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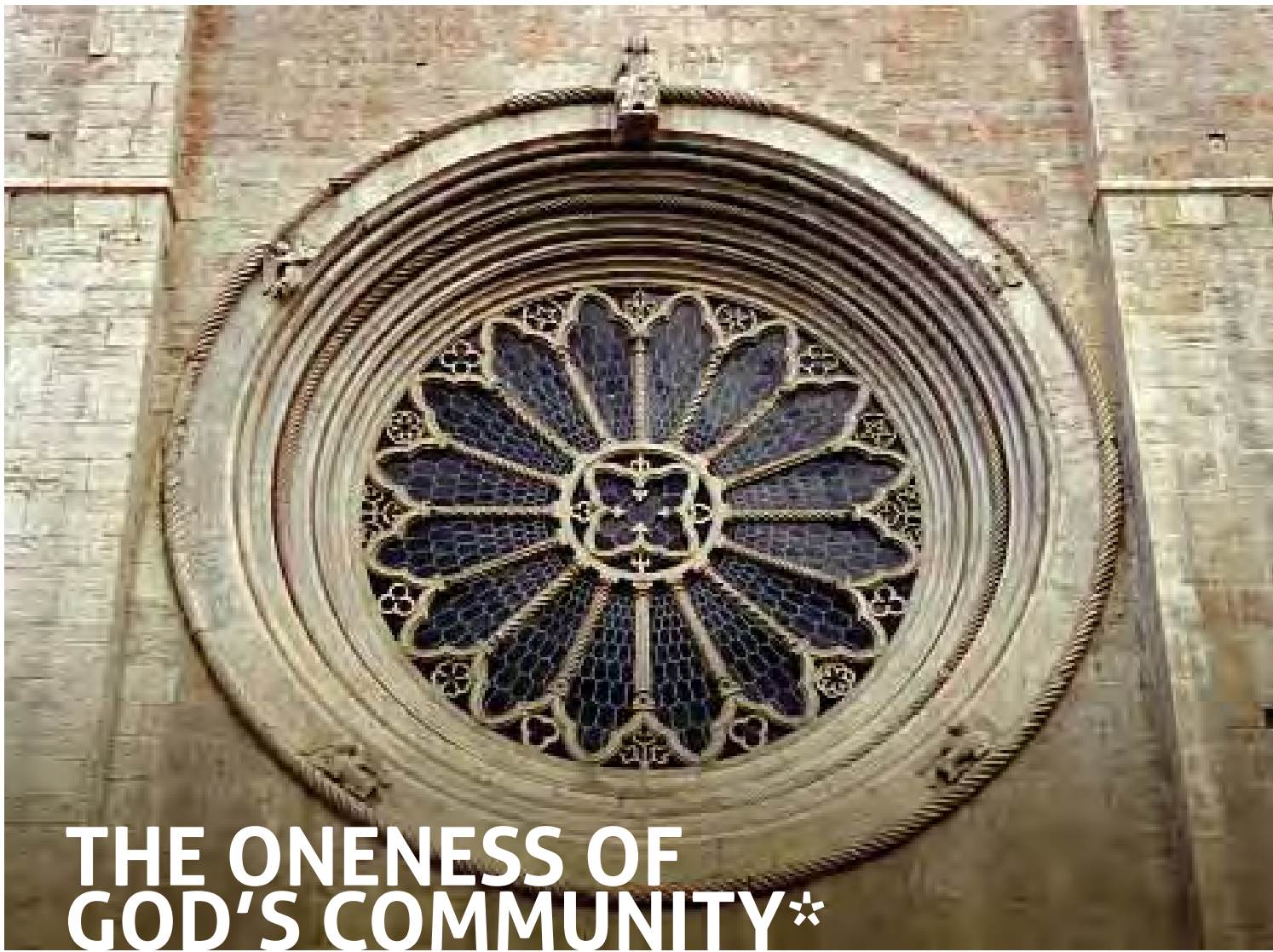
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THE ONENESS OF GOD'S COMMUNITY*

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Why is Abraham considered to be our common father? It is because our Lord told him: "Leave your country and your kinsfolk and your father's house for the land which I will show you" (Genesis 12:1). Faith is the departure from man-made idols to the spiritual abode in which you settle to behold the face of God who fashions you at will. Faith is always an exodus, that is to say a leaving behind of what you were immersed in your terrestrial world, so that you may receive what you hope to be bestowed on you from on high.

In the Semitic orbit Abraham appears as the first monotheist in history. This is confirmed by the Qur'ān in which

Abraham avers: "Verily, I have turned my face toward Him who created the heavens and the earth, and I am not of the polytheists" (Surat al-Anaam, 79).

The designation "the community of Abraham" may be taken as a reference to a unified religious group anteceding Moses. This would cohere with Paul's affirmation in the letter to the Romans and the Galatians that it is Abraham who is the bearer of the faith, vindicating him prior to the descent of the Ten Commandments to Moses.

Yet the term "the religious community of Abraham" in fact carries wider implications than to be confined to the followers of the Qur'ān. After all, the latter ascribes to Joseph in the words:



“And I followed the religion of my fathers Abraham and Isaac and Jacob” (Surat al-Yusuf 38). All these men came before the message of Muhammad. The expression “Community of Abraham” appeared as a reference to the Abrahamian family lineage in the work of the orientalist Louis Massignon¹, and became known as such in Western

circles several for decades even though it refers to the Jews, Christians and Muslims alike.

Affirming the Abrahamic pedigree then is nothing other than an affirmation of the proclamation of faith in one God. And God’s most fundamental truth is nothing other than his oneness which prompts me to employ the expression of “the different monotheistic religions” whose perspective differs from the religions of the Far East. To be sure, to speak of the kinship between these three faiths implies the existence of distinctions without which these religions would have merged completely. A concise study of these religions, their respective temperament and singularity is bound to reveal differences, underscoring that each faith has abolished what was before it even as it has claimed to complete its predecessor. In broaching the issue of religious beliefs, there is no escape from agreement, differentiation and clash between them. And yet, by ways of a disciplined, religious, existential, spiritual and methodological taming of your ego you may be able to arrive at the discovery of mutual [confessional] affinities. You may then interpret these seeking to approach and embrace the other so that you will find yourself standing firmly on your ground and on the ground of the other with a complete love. This does not at all push you into the pitfall of relativism in which the faiths are mixed and confounded, nor does it come at the expense of your integrity or make you succumb to a suspicious lassitude.

We shall first seek to fathom the contours of this kinship in each of the three conceptions of the Divinity. In the Old Testament, the first historical entreaty to God, the testimony to Him is

as follows: "Hear o Israel, the Lord our God is one" which likewise appears in Mark 12:29-30 and is reiterated a second time in Deuteronomy 6:4. This is not to mean that He is a God of the Hebrew tribes. Rather, it is the idea of a people unified [in God]. The author of the psalms longs that all and sundry give Him praise: "kings of the earth and all people, princes and all the rulers of the earth" (Psalms 148:11). This is echoed by the Qur'ān's assertion that He is the God of the Two Worlds [i.e. of the entire universe].

This universal supremacy and unity of God is underscored by Christianity: "There is no God but the one God" (Corinthians 8:4). This verse corresponds verbatim to the first profession in Islam (with the addition of the adjective "the one" in Paul). And so too the Creed of the Nicean Council of 325 begins with the invocation: "I believe in the one God." It is a well-known fact that the first Christian martyrs were killed by the Roman Empire for their belief in the one God at a time in which the constitution of the Empire mandated the worship of the Caesar [as a deity].

There is no room to cast any doubt on the monotheism of Christianity despite its association with the trinity. The Church, in its proclamation of the trinity, fully recognizes that there are no three gods but one Divine essence. It views the three personages [of the trinity] from the perspective of God's unity. Indeed, the insistence on the unity of God is salient throughout the New Testament, the teachings of the ecumenical councils and the patristic fathers as well as their successors and followers. In fact, the Qur'ān itself does not contain a single phrase charging the Christians with polytheism. Those that are

branded with heresy – the "Nasara" or "Nazarenes" – are not confounded by the Qur'ān with the Christians who did not call themselves "Nazarenes."

Just who then are these Nazarenes to whom the Qur'ān attributes these beliefs? Did they stem from the Church whose creeds were formulated prior to Muhammad's mission, or are they a different phenomenon altogether? It is clear that they are not identical with the Christians of Najran. Nor does the biography of the Prophet indicate that he was acquainted with the other Christian communities of the Arabian peninsula which excavations in Qatar and Bahrain have revealed.

Muhammad was an adolescent on a caravan going to Damascus when he was received by the monk Buhayra in the Syrian town of Busra. But this encounter cannot be taken as evidence that Muhammad was influenced by Buhayra. The Qur'ān refuted the accusation of the Prophet having been influenced by human teaching: "We know well that they claim that a man has taught him. The tongue of those who utter such apostasy is garbled and foreign, while his speech is pure and lucid Arabic" (al-Nahl 103).

Yet there is no doubt that the Prophet did entertain close relations with Waraqa Ibn Nawfal, the cousin of his wife Khadija. Even so, there is nothing to indicate that the latter was a Christian priest residing in Mecca. In my estimate he was a Nazarene. These were a community of pre-Islamic monotheists who did not belong to any recognized

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Christian church and themselves were divided. What is more, we do not find any organized Christian community in the Hejaz in the era of the Prophet as Fr. Henri Lammens has demonstrated in

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a decisive way in his famous monograph on Mecca prior to the Hijra.² Perhaps more significant than all this is that the ecclesiastic history of the Church does not know of any Christian structure in the entire Arabian Peninsula other than in Yemen. Nor did the Church enjoy any civilizational relation with the Hijaz other than what is hinted at in terms of the image of the Quraysh travelling in “seasons of winter and summer.”

Thus we are constrained to acknowledge - without accepting all its arguments, entire thesis and dearth of sources - some of the truth of what Professor Haddad has claimed in his book “The Qur’ān: A Nazarene Gospel.” For the aforementioned Nazarenes were but a splinter group of a Judaized

Christianity.

What makes this thesis more plausible is that the Gospel of the Judaized Ebionites [“the poor ones”] was well-known in Church history and in the lost book on the Elkasaites which was disseminated east of the Jordan river in the fourth century. The significance of this group is that they were expecting the mission of a new prophet.

All this is alien to the traditional forms of Christianity which we know from the Najran or the Ghassanides and the ongoing debate in the Arabian Peninsula. None of these Christian groups appear in the biography of the Prophet except for the invitation to a mutual imprecation (Mubahala) by the Prophet with the Christians of Najran which the latter rejected (3: 61)³.

Furthermore, how is it conceivable to designate the Christians as Nazarenes when their book/scripture says: “It was in Antioch that the disciples for the first time were named ‘Christians’” (Acts 11:26). The term “Nazarenes” was first used for the followers of Jesus the Nazarene at the dawn of Christianity in the Fertile Crescent even though



this designation fell completely out of use by the seventh century. So how did the Nazarenes become the Arabic "Nasara" and in which of the Aramaic dialects did it find its way into the covers of the Qur'ān?

If our hypothesis is true then all of the Christians of the entire period between the descent of the Qur'ān down to our present day are not the point of reference when the Qur'ān speaks about the "Nasara," except as regards the few point of overlap. And this holds true for every verse which contains such declarations. It is not permissible to argue in reverse, i.e. "you Christians say this and that because the Qur'ān says this about you." Rather, the correct inference must be the other way: "If you Christians claim this and that, you are the intended objects of the Qur'ān." The premise cannot simply be: "The Nasara are the Christians." This was the claim of the exegetes who wrote in the lands of the Islamic conquest; they got to know the Christians and reached the conclusion that they must be one and the same with the Nasara mentioned in the revelation.

And when we come across the line: "They say that the Most Merciful has begotten a son" (Mariam 88) and similar verses, we cannot understand this as a repudiation of the Christianity which we know and which equally rejects such begetting, that is to say the elevation of a created being to the status of a deity. The heresy that Christ was elevated to that divine status was known as adoptionism. It was also propounded by the Gnostics who went so far as to say that God made Christ his son during the baptism in the river Jordan. If the Surat al-Ikhlās states that God is not begotten and does not beget, so too Christian-

ity emphasizes that the Divine essence is indivisible and neither begets nor is begotten by another. If we wanted to understand the meaning of divine birth and begetting by God according to the Qur'ān, would it not be closer to the scriptural context to say that what the Qur'ān rejects is angels being daughters of the God: "And they ascribe to God almighty daughters as they wish" (al-Nahl 57). Al-Jalalayn's exegesis of this verse reads: "He does not beget due to the absence of anything like Him, and He is not begotten, due to the impossibility of anything acting upon Him."⁴ The text therefore does allude to declaring the Christians heretics due to their belief in the pre-eternal filiation of Christ to God. The Surat al-Ikhlās does not point to this since the transcendence of [Christ's] birth is tantamount to the transcendence of God above any sexual element. This is precisely the standpoint of Christianity. It is also supported by verse 101 of the Surat al-Anaam: "How can He have a child if He has no consort?" This is decidedly not the concept of Christ's filiation to God amongst Christians who completely reject out of hand the notion of a transcendent and wholly ineffable God having any physical relation with Mary. Rather, the filiation of Christ and God refers to the eternal relationship between God and the Word prior to the latter having taken on a human form. This unique relationship is even alluded to in the Qur'ān which refers to Jesus alone amongst all prophets as the "Word of God" (3:46; 4:171).

It is regrettable that the Christian theology has not yet been arabized, i.e. it has not faced the Islamic consciousness in a dialogical approach to make itself clear and to seek clarification of Islam as well.

There is a unique aspect in which the Quran and the Gospels find themselves in accord, and that is the status of veneration according to Mary in the two books which creates as a common bond between Christians and Muslims.

The Qur'ān's stance on the trinity is governed by the verse: "O Jesus, son of Mary! Did thou say to people: 'take me and my mother as gods besides God?'" (al-Maida 211). This verse to my mind provides us with an image of the astral trinity as it was current amongst the Arabs worshiping a greater deity. In the Yemen it was the moon which gave birth to the radiating sun so that amongst the polytheistic Arabs there were two small gods below the supreme deity. Upon closer examination, we find the prototype of a grand trinity, but the supreme deity here is Baal Shamin, the god of the Heavens. It was sex which governed the relationship of all the male and female deities in the ancient civilizations of the Middle East, Greece and Rome.

It is the particular trinity ascribed to the Nazarenes which is the reference point for Maida 211 according to Jalalayn⁵. And when the verse appears: "Do not say there are three deities. Desist! It is better for you. God almighty is only One (Surat al-Nisa, 171-2)," it becomes evident that the trinity here pertains to Jesus, Mary and God as it does in Surat al-Nisa 73: "They disbelieve who say that God is one of three in a trinity." Jalalayn's commentary is unequivocal: "The trinity here refers to deities, one of which being God, the other Jesus and the third his mother Mary. 'They' refers to the Nasara."

The Imam Bidawi has purported that the Christians worship Jesus and his mother as two deities as if they were worshiping God himself, thereby com-

mitting blasphemy. It is clear that he mistook Mary's intercession, and her supplication to God. For this honouring of Mary and her intercessory role never, not once, amounted to her Divinity or worship as God in the Church. As for the Imam Razi, he interprets the verse by claiming that the *Nasara* took the creator of the miracles of Jesus and Mary to be Jesus and Mary themselves, and that God had not created them, and that Mary and Jesus were therefore considered as two deities. Clearly such talk contradicts what we find amongst the Christians, for Christ never ascribed to himself the power to perform deeds independently from God. "I cannot do anything of myself" (John 5:30). It is equally clear that the Church does not ascribe to Mary and the saints any autonomous power apart from God. "Two deities without God" remains a phrase of the Arab apostasy [erroneously] affixed to the Christian trinity.

We only know of one Arabic faction, mentioned by Saint Epiphanius the Cypriot in the fourth century, which offered devotions to Mary.⁶ Cognizant of the considerable mystery which still surrounds this sect, we condemn its divinization of Mary. And yet after this period, that is to say between the fourth century and the beginning of Islam we do not find evidence substantiating the continuation of this movement in the Arab peninsula. Be that as it may, the fact remains that the Church did not know anything about such matters; the trinity which the Qur'ān repudiates is simply not the Trinity of the Church.

Regular Christians who know the basics of their faith will not feel targeted in the verses on the Nasara which we have cited here. It is natural that Christianity conceives of itself as the fi-

nal religion even as Judaism saw itself as final, yet this is on the creedal level. In the official Christian sources and references I do not find a single Christian text confronting Islam.

The intellectual encounter will be facilitated if you seek to comprehend Islam from its sources and Christianity from its own references. Each religion should speak for itself. Yet this necessitates a historical reading of the holy scriptures since each and every revelation emanates within a set of historical circumstances which illuminate understanding. What we lack is that Christianity clarifies its core pillars in a plain, lucid Arabic vocabulary, that is to say that it discloses itself by itself and speaks to the Arab mind rather than merely speaking to its own flock in the terminology it inherited from the Greeks and Syriacs. It is regrettable that the Christian theology has not yet been arabized, i.e. it has not faced the Islamic consciousness in a dialogical approach to make itself clear and to seek clarification of Islam as well.

And it is this clarification of one's own stance, and the quest to gain a more accurate image of the other, which are the fundamental premises for a free and unperturbed meeting of minds.

What remains to be discussed is the name which pervades the scriptures of both religions more than any other, some 1052 times in the Qur'ān: the name of God. It is He upon whom rests the entire body of religious thought. It is He who is the mainspring of monotheism in Judaism, Christianity and Islam alike. And there is the matter of the Divine attributes. Whatever the debate may be surrounding the 99 beautiful names of God, we can generally say

that the followers of these religions view God from one perspective, whether they believe that they are His people or his family (ummah) or his sons or his servants. And it is from this vantage point that they regard their faith and their subservience to God.

The paramount importance of the pervasive supremacy of God in the scriptures of the monotheistic religions calls for a review of the beautiful names whose implications share much in common. Furthermore, there must be a juxtaposition of the Christian axiom that "God is Love" with the name of "God the Merciful" in the Qur'ān so that we can properly assess the development of the theological conception of God in both religions. For the notion of "God is Love" appears in a passage rich of connotations in John's first letter:

"So let us love one another dear friends: for love is of God; and every one that loves is born of God, and knows God. He that does

not love does not know God; for God is love. And God manifested his love towards us by sending his only, that we might live through him" (1 John 4:7-9).

It becomes clear in this passage that God moves to-

wards humanity through his love for it. They, in turn, receive this love and love him and each other in return. And yet it is not sufficient to consider the expression "God is Love" as a mere description of God. Rather, God essentially makes love his own nature, it is His innermost being, and, consequentially, the reason for his continual, dynamic

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activity so that each believer receives God's power which enables him to love.

Perhaps "the Compassionate" in the Qur'ān is the closest analogue to the New Testament's description of God as the lover. It denotes the abundance of compassion, and the Arabic inflection (al-Rahman) accentuates the surfeit of mercy while the similar attribute of the merciful (al-Rahim) connotes permanence and staying power⁷.

Tabari writes in his commentary on the Qur'ān: "The scope of the compassionate (al-Rahman) is wider than that of the merciful (al-Rahim). It is customary to gradually ascend from the lower to the higher, because the compassionate (al-Rahman) encompasses the fruits of divine bounty and its roots, while its peripheral extensions to the merciful are like a completion of what

has been refined and soothed by him.⁸ We thus do not find the interpreters of the Qur'ān making any great distinction between the two forms compassion and mercifulness; both refer to the relationship between God and man and creation. By contrast, the love referred to in the Epistle of John, even if the author connects it to man in terms of its application, he also establishes it as the nature of God rather than merely one of his attributes. The depth of Christian theology allows for this.

The question then remains: are the Qur'ānic notions of mercifulness and compassion synonyms of the evangelical notion of love? We need to more closely examine the Qur'ānic verses dealing with compassion (al-Rahman) in order to determine whether the two concepts of compassion and love have the same sig-

nificance or similar implications.

There is a unique aspect in which the Qur'ān and the Gospels find themselves in accord, and that is the status of veneration accorded to Mary in the two books which creates as a common bond between Christians and Muslims. It is a bond which softens the hearts and discloses an astonishing affinity between the devotees. For example, if we read the verses of the Sura Mariam dealing with Zakharias and his son John – who corresponds to John the Baptist in the Gospel of Luke – we find an astounding similarity. Likewise, you find a remarkable similarity between the people of Imran and the Gospel of Luke which ascribes to Gabriel the words: "Rejoice! [or Peace be upon you!] Ye who is full of grace, the Lord is with thee" (Luke 1:28) whereupon is added: "Blessed art thou amongst women" (Luke 1:42). These then are two verses which correspond to the Qur'ānic verses in Sura al-Umran 24: "And thus the angel said: God has selected you Mary and your chastity, and He has selected you amongst all the women of the world." The Christian belief in the immaculate chastity of the Virgin reverberates in Mary's pronouncement in the Qur'ān: "Far be it that I bear a child while no man has touched me" (al-Imran, 54). The sanctification and the glorification of Mary in both verses cannot be impugned.

Besides the creeds in God and his unity we must look at the Beautiful Names to highlight in their gamut the kinship between Islam and Christianity. I will confine myself here to only a few quick deliberations of the Lord's relationship to man. Amongst the most important of these encounters is kindness. In point of fact, the issues of kindness and agreement and serenity all overlap.

They all usher from the commandment which is a work of God as he charges his servants to assume their duty. The Muatazalites held that he who is charged to observe the commandments, by being kind to God, thereby obeys Him. There is a concordance between the divine command, on the one side, and the kindness which God dispenses on man so that he may act virtuously, on the other.

We may equate the notion of kindness in Islam with the notion of grace in Christianity, the indispensable divine blessing without man cannot assume any virtuous task. In the Christian formulation, the person who accepts the Divine blessing becomes sanctified by God and moves towards Him. The core of this notion of grace in Christianity is akin to the state of contentment and satisfaction in the Islamic terminology: the self on whom God has dispensed his favour and blessing is the calm, serene self.

Even in the commiseration of God with man the favour returns to God, its initiator. For He is the beginning and the end, the Alpha and the Omega.

Man is the recipient, yet in Islam he is an active, free subject because he is a responsible agent. After a long disputation between the theologians and the philosophers in Islam, the case for freedom won out in Islamic society. This too is a common juncture shared with Christianity where John Calvin propounded the thesis of the double predestination in determining man's fate in heaven or hell until this aspect of this confession came to an end in the modern age. In

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all denominations of Christianity, there must be a cooperation between Divine grace and human effort are needed for salvation to come to pass. And if the particular notion of a "cooperation between God and man" may not be customary in Islam, it remains the case that the individual Muslim contributes to his salvation and may not perish in the afterlife, except for the unbelievers.

I am of the conviction that the discussion of the true relationship between God and man remains one of the most important points in Islamic-Christian dialogue.

Is there a permanent relationship between the Being which we call God and the other, human being? Can we conceive of an intimate conjunction between the Creator and the created

in a reasonable way without being idolatrous? Needless to say, all this requires a discussion of belief first and foremost.

The relation of man to man is simpler when viewed from a contractual perspective. Even so, the spiritual interconnectedness of man is a result of man's

God-inspired regard for his fellow man.

In an exceptional testament to dialogue, 138 Muslim scholars from all over the world sent a declaration of reconciliation to the spiritual heads of the Christian churches on the occasion of Ramadan in the year of 1428 h. or October 13, 2007. The importance lies in the affirmation of these scholars that Christians are monotheists; they thereby laid the basis for the famous

Qur'anic call to come to a common word of agreement.

The significance of this document was not the concern for any scientific approach but rather the quest for peace in the world based on the presumption that a recognition of kindred beliefs would aid the cause of peace.

The drafters of the document saw that the common ground of Islam and Christianity lay in man's love for God and his love for his neighbour. It is such love which is affirmed in one of the first verses to descend in the Qur'an: "Mention the name of your Lord and devote yourself to Him with full devotion" (al-Mazmal 73:8).

The undersigning scholars further expound on this dialectic of love in Christianity. When a legal expert asked the lord in order to trap him: "Oh teacher, which commandment is the greatest in the law?" And Christ answered him: "That you love your Lord with all your heart and all your being and all your thought. This is the first and greatest of the commandments. And the second is like it: Love your neighbour as yourself. On these two commandments rest all the law and prophets." (Mathew 22: 40-43).

Further shedding light on the common ground, the signatories of this letter add: "As Muslims we tell the Christians that we are not against you, and that Islam is not opposed to them." After this creedal exposition and the affirmation of reconciliation on a global level, the thinkers issue a call for a burying of hatred and dissension so that mutual respect, equity, justice and cordial friendship may prevail instead.

The most important element in this document is the appeal to the communities of these two religions to live

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together without resorting to the habitual mode of interaction between them under the headings of "majority" and "minority."

The document does not resolve all issues but it does, if pursued, pave the way for a new seriousness of correspondence which could, in turn, prepare for an uprooting of the roots of division and mutual animosity. This fresh atmosphere in turn could enter us into a face to face encounter with the powers that be so that we might recognize kinship in matters in which we share a lot in common and which we tended to ignore in the days of confrontational discourse which could even reach the degree of verbal violence.

Two things promise to make the mutual encounter of Christians and Muslims living at a level of depth a genuine one:

1. Each party finds a lot to approve and appreciate amongst the other, be it in word or deed, be it consciously or unconsciously.

2. Terms enter from other languages along with their associated concepts. To take an example, the Christians of this country rejoice in the advent of Ramadan while the spiritual heads will understand the Fast of Ramadan as the equivalent to their Fasting, both being an effort to approach God and flatter Him.

Many Christians derive pleasure from the Muslim call to prayer and the recitation of the Qur'an. There is at least one salient emanation of a civilized Islam which is comparable to a parallel Christian evolution of customs and refinement.

Yet there are things which are more valuable than tradition. In the countries of the Levant, you will find amongst the

Muslims a genuine relishing of the concept of love as it is manifested in the Gospel and as it is borrowed from the relationship between man and woman as you will find greater respect shown to monks and nuns due to the long experience of living side-by-side (and not just on account of the Qur'anic text).

This is reflected in thought and discourse. Without any undue generalization and simplification, it may be said that intellectual probity and the appreciation of the values of the other are in the process of spreading, especially amidst those who live their faith and have not fallen under the spell of syncretism which has come to dominate quarters of the naïve, the aware and the extremist alike.

Intimate knowledge of the texts does not always lead to love of the other. For love is a divine grace which often can dispense with a lot of knowledge. Insofar as the Christians are Arabs, Islamic civilization reveals to them something of their mental constitution so that they devote themselves to its study in their school curricula and colleges of the social sciences. It is regrettable that Christianity in the Middle East does not enter the curricula of any school or university so that the Muslims might in turn catch something of it from their foreign perusals.

In conversations amongst intellectual circles, Christians do not necessarily appear superior in their command of foreign languages. In the francophone summits Muslims are no less prominent than Christians. I happen to know that Salah Stetie, a Muslim, dictated the Lebanese during the universal francophone summit. The Lebanese have come to reach full parity intellectually in literature and the sciences, including spe-

cialized fields of medicine. Moreover, due to demographic intermixing, we often find in Lebanon an overwhelming Muslim majority in Christian secondary schools without there being the slightest trace of evangelization. Nor is this phenomenon new to the Near East.

The foreign missionaries who undertook the schooling were not intent on summoning the Muslim students to Christianity but rather aimed at the dissemination of knowledge which they considered as their Christian commitment to serve man whatever his colour or creed.

We are left to address what is hidden beneath the text and the talk. In general, you will not find many traces of the religious debate, or even the mere talk which reveals differences, in the ordinary life of society. Many a time this person will refer to that book to discover the shared vision and to supplicate the face of God. The fundamental divergences go unmentioned and are eschewed for the sake of the mildness of the meeting. This may be on account of some timid diffidence at times, but most of the times it is on account of sheer ignorance of the other and his belief.

What remains is the unifying invocation of God along with the premonition that our counterpart too is seeking God's goodness and lives through and from it. Many times one is humbled and touched when one espies the radiant glow on the face of the other, and each person opens to the other, taken by the momentum of love which renders the religious institution redundant. The formation of this spiritual union in communal gatherings is the condition for peace in them.

Politics corrupts everything in this

virtuous journey in that it fashions a path of dichotomy. This is what happens in the sectarian clash of politics. Despite this, a friend may continue to exchange affection with his friend in personal discussion, whilst they close in on themselves when it comes to political talk. To be sure, this phenomenon is destined to disappear as sects intermingle and ideologies shared by members of different sects arise and compete with each other. Likewise, authoritarian systems may put a lid on sectarianism.

This is what may be observed in the Arab East insofar as Christians and Muslims partake of one Arabic culture and set of customs, having been trained by time to live side by side.

It is not so when disagreements arise from racial difference. The Muslim minority in the West for instance needs time until the reciprocal acculturation between them and the indigenous French population expands further. This has little to do with a religious problematic in a country in which a great many have distanced themselves from their erstwhile faith; rather, it is an ethnic problem revolving around the lingering doubt that the alien brown or black person is capable of integrating into French society. You cannot seek to insert yourself into a society in a few years. And if you venture to do so, you want to preserve the identity of your ancestors, i.e. you want to remain a civilized Muslim while becoming a civilized French citizen while pondering the points of divergence between the two identities. Often enough, globalization and cultural individualism appear at odds with one another, and perhaps you will refrain from practicing religion deeply lest you set yourself in opposition to the other. You are against the total and genuine

assimilation on account of which the other might welcome you with joy.

It is my sense that the Muslims are Muslims forever and likewise the Christians. Each party may lose a number of devotees for various reasons, yet a large core constituency will remain. I thus harbour no great practical hopes of great changes brought about by proselytizing, however perspicacious. I am not saying that we are predestined to live together. It is equally inappropriate to just have a quantitative proliferation without meaning. What I do hope is that the growing numbers of adherents of both faiths can live next to each in an understanding and loving way in order to afford a constructive and new human model.

Rather than a mere national cohesion, an intelligent reciprocal familiarization will evolve, one which we hope will be grounded in the freedom and development which is congruent with the common good of all of us.

I have the impression that the societies governed by the pure, loyal and courageous love of God breathe life into such familiarization of different communities.

The most important of all freedoms is the freedom of faith, including idolatry. You accept me when you accept the form of my existence with my brethren in faith as we understand this existence. There is room here to delve into details, but any feeling of oppression stems from oppression and not from fantasy. There is therefore no space here to renew the inquisitorial courts and mentality of the Middle Ages just as there is no ground to portray Christians as if they are still “*dhimmi*” protected subjects after the Ottoman Empire suspended this category some 150 years ago. Civil free-

doms are established in all advanced countries. Those social segments who are at ease with their faith will not fear the sweeping tide given that their house is not made of glass which anyone can pelt.

The age of imperialism has passed and nobody is attached to it. We Orientals see our trust increased in each of us. May this trust be supported by a respect for the other and his articles of faith? I dare say that we monotheists have become a family of God which finds itself in agreement on much of what we know of Him. And we yearn for the other in order to embrace God with humility and sincerity.

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NOTES

¹ Louis Massignon, *Les Trois Prières d'Abraham*, Paris: Cerf, 1998.

² P. Henri Lammens, *La Mecque à la veille de l'Hégire (Mélanges de l'Université Saint-Joseph, t. IX, fasc.3)*, Beirut: Imprimerie Catholique, 1924, pp. 97-439.

³ Alfred Guillaume, *The Life of Muhammad. A translation of Ibn Ishaq's Sirat Rasul Allāh*. Oxford: OUP, 1955, p. 277.

⁴ Jalal al-Din Muhammad al-Mahali, *Tafsir al-Jalalayn bi Hamish al-Qur'an al-Karim*, Beirut: M. al-Risala, 1995.

⁵ *Ibid.* Also see: <http://www.altafsir.com/Al-Jalalayn.asp>

⁶ *The Panarion of St. Epiphanius, Bishop of Salamis* Philip R. Amidon, translator. New York: Oxford, 1990.

⁷ Muhammad Tabatabai, *al-Mizan fi Fi Tafsir al-Qur'an*, Beirut: Muassasat al-Alami, 1970.

⁸ Abu Jafar Bin Jarir al-Tabari, *Tafsir al-Tabari : al-musamma Jami' al-bayan fi ta'wil al-Qur'an*. Beirut: Dar al-Kutub al-'Ilmiyah, 1997