not a name for group formation. Whatever the race or community or country one belonged to, if only one believed in God and did righteous deeds, he/she is a follower of the Din of God, and salvation is to be his/her reward. That essentially is the Way of God, or "The Straight Path," preached by all the Prophets, and the one for all humanity to follow. And, proclaims the Quran, "To every people (was sent) an Apostle: When their Apostle comes (before them), the matter will be judged between them with justice, and they will not be wronged." (Q.10/47).

The second broad conception developing from the M'aad understanding is that of every human being's essential responsibility for every deed, word, and thought of his/her, and God's essential justice in the judgement of all - in this life, and in the Hereafter. Both extremes, viz cast-iron determinism and the idea of chaotic free will, are excluded. Though the origin of man as an animal is lowly indeed, the faculties and capabilities that God has granted him upgrade him above the animal level (Q.17/70). Besides his animal body, in which also he shares in all the blessings which God has bestowed on the rest of His creation, man has been endowed with divine gifts which entitle him to be called the Vicegerent of God on earth (Q.6/165). A number of basic precepts are laid out: God is Just, commands Justice, and no wrong shall be done unto any person (Q.4/40,58); Good is rewarded by Good, ten times over;

Evil is recompensed accordingly (Q.6/160); None shall bear the burden of another (Q.6/164); None shall be charged beyond his/her ability (Q.7/42); One's honor is commensurate with one's righteousness (Q.49/13); No matter how sinful, none may ever despair of God's mercy (Q.39/53).

ISLAM'S VIEW OF JUDAISM AND CHRISTIANITY

With the above basic outline of the Islamic creed in mind, let us now see how Islam perceives the other monotheistic religions, and how, based upon that perception, it calls for maintaining an essential concord with them. To begin with, Islam recognizes both Judaism and Christianity, in their original forms, as God-revealed messages - phases, in essence, of the same One Religion given to humankind from its earliest days. Moses and Jesus are revered as Prophets and Messengers of God. The Torah of Judaism, and the Evangel of Christianity, in their pristine forms, are recognized as God-revealed scripture, containing "guidance and light" (Q.5/47,49).

The Quran refers to the oppression of the Children of Israel under the Pharoahic rule in Egypt, relates the story of Moses and his God-ordained mission to rescue his people, and tells of the Exodus and its major events. About Jesus the Quran speaks in exalted terms. It tells about the miracle of his virgin birth, his talking in the cradle, his healing of the sick, his preaching the word of God. His mission is announced as to be both a Sign and a bearer of solace and salvation to mankind.

The stories and themes about Moses and Jesus are introduced

in the Meccan Revelation and followed through during the Madinian era, indicating an early and consistent concern to explain Islam's view of Judaism and Christianity, not as alien faiths, but as links in the one divine message revealed to mankind over time, culminating in Islam itself.

The Quran affirms, by and large, the Biblical conception of the Creation of the Universe (although one must be mindful not to empty out all allegorical interpretation of such cosmic pronouncements). Such details as the six-day time span in which God completed the Creation, the origination of all life from water, the creation of Adam and Hawwa (Eve), their error of judgement (forgiven by God upon their repentance there and then, hence there exists no basis in Islam for original sin or eternal guilt), the story of their two sons, Habil (Abel) and Qabil (Cain), and many subsequent accounts about the Prophets and their lives events are common. The conception of Satan as the archenemy of man for ever tempting him to disobey God, that of the angels carrying out God's errands around the universe, and the main eschatological conceptions, such as of heaven, hell, and purgatory are all considerably similar in detail. The general criteria for righteousness and piety are shared in the notions of prayer, fasting, charity, forgiveness, sacrifice, sincerity, honesty, truthfulness, purity, endurance and humility. The first three of these constitute three of Islam's five pillars of faith (in addition to the Shahadah, or profession of faith (that there is no god but God, and Muhammad is His Prophet) and the

once in a lifetime Hajj pilgrimage to Mecca). Of the Bible's Ten Commandments, the Quran upholds all but the one that mandates rest on a Sabbath day, and while upholding the injunction against idolatry (Second Commandment), rejects the depiction of God therein as either "jealous" or "punishing the children for the sin of the fathers to the third and fourth generation..." (None shall bear the burden of another - Q.6/164). Above all, Islam affirms, with infinite categoricalness, the monotheistic creed on which all believing Jews, Christians and Muslims agree, whether it is expressed as "There is no god but Allah", or "You shall have no other Gods before Me".

THE DIFFERENCES, ...

Based on this perception of Judaism and Christianity as authentic phases of the one Standard Religion which God has decreed for mankind, let us now see how Islam relates to each and both of them. The Quran does not refer to Judaism and Christianity as such, but to "Christians" (Nasara), and "Jews" (Yahud) or "Children of Israel" (Bani__Israel). Where Christians and Jews are referred to jointly, the term used is "People of the Book". Such references are many, laudatory where acts of piety are recognized, and critical on beliefs and practices which Islam considers to be incompatible with the true divine message. In the latter case, the Quranic approach generally combines a tone of argument, reminder, appeal, reproach and enjoyment. Let us see how this all is expressed: first, in verses primarily addressed to the Jews; second, in verses

primarily relating to the Christians; and third, in verses primarily addressed to both as the People of the Book. In doing so, however, we must remain mindful of the essentially universal character of the Quran: that even where some verses are primarily addressed to a particular group of people, or appear to relate to some given situations, their broader significance and moral are meant for all people to heed, and are inherently relevant to all situations of similar nature in the affairs of humankind. Thus, for example, when Muslims are admonished: "O ye who believe! Devour not usury, doubled and multiplied; but fear God; that ye may really prosper" (Q.3/130), the admonition is meant for all humankind to refrain from this highly exploitative practice. And, when the Children of Israel are reminded: "Do ye enjoin right conduct on the people, and forget (to practise it) yourselves, and yet Ye study the scripture? Will ye not understand?" (Q.2/44), the reminder is meant as well for Muslims, Christians and others, who may lapse into such double standard. In general, thus, the comprehensive meaning of such Quranic verses refers not only to a particular person or group or occasion but also gives a universal direction to all mankind.

In the body of verses addressed to the Children of Israel there is a repeated reminder of the tremendous ordeal the Jews suffered in the bondage of Egypt; of their deliverance at the hands of Moses acting on God's command; and of the subsequent events during the Exodus, such as the giving of the Ten Commandments to Moses at Mount Sinai, and their taking to the

worship of a calf of melted gold (after they had become impatient of Moses' delay). They are also reminded of the special favors which God bestowed upon them, and how He preferred them to all others for his message; that all that was in accordance with the Covenant they had with Him, and He had with them; that He having fulfilled his Covenant to them, it was their obligation now to fulfill theirs to Him. Then, says the Quran describing a major breach of that Covenant: "We gave Moses the Book and followed him up with a succession of apostles; We gave Jesus the son of Mary Clear Signs and strengthened him with the holy spirit. Is it that whenever there comes to you an apostle with what ye yourselves desire not, ye are puffed up with pride? - some ye called imposters, and others ye slay!" (Q.2/87). This apparently brings out Islam's major argument with the Jews: their rejection of Jesus and Muhammad.

In the body of verses referring to the Christians, the Quran's foremost objection is to the claim that Jesus is the begotten son of God. This claim is refuted in strong, almost indignant, terms in several instances, most notably in Jesus' own words under questioning by the Lord (apparently on the Day of Judgement): "And behold! God will say: 'O Jesus the son of Mary! Did thou say unto men, worship me and my mother as gods in derogation of God?'" He will say: 'Glory to Thee! Never could I say what I had no right (to say). Had I said such a thing, Thou wouldst indeed have known it. Thou knowest what is in my heart, though I know not what is in Thine. For Thou knowest in full all

that is hidden". "Never said I to them aught except what Thou didst command me to say, to wit, 'Worship God, my Lord and your Lord'; and I was a witness over them whilst I dwelt amongst them; when thou didst take me up, Thou wast the watcher over them, and Thou art a witness to all things" (Q.5/119,120).

Where the Jews and the Christians are jointly addressed, the central point, generally, is that the People of the Book, unlike the Pagans, having known something about the religious history of mankind, having received scripture respectively through Moses and Jesus, having entered into covenant with God always to follow his revealed truth,... should not now reject Islam which, after all, only affirms that which they already have received, and builds on it by further divine revelation.

...AND THE DA'WAH AND THE DIALOGUE

So far I have sought to present, in concise form, an exposition of Islam's self-perception as a universal religion; of its essentially generic view of humankind; and, finally, of its perception of, and relationship with, Judaism and Christianity. We have observed how Islam affirms monotheistic faith, along with Judaism and Christianity, shares some important theological conceptions with them, but maintains some critical differences with either one of them, and what the major difference in each case is. With that mind, let us now address the central question that we set out to examine: how detrimental are these differences, from the Islamic standpoint, to the achievement of a regime of essential concord with the People of the Book? We must

go back to the Quran once again to look for an authentic answer.

In referring to the People of the Book, as, indeed, in references to the Muslims themselves and to humankind in general, the Quran consistently makes an essential distinction between those who are righteous and perform good deeds, and those who deviate from righteousness and violate public trust. Salvation and honor for the righteous who perform good deeds is assured wherever they exist and from whichever faith they come, for, as may be inferred from the thrust of the Quranic teaching, righteousness and good deeds can emanate only from an essentially monotheistic frame of mind. Applying this generic criterion to all the men and women of this world the Quran states: "If any do deeds of righteousness, - be they male or female - and have faith, they will enter Heaven, and not the least injustice will be done to them" (Q.4/124). And, "To those who do right is a goodly (reward) ...But those who have earned evil will have a reward of like evil..." (Q.10/26,27). Conversely, a mere profession of Islam does not in itself guarantee salvation: God knows the inner secrets and motives of our hearts and we cannot deceive him by attaching a certain label to ourselves (Q.49/16). Genuine faith and righteous deeds remain the ultimate criteria for true merit.

About the people of the monotheistic faiths, the Quran tends even more to emphasize the basic common faith in one God and the criteria of righteousness and good deeds over the differences in creed. It declares: "Those who believe (in the

Quran), and those who follow the Jewish scriptures, and the Christians and Sabians - any who believe in God and the Last Day, and work righteousness, shall have their reward with their Lord: on them shall be no fear, nor shall they grieve" (Q.2/62). In another instance, it states that not all of the People of the Book are alike, for among them are those who "...believe in God and the Last Day; they enjoin what is right, and forbid what is wrong, and they hasten (in emulation) in (all) good works: they are in the ranks of the righteous. Of the good that they do nothing shall be rejected of them; for God knoweth well those that do right" (Q.3/113,114,115).

From this basic Quranic overview develops the Islamic perspective on relating with the non-Islamic world. In the first place, Islam invites the whole of humankind to a life in Islam, the One Religion of God, as proclaimed in the Quran and conveyed by the Prophet Muhammad; short of that, Islam still invites the whole of humankind to the core of the monotheistic creed: faith in the One God and commitment to righteous living. This invitation, or Da'wah, is predicated as a duty of the Muslim on the basis that he who have been privileged to know the truth has the obligation to dispense that truth for the benefit of the others who have not been exposed to it. The Da'wah was started by the Prophet himself when, at the very outset of his mission, he was commanded to call to Islam his nearest kinsmen (Q.26/214). From the outset, too, two fundamental rules were established for the practice of the Da'wah: (1) that no one would be forced to

enter Islam against his will, and (2) that the call would be conducted with wisdom and grace.

"Let there be no compulsion in religion: Truth stands out clear from error: whoever rejects evil and believes in God hath grasped the most trustworthy hand-hold, that never breaks, and God hearth and knoweth all things," (Q.2/256) states the Quran in a categorical rejection of coercion in the call to Islam. The purpose of the call is not fulfilled unless the called responds with genuine persuasion, exercising his free will. "The truth is from your Lord," enjoins the Quran, "...Let him who will, believe, and let him who will, reject (it)..." (Q.18/29). If the others are not convinced, they must be left alone, and the matter must rest with God. "O ye who believe ! Guard your own souls; if ye follow (right) guidance, no hurt can come to you from those who stray. The goal of you all is to God: it is He that will show you the truth of all that ye do" (Q.5/108).

The second rule governs the way in which the Da'wah ought to be conducted. One may hardly win the hearts and minds of people to even the most manifest truth if one's way of calling attention to the truth is fraught with faulty logic and manner of speech. Thus, the Quran admonishes: "Invite (all) to the Way of thy Lord with wisdom and beautiful preaching; and argue with them in ways that are best and most gracious: for thy Lord knoweth best who have strayed from His Path, and who receive guidance (Q.16/125). And, "Who is better in speech than one who calls (men) to God..." (Q.41/33).

Jews, Christians, Sabians, Zoroastrians, and others, who would not yet accept Islam were to be left to themselves, and in their respective faiths recognized as autonomous communities free to exercise their faiths in freedom. This was the principle upon which Prophet Muhammad promulgated the first Islamic state in Medina (622 A.D.) and made it inclusive of the various religious communities of Arabia. Thus, alongside the U'mmah of the Muslims, there stood the U'mmah of the Jews and the U'mmah of the Christians, the life of each community structured around its own institutions and scripture, and relations between each community and the overarching Islamic state governed by a covenant which the two had entered freely. The covenants established defence, external affairs, and the carrying out of Islam's universal mission as incumbent only upon the Islamic state. The state could conscript the Muslims in its services, but not the others. However, the others could volunteer their services if they wished. This distinction was necessary for the mere fact that non-Muslims could not legitimately be required, against their will, to partake in those activities of the Islamic state that primarily served the cause of Islam itself. As the Shariah crystallized in prescriptive form, the status, rights and obligations of Muslim and non-Muslims citizens of the Islamic state were further defined. For their exemption from Jihad (holy war in self-defense), which was made mandatory upon Muslims alone, and while enjoying equal protection as their Muslim fellow citizens of the Islamic state, non-Muslims were required to pay

the Jizyah or tax due. It is interesting to note that the non-Muslim communities within the Islamic state were called Ahl al_Dhimmah - or the people with whom the Muslims were bound in a covenant of trust. The covenant was taken by Muslims to be both God-ordained and God-guaranteed. This meant that non-Muslims were entitled to not only protection against external aggression (as were the Muslims), but also to protection against transgression (by the Muslims or others) from within the Islamic state. It may be pointed out, though, that Islamic history has had its share of evil rulers who were far more loyal to their personal interests than to the teachings of Islam or the welfare of the peoples of the Islamic state, and under them Muslims as well as non-Muslims suffered. But Islam is not its history, and the legacy of thought, action and expression by Muslims, good or bad, is not to be considered as constitutive of Islam itself. Unlike Judaism and Christianity, whose traditions and teachings are taken to have developed over time, Islam was born complete in the lifetime of the Prophet, and left intact by him after his death. "This day have I perfected your religion for you, completed my favor upon you, and have chosen for you Islam as your religion," reads the last verse revealed chronologically in the Quran, marking the approaching end of the Prophet's ministry in his earthly life (Q.5/4).

Conceiving, thus, a state of peaceful co-existence among various religious communities in society, Islam encourages dialoguing that is aimed at promoting greater harmony and

cooperation among them. In regard to the People of the Book, it presents a framework that prescribes both the manner in which the dialogue should be conducted and the commonality of belief and commitment that it should seek. To begin with, dialogue should be sought in a spirit of goodwill and should seek to achieve better understanding, for mere disputations are futile. Where good motivation exists, dialogue is to be conducted objectively and amicably; without losing sight of the differences that persist, the focus must move on to finding common grounds of faith, upon which then a better mutual understanding may come to rest. The Quranic verse that reflects these notions, reads: "And dispute ye not with the People of the Book, except with means better (than mere disputation), unless it be with those of them who inflict wrong (and injury): but say 'we believe in the Revelation which has come down to us and in that which come down to you; our God and your God is one; and it is to Him we bow (in Islam)'" (Q.29/46).

Together with the commonality of the monotheistic faith the Quran introduces another essential element to constitute the grounds for an essential concord with the People of the Book. It is not enough that Jews, Christians, and Muslims believe in one God, but that they should, also, be commonly committed not to admit supremacy of any among them over the others. The Quran enjoins: "Say: 'O People of the Book! Come to common terms as between us and you: that we worship none but God; that we associate no partners with Him; that we erect not, from among

ourselves, lords and patrons other than God.' If then they turn back, say ye: 'Bear witness that we (at least) are Muslims (bowing to God's will)' (Q.3/64).

This, in outline, is an Islamic perspective on humanity and other faiths, and on seeking dialogue and understanding within the monotheistic fold. It is a perspective in which, while creed differences are by no means set aside, the search for a better interreligious understanding is, nonetheless, pursued. Islam proceeds neither from a standpoint of exclusivity nor from a standpoint of superiority based on mere groupism. Its basic criteria for all human beings is faith and righteous works, regardless of what else is different about them. And so the Quran, when it states that if "any desires a Din (religion) other than Islam, never will it be accepted from them" (Q.3/85), it styles Islam as that primordial al_Din_al_Hanif, the One Standard Religion, preached by all the earlier prophets, whose truth is taught by all the inspired Books, and which in essence amounts to a consciousness of the Will and Plan of God and a joyful living harmony with that Will and Plan. Such is Islam's consciousness of its identity and status as the one undifferentiated, eternal, universal, divine message for all humankind.

DOES DIALOGUING HELP?

Generally speaking, two diametrically opposite sets of arguments can be made on dialoguing about religion. The argument against interreligious dialogue would contend that the exercise is not called for in the first place, since intercourse in all

areas of practical interest can normally be carried on between adherents of different religions, nationally as well as internationally, without the necessity of recourse to inter-religious understanding. It would also contend that exposing religious beliefs in such a dialogue to a critical comparison with the beliefs of others would lead to a weakening of believers' commitment to their own faith; furthermore, that given the extreme sensitivities often involved in religious tradition, such a dialogue could prove counter-productive in that it might give rise to divisiveness and discord rather than promote the understanding the participants had set out to achieve.

While acknowledging some validity to the points made above, the counter-argument supporting interreligious dialogue, to which I subscribe, would hardly see such potential risks as outweighing the promise of enlightened, disciplined and purposeful interreligious dialogue. While it is true that by and large modern societies get along well in their social, economic and political intercourse without much reference to religion, none of us can ignore the increasing friction and violence in today's world, on both local and international levels, as a result of long nurtured interreligious misgivings and misconceptions. If the modern age had truly made religion irrelevant to our lives, if science had sufficiently succeeded in offering humankind a common alternative to religion, if human rationality had truly advanced to a level beyond the sectarian influences of religion,

interreligious dialogue, even if I would still value the exercise as an engaging intellectual pursuit. But the experiences of both our recent history and the ongoing global political scene clearly point to several violent conflicts in various parts of the world, generated and sustained by interreligious estrangement. The extent to which such estrangement may give rise to passionate misgivings can be even more dangerous and mutually destructive in the absence of any attempt to correct misconceptions and build mutual trust. Religion, I submit, continues to be relevant to society not merely for its metaphysical, moral and social input in our lives, but also because of its practical implications for national and international peace and harmony in our conflict-ridden and controversial times.

Nor should interreligious dialogue be seen primarily as undermining believers' commitment to their own faith. Pursued thoughtfully, it would more likely reinforce believers' faith by bringing out the more universal, value-oriented elements in their faith and by showing that the principles they believe in, the concepts they hold, and the values they cherish, are also shared by their fellow human beings of the other faiths. "The strength of a faith," as Dr. Adil Ozdemir has so succinctly pointed out, "lies not only in its distinctiveness, particularity and differences, but also in its similarity and resemblance to other faiths, to the commonality that it has with other religions."

On the last point, that extreme sensitivities are involved

in an interreligious dialogue, I could not agree more. Even among some most scholarly debaters I have seen flashes of uneasiness and some hardening of attitudes when discussion at times gave way to mere disputation. But where serenity, respect and discipline prevailed, the debates have invariably been educative and greatly conducive to goodwill and better understanding. In a positive environment, learning more about the faiths of others also makes us more sensitive to what others hold sacred; we become more cognizant of the fact that just as we revere the traditions of our own faith, so do others revere the traditions of their faith(s), and such cognizance then makes our attitudes toward our respective faiths mutually more enlightened. As we thus learn to relate as intelligent beings peeping at reality through different apertures, we may yet discover that we are all looking at one and the same reality but have a hard time trying to describe it in identical terms. In the Islamic perspective, such diversity of expression need not be divisive or detrimental to harmony and cooperation among peoples of different faiths once the basic provisions are commonly acknowledged and abided by, namely: faith in One God, commitment to righteous living, and rejection of supremacy of any over the others (Q.3/64).

THE END