

Catholicism and Islam: Points of Convergence and
Divergence, Encounter and Cooperation
Notre Dame University
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An ancient Middle Eastern story tells of a traveler in a desert, who, at a certain point, notices at a distance a horrible and violent monster making its way towards him. Obviously the traveler is frightened. As the monster gets closer, the traveler being able to see him clearer, notices that it is not a monster but a man: an ugly man, but a man nonetheless. After awhile, the traveler begins to notice him better and realizes in the end, that the man is not that ugly at all. Finally, when he looks into his eyes, he recognizes that he's his brother.

In our day, many Christians and Muslims happen to meet each other as in the desert night, where the human silhouette is completely distorted. Muslims look at Christians as the monsters of the Crusades, as described in their history books; but above all, they view and fear the western secularized world where Christians live going adrift. Christians, on the other hand, see in Muslims the threatening monster of religious intolerance that seem to render them indisposed to welcome the cultural and juridical values that shape our western societies.

The insidious desert in which we walk and the deceiving night which has fallen indiscriminately upon all, Christians and Muslims, Western and Islamic world, are not new phenomena. Rather, their roots go back to ancient history, marked by long periods of incomprehension, of rivalry, and at times also very violent oppression, interspersed with intervals – although truly limited in time and space – of peaceful coexistence and of mutual cooperation at all levels.

Deep roots anchored in traditions, cultures and religions, which no doubt are different, at times even divergent, and contain elements that seem quite incompatible, and mutually unacceptable or intolerable.

The insidiousness of the desert and the deception of the night are also very modern phenomena. In the last century they have been exacerbated and continue to be nurtured by erroneous ethnic, intercultural, and international relationships, marked by reciprocal challenges, arrogance, and oppression.

When speaking of points of convergence between Christians and Muslims, three specific reasons are generally cited: we are all children of Abraham; both are monotheists and belong to a religion gifted with a sacred book.

I believe that these three aspects offer us good elements to affirm important convergences, capable of motivating encounter and collaboration among individuals and communities at the local and international levels. At the same time, they also denote just as clear, divergences that need to be recognized, adequately presented, respected as basic differences of religious identity, but never distorted or misrepresented in order to foster rivalry, conflict and hatred.

Islam can certainly not be identified with Arab history and culture. Nonetheless, it is a fact that it grew out of that geographical, cultural and linguistic environment. Now, according to tradition, Arabs are descendants from Ishmael, the first son Abraham had with Hagar, the Egyptian. For this reason, Muslims take pleasure in considering themselves descendants of Abraham.

Speaking to young Muslims in Morocco, back in 1985, John Paul II stated: “Christians and Muslims, we have many things in common, as believers and as human beings. (...) For us Abraham is a very model of faith in God, of submission to his will and of confidence in his goodness” (August 19, 1985).

The expression has much value in the context of Arab culture. In this regard, Wael Farouq, professor of Arabic at the American University in Cairo, affirms that: “the most important tree in the

desert is the tree of genealogy. Every tribe is a tree and man in the desert defines himself as a branch of the tree... The branch cannot have life without the tree, nor the tree without roots or the stable foundation in time... Man is therefore man only by reason of his genealogy” (*Dio salvi la ragione*, Cantagalli, 83).

Christians find in the Gospel a precise idea of Jesus on this question. He never contested nor diminished the importance of the kinship with Abraham, but He also surpassed it. One day, while speaking with his fellow Jews who boasted in being children of Abraham, Jesus said: “Do not presume to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our father.' For I tell you, God can raise up children to Abraham from these very stones” (Mt 3:9). Faith and the works inspired by it constitute being children of God hence, children of Abraham.

The Declaration, *Nostra Aetate*, of the Second Vatican Council, on the relationship between the Church with non-Christian religions, clarifies the convergence between Christian and Islam, without obfuscating the conspicuous differences in one relevant sentence: “they do not acknowledge Jesus as God”. The Vatican II text says: “The Church regards with esteem also the Moslems. They adore the one God, living and subsisting in Himself; merciful and all-powerful, the Creator of heaven and earth, who has spoken to men; they take pains to submit wholeheartedly to even His inscrutable decrees, just as Abraham, with whom the faith of Islam takes pleasure in linking itself, submitted to God. Though they do not acknowledge Jesus as God, they revere Him as a prophet. They also honor Mary, His virgin Mother; at times they even call on her with devotion. In addition, they await the day of judgment when God will render their desserts to all those who have been raised up from the dead. Finally, they value the moral life and worship God especially through prayer, almsgiving and fasting” (n.3).

We do believe, Christians and Muslims, in the one God, the living God, the God who created the world and this is a powerful common ground on which to build together “true holiness in

obedience and worship to God” (*John Paul II, Colloquium on holiness in Christianity and Islam, May 9, 1985*). At the same time, the different way we consider and try to live out the unity and transcendancy of God is full of consequences in our daily lives as well as in our approach to social and political organization and to coexistence.

Finally, what we have in common is the fact that both religions are of the book. The Bible and the Koran are respectively our sacred books, our Magna Carta. The similarities that are found in the two books offer starting points and basis to achieve together personal holiness and the common good of society. The difference – to mention only one, the fundamental one – between the book dictated by God to the Prophet Mohammed and the book revealed and inspired by God throughout the history of God with man, gives rise to a different vision of the relationship between the believer and human society with God.

It is important to keep in mind these points of convergence/divergence. They are not only important, but essential for whoever places religion as a basic component that informs one’s individual and social life. They are essential for the believer who through his religiosity intends first of all to worship God and to express individually and socially his fulfilling dependence on God.

They are important for those who study the place and role of religion in society.

“No world peace without religious peace”, was the effective slogan launched years ago by Hans Küng, who in his recent monumental work on *Islam, Past, Present and Future (One World, Oxford, 2007)* goes on to say: “No peace among the nations without peace among the religions. No peace among the religions without dialogue between the religions. No dialogue between the religions without investigation of the foundations of the religions” (xxv).

Cardinal J. Ratzinger, a year before being elected to the throne of Peter, in a conference commemorating the 60th

anniversary of the landing of the allied troops in Normandy, referred to Küng's statement saying: "Modifying a statement of Hans Küng, I would say that without true peace between reason and faith there can't be peace at the world level, because without peace between reason and religion, the very sources of morals and the rule of law dry out". In the same conference, he mentioned some pathologies of religion as well as some pathologies of reason that undermine our efforts in building peaceful coexistence.

In his first message for World Day of Peace, on January 1, 2006, he dealt with two of these pathologies: religious fundamentalism and nihilism. "Looked at closely –said the Pope– they share an erroneous relationship to truth: the nihilist denies the very existence of truth, while the fundamentalist claims to be able to impose it by force. Despite their different origins and cultural backgrounds, both show a dangerous contempt for human beings and human life, and ultimately for God himself. Indeed, this shared tragic outcome results from a distortion of the full truth about God: nihilism denies God's existence and his provident presence in history, while fanatical fundamentalism disfigures his loving and merciful countenance, replacing him with idols made in its own image".

"Only through recognition of the centrality of the person can a common basis for understanding be found, one which enables us to move beyond cultural conflicts and which neutralizes the disruptive power of ideologies", he said to the representatives of the Islamic communities in Germany, during World Youth Day of 2005.

In Regensburg, a little more than a year ago, Benedict XVI called on Christians, Muslims and secularists to promote together a peaceful coexistence and cooperation. As a condition for such a fruitful encounter, he mentioned the respect for others' faith and the use of reason in conjunction with revelation. Reason which purifies faith from any irrational justification of violence, and faith that purifies reason from the tyranny of relativism.

Two months later, meeting with the President of the Religious Affairs Directorate in Turkey, he said: “Christians and Muslims, following their respective religions, point to the truth of the sacred character and dignity of the person. This is the basis of our mutual respect and esteem, this is the basis for cooperation in the service of peace between nations and peoples, the dearest wish of all believers and all people of good will (...) Freedom of religion, institutionally guaranteed and effectively respected in practice, both for individuals and communities, constitutes for all believers the necessary condition for their loyal contribution to the building up of society, in an attitude of authentic service, especially towards the most vulnerable and the very poor” (*Ankara, 28 November 2006*).

The tone for a dialogue that involves the respective religious foundations, as well as their translation and expression on the cultural, social and international level, has been set and taken to heart by a growing number of people of good will. All this augurs well also for the relations between Christians and Muslims and for their contribution to world peace.

Soon after Pope Benedict’s lecture in Regensburg, 38 Muslim religious leaders and academics from different countries and schools of thought, wrote an open letter to the Pope, by which they illustrated the basic tenets of Islam with a view to reaching a mutual understanding. Within months some 60 more members and representatives of Muslim associations co-signed this same message.

That letter, while expressing agreement on some points and disagreement on others contained in the Regensburg lecture, also hinted at the possibility of finding common ground on the love of God and neighbor.

Love of God and neighbor is precisely the theme of a second open letter released less than two months ago and signed, this time, by 138 Muslim religious scholars and leaders. The intent of this letter, entitled *A Common Word between Us and You*, is to outline “the most solid theological foundation possible” for the

understanding and cooperation between Muslims and Christians. Indeed, the letter is addressed in general to the leaders of the Christian Churches and specifically to Pope Benedict XVI; the Ecumenical Patriarch of Constantinople, Bartholomew I; the heads of 19 other Orthodox Churches; the Anglican Archbishop of Canterbury, the Leaders of the Federations and Alliances of Lutheran, Reformed, Methodist and Baptist Churches; and to the Secretary-General of the World Council of Churches.

With the passing of days and weeks, the number of co-signers increases. Up to now the number is around 150. The message draws attention and interest both within the Christian community as well as in the Muslim community.

I would like to cite a passage of an interview that the Libyan theologian, Aref Ali Nayed, the chief spokesperson on behalf of the open letter, gave recently to Catholic News Service. He said, “The dialogue, or rather, set of dialogues, we hope ‘A Common Word’ will initiate are multifaceted, multilayered, multidisciplinary, and multilateral. It is more a set or matrix of polyphonic discourses that are united through their exclusive focus: Loving worship of the One God, and Love of our neighbors. The matrix includes theological, spiritual, scriptural, juridical, and ethical discourses. It is to be conducted in cooperation with a broad range of partners from all active Christian Churches and denominations including the Catholic, Protestant (both traditional and evangelical), and the Orthodox communities. The discourses will be with Church leaders, centers of theological studies, spiritual communities, scriptural reasoning and reading groups, and grassroots organizations. We are very much encouraged by the fact that positive responses have already come in abundance from such a multiplicity of layers of Christian communal life including top Christian leaders, and the world’s top Theology, Divinity, and Islamic Studies centers”.

From all this follows that if Christians and Muslims want to find common ground to build together a livable society of peace and collaboration, they have in common religious elements, but, in

particular, they have to start from their own common “submission to God, who is the source and judge of all that is good, and the sense that the other is one’s equal” (*Benedict XVI to members of the International Theological Commission, October 5, 2007*).

All the world’s major religions have the Golden Rule among their ethical and moral foundations. Jesus taught his disciples, “treat others the way you would have them treat you” (Mt 7:12). An Hadith, that is an oral tradition relating to the words and deeds of the Prophet Muhammed, states: “No one of you is a believer until he wishes for his brother that which he desires for himself”. Every religion, then, should motivate and substantiate this Golden Rule, with its proper spiritual patrimony.

Both Christianity and Islam, when speaking of mutual love, use the terms “your brother” and “your neighbor”.

Jesus indicated clearly that the word “brother” goes beyond kinship ties, ethnic and even religious affiliation. When He wanted to explain the significance of the word “neighbor,” He told the parable of the Good Samaritan. A Samaritan who came to the help of a Jew. Now, there was no good blood between Samaritans and Jews, in fact there existed hostility and prejudice. And yet, a Samaritan made himself “neighbor” to a Jew.

I don’t have the competence to tell you what is the breadth of the terms “brother” and “neighbor” in the sacred texts of Islam. The letter, “A Common Word,” mentions the two terms, but does not give details. However, this will be a fundamental point for dialogue on principles and dialogue on daily living and coexistence. In fact, if Christians and Muslims rediscover together the profundity and fruitfulness of the messages that their respective texts contain on the topic of the love of God and neighbor, a neighbor who embraces humanity in all its components, without exception and discrimination, we will assist in shedding light and good will to resolve many questions concerning reciprocal respect and collaboration for peace.

On this particular background I think it important to mention some of the most delicate but also effective components of this dialogue.

First of all, the real obstacle to religious peaceful coexistence and cooperation comes too often not from the believers' claim of having the truth, of representing a religion and faith in the true God, rather from their approach to this conviction. An approach that becomes exclusive in terms of relations and can even resort to some kind of force and violence in order to fight, submit or exclude those who do not embrace the same truth.

Having a precise identity and not to conceal it is an asset for dialogue. Dialogue is possible and fruitful only among those who know and love their own identity. The Apostle Peter, writing to the early Christian community in Asia Minor exhorted them: "should anyone ask you the reason for this hope of yours, be ever ready to reply, but speak gently and respectfully" (1 Pt 3:15-16).

My second remark refers to the particular climate which has triggered a renewed interest in Christian/Islamic dialogue, namely, the spread of terrorism. It's not enough for any religion to say: we have nothing to do with extremists, with fundamentalists; or, extremists do not speak for our respective religion. Indeed extremists and fundamentalists do make reference to the same sacred texts; they even dare to portray themselves as the faithful interpreters and keepers of those sacred texts. Rather, we have to engage those who try to justify their unjustifiable acts of violence and multiform violations of human rights using those same texts and proclaim it loud and clear that those texts do not lend themselves to a reading which lead to violence.

Those who really want to engage in a fruitful dialogue cannot leave anyone in their respective communities go unchallenged on this point.

This task may seem somewhat easier for the Catholic Church which is lead by the Pope. It will take too long to list the firm and forceful appeals made by both Pope John Paul II and Benedict XVI, on their clear statements that no one can presume to kill or

disrespect human beings in the name of God. The same appeal is being upheld and propagated by leaders of the different local catholic communities. Muslims do not have a central authority. However, they do have religious leaders. In Cologne, Pope Benedict appealed to them: “You guide Muslim believers and train them in the Islamic faith. Teaching is the vehicle through which ideas and convictions are transmitted. Words are highly influential in the education of the mind” (*August 20, 2005*).

The recent open letter, *A Common Word between Us and You*, was generally viewed, for all intents and purpose, as an agreed statement backed by the highest number ever reached by Muslim religious leaders.

Moreover, I think that a serious and productive dialogue cannot avoid another basic issue. We have to be able to say that the God whom we believe in is consistent in maintaining and asking us to hold on to the conviction that all human life is sacred and endowed with an inherent dignity, without exception. Otherwise, we would keep the door open to loopholes, to exceptions which belittle our common belief and frustrate our efforts towards coexistence and cooperation.

Certainly, in order to make the love of God and neighbor our "common word", we are called to deepen our dialogue and our daily experience so as to make the content and the extension of the word "love" truly common and mutually understood, shared and experienced.

The moment we anchor love to its divine source -what I think is the correct approach to get our dialogue fruitfully under way- we are in the presence of not only a divine commandment but also an example given by God. Hence, our dialogue goes far beyond the principles of natural ethics and becomes theologically and spiritually grounded.

In any case, love entails the recognition that the sacredness of life and human dignity apply universally and without exception nor discrimination to every human being and to every people and society.

This is a much broader issue than an item specific to the Christian/Islamic encounter and dialogue. The question has resurfaced of how there can be universal rights in view of the diversity among cultures. Some maintain that all rights are culturally relative; others claim that universal rights are just instruments of a given cultural imperialism; and some believe the gulf between those two positions cannot be bridged.

The principal framers of the Universal Declaration on Human Rights worked from the premise that certain values are so fundamental that they can find support in the moral and philosophical traditions of cultures. For that reason, such universal principles or basic human rights are undeniable. In their essential core they have to be universally recognized and must be operative *erga omnes*.

To maintain the idea that basic rights are universal, however, does not require one to reject a legitimate pluralism in their implementation. Quite the contrary - for pluralism is the only way to move beyond the sterile relativism-imperialism debate. The framework the drafters of the Universal Declaration fashioned is flexible enough to allow for differences in emphasis and implementation, but not so malleable as to permit any basic human right to be completely eclipsed or unnecessarily subordinated for the sake of other rights.

Every year the Pontifical Council for Interreligious dialogue addresses a message to the Muslims on the occasion of the feast of `Id al-Fitr. This year the text developed some considerations on the universal right to religious freedom. A couple of weeks ago, the previously mentioned Mr. Aref Ali Nayed, replied with a *Muslim's message of thanks for the Vatican's message for the end of Ramadan*. I would like to quote some of his promising remarks: "The complex issues of balancing human rights, human duties, and communal integrity and wellbeing are in need of urgent studies and discussions. Accumulated and normative juridical rulings, from different ages and different circumstances must be addressed, engaged, and updated. Such a task demands tremendous work and

fresh juridical striving by all concerned. Dialogue is key to this important work as well. However, these issues are faced by all religious traditions, and there is an urgent need, for all of us, to reconcile revelation-based affirmations of rights and duties with the more recent, but popular, affirmation that come from the notions and vocabularies of the French Revolution and British Liberal teachings. Indeed, we are all called upon to retrieve, rehabilitate, and rearticulate the true compassionate teachings of our traditions regarding the divinely ordained value of human personhood and its associated rights, duties, and freedoms. We need to work on these issues with not only religious colleagues, but also with philosophers and jurists who invoke ‘natural’ grounds for personhood and rights” (*Islamica Magazine, Issue 20*).

I suppose I was invited to speak this evening on Catholicism and Islam because of my role at the United Nations.

People in New York, half seriously and half jokingly, like to refer to the UN as Turtle Bay. Turtle Bay is named after an actual bay that was filled in and is now the site of the United Nations Headquarters.

I like to think that this nickname is purely coincidental! Sometimes the work at the UN moves at a turtle’s pace. But in point of actual fact, the United Nations hosts many civil servants who have at heart the culture of peace, the peaceful coexistence and fruitful collaboration with billions of people, belonging to diverse cultures, traditions, and religions.

It is from this perspective, namely, the UN approach to the place and role of religions in society, that I would like to add a comment relating to our theme.

First of all, it has been noted that cultural fragmentation is a human and historical phenomenon that dates as far back to the biblical account of the Tower of Babel. Nevertheless, for a number of reasons and events, it is particularly evident today. The air that one breathes daily at the United Nations is often polluted with national interests that impedes a decision not only upon challenges

and current priorities, such as security, peace and development, but directly at times on smaller things.

There is an ever growing opinion, even if it is difficult to accept, that the climate of distrust, of fear and threat, that exists between *The West and The Rest* –as Roger Scruton puts it in his insightful book by the same title- is due more to non-existent relations or to reluctant will to understand beyond the proper cultural or religious schemes, than to real and seemingly insurmountable cultural and religious differences. It is due to wrong patterns of relations, based mainly on arrogance, challenges and reciprocal malfeasance; and also to literature, interpretations and experience of respective cultural and religious codices, that are exclusive rather than inclusive.

For years religion was taboo at the UN. As a matter of fact, the UN Charter does not mention religion other than in the technical expression, “respect for human rights and for fundamental freedoms for all without distinction as to race, sex, language, or religion”. Its goals are peace and wellbeing for all, to be attained by means of cooperation and international law.

Suddenly, within the past two years, religion has erupted on the scene at the UN. We speak much of encounter or even dialogue among religions and civilizations.

The UN dedicated the year 2001, to dialogue among civilizations. Two years ago, at the initiative of Turkey and Spain, the UN launched a new formula: the Alliance of Civilizations. In the meantime, the Philippines, Pakistan and other countries recently set up a Tripartite Forum on interreligious dialogue and cooperation for peace.

I think we have to make sure that we make good use of this new interest. By that I mean, religion has the greatest potential for being a part of the solution when it is treated as such. The slightest manipulation for other interests would result in a messier state of world affairs.

What we would do well to do, I think, is threefold.

First, to allow or even encourage religion and religions to join the wide spectrum of agents of peace and builders of peaceful coexistence. Religions are better understood as part of the solution than part of the problem, because they have the role and the power to sustain hope and promote engagement and action for the common good not only now but for the future as well.

Second, to allow them and encourage them to give this important contribution on their own terms.

Raymond Helmick S.J., who teaches conflict resolution at Boston College, wrote an interesting study entitled: *Does religion fuel or heal in conflicts?* (in *Forgiveness and Reconciliation*, by R. Helmick-R. Petersen, Templeton Foundation Press, 2001). I found it interesting because he gets to the very core of the problem. It is not that religion has too often proven a negative factor – though this is true – rather, one ought not look to religion for purposes other than its own. In other words, religious leaders and believers have an important contribution to make to the process of conflict prevention and resolution, not in the specific terms of mediation, resolution, or prevention, as these are intended in the international juridical instruments, but in their own terms. ‘Their own terms’ stands for what we call the *Golden Rule* – do unto others what you would like to have done unto you. This is the precondition of every encounter, of every type of dialogue and cooperation. And it stems from recognizing and promoting the human dignity of every human being, independent from his or her religious affiliation. I think that the dialogue we have to establish with the Islamic community is not a matter of reconciling our theological tenets. Rather, it’s a matter of agreeing on the human dignity of every person, created in the image and likeness of God, which long precedes one’s religious affiliation. From that point on, we can talk to each other and cooperate for the common good.

Third, we have to be very careful to avoid undue and dangerous interferences. In fact, there is a particular type of interreligious dialogue where religious representatives and their constituents engage in discussion on the theological and spiritual

tenets of their respective religions and exchange positive experiences with a view to promoting mutual understanding and respect among all. This type of interreligious dialogue requires that it be conducted in a full climate of faith and in a spirit of dependence on God that is characteristic of many religious beliefs. In a word, it has to be engaged in by believers whose primary interest is fomenting good personal and communal relations with God followed by international coexistence. Since this type of interreligious dialogue does not appear to be part of any international organization's Charter, it is, therefore, better left to religious experts and appropriate representatives of religions.

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