

MONKS AND MUSLIMS

MONASTIC AND
SHI'A SPIRITUALITY
IN DIALOGUE

EDITED BY
WILLIAM SKUDLAREK
AND MOHAMMAD ALI SHOMALI

Volume III

MONKS AND MUSLIMS III

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MONKS AND MUSLIMS III
Towards a Global Abrahamic Community

edited by

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Abbreviations

A *alayhi al-salam*; Arabic for ‘peace be upon him’. Used after the names or titles of the twelve Imams or of prophets other than the Prophet Muhammad.

Huj. *hujjat al-Islam*; an honorific title meaning ‘authority on Islam’ or ‘proof of Islam’.

S *sall allahu alayhi wa alihi wa sallam*; Arabic for ‘May God’s peace and blessings be with him and his family’. Used after the name or title of the Prophet Muhammad.

SWT *subhanahu wa ta’ala*; Arabic for ‘May he be glorified and exalted’. Used after the name of God.

Foreword

Our world is in trouble. The bright hope for the spread of peace throughout a globalising world is being ravaged by terrorism and the looming danger of war. Therefore, all people of good will have to stand together and work for the peaceful living of one culture with the other, of one religion with the other. We have to create centres of hope that invite people to live together in unity and mutual understanding. We have to discern God's love in their hearts and in ours, discovering anew the God who created us, loves us, and forgives us our sins and our shortcomings.

Over the past two decades, we Benedictines have received the grace of getting to know and become friends with Shi'ite Muslims from Iran. They, in turn, have discovered monks and nuns who live according to the Rule of the spiritual Father of the West. We have learned to respect one another and share our deep spiritualities, where God is the centre of our life, and adoration and praise is our response. God himself unites us, and it is for this reason that we come together as friends, as brothers, and sisters.

From time to time we visit each other and spend some days together in study and shared prayer, our eyes and hearts directed to God. May the present volume, which reflects our latest encounter in Assisi and Rome, be a witness of the mutual learning that all people of good will are called to pursue. May what we have begun continue to grow, deepening our understanding of each other as friends who are loved by God and who love one another. May our friendship become a seed of hope and unity for our world.

NOTKER WOLF, OSB
Abbot Primate
Easter; 5 April 2015
Rome

Introduction

In the Name of God, the Compassionate, the Merciful

In the 'Postscript' for *Monks and Muslims II: Creating Communities of Friendship*, I explained how the theme of friendship was chosen for the fifth round of Catholic–Shi'a dialogue held in Qum in September 2012, and I shared some of the participants' reflections on the deep sense of friendship we enjoyed. I wrote, 'When you can joyfully sit and eat together, meaningfully pray together and feel at home and close to God in one another's holy sites then surely you have really become intimate friends.'¹ We felt true friendship, whether it was enjoying academic discussions at the International Institute for Islamic Studies in Qum, chatting in the minibus on the motorway between Qum and Isfahan, sitting on our prayer mats in Qum, or praying while standing in an old Armenian church in Isfahan.

In our closing session in Qum, Father William suggested an idea that I too held but had not yet mentioned, and this might be another sign of our friendship. Referring to the Catholic–Shi'a dialogue that we were both involved in, the Mennonite–Shi'a dialogue that I was involved in, and a Mennonite–Catholic dialogue (Bridgefolk) that Father William was involved in, he suggested that we try a type of trialogue with Catholics, Shi'ites, and Mennonites. I willingly welcomed the idea and later accepted the invitation to attend the 2013 Bridgefolk meeting (from 23 to 29 July 2013) in Waterloo, Canada, in order to observe this Catholic–Mennonite Dialogue and also to explore the possibility of starting a Catholic–Shi'a–Mennonite trialogue. Despite having some follow-up meetings, we have not yet been successful in actually embarking on that trilateral journey. However, that meeting in Canada gave Father William and I the idea of making community

¹ Mohammad Ali Shomali & William Skudlarek (eds.), *Monks and Muslims II: Creating Communities of Friendship* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2014), p. 117. See also the presentation I made at the Pontifical Institute for the Study of Arabic and Islam, 'Restoring the House of Abraham: Unity in Diversity', in this volume.

the topic of the sixth round of Catholic–Shi‘a dialogue.²

After several email exchanges, I wrote to Father William on 6 December 2013 to say:

The topic of the community is very important for me personally and has occupied my mind and heart in the last several years. It is also related to the social aspects of our religions like social ethics, social justice, friendship, charity, etc. What I am really struggling with is first to educate people that unless we think, plan, and act as a community we cannot make that much success not only in our worldly life, but also in our spiritual life. To please God I should approach Him not just as an individual; rather, I should approach Him as a person who has concern for the common good and thinks of himself as a member of the community of the faithful. I am also trying to find out the practical steps towards establishing such a community locally, nationally, and globally in which all believers in God feel at home and play an active role.

When the topic of community was proposed to other friends, we received encouraging responses.³ Of course, there were also concerns. For example, one of the monastic participants wrote,

The topic of ‘community’ has so many different resonances that it is difficult to (i) offer a concise view; (ii) find a way within the Benedictine Rule where it truly works; and (iii) see how that relates to the Muslim world where the notion of a celibate community is rare/

² After the Bridgefolk meeting, Father William wrote to me, ‘If we go with the theme of community, which you suggested in Waterloo, then I think it would be especially important that each one speak from the heart about what community means for him or her, what graces it brings, what challenges they face in making community a reality, etc.’

³ For example, Sr Julian, who participated in the two previous meetings, but who could not be with us in Assisi, wrote to say, ‘For the meeting in Assisi I hope we find a way of being a “community”, even for only a few days. I believe it works wonders for a long time afterwards. I also believe that it is this intensity of sharing that every participant takes home with him/her and radiates in his/her own community and surroundings, spoken and unspoken, but always with this longing for a better, shared world in honour of God the Almighty, in our souls.’

even looked down on. So, for a conference to be a success we need a very clear understanding of what sort of 'community' we are talking about... This outline prompts me to ask the question, on 'what sort of community would such a dialogue focus?' I don't think there is any real mileage in a sense of community without serious focus on the 'human dynamics' before moving into the 'spiritual'. Put another way, the more I travel in the Benedictine world, the more I become aware that 'human formation' is an essential requirement.

In none of our previous rounds of dialogue did we have so much difficulty in defining the topic, subtopics, and modality of the presentations and discussions. This was not because there was no mutual understanding. Our friendship has developed over the years with mutual respect, understanding, and love. This difficulty originated from the scope and complexity of the topic. In my opinion, the greatest challenge as well as the greatest need for humanity is to build, maintain, and grow a true community.

Islam is very clear about the importance of establishing an Islamic community, but to my knowledge at least, a full-fledged Islamic community has rarely existed. While Muslims have always been blessed with dedicated individuals throughout history, they have not yet been that successful in maintaining a comprehensive Islamic system or establishing a genuine Islamic community. I leave it for my Christian friends to judge whether they think there have been Christian communities that fulfilled all the requirements of an ideal community. What I think is beyond question, however, is that we have certainly not had an ideal united community of Muslims and Christians, a true Abrahamic community. I firmly believe that even people of no faith would not be able to resist the attraction of such a community in which devotion to God can be witnessed not only in people's personal relation with God, but also in the way they care for each other and organise their sociopolitical life for the sake of the all-embracing, all-merciful God of all.

There are different ways to approach the topic of community. One way is from the angle of love. A quality that is arguably the most important element of a person's faithfulness, but is often sadly neglected, is a person's love for God and love for other people for the

sake of God or for Godly reasons. Islamic narrations categorically reject the false assumption that true believers may love God, but not love their brothers and sisters in God, let alone harm them or wish them misfortune. Prophet Muhammad is quoted as asking some of his companions, 'Which handhold of faith is the strongest?' Different answers were given, such as, prayer, almsgiving, fasting, and pilgrimage to Mecca. The Prophet said that these actions were all good, but none of them was the answer to his question. Then he himself gave the answer: 'To love for God's sake and to dislike for God's sake.'⁴ This means that in a believer there must be nothing selfish or egoistic. When one's emotions and motivations originate from one's love for God, nothing other than good can come from such a one. In another narration, Imam Baqir quotes Prophet Muhammad,

Indeed one of the greatest factors that lead to faith is to love another faithful believer. When the faithful believers love each other for the sake of God they become like one body; when one part of the body suffers pain the rest of the parts will not find rest, they will work harder to support the injured part.⁵

The faithful are parts of one body, each playing an integral role for the health and survival of that body. It is only when all the parts unite and work together that the body can survive and thrive. In this regard Sa'di (d. 1291 or 1292), the renowned Iranian poet, has a very famous aphorism in his *Gulistan* which appears on one of the walls of the United Nations main building in New York. It reads,

Adam's sons are body limbs, to say;
For they're created of the same clay.
Should one organ be troubled by pain,
Others would suffer severe strain.
Thou, careless of people's suffering,

⁴ Muhammad ibn Ya'qub al-Kulayni, *Al-Kafi* (Tehran: Dar al-Kutub al-Islamiyyah, 1365 AH (solar)), vol. 2, 125 & 126.

⁵ Muhammad ibn al-Hasan al-Hurr al-'Amili, *Mustadrak Wasa'il al-Shi'ah* (Qum: Mu'assasah Al al-Bayt (A), 1408 AH), vol. 12, 217.

Deserve not the name, 'human being'.⁶

Once a person embodies this characteristic, then other noble qualities also follow. It is our nature as humans to follow the things we love and to avoid the things we dislike. Thus, if the fundamental trait of loving and disliking things according to God's preferences is engrained in a person, then all their actions will fall into line.

In any case, we were determined to have a friendly conversation on the topic of community. Early in April 2014, I suggested that we discuss three things: (i) why is it so important to form, belong to, and act as a community? (ii) what does belonging to a community involve? (iii) how can a real community of the faithful be established both locally and globally. These three questions relate to strategies, policies, techniques, and challenges. For several years, I have been thinking about these issues and I really wanted to learn from the experiences and thoughts of other participants of the dialogue. I see no problem at all in saying that I may, and indeed want to, learn from my dialogue partners. I think a genuine dialogue is a collective search for truth. I can learn from my Muslim friends or from my Christian friends. I believe truth comes from God, and I will be deeply grateful to anyone who can help me understand it. One may believe in the perfection of one's own religion or holy scriptures and still, in my opinion, admit one's own limits of knowledge, wisdom, and experiences.

We agreed to carry on with the topic of community and the three major subtopics. Parallel to this, we had to plan for the logistics of the dialogue. The first three had taken place in the UK: 2003 and 2005 in Heythrop College and Ampleforth Abbey; 2007 in Heythrop College and Worth Abbey. The fourth round of dialogue took place in 2011 at Sant'Anselmo, the international Benedictine university in Rome. The fifth round was conducted in 2012 in Qum, followed by a visit to Isfahan. This time we agreed to have it in Assisi, followed by a public event in Rome at the Pontifical Institute for the Study of Arabic and Islam (PISAI), along with a visit to the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue and a return visit to Sant'Anselmo.

⁶ H. Vahid Dastjerdi, *East of Sophia (Mashriq-i Ma'rifat)* (Qum: Ansariyan, 2006).

In Assisi we were hosted by the Bose community in their beautiful and historical Monastero di San Masseo. It is said that the young Saint Francis prayed there in a crypt that is now used as a chapel. The monks of Bose describe themselves by saying they are ‘a community of monks and nuns belonging to different Christian Churches, seeking God in obedience to the Gospel and living in fraternal communion and celibacy. We live in fellowship with men and women and at their service.’ Guido Dotti, a member of the Bose community, had participated in our fourth round of dialogue in Rome in 2011, so we had some familiarity with the Bose community, but this was a very good opportunity to know more about the spirit of this new monastic path. I think everyone was touched by the warm hospitality and fraternal love that we received. The beauty of nature on the hillside between upper and lower Assisi; the rich history of the place; the careful design of the newly built or renovated buildings in order to preserve their original character; the view of the peaceful and spiritual town of Assisi just above us; frequent moments of prayer; and the friendship that was built over years all combined to create a beautiful physical and spiritual atmosphere for our discussions and meetings.

The sixth round of Catholic–Shi’a dialogue – which is the third round of the Monks and Muslims dialogue – took place from 17 to 22 October 2014. The Muslim participants were Mahnaz Heydarpoor, Hamed Fayazi, and Mohsen Javadi from Iran; Isa Jahangir from England; Fatima Ali from Canada; and myself. The monastic participants were Benoît Standaert, OSB from Belgium; Godefroy Ragueneau de Saint-Albin, OCSO from France; Guido Dotti and Mariangela Yator, OSB from Italy; Maximilian Musindai, OSB from Kenya; Timothy Wright, OSB from England; and William Skudlarek, OSB from the United States. Matteo Nicolini-Zani from the motherhouse of the Bose community helped us with logistics and attended our sessions.

Unlike previous rounds of dialogue, this time we had fewer papers and more time for discussion. The six papers that were presented in Assisi offered monastic and Muslim perspectives on the importance of forming, being, and acting as a community by Br Guido and Dr Javadi; monastic and Muslim perspectives on what is actually

involved in belonging to a community by Father Standaert and Huj. Fayazi; and monastic and Muslim perspectives on the establishment of real communities of the faithful locally and globally by Abbot Timothy and Huj. Jahangir.

In the public event at PISAI on 22 October, there was a welcome by Father Valentino Cottini, the rector of PISAI, an introduction by Father Skudlarek, a word of thanks by Abbot Primate Notker Wolf and two presentations, one by me and the other by Father Standaert, followed by a time for questions and discussion.

This volume contains revised versions of the papers presented in Assisi, the presentations at the PISAI, reflections by some of the participants, a foreword by Abbot Primate Notker Wolf, and an afterword by Father Skudlarek. In what follows, I summarise some of the main themes of the papers presented in Assisi.

In his contribution entitled ‘A Christian Perspective on Forming, Being, and Acting as a Community’, Guido Dotti describes various types of Christian religious communities in the past and present. He begins by explaining the difference between the relationship of a rabbi with his disciples at the time of Jesus, and that of Jesus with his disciples. In contrast to the emphasis placed on a disciple’s personal relationship with his rabbi and the transmission of the rabbi’s teaching to each disciple, Jesus treated his disciples as a community and was concerned with how his disciples related to one another. Br Guido then describes some of the characteristics of Jesus’ community, such as breaking family ties in order to distance oneself from the sociocultural norms of society at that time and renouncing marriage and the family model of relationship. He then explains that as more and more families became Christian over time, breaking family ties became less necessary and celibacy was only required for members of certain communities. Fraternity, however, would continue to be a characteristic feature of the community of Christ. Br Guido brings us to the present day by describing the local communities of the Church as communities of co-disciples travelling together and having one heart and soul. Finally, he refers to the significance of monastic community or way of life as ‘a “sign” and a stimulus for the entire Church’.

In the second chapter, ‘The Importance of Community in Islamic

Teachings', Mohsen Javadi first defines community as that which has been formed around the prophets throughout history for the worship of God. He then explains that worshipping God is not just a matter of performing some rituals or acts of worship; rather it goes beyond this to a higher form of life that involves nearness to God and is known as the 'goodly life'. The principles and prerequisites for community are made known through two major sources: Wisdom (*hikmah*) and the Book (*kitab*). Ignoring either of these two factors puts the community at risk of collapsing. Dr Javadi then explores the major components in the formation of communities and the factors that destroy them. Unity in doctrine and belief is a major factor in a strong and cohesive community, as is feeling ennobled by possessing faith and seeking divine beauty and mercy in human existence. The divine gifts of love and friendship are 'the secret of the longevity and perseverance of a community on its original path to nearness to God.' Justice is an 'overarching principle that can guide action within a community.' Finally, Dr Javadi explains the merits of giving the benefit of the doubt to others and avoiding spying, mockery, and backbiting, all of which weaken and eventually destroy the community.

In the third chapter, 'The Actual Experience of Belonging to a Monastic Community', Benoît Standaert describes the process and stages of joining a monastic community, which are very similar to the stages of initiation into the Christian community in general. Saint Benedict was a Roman, and therefore the army model also appears in his Rule: one 'becomes a monk in the way one becomes a soldier, ready to serve the great King, joined to him by a *sacramentum*, a solemn bond that can only be broken by death.' Saint Paul advised the Ephesians to 'put on the whole armour of God' listing the weapons that a Christian must have, which are mainly defensive, except for the Word of God, which is described as a sword. 'In monastic language, prayer with the Word of God is sometimes referred to as the "sword" of the monk.' Father Standaert goes on to explain how monks who live in a community (cenobites) make three vows: conversion to a monastic way of life, obedience to a Rule and an abbot, and stability in a given monastic community. He then describes other forms of monastic life which lack features of the communal monastic life as

laid down by Saint Benedict. In conclusion, Father Standaert says:

Spiritually we have to reach the point where there are no longer any barriers or boundaries, neither inside nor outside...One day we discover that the world is present in the monastery and that the monastery has no other limits than the whole world...At the end of the road monks hope to arrive at a stability that encompasses the whole universe; at a way of life that brings serenity and peace to themselves and those around them.

In the fourth chapter, 'What does it Mean to Belong to a Muslim Community?' Hamed Fayazi explains how belonging to a community is closely related to the concept of *wilayah*. He makes a contrast between the common understanding of *wilayah* as the relation between the believer and God and His vicegerents and the comprehensive understanding of *wilayah*, which involves also the relationship of believers with one another. At the same time that *wilayah* relates the believer to God, the Prophet, and the Imams, it also connects believers to one another. He further argues that there is even a communal dimension to rituals that pertain to the relationship of an individual with God, for example, daily prayers, which have increased merit when performed in a congregation. Huj. Fayazi continues by describing what it means to be a member of a Muslim community using three analogies. First, he quotes a *hadith* that states that we are all shepherds who are responsible for fulfilling the needs of our flocks. The second analogy is that of a brotherhood, which involves love, closeness, strong loyalty, and deep trust between the brothers. The third analogy is that of a body. Believers are different cells and organs of the same body, and therefore when some members are in pain or need, the other members cannot rest until their pain is alleviated or their need is met. To stress the importance of unity, he concludes by stating that 'What belonging to a Muslim Community actually involves is really what being a Muslim involves.'

In the fifth chapter, 'Might Benedictines and Muslims build a Community Founded on a Dialogue of Spirituality?' Timothy Wright asks whether there is a real and viable possibility of building

a community of Benedictines and Muslims. He first mentions two major differences which would need to be addressed: the celibate lifestyle of Benedictines (which is in contrast to the married lifestyle of Muslims) and also the differences between Christianity and Islam. He mentions that due to the amount of time committed by individuals in both groups to their families or monastic communities, faith, and work, it would 'be better to speak of an occasional community of dialogue'. He then elaborates six points which justify such a proposal. First, Benedictine spirituality and Muslim spirituality are both based on the revelation of the One God. He believes that not only is a monastic-Muslim dialogue possible, it is also a vocation, given their shared relationship with a revealing God. Secondly, he believes that each of us regards our spiritual journey as a way to completeness and as an obedience to the will of God. Thirdly, we can find affirmation by listening to the other describe his or her spiritual journey and thereby discover many similarities. Fourthly, although God is without boundaries, a dialogue of spirituality can help to make porous the boundaries that humans have built to define where faith begins and ends. Fifthly, it is possible to create a framework in which a dialogue of spirituality can be developed. Sixthly, participants dedicated to such a dialogue will be ready to listen with an open heart and mind to the other's articulation of his or her spiritual story. He expects that that the language used in a dialogue of religious experience will be surprisingly similar, and he believes that this dialogue will result in understanding the One Revealing God better. Abbot Timothy goes on to expound the monastic practice of *lectio divina* as practiced by the Manquehue Apostolic Movement in Santiago. He believes this method has the potential to create a new environment for a monastic-Muslim dialogue in which God may speak through the revealed Word to both parties of the dialogue. He then makes some practical suggestions on how to build a community of Muslims and monastics engaged in a dialogue of spirituality.

In the sixth chapter, and last of the Assisi papers, 'An Islamic Perspective on Policies and Principles for the Establishment of Local and Global Faith-based Communities', Isa Jahangir refers to the high status of social life in all Abrahamic religions, especially

Islam, and the way they urge the faithful to establish faith-based communities on local and global scales. He then proceeds to elaborate two main themes, namely ‘vision as a prerequisite’ and ‘mission as an action plan’. In the first part of his paper, he describes several concepts in detail. Firstly, he expounds the Islamic view of a faith-based community. Secondly, he describes the limits and the scope of a faith-based community. Thirdly, he discusses the subjects of justice, love, and unity as some of the various components which can be presented as mechanisms for local Shi’a communities to be in communion with global (Islamic and Abrahamic) communities. Huj. Jahangir then moves on to detail the principles and values governing such communities, such as religious hierarchies and priorities, religious values, respect and benevolence for others, the need for mutual understanding, social love, social justice, and truthfulness. The second part of the chapter deals with strategic steps for developing a religious community, which involve developing short-term, medium-term, and long-term action plans, assessing resources, needs, and issues of the community, taking an upstream approach, network building, managing and minimising conflicts, and evaluating the results of cooperative actions.

Overall, I think this round of dialogue – with all the discussions and experiences it involved – strengthened our friendship and helped us to take a step forward towards establishing a community of the faithful, but much still remains to be done. It took us several years to become close friends and I think it might take us (even as close friends) a few more years to understand how to build a united community, let alone to actually begin building it.

I take this opportunity to thank everyone who helped or contributed to our dialogue in Assisi and Rome, especially the presenters and participants, the Bose community in San Masseo, Monastic Interreligious Dialogue, the International Institute for Islamic Studies in Qum, the Pontifical Institute for the Study of Arabic and Islam, the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue, and Sant’Anselmo. Last, but not least, I should thank God for all His blessings and gifts, especially the gifts of guidance and friendship. If anything good has been achieved it is because of the guidance and support we received from Him. If any problem or gap remains, it is

because we have not turned to Him completely, though His glorious face is always and everywhere turned towards us: 'To God belong the east and the west: so whichever way you turn, there is the face of God! God is indeed all-embracing, all-knowing' (Qur'an 2:115).

While I invite our dear readers to read the presentations and reflections that follow this introduction, I would also like to invite them to end this introduction with a prayer: 'Our Lord, forgive us and our brethren who were our forerunners in the faith, and do not put any rancour in our hearts toward the faithful. Our Lord, You are indeed most kind and merciful' (Qur'an 59:10).

MOHAMMAD ALI SHOMALI

15 March 2015

London

PAPERS

1

A Christian Perspective on Forming, Being, and Acting as a Community

Guido Dotti

One of the most significant differences between Jesus of Nazareth and the Jewish rabbis of his time and of earlier Jewish tradition is the kind of relationship between master and disciple that he fostered. In Judaism, the master fostered a personal relationship of every individual disciple with himself; relations among the disciples took second place. The attention of master and disciples was thus concentrated on the teaching transmitted, on the fidelity with which it was received, assimilated, and enriched by each disciple and, in particular, by the disciple who in his turn would become ‘master’ of others at the rabbi’s death.

The community of Jesus

Jesus, on the other hand, appears to have been concerned above all with the quality and style of life of his disciples, and above all, with the way the members of his community related to one another. Jesus

called individuals to himself to entrust them with a mission and to exhort them to be faithful to their calling. However, when it came to revealing the mysteries of the Kingdom, to announcing the good news of God's mercy, to teaching people how to pray and how to live in the world, Jesus always addressed a community, the disciples he called individually to 'be with him' and with each other (Mark 3:14). The 'good news' of the salvation announced by Jesus and the conversion of life that it requires reached and continues to reach the individual disciple through the daily living of a community of brothers and sisters.

A second element characteristic of the community life lived and preached by Jesus is the requirement of breaking with one's family. This break meant distancing oneself from the sociocultural models of his time, whether Jewish, Roman, or Hellenistic, and was carried out on three levels.

First of all, those who wanted to become a disciple of Jesus and follow him on the road from Galilee to Jerusalem had to break with their family of origin. This entailed leaving father and mother, doing so even when it meant definitively breaking the ties that in those times were a guarantee of economic security.

Secondly, these disciples were to renounce marriage and the formation of a new family (Mark 10:28–30) and to remain 'eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom of heaven' (Matt 19:10–12).

Thirdly, they were also to renounce the family model of relationship, that is, the relation of parents to children: 'Call no one your father on earth' (Matthew 23:9); 'Who are my mother and my brothers?' (Mark 3:33). Note that no one of these 'brothers' had chosen to be a brother in the way one chooses to be husband, wife, father, or mother. To be a brother (or sister) of Jesus is something that can only be received. It then depends on each brother or sister to welcome the other brothers and sisters and to treat them in a 'brotherly' manner.

Over time, the requirement of breaking with one's family of origin will decline as entire families become Christian. Furthermore, the renunciation of forming a family will come to be required only of those who are called to the monastic or other forms of vowed religious life and who profess celibacy for the sake of the kingdom of heaven. However, fraternity – that is, the renunciation of the

family model of relationship – will continue to be regarded as the radical and characteristic feature of the community to which Christ calls his disciples.

The apostolic community

What importance does ‘forming, being, and acting as community’ have after Jesus’ death, resurrection, and ascension? The communities described in the Acts of the Apostles, whether the first community of Jesus’ followers in Jerusalem or those that arose from the preaching of the Apostles throughout the Mediterranean world, provide the model. Among the elements that characterise the early Christian communities are:

- a. perseverance in four practices: the apostles’ teaching, fellowship (*koinonia*), the breaking of bread, prayers. In other words, one heart, one body, radical sharing, being of one accord in ‘asking God’ (Acts 2:42–47a);
- b. mission, but not proselytism: ‘And day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved’ (Acts 2:47);
- c. community spirit as the primary message of the Gospel and sign of Christian discipleship: ‘By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another’ (John 13:35).

The Church, community of co-disciples

The consequences for today of these biblical foundations are, as Tertullian (c. 160–c. 225), the Christian author from Carthage in the Roman province of Africa, put it, *unus christianus, nullus christianus* (one Christian, no Christian).

Within the single local community, whether that be the monastic, parish, or diocesan community, there is to be a sense of ‘traveling together’ (the root meaning of ‘synod’). The members of the community are to have ‘one heart and soul’ (in Acts 4:32 this is significantly connected with sharing one’s goods). That is to say,

they are to have the same sentiments as Jesus had (see Philippians 2:5). Saint Basil goes so far as to say that community life is the only way the evangelical precepts can be put into practice (Long Rule, 7).

Beyond the circle in which the disciple of Jesus lives out his or her Christian calling, the term *koinonia* (fellowship) is used in the Acts of the Apostles and Paul's Letters to designate both the communion that binds Christians to one another and the monetary collections organised by some local churches to aid the impoverished Christian community in Jerusalem. The image of the body and its members, an image that is also common in the pagan world of those times, is applied primarily to the local community (the church of God that is in Rome, in Corinth, in Thessalonica, etc.): 'God has so arranged the body, giving the greater honour to the inferior member, that there may be no dissension within the body, but the members may have the same care for one another. If one member suffers, all suffer together with it; if one member is honoured, all rejoice together with it. Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it' (1 Corinthians 12:24-7). This image is then extended to the 'cosmic' dimension of Christ's body, which, after the resurrection, recapitulates everything in itself.

But speaking the truth in love, we must grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, from whom the whole body, joined and knitted together by every ligament with which it is equipped, as each part is working properly, promotes the body's growth in building itself up in love. (Ephesians 4:15-16)

The sign of the monastic community

Some of the requirements of Christian community assume a special, even radical, importance, for the monastic way of life so that it may become a 'sign' and a stimulus for the entire Church.

The choice of celibacy with the concomitant renunciation of forming one's own family is renewed in the daily renunciation of reproducing a 'family' model of community, with all that such a model implies in terms of roles and relationships. 'Living together

as brothers' (see Psalm 133) means having in common not the same 'blood', but the same living breath that comes from the one Father.

Monks seek a synodal model in making decisions that regard community life. Such a model is neither monarchical or democratic. It demands, and at the same time favours, harmonising in a fruitful manner 'the many and the one', the body of the community and the one who has the responsibility of creating, guarding, and nourishing the community's unity.

Finally, the monastic community looks for a way to balance personal and community time and activities, especially with regard to listening to scripture and prayer, but also with regard to work – which is assumed by a community but depends on personal responsibility. The balance between personal and community responsibility also applies to receiving guests and to maintaining good relations with people outside the monastery.

2

The Importance of Community in Islamic Teachings

Mohsen Javadi

That which separates a *community* from a *society* and imbues it with a special identity is its final goal. If we look at the Latin roots of the word *community*, we see that it was originally used to denote the coming together of Christians to worship God.¹ Hence, we can conclude that the original goal of a *community* is ‘worship’.

During the course of human history many communities have been formed, and the founding and central pillar of every one of them was a divinely ordained prophet. Hence the history of ‘communities’ can be seen to be the same as the history of prophets. The largest communities that the world has seen have taken shape by way of the congregation of people around one of the great prophets such as Abraham, Moses, Jesus, and Muhammad (S) for

¹ The community is an outcome of the communion of saints. As per the *Catholic Encyclopedia*, the latter is ‘the spiritual solidarity which binds together the faithful on earth, the souls in purgatory, and the saints in heaven in the organic unity of the same mystical body under Christ its head, and in a constant interchange of supernatural offices.’ St. Ignatius of Antioch said, ‘Where the bishop is there is the community, even as where Christ is there is the Catholic Church’ (Smyrnæans 8.2).

the purpose of the worship of God.

That the original and final purpose of a *community* is the worship of God has been both explicitly and implicitly referred to in the verses of the Noble Qur'an. Each and every one of the prophets would call the people to gather and worship God. Here are some examples of such verses:

And we sent Noah to his people: and he said, O my people, worship God (7:59).

And to Ad their brother Hud: he said, O my people, worship God! You have no other god besides Him; will you not then be wary of Him? (7:65).

And to Thamud their brother Salih; he said, O my people, worship God (7:73).

And Abraham, when he said to his people 'worship God and be wary of Him. That is better for you should you know' (29:16).

And the Messiah had said 'O, children of Israel! Worship God my Lord and your Lord' (5:72).

In general, God says, 'Certainly we raised an apostle in every nation to preach "worship God and keep away from the Rebel"' (Qur'an 16:36).

The worship of God does not only mean the enacting of rites and rituals such as prayer, fasting, and hajj. Rather, it goes beyond these and refers to that special way of human life that the Qur'an refers to as 'the goodly life' (*al-hayat al-tayyibah*) or simply, life. 'Whoever acts righteously, whether male or female, should he be faithful, we shall revive him with a good life and pay them their reward' (Qur'an 16:97).

It is true that human beings belong to the animal kingdom and have needs similar to those of other animals, but because of the existence of the divine spirit that God breathed into the human being he created,² humans have the possibility of a higher life – the

² The Noble Qur'an says 'So when I have proportioned him and breathed into

goodly life – that in reality is nothing other than proximity to the divine realm. Now, the goodly life involves certain prerequisites and principles, all of which hinge on the final goal – the worship of God and seeking divine proximity. These exigencies and principles are made known in two ways. The first is the way of the intellect, which is tantamount to the *inner prophet* and is found in the conscience of every person. The second is the way of revelation, specifically, that received by divinely mandated prophets and enunciated by them to the people in the form of religious traditions. In Islamic discourse, the first path is known as *hikmah*, or Wisdom, and the second is known as *kitab*, or the Book. Hence, Wisdom and the Book are the two major sources of acquiring the necessary principles and prerequisites of the goodly life or the *community* in its original sense.

The following verse of the Noble Qur'an refers to the twin sources of divine guidance for human beings: 'And they will say, "had we listened or applied reason, we would not have been among inmates of the Blaze"' (67:10). Intellectual discourse within the confines of Wisdom has an important place in the community, just as the serious acceptance and availing oneself of the Book is another important factor in the goodly life. Whenever either of these two factors is ignored, the community runs the risk of collapsing.

While it is evident that the goodly life, in spite of its fixed criteria and atemporal nature, sometimes takes on different forms according to temporal and spatial contingencies, nevertheless, Wisdom and the Book are what give it validity and substantive content. Conditions change with time, and it is possible that the goodly life will adapt to such contingencies, but what is of paramount importance is that the variation and diversity at play in such adaptations stay within the parameters of Wisdom and the Book so as not to go astray from the original way of the goodly life. In fact, some contemporary congregations and societies, though they are labelled as 'Christian communities' or 'Muslim communities', do not partake of the goodly life because they have distanced themselves from the Book and Wisdom and taken up other forms of life. They think that they are on the right path, but unfortunately their efforts bear no fruits:

him of My spirit, then fall down in prostration before him' (15:29).

‘Those whose endeavors go awry in the life of the world, while they suppose they are doing good’ (Qur’an 18:103).

In this paper, by taking recourse to the Book – that is the Noble Qur’an – and traditions, which are a type of exposition of the meaning of the Qur’an, I endeavour to illustrate the major components in the formation and subsistence of communities. In the process, the factors that threaten and destroy communities will also become known.

The remembrance of God

The remembrance of God, called *dhikr* in religious texts, is the most fundamental pillar of a community, its final goal and destination. Many of the rites that have been mandated in different religions are for the express purpose of keeping alive the remembrance of God – the final goal of a religious community – or preventing people from forgetting Him. This is because forgetting God would be tantamount to a community’s loss of the spirit and faith and becoming a plain *society*.

The Noble Qur’an frequently asks us to remember Him in the morning and evening: ‘O you who have faith! Remember Allah with frequent remembrance, and glorify Him morning and evening. It is He who blesses you, and so do His angels, that He may bring you out from darkness into light, and He is most merciful to the faithful’ (Qur’an 33:41–2).

The different rites, whether individual or social, act as reminders and ensure that the right direction of the goodly life – going towards God individually and collectively – is not lost. God has placed His signs in the creation of the heavens and the earth, and even in human beings themselves, so that by perceiving these signs with their intellect, they could sense the presence of God. In addition, in different places of His Book, God has called on us to pay attention to Himself. Verses of the Qur’an state that if we forget God, we will have forgotten ourselves, falling into sinfulness and loss. This is because the true *self* of a human being is what reaches the divine realm (and the Supreme Self) by spiritual wayfaring. If God (the

true Supreme Self) is forgotten, then this true self also is forgotten and is overtaken by false selves that are based on unreality, vanity, and flights of fancy. 'And do not be like those who forget Allah, so He makes them forget their own souls' (Qur'an 59:19).

It is Satan who seduces human beings to forget God. This forgetfulness leads to the forgetting of our original self. We become lost in a myriad of false and unreal selves and are left with demonic groups instead of a community based on faith. 'Satan has prevailed upon them, so he has caused them to forget the remembrance of Allah and His Apostle – they will be among the most abased' (Qur'an 58:19).

A single voice

Unity in doctrine and belief is another major factor instrumental in the formation and subsistence of communities. Divisions and differences destroy the collective nature of a community and lead to its members becoming embroiled in antagonisms and strife. In this way, they lose sight of the real path to life (proximity to God). Upon deliberation, it becomes clear that what is intended by a 'single voice' or 'unity of word' is nothing other than the word of God – the Logos – mentioned in revealed scripture and by the prophets of God. 'And obey Allah and His Apostle, and do not dispute, or you will lose heart and your power will be gone' (Qur'an 8:46).

In Islamic texts, the foundation of unity, that is the divine Book, is called the 'rope' or 'cord' of God. 'Hold fast, all together, to Allah's cord, and do not be divided into sects' (Qur'an 3:103).

One of the reasons that religions are opposed to innovations that lead to schisms – which unfortunately occur in the history of all religions – is that such divisions lead to the disintegration and collapse of the community. Exegesis based on personal opinions and whims is highly frowned on in Islam since it is tantamount to interposing beliefs that have no intellectual basis in Wisdom, nor any precedent in the Book and tradition. Of course, it goes without saying that new developments that are traditionally well-founded and rationally demonstrable – in other words, those that show the richness of religious knowledge – are not to be counted among

the innovations that are disfavoured. The forsaking of a particular outmoded tradition is not the equivalent of an innovation. 'Shun innovations and keep to the broad road. Surely the old tested ways are the best and innovated ones are bad.'³

In Islamic texts there is a tradition recorded from Jesus (A) testifying to the importance of being careful about accepting something that is presented as 'religious'. The same meaning can also be inferred from a verse from the Qur'an. The tradition is as follows:

Jesus said, 'Take the truth from the people of falsehood, but do not take the falsehood from the people of truth. Be critical of speech, for many an error is adorned with a verse from the book of God, just as a copper coin is plated with silver. It fools the eye since it looks the same, but it takes the keen expert eye [to see through the deception].'⁴

Feeling ennobled

Faith, whether in its Christian sense of accepting the grace of God, or in the Islamic sense of working to arrive at a state of trust and surety with regard to God, leads to a fundamental perception and feeling regarding human life that can be called 'feeling ennobled'. Faith gives one a new identity and nobility, which in Christian terminology is called being 'born again'. Persons of faith give value to their soul, knowing it to be of divine inspiration. The feeling of aimlessness and abjectness, like vinegar, destroys the sweet nectar of faith. Faith ennobles the soul and gives meaning to human existence. If one loses the feeling of nobility and is overcome by a feeling of abjectness, every evil act becomes possible. The tenth Imam, his Eminence Ali al-Naqi (A) said, 'Do not feel secure from the evil of him who disparages his own soul.'⁵

³ Imam Ali, *Nahj al-Balaghah*, ed. Subhi Salih (Beirut: Markaz al-Buhuth al-Islamiyyah, 1395 AH), Sermon 145.

⁴ Ahmad ibn Muhammad ibn Khalid Barghi, *al-Mahasin* (Qum: Dar al-Kutub Islamiyyah, 1371 AH), vol. 1, 229.

⁵ Muhammad Muhammadi Rayshahri, *Mizan al-Hikmah (Scale of Wisdom)* (Qum: Dar al-Hadith, 1996), no. 6719.

The feeling of hopelessness and despair come from this very feeling of abjectness, which in turn makes one think one is all alone and has no refuge in this endless world. Such feelings eat away at the identity and faith of such people and ultimately unravel the ties that they have with other believers. It is for this reason that the Qur'an warns us to stay away from all acts that would bring on such feelings. The feeling or emotion of hopelessness is a sign of disbelief, and hence believers must always seek divine beauty and mercy, never allowing themselves to fall into despair. 'Go my sons, and look for Josef and his brother, and do not despair of Allah's mercy' (Qur'an 12:87). Joseph is the symbol of the lost divine beauty in human existence. God calls us to seek such beauty and wants that we never despair or lose hope in our search for it.

If we see ourselves as abject and lowly, then in truth we sell our soul – which is a divine gift and of theomorphic origin – for the paltry price of ephemeral pleasures. In such a case, instead of using our soul as a means of getting close to God, we behave like animals, looking for satisfaction in feasting, sleeping, and merrymaking. 'As for the faithless, they enjoy and eat just like the cattle eat, and the Fire will be their final abode' (Qur'an 47:12).

The following lines of poetry from Rumi beautifully explain this point:

O gross-spirited one, thou hast held Me in light esteem,
because thou hast bought Me very cheaply.
He that buys cheaply gives cheaply:
a child will give a pearl for a loaf of bread.⁶

According to Islamic texts, this is why the true scholar of Islam and the intellectual leader of the Muslim nation is seen to be the person who warns the people of divine punishment but at the same time does not allow them to despair of divine mercy. The true scholar is one who does not allow the people to lose hope in the mercy of God,

⁶ Jalal al-Din Rumi, *Mathnawi of Jalaluddin Rumi*, trans. Reynold A. Nicholson (Gibb Memorial Trust, 1990), vol. 1, verse 1755.

to despair of the grace of God, or to feel abandoned by God.⁷

Love and friendship

The subsistence of any society, even a non-religious society, depends on the love and friendship of its members. The friendship that exists between the faithful – sometimes referred to in the Qur'an as a *brotherhood* – is the secret of the longevity and perseverance of a community on its original path to nearness to God. 'The faithful are indeed brothers, therefore make peace between your brothers and be wary of Allah so that you may receive His mercy' (Qur'an 49:10).

Such friendship is divine in origin, founded on the love of people for God. It continues to flow from this origin and spreads throughout the world and pertains to the creatures of God, in particular the most noble of His creatures, human beings, who need friends to motivate them towards a goal. This is all the more true if this goal is God and proximity to Him.⁸ Imam 'Ali (A) says, 'First befriend then start out on the path.'⁹

On the path towards God, all sorts of demons are lying in ambush to arrest or divert the wayfarer. Is it not then necessary that there be faithful friends and companions in faith whose friendship is divine in origin and not tainted with ulterior motives?

Reconciliation

To reconcile or even to attempt to keep the peace between those who, for whatever reason, avoid and sometimes have enmity towards one another is of such great importance in Islam that Imam 'Ali on his deathbed, narrating from the Prophet, counselled his children by

⁷ Imam Ali, *Nahj al-Balaghah*, Saying 95.

⁸ For a detailed study see: Mohsen Javadi, 'Love and Friendship', *al-Mustafa Journal of Islamic Studies*, Summer 2012, vol. 1, no. 2, 111–130.

⁹ Muhammad ibn al-Hasan al-Hurr al-'Amili, *Wasa'il al-Shi'ah* (Beirut: Mu'assasat Al al-Bayt li-Ihya al-Turath, 1993), vol. 8, ch. 30, *hadith* 1.

saying that such an action had more merit than most prayers and fasts of the believers. 'I heard from your grandfather (upon whom and his progeny be the blessings of God) that he said: "Reconciling and making amends between people is of more merit than much prayer and fasting."' ¹⁰

Tending to the affairs of others

One of the most important elements of a community is that its members show concern for one another and try, to the extent of their capacity, to bring about the happiness and wellbeing of others.

Imam 'Ali (A) said, 'A person is not felicitous whose brothers are wretched.'¹¹ This concern is of different types. Sometimes it can take on a spiritual character where one believer is concerned about the good and bad character traits of another, or is diligent with regards to the religious observance of his brother in faith, showing concern in such cases by enjoining the good and discouraging the evil.

What this means is that every member of the community not only cares about his or her own ritual practice and good works, but also the practice and works of others. They show this care in different ways. Sometimes by a gentle verbal reminder, at other times by giving good example, they draw the attention of their brother or sister in faith to the necessity of an act of worship or a good deed for the purpose of seeking nearness to God. This 'enjoining of good and discouraging the evil' is sometimes misunderstood and is used by some to show their superiority and power over others. In truth, such acts should be done out of empathy and necessity, and with humility and kindness.

Enjoining the good plays an important role in the subsistence of goodness in the community and obstructs the spread of evil that would lead to the dissolution of the community. Imam 'Ali (A) held the enjoining of good and the forbidding of evil to be a divine

¹⁰ Imam Ali, *Nahj al-Balaghah*, Sermon 47.

¹¹ Imam Ali, *Ghurar al-Hikam wa Durar al-Kalim* (Tehran: Tehran University, 1373), ch. 79, no. 33.

characteristic and activity, and he asked that this act not be omitted out of fear of death or the loss of wealth. 'Surely the enjoining of good and the forbidding of evil are two traits of the traits of God the most sublime, they do not bring death any closer nor do they reduce sustenance.'¹²

To tend to the needs of others and to be concerned about them is one of the outstanding characteristics of believers and the members of the community. According to Imam Sadiq (A), whoever does not do this is not a Muslim. 'He who awakes in the morning and does not tend to the affairs of the Muslims is not of them, and he who hears a man crying out, "O Muslims [come help me]" and he does not respond to the call is not a Muslim.'¹³

Of course, such concern is not limited to spiritual and religious affairs; it includes material affairs, comforts, and general welfare as well. The main teachings of the social ethics of the Qur'an hinge on just this type of a concern for others. For example, believers are counselled to visit the ill and to take part in burial ceremonies. They are also told to attend to the needs of neighbours. In *Nahj al-Balaghah*, Imam 'Ali (A) in his last will and testament declared on his deathbed, emphasised that the Noble Prophet of Islam called on believers to observe the rights of their neighbours even to the extent of thinking that they, just like our children, will inherit the property we leave behind.¹⁴

Great emphasis is also placed on *zakat* (alms) and other charities, which religious teachings indicate can sometimes be obligatory and discretionary. Being charitable or generous, whether in regard to money or service to others, whether expressed openly or in secret, is one of the most important aspects of the goodly life.

The Noble Qur'an speaks well of those who, despite their own needs, give importance to the welfare and happiness of others. The outstanding example of this is the generosity that was shown by Imam 'Ali (A) and his family, as mentioned in the following verse.

¹² Imam Ali, *Nahj al-Balaghah*, Saying 374.

¹³ Muhammad ibn Ya'qub al-Kulayni, *Al-Kafi* (Tehran: Dar al-Kutub al-Islamiyyah, 1365 AH (solar)), vol. 2, 164, *hadith* 5.

¹⁴ Imam Ali, *Nahj al-Balaghah*, Sermon 47.

‘They give food, for the love of Him, to the needy, the orphan and the prisoner, [saying,] “We feed you only for the sake of Allah. We do not want any reward from you nor any thanks”’ (Qur’an 76:8–9).

What is interesting is that in the Noble Qur’an, alms and charity, which are a kind of ‘giving away’, have been mentioned as a way of fortifying and keeping oneself [secure]. ‘The parable of those who spend their wealth seeking Allah’s pleasure and to *confirm themselves...*’ (Qur’an 2:265; emphasis added). Is it not possible that others are just like oneself, and that giving charity is the cause of their staying with the community?

Justice

Justice is one of the basic principles of Islamic social ethics. In the classical approach to ethics, called ‘virtue ethics’, it refers to the most basic virtue of the human soul. But in the social ethics that we are dealing with, it refers to one of the basic obligations of human behaviour in different areas of society. On the one hand, there is distributive justice, which means respecting the merits of the individual in distributing money and other kinds of goods. On the other hand, there is corrective or criminal justice, which deals with the punishment of guilty persons. The main reason Imam Ali engaged in political life was to promote justice in the society. For this purpose, he led a life of contemplation and engaged in a hard struggle against corruption. Imam Ali says,

Behold, by Him who split the grain (to grow) and created living beings, if people had not come to me and supporters had not exhausted the argument and if there had been no pledge of Allah with the learned to the effect that they should not acquiesce in the gluttony of the oppressor and the hunger of the oppressed I would have cast the rope of Caliphate on its own shoulders, and would have given the last one the same treatment as to the first one. Then you would have seen that in my view this world of yours is no better than the sneezing of a goat.¹⁵

¹⁵ Imam Ali, *Nahj al-Balaghah*, Sermon 3.

It is easy to speak about justice, but simply speaking about it does not benefit society in the least. What is useful is applying justice and observing the rights of people, for this is what fosters the growth and perseverance of the community. Truth is the most widely described reality but the most limited in application.¹⁶

Justice is even better than forgiveness in maintaining social ties and bonds. Hence justice is the overarching principle that can guide action within a community.

Injustice and the violation of rights, on the contrary, lead to the collapse of a community. It has been reported that the Prophet of Islam said that a government or social system might subsist even though it is marked with disbelief, but it will never subsist if it is implicated in injustice. Sovereign rule can survive disbelief, but it does not survive injustice.¹⁷ The meaning of this saying is that injustice destroys the very foundations of society, and by so doing, removes any possibility of a mass movement towards God. Hence one of the most important duties of those who are concerned about society is to stop injustice, and even to tackle it head on.

Giving the benefit of the doubt; trusting others

One of the fundamental teachings of Islam regards trusting other believers and not being suspicious of their intentions. The Noble Qur'an has forbidden the members of the community from acting upon the dictates of suspicion and conjecture, such as would cause distress amongst the believers. 'Do not follow that of which you have no knowledge' (Qur'an 17:36). 'O you who have faith! avoid much suspicion. Indeed some suspicions are sins' (Qur'an 49:12).

Islamic texts have not only forbidden believers from acting on suspicion, but have gone on to enjoin giving the benefit of the doubt and trying to find the best positive explanation for the actions of others. This is enshrined in Islamic jurisprudence as the Principle

¹⁶ Imam Ali, *Nahj al-Balaghah*, Sermon 216.

¹⁷ Muhammad Baqir al-Majlisi, *Bihar al-Anwar* (Beirut: Mu'assasat al-Wafa', 1404 AH), vol. 72, 331.

of Correctness. Interpret the actions of your brother or sister in the best manner, until you are forced to not do so; do not think bad of the words that come from your brother or sister while you are able to find a good explanation for them.¹⁸

The principle of trusting fellow believers fortifies the community of the faithful; on the contrary, the proliferation of suspicion and finding blame not only destroys the community of the faithful, it destroys the faith of the individual as well. The following tradition likens a culture of suspicion to water that dissolves salt. 'When a believer accuses his brother in faith, faith dissolves from his heart just like salt dissolves in water.'¹⁹

Forbidding spying, mockery and backbiting

Spying, in this context, means violating the personal space of individuals for the purpose of finding an error or a fault and has been forbidden in the Qur'an. All human beings make mistakes in their lives such that, if they were to be aired, would cause damage to their image in the eyes of others and would cause them to become abject. This not only affects their nobility in the eyes of others but also causes them to feel disparaged and effectively removes the foundation of any religious society that is informed by the nobility of its members. Mocking others, no matter what its form, is forbidden in the Qur'an because it weakens two basic elements that give form and substance to a religious society: human nobility and love/friendship. The same is true of backbiting, which can be defined as speaking about the faults of a person in his absence; this is also severely forbidden. The Noble Qur'an has prohibited the airing of the faults of people in a way that would subject them to mockery or a bad reputation. Spying, mockery, and backbiting destroy the nobility of the members of a community and replace it with a type of lowliness and humiliation.

The community of the faithful must be composed of persons who

¹⁸ Al-Hurr al-'Amili, *Wasa'il al-Shi'ah*, vol. 12, 302.

¹⁹ Ibid, 269.

have at least an inkling of self-respect and nobility. Whenever this feeling, for whatever reason, is weakened and a person is weighed down by feelings of abjectness and humiliation, the community collapses, and evil and wretchedness become the lot of that person and the community in general. As was explained above, Islamic texts clearly state that the absence of the feeling of nobility and a sense of abjectness is the source of all sorts of evils, wretchedness, losses, and damages. Islam has prohibited, in emphatic terms, actions such as spying, backbiting, insulting, mockery, vainglory, and pride that would cause others to feel lowly and abject. 'And do not spy on or backbite one another, will any of you love to eat the flesh of his dead brother? You would hate it and be wary of Allah' (Qur'an 47:12).²⁰

²⁰ I would like to thank my dear friend Shuja Mirza for his help with writing this paper.

3

The Actual Experience of Belonging to a Monastic Community

Benoît Standaert

One becomes a monk, a member of a monastic community, in stages, and these stages have much in common with the way one becomes member of the Christian community generally. In their commentaries on the Rule of our founder, Saint Benedict (480–543), many authors find that the process of monastic initiation parallels the stages of initiation into the Christian community, a process that is known as the catechumenate and that is completed by the sacraments of initiation: baptism, confirmation, and the Eucharist. For example, candidates for the monastic life, like candidates for the Christian life, change ‘habits’, taking off the clothes they are wearing, symbols of the ‘old man’, and putting on the clothes of the ‘new man’ who is reborn in Christ and through his Holy Spirit.

Saint Benedict was a Roman, and therefore another model, that of the army, also appears in his Rule. One becomes a monk in the way one becomes a soldier, ready to serve the great King, joined to him by a *sacramentum*, a solemn bond that can only be broken by death.

The metaphors of clothing and of military service are present

in the Rule of Benedict, but they also appear in earlier monastic literature, as well as in writings that deal with Christian initiation in general. Life is a struggle, whether that be the life of a baptised person or that of a monk. No one goes into battle unarmed; they carry with them the weapons they will need. In the Pauline Letter to the Ephesians, we find the expression 'Put on the whole armor of God.' The author lists the weapons the Christian should have, quoting different passages from the prophetic books of the Bible (6:10–20). Those arms, as an elderly monk once pointed out to me, are mainly defensive – except for the Word of God, which is called 'the sword!' In monastic language, prayer with the Word of God is sometimes referred to as the 'sword' of the monk.

Three characteristics of the cenobite

For Saint Benedict, our founder, cenobites, that is, monks who live in community, are distinguished by three characteristics: they live under a Rule, under an abbot, and in a given place, the *monasterium*. The three vows of monastic profession correspond to these three characteristics.

On the day they make their monastic vows, monks promise stability to the monastery where they will live – 'monastery' not just in the sense of a place or a building, but even more, of the community of brothers or sisters with whom they choose to live and to remain.

Secondly, they make a vow of *conversatio morum*, which means the way of life, the uses and costumes, the behaviour and the practices that have characterised monastic identity throughout the centuries. These include the instruments, the arts, and the arms that monks are to adopt and/or learn during their period of initial training: their dress, their tonsure, the dispossession of all their belongings, celibacy, chastity, the art of praying the Psalms, of practicing *lectio divina* or holy reading, keeping vigils, practicing silence, and so on. In Chapter 4 of his Rule, Saint Benedict provides a list of about seventy-two short principles that he simply calls the 'tools' that monks are to use in the workshop of their Lord and master. We discover here another metaphor for monks: they are

basically workers who have been trained to use different tools and have honed their skill in the training school that is the monastery.

Thirdly, and finally, there is the vow of obedience by which monks bind themselves to their abbot, and through the mediation of their abbot, to Christ and to God. This is the most mystical pole, since it concerns the most interior dimension of the monastic life.

One might speak of three concentric circles that are shaped by this triple vow. The most exterior, and also the most narrow circle, is formed by the vow of stability.

The second circle has a much larger radius: the entire monastic tradition in the East as well as the West (Egypt, Palestine, Cappadocia, Syria, Lérins in Gaul [France], and North Africa). Non-Christian monks can also be included in this second vow of conversion to the monastic way of life (*conversatio morum*). This dimension of the monastic life constitutes a bridge linking Christian monks with Hindu and Buddhist monks and, I would suggest, with some Muslim fraternities or *tariqahs*.

Finally, the third vow, obedience, opens the heart to an even larger horizon, to the depths of Christ's love and his total surrender to God the Father. Christ's love takes the shape of an immense cosmic cross, which is the image that stands in the background of the passage of the Letter to the Ephesians that speaks of the 'breadth and length and height and depth of Christ's love', a love that 'surpasses knowledge' (3:18f.).

The three vows can also be thought of as three degrees of interiority.

Becoming a monk can be expressed by external signs such as the place chosen for stability, the clothing and tonsure, the schedule for prayer, work and meals, dietary rules, and so on. It should be obvious, however, that external signs such as these are insufficient. As the old Latin proverb has it, '*Cucullus non facit monachum*' ('The cowl does not make the monk'). However, we can also say that good habits enable a person to be more and more disposed to the leading and concrete injunctions of the Holy Spirit.

Ultimately, the goal to be attained is that the monk (Greek, *monachos*; solitary) becomes 'one and alone with the One and the Alone'. The true monk is one who bravely faces the many paradoxes

of life, where loss is wining, where solitude becomes communion, where poverty equals richness in God. 'The monk is one who, being separated from all, is united with all' (Evagrius Ponticus (345–399)). The walls of the monastic cloister enclose the entire world. The monastic life embraces centuries and dwells in the midst of galaxies. We see this concretely in some older monks: everything is too narrow for their heart.

One form among many: pluralism, alternatives, and deviations

Belonging, like identity, becomes something true and living in times of crisis, for example, when it becomes necessary to move from one place to another, to change long-established ways of behaviour, to end a relationship or to begin one. In order to make clear what constitutes the communal monastic life for which he writes his Rule, Benedict contrasts monastic life in community with three other models of monastic life. Each of them lacks one, two, or even all three of the identifying marks of the cenobite: the hermit lacks obedience (i.e., obedience to an abbot); the sarabaites lack obedience and *conversatio morum* (monastic behavior); the gyrovague lacks both characteristics of the cenobite as well as stability.

History, before and after Saint Benedict, presents several other forms of monastic life. In the 'lauriac' model, which goes back to the time of Ammonas (fourth century), hermits gather around a guide and spiritual father. They share some moments together, especially on Saturday and Sunday, but most of the time they stay by themselves, in individual hermitages connected by a little street (Greek, *lavra*). The Rule of the monks of Mount Carmel near Haifa was composed in the thirteenth century for people who wanted to live together, but did not want to become Benedictines. The twentieth century has given rise to various forms of 'urban monasticism'. One of the most well-known is the Monastic Fraternity of Jerusalem founded by Jean Marie Delfieux. Another twentieth-century monastic foundation is the 'Bose community' started by Enzo Bianchi in 1964 near Vercelli and now comprising several other monasteries,

including San Masseo in Assisi. One of the features of all these new foundations is that the communities are 'mixed', that is, comprised of men and women. Such a model already existed in the Middle Ages. For example, in Le Bec Hellouin (Normandy), brothers and sisters lived in community under an abbess.

When we meet monks from other religious traditions, we often discover dimensions of the monastic way of life that have been neglected in ours. For example, monks from India have taught me the value of the vow of instability. One who was passing by Bruges told us, 'Where I eat, I do not sleep, where I sleep, I do not eat.' This determination to remain uprooted and constantly on the move manifests an attitude that should characterise every mature monk.

Exceptions and exclusions

Catholic monks today observe not only a Rule, the one written by Saint Benedict, but also constitutions, which are a set of regulations that address concrete and contemporary situations not dealt with in the Rule. There, for example, we find directions for managing the case of those brothers or sisters who, for one reason or another (physical or mental health, or even a sense of being called to another way of monastic life), are allowed to leave the place of their first monastic profession. The constitutions of some monastic federations require that they come back home for at least one month a year. Sometimes they are allowed a three-year period of 'exclaustration' (living outside the monastery) to discern their vocation. A complete change of stability is also possible, making it possible for a monk to leave one community and become part of another, provided both communities agree to this.

Is it possible for a monk to be expelled from a community? I belong to a community that was rather large (250 monks in 1964), and I have no personal knowledge that this ever happened. I would conclude that if and when it does happen, it is rather exceptional. However, there are brothers who leave to become priests of a diocese or to get married, just as there are widows and widowers or missionary priests and sisters who seek admission to the monastic life.

A new and rather strange phenomenon is the case of monks who, after twenty or so years in the monastery, even after having held important positions in the community, decide to leave and begin a new life, or at least a completely new stage in their life. They do so without sorrow or sadness. In fact, they express profound gratitude for all they received as members of the monastic community. For them, there is no rupture – but that is rarely the case for those who remain and especially for the superior of the community. There are also cases of a brother leaving the community to join a brother who had been a member of the community, but left.

Another difficult situation for monastic communities is how to respond to those monks who left the community years ago and now want to return. In my experience, they will rarely be well received. Some of the members of the community can have a surprisingly hostile attitude to those they consider to have been ‘turncoats’. Could it be that their leaving had been experienced as a threat to the self-identity of those who remained?

When someone leaves, there is always a sense of mourning. Monastic communities, by and large, do not do a very good job of mourning. It is rather exceptional, I believe, for community members to take the time to talk with one another about these cases. We do not ask ourselves what we may have done to cause a monk to leave. Sometimes a member disappears, and there is no emotional response whatsoever to his or her departure. It is as if one loses an arm, but experiences no pain or sorrow. This, of course, is not a good sign of the quality of life of that particular community.

On the other hand, every new face, every new brother or sister who asks to join the community, poses a real challenge to the community. Each and every member has to determine how they will present themselves to the one who appears at the door seeking admission. Here too we encounter some recent developments. There are some communities that regard every new face as a threat. The community has grown old and it has been years since anyone has entered. So, they say, ‘Let us die in peace.’ Consciously, or unconsciously, some do everything they can to make life bitter for the new candidate. ‘If she can’t accept us as we are, it’s a clear sign that she was not made for life here! She can go someplace else!’ I

once heard a spiritual master from abroad make the comment 'In society today it has become relatively easy to have an abortion. We have to be careful not to let this happen in our communities!' Unfortunately, there are some monks who, being unable to prevent the 'conception' of a monastic vocation, do all they can to 'abort' it. To belong to a community where such an abortive spirit is present is, of course, very painful.

The rule without rules

'Except the mind, no other law.' – CHINESE PROVERB

Spiritually we have to reach the point where there are no longer any barriers or boundaries, neither inside nor outside. Opposing the monastery to 'the world' may have been helpful in making the transition to a the new way of life. But can we say that this opposition belongs to the essence and goal of monastic life? One day we discover that the world is present in the monastery and that the monastery has no other limits than the whole world. The unconscious self that we bring to the monastery is not different from the unconscious self of our contemporaries who live outside the monastery. Even though we may adopt many new practices, the unconscious self remains. We do not get rid of it; rather, we hope to learn how to deal with it wisely.

At the end of the road monks hope to arrive at a stability that encompasses the whole universe; at a way of life that brings serenity and peace to themselves and those around them. According to Isaac the Syrian (c. 613–c. 700) the monk is one who surrenders to Christ with tears and compassion, and 'prays for every creature under the sky, even for the enemies of the truth and for the demons, that they may be preserved. In his mercy, as the image of God, he prays even for the serpents.'

4

What does it Mean to Belong to a Muslim Community?

Hamed Fayazi

From an Islamic viewpoint, belonging to a community is closely related to the concept of *wilayah*. In its most basic meaning *w-l-y*, the root of '*wilayah*', denotes the closeness of two or more things to each other such that nothing can stand between them. Its derivatives have various but related meanings, for example, friendship, support, devotion, loyalty, authority, and sovereignty (Isfahani 1412 AH: 886–8). In the Qur'an and Hadith, *wilayah* is used to signify a reciprocal relationship that connects believers to God, the Prophet (S), and the Imams (A) (Qur'an 5:55; 2:257). This bond entails the obedience and devotion of the believers, and the mastership and authority of God and His divinely appointed leaders. It also involves mutual love and support between the believers and their masters.

However, the bond of *wilayah* also has an essential, but often overlooked dimension that has to do with the relationship of believers with one another. In this regard, M. A. Shomali writes,

Contrary to what most people believe, *wilāyah* is not just the relationship between each individual believer and the Prophet and Imams, rather it is the relationship between the community

of believers as a whole and the Prophet and Imams and also the relationship amongst the believers themselves. The *wilāyah* of Allah swt and His *walis* creates a united society and an integrated body of believers who demonstrate love, devotion and dedication amongst themselves (Shomali 2010: 69–70; italics added).

Thus, just as our tradition speaks of the *wilayah* that relates God, the Prophet (S), and the Imams (A) to the believers, it also speaks of the *wilayah* that connects believers to one another (Qur'an 9:71).

The evidence from our tradition shows that these two aspects of *wilayah* are inseparable, and one cannot exist without the other. A Muslim who cuts off his or her relationship with another Muslim is no longer considered a Muslim. A famous *hadith*, which will be discussed further below, clearly states that 'he who does not care about the affairs of Muslims is not a Muslim' (Kulayni 1407 AH: vol. 2, 164). In another *hadith*, Imam Sadiq (A) tells one of his companions that whoever refuses to fulfil his duties in relation to other believers 'goes out of the *wilayah* of God' (Kulayni 1407 AH: vol. 2, 169); elsewhere, the Imam (A) says to the same companion, if he fulfils those duties, his '*wilayah* connects to our *wilayah*, and our *wilayah* to the *wilayah* of God' (Kulayni 1407 AH: vol. 2, 174). According to our tradition, the way to seek nearness to God, the Prophet (S), and the Imams (A) is not to merely have their *muwalat* (another derivate of the root *w-l-y*, close in meaning to *wilayah*) but also the *muwalat* of those who have their *wilayah*. Along the same lines, it is not enough to say that one is at peace with the Imams (A); one must also declare that they are at peace with those who are at peace with them (Ibn Qulawayh 1356 AH (solar): 177).

Further evidence that shows the inseparability of the two aspects of *wilayah* is the fact that our tradition – besides comprising many laws and rituals that directly relate to the community – gives a communal dimension even to the rituals that pertain to the relationship of an individual believer with God. For instance, in the case of the daily prayers (sing., *salah*), Muslims are strongly encouraged to perform them congregationally. Multiple traditions indicate that the merit of a congregational prayer is twenty five times more than the same prayer performed individually ('Amili 1409 AH: vol. 8,

285–6). The prayers of those who do not attend congregational prayer because of ‘disinterest in it and in the congregation of believers’ will not be accepted (‘Amili 1409 AH: vol. 8, 285). Further, the prayer of those who hear the call for congregational prayer but do not attend it is not accepted if they have no justifiable excuse (1409 AH: vol. 8, 291). Here, even blindness is not considered to be a justifiable excuse, since according to a *hadith*, the Prophet (S) once told a blind man to connect a rope from his door to the mosque in order to attend the congregational prayers (Tusi 1407 AH: vol. 3, 266).

If the two aspects of *wilayah* are inseparable, and if our relationship to God and to our divinely appointed leaders, even in its most personal aspects, has a communal dimension, then studying the meaning of belonging to a Muslim community is in reality, study of the whole Islamic tradition. This is because all the teachings of our religion may be related to one of these two relationships.

In this chapter, we do not aim to conduct a broad investigation. Instead, we will try to provide a sample of what Islam has taught us about community. For this purpose, we have selected three analogies that the tradition has used to describe what it is to be a member of a Muslim community. We use these analogies to serve as a way of categorising the selected content for this study.

‘All shepherds’

A famous *hadith* of the Prophet (S) reads, ‘You are all shepherds, and you are all responsible for your flock’ (Majlisi 1403 AH: vol. 72, 38). If shepherds are responsible for leading their flocks to pasture, protecting them from danger, and providing for their needs, then, according to this *hadith*, all the members of a Muslim community are responsible for guiding their community, safeguarding it, and providing for its needs. This *hadith*, most significantly teaches Muslims that these three responsibilities are not the responsibilities of a special class in society (e.g. leaders, elders, the rich, etc.); rather, each member has to contribute in fulfilling them to the degree that each is able.

However, this is a very big task. How can each person be respon-

sible for guiding the community to whatever benefits it in religious, spiritual, ethical, and worldly spheres, protecting it from all dangers (worldly, material, religious, and/or spiritual), and providing whatever it needs to survive and succeed?

One explanation is that the responsibility to become ‘shepherds’ of the community and all that it entails is, in Islamic legal terms, the *wajib kifa’i* (common duty) of all members. This means that in each of the above areas some members have to fulfil the needs of the community; if this is not done, then all will be held responsible. For instance, the Islamic community needs scholars of religion who can provide people with a genuine understanding of Islamic beliefs and practices, and safeguard them against false interpretations. The Holy Qur’an states, ‘Why should not there go forth a group from each of their sections to become learned in religion, and to warn their people when they return to them, so that they may beware?’ (9:122). If enough people take it upon themselves to carry out this task, and to become the ‘shepherds’ of the community in this respect, this obligation will be removed from everybody else. Likewise, the community needs physicians who can attend to the sick, and it is the common duty of all to take up this task until an adequate number of people are able to do so.

Understood as a common duty, becoming ‘shepherds’ of the community can be fulfilled in a way that all members of the community individually takes it upon themselves to carry out a task that they see they have the ability to fulfil, and thus each becomes the ‘shepherd’ of their community in that particular area of need.

However, a second explanation is that apart from the common duties related to guiding, protecting, and providing for the community, there are individual duties (*wajib ‘ayni*) that make every member a shepherd of the community. Below we will discuss some of these duties.

Commanding the good and forbidding the evil

If some members fail to fulfil their obligations or any other required good deeds, other members are required to ‘command the good’ and bid them to fulfil their duties. Likewise in case of a misdeed, other

members have to 'forbid the evil' and prohibit the evildoers from wrongdoing. Commanding the good and forbidding the evil (*al-amr bil-ma'ruf wa al-nahy 'an al-munkar*) is an important religious duty of each member of a Muslim community and a sign that the members care for each other.¹ The Qur'an says, 'The faithful, men and women, are comrades of one another: they bid what is right and forbid what is wrong' (9:71).

It is important to remember that this religious duty is not restricted to good or evil social deeds; that is to say, if some members fail to fulfil even an individual obligatory duty, such as prayer, other members have to remind them of their duty and require them to fulfil it.² Members of a Muslim community must not only be concerned with their own personal spiritual welfare, but must also care for the spiritual welfare of the other members and of the community as a whole. The Qur'an tells us the story of the Israelites who broke the Sabbath and who were punished by God as a result. In this story, there are two other groups who did not break the Sabbath, however, one of them would 'forbid the evil' and warn the sinners, and the other would keep silent. The latter group would even criticise the former, saying, 'Why do you advise a people whom Allah will destroy or punish with a severe punishment?' (Qur'an 7:164). However, they had no idea that when the punishment would fall, it would also include them with the sinners, and only those who had forbidden the evil would be saved (Qur'an 7:165).

By 'commanding the good and forbidding the evil', every member fulfils the duty of being the 'shepherd' of the community.

Providing for the community

In a famous tradition, which we mentioned earlier, we are told that 'he who does not care about the affairs of Muslims is not a Muslim'

¹ The importance of this duty in the eyes of Muslims was so great that an early Muslim sect, the Mu'tazilah, went to the extreme of making this duty one of the five major principles of their school.

² Of course, this is not a license to investigate people's personal matters. Qur'an 49:12 clearly prohibits us from such investigations.

(Kulayni 1407 AH: vol. 2, 164). This is a very strong way of saying that to be a Muslim means to care for Muslims – for *all* Muslims in *all* situations. We usually care for ourselves and our family and close friends, but this is not enough according to this *hadith*. Rather, a Muslim has to care for all the members of the Muslim community (the *ummah*). Also, according to this *hadith*, caring for other Muslims is not just a duty among our other duties. Rather, it is a condition for being part of the Muslim community.

Caring for all Muslims means to first of all be aware of what is going on in the community as a whole and of what is happening to its members, and then to be concerned emotionally, and to strive to do whatever one can to provide help and support for the community. Although caring and being concerned can be expressed in many different ways, our focus here will be on material support.

Of course, one must begin with oneself and one's family. Our traditions teach us that those who strive to provide for their families are like 'strugglers in the path of God' (Saduq 1992: vol. 3, 168). On the other hand, those who can work and provide for themselves and their families but refuse to do so, are severely condemned: 'Damned is the one who puts his burden on people! Damned is the one who neglects his dependents!' (Saduq 1992: vol. 2, 68).

After fulfilling the needs of one's family, one has to do whatever one can in order to support and provide for the other members of the community who are in need. In the Islamic legal system, there are various forms of obligatory and recommended duties of almsgiving and charity (such as *zakat*, *khums*, *sadaqah*, etc.), the details of which can be found in manuals of Islamic law.³ Our tradition teaches us that when a person asks us for help, we have to consider this as actually a sign of God's mercy to us (Kulayni 1407 AH: vol. 2, 193). Fulfilling the needs of a believer is regarded as a righteous deed that has a greater reward in the Hereafter than other important rituals, such as the hajj: 'Verily, fulfilling the need of a believer is dearer to God than twenty hajjs in which one spends one hundred thousand [gold or silver coins] in each of them' (Kulayni 1407 AH: vol. 2, 193). In another *hadith*, we are told, 'Whoever fulfils

³ See for instance Muhaqqiq (1389 AH).

the needs of his believing brother is like the one who worships God for nine thousand years, while fasting the days and standing in prayer during the nights' (Saduq 1992: vol. 2, 190).

This deed is so precious that 'whenever a Muslim fulfils the needs of a Muslim, God Almighty calls him, "Your reward is upon me, and I will not be pleased with anything for you less than Paradise"' (Kulayni 1407 AH: vol. 2, 194). When one cannot help others in need and becomes sad as a result, 'God Almighty will take him to Paradise because of his sadness' (Kulayni 1407 AH: vol. 2, 196).

All 'brothers'

Another analogy that is widely used in the Islamic tradition to show the meaning of belonging to a Muslim community is the analogy of brotherhood. The Qur'an states, 'The faithful are indeed brothers' (49:10), and according to a *hadith* 'A believer is the brother of other believers; he does not betray, wrong, or deceive him, nor does he break his promise to him' (Kulayni 1407 AH: vol. 2, 166). For an audience that gives importance to familial ties (like the original audience of the Qur'an and Hadith), the analogy of brotherhood points, among other things, to the love, closeness, strong loyalty, and deep trust that must exist between them. In other *hadiths*, the believers are instructed to consider each other as members of one family by regarding the elderly as their parents, children as their own children, and others as their siblings (Saduq 1992: vol. 2, 625).⁴

⁴ There is another group of traditions that speak of a deeper level of brotherhood between believers, which is rooted in their creation: 'Believers are each other's full brothers, because God Almighty created the believers from the clay of Paradise and imbued their images with its aroma' (Kulayni 1407 AH: vol. 2, 166–7). According to these traditions, this brotherhood is so fundamental that when a believer is not feeling well, others may undergo sudden experiences of sadness or insomnia (Kulayni 1407 AH: vol. 2, 165, 166). A comprehensive study of this group of *hadiths* is beyond the scope of this article. However, even if one insists on a non-literal interpretation of these *hadiths*, there is no doubt that they indicate a very deep connection between the believers which must manifest itself in a truly 'brotherly' manner.

Below we will discuss the teachings of Islamic tradition related to this analogy.

Brotherly love

Islamic tradition teaches us that we must love each other for the sake of God. This love is regarded as 'one of the greatest branches of faith' (Kulayni 1407 AH: vol. 2, 125). We are taught that 'whenever two Muslims meet, the more excellent one is the one who loves his brother more' (Kulayni 1407 AH: vol. 2, 127). The fruits of this love are not limited to this world but extend to the Hereafter:

On the Day of Judgment, those who love one another for the sake of God are on platforms of light, while the light of their faces, the light of their bodies, and the light of their platforms illuminate everything. They will be known by this love and people will call them 'the lovers for the sake of God'. (Kulayni 1407 AH: vol. 2, 125)

On that day, we are told, those who love one another for the sake of God will enter Paradise 'without any reckoning' (Kulayni 1407 AH: vol. 2, 126).

Thus, it is not enough for a member of a Muslim community to be a good, caring, and supportive member without a true brotherly or sisterly love for others. Also, according to these *hadiths*, it is not enough to love them because they are our family members or close friends; we have to love them 'for the sake of God', that is, because they love and believe in God and are loved by Him.

Special rights

The bond of brotherhood between believers means that their rights and duties with regard to one another is greater than the duties and rights of the members of an ordinary community. Fulfilling these rights is stressed in Islamic tradition as a crucial and highly vital duty, so much so that according to a *hadith*, 'God has not been worshipped by any deed better than fulfilling the right of a believer' (Kulayni 1407 AH: vol. 2, 170). It is reported that Mu'alla ibn Khunays,

one of the companions of Imam al-Sadiq (A), asked the Imam (A) about the rights of a Muslim. The Imam (A) said, 'There are seven obligatory rights. If one neglects any of them, he will be cut off from the *wilayah* of God and obedience.' When Mu'alla asked the Imam (A) to narrate them for him, the Imam (A) expressed his worry that Mu'alla might not be able to fulfil those rights and thus would face the consequences, but upon further insistence, the Imam (A) complied and said,

The easiest right of those rights is to like for him what you like for yourself and to dislike for him what you dislike for yourself. The second right is to avoid his anger, seek his pleasure, and to obey his command. The third right is to help him by your soul, your funds, your tongue, your hands, and your legs. The fourth right is to be his eyes, guide, and mirror. The fifth right is not to be full when he is hungry, not to be quenched when he is thirsty, and not to have [proper] clothes when he does not have any. The sixth right is that if you have a servant and he does not, you must send your servant to wash his clothes, prepare food for him, and make his bed. The seventh right is that you must fulfil his oath, accept his invitation, visit him when he is sick, and attend his burial ceremony [when he dies]. And when you know that he needs something, rush to fulfil his need and do not make him ask you for it. If you do this, your *wilayah* connects to his, and his *wilayah* connects to yours. (Kulayni 1407 AH: vol. 2, 169)

In another report, Imam al-Baqir (A) asked Sa'id ibn al-Hasan, one of his companions, about the latter's community: 'Is it the case that one of you comes to his brother, puts his hand into his pocket, takes what he needs, and he is not stopped?' Sa'id said, 'This is not the case among us.' The Imam (A) said, 'Then, [it is] no good...the people have not reached their maturity' (Kulayni 1407 AH: vol. 2, 174).

Benevolent interactions

What is meant by benevolent interactions is not actions like helping the poor where a duty or an obligation is involved, but rather the

interactions that are rooted in love and care for one another. For instance, our tradition encourages us to socialise with our brothers and sisters in faith, giving this socialisation a spiritual and religious value. We are told that ‘whoever visits his brother for the sake of God, the Almighty says, “Indeed you have visited Me, your reward is on Me, and I will not be satisfied with any reward for you less than Paradise”’ (Kulayni 1407 AH: vol. 2, 176). According to another tradition,

God Almighty sent down an angel to earth. The angel kept walking until he reached a door at which a man was standing asking for the permission of the homeowner [to visit him]. The angel asked the man, ‘What do you need from the owner of this house?’ The man said, ‘This is my Muslim brother whom I want to visit for the sake of God Almighty.’ The angel asked, ‘Only this has brought you here?’ The man replied, ‘Only this has brought me here.’ The angel then said, ‘I am the messenger of your Lord; He salutes you and says, ‘Paradise has become necessary for you.’ (Kulayni 1407 AH: vol. 2, 176)

Visiting other believers and shaking hands with them result in the forgiveness of sins: ‘When two believers meet and shake hands, God Almighty will face them [with His mercy], and their sins will fall from them, like leaves falling from a tree’ (Kulayni 1407 AH: vol. 2, 180). Angels will attend the gatherings of believers: ‘When three or more believers meet, the same number of angels attend their gathering. When they pray for something, the angels say “amen”, and when they seek refuge [to God] from some distress, the angels ask God to protect them from it’ (Kulayni 1407 AH: vol. 2, 187).

Another example of benevolence is creating joy in the heart of believers. The Prophet (S) is reported to have said, ‘Whoever makes a believer happy has indeed made me happy, and whoever makes me happy, has indeed made God happy’ (Kulayni 1407 AH: vol. 2, 188). Even acts that may seem insignificant to us are highly valued by God, such as smiling at the face of a believer (Kulayni 1407 AH: vol. 2, 188), giving him dates (vol. 2, 189), saying ‘welcome’ to him (vol. 2, 206), taking a mote from his face (vol. 2, 205). Making believers happy is so much appreciated by God, that He will not only take those who do so to Paradise, but He will make them rulers therein:

God Almighty told His servant, Moses, the following: 'I have some servants to whom I will give my Paradise and whom I will make rulers therein.' Moses said, 'O Lord! Who are those servants to whom You will give your Paradise and whom You will make rulers therein?' God said, 'Those who made a believer happy.' (Kulayni 1407 AH: vol. 2, 188-9)

Feeding, giving water, providing clothes, and serving one another are all considered in our tradition to be instances of the benevolence that must exist in a Muslim community. In a *hadith*, we read, 'Whoever provides clothes for a believer who does not have clothes, God will clothe him of the brocade of Paradise, and whoever provides clothes for a believer who has clothes will remain in God's protection as long as the clothes remain' (Kulayni 1407 AH: vol. 2, 205). In another report, Imam Sadiq (A) encouraged one of his companions to feed one person every day. The companion asked whether the person he fed had to be a poor person. The Imam (A) replied, 'The rich also desire food sometimes' (Kulayni 1407 AH: vol. 2, 203). Although doing good to the poor and to those in need is an obligation that must be fulfilled in a Muslim community, doing good to other members who may not be needy, promotes benevolence and strengthens brotherly bonds.

No discrimination

The analogy of brotherhood also indicates that there is no place for discrimination between the members of a Muslim community. The Qur'an teaches us that the only thing that makes a human being better than another is *taqwa* (God-wariness), not things like gender or race:

O mankind! Indeed We created you from a male and a female, and made you nations and tribes that you may identify yourselves with one another. Indeed the noblest of you in the sight of Allah is the most God-wary among you. Indeed Allah is all-knowing, all-aware. (Qur'an 49:13)

Although the community cannot survive without various kinds of diversity, no member is above the bond of brotherhood. In fact, even leaders should regard and be regarded by other members as brothers and sisters. In the famous letter of Imam ‘Ali (A) to Malik al-Ashtar, whom he had appointed as governor of Egypt, he (A) writes:

Fill your heart with mercy, love, and grace for the people. Do not be to them like a ravenous beast who seizes their sustenance. For they [i.e. the people] are of two types: either your brother in faith or your equal in creation. (*Nahj al-Balaghah*, letter 53)

This viewpoint leaves no place in a Muslim community for the appearance of despotic rulers, privileged classes, or any form of discrimination and injustice.

One body, of the same soul

Our tradition teaches us that believers are like ‘the parts of one body; if one part is afflicted, the other parts feel the pain – and their souls are of the same soul’ (Kulayni 1407 AH: vol. 2, 166). This analogy shows that in a Muslim community a powerful emotional bond must exist between the members, such that when some members are in need, the other members are not only ready to provide their material and emotional support but ‘find the pain’ in their hearts. Needless to say, the support that comes from the heart is far superior to that which comes merely from a sense of ethical or religious obligation.

The importance of unity

However, the analogy of the body also shows the strong unity that must exist in a Muslim community. The Qur’an says in this regard, ‘Indeed this community of yours is *one* community, and I am your Lord’ (21:92; 23:52). Another Qur’anic verse commands us, ‘Hold fast, all together, to Allah’s cord, and do not be divided’ (3:103). In some *hadiths*, we are told that ‘whoever parts from the congregation of Muslims a hand span has taken out the tie of Islam from his neck’

(Kulayni 1407 AH: vol. 1, 405). 'Whenever two men part company with each other, one of them deserves repudiation and damnation, and sometimes they both deserve that' (Kulayni 1407 AH: vol. 2, 344).

It may happen that a conflict or a dispute arises between some members of the community. In such cases, our religion instructs us to do whatever we can to reconcile them. This is considered as a 'charity that God loves' (Kulayni 1407 AH: vol. 2, 209); it is better than 'one year praying and fasting' (Harrani 1404 AH: 198). It is reported in a *hadith* that at the time of Imam Sadiq (A) two Shi'ites were having an argument over some inheritance, when Mufaddal, a companion of the Imam (A), met them. Mufaddal took them both to his home, and there he reconciled them by giving them four hundred dirhams. After he had them promise to stop fighting, he told them that the four hundred dirhams did not belong to him; rather, Imam Sadiq (A) had commanded him that whenever two Shi'ites had a financial dispute, he pay the disputed amount from the Imam's (A) funds and reconcile them (Kulayni 1407 AH: vol. 2, 209). Sometimes, the conflict may be more serious; in this regard, the Qur'an teaches us,

If two groups of the faithful fight one another, make peace between them. But if one party of them aggresses against the other, fight the one which aggresses until it returns to Allah's ordinance. Then, if it returns, make peace between them fairly, and do justice. Indeed Allah loves the just. The faithful are indeed brothers. Therefore make peace between your brothers and be wary of Allah, so that you may receive [His] mercy (Qur'an 49:9–10).

Another similar analogy that our tradition uses in this regard is that of an edifice. In a *hadith* of the Prophet (S), we read, 'Believers are like an edifice, whose parts support each other' (Majlisi 1403 AH: vol. 58, 150). This *hadith* also indicates – in addition to the mutual support that the members of a Muslim community are to show one another – that they have to form a united whole, whose parts are closely related to each other and find function and meaning in this essential relationship. If some of these parts separate themselves from the whole, not only will they lose their own meaning, but they will also damage the meaning of the whole, which cannot exist without its parts.

Conclusion

What belonging to a Muslim community actually involves is really what being a Muslim involves. The personal and communal aspects of Islam, the two aspects of the bond of *wilayah*, are so essentially intertwined that one cannot exist without the other. So, the study of the former really means a study of the whole Muslim tradition and its teachings.

Because of this, we have to provide a sample of what our religion teaches in this regard. For this purpose, we selected three analogies used by our tradition to portray what belonging to a Muslim community means. Firstly, the members of a Muslim community have to regard themselves as the 'shepherds' of their community. This means, they have to try to guide their community, safeguard it, and provide for its needs. Among the different ways in which this task can be fulfilled, we studied the obligation to 'command the good and forbid the evil' and the duty of providing material support for the community.

According to the second analogy, the members of a Muslim community are each other's 'brothers'. This entails, among other things, the existence of brotherly or sisterly love for one another, special rights and duties, and benevolent interactions.

Finally, the third analogy is that Muslims are 'one body, of the same soul'. This and a similar analogy that likens the community of believers to an edifice show us the importance of forming a united whole that must be protected against any form of disharmony and division.

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5

Might Benedictines and Muslims build a Community Founded on a Dialogue of Spirituality?

Timothy Wright

At first sight, a Benedictine–Muslim community dedicated to a dialogue of spirituality might seem an impossibility. Two major differences would need to be overcome: the celibate lifestyle of the Benedictine – living in a single sex community against the married lifestyle of the Shi’a – and the differences between the two Abrahamic faiths, Christianity and Islam.

It is true that Benedictine communities, male and female, carry with them a notion of family: they are not merely organisations destined to fulfil a function, but a group of people who care for each other in the way a family does. Some Benedictines describe their life as a search for God under the guidance of an Abbot.

By contrast, Muslims are linked to their biological families. Their faith is developed through their families, which play an essential role in the religious upbringing of their children. In addition, from my partial observation of Islam round the world, Muslims have a closer relationship with the local mosque than the majority of Catholics have with their parish church.

Because of the commitment of time required for family, faith, and work, it is not very likely that Benedictines or Muslims could become fully engaged in a fourth community dedicated to a dialogue of spirituality. So, perhaps it would be better to speak of an occasional community of dialogue.

Six points that justify a proposal

First, the spirituality of both Benedictines and Muslims is based on the revelation of the One God. This enables us to reflect on, and share, what this 'revelation of the One God' means. We have to go deeper than simply sliding into a discussion about 'oneness' and 'trinity'. Put another way, the phrase 'revealing God' implies a relationship of Muslim and Christian believers with the revealing God. Given the existence of that relationship, a Benedictine-Muslim dialogue is not just possible, it is necessary. Such a necessary vocation would encourage the one to articulate to the other how his or her respective faith is lived, how the weakness of human life is strengthened by this relationship with God. In this way, each will identify important areas of similarity and difference.

Second, each regards his or her spiritual journey as a way to completeness. It is a journey that leads to an ever deeper level of intimacy with God, achieved in different ways, with different languages. Each regards this journey as an obedience to the will of God. It begins at the moment of conception and continues until its fulfilment in a union with God in a resurrected life after death. Again similar languages, but different journeys.

Third, each can find affirmation and encouragement by listening to the journey of the other. Within the context of difference there are many elements of similarity. Sharing insights, similar and different, is both enriching and helpful. The human desire, prompted by faith in the One Revealing God, is to seek ever deeper intimacy with the One God. The dialogue enables each to affirm similarity and define difference. Such is the gift of this dialogue of spirituality. These gifts may take the form of a new insight offered by the testimony of the other or enlargement of an existing insight, or, again, a new

approach to the journey into mystical union with the One God.

Fourth, the One Revealing, All-Powerful God is, by definition, without boundaries. Human beings build boundaries to define more clearly where their faith begins and ends. Theological boundaries define the respective understandings of truth. In a dialogue of spirituality, this boundary becomes – in some ways, at least – porous, for there can only be one definition of the phrase ‘One God’. From this basic definition, each has developed the truth about God in ways consonant with their respective revelations. But behind these definitions each acknowledges the unique mystery of the One God, beyond the grasp of human reason.

Fifth, from this point there opens up the possibility of creating a framework in which a dialogue of spirituality can be developed. The basis of this framework is that each recognises the other’s commitment of faith in the One God. Here an important qualification has to be inserted. Such a dialogue requires participants to be strong in their respective faith.

Sixth, participants in this special kind of community dedicated to a dialogue of spirituality will be ready to listen with an open heart and mind to the other’s articulation of his or her spiritual story. During this exchange, many will be surprised by the similarity of language used in a dialogue of religious experience. All will find elements of affirmation, moments of illumination and words of challenge. The result: an enlargement in understanding the One Revealing God.

The importance of the Hebrew/Christian Scriptures and the Holy Qur’an

In four separate surahs, the Holy Qur’an has this to say about the Christian scriptures:¹

Prosperous are those who purify themselves, remember the name of their Lord and pray...All this is in the earlier scriptures, the

¹ I cite from the M. A. S. Abdel Haleem translation (Oxford University Press; Reissue edition, 2008).

scriptures of Abraham and Moses. (Qur'an 87:14, 18)

We also gave Moses the Scripture, and made it a guide for the Children of Israel. Entrust yourselves to no one but Me, you descendants of those We carried with Noah: he was truly a thankful servant. (Qur'an 17:2–3)

We gave Moses and Aaron [the Scripture] that distinguishes right from wrong, a light and a reminder for those who are mindful of God. (Qur'an 21:48)

The scripture of Moses was revealed before it as a guide and a mercy and this is a scripture confirming it in the Arabic language to warn those who do evil and bring good news for those who do good. (Qur'an 46:12)

In these citations, Christians can see the respect the Qur'an has for the Old Testament. Both understand their respective Inspired Word of God as God speaking, albeit interpreted with different emphases. Both understand the Word of God as alive and active, inviting a positive response from the reader.

Since we are engaged in Benedictine–Muslim dialogue, it is important to remind our Shi'a dialogue partners that Benedictine spirituality is firmly based on the Word of God. Saint Benedict expects his followers to spend hours each day pondering the Word of God. These quotations from the Rule illustrate the point: 'The Lord says in the Gospel: Whoever hears these words of mine and does them is like a wise man who built his house upon rock: the floods came and the winds blew and beat against the house, but it did not fall: it was founded on rock' (Prologue: 33–4, quoting Matthew 7:24–5). From this strong start the inquirer is invited to 'make known your way to the Lord and hope in him' (7:45, quoting Psalms 36/37:5) and it orders that 'the brothers should have specified periods...for prayerful reading' (48:1) enabling them to 'listen readily to holy reading' (4:55), learn that 'a wise man is known by his few words' (7:61), and realise that 'passages of the inspired books of the Old and New Testaments [are]...the truest of guides for human life' (RSB 73:3).

These passages show that the Rule of Benedict enables a framework for a dialogue with our Shi'a partners using our respective inspired scriptures. Both revere the revealed Word of God, albeit addressed in different 'scripts', that enables reflection, listening, prayer, and mutual respect. From time spent in this dialogue new insights into the spirituality of the other will emerge and both partners will benefit.

Insights on *lectio divina* from a lay Benedictine community

I want to turn now to the monastic practice of *lectio divina*. Much has been written about this subject, but the developments of the Manquehue Apostolic Movement in Santiago, Chile, have been particularly significant. Theirs is an entirely lay movement of men and women whose spirituality is based on their own ways of *lectio divina*. Its influence has spread to continents beyond South America. Its founder, José Manuel Eguiguren Guzmán, has written much about *lectio divina* and the various ways it is used by the communities of his movement, most especially what is called shared *lectio divina*. He defines this method as follows:

This sharing is not focused on ideas prompted by Sacred Scripture, but on what *lectio divina* has meant for each, how it has challenged or affirmed their lives, particularly how the Word has resonated in the heart and mind of each participant. It is not a sharing of ideas that may enlighten others, but the sharing of a conversation with God. This is why we place great importance on the first person singular. Each participant speaks from his or her heart as if to God present in the community. So [we use] phrases like it strikes me, it is telling me, it has challenged me, [and we] encourage all to speak of his or her personal experience, not a new point of exegesis. In each of these echoes there is a fragment of a personal conversation with the Revealing God. Sharing that echo with others highlights the vocal presence of God. (Para. 103)²

² All citations are from an unofficial translation of José Manuel Eguiguren

This method, I suggest, offers a chance to create a new environment for a Benedictine–Muslim dialogue focused on the revealed scriptures. It allows God to speak through the revealed Word. Each participant listens respectfully and affirms what the speaker is saying. This is not the first step in an academic debate, but the beginning of a journey that allows each to accompany the other in his or her personal relationship with the God heard through Word.

Eguiguren continues,

At its heart, the Word of God is Good News precisely because the Word is the Divine Gift of salvation, opening a way, at this moment, in this context. *Lectio divina* does not take participants into a heavenly dreamland. It is rather a conversation about different aspects of the salvation sought by us all. (Para. 104).

In that way *lectio divina* will build mutual trust in a Benedictine dialogue with the Shi‘a.

The movement recognises that this form of *lectio divina* requires more than skill; it also requires trust. Every person present has to trust the other, enabling each to speak as each wishes, revealing the Word of God, spoken from two directions. Eguiguren continues,

The sharing of echoes is a sensitive moment. Personal honesty removes all barriers: each articulates weakness and failure to the others present. Each articulates the need for the saving grace of God, whose continuing mission is to redeem failure and forgive sin. In addition, as often happens, the weaknesses and failures of others help us to recognize our own. This leads us to an ever deeper appreciation of the value of community, where God speaks to us; enhancing and making more relevant our own dialogue with the Word in *lectio divina* (para 105).

Eguiguren goes on to speak of other dimensions:

We are corrected and affirmed by the words of others in the com-

munity. Above all God speaks to us. As we listen to these echoes, divine insights are conveyed in the words of the speaker, leading us to a deeper understanding of God's presence. These glimpses into the relationship others have with God, broaden our own and enrich our understanding of what is, at heart, a mystery. True, this is not the complete picture; there are intimacies which cannot be expressed. But such experiences enable us all to learn more about how the Love Who Is God is alive within each member of the community and we are thankful for that gift (para 105).

This model can also fit a community of Benedictines and Shi'ites in a shared dialogue with their respective inspired scriptures.

Another important issue that we have to be aware of in shared *lectio divina* is the temptation 'to massage the Word to meet our own agenda. Shared *lectio divina* minimizes opportunities for this, because our experiences are challenged by those of others' (para. 106). Eguiguren writes autobiographically,

I learnt the skills of *lectio divina* by sharing the Word with Father Gabriel [a monk of the Benedictine Abbey of Las Condes in Santiago, Chile]. The tradition is passed on from one more experienced to the one who wants to learn, both acknowledging that it is God speaking. Once we become aware of God's action in our lives, we can share our echoes. (Para. 106).

In that way we grow in mutual appreciation of the other and learn important lessons, perhaps the most important being the deeper understanding we have of the Oneness of God, surely a foundation for Benedictine-Shi'a dialogue.

Eguiguren concludes,

With this model in mind I have been able to see that is how a community is born, matures and multiplies precisely because it is based on the inspiration of God, communicated to each of us by listening to the Word. The Word opens us up, enriching us as we listen and ponder the Word. Flowing from this, the reign of God becomes ever more effective in our lives. (Para. 106)

A possible way forward

The question I put before the members of our meeting was a simple one: might this model of shared *lectio divina*, using our respective revealed scriptures, be a way of building a new memory, a memory built on the firm foundation that all participants accept, namely, that we have our own revealed scriptures, but we are also prepared to listen to the revealed scriptures of the others as authentic echoes of their own tradition?

Clearly, this will require some imaginative thinking. We do not live close enough to each other to engage regularly in this shared *lectio divina*. I want to propose a scheme of shared *lectio divina* by means of the internet: it would start slowly and under the grace of God develop.

The first step would be to form a group, the members of which would be prepared, on a regular basis, say once a month, to provide a passage from their inspired scripture, no longer than a couple of sentences, and then offer their own commentary on that passage. Each member of the group would do this.

Once all the texts have arrived, those with the time could try to build a single reflection from the inspired texts and the commentaries. The rules for this single reflection are: first, it is the work of the individual; second, that as far as possible it tries to express insights which would build trust without compromising personal honesty.

As time passes and this collection of reflections increases, consideration could be given to putting them together and asking the group to evaluate them and offer suggestions for the future.

Once the method has been shown to produce positive results, each participant could set up his or her own group.

Such a process does not seek to provide an agreed-upon statement. Rather the collection of voices is truly inspired by the One God. It is what I would like to call a spiritual memory building a friendship created by the inspired Word of God of both communities.

I propose this as a practical way of building a community of Muslim–Benedictine dialogue of spirituality. It is founded on our shared faith in the One Revealing God speaking through two voices, enriching each of us. It would surely be a way to dissolve distrust and build new insights into the One God revealing to each human being.

6

An Islamic Perspective on Policies and Principles for the Establishment of Local and Global Faith-based Communities

Isa Jahangir

The Abrahamic religions, and especially Islam, place great emphasis on social life and the establishment of faith-based communities on local and global scales. Over the course of history, a huge amount of intellectual and practical effort has been made to realise this objective. Nonetheless, we have not seen any remarkable breakthrough on a global scale. Perhaps one of the reasons religious communities have been relatively ineffective in realising this objective is a lack of vision and of short-term, medium-term, and long-term strategic planning. Relying on Islamic primary sources and benefitting from strategic management techniques, this chapter seeks to explain the policies and principles for the establishment of local and global faith-based communities, and to offer a preliminary strategic plan for it. This chapter contains five sections. In the first section the following question will be addressed: what is the status of a faith-based community in an Islamic perspective and

in the Muslims' worldview? In the second section, the questions to be addressed will concern the limits and scope of faith-based communities and the possibility of forming a religious community with the followers of various views, schools, sects, and religions. In the third section, the question under discussion will regard how the local religious (Shi'ite) communities should deal with the global (Islamic and Abrahamic) communities? In the fourth section, the principles and values of the community of the faithful will be discussed in detail. In the fifth section, an operational and strategic plan for developing a religious community will be presented.

1. The status of a faith-based community from an Islamic perspective

One of the distinctive characteristics of Islam is its emphasis on community and social interactions. The relation of the individual to society, the fate of past communities and societies, the position of the individual within the family, and the future of the individual and society are some of the major social themes of the Qur'an. Issues like kindness, being concerned about the affairs of Muslims and keeping informed of the situation of relatives and neighbours, promoting virtue and preventing evil, and social intimacy are all treated. Moreover, numerous communicative concepts such as cooperation (*ta'awun*), mutual recognition (*ta'aruf*), and interconnectedness (*murabatah*), depict the outstanding place of community in the Qur'an.

1-1. Human beings are social beings

As stated unanimously and expressed in the words of Muslim scholars such as Farabi, Abu Rayhan Birurni, Nasir al-Din Tusi, Ibn Khaldun, Allamah Tabataba'i, Sayyid Muhammad Baqir al-Sadr and Murtada Mutahhari, human beings are social by nature. For example, Allamah Tabataba'i writes,

Among all animals, man is a being that must live a social life and this is a fact that needs not to be demonstrated and discussed at length

because man's innate nature perceives that he is social by nature. As far as the history has shown, as also evidenced by archaeological revelations, man has lived a social life wherever he happened to live. The Qur'an has also asserted this fact beautifully in many verses such as the following: 'O mankind! Surely We have created you of a male and a female, and made you tribes and families that you may know each other...' (49:13). Elsewhere the Qur'an says, 'We distribute among them their livelihood in the life of this world, and We have exalted some of them above others in degrees, that some of them may take others in subjection' (43:32). And the verse 'the one of you being from the other' (3:195) and also the verse which says, 'It is He Who has created man from water: then has He established relationships of lineage and marriage' (25:54) and many a number of other verses. (Tabataba'i, 1995: 4, 144)

Referring to Qur'anic verses 25:54 and 43:32, Murtada Mutahhari explains that biological and causal relations, which *bind* one human being to another in a mutual relationship and help us recognise human beings, are essential elements in the creation of humans and were put forth for a rationale and purpose. He concludes that the social life of humans is natural, in the sense that they are neither compelled in their social life nor are they totally free to act of their own choice or social contract (Mutahhari 2006: 23-4).

1-2. Prophets, the first harbingers of community

Referring to Qur'anic verse 2:213, Allamah Tabataba'i is of the view that the first time man came to realise subconsciously and learn fully well the benefits of community and social life and sought to protect them, coincided with the prophetic mission of the first prophet among mankind. The Holy Qur'an says, '[All] people are a single nation; so Allah raised prophets as bearers of good news and as warners, and He revealed with them the Book with truth, that it might judge between people in that in which they differed' (2:213).¹

This verse reports that in the beginning, all people were a single,

¹ I have used M. H. Shakir's translation of the Qur'an throughout this chapter.

unsophisticated and discord-free community. Then they started differing and quarrelling. That was when and why God raised prophets among them, to whom He revealed the Book, so as to do away with their differences, bring them together, and make them one nation. Allamah Tabataba'i (1995: vol. 4, 144) further says that, according to Qur'an 42:13, doing away with discord is made possible only through the establishment of the religion enjoined on Noah and through the peoples' uniting on that religion. Hence, the only religion that guarantees the protection of the righteous community is the religion established by God.

The same religion has He established for you as that which He enjoined on Noah – the which We have sent by inspiration to thee – and that which We enjoined on Abraham, Moses, and Jesus: Namely, that ye should remain steadfast in religion, and make no divisions therein (Qur'an 42:13),

It is noteworthy that the Qur'anic verses regarding community life invite people to *fitrah* (God-given human nature) with the claim that the religion of the *fitrah* is undoubtedly the religion of truth. This is the first step taken by the Qur'an to enlighten people with different understandings and perceptions. Although the people are different in their desires and aspirations as well as in their adherence to moral codes, they are not different in terms of their God-given nature, and they have to follow the truth (Tabataba'i 2010: 129).

1-3. The Qur'an, the harbinger of community and communication

Concepts and terms in the Qur'an such as tribe, clan, village, nation, *ummah*, and people point to the concept of society and community. To demonstrate the fact that society enjoys a special status in Islam, we can briefly refer to the following relevant Qur'anic terms:

Qawm (lit. tribe) has been translated as 'people'. It appears more than three hundred times in the Qur'an. In addition, it is used more than a hundred times in *Nahj al-Balaghah*.

Qaryah (lit. village) refers to a hamlet, rural community, township, a group of houses and associated buildings, or a clustered human settlement. If a group of men and women live at a place in a way that their houses and settlements are associated with one another, their place of living is called *qaryah*. This term appears many times in the Qur'an.

Nas (lit. people) appears more than two hundred times in the Qur'an and is used as a plural noun to mean people. The singular form of the word is '*insan*' (human being). It may sometimes be used to refer to both humans and other genera, but it is most often used to refer to human beings and their origin. (Javadi Amuli 2011: 34)

Employing verses from the Qur'an, Allamah Tabataba'i concludes that all aspects of Islam are social and that the relationship that has been formed between the individual and society is so real and firm that it results in a different identity and entity, something other than individual human beings. Hence, he believes in an independent character for society and community in Islam (Tabataba'i 1995: vol. 4, 152).

A similar viewpoint has been expressed by Muhammad Baqir Sadr and Murtada Mutahhari (2006: 32). According to the latter, the topics of the Holy Qur'an include a common fate (7:34), book of deeds (45:28), understanding, perception, conduct (6:108), obedience, and commitment for the nations (communities). Obviously, if a nation does not exist in the external world, fate, understanding, perception, obedience, and commitment would not be meaningful. According to Mutahhari, a collective life is not merely a metaphor or allegory; it is a reality in the same way that collective death is a reality. In the Qur'an, an individual's deed is at times ascribed to an entire community, as in the story of the camel of Prophet Salih. Sometimes an entire generation's deeds are ascribed to the succeeding generations. For example, the deeds of the Children of Israel were ascribed to the people of the time of the Prophet [of Islam]. Mutahhari says that such ascriptions take place at times when people share a common way of thinking and willing, when they have what sociologists term a collective soul.

1-4. *Social laws*

If we accept that society is a reality independent of individuals, we can understand that society has its own rules and traditions (*sunan*). Ibn Khaldun may be the first person to speak clearly of laws governing society. In the famous introduction to his *History*, Ibn Khaldun considers society as having an independent reality. Among modern scholars and philosophers, the first person who sought to discover the rules governing communities is Montesquieu, the eighteenth-century French anthropologist (Mutahhari 2006: 36). He asserts that communities and societies have tradition, eminence, and decadence. Common fate can simply indicate that the society has a tradition (Mutahhari 2006: 36).

According to Muhammad Baqir al-Sadr, we can enumerate three basic features for the divine laws in the Qur'an that concern history and society. The first characteristic is universality and decisiveness. These laws are invariable as long as the world moves on in its usual natural and cosmic course. The universality of these laws gives a scientific dimension to these historical laws. That is because scientific laws are universal and invariable. 'For you shall not find any alteration in the course (*sunnah*) of Allah; and you shall not find any change in the course (*sunnah*) of Allah' (Qur'an 35:43).

The second characteristic of these laws is what we might call their 'divinity'. They are 'Allah's way of dealing' or 'words of Allah'. According to Sadr, the Qur'an insists on the divinity of historical laws to foster human dependence on God.

The third characteristic is their harmony with human free will. Hence, the Qur'an reiterates that the events taking place one after another in this world originate in man's will (Sadr 2002: 83-90).

1-5. *Muslim social thinkers*

A study of the works of most Muslim thinkers shows that religious and Qur'anic principles have clearly influenced their laying out of their social and philosophical thought. Muslim scholarship in social science can be found in the works of prominent scholars such as al-Mas'udi, al-Biruni, Nasir al-Din Tusi, Nizam al-Mulk, Ibn Rushd

(Averroes), Ibn Khaldun, Sayyid Jamaluddin Asadabadi, Allamah Tabataba'i, Ayatollah Mutahhari, and Imam Khomeini. Some of the major features of Muslim social thought are the religious point of view; regulation of the relationship between science and religion; the philosophical perspective; the relationship between God and humans and nature and humans (society); geography in social analysis; and attention to change and perfection (Azad Armaki 2011: 53).

2. The limits and the scope of faith-based community

The second question has to do with the scope of a faith-based community and the limits of forming a religious community with the followers of other schools and religions.

A good way to approach this question is to see what concept, according to the Holy Qur'an, serves as an equivalent for community and what its limits and boundaries are. Among Qur'anic terms, perhaps the one that best signifies community is *ummah*.

Ummah is an Arabic word that appears sixty-four times in both singular and plural forms in sixty-two verses (in twenty-five different chapters) of the Qur'an. It has been used to mean *shari'ah* (law), religion, community, way, co-religionists, nation, method, way, and the like. It is, as Izutsu suggests, a key term in everything that relates, in one way or another, to Islamic culture. The origin of this term in the history of Islam is significant in that:

the social structure of pre-Islamic Arabia was essentially tribal. The tribe, or its subclass, the clan, was for the pre-Islamic Arabs not only the sole unit and basis of social life but represented first and foremost the highest principle of conduct, evolving a comprehensive pattern for the whole of life, both individual and public. (Izutsu 2002: 55)

The Qur'an presented a new paradigm for unity that differed from that of the tribe or clan. Likewise,

Prophet Mohammad, when he migrated to Medina, tried at first

to establish, in accordance with his newly proclaimed principle, a super tribal unity of all believers, and declared that the Muhajirin (i.e. those who had shared from the very beginning in his hardship and migrated with him from Mecca) and the Ansar (i.e. those who newly became Muslims in Medina) should regard themselves as 'brothers' in religion, and that this brotherhood should abrogate all the ancient customs and rules of blood kinship. (Izutsu 2002: 61)

As can be seen from its use by pre-Islamic Arabs, the word *ummah* was not a sociological concept before the era of Islam. Pre-Islamic Arabs used it to designate rites and religion, as does the Qur'an in some verses. It can perhaps be said that it was in the Qur'an that this term was first used to refer to a group of people who united with one another on the basis of religion, divine laws, and divine leadership.

The first point to be made regarding the Qur'anic usage of *ummah* is that the term was also used to refer to non-Muslims. For instance, the Qur'an speaks of a single nation of human beings: 'All people are a single nation; so Allah raised prophets as bearers of good news and as warners, and He revealed with them the Book with truth, that it might judge between people in that in which they differed' (2:213).

The term *ummah* in this verse refers to a group of people having the same beliefs and religion. However, Muslim scholars are not unanimous as to what 'a single nation' may refer. Tabari maintains that it refers to a single *shari'ah* that existed in the time gap between Adam and Noah (Tabari 1991: vol. 2, 194). In his *al-Mizan*, Tabataba'i believes that the term *ummah* in this verse refers to a group of people who lived together in a community cooperating with one another on the basis of their God-given nature (Tabataba'i 1995: vol. 2, 123).

In some verses, a group of the People of the Book has been clearly referred to as a nation. For example, the Qur'an says, 'Of the People of the Scripture there is a staunch community who recite the revelations of Allah in the nighttime, falling prostrate [before Him]' (3: 113). According to Tabataba'i, the expression 'staunch community' refers to a group of the People of the Book who were on the right path, upright and steadfast in their beliefs and obedience (Tabataba'i 1995: vol. 2, 125).

It can, therefore, be concluded that the term in its Qur'anic usage

refers to a group of human beings who form a community based on religious commonalities, and it is for this same reason that in the Constitution of Medina, the Prophet of Islam described Muslims, Jews, and Christians as a single *ummah*.

According to the Qur'an, among the divine prophets who called people to divine unity and faith-based community was Prophet Ibrahim. As the Qur'an reports, upon constructing the House of Allah, Prophet Ibrahim prayed, saying 'Our Lord! and make us both submissive to Thee and [raise] from our offspring a nation submitting to Thee' (2:128). It is noteworthy that in this verse, Prophet Ibrahim did not ask God to make from his descendants people who were submissive; rather he prayed to make a nation (*ummah*) faithful and submissive to Him.

This point can also be explained in another way. As pointed out by Ayatollah Javadi Amuli, 'the religion with God is Islam' (Qur'an 3:19) refers to the human being's all-out devotion to God. Religion is rooted in the human *fitrah*, and since *fitrah* is inborn and immutable, the general tenets and principles of religion are not subject to change. In other words, religion refers to a set of fundamental doctrines, laws, and moral codes consistent with the innate nature of human beings. Given the fact that human nature has not changed, nor will it change, the divine religion will not change either, as long as there are humans living on the face of the earth. What all religions – and also human nature – consciously accept are fundamental principles, which the Qur'an terms as Islam or submission. 'Surely the [true] *religion with Allah* is Islam' (Qur'an 3:19; emphasis added). What is subject to change over the ages are the moral and religious codes guiding practice. In fact, the general principles of religion, which are immutable, are in harmony with the immutable nature of human beings, whereas changeable codes are in agreement with their changing nature (Javadi Amuli 2009: 30). The Qur'an states, 'For every one of you did We appoint a law and a way' (7: 48). God, the Glorified, is aware of the connection between *fitrah* and nature and knows when differences and discord will come into being. That was why He met human needs by sending prophets and allowing change in the flexible codes of practice. In short, all the prophets have brought one religion, and their followers

are considered to be a single nation. The Qur'an says, 'O messengers! eat of the good things and do good; surely I know what you do. And surely this your religion [*ummah*] is one religion [*ummah*] and I am your Lord, therefore be careful [of your duty to Me]' (23:51-2).

The word '*hadhihi*' (this) in the verse does not refer to a particular group of people; rather it covers the followers of all divine prophets. Diversity of religious laws (*shari'ah*) also means that they are all watered by the same immense river of religion. However, the ways leading to the religious laws are varied (Javadi Amuli 2009: 31). As Allah says, 'For every one of you did We appoint a law (*shari'ah*) and a way' (Qur'an 7:48).

The fundamentals of religion (divine unity, resurrection, prophethood) are unalterable and common and they address, respectively, three basic questions. What is our origin and the origin of the world? What is the destination of humanity? Who is leading us towards our ultimate goal? (Misbah Yazdi 2009: 40). That is why the Qur'an says that the religions verify one another: 'confirming what went before it' (3:3), and the followers of prophets as a single community (23:52), and the prophets as brothers of other prophets' people (11:61; 8:65).

3. Local and global communities of the faithful

In an answer to the third question dealing with a mechanism for local (Shi'ite) communities to be in communion with global (Islamic and Abrahamic) communities, various components can be presented. For the sake of brevity, I will summarise here those relating to justice and unity.

3-1. Justice

Justice and moderation are rooted, like the principle of divine unity, in the system of creation. The Holy Prophet of Islam has been quoted as having said, 'The heavens and the earth are maintained with justice' (Kashani 1995: vol. 5, 107). Thus, overlooking justice amounts to opposing the system of nature. The Qur'an commands Muslims to restore trusts (deposits) to their owners and to judge

with justice among people (4:58). Islam's heavenly book states that we should not let others' hatred of us make us swerve to wrong and depart from justice (5:8) and that one should not swerve or turn aside even if it is at one's disadvantage or at the disadvantage of one's relatives (4:135). Also, the Qur'an announces that one of the purposes for sending messengers and heavenly books was to let people establish justice (57:25).

Furthermore, there are numerous traditions from the Prophet and Imams regarding justice. One instance is the letter Imam Ali (A) wrote to Malik al-Ashtar, the newly appointed governor of Egypt, as already noted by Hamed Fayazi. In his letter Imam Ali (A) states, 'Do not be to them like a ravenous beast who seizes their sustenance. For they [i.e. the people] are of two types: either your brother in faith or your equal in creation.' (*Nahj al-Balaghah*, Letter 53).

Generally justice has been defined as putting everything in its right place, ensuring that everything in the system of creation is functioning in its appropriate place. When it comes to human beings, justice is the outcome of balancing their faculties of rationality, anger, and appetites. If anyone is moderate in terms of applying one or two faculties, but goes to extremes in employing the remaining faculties, such a person has not practiced complete and real justice (Javadi Amuli 2009: 42).

3-2. *Justice and love*

According to some Muslim philosophers such as Nasir al-Din Tusi, with regard to social relations and societal survival, love is prior to justice. That is to say, love is more meaningful and virtuous than justice. The reason for this, as Tusi explains, is that justice requires artificial union, whereas love requires natural union. Thus, it is obvious that the need for justice, which is the most perfect of human virtues, to preserve order arises from the loss of love, for if there were love between individuals, there would be no need for equity and impartiality. Etymologically, the word *insaf* (fairness and equity) derives from *nisf* (equal share), indicating that the dispenser of equity divides the disputed object equally. However, this division into halves is one of the consequences of multiplicity, whereas love

is one of the causes of union (Tusi 1992: 217–18).

According to Tusi, since people need each other, and no individual can reach perfection in isolation, there is an inescapable need for mutual cooperation, comparable to the cooperative functioning of the bodily organs of an individual (Tusi 1992: 217). Moreover, since human beings have been created with a natural direction towards perfection, they have a natural yearning for cooperation and union, which Tusi calls love. He even points out that according to many in the past, love is the cause of the ordering of all beings and that its existence among human beings would do away with the need for justice and equity.

However, as some philosophers have explained, when someone enters the way of justice, neither speeding up nor slowing down is incompatible with justice. Indeed, speeding up and slowing down may even be desirable. Speeding up on the road of justice, which involves kindness and love, will manifest itself as an instance of the Qur'anic verse which says 'then strive together [as in a race] towards all that is good' (2:148) (Javadi Amuli 2009: 43).

3-3. *Unity*

The second main indicator of a local community's ties with wider societies is unity. The human being comprises one multiplicity factor, namely clay (matter), and one unity factor, the metaphysical soul. Those who pamper their natural self will gain nothing but discord and dispute, while those who purify the metaphysical dimension will be immune to all kinds of disagreement with their fellow human beings. God says that man was created from dust (Qur'an 35:11) whereas He breathed into him something of His spirit (Qur'an 32:9), which is a continual cause of unity, mercy, and love. The secret behind the multiplicity of matter is in the narrowness of its existence, while the mystery behind metaphysical unity is in its existential expansiveness (Javadi Amuli 2009: 62). That is why unity and love among human beings are considered by the Qur'an and Islamic traditions to be among the great divine blessings bestowed upon humanity (*Nahj al-Balaghah*, Sermon 192).

The Holy Qur'an describes the first human beings as a single

community that, because of its simple and basic nature, enjoyed a common vision and ethos (Qur'an 2:213). The simple and untainted life of early humans, along with their uncomplicated way of thinking, supported their unity. However, mainly because of the advances made in science, thought, and industry or owing to the expansion of social ties (Javadi Amuli 2009: 65); or because of the natural tendency of humans to make use of others (Tabataba'i 1412 AH, 2:118); differences and conflicts gradually began to emerge among them, paving the way for prophets to be sent and divine books and law to be revealed so that disputes could be settled and humankind be led back to unity.

3-4. Just union

The components of justice and unity can be brought together to form a general and basic strategy to bring local and global communities into a relationship that is fair and just. This union comprises Muslim unity (the Islamic community), monotheistic unity (the Abrahamic community), and even the unity of all societies (the human community). The Qur'an describes Muslims and believers as brethren (49:10). It invites monotheists and followers of the Book to come to a common word by believing in divine unity (3:64). Elsewhere it uses 'single nation' to address the followers of divine prophets (23:52). In some other verses, it describes the people of Noah and the dwellers of the Rock (*ashab al-hijr*) who rejected their prophet as such: 'The people of Noah rejected the messengers' (26:105); 'and the dwellers of the Rock certainly rejected the messengers' (15:80). The plural form of the term 'messengers' means that the people of Noah and the dwellers of the Rock considered all the prophets to be liars (Javadi Amuli 2009: 72). That is the reason the Qur'an confirms other religions in many verses such as verse 3:3, and introduces Prophet Muhammad as someone who believed in all prophets and the books brought by them (2:285).

When it comes to global unity (human community), God commands Muslims to treat with goodness and justice all those who are not hostile to them and their religion and who do not drive them out of their land, because God loves those who treat others with justice

(Qur'an 23:53). Elsewhere the Qur'an speaks of reconciliation with the non-Muslim and says that if the unbelievers offer you peace and reconciliation, you should incline to it: 'And if they incline to peace, then incline to it and trust in Allah' (8:61).

Moreover, there are many verses in the Qur'an according to which God created humanity (people) from a single (pair of) male and female (49:13). The delicate point to be deduced from these verses is that coming from a common origin and being rooted in a single male and female is sufficient for human and global unity. It has been recorded that the Prophet of Islam said, 'O people! Your Lord is one Lord, and you all share the same father. There is no preference for Arabs over non-Arabs, nor for non-Arabs over Arabs. Preference is only through piety' (Javadi Amuli 2010: 358).

Referring to human brotherhood and community, many verses of the Qur'an say that the nations of previous prophets who were not monotheists considered Prophet Salih, Prophet Shu'ayb, and Prophet Noah as their brothers. Accordingly, it stressed that all Muslims should remain committed to covenants, contracts (Qur'an 1:5) and political treaties (Qur'an 4:90) signed with other peoples.

It can be inferred from some Qur'anic verses that when Imam Mahdi reappears, some people may not embrace Islam, but justice will prevail over the whole earth. The Islamic narrations do not insist that all people on earth will convert to Islam. In fact, it is understood from some verses, 5:64 for instance, that some non-Muslims will follow their own religions until the Day of Judgment (Javadi Amuli 2009: 55). In other words, some people may not become Muslims during the time of Imam Mahdi's government, but Islam and Muslims will treat them with justice.

4. Faith-based community: principles and values

4-1. Religious hierarchies and priorities

In the social system of Islam, Muslim individuals have different duties to fulfil towards other people, including close relatives, neighbours, brothers and sisters, religious minorities, and others.

Some duties and responsibilities are common to all human beings and some are particular to a specific group of people. For instance, respect for human values and dignity is a duty that applies to all people, not to a specific group or individuals. Islamic teachings do, however, establish priorities with regard to how people are treated. For example, when it comes to distributing *zakat* (tax for the poor), it has been said that one should give preference to one's relatives, then to needy neighbours, then the deserving poor of the village, and then those of the city and community. The Qur'an also commands believers to do good to one's parents and next of kin, to orphans, the needy, the near neighbour and the distant neighbour, the companion on a journey, and the wayfarer (4:36). One can, through Qur'an 4:36, understand the hierarchy governing human relationships in a community of believers. Interestingly, one of the recorded sayings of the Holy Prophet of Islam is that neighbours are of three kinds: the one who has one right upon you; the one who has two rights upon you; and the one who has three rights upon you.

The neighbour having three rights upon you is the one who is also a Muslim and a relative. The neighbour having two rights is the one who is either a non-Muslim relative or an unrelated Muslim. The neighbour having one right – and it is a right – is one who is neither a Muslim nor a relative. (Kashani 1993, vol. 4, 422)

Based on just unity, the hierarchical relationship means that believers have a greater responsibility towards local community members (Shi'ites and Sunnis) than toward individuals in the wider community.

4-2. Respect for others' religious values

Much of the discord among small and large religious communities emanates from extreme religious fanaticism. When this involves the desecration of the symbols and values of other religions, such fanaticism has, over the course of history, fuelled the fire of strife and earned believers nothing but hate and animosity. Such abominable behaviours are condemned by reason and religion. To help

create peaceful coexistence and respect for other people's values, the Qur'an supports freedom of belief and freedom of thought. It stresses the commonalities among religions, rejects racism, and recommends peaceful dialogue and recognition of divine prophets and scriptures.

Some verses of the Qur'an stress freedom of belief because of the fact that belief is a state of the mind and heart without compulsion being involved or imposed. As the Qur'an says, 'There is no compulsion in the Religion. The right way stands clearly distinguished from the false' (2:256). The Qur'an also recognises freedom of thought. There are many verses that emphasise the importance of pondering on the universe and making use of one's faculty of reason to achieve perfection and freedom from evil and misguidance. According to the Qur'an, there are signs for believers in the universe and in human existence that can be seen with the eye of insight and reason (51:20-1).

The Qur'an addresses all of humanity when it says, 'O children of Adam' and 'O man', signifying that humanity is a shared experience and quality among all the inhabitants of the earth. Over the course of history, human beings have differed in terms of language, colour, race, and so forth, but according to Islam all are children of the same parents. These differences do not contradict sharing the same nature.

The Qur'an instructs Muslims to talk to the People of the Book in a kind and non-violent way, to maintain their ties with them on the basis of shared principles, and to not argue with them except in the best possible way (29:46). It also commands Muslims not to revile and abuse infidels and idolaters, because they will reciprocate in the same way (6:108). According to Islamic narrations, the Prophet and Imams strongly forbade Muslims from cursing others.

Obviously, respecting others' beliefs does not imply believing in religious pluralism, which itself derives from epistemological pluralism. A pluralistic point of view tolerates, theoretically and practically, only one way of understanding religion and it is quite intolerant in the face of any other way. The understanding of religion advocated by the Qur'anic view is that there is one single sublime reality of the religion which surpasses human understanding. In reality, the Qur'anic view, which ascribes all the doubt and

skepticism to human religious knowledge, does not hesitate to label as erroneous the ideas of those who claim to understand the truth (Parsaniya 2002: 66).

4-3. The need for mutual understanding

The Qur'an clearly states that the reason for diversity of cultures, tribes, and peoples is to allow for mutual social understanding and acquaintance: 'O you men! surely We have created you of a male and a female, and made you tribes and families that you may know each other; surely the most honorable of you with Allah is the one among you most careful [of his duty]' (49:13).

Since this Qur'anic understanding of the reason for diversity – 'that you may know each other' – is followed by the words 'the most honorable of you with Allah is the one among you most careful [of his duty]', the former concept has been overshadowed by the latter. The reason for this is that most exegetes focus their attention on the last part of the verse rather than the first.

In the exegesis of Tabari, some companions and their disciples are quoted to have said that mutual understanding is defined through the distinction of relations (*ansab*) (Tabari 1991 AH: vol. 26, 138). According to this notion, the emphasis of the Holy Qur'an in regards to tribes and people knowing one another runs counter to blood relationship, as well as to racial hegemony and conflict. Allamah Tabataba'i is of the view that people, as people, are equal, with no difference among them or preference of one over the other. The diversity that comes with their belonging to divergent groups, tribes, and clans is only to let them know one another so that community may be established and a coalition made. Without mutual recognition, there can be no cooperation (Tabataba'i 1995: vol. 18, 489).

Some contemporary scholars go beyond the recognition of different races when defining the concept of mutual understanding. They maintain that this concept signifies identifying various cultures and paving the way for different nations to know one another, which will, in turn, ultimately serve as a prelude to upholding human rights and true values. They have insisted that in a system in which

material values are given priority over piety and righteousness, a culture of understanding, recognising, and benefiting from others' experiences will never prevail, because such people always consider themselves without need of, and superior to, others (M. T. Mudarrisi 1987: vol. 13, 433). Mudarrisi, and scholars such as Muhammad Jawad Mughniyyah and Muhammad Husayn Fadlullah, who relate the concept of mutual understanding to Islamic ideals such as unity and human rights, have stressed the necessity and availability of various ways of coming to mutual understanding in the present age.

4-4. Showing benevolence to people

Another central principle and value in a religious community is to be useful and benevolent to community members. The Qur'an tells us that one of the salient features of divine prophets is kind-heartedness and benevolence. The Qur'an also speaks of believers as guardians, friends (*awliya*), and helpers of one another (9:71). The meaning and nature of guardianship and friendship (*wilayah*) have been applied to various individual, social, and inter-cultural relations in faith-based communities. Islamic reflection points to the specific meaning of the relationship between Creator and created, leader and follower; and develops the special characteristics for each particular relationship. It can be deduced from the application of the term *wali/awliya* that a *wilayah*-based community is opposed to an infidelity-based community. That is because this term has, in some verses, been used in opposition to infidelity, disbelief, and falsehood. As a result, the scope of a *wilayah*-based community can be very broad and extensive. One of the main characteristics of *wilayah* is to be useful, benevolent, and kind to other human fellows. For instance, in Qur'anic verse 9:71, after mentioning the social friendship of believers, God says that they enjoin good and forbid evil. That is, they are not indifferent towards the religious community and the believers' social affairs. In some Qur'anic verses, the term 'assistance' has been used alongside the term '*wali*' (42:31).

Thus, God says to Muslims, 'You are the most beneficial nation to people since you invite them to virtue and prevent them from evil' (Qur'an 3:110). Interestingly, in this verse, as in the previous verse,

enjoining good and forbidding evil have been used to describe the best or the most useful nation. Accordingly, there are exegetes like Tabari who quote some traditions according to which the best and most useful nation is a nation that enjoins virtue and forbids evil, a characteristic that is also true of the faith-based community of believers. Another precise point in the verse is found in the terms '*khayr*' (best/most beneficial) and '*lil-nas*' (for humankind). It can be understood from '*lil-nas*' that the term '*khayr*' does not necessarily mean 'the best'; rather it may mean 'the most beneficial'. Ayatollah Javadi Amuli, for example, writes,

In this verse, in addition to perfection of the self (belief in God), goodness and benevolence have also been put forth. Unlike the verse 'the noblest of you with Allah is the most pious of you', which refers only to perfection of the self, the verse 'you are the best [or most beneficial] of the nations raised up for [the benefit of] humankind' indicates that such people are the most beneficial people. In other words, the term '*lil-nas*' pertains to the public aspect of the said *khayr*. (Javadi Amuli 2012: vol. 15, 43)

4-5. Social love

Another distinguishing aspect of the guardianship of believers is social love. According to the Qur'an, believers love God the most. An ideal society is a society that is shaped on the basis of love for God above all and social love among believers to the extent that all people consider themselves to be brothers and sisters of one another and love one another devotedly and without any selfish motives. According to one narration, God said to Prophet Muhammad, 'My love is necessary on those who love one another because of Me' (Amudi 1995: 26). Likewise, Prophet Muhammad said that you cannot attain heaven unless you have faith, and you cannot have faith unless you love each other. Imam Baqir taught that expressing love to people results in the survival of love, personality, and community (Majlisi 1983: vol.71, 181).

It can be inferred from some Qur'anic verses that the strength and glory of a nation lies in the affectionate relationship of its people.

Power and wisdom are the prerogative of Allah, and He bestows them upon those who are affectionate to one another. Hence, a society whose people are not intimate with one another will not be strong and proud (Javadi Amuli 2010: 374). They may think they have formed a solid society, but the basis of their community is very weak. As Allah states, ‘You may think they are together, and their hearts are divided’ (Qur’an 59:14).

4-6. Justice and truthfulness

Justice and truthfulness are two founding principles of a faith-based community. Justice has already been considered in detail, so a short explanation of truthfulness will suffice.

Religion is rooted in human nature, and truthfulness is also something required by nature. Human nature in its pure form requires one to be healthy, moderate, and honest, both in one’s heart and in one’s words and actions. This is perhaps the most prominent feature of the divine prophets in their invitation to God. The Qur’an unambiguously commands all believers to guard themselves against evil and to be with those who are true in word and deed (9:119). In the Islamic narrations we find that the relationship between truthfulness and religion is similar to the relationship of one’s head to one’s body (Amudi 1995: 218). Regarding the status of truthfulness in a community of believers, it is reported that the Prophet of Islam said, ‘Do not look at the abundant prayers, fasting, pilgrimage, and nightly supplications of people; rather look at their truthfulness and trustworthiness’ (Saduq 1983: vol. 2, 51).

5. Strategies for developing a faith-based community

Once we have identified that there are some common interests among community members, both locally and globally, the next main task is to convoke a gathering of the representatives of specific organisations and communities. The purpose of this gathering would be to develop a shared ‘community vision’ by imagining the

ideal community and formulating a plan to arrive at a common vision. Such a program of action would include the following strategic steps.

5-1. Developing a comprehensive short-term, medium-term, and long-term action plan

One of the shortcomings of religious communities is that they tend to have a good number of talks and dialogues on the importance of establishing faith-based communities, but do not get around to setting the strategic directions and a plan of action, which are at the heart of community building. Based on a common vision, a comprehensive strategic plan containing long-, mid-, and short-term objectives, along with mid-level plans for our initiative. The point the community wants to start from and the point it needs to arrive at have to be clarified and easily comprehended by community members and representatives. For this reason, the links between activities and objectives should be made clear.

5-2. Assessing the community's resources, needs, and issues

Every community has a unique combination of assets upon which to build its future. To be able to work effectively in community development, we will need to gather some information about our community. It is extremely helpful to undertake a comprehensive community assessment that gathers both qualitative and quantitative data on a wide range of community features. Deciding what and how much information to collect may be aided by a SWOT (strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats) analysis of the community. Such an analysis may indicate the areas where there is a higher priority for action.

Kretzmann and McKnight (1993: 1) propose that community developers start with a 'clear commitment to discovering a community's capacities and assets'. Asset-based community development begins with the assumption that successful community building depends on rediscovering and mobilising resources already present in any community. These resources include the skills and resources

of individuals, the power of voluntary associations, the array of local institutions, the physical infrastructure, and the local economy (Rans & Altman 2002: 6). Compiling a community demographic profile is an excellent start. However, simply collecting information is not sufficient; it must be analysed in order for it to be meaningful and functional. Speaking from an Islamic point of view, individuals who have the means and ability to mobilise resources needed for the community can be found in a range of institutions and organisations, such as mosques, *husayniyyahs*, *hawzahs*, and Islamic schools, as well as among religious leaders and scholars.

5-3. Taking an upstream approach and moving from the bottom up

At the heart of asset-based community development (ABCD) is the belief that community change always comes from within, and that people in communities are the best experts on how to achieve that change. Long before this practice had a name, or acquired the capital letters that identify it, ABCD was about how local people create change by mobilising their own resources (Rans & Altman 2002: 10).

In any community development process, it is the community that is in the driver's seat. Community members and representatives will define the issues and the process for resolving them, which might be quite different from what would be proposed by an external 'expert'. This is sometimes called community self-determination or taking an upstream approach. An upstream approach is opposed to a downstream approach, in which the community is established by the hierarchical structure of the power.

A similar idea is expressed in several verses of the Qur'an. For example, in 13:11 it is stated, 'Indeed, Allah will not change the condition of a people until they change what is in themselves.' Elsewhere in the Qur'an, Allah declares, 'We have already sent Our messengers with clear evidences and sent down with them the Scripture and the balance that the people may establish justice' (57:25). This verse indicates that the establishment of social justice and just community has to be done finally by the people themselves; the prophets have been sent to help them do that.

5-4. Network building

In almost any kind of community initiative, finding other groups and organisations with similar interests that are willing to work on common issues or projects, is strategically advantageous. The Qur'an clearly commands such a strategy: 'And hold firmly to the rope of Allah all together and do not become divided. And remember the favor of Allah upon you – when you were enemies and He brought your hearts together and you became, by His favor, brothers' (3:103).

There are many benefits that can result from collaborating with others such as synergy, heightened community awareness, sharing resources, overcoming obstacles, avoiding duplication, and so forth.

One of the best ways to effect community collaboration is building networks. Members of a network have informal ties to each other; their relationships are non-hierarchical. Faith-based networks can nowadays be developed easily on small and large scales, thanks especially to the resources of the internet. Eboo Patel reminds us that 'if we don't talk openly about faith and bring people from different traditions together, we forfeit the conversation to people who are happy to build barriers' (Brown 2013: 6). Patel is correct, for history has taught us that if people of faith do not identify and proclaim their identity as believers, then our monotheistic identity will be highly affected by secular culture.

5-5. Managing and minimising conflicts

Conflict situations appear with frequency in daily, public, and private life. These conflicts may be on a small or large scale; they may occur within and among groups and communities. They may also be triggered by ethnic, religious, or economic differences, or arise from differences in values, beliefs, and attitudes.

As Parker (1974) notes, unmanaged conflict will bring about delays, disinterest, lack of action and, in extreme cases, a complete breakdown of the group. Unmanaged conflict may result in the withdrawal of individuals and an unwillingness on their part to participate in other groups or assist with various group action programs.

The Muslim and Christian traditions have a huge number of guidelines and principles for conflict management.

The constructive effort of wise people to achieve unity and harmony among different parties is one of the valuable strategies emphasised by the Qur'an to resolve differences and create unity at various levels (Hakim 2008: 438). For instance, if a family dispute arises and it is feared that a man and his wife might separate, the Qur'an says that a judge should be appointed from the wife's family and another from the husband's family to help them resolve their conflicts. If they are willing to work for a resolution, then God will bring about their reconciliation (Qur'an 4:35). If there is a conflict or quarrel between two groups of people or tribes, the Qur'an orders Muslims to make peace between them (49:9). When it comes to large scale conflicts, God commands Prophet Muhammad that if his enemies are inclined to make peace, he should also be so inclined and trust in Allah (Qur'an 8:61). Making peace and resolving differences is so important that the Prophet of Islam said that reconciliation is better than prayers and fasting (*Nahj al-Balaghah*, Letter 47).

It can be argued that one of the main initiatives of the Prophet of Islam that helped him succeed in establishing the Muslim community in Medina was the reconciliation brought about between conflicting groups, such as the Aws and the Khazraj.

An outline of suggestions for use in managing conflict within and among community groups would look something like this:

- a. recognise and acknowledge that conflict exists;
- b. analyse the existing situation and the behaviour of the involved parties;
- c. facilitate communication among all members;
- d. negotiate;
- e. make necessary adjustments, reinforce, and confirm;
- f. live with conflict; not all conflicts can be resolved (Smith, 2014).

5-6. Evaluating the results of cooperative actions

The implementation of proposed common programs and communicational cooperation is the most practical step in community

development that involves the mobilisation of financial and human resources, including volunteers and community members. It is important to ensure that the factors that are required for the success of any community initiative are in place. Finally, using specific procedures and criteria, the community coalition that was formed should be assessed to determine how well it is functioning.

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**PRESENTATIONS AT THE
PONTIFICAL INSTITUTE
FOR THE STUDY OF
ISLAM AND ARABIC**

Restoring the House of Abraham: Unity in Diversity

Mohammad Ali Shomali

I would like to begin my talk by offering peace to all of you: my dear brothers and sisters in Islam, or Christianity, or humanity. I should first thank God Almighty for enabling us to get together once again, this time at the end of our sixth round of Shi'a–Catholic dialogue. There have been other occasions when we gathered together in Rome, and actually, also in this particular place. I am grateful to God for this friendship, and in the second part of my talk I will give you an overview of how this friendship started and how it developed. I should also thank our friends from the monastic community, in particular from the monastic interfaith dialogue team, Father William Skudlarek, the whole Benedictine community, and in particular Abbot Primate Notker Wolf for his constant encouragement. Other groups of our Christian friends have welcomed us with a heart open for dialogue. Today we have some of our Focolare friends here who have been helping us to get to know more about Christianity. We have had friends from the Jesuits, Franciscans, and also from other denominations of the Church – Anglicans, Mennonites, and so on and so forth. I am indeed grateful to God for all these friends with which He has gifted us.

What I am going to share with you today is first of all my understanding of the reason God has created us in different shapes and forms and diverse ways.

Unlike what most of us may think, namely, that diversity is a source of differences, disagreements, and sometimes conflicts and fighting, it seems the Qur'an suggests another view. It suggests that God created us in different forms, colours, races, and nations not in order to fight with one another but in order to come to a better understanding of each other. In a famous verse of the Qur'an, God says that all of us have been created from the same man and woman – Adam and Eve – and then adds,

O mankind! Indeed We created you from a male and a female, and made you nations and tribes that you may identify yourselves with one another. Indeed the noblest of you in the sight of Allah is the most Godwary among you. Indeed Allah is all-knowing, all-aware.
(Qur'an 49:13)

'Identify' in this English translation of the Qur'an translates an Arabic word that means mutual recognition. God has not created us in different colours and races for us to use these qualities to say, 'I am better than another person. Therefore I must be superior and we must fight for power and control.' No. God has created us in different shapes and colours and with different languages so that we can know each other in a better way.

Then, God goes on to say that the only thing that can make a person better is piety and a virtuous life; not colour, race, ethnicity, or geographical location. Piety is something that we can all achieve, as opposed to our colour and ethnicity, which we cannot change. The Qur'an further says that this difference in colours and languages is a sign to know God better:

Among His signs is the creation of the heavens and the earth, and the difference of your languages and colors. There are indeed signs in that for those who know. (Qur'an 30:22)

God has created us in a very special way. I often say that God has

not mass-produced human beings like a product that numbers in the billions! He has created us in a very special way, and we should appreciate that each individual is unique in the eyes of God. We need to recognise this diversity as a means of knowing God as well as knowing each other better.

However, there is another matter that is not bad in itself but needs to be checked and carefully regulated. In my understanding, it is natural for human beings to notice differences at first; we understand the world around us by first paying attention to differences. If I walk into a room where fifty people have gathered, the first thing I will notice is how they differ in their colour, dress, gender, ages, and so forth. It may take extra energy and effort to find the commonalities among these people. Another example: if I glance at a collection of beautiful books, the first thing I notice is that they are of different colours, sizes, and so forth. It takes a little extra effort and time to notice their similarities: perhaps they are in the same language, or on the same topic, or written by the same author.

When it comes to human relations it seems that the same thing happens. When I meet a person from another faith, if I do not make an extra effort, then the first thing that will come to my mind will not be what we have in common, but rather the differences that exist between us. When I, as a Muslim, meet a Christian, if I am not careful and vigilant, then the 10% or 20% of difference that we have would dominate my attention and might lead me to underestimate our commonalities.

This may also happen to people of the same faith. For example when two Muslims from different schools of thought or two Christians from different denominations come together and begin to talk, their attention first goes to those points upon which they differ, rather than to what they have in common. This is something that happens more or less naturally, but if we are not careful, it can create lots of problems. Unfortunately, sometimes we see people of the same faith, who share perhaps 90% of the particulars of that faith, who are unable to converse peacefully with one another. Sometimes they may not even recognise each other as people of the same faith. The history of all religious traditions provides us with many such examples. Hence, it is important for us to take a different stance.

When I have discussions in my own community, I sometimes say that if one of us meets someone who is a believer in God, we must be very happy, even if that person is not a Christian or a follower of any Abrahamic religion. The simple fact that he or she believes in God should make us happy. With regard to people who do not believe in God, we would have to make an immense effort to get them to a point where they begin to believe in God who has created us and is intelligent, loving and caring, and for this to be a common point between them and us. With regard to a person who is a Christian or a Jew, however, we need to recognise how much we do share with someone who believes in the God of Abraham! Unfortunately, however, we tend not to look at it in this way, and instead of recognising how much there is in common, we focus on the differences that exist between us.

The right approach, one the Qur'an also teaches us, is to make an effort to recognise commonalities and common ground. Another famous verse of the Qur'an says,

Say, 'O People of the Book! Come to a word common between us and you: that we will worship no one but Allah, and that we will not ascribe any partner to Him, and that we will not take each other as lords besides Allah.' But if they turn away, say, 'Be witnesses that we are muslims.' (Qur'an 3:64)

This 'gathering around a common word' is extremely important, but we unfortunately forget the common word, and become busied with the little letters and details, which are unessential.

Therefore, in my understanding, we have to take the diversity and differences as a means to try to know each other better, as a motivation to explore the new worlds of human beings, because every human being is a new world for us. If everyone looked the same, spoke the same language, and thought the same, then the world would be very boring. This colourful creation is beautiful and should motivate us to try to know each other better, especially when it comes to the people who share the God of Abraham.

In my understanding of the Qur'an, God Almighty did not want to introduce different religions and traditions. From the outset, with

the creation of Adam and the Prophets after him, He always desired one tradition: submission to the truth and to utter reality, the one transcendent reality that is the basis of all other realities, the core of all goodness and of all beauty, mercy, love, charity and everything.

Unfortunately the human response to that one and single message has created different religions. God did not send different religions; He may have sent different books and Prophets but not different religions. It is very clear that God wants us all to follow the tradition of Abraham. When He refers to the single nation in this verse:

Indeed this community of yours is one community, and I am your Lord. So worship Me. (Qur'an 21:92)

Some have wrongly thought this to mean Muslims. In fact it refers to all followers of Abraham. We are all one *ummah*, one nation.

According to my understanding, Prophet Muhammad did not want to bring a new religion and give a new name to this tradition. He wanted to invite everyone to go back to the tradition of Abraham, and Islam is the name that Abraham had chosen for this tradition, which means 'submission to God'. Therefore, I sometimes say that a Christian who is submissive to God is much closer to a true Muslim than a Muslim who is not submissive to God, because the core and essence of true religion is submission to God.

If we try to pay more attention to the common points, we will find that we share a lot with people of different faiths, especially when it comes to the followers of Abraham. We are members of one family, not strangers who try to establish peaceful coexistence with one another. This is too small a goal for dialogue between the followers of Abraham. We followers of Abraham are brothers and sisters. Dialogue and friendship is the most natural thing for brothers and sisters, and it is part of what it means to be brothers and sisters.

I would now like to review briefly the experience that led to this meeting today. In October 1996, when I went to the UK to pursue a PhD in ethical relativism, I saw it as a good opportunity for my wife and I to learn more about people of other faiths. Iran has a small percentage of non-Muslims, and the city of Qum has none at all.

It took time for us to make initial contacts. One of those initial

contacts was with the Focolare movement. At a one-day meeting at Liverpool Hope University, I sat next to a Catholic priest who was Benedictine. I asked him if it was possible to visit a Catholic seminary, because although I was studying at a university, I have a seminary background. He suggested we visit Ampleforth Abbey, which is not a seminary, but is a place for the formation of monks. It is located in North Yorkshire and is the largest Benedictine monastery in the UK. When I visited the monastery, I met Abbot Timothy Wright, who was the abbot of Ampleforth Abbey at that time. He welcomed me to attend the community prayers and invited me to come again. I was very much taken with the prayer of the brethren and found their chanting especially beautiful. So, at different times, my family and I would visit, staying for a day or two, or even for a week.

When I was in the final year of my stay in the UK, Abbot Timothy asked me if I would be willing to give a talk on Islam to the community. I agreed, and he asked me what I would speak about. I replied that I would give an introduction to Islam, followed by something on Islamic spirituality, and end with some practical instructions given by Muslim mystics. I imagined this would provide the monks with a way to compare their tradition with the Islamic tradition. Abbot Timothy then suggested that instead of one talk, I should give three talks on three separate occasions, to which I agreed. This meant I would go to Ampleforth, give a lecture, spend the night there, and then return home the next day.

Thanks to God, those three lectures were very well received and we discovered many similarities. I invited Abbot Timothy to come to Iran, and he and another monk of the community visited us in 2002. We had very good discussions in Qum, and they felt very comfortable in Iran. Abbot Timothy later wrote that Iran is like a large monastery where you see the names of God everywhere.

We then began planning for the first Catholic–Shi’a dialogue in the UK, deciding that we would meet for one day in London followed by four days in Ampleforth. At this point, Heythrop College, which is run by the Jesuits, was involved. The dialogue took place in July 2003, and the papers given at it were published in 2004. It was followed by another visit to Qum.

In 2005 we organised the second Catholic–Shi‘a dialogue and repeated the model of one day in Heythrop and the rest in Ampleforth. There was another visit to Iran in 2006, and in 2007 we held the third Catholic–Shi‘a dialogue in Worth Abbey near Gatwick airport as well as in Heythrop College.

This was followed by a time of inactivity because Abbot Timothy had moved to Rome. But with the help of Monastic Interreligious Dialogue, we were able to continue our meetings. The first one to be sponsored by Monastic Interreligious Dialogue took place at Sant’Anselmo here in Rome in 2011. At that meeting we visited this place, and I asked our host here, ‘The people that you train here, do they become friends of Islam or do they just know about Islam?’ Father William remembered my question and suggested that our next dialogue be on friendship. We held that dialogue in Qum in September 2012, and it was on that occasion that our friendship deepened and we developed a close relationship with one another.¹ We then decided to have the sixth round of dialogue in Assisi, and now we are meeting here again, because it is difficult for us to come to Rome and not come to PISAI. A part of our heart is always in PISAI, and I think of it as a home for Muslims within the Vatican.

I am grateful to God for this friendship, which has expanded and allowed us to make so many connections with different groups of Christians. I give thanks to God for having opened my eyes and helped me see that the more we practice dialogue, the more we understand the theological basis for engaging in it.

¹ The papers presented in this dialogue are published in *Monks and Muslims II: Creating Communities of Friendship* (2014). Previous volumes on Catholic–Shi‘a dialogue are as follows: *Catholics & Shi‘a in Dialogue: Studies in Theology & Spirituality* (2004, 2011), *Catholic–Shi‘a Engagement: Reason & Faith in Theory and Practice* (2006, 2011), *A Catholic–Shi‘a Dialogue: Ethics in Today’s Society* (2008, 2011) and *Monks and Muslims: Monastic and Shi‘a Spirituality in Dialogue* (2012).

8

Walking Shoulder to Shoulder

Benoît Standaert

I am very thankful to Dr Shomali for having retraced the origins of this sixth meeting between monks and Muslims that we are now completing. As we heard, the first meeting took place in 2003, at Heythrop College in London and Ampleforth Abbey. I had the opportunity to participate in the last three meetings: Rome in 2011, Qum, Iran in 2012 and now in Assisi. Together those last three encounters form a splendid arc with a coming and going between Europe (England and Italy), and Iran, but now including participants from as far as Canada and Kenya.

Someone might ask about the challenge and the inner goal of these encounters. Surely we can say that they allow all of us to grow in the recognition of who we are and in the discovery – which becomes ever more precise and refined – of who the other is and wants to be. As we continue along this way, we learn to be amazed and to wonder as we discover the qualities of reflection, worship, and humanity/hospitality that the other is able to offer us.

Most probably, each of us who participated in the last three gatherings will have his or her own impressions and reflections, observations, and critical remarks about how things went. In the epilogue of the book containing the proceedings of our meeting in Qum, Dr Shomali recalled several comments and reactions of the

monastic members who took part. Each of us had our own way of expressing what it was that struck us – perhaps even overwhelmed us – in the three specific areas I have just mentioned: prayer, reflection, and hospitality, which Saint Benedict referred to as ‘humanity’.

Allow me to speak briefly about each of these three ‘pillars of dialogue’, as we may call them.

First of all, the pillar of prayer. In Qum we were staying at a small hotel near the shrine of Fatimah Masumah, sister of the eighth infallible Imam of the Shi’a. On our first evening there, which happened to be the last day of a ten-day festival honouring Fatimah Masumah, we were taken to her sanctuary, which was crowded with pilgrims. We were graciously received by the imam in charge of the shrine (who had already gone home for supper and was called back to welcome us), and then we were taken to the tomb, where we sat down to meditate and pray, which seemed like the most natural thing to do.

On another occasion, we were invited by our host to pay a visit to the same sanctuary. It was late at night, but inside there were many people of all ages, sitting, walking, praying. We again spent some time in meditation before returning to our hotel. I tried to imagine something of this kind at the end of a long day of meetings in a city like Leuven, or even at a monastery. The doors of the churches would be locked, no light, no time to sit and pray at night. Here, in Qum, prayer at night was natural, non-stop, open to all.

One aspect of this pillar of prayer is simply to be present to one another’s prayer in the same room, silently breathing the same air, recognising another expression of adoration, intercession, confession of the holy Name: *Allah akbar*.

Last Sunday the first reading in eucharistic liturgy of the Catholic Church came from the Prophet Isaiah, who speaks about Cyrus, the Persian – that is, the Iranian. Isaiah greets him as a Messiah! He then – and this is five centuries before Christ and eleven centuries before Muhammad – has God address Cyrus in the following words: ‘I am the Lord, and there is no other; besides me there is no god’ (Isaiah 45:5–6). Twice in the same prophecy he says this! As one of the members of our dialogue pointed out to me, this is the only passage in the whole Bible where this expression occurs, and

that particular passage is read in our Sunday liturgy only once every three years. How striking it was to hear it proclaimed precisely on the Sunday we were in dialogue with our Muslim friends from Iran.

Let me now say a word about hospitality. What is the best way to receive one another? We may recall the fable of the fox and the stork. Because of terrible mistakes and misunderstandings, the efforts of both to show hospitality backfire, and both are offended. Our experience was just the opposite; we could not have been received more graciously. On one evening we were invited to take our meal inside the sanctuary itself, a rare opportunity. On another evening, Dr Shomali, his wife Mahnaz, and their young daughter took us to hillside overlooking the city. Carpets were unrolled, food dished up, and we shared a picnic supper as we gazed over the lights of Qum.

Perhaps because of the emphasis Saint Benedict places on silence in his Rule, monks have become quite sensitive to non-verbal language, especially in gestures of hospitality. We notice and appreciate the quiet and unassuming ways in which people extend a welcome and offer hospitality. We left Qum with an immense sense of gratitude for the countless ways in which we were graciously welcomed and made to feel at home, day after day, hour after hour.

And then there is the level of reflection, which showed us the remarkable open mindedness of Shi'ite Muslims. We noted in one of their publications that a young woman student in theology was doing research on Karl Barth and his influence on the theology of the twentieth century. We also discovered that, for a better understanding of Catholicism, the recent Catechism of the Catholic Church was being translated into Farsi – and even submitted to Vatican authorities to check its accuracy! They made this translation not for the Catholics in Iran but for their own students – around 70,000 – in Qum. At this most recent gathering the proposal was made to translate the Rule of Saint Benedict into Farsi.

I will not summarise the talks that were given in Rome, Qum, and Assisi since they have been, and will be, published. Those prepared by the Muslim participants in our dialogue clearly demonstrate a broad knowledge of the basic texts of their tradition (the Holy Qur'an and the *hadiths* of the Prophet), a penetrating analysis of them, a subtle appreciation of their vocabulary and typological distinctions, and

an ability to apply them to present-day circumstances. In general, we may say that Shi'ites, in their study of their own tradition as well as of Christianity, show an openness that would be difficult to find in our Catholic academic circles.

What is especially important in meetings such as these is what happens during the times when the participants can engage in personal conversation. In this setting, reflections can become very personal, with references to particular experiences that touch all levels of one's psychological and spiritual life. Even something as simple and ordinary as sitting close to one another during times of prayer can have a profound effect. As one of the participants said to me, 'Yes, I do believe that God loves the fact that we pray together.' Or, as another said, 'In Canada there is someone who prays for me, and I pray for someone in England who is sick. I know that God loves that we pray this way for one another.' If I may add, she said this fully aware that we do not share exactly the same faith.

In conclusion, let me simply state my conviction that we are walking together as pilgrims, and that our walking together has a peculiar aroma, a perfume that transmits joy and life.

Our way of walking together goes counter to certain movements that we are reminded of every day by the media, which inundates us with images of violence, murder, and the destruction of entire cities. These movements, which provoke hate and all kind of violence, are not only present in far-off lands; they are in the streets of cities like Brussels and Antwerp, to speak only of what I am familiar with in my own country.

We will now return to our own milieus, to Canada and Qum, to Bruges, Kenya and Cairo, to Bose and Aiguebelle, and even to Japan and London. We will give witness to what we have lived together, and sometimes our testimony will surprise our own communities, schools, or training institutions. We will be invited to speak, to write, even to publish our ideas in Iranian reviews. Our interaction will continue to go on.

We could compare what we are about to a spot of oil on a piece of cloth, or to the aroma of perfume. Once the perfume is out of the bottle, who can put it back? Who will be able to stop the spread of a spot of oil on a piece of cloth? We all know about the

bad smells that provoke anger, fights, conflicts, violence. We would like to introduce some good smells, some aromas. We believe that the dialogue we are involved in, as modest as it may be, can have an impact that goes far beyond our little group. We are convinced that our humble realisation of honest exchange, true friendship, and spiritual hospitality will encourage others, on a larger scale, to promote and experience a positive encounter between the two great traditions of Islam and Christianity.

We monastics and Muslims are convinced that the way we are pursuing corresponds to what God wants.

‘Peace is the future.’ That was the theme given to an interreligious meeting sponsored by the Sant’Egidio community in Antwerp last September. In any case, the future is what we have in common. A future of wisdom, praise or adoration, and peace means a future of justice, mutual support, high humanity. We work for this future with modesty, but also with great conviction. Something always greater than ourselves comes to dwell in us and work through when we are together.

We are little more than poor pilgrims, matching to a common destination. We need to remember the biblical vision that is offered to us on several occasions in the First Testament: we are pilgrims who set out from all the nations on the earth to march toward the place where God will establish peace. We are not in a race, nor does anyone lord it over the others. On the contrary, as the prophet Zephaniah puts it, we march humbly, ‘shoulder to shoulder’ – or more literally, ‘under one shoulder’ (Zephaniah 3:9).

Let it be so. Let us all here present be resolved to walk together, shoulder to shoulder, to a sanctuary that is always higher than what we have achieved until now. May that be our common wish, hope, and goal.

**REFLECTIONS ON
THE DIALOGUE**

A Community of Friendship and Mutual Respect

Timothy Wright

This was the sixth of our dialogues with the Shi'a scholars of Qum, Iran; the first three were in the UK at the Abbeys of Ampleforth and Worth; the next three were in Rome, Qum, and this time in Assisi with the small Bose community. The group was smaller than earlier ones, but that encouraged more opportunity for fruitful dialogue, much appreciated. Sadly, the two nuns who were to take part were not able to be with us, an absence which made the dialogue somewhat lopsided. The location was superb, and the warm and appropriate hospitality shown us bore fruit in the seamless way our respect for each other grew as the days passed.

The topic of 'community' was, to me, always problematic. In my monastic years it has been a frequent topic of discussion; rarely were there new insights, and often an increase in frustration. After some forty years of life in an abbey, I was invited to take up the post of Spiritual Director at a seminary for older men (over thirty years of age) from the English-speaking world. In that position, I came to appreciate the vital importance of 'human formation' alongside theological and spiritual formation. I was part of the team that gave equal importance to human formation. Each year groups of

students of different ages and backgrounds were taught to build a 'community' founded on mutual trust and respect. It was impressive to see how much they changed over the course of four years and how they actually did build communities.

In earlier discussion about this topic, I expressed two reservations. First, the ageing of Benedictine communities, male and female, does not give a sound understanding of Benedictine community. Second, our practice of community is so different from the Shi'a understanding of community, which has to fit within a context of family life as the norm.

At our meeting, I was delighted to listen to papers that were well written and researched. From the monastic writers, the phrases describing community that struck me were 'walking the path together', 'Jesus forms community but not individuals', and 'all are called to live as brothers in a spiritual sense'. But there was no treatment of human formation. One Muslim member challenged us with the question, 'What does "forming" a community mean?' I was struck by these three answers: 'a group of people who share a way of life', 'the meaning of "community" comes from understanding the Church', and 'taking care of the one who you can see and with whom you can dialogue'. Each assumed some level of human formation, but that was not articulated. I heard no real answer to the question 'What does "forming" a community mean?'

But I did hear many inspiring things during the meetings. At the end, I realised our Muslim friends were looking to the Benedictine model of community as a way that enables people to work together, to build a community of people committed to the same task, whether running schools or training religious leaders. What they recognised as the critical difference is that monks live in community twenty-four hours a day, not just during working hours.

But that difference of purpose did not in any way undermine the central aim: to live those few days as a single community dedicated to ever deeper union with the One God. To achieve this we were encouraged by the example of our hosts from the Bose community, particularly sensitive to the needs of our Shi'a guests. During those few days we formed a community of friendship and mutual respect, a gift of God to Whom we must be deeply grateful.

A Community of Neighbours

Isa Jahangir

I am very grateful to God for giving me the opportunity to take part in the fifth and sixth rounds of dialogues with a group of Catholic monks in Qum (2012) and Assisi (2014). I must also thank Dr Mohammad Ali Shomali, one of the eminent international figures in religious dialogue, and Abbot Timothy Wright for establishing the meetings between monks and Muslims.

The first point I would like to mention about the event is that we were received and welcomed warmly by the brothers of the Bose community in Assisi. They hosted the meeting brilliantly, in a peaceful and spiritually inspiring atmosphere. I believe we couldn't have asked for a more enjoyable time than we had in Assisi. The location was marvellous, the food was superb, the hospitality was fabulous, the organisation was perfect, and the friends were wonderful and thoughtful. I don't think we'll ever forget the stories from the Bose community.

One of best things about the Assisi meeting was that the papers were few, with adequate time to present and much more time for discussion. We also had a very fruitful event in PISAI, Rome, during which Dr Shomali and Father Benoît spoke and responded to the questions of the audience. This meeting was received with enthusiasm and amazement by a broad audience.

As a Muslim who, in addition to Islamic studies, has studied sociology and communication, I was delighted to be part of a five-day meeting on community. This topic is an area of intercultural and interreligious communication that is of particular importance for monastic-Muslim dialogue.

In sociology, it is said that there is no single agreed-upon definition of community. Generally, it implies that there are relationships within a group of people that are closer than casual relationships because those who form a community share some common goals, values, and perhaps a way of life that reinforces each other, creates positive feelings, and results in mutual commitment and responsibility. As Scott Peck rightly mentions in *The Different Drum* (1987), if we are going to use the word 'community' meaningfully, we must restrict it to a group of individuals who have learned how to communicate honestly with each other, whose relationship goes deeper than their masks of composure, who have developed some sufficient commitment to rejoice together, mourn together, and to delight in each other, and make others' conditions their own.

One of the highlights of the meeting, to my mind, was the fact that we added, theoretically and practically, an additional feature to the above-mentioned definition, and that was a common belief in community itself as a religiously uniting value. We all seemed to share this mentality. We not only formally engaged in discussions on community, we also informally lived it and felt it. I had the impression, during our stay in Italy, that our hearts were closer to one another and we all enjoyed living together and learning from each other. We, in fact, gave a soul to the concept of community.

Our gathering was marked by a 'feeling', 'knowing', and 'comfort' that accompanied our working together toward a common goal and a communal identity. This granted us a sense of 'membership', being a part of a team, and a sense of 'influence', believing that each member of a team has some degree of power and can make a difference in what it is striving for. Lastly, we had a sense of shared 'emotional connections'. Everyone felt good about taking part in a joint effort, and I, for one, was enjoying the empathy and acceptance of our community members.

Our discussions reminded me of the fact that many Muslim schol-

ars – Allamah Tabataba'i, Murtada Muttahari, and Muhammad Baqir Sadr, for example – have stressed that much, if not all, of religion is communal. Religious faith and practice produce interpersonal connections, and the fellowship of like-minded believers provides a sense of group solidarity. One of the strongest elements of a sense of community is neighbouring, which, like a family support system, enhances community attachment and ties. The Qur'an and Prophet Muhammad command Muslims to be good and benevolent to their neighbours. Assisi was a good opportunity for me to gain a better understanding and create closer connections with Christianity, our nearest religious neighbour.

Overall, our meeting was both enjoyable and informative. The presentation and talks in Assisi and Rome contained many insightful and innovative ideas. I would like to express my sincere appreciation and gratitude to all who were involved in the meeting, especially the Bose community for the amazing venue and hospitality and Father William Skudlarek for his extremely hard work in organising this great event. I truly hope we can continue our dialogues, broaden our common spiritual horizons, and strengthen our monotheistic community to ensure that we can all work together for peace and justice at this crucial time of human history.

11

In Adoration of the One

Fatima Ali

And there are, certainly, among the People of the Book, those who believe in Allah, in the revelation to you, and in the revelation to them, bowing in humility to Allah: They will not sell the Signs of Allah for a miserable gain! For them is a reward with their Lord, and Allah is swift in account. (Qur'an 3:199)

I begin with one of the Names of God, the Most Glorious, the Most High, which is 'al-Salaam' (Peace) because it is the best Name to describe the journey to, and experience in, Assisi. Not only did the participants exude a sense of calm from within, but the natural environment and the monastic community blanketed the surroundings with tranquillity and serenity. I believe this was the case for everyone except the organisers, who were busy attending to everyone's needs and paying attention to all details. Even though the coordinators were preoccupied with adhering to the schedule, eventually they submitted to the atmosphere and allowed life to unfold as it normally does. As Father William noted, 'At some point you come to the realisation that you really don't have control over anything. The only One who has control is our Lord.'

One of the endearing characteristics about the dialogue was that it resembled a micro-hajj (pilgrimage) for it summoned servants

from different points of the globe to assemble in adoration and discussion of the One. As in hajj, one is able to bear witness to Allah's Creative Will when viewing the spectrum of humanity, which spans the continuum of physical and spiritual qualities. God's artistic display of corporeal eloquence was also manifested in this dialogue, for its members were of varying heights, sizes, tongues, and racial backgrounds, all of which added to the beauty of the personal exchanges and presentations.

The first point on the agenda was the evening prayer of the two communities, which clearly demonstrated that worship is the primary objective for monks and Muslims alike. Being able to participate in or attend one another's spiritual expressions of devotion solidified the concept of God's Unity. Not only did the times for prayer complement each other, but the form exhibited by both communities showed a common origin, each group conveying their praises of God by *qiyam* (standing), *ruku* (bowing), and *sujud* (prostration) within their respective rituals. The monastic community at San Maseo ensured that the Muslims were able to partake in their services by providing copies of each prayer service so that we could follow along in Italian. Their voices, especially during the morning prayer, were heavenly and spiritually uplifting. Even though echoed in another language, their sincerity and love for God was evident. Br Mohsen touched on this when he noted in his presentation that the worship of God should not be relegated to rites and rituals; the original goal of community is God, and the final goal of community is also God. As Abbot Timothy foresees in his book, *No Peace Without Prayer – Encouraging Muslims and Christians to Pray Together – A Benedictine Approach*, this joining of spirits, although from distinct faiths, is possible.

In his lecture, Father Benoît mentioned that monastic literature refers to prayer with the Name of God as the 'sword' of the monk, and that the solitary monk becomes one with the One who is Alone. His first statement was exemplified in the life of Saint Francis, whom we learned about during our walk to, and while present at, the church of San Damiano. There Jesus spoke to Saint Francis and instructed him to go and rebuild the church. We were met by a recently ordained Franciscan friar who provided us with a general

background of Saint Francis' life and responded to our questions. He wore the Franciscan habit, which included a string of prayer beads attached to the belt around his waist. He had a quiet demeanour and a sense of humour and appeared to be enraptured with his new path in life. I felt he was at peace. Father Benoît's second statement seemed to be exemplified by two other friars who shared their experiences of introspection. One had spent approximately five years contemplating on a daily basis before making his life commitment to be a Franciscan and the other spent time in the desert, in solitude, to awaken the spirit within. I was awed by their resolution to serve God with pure intentions and in a state of complete surrender.

Abbot Timothy's presentation raised the following question: 'Can we be humbled and encouraged by the Word of God, of the other? This is an invitation to develop and share with a larger network of people. The practical implications are how to spread to a larger community.' Father Maximilian responded by stating that we should have reciprocal talks during Lent and Ramadan. Maximilian is a Benedictine monk who is in the process of learning Arabic in Cairo and who expressed his love for Islam. He believes that in order for Christians to dialogue with Muslims, they must become acquainted with the beliefs of Islam.

We also visited the Basilica of Saint Francis, where our guide was an American friar from Brooklyn. That was followed by a visit to the Franciscan International Center for Dialogue, where another English-speaking friar provided us with some of the Franciscan ideas about dialogue: to give of oneself to become better communicators; to give testimony to fraternity and dialogue; to recognise monologue as impoverishment and dialogue as greater transparency. Human beings are better able to understand themselves through dialogue, which is a form of conversion.

In line with this sentiment, Sr Mahnaz reminded the attendees that we needed to develop community among ourselves first – to develop a sense of caring by sharing with each other what is going on in our lives during the two years between our meetings. Otherwise, what is the sense of what we are doing here? *Al-hamdu lillah*, her proposal has been heeded and the communication between the members has continued, thanks especially to Abbot Timothy's

suggestion that we spiritually engage with one another through the exchange of passages from each other's divine revelations.

The notion of caring and sharing with each other continued that evening over dinner when Dr Shomali told Father Benoît, 'True love does not require patience because you don't get bothered or upset by the other person's actions. So, you don't need to be patient with them.'

Another thought-provoking comment came from Br Godefroy, a monk of Aiguebelle, when I asked his opinion about happiness. He said, 'I don't think happiness belongs to this world, but the one to come. But, joy is for this world. You may be out in the cold, your clothes may be thin and your feet freezing. You arrive at someone's home and they don't allow you in. But that's okay, because you're in a state of joy.' As I discovered again and again, the personal exchanges were as insightful and memorable as the presentations themselves, which were characterised by intelligence, wisdom, and a deep knowledge not only of the presenter's beliefs but of the beliefs of the others as well.

The willingness to call upon God or Allah (SWT), to speak about His Greatness, or to state, '*Allahu akbar*' without reservation was a newfound experience for me, especially when those expressions came from the mouths of monks. It was heartening to be able to speak about the disciples, prophets, and Imams (A) in a single breath as beings who were Allah's selected servants, making no distinction between them but referring to them as messengers and directors of humanity. It was so reassuring to be able to speak about religion without fear of retribution or reprisal and without having to be shy about sharing one's thoughts about God, religious practices, or experiences. We were all standing on the same platform, and our exchanges were a way to deepen our understanding of one another through honest and open dialogue. We all bore witness that difference of religion does not equal difference of heart. We communicated with one another with the utmost respect – and a hint of humour.

I can never thank Dr Shomali enough for inviting me to be part of this beautiful encounter, for it was one of the most memorable spiritual experiences of my religious life. When I left Rome, I felt

as though I was being separated from my brothers – William, Benoît, Timothy, Hamed, Isa, Mohsen, Matteo, Guido, Godefroy, Maximilian, Mohammad – and my sister Mahnaz. Separated not from Christian monks or Shi'a Muslims, but from my family.

Reflection:

See your brother/sister as God sees them.

See yourself as God sees you.

See the rest of humanity as God sees them

By consequence, guide yourself in that direction.

12

Mercy and Community

Godefroy Raguenet de Saint-Albin

Our encounter in Assisi was blessed by the spiritual presence of Saint Francis and the hospitality of the brothers of Bose at the monastery of San Masseo. Two years after our memorable visit to Iran, what we especially appreciated – over and above the presentations we heard – was the time to engage in more informal sharing, to be present at one another's prayers, to walk together to San Damiano and the Basilica, and – last, but certainly not least – to gather together at a table and partake of the delicious meals the brothers prepared for us. These expressions of hospitality and community sound very ordinary – and indeed they are – but I believe they are the true ground on which we journey together, a ground that is receptive to more 'spiritual' manifestations and that is especially relevant to our reflection on shaping community. The new means of communication provide us with marvellous tools to build communion...or to foment global religious terror. But even if we make the best possible use of these media to communicate with one another, to set up discussion groups, or to facilitate the organisation of a movement, they still fall short of a fully human, face-to-face encounter.

One premise of our meetings is the acknowledgment of the divine initiative that brings people together and of our own experience of

the joy of having already been gathered together by Him who calls us to share in a community of dialogue and friendship. In one of the first formal presentations, Dr Javadi pointed out that the difference between society and community is that community is the result of God's initiative and that it realises its essential nature by becoming a community of worshipers in obedience to the prophets' call to respond to God in prayer.

On the following day, when we gathered for Sunday Mass, we heard the words of Jesus, 'Repay to Caesar what belongs to Caesar and to God what belongs to God' (Matthew 22:21). For me, those words were a powerful echo of the distinction Dr Javadi made between society and community, and also of the divine initiative that provided this significant but certainly unplanned 'input' to our dialogue. Jesus' words, it should be noted, do not provide a turnkey solution. Rather, they are a summons to articulate and distinguish the political and religious dimensions of human society. Certainly, the diversity of our backgrounds shows us that there is no single way to do this. We cannot ignore the differences between Belgian secularism, French *laïcité*, and the religiously sanctioned democracy of the United States, nor the sharp contrast of all of these with Iran, where religion (Shi'a Islam) is at the heart of the social and political structures. This diversity certainly contributed to the richness of our discussions.

'Spice' was not lacking at our meeting in Assisi. In addition to the excellent spicy dishes prepared by the brothers, there were some spicy moments in our discussions as well. The conversation became especially animated in response to the statement of one of the monastic participants who said that his spontaneous reaction to someone who told him he had converted to Islam would be 'congratulations!' His remark brought up the very sensitive point of conversion (dramatic for many people throughout the world) and raised the question of our relation to Truth. The trust that had developed among us helped us to recognise that even if believers are devoted to, 'possessed' by, and witnessing to Truth, they cannot pretend to own it, imagining that they are somehow able to grasp this attribute of the Revealing God in a complete and exclusivist way, be it as individual persons, or even as a community. That

being the case, 'congratulations!' could be understood as a way of affirming those who believe they have received a gift – Islam in this case – from God. As I heard it, this 'congratulations!' was the expression of a faith confident enough to let God be God, to let God lead each human being to a greater openness to Truth in a unique and personal way ('no compulsion in religion' says Qur'an 2:256), all the while being fully aware that the way people sense they are being led by God is deeply related to their encounter with a witnessing community ('You are the best community' (Qur'an 3:110); 'You are the light of the world' (Matthew 5:14)). Interpreted in this way, 'congratulations!' is a very personal and sincere statement.

When we reflect upon community and our sense of belonging, we inevitably draw a line between insiders and outsiders. Such boundaries give us the comfort of a reference and the satisfaction offered by a binary mode of reading the human world: 'in' or 'out'; 'with us' or 'not with us' – which so easily turns into 'against us'. Insecurity can blind us to the in-between zone and the complexity of the real world and of the human heart. We even disregard the antidotes that our own traditions offer us to fight against this laziness of spirit. Within the Christian tradition, the words of Jesus 'Whoever is not against us, is with us' (Mark 9:40) and his famous, but rarely observed, command 'Love your enemies' (Matthew 5:44) radically turn the boundaries inside out. His words urge us to build bridges precisely in those situations where mere human reasoning and our religious convictions so often tell us that we have to erect walls and barriers. An especially valuable gift we share in our group of friends is the knowledge that walls do not reach up to heaven.

One of the presentations offered a more complex model of community than that of the Manichean circle of insiders and outsiders. This alternate pattern of belonging consists of concentric circles. The innermost circle is the community of those who, in addition to faith, are bound together by kinship. Then come the circles of friends, neighbours, acquaintances, and so forth. The outermost and largest circle encompasses the whole of humanity. Muslims and Christians share the precious vision of a universal horizon for their communities. Though we may have different ways of interpreting this horizon, we can together confess that we are all created and

united in one human family, devoted to the proclamation of God's unity and uniqueness (*tawhid*; see also the concept of *mithaq*). Christians understand this unity to be recapitulated in Christ, and they look to its fulfilment in the eschatological communion of saints.

In this perspective, it may help to consider community as an evolving form that combines varying degrees of 'intensity' and 'extension'. The 'intensity' of a community involves conversion, formation, the strengthening of bonds, purification of heart – the latter a traditionally monastic expression. Time is an essential element of a community's 'intensity', and faith is spoken of as a journey. 'Extension' refers to reaching out to others, *da'wah*, evangelisation, testimony, and so forth; it is also a time-related parameter. While we may instinctively think that intensity is more important and fundamental than extension (since, for instance, a lack of a 'spiritual life' soon weakens and even corrupts testimony), we also have to admit that the reverse is also true: extension verifies intensity.

Monastic life clearly chooses to invest in intensity, convinced that the history of humanity is written by Saint John of the Cross (not to mention Jesus!) or Imam 'Ali ibn Musa al-Rida, no less – or, indeed, far more – than Alexander the Great or Napoleon, despite the more obvious roles of the latter on the stage of history. Seeking to correspond fully to our human vocation calls us to authenticity and coherency (intensity), but in this journey of humanisation, the self – with ever increased revelation of its relational nature as person-in-communion – expands towards others and ultimately reaches communion with the whole of humanity, the whole of creation (extension).

Still, the temptation is always there for monks and monastic communities to forget the ecstatic dimension of their way of life and to entrench themselves in spiritual self-complacency. Dr Shomali explained that the Islamic position regarding monasticism (see Qur'an 57:27 and also the famous *hadith*, 'no monasticism in Islam') is fundamentally a warning against cutting oneself off from the life of the larger community. The temptation to retreat into isolation is something we, and all Christian communities, need to be aware of. Whether the reference be to *ecclesiolae* (churches in miniature) or to the Church at large, Christians are necessarily rooted in

their environment (be it Christian or not), and 'given' to it – an awareness that was particularly strong in the monastic community at Tibhirine in Algeria. The Church does not exist for its own sake but for others – that is, those who do not belong to the Christian community. It exists to be sign and servant of the unity of all people with one another and with God, a vision of the Church that emerged with particular clarity during the Second Vatican Council.

Our communities will always have to struggle against the demons of exclusivism, of 'purity'. Popular wisdom advises people to 'clean up your own backyard', and Jesus enjoins his hearers to remove the plank from their own eye before they try to remove the speck of sawdust in their neighbour's eye (Matthew 7:3). There is a noble way of understanding and practicing the directive 'to command what is just and forbid what is evil, (*amr bil-ma'ruf wa al-nahy 'an al-munkar*) and other injunctions to 'fraternal correction' (another monastic expression), but is it not too often used to justify oppressive and aggressive policies? One of the reasons Jesus was perceived as such a threat by many among the Pharisees (the 'Separates', i.e. the 'pure ones') and other Jewish groups of his time was because he acted as the messenger who not only announced the good news of divine grace offered to all, but embodied that good news by associating with public sinners and prostitutes.

At the heart of the Gospel proclaimed by Jesus and of the Christian community is the mercy of God shown to the sinner. So it was from the very beginning. The first 'pope', the Apostle Peter, was a renegade. Jesus' disciples fled at the time of his arrest. Like the first followers of Jesus, we too are invited to let our very weaknesses and failures become the channel for receiving the Strength to Love – the Jesus Spirit. Love beyond death, forgiveness that overcomes evil, is what creates community.

In our Benedictine tradition, monastic life solemnly begins when those desiring to enter the community are asked what it is they are seeking. Their response is 'the mercy of God and fellowship in this community.' In doing so, they proclaim that the only life sustaining principle of community is the divine bond of merciful love between its fallible, sinful members. We could hear an echo of this conviction in the honest acknowledgement of disappointments encountered

in monastic community life. At the same time, we recognise that disappointment can also be a way of calling us back to our vocation, which demands constant effort and continual conversion. Becoming and being communities where mercy wells up and overflows is precisely the way monasteries contribute to the good of society. Their mission is to be places where Divine Mercy is received as a divine gift, offered to one's brothers – or sisters – in the monastic community, and imparted to all in a spirit of poverty and sharing. That might well be a good theme for the next encounter, inshallah!

13

Remembering God's Name Together

Hamed Fayazi

For me, participating in the sixth round of Shi'a–Catholic dialogue was an honour and blessing, for which I thank God and also express my gratitude to all the people who contributed to this program, including Dr Mohammad Ali Shomali, Father William Skudlarek, and the community at Bose for their warm and kind hospitality.

A couple of features of this program made it unique among other interfaith experiences I have had. First, I thought we would be staying in a hotel, but to my surprise and delight, I was told out we were going to stay in a monastery. Monasteries have always held a special attraction for me. In the Qur'an, we read that God protected monasteries and other houses of worship as places where 'God's name is much remembered' (Qur'an 22:40). Moreover, Muslims know about monasteries and monks through the story of the hospitality and support Prophet Muhammad (S) received from Bahira, the Christian monk in Bosra. As Shi'ite Muslims, furthermore, we hear about monasteries in the tragedy of Karbala', when, after the massacre of Imam Husayn (A) and his companions, the army of 'Umar ibn Sa'd took the head of the Imam to Damascus, and brought along his family as captives. On their way they stayed at a monastery.

There, a poem was miraculously written on the wall, rebuking those who committed such a crime against the grandson of their Prophet. In another report, the resident monk is said to have shown great reverence for the head of the slain Imam Husayn (A).

Having these images in mind, I was of course excited about the opportunity to stay in a monastery. However, since I thought of monasteries and monastic life as involving a difficult, ascetic life in an austere setting, I was a bit worried about the degree of difficulty I would experience. All my worries, however, disappeared as soon as we arrived at the comfortable, relaxing, and beautiful place that is the Monastero di Bose, with its friendly and hospitable community that hosted us with great warmth and kindness.

The sixth Shi'a-Catholic dialogue was also a unique experience because of the nature of the rapport between the monastic and Muslim participants. They related to one another not merely on the basis of theological or scholarly interests, nor by ordinary bonds of friendship; rather, there was a deep connection at the level of spirituality. What brought us together was 'the common word between us' (Qur'an 3:64) that connected each of us to one another and to God our Lord. At the Monastero di Bose, the Qur'anic image of the monastery as a place of worship where 'God's name is much remembered' was a lived experience.

Afterword

When ‘community’ was proposed as the topic of this dialogue, some of the monastic participants were understandably apprehensive. While community is at the very centre of Christian monasticism – cenobitic monasticism, that is – many monks are painfully conscious that the actual practice of community in monasteries often leaves much to be desired. Furthermore, we know that the monastic form of community life does not exist in Islam. Therefore, if we were going to reflect with Muslims on the importance of community and the ways it is implemented, there could be no question of holding up our monastic communities as models to be imitated. What we could do, however, was explain why community is of such importance in the Christian tradition, and especially the Christian monastic tradition – the specific topic of Brother Guido Dotti’s presentation. We could also speak from our experience, describing some of the important elements of monastic community and honestly acknowledging our weaknesses and failures – the content of Father Benoît Standaert’s paper. And finally, we could propose possibilities for creating communities of dialogue composed of monks and Muslims, as Abbot Timothy Wright does in his paper.

The experience of community for Muslims is obviously quite different from that of monks, who live together and share material and spiritual goods. Nonetheless, as can especially be seen in the presentations of Mohsen Javadi and Hamed Fayazi, the Islamic understanding of what fosters the formation of community and what impedes it overlaps considerably with a monastic approach to these questions. The way community is understood and practiced in Islam can also direct attention to problematic developments within Christian monastic communities. For instance, Dr Javadi writes, ‘The community of the faithful must be composed of persons who have at least an inkling of self-respect and nobility. Whenever this feeling, for whatever reason, is weakened and a person is weighed down by feelings of abjectness and humiliation, the community collapses...’ A statement like that certainly calls into question some mistaken, but all too common, ways of understanding and

promoting humility in monastic life. Hamed Fayazi's reflections on the *hadith* 'You are all shepherds, and you are all responsible for your flock' can offer a helpful approach to the monastic practice (or, more often, non-practice) of 'fraternal correction'.

Dr Javadi's definition of 'community' as a congregation of people brought together by a divinely-appointed prophet for the worship of God raises the question of the relationship of the community founded by the Prophet Mohammed with communities founded by other prophets, as well as the relation of Islam to secular societies. This question has now become even more pointed in the aftermath of the murderous attack on the editorial staff of *Charlie Hebdo* in Paris and during the increasing and ever more horrendous atrocities committed by ISIS in Syria, Iraq, and Libya, and by Boko Haram in Nigeria and other African countries. Although not dealing with these issues directly, Isa Jahangir's presentation of Islamic teaching on the Muslim community and the way it is to relate to other religious communities and to society as a whole provides a much needed corrective to the view, still all too common, that Islam is a religion that espouses forced conversion and worldwide domination. Some key passages from his paper:

When it comes to global unity (human community), God commands Muslims to treat with goodness and justice all those who are not hostile to them and their religion and who do not drive them out of their land, because God loves those who treat others with justice (Qur'an 23:53). Elsewhere the Qur'an speaks of reconciliation with the non-Muslim and says that if the unbelievers offer you peace and reconciliation, you should incline to it: 'And if they incline to peace, then incline to it and trust in Allah' (8:61).

It can be inferred from some Qur'anic verses that when Imam Mahdi reappears, some people may not embrace Islam, but justice will prevail over the whole earth. The Islamic narrations do not insist that all people on earth will convert to Islam. In fact, it is understood from some verses, 5:64 for instance, that some non-Muslims will follow their own religions until the Day of Judgment (Javadi Amuli 2009: 55). In other words, some people may not become Muslims during

the time of Imam Mahdi's government, but Islam and Muslims will treat them with justice.

The Qur'an clearly states that the reason for diversity of cultures, tribes, and peoples is to allow for mutual social understanding and acquaintance: 'O you men! surely We have created you of a male and a female, and made you tribes and families that you may know each other; surely the most honorable of you with Allah is the one among you most careful [of his duty]' (49:13).

Since this Qur'anic understanding of the reason for diversity – 'that you may know each other' – is followed by the words 'the most honorable of you with Allah is the one among you most careful [of his duty]', the former concept has been overshadowed by the latter. The reason for this is that most exegetes focus their attention on the last part of the verse rather than the first.

Unfortunately, given the present climate, even statements as direct and clear as these can be met with scepticism and even outright rejection. Shortly after our meeting in Assisi, an American monk doing graduate studies in theology in Rome expressed his concern about my engaging in dialogue with Muslims and gave me a couple of articles that he thought were excellent. I read them, but came to a quite different conclusion. It seemed to me that author's criticism of Islam was based on little, if any, personal contact with Muslims and depended mainly on non-Muslim interpretations of Islam, some of which were little more than caricatures.¹ I said as much in follow-up correspondence with the monk in Rome. In his reply, it was obvious that my statement that I had gotten quite a different impression of Islam from my conversations with Muslims whom I knew and whom I regarded as friends did not impress him

¹ The two articles, 'Dialoguing with Islam' and 'It's Time to Take the Islamic State Seriously', are by James V. Schall, SJ and are available online. In one of the articles, he writes, 'Muslims understand "dialogue" to be a practical means to further Muslim goals of a world at "peace" where everyone worships Allah. Those who do not accept this understanding are seen to be in opposition to Islam.'

very much. Muslims, he wrote, were not to be trusted since they were permitted to lie in order to deceive unbelievers and to bring about world domination.

A comment like that is what Cardinal John Henry Newman calls ‘poisoning the wells’. In his *Apologia pro Vita Sua*, he describes the difficulty he faced in responding to the attacks of his detractor, Mr Kingsley, who, he says, ‘infuse[s] into the imaginations of my readers, suspicion and mistrust of everything that I may say in reply to him. This I call *poisoning the wells*.’

If I am natural, he will tell them, ‘*Ars est celare artem*’ [(True) art conceals art]; if I am convincing, he will suggest that I am an able logician; if I show warmth, I am acting the indignant innocent; if I am calm, I am thereby detected as a smooth hypocrite; if I clear up difficulties, I am too plausible and perfect to be true. The more triumphant are my statements, the more certain will be my defeat.²

Precisely because the well has been poisoned, more and more Christians need to be in dialogue with Muslims, especially dialogue that deepens knowledge and appreciation of one another and that allows friendship to develop and grow. The most effective way to respond to those who insist that ‘true’ Islam is violent, and who are certain that Muslims who would deny this must be lying, is, I believe, not argument, but witness. Being part of a Christian–Muslim dialogue dedicated to mutual knowledge and friendship, makes it possible to say, ‘I have friends who are Muslims. We have spoken about these issues, taken meals together, and prayed together. I can find no reason to believe that they are trying to deceive me when they present Islam as a religion devoted to peace and justice with and for all people.’

We hope for the day when Muslims, like Christians, will not be required to defend their religion every time an act of violence or terror is committed by someone claiming to act in the name of Allah

² John Henry Newman, *Apologia pro Vita Sua* (London: J. M. Dent & Sons & New York: E. P. Dutton & Coby, n.d.) <<http://www.gutenberg.org/files/19690/19690-h/19690-h.htm#p1>>. Accessed 1 July 2015.

or the Prophet. Writing in an issue of *Time* published shortly after the killings in Paris, Kareem Abdul-Jabbar noted,

When the Ku Klux Klan burns a cross in a black family's yard, prominent Christians aren't required to explain how it isn't really a Christian act. Most people realize that the KKK doesn't represent Christian teachings. That's what I and other Muslims long for – the day when these terrorists praising Muhammad or Allah's name as they debased their actual teaching are instantly recognized as thugs disguising themselves as Muslims.³

That day will come when, through dialogue, friendship, and prayer, enmity gives way to hospitality, ignorance to knowledge, fear to trust, and silence to witness. In his talk at the Pontifical Institute for the Study of Arabic and Islam in Rome, Father Benoît Standaert indicated the way forward:

We will now return to our own milieus, to Canada and Qum, to Bruges, Kenya and Cairo, to Bose and Aiguebelle, and even to Japan and London. We will give witness to what we have lived together, and sometimes our testimony will surprise our own communities, schools, or training institutions. We will be invited to speak, to write, even to publish our ideas in Iranian reviews. Our interaction will continue to go on...We believe that the dialogue we are involved in, as modest as it may be, can have an impact that goes far beyond our little group. We are convinced that our humble realisation of honest exchange, true friendship, and spiritual hospitality will encourage others, on a larger scale, to promote and experience a positive encounter between the two great traditions of Islam and Christianity.

WILLIAM SKUDLAREK
Fujimi, Japan
27 February 2015

³ Kareem Abdul-Jabbar, 'Paris Was Not About Religion', *Time*, 26 January 2015, p. 19.

List of Contributors

NOTKER WOLF, Abbot Primate, is the highest-ranking member of the Benedictine Confederation. In this role, he travels from his base at Sant'Anselmo in Rome to visit Benedictine communities throughout the world. He is a widely published author and an enthusiastic and diverse musician. An integral part of his Christian spirituality is interreligious dialogue, 'loving the world of the other'.

MOHAMMAD ALI SHOMALI is a graduate of the Islamic Seminaries of Qum and also has both a BA and an MA in Western philosophy from the University of Tehran. He earned his PhD from the University of Manchester. His publications include *Self-Knowledge* (1996, 2006; translated into Malay, Spanish, and Kiswahili); *Ethical Relativism: An Analysis of the Foundations of Morality* (2001; translated into Malay); *Discovering Shi'a Islam* (now in 8th ed., 2014; translated into twelve languages); *Shi'a Islam: Origins, Faith and Practices* (2003, 2010; translated into Spanish and Swedish); and *Principles of Jurisprudence: An Introduction to Methodology of Fiqh* (2006). He is co-editor of *Catholics and Shi'a in Dialogue: Studies in Theology and Spirituality* (2004, 2011); *Catholic-Shi'a Engagement: Reason and Faith in Theory and Practice* (2006, 2011); *A Catholic-Shi'a Dialogue: Ethics in Today's Society* (2008, 2011); *Monks and Muslims: Monastic and Shi'a Spirituality in Dialogue* (2012); and *Monks and Muslims II: Creating Communities of Friendship* (2014). Dr Shomali is editor-in-chief of two journals: the *Message of Thaqaalayn: A Quarterly Journal of Islamic Studies* and the *Spiritual Quest: A Biannual Journal of Ethics and Spirituality*. Currently he is the director of the International Institute for Islamic Studies in Qum and the Institute of Islamic Studies in London.

GUIDO DOTTI is a member of the monastic community of Bose in Italy. He was subprior for twenty-five years and now works as an editor at *Edizioni Qiqajon*. He was co-chair of the Forum on Spirituality at the Third European Ecumenical Assembly in Sibiu in 2007 and participated in the 2008 Lambeth Conference as a personal guest

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MOHSEN JAVADI has a PhD from Tarbiat Modares University in Tehran and is now head of the Ethics Department of the University of Qum. He works as the chief editor of *Religious Inquiries* and is a member of the editorial boards of some other academic journals. Although his main interest is ethics, his studies and research include theology and Islamic philosophy. He has written more than forty papers on moral, theological, and philosophical topics, most of them in Farsi.

BENOÎT STANDAERT is a monk of Sint-Andries Abbey near Bruges (Belgium). He is a biblical scholar and author who teaches at his abbey in the international Institute Gaudium et Spes as well as in Leuven, Milan, and Bangalore. His major work, *L'espace Jésus* (2000) was partially translated into English (*Sharing Sacred Space: Interreligious Dialogue as Spiritual Encounter*, Liturgical Press, 2009) and brings together exegetical skill, interreligious concern, and a special sensitivity for spirituality.

HAMED FAYAZI studied Islamic Studies at the Islamic Seminary of Qum. He also did an MA in Abrahamic Religions at the University of Religions and Denominations in Iran and another MA in Islamic Studies and Christian–Muslim Relations at Hartford Seminary, USA. He is currently a researcher at the International Institute for Islamic Studies (IIIS) in Qum and has teaching positions at other schools affiliated with the Islamic Seminary of Qum. His research interests include Shi'ite Studies, Islamic theology, and Christian–Muslim dialogue.

TIMOTHY WRIGHT is the former abbot of Ampleforth Abbey in England. He served in the abbey's school for twenty-five years as teacher, head of religious studies, boarding housemaster, deputy head, and fundraiser. As abbot, he initiated a series of meetings and publications on Catholics and Shi'a Muslims in dialogue. He recently completed a doctoral program at University of Wales

Trinity Saint David, formerly known as Lampeter University, focused on possible ways forward for Benedict–Muslim dialogue. He now teaches at Benedictine University in Lisle, Illinois.

ISA JAHANGIR read Islamic studies at the Seminary of Qum, and the International Institute for Islamic Studies (Qum) and studies Sociology at the University of Baqir al-Ulum. He teaches different subjects in the field of Islamic studies and Muslim social thought. He was the Head of the Department of Islamic Studies in English, at al-Mustafa International University. Currently he is the group leader for BA/MA Islamic Studies and Islam and the West at the Islamic College, London. He also teaches at the Hawzah of England. He has published several books and papers on Shi'a and Islamic studies.

FATIMA ALI recently completed her BA in English Literature and Professional Writing at Concordia University, Montreal, Canada. She has a diploma in Special Care Counselling and Social Sciences. Fatima works as a Sourcing Specialist for a global corporation and is active in the Muslim community in Montreal.

GODEFROY RAGUENET DE SAINT-ALBIN has been a Cistercian monk since 2001. He entered the Abbey of Notre-Dame d'Aiguebelle, the motherhouse of Tibhirine, as it was supporting an attempt (since interrupted) to re-found a community in Algeria. He has also lived with the Cistercian community of Atlas in Morocco on several occasions over the course of four years. In February 2015, he began service as chaplain to a small community of Italian Cistercian nuns in Syria.

WILLIAM SKUDLAREK is a monk of Saint John's Abbey in Collegeville, Minnesota, and Secretary General of Monastic Interreligious Dialogue. After receiving a PhD in homiletics and liturgics from Princeton Theological Seminary, he taught in the college and School of Theology of Saint John's University in Collegeville. He spent five years in Brazil engaged in pastoral ministry and for ten years was a member of the priory of Saint John's Abbey in Japan.