

# Salaam

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Quarterly to Promote Understanding



## Editorial

The Significance of Jesus in Interreligious Relations

Crossing Over to the Other

Challenges to and Prospects for Christian-Muslim dialogue

How do Muslims understand Jesus?

God-Consciousness

Gender Sensitive Interpretations of the Quran

Faith is the Hope of Things Unseen

Mission: Joy – Finding Happiness in Troubled Times

Summer Course on Islamic studies and Christian- Muslim Relations

Fraternity and peace: Global call for unity, transformation

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**ISLAMIC STUDIES ASSOCIATION**

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**“..... that they.....  
may be one.....”**

## INFORMATION

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All business communications must be addressed to : Victor Edwin SJ, Editor, SALAAM, Vidyajyoti, 23 Raj Niwas Marg, Delhi-110 054, INDIA, or email to : [victoredwinsj@gmail.com](mailto:victoredwinsj@gmail.com)

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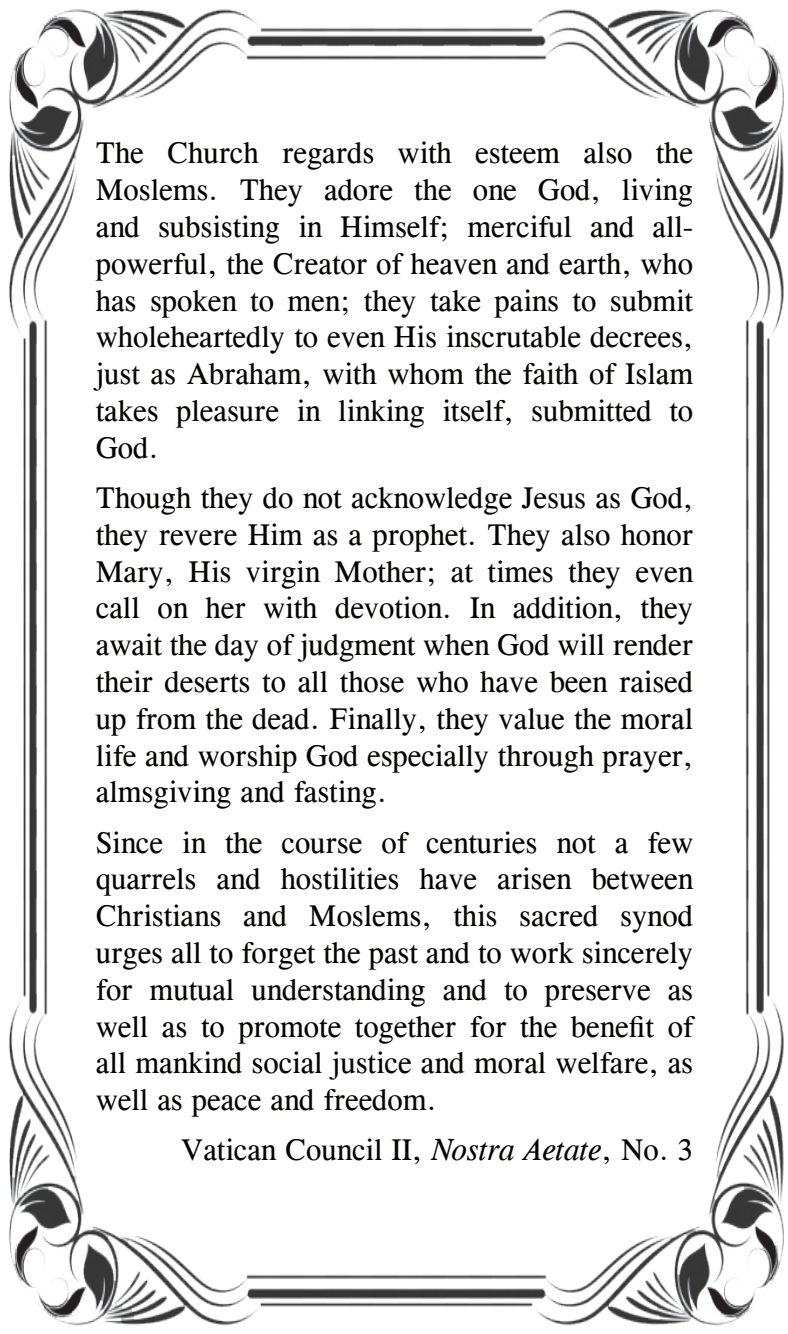
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The Church regards with esteem also the Moslems. They adore the one God, living and subsisting in Himself; merciful and all-powerful, the Creator of heaven and earth, who has spoken to men; they take pains to submit wholeheartedly to even His inscrutable 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 deserts 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.

Since in the course of centuries not a few quarrels and hostilities have arisen between Christians and Moslems, this sacred synod urges all to forget the past and to work sincerely for mutual understanding and to preserve as well as to promote together for the benefit of all mankind social justice and moral welfare, as well as peace and freedom.

Vatican Council II, *Nostra Aetate*, No. 3

# Editorial

## **Human Fraternity: A call to unite and work together!**

His Holiness Pope Francis and The Grand Imam of Al-Azhar Ahmad Al-Tayyeb co-signed *A Document on Human Fraternity* on 4 February 2019 at Abu Dhabi. Both the religious leaders call all people to work for “peace, dialogue, mutual understanding and mutual respect among believers for the common good.” It could be said that this historic and unprecedented declaration paves a path for greater harmony and understanding between all faiths. It also inspired the United Nations Organisation to establish February 4 every year as Day of Human Fraternity.

### **Unite and work together!**

More than ever, humanity today is overwhelmed by armed conflicts, terrorism, fascism, dehumanising levels of poverty, malnutrition, illiteracy, abuse of mother earth, and displacement of peoples in many millions. It is in this context the Document on Human Fraternity alerts us that we should not keep silent; we should unite and act to resolve all these issues through dialogue, cooperation, good education system, and the empowerment and protection of women, children, elderly, disabled, and oppressed people.

The idea for the document was born when Pope Francis and the Grand Imam broke the bread together. It is pertinent to listen to Pope Francis’ words. He said: “He (the Grand Imam) had come to the Vatican for a visit ... It was almost lunchtime, and he was leaving, and as I was accompanying him to bid him goodbye, I asked him, Where are you going for lunch?” Even before the Grand Imam responded, the Pope invited him for lunch. At the Table, the Pope continued: “we took the bread, broke it, and gave it to each other”. This gesture of friendship brought them closer to one another and then they decided to write the Document on Human Fraternity.

The Grand Imam, at the event of signing of the document, said: “My message to the world’s youth in the West and the East: Make the Human Fraternity Document a charter for good, destroying evil and

ending hatred.” On the same occasion, His Holiness Pope Francis said: “The Document on Human Fraternity, which I signed today in Abu Dhabi with my brother The Grand Imam of Al-Azhar, invited all persons who have faith in God and faith in Human Fraternity to unite and work Together.”

### **Human Fraternity Document in our context**

India is richly blessed with diversity. Many religions, cultures, forms of song and dance, languages, food habits, places of worship, and ways of life make India, a kaleidoscope of humanity. Each culture is unique, and it embodies India’s soul, including the religion as it is lived in a particular context. Cultures express in many tangible ways the transcendent dimension of human person. Through cultural expressions and symbols, we open ourselves to the mystery which grounds all meaning, that mystery is God. Peoples’ shared life represents the high level of integration of diverse cultures and religions that underlie our unity that is founded on diversity. This diversity is at the heart of our unity as one India.

Human person is a mystery, and everyone is radically open to God. The places of worship such as temples, mosques, churches, gurudwaras, sacred grooves of tribal peoples, etc., open one to God and to fellow human beings. It is important to recognise this dimension of civic literacy for our times, particularly in a context where cultural, historical, and symbolic elements are weaponised and are increasingly used to stir up many conflicts among peoples.

### **The Document invites ...**

It is in this context; the document invites all people to ...

- **ACT** with confidence ... humanity belongs to God ... God our common origin and destination ...
- **Engage** others ... learn about others ... remove ignorance and prejudice ...
- **Appreciate** ... the values and virtues others embody ...
- **End** the vicious cycle of violence ... ..
- **Stop** abusing God’s name to justify violence ... (discover the true nature of religion) ...
- **Build** a future together ... on the foundations of Peace and Justice

## Human Fraternity Forums ...

The members of Islamic Studies Association established two Human Fraternity Forums in schools in Coimbatore in collaboration with the sisters belonging to the Franciscan Missionaries of Mary. The Human Fraternity Forum (HFF) will strive to train children to value peace and instil in them the conviction that freedom is the right of every person, and that justice is the path to achieve a dignified life. Through watching documentaries and listening to educationists, social activists and public intellectuals, children will learn about their fundamental rights. Equally they will learn about the rights of the elderly and weak persons, recognise the rights of women to education and employment, acknowledge and appreciate citizenship based on equality of rights and duties. They will learn about diverse cultures and religions in order to widen their horizons and cultivate mutually enriching reciprocal relationships. HFF will facilitate and encourage all forms of positive engagements, promote good will and positive attitudes among children.

Friends of ISA: Jesuit Father Dr. A. Cyril (Children Rights activist), FMM Sister Dr. Stella Baltasar (Theologian and social activist) and Rev. Dr. Vincent Manoharan (Theologian and Human Rights defender) are guiding the HFF. They could be contacted: Fr. A. Cyril SJ ([aacyril@gmail.com](mailto:aacyril@gmail.com)), Sr. Stella Baltazar ([stellabaltazar9@gmail.com](mailto:stellabaltazar9@gmail.com)), and Dr. Vincent Manoharan ([vincentbham@googlemail.com](mailto:vincentbham@googlemail.com)).

**Joseph Victor Edwin SJ**

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*Human Fraternity Document and the Role of the United Arab Emirates.* ([https://www.riverpublishers.com/pdf/ebook/chapter/RP\\_9788770222075C1.pdf](https://www.riverpublishers.com/pdf/ebook/chapter/RP_9788770222075C1.pdf))

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## The Significance of Jesus in Interreligious Relations

By Leo D. Lefebure

I would like to reflect on the implications of Jesus's Jewish identity for Christian theology in dialogue with religious traditions other than Judaism, and I will focus on Christian relations with Muslims, Hindus, and Buddhists. In each case I will reflect first on how some followers of these traditions respond to the Jewishness of Jesus, and then I will reflect on the question each tradition poses to Christians in this regard.

It is crucial to remember that for all Muslims, many Hindus, and some Buddhists, Jesus is a religious figure in their practice in a very strong sense. He is a divinely sent Messenger and Prophet in Islam, he is a fully divine manifestation for many Hindus, and he is a Buddha, a bodhisattva or a fully realized being for a number of Buddhists. In these dialogues, we are not simply discussing a figure from history but a religious figure active in people's lives today who is viewed from different perspectives and who challenges people in various ways.

Professor Adele Reinhartz, in her study of the anonymous characters in the Bible, set forth a principle for approaching questions of identity that I think is helpful for our topic today. She commented that "the variety of readings proposed for biblical characters, both named and unnamed, suggest that identity hovers in the encounter between character and reader and is demanding of both." I believe that this principle applies to religious interpretations of Jesus in an interreligious context. If it is true that in interpreting the anonymous characters in the Bible, "identity hovers in the encounter between character and reader and is demanding of both," we can also say that in interreligious dialogue the identity of Jesus hovers in the encounter between religious practitioners and is demanding of each partner. This means that Jews and Christians cannot predict or control what importance the Jewishness of Jesus will have for dialogues with Muslims, Hindus, and Buddhists. They often bring very different horizons of expectation, and they may well see



different implications of both Jewishness and of Jesus than Jews or Christians.

### **Islam: Jesus as Prophet and Messenger in Islam**

Some years ago I spoke on themes of the New Testament to American Muslim leaders at the Islamic Society of North America in Indianapolis. I began by summarizing contemporary research on the historical Jesus, and then I presented an overview of interpretations of Jesus by New Testament authors. The Muslim leaders completely accepted the material on the historical Jesus, with the important exception of his death by crucifixion. There is a long Islamic debate over how to interpret the Qur'an concerning the end of Jesus's earthly existence, which I will not go here into for reasons of time. After my presentation, one Muslim scholar commented to me, "First you gave me a very Muslim Jesus, and then you added all that Christian stuff." Presenting Jesus as a Jew in his original context allowed Muslims to accept him quite easily in relation to the view of Jesus in traditional Islam.

Muslims can easily acknowledge that Jesus as a Jew proclaimed the rule of God, that he healed people through the power of God, that he challenged people to repent for their sins and accept God's will. Muslims are pleased to know that biblical scholarship indicates that the historical Jesus never proclaimed a doctrine of the Trinity and never explicitly claimed to be the eternally begotten Son of God. The teaching of the historical Jesus resonates deeply with the early suras of the Qur'an, which stress the oneness of God, the necessity for justice in society, and the coming judgment of all persons by God. Muslim scholar Neal Robinson points out that Muslims note that in the Gospel of Mark Jesus "thought of himself as a prophet, objected when someone called him good, and stressed the oneness of God (Mark 6:4; 10:17; 12:29)." Muslims rejoice that the hallmark of Jesus's teaching is "radical obedience to God," which they identify with true *islam*. Concerning the Lord's Prayer, Muslims can accept that Jesus as a Jew prayed to God as Father without any implication of a divine Trinity, and they can endorse all the petitions in the prayer.

The Qur'an presents Jesus as confirming the Torah (*Tawra*); the Qur'anic Jesus says: "And [I come] confirming that which was before me, the Torah, and to make lawful unto you part of that which was forbidden unto you. And I have come to you with a sign from your Lord" (Qur'an 3:50). Muslim commentators have offered varying views on precisely what Jesus made lawful. Some have thought it involved dietary restrictions in Torah, while others have thought it refers to things that the Israelites had forbidden but that were not in Torah itself. Recent research on the affirmation of Torah by Jesus confirms a traditional Islamic perspective.

The Qur'an identifies Jesus as emerging from and participating in the line of prophets and leaders in ancient Israel: "Say, 'We believe in God and what has been sent down upon us, and in what was sent down upon Abraham, Ishmael, Isaac, Jacob, and the Tribes, and in what Moses, Jesus, and the prophets were given from their Lord. We make no distinction among any of them, and unto Him we submit'" (Q 3:84). So according to the Qur'an, the message brought by Jesus is in its core identical with that of Moses and the other prophets of ancient Israel, as well as with that of Muhammad. Muslims see the message brought by Jesus, which they call *Injil*, as a complement to the message brought by Moses, *Tawra*, and that brought by David, *Zabur*. According to Amin Ahsan Islahi, "Jesus 'fulfils' the Law in that, without repealing it in any way, he restores it to its state of pristine purity in that he imbues it with the spirit of wisdom which it had once possessed but which had been lost in the course of time." Muslims view Jesus as the last of the prophets of Israel, and thus they can call him the seal of the prophets of Israel. Muslims note that the Qur'an does not present Muhammad as bringing a new message from God; the Qur'an says: "Naught is said to thee (Muhammad) but what already was said to the Messengers before thee" (41:43).

It is not new to note that Judaism and Islam are very similar. In 1833 Abraham Geiger argued "that Muhammad in his Quran has borrowed much from Judaism as it presented itself to him in his time." While this formulation is highly offensive to Muslims since they believe the Qur'an came directly from God and was

not “Muhammad’s,” they do acknowledge that the one God sent the same message through the prophets of ancient Israel and through Muhammad. In the twentieth century Protestant scholars Adolf von Harnack and Adolf Schlatter and Jewish scholar Hans-Joachim Schoeps viewed Islam as arising from the matrix of Jewish Christianity. Today there is a vigorous debate over whether there were Jewish Christian communities in the context of Muhammad, and some Christians have proposed that dialogue with Muslims over Jesus calls for consideration of the relation between Jewish Christianity in the ancient world and the rise of Islam. Hans Küng has suggested that Christians today should be open to respecting the various forms of Jewish Christianity in antiquity and thereby open ourselves also to fresh dialogue with Muslims. He poses the question of whether Christians can proclaim Jesus in the language of the New Testament as servant and prophet without insisting on the later dogmatic formulations of the early church councils. Küng does not pretend to resolve the issue and seeks further conversation informed by study of the New Testament, early Jewish Christianity, and the Qur’an.

Whatever the historical details may have been, one challenge that dialogue with Muslims poses to Christians regarding Jesus as a Jew is: what does it mean for Christians to hear Jesus as a Jew reciting “Shema Israel, Adonai Elohenu, Adonai Echad,” especially the word “Echad”? What does it mean for Christians to say we believe in one God, given both the Jewishness of Jesus and the later development of the doctrine of the Trinity?

### **Jesus as *Avatara*, Descent of God, in Hinduism**

Many Hindus during the last two centuries have honored and worshipped Jesus as a divine manifestation. When I visited the Hindu-majority island of Bali in Indonesia some years ago, a senior Catholic priest there told me that if you ask most Hindus in Bali if there is one God, they will say, “Yes, of course.” If you ask them if Jesus Christ is the Son of God, they will say, “Yes, of course.” But they see no need to become Christian. When I was teaching a Muslim-majority class in Doha, Qatar some years ago, I commented

that many Hindus accept Jesus as divine, and a hand shot up in the back of the room. A young woman of Indian heritage said, “I am a Hindu and I fully accept Jesus Christ as the Son of God.” In India today large numbers of Hindus come to Catholic shrines of Jesus and Mary, especially in locations where there have been reports of healings.

In dialogue with Hindus we face a paradox: many Hindus fully accept Jesus Christ as divine, but many are very distrustful of Christian missionaries and the modern Western academic study of religion, which entered India with the British colonizers. Hindu religious acceptance of Jesus developed about 200 years ago in the context of the British dominating more and more of India, together with Protestant missionaries from Britain and the USA challenging Hindu practices like child marriage, sati, and the caste system. In response to both Christian missionaries and British colonial officials, some educated Hindus began rethinking the meaning of Hinduism and launched what has been variously called the Bengali Renaissance or Neo-Hinduism. They accepted Jesus, frequently claiming that Christians do not understand Jesus, but Hindus do. From Ram Mohan Roy through Keshub Chandra Sen, Ramakrishna, Swami Vivekananda, Mahatma Gandhi, Sarvepelli Radhakrishnan to contemporary scholar Ravi Ravindra in Halifax, many Hindus have accepted Jesus as a significant religious leader and divine manifestation. Gandhi was the most successful in claiming to understand Jesus better than Christians. When criticized, he pointed out that Jesus died opposing a mighty empire through non-violent means, and he was simply following the example of Jesus and the Buddha. Gandhi convinced many Christians that Jesus’s teachings on non-violent resistance to evil could be put into practice on an unprecedented level to transform societies.

Some Hindus have emphasized Jesus’s ethical teaching, but very many have viewed him as fully divine, an *avatara*, a descent of God into this world bringing eternal wisdom. From this perspective, the Jewishness of Jesus would be the effect of *Ishvara*, the manifestation of the ultimate *Brahman*, graciously adapting itself to communicate with Jewish culture. Advaita Hindus like

Vivekananda, Radhakrishnan or Ravindra would generally assume that they understand the ultimate truth of Jesus's identity as non-dual much better than most Jews or Christians; many Hindus would see historical, contextual research as of little import. The great nineteenth-century leader Ramakrishna, who worshipped Jesus, commented, "Whether Christ or Krishna lived or not is immaterial; the people from whose brain the Christ ideal, or Krishna ideal, has emanated did actually live as Christ or Krishna for the time being."

Ramakrishna's disciple Vivekananda interpreted Jesus's teaching on three levels: Dvaitic or dual for the non-educated, exemplified by the Lord's Prayer; Vishtadvaitic or modified non-dual for the higher circle, exemplified by Jesus saying "I am in my Father, and he in me, and I in you." Finally, for the most highly advanced, Jesus teaches Advaita Vedanta when he claims to be one with the Father, but he was misunderstood by Jews and Christians alike. Vivekananda does not believe Jesus was really crucified: "Christ was God incarnate; they could not kill him. That which was crucified was only a semblance, a mirage." Vivekananda was very aware of the disagreements over the historical Jesus in the late nineteenth century, and he thought that this opened the door for Hindus to explain Jesus's teaching freed from the worries of historical evidence.

Among contemporary Hindu scholars, Ravi Ravindra, who is based in Halifax, Nova Scotia, has written a Hindu interpretation of the gospel of John in which he presents Jesus as a guru in light of Hindu mysticism. He proposes a spiritual elitism where mystics of all traditions can communicate with each other but all others cannot. Positing an allegedly universal mystical spirituality, Ravi Ravindra assumes that Hindu categories can adequately interpret the significance of figures and events in the Fourth Gospel. He recontextualizes Jesus so radically that the original Jewish context plays little to no role in his interpretation of the Gospel of John. I think it is a legitimate hermeneutical wager to interpret one tradition in light of the categories of another, but to read in the categories of one tradition into a text without any attention to the original context is to my mind problematic and unconvincing. Some years ago I

responded to Ravindra concerning his interpretation at a conference in Nova Scotia, and I explained my concerns about neglecting the original context. He was very gracious to me personally, but he did not take my academic concerns seriously at all. Instead, he read various letters from Christians, like Wilfred Cantwell Smith, commending his interpretation of the Fourth Gospel as illuminating it for the first time. For Ravindra, interpreting Jesus as a Jew in his original Jewish context was not a significant issue at all.

Other Hindus have disagreed. K.R. Sundararajan, a Hindu scholar long based in the United States, has criticized other Hindus for reading Hindu ideas into Jesus, and he challenges Hindus to broaden their horizons and open themselves in dialogue with Christians to “the possibility of a ‘suffering God.’” Similarly, Anantanand Rambachan, a Hindu scholar originally from Trinidad now teaching at St. Olaf’s College in Minnesota, strenuously objects to the long history of Hindus reading their own ideas into Jesus. Regarding the implications for Christian theology, the Indian Christian theologian M. Thomas Thangaraj expresses concern that many Indians, both Hindu and Christian, have accepted Jesus as divine but have not seen him as fully human. Thangaraj himself stresses the issue of suffering and interprets Jesus as “The Crucified Guru.”

Hindus reject the Christian claim that Jesus is in a unique sense the only-begotten Son of God. Many Hindus have seen Jesus as revealing the innate divine-human oneness that is the birthright of all humans. From a different angle than most Muslims, Advaitic Hindus pose the question to Christians, what does it mean to hear Jesus say, “Adonai Echad”? What does it mean to speak of divine Oneness? While Advaitic Hindus would likely view most Jews and Christians as either Dvaitic or Vishishtadvaitic, aspects of Jewish and Christian mysticism offer interesting analogues to Hindu teachings on non-duality. For example, Arthur Green’s interpretation of Jewish mysticism has strong points of convergence with Advaita Vedanta on the meaning of *Echad*. Advaitic Hindus could agree with Green when he writes: “My ‘self’ is nothing other than a manifestation of the single Self of being,” and, “I write as a mystic and a monist, one who believes in (and in rare and precious

moments has come to know) the essential truth that there is only one Being, and that all distinctions between self and other and between God, world, and soul represent partial betrayals of that truth.” If this sounds strange to Catholics, we should remember that in the fifteenth century the great promoter of interreligious dialogue Cardinal Nicholas of Cusa pointed out that if God is infinite, then there is no boundary between God and the world and God can be named “non aliud” (“not other”). We face the perplexing question: when is not-other other than not-other, and when is it not?

Advaitic Hindu scholars with their sophisticated educational backgrounds have generally come from upper castes. Many of those involved in the Bengali Renaissance and Neo-Hinduism worked to reform or abolish the caste system and the status of untouchability, but this remains a highly contested issue in India today. A very different perspective on Jesus emerges from the Dalit and Adivasi communities, many of whom are illiterate and whose children are right now the first in the history of their families to learn to read and write. Most Christians in India today are from the Dalit (formerly called “Untouchable”) or Adivasi (Tribal) communities who suffered grievously under the caste system and who often object to being identified as Hindus. “Dalit” means “crushed” or “oppressed,” and it is the term that Gandhi’s great opponent, Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, preferred to refer to his community. For these populations, Christian efforts to interpret Jesus in relation to caste Hinduism, including seeing him as an avatar, can be profoundly alienating; and they interpret Jesus in relation to their subaltern situations.

While there are to date are very few *adivasi* Christian theologians, there are numerous Christians involved in Dalit theology. In this perspective Jesus appears as a Dalit who had nowhere to lay his head, who was rejected and who died the type of death reserved for Dalits. Leonard Fernando, S.J., explains the approach of Dalit Christian hermeneutics: “The Dalits and those on their side began to read the Bible and look at Jesus from the perspective of the oppressed. They began to own Jesus as *the* Dalit.” Tragically, however, the hopes of Dalits have not always been fulfilled in

Christian Indian life today, even in Catholic religious orders, as Christians from upper caste backgrounds continue to dominate in most contexts. One Indian Catholic priest in Bombay told me: “It’s totally irrational, but we cannot think outside these categories.”

Questions of purity and impurity are extremely sensitive and painful because Dalits in India have traditionally been viewed as impure and as threatening to pollute the higher castes by their very presence. Thus they were stigmatized as untouchable, or even in some cases “unseeable,” and forbidden to drink from common water sources. Dalits take a particular interest in the New Testament’s presentation of Jesus in relation to rules concerning diet and purity, and they generally see him ending these regulations, based, for example, on an interpretation of Mark 7. The danger is that Indian Christians often view the purity regulations of Judaism in light of the Hindu caste system without fully appreciating the differences. This is an area in which recent research on the relation of Jesus to the Jewish tradition of his time can be of vital importance as a corrective to earlier views. This is an area in which outsiders to India need to have tremendous sensitivity to the various Indian contexts.

### **The Emptying Christ: Jesus and Buddhist Perspectives**

Buddhists have their distinctive teachings on non-duality, and they differ profoundly from Jews and Christians (and many Hindus) in that they do not believe in a God who creates the universe. For Buddhists, there is no God; and there is no substantial, enduring self. Dialoguing with Buddhists on questions of identity can be challenging and instructive because they identify clinging to any fixed identity as the primary source of unnecessary suffering. For Buddhists, our fundamental error is that we identify ourselves wrongly as substantial, enduring entities. Mahayana Buddhists in particular warn us that only when we see ourselves, our religious traditions, and all reality as empty will we be free from the cycle of the three poisons: ignorance, craving, and anger. The Buddhist perspectives on no-God and no-self pose questions to the fundamental assumptions of theistic traditions.



There is no widespread traditional history of Buddhist acceptance of Jesus as a religious figure on the scale of Muslim or Hindu responses. Because many Buddhists first came to know about Jesus in the context of European Christian missionaries who arrived in Asia together with the European colonial empires, they have often had extremely negative impressions of Jesus and the Christian message; and these suspicions linger today in many Asian Buddhist communities. Nonetheless, in many contexts there have been very fruitful Buddhist-Christian dialogues, and a number of prominent Buddhist leaders have embraced Jesus in light of Buddhist perspectives. In the early twentieth century, the influential Japanese Buddhist scholar D.T. Suzuki commented that many Buddhists view Jesus “as a manifestation of the Dharmakaya [ultimate reality] in human form. He is a Buddha and as such not essentially different from Shakyamuni [Buddha]. . . . The Dharmakaya appeared in the person of Christ on the Semitic stage, because it suited their taste best in this way.” From Suzuki’s perspective, the Jewishness of Jesus reflects the compassion (*karuna*) and skillful means (*upaya*) of Dharmakaya manifesting and adapting the truth to Jews and others in this particular context, but there can be no essential difference between Jesus as a Buddha and the teaching of Shakyamuni Buddha.

The paradoxical role of negation is crucial to many Buddhist-Christian dialogues. The basic logic of Mahayana Buddhism tells us: A is not A. Therefore A is truly A. As interpreted by Thich Nhat Hanh, a leading Vietnamese Thien (Zen) Buddhist monk, this means that Buddhist identity is made up of non-Buddhist elements; Christian identity is made up of non-Christian elements; and Jewish identity is made up of non-Jewish elements. In principle, this can allow for a creative interpenetration of Jewish, Christian, and Buddhist identities; and there are some Christians who engage in dual practice of Christian and Buddhist paths. Some years ago I attended the ordination of a Trappist monk, Kevin Hunt, as a *Zen sensei* (teacher). Among the participants, there was Robert Kennedy, who is both a Jesuit priest and *Zen roshi* (honored teacher) and who had prepared the Trappist for his Buddhist ordination, as well as a Catholic sister who was a *Zen roshi*. Also attending was Rabbi

Singer from California who was also a Zen teacher, and I had a very long and lively conversation with him the evening before the ordination. While highly controversial, dual practice poses many questions about identity hovering in the encounter in between religious paths.

In my experience, for a number of Buddhists who reverence Jesus, including Thich Nhat Hanh himself, the Jewish identity of Jesus is simply not a significant factor. Thich Nhat Hanh has a statue of Jesus on his personal altar alongside a statue of Shakyamuni Buddha, and he lights incense to both. Nhat Hanh views Jesus and the Buddha as brothers and he honors them both as spiritual ancestors, but he interprets Jesus in a strongly Mahayana Buddhist fashion. Rather like Ravi Ravindra interpreting Jesus in light of Hindu categories, Nhat Hanh interprets the teaching of Jesus as teaching Mahayana wisdom. Thus he views faith in God as “the equivalent” of Buddhist experience of nirvana. Because he focuses on direct experience, the different conceptual formulations, whether Jewish, Christian, or Buddhist, matter relatively little to him. Thich Nhat Hanh interprets the Holy Spirit as mindfulness and sees the Christian Eucharist as a way of celebrating mindfulness. These interpretations open up new avenues for reflection, but I question whether Thich Nhat Hanh has really encountered the distinctiveness of faith in God as creator in the Jewish and Christian traditions, including the teaching of Jesus. A more adequate comparison would require greater recognition of the profound differences between Jesus’s Jewish teaching and the Mahayana Buddhist world. Here I believe attention to the Jewish identity of Jesus could serve as an important corrective.

His Holiness the XIV<sup>th</sup> Dalai Lama has offered moving reflections on the teaching of Jesus in *The Good Heart*. While he notes many points of contact with Christians in the area of spiritual practice of compassion, love, and meditation, he also stresses that there are important differences, especially between biblical understandings of a divine Creator and creation and Buddhist perspectives on interdependence. Metaphysically, he tells us that “the two traditions must diverge.” When asked about the identity of Jesus, the Dalai Lama advises Christians that “it is only by relying on

the authoritative scriptures of the spiritual fathers of the past that one may understand the uniqueness that is being described in the Scriptures. But if you are asking my own personal opinion, then I have given it earlier. For me, as a Buddhist, my attitude toward Jesus Christ is that he was either a fully enlightened being or a bodhisattva of a very high spiritual realization.” From the Dalai Lama’s perspective, this is the highest praise that he can bestow upon a religious leader. However, beyond the general recognition of difference regarding creation, the specifically Jewish context of Jesus plays relatively little role in the Dalai Lama’s reflections.

My mentor in Buddhist-Christian dialogue was Masao Abe, who interpreted the emptying of Jesus Christ in Paul’s Letter to the Philippians in relation to emptying in Zen Buddhism. For Abe, Christ “is a kind of *bodhisattva*,” and the death of Christ was an existential event that every authentic practitioner must go through; to view it simply as an external, objective event in past history meant one had not realized its significance. Abe engaged in dialogue with Jewish scholars, but the specifically Jewish identity and context of Jesus played relatively little role in his thought. Abe returned again and again to the words of Paul in his Letter to the Philippians: “Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not deem equality with God as something to be exploited [or grasped at], but emptied himself” (Phil 2:5-7a). Abe interpreted this in light of Mahayana Buddhism, and he used to ask Christians if we can affirm that God is emptiness. Many liberal American Protestant theologians told him, “No,” but Abe wanted an authoritative answer, and so Donald Mitchell arranged for him to visit officials at the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith in Rome. The assistants to then-Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, Piero Coda and Jacques Servais, finally gave Abe the answer he was seeking: properly understood, yes, Catholics can affirm that God is emptiness. So Abe decided that Vatican officials were more liberal than many liberal American Protestants!

Regarding the implications for Christian theology, John Keenan, a Christian theologian with a detailed knowledge of Buddhism, has written a number of commentaries on books of the Bible in light

of Buddhist perspectives, especially those of the Madhyamika and Yogacara schools of Buddhist philosophy. In his commentary on the gospel of Mark, the Mahayana category of emptiness (*shunyata*) tends to dominate, as Keenan claims to discover the “empty eschatology” in the preaching of Jesus. In interpreting the gospel of Mark, Keenan detaches it from its original setting. Keenan sees Mark as presenting Jesus without identity markers: “Jesus does not come with any divine pedigree or guarantee. Rather, by introducing Jesus as an earthly son of man, Mark empties the term of imagined content” (p. 88). According to Keenan, the Markan Jesus has no clear teaching of his own: “If Mark is recommending Jesus’ new teaching over the old teachings of the Torah, he has done a singularly inept job of presenting just what is specifically new in those teachings. Nowhere does he outline Jesus’ ideological position” (p. 94). The upshot is a sharp critique of all traditions: “Jesus empties not only the tradition of the elders, but also the Mosaic law of any final, fixed validity. . . . It is not a question of which traditions can at times be ignored, but of the validity of tradition itself, in all its forms” (1995: 96). Keenan applied his Mahayana hermeneutic in later works on the Epistle of James, the Gospel of John, and most recently on the Letter of Paul to the Philippians. While always thought-provoking, this hermeneutic based on emptiness and dependent co-arising accords little importance to the specifically Jewish context of Jesus’s life and teaching. Keenan poses the same question that Abe used to pose: What does it mean for Christians to share the mind of Christ Jesus who emptied himself?

### **Concluding Reflections**

Various aspects of the Jewish biblical traditions intertwine in the identity of Jesus, including the prophetic, apocalyptic, and sapiential trajectories. While all three are important and interrelated, in one dialogical context or another each tradition may have a particular contribution to make. In contexts where systemic evil is dominant, the apocalyptic tradition offers resources with its demand for justice. In dialogue with Muslims, the shared prophetic heritage is often in the forefront of the discussion. In discussions with Hindus and Buddhists, Christians find helpful resources in the

wisdom tradition of ancient Israel, which prized the paradoxical, which acknowledged the importance of recognizing the proper time for action or non-action, which personified *Chokmah* as a way of naming the way humans encounter God in the world (Prov 8), and which was open to finding wisdom in other traditions.

Jesus can pop up in unexpected ways. Some years ago I met with Robert Aitken, one of the great leaders of American Zen Buddhism. He told me that he had been so bored in the Christian churches of his youth that he thought he had left all that behind him when he became a Zen Buddhist as an adult. Yet as a respected Zen teacher interacting with his students, he again and again found Jesus rising up before him, and he had to admit to his surprise, “I’m still a Christian.” When I asked him who Jesus was for him, he answered simply, “Elusive.” In each of these interreligious dialogues, the identity of Jesus hovers in the encounter, making demands on each partner.



## Religious freedom

“It is inconceivable, then, that believers should have to suppress a part of themselves — their faith — in order to be active citizens. It should never be necessary to deny God in order to enjoy one’s rights. ... The full guarantee of religious liberty cannot be limited to the free exercise of worship but has to give due consideration to the public dimension of religion, and hence to the possibility of believers playing their part in building the social order.”

— Pope Benedict XVI, at the United Nations,  
April 18, 2008

## **Crossing Over to the Other: Sharing life with our Muslim brothers and sisters**

By Dorothy Buck

As I write these reflections, Christians are entering the fifth week of the Easter Season, a fifty-day journey after the events of Easter Sunday. We call this journey *Mystagogia* (the profound and joyous “mystery” of living life fully aware that Jesus is the Lord), as it invites us to reflect deeply on the dramatic events of Holy Week, on the meaning of the mysteries revealed in the life, death, and resurrection of Christ and to experience with those early disciples of Jesus the accounts of his post-resurrection appearances to them, and to us, on that Easter Sunday and afterwards. We wept with Mary Magdalen at the empty tomb, and rejoiced with her when she recognized him when he called her by name. We walked with the two disciples on their seven mile walk from Jerusalem to Emmaus, listened to him explain the scriptures, the Law and the prophets and psalms that referred to him and recognized him in the breaking of the bread, as we continue to recognize him today.

Perhaps we are unsure, like Thomas in our reading for today when Jesus tells the disciples, “Do not let your hearts be troubled. In my Father’s house there are many dwelling places. If I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to myself so that where I am you also may be. Where I am going you know the way. Thomas said to him, ‘Master, we do not know where you are going, how can we know the way?’ Jesus replies that he is “the way, the truth and the life” and that “whoever has seen me has seen the Father”. (Gospel according to John 14:1-12) Like those early followers of Jesus, we have difficulty understanding and trusting, getting stuck on Good Friday as if it were the end of the story, like so many people in our world today. Perhaps we are continuing to walk on the road to Emmaus without recognizing this stranger in our midst; unable to recognize the presence of Divine Love in every person we meet.

Our Muslim community has completed the holy month of Ramadan, that included the commemoration of the Islamic festival

of *Laylat-al-Qadr*, the Night of Power, on April 17th this year. This is the night when the first verses of the Qur'an were revealed by the Angel *Jibril*, Gabriel, to Muhammad. He was commanded by the Angel, "Iqra! Recite!". The commemoration of the end of the holy month of Ramadan fast is called *Eid al-Fitr*, the feast of the breaking of the fast, and is celebrated during the first three days of the 10th month in the lunar calendar, called *Shawwāl*, celebrated this year from April 21-23, 2023. This is a time of celebration and gratitude, visiting with friends and relatives, sharing gifts, wearing new clothes and offering sweets to the children and providing for the poor. As Christians rejoice during the Easter Season, so our Muslim friends rejoice during these days of *Eid*.

In the spirit of the Badaliya, both the Easter Season and Eid offer us an opportunity to fulfil Louis Massignon's vision of "crossing over to the other" and sharing life with our Muslim brothers and sisters. Massignon's vision is being lived out at *Deir Mar Musa al-Habashi*, the Monastery of St. Moses, the Abyssinian, in Syria very much as he would have envisioned it; Praying together in Arabic, dedicated to hospitality and immersed in Abrahamic friendship. These are some of the essential aspects of the Badaliya that were, and are, an invitation for Christians living in the Middle East to share life with their Muslim neighbours just as they are for us.

Each month we pray for peace with justice in Ukraine and for an end to violence as a solution to conflict in every part of the world as the media continues to move on from one to another, leaving more lasting conflicts behind. At this moment, our friends in the community at Deir Mar Musa remain a light of hope amid an ongoing civil war in Syria. Living out the inspired experience of a devoted believer in Jesus and a lover of Islam, their founder and spiritual mentor, the Jesuit Priest, Father Paolo Dall'Oglio has left us a legacy of spiritual insight and wisdom for our time. Inspired by the writings and spiritual vision of Louis Massignon and the legacy of our now canonized Saint Charles de Foucauld, Paolo wrote: "The Orient helped me to understand the value of experience. There, Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism all remind us of the importance

of lived experience. Even if we are limited, imperfect or powerless we remain indispensable. God is obligated to pass through us to go to others. God loves to incarnate himself for you in me and loves to incarnate himself for me in you. If we refuse to accept that responsibility, then Love disincarnates itself, loses its weight and its flavour.” Paolo’s entry into the lived-experience of Muslim believers as he did in his vocation as a Jesuit Catholic priest. He found no contradiction in his spiritual experience and vision of “a final harmony in God” of these two faith traditions.

Each month we pray for peace with justice in Palestine and Israel as the grip of the occupation strangles any hope for justice and peaceful resolution, making escalating violence inevitable. During those painful post World War II years with the establishment of the modern State of Israel, Massignon’s experience and spiritual identification with what he called “Abrahamic hospitality” along with his conviction that the Holy Land was meant to be “a children’s garden of reconciled humanity” was cause for distress. This “return of biblical Israel to Palestine” was a mystery that instead led to the displacement and exile of thousands of indigenous Palestinians from their homes of generations. Massignon had been intimately involved in the British and French partitioning of these lands after World War I that wounded his spiritual insights and vision for these holy lands. He wrote: “The Holy Land must not be an object to be shared among the privileged but the seamless tunic of world reconciliation, a place of intimate mixture between us all.” That image of the seamless tunic of Jesus crucified claimed by the Roman soldiers at the foot of the Cross is ripe with universal meaning and highlights how the spirit permeated Massignon’s way of experiencing the political climate of his time.

Taking sides with all refugees from war and violence, political persecution, and displaced persons, from the Jews from Europe in 1947 to the Palestinians in 1948, this was a question of hospitality. It was “sacrilegious to abuse refugees and make them into political hostages. The problem of hospitality dominates every question of peace with justice. As long as we will not treat all displaced persons



as the guests of God, we will not find a solution” to international conflicts. And finally, this example of how his spiritual experience of the Divine permeated his vision of international relations and his love of the land of Palestine: “I really want to go there, to the tomb of Abraham, the patriarch of believers, Jews, Christians and Muslims, and this is also the first hero of hospitality...I think that the problems at the beginning of humanity are those that will arise at the end, especially those of the sacred character of the right of asylum and respect for the stranger”. We are transported to that iconic biblical image of the three angel/ visitors to Abraham at Mamre in the Book of Genesis, the first Book.

Our Badaliya and Peace Islands gathering pays homage to these spiritual guides whose lived experience continues to inspire our relationships with one another and our vision of hospitality as we welcome those many refugees and asylum seekers today and pray together for peace with justice in the Ukraine, Palestine and Israel and throughout the world.



## Salvation

“The Lord God did not counter the threats of history with external power, as we human beings would expect according to the prospects of our world. His weapon is goodness. He revealed himself as a child, born in a stable. This is precisely how he counters with his power, completely different from the destructive powers of violence. In this very way he saves us. In this very way he shows us what saves.”

—Pope Benedict XVI

## **Challenges to and Prospects for Christian-Muslim dialogue (A reflection on conversations with Catholic youth)**

By S. A. Anto SJ

Young people are not just the future, but also the present, of the Church. They are to bring newness and freshness to the life and mission of the Church, with a certain dynamism and audacity. Young people today must take up greater roles in the Church, not just in youth ministry but in every other area of the Church. They are also called to play a vital role in participating in the mission of the Church and the communion of the people of God, to introduce the newness the Spirit has to offer. They are to identify needs, find solutions to problems, and make decisions within communities. In this regard, I feel concentrating on Christian-Muslim relations among the Catholic youth is an important need of the times. I wanted to get an idea of how Catholic youth think about Islam and Muslims. And so, I prepared a few questions and had conversations with some such young people, aged between 20 to 30, from Tamil Nadu and Kerala, in South India. In this essay, I share these questions and some of the responses I received.

### **How do you view Muslims or your Muslim friends?**

- They are like us. They too are human beings. People have some misconceptions about Muslims but I don't believe in these notions. I look at my Muslim friends as normal people, just like any other of my friends. I don't treat them on the basis of their religion or beliefs.
- I have only a few Muslim friends. They are friendly and caring. For me, friendship is not dependent on a person's religion. At times, I am surprised by the Muslims' discipline when it comes to certain food habits and religious rituals. I respect them a lot, but I feel that they are manipulated much by their religion and have some misunderstandings about people of other religions.
- I have quite a few Muslim friends. They are just the way they are. I don't see much of difference between us and them.

- I look at Muslims as people who follow the rules and regulations very carefully that have been handed down to them by their ancestors. They are very helpful towards the poor and downtrodden members of their own religious community. They have a strong community spirit and a great love for their religion. They are ready to risk their lives at any cost for their religion and their God. They love their God with great intensity.

### **Can you share some of your experiences with Muslims?**

- When I was doing my college studies, I stayed in a hostel and my roommates were Muslims. They were really strong in their religious beliefs and very particular about their rituals. They bonded very strongly among themselves.
- They are very truthful and trustworthy. They are strong in their values. They make good friends.
- Once, a Muslim friend and I had dinner in a restaurant. My friend did not eat meat there. Later, I came to know that he avoids eating non-vegetarian food outside because he is not sure whether the meat is *halal* or not. From this I understood how particular Muslims are about their religious beliefs and practices.
- I have a Muslim friend named Hussain. He is a person who always analyses things and questions rules and regulations that are just followed blindly by others. One of the best experiences that I had with him was a dialogue on the Muslim women empowerment and freedom. He was so open-minded that he was totally against Muslim women wearing the *hijab*, against women not having the equal rights as men (for example, their not being able to worship in mosques in many places). He could even relate with many Muslim women activists who struggled for women's emancipation. He admires the courage of Malala and wants many more Malalas in the world. He does not allow his mother and sister to wear *hijab* and he respects them. He really opened my eyes and removed my prejudiced thinking about Muslim men. It is wrong to make generalisations.

## **How do you correlate the Qur'an and the Bible?**

- I think they are interconnected in some way. I think the Quran is based on the Old Testament of the Bible. Christians and Muslims are believed to be sons of Abraham. The Quran and the Bible are two of the most widely read and revered religious texts in the world. There are many incidents that are common to both. The Quran considers Jesus Christ as a prophet.
- I consider the Bible, especially the Old Testament, as a pre-text to the Quran.
- There are many similarities between the two scriptures. Both believe that Jesus was born to Virgin Mary and also believe in the Day of Judgment.
- The Quran has many teachings from the Old Testament. Catholics give more importance to the teaching of Jesus. Though Catholics accept the teachings of the Old Testament, we do not exactly follow them: we give more emphasis to the New Testament, especially to the teachings of Christ who came to fulfill the laws of the Old Testament.

## **Do you think the Quran and Bible can travel together?**

- The Quran and Bible can certainly 'travel' together in the sense that they can coexist in the same physical space or be read side by side. However, it is important to recognize that these two books have different teachings and interpretations and may not always be in agreement on certain issues.
- I don't think so. According to the Quran, Allah sends his messages through prophets, and it considers Jesus a prophet, just like other prophets. But according to the Bible, Jesus is the Son of God sent by the Father to redeem the world.
- The Quran's vision of creation and eschatology, its cosmology, its use of parables and its discussion of legal matters are all intimately connected to the Biblical tradition.

## What do you feel about Pope Francis' approach to Islam?

- Pope Francis is the best pope in history. He has variety of thoughts and deeds compared to others. According to him, all of us are children of God. He is very kind and treats everyone equally as God's children. He wants us to love them as brothers.
- Pope Francis has been widely praised for his efforts to promote dialogue and understanding between Christians and Muslims. He has spoken out against prejudice and discrimination against Muslims and has emphasized the importance of building bridges of understanding and cooperation between different faiths.
- Pope Francis' approach towards Islam is very appreciable. Every act of his inspires me, and his efforts to promote Christian-Muslim dialogue is one among them.
- Pope Francis is a man of prayer and love. His approach towards Islam and his meetings with the Muslim leaders in different parts of the world are heart-touching. "Love and forgiveness" are among the hallmarks of the Christian faith, and these characterise Pope Francis' approach towards Islam. I would say that he is inviting all of us to accept everyone as brothers and sisters and to be humane in our dealings with each other.

Based on the responses I received in the course of conversation with these youth, I feel that it is easy to initiate dialogue between young people from Catholic and Muslim backgrounds. The need of the hour is to initiate this process. Such dialogue can overcome exclusivism and insular attitudes as well help address issues such as spiritual emptiness and psychological fragility. Positive and cooperative interaction between young Muslims and Catholics can help promote mutual understanding, acceptance and tolerance.

**Note:** Special thanks to Ann Maria Raju, Mithra Rose Thomas and Jeffy from Kerala, and Neopolitan, Mary Nithya, Anusha Biju and Benita Nicholas from Tamil Nadu for involving themselves in conversations that helped form this essay.

# HOW DO MUSLIMS UNDERSTAND JESUS?

By M. Nelsonraj SJ

## Introduction

I believe that if one wants to strengthen one's relationship with another, one should know what the other person thinks of oneself. This applies to religious communities also. For instance, in the case of Christian-Muslim relations, Christians can benefit from knowing who Muslims think Muhammad was and Muslims can benefit from knowing what Christians think Jesus is. By knowing each other better in this way, both Muslims and Christians can strengthen their relationships.

Jesus also asked his disciples 'who do you say I am?' Simon Peter answered, 'You are the Christ, the Son of the living God. (Mt 16: 15-17). This really helped the disciples understand Jesus. If I had to answer this question put by Jesus, I would boldly say by faith that Jesus is the Son of God and Saviour of the world. From my day-to-day experience, I would proclaim that Jesus is everything to me, the one who accompanies and guides me on the right path. But the way a person of another faith understands Jesus might be different.

In this essay, let me try to pen down some insights about how Muslims see and understand Jesus.

## Common Origin, Similarities and Differences

Christians and Muslims share a common origin. This common origin is the person of Abraham. Abraham, the first prophet, gave birth to Ishmael and Isaac. The Arabs who were the first Muslims descended from Ishmael while the Jews who were the first Christians have Abraham as their father through Isaac, another of his sons. Both Christians and Muslims have a book as their main written source—the Bible for Christians, and the Quran for Muslims. Prophets are integral to both religions. For Muslims, Jesus was an extraordinary prophet and cannot be God. But for Christians, Jesus is much more than a prophet. Jesus is the only Son of God, the promised Messiah. Jesus died on the cross and rose again on the third day, and whoever

believes in Him has eternal life. Muslims claim that Jesus did not die on the cross and that He cannot be God. Who, then, is Jesus for Muslims?

### **Jesus was born of a Virgin**

There are a good number of churches dedicated to Mother Mary in Tamil Nadu. People from other religions, including some Hindus and Muslims, also visit Marian shrines and basilicas with a lot of devotion. I used to wonder what induced them to pray to Mother Mary. The possible answer could be simply that Mother Mary being a woman draws believers to her. For some Hindus, Mother Mary could be thought of as one among many goddesses, while for Muslims, she is a pure vessel who gave birth to Jesus. In the entire Quran Mary is the only woman to be mentioned by name. Other female characters are identified only by their relation to others (such as the wife of Adam) or by their title (such as the Queen of Sheba).

### **Jesus as a Miracle Worker**

Muslims believe that Jesus performed miracles. The Quran says Jesus' miracles were possible because Allah allowed it. Jesus never took credit for them himself. The Qur'an discusses several miracles of Jesus, including healing lepers, giving sight to the blind, raising the dead, and breathing life into clay birds etc. These miracles occurred for a specific goal. For instance, when Mary took the baby Jesus to her own people, they accused her of adultery. Without speaking, she pointed to the baby as if to say, "Do not ask me, ask the baby". The people asked how they could speak to a baby, and the baby Jesus then started speaking, in defence of his mother and of the truth: 'I am a servant of Almighty God. He has given me Scripture and has made me a Prophet. He has blessed me wherever I may be and has made prayer and charity my duty as long as I live' (Al-Qur'an 19:30-31).

### **Jesus was Given Different Honourable Titles**

The Quran gives Jesus a greater number of honourable titles. It calls Jesus a sign, a witness, mercy, an example, and one who is upright. It gives Jesus the titles like Messiah, Son of Mary, Messenger, Prophet, Servant, Word of God, and a Spirit from God.

## **Jesus as a Messenger From God**

According to Islam, Noah, Abraham, Moses, Jesus, and Muhammad are five messengers of God and are the most important of all the prophets and hold the highest spiritual rank of all human beings. Muslims believe that Jesus was chosen by the Almighty God as His Messenger to the Israelites. Jesus is one of the five law-giving and great Prophets and Messengers. Muslims believe that Almighty God revealed a scripture to him called 'Injil' to convey to people. It is claimed that this message was what taught in the Torah and foretold the coming of Prophet Muhammad. Thus, Jesus has a vital and unique role to play in the Muslim faith.

## **Jesus as Messiah**

According to Muslim belief, out of all prophets and messengers of God, Jesus is the only one who received the title of al-Masih, or Messiah. The term messiah is used by Muslims, Jews and Christians, but they have differed in what they mean by it. Muslim scholars have tried to explain the term from the point of view of Arabic etymology. The term can be translated as the Anointed One. They suggest that 'mesaha' means to touch, to anoint, or to wipe. They also suggest that Al-Masih also refers to the eschatological purpose of Jesus, his coming at the end of time. In the Jewish tradition, the messiah brings peace, ends injustice and secures the return of Jews to the land of Israel. Similarly, in Islam, the Islamic messianic figure will also bring justice, prosperity, and peace to the world. However, neither Muslims nor Jews consider their messiah to be divine. This is in contradistinction to Christianity. However, by using this title for Jesus, the Qur'an does not make any connection between Jesus and the messianic expectations of the Old Testament.

## **Jesus' Ascension Into Heaven**

Both Christians and Muslims believe in the ascension of Jesus. Most Muslims believe that Jesus was raised to heaven without being put on the cross. Then who died on the cross? Some proposals are put forward by Muslims with regard to this. The first proposal is that God used one of Jesus' enemies. The second is that Jesus supposedly asked for someone to volunteer to be crucified instead



of him. A third is that Simon of Cyrene was put on the cross instead of Jesus.

Muslims believe that Jesus ascended bodily to Heaven, and remains there until his second coming in the end times. According to the Quran, Jesus was not crucified but was, rather, saved by God.



“If in my life I fail completely to heed others, solely out of a desire to be ‘devout’ and to perform my ‘religious duties,’ then my relationship with God will also grow arid. It becomes merely ‘proper,’ but loveless. Only my readiness to encounter my neighbor and to show him love makes me sensitive to God as well. Only if I serve my neighbor can my eyes be opened to what God does for me and how much he loves me.”

—Encyclical *Deus Caritas Est*, 2005

## God-Consciousness

By Ragu Antony SJ

God-consciousness means *total surrender to God*. We put our whole trust in Him and become a channel to do the good that He wills for us to do in the world.

In this regard, it is inspiring for us to bring to mind the example of people who have sought to live not just for themselves but for others too, especially the needy. For instance, in the recent Covid-19 pandemic, numerous people across India rendered yeoman services to their neighbours and others. Among these were some Muslims. This was a time when in some places people were facing great challenges in conducting the last rites of persons who had died in the epidemic. In some cases, when people heard about the death of a person, they refused to conduct their last rites. At this time, in several places, Muslim friends came forward to help. I witnessed this myself. When I was doing my PG studies, I received the news that a priest had died of Covid-19. His body was brought to our place for burial. We contacted many people to bury the body. Finally, we learnt of a Muslim team. So, we called them and they came and buried the body. They faced this great challenge and did such a great service, this very likely indicating a spirit of being surrendered totally to God.

Some years ago, there was massive flooding in the city of Chennai. Many people were not able to come out from their houses and they did not get any food for many days. Many poor people suffered a lot. In the midst of this, there were many Muslims who provided food to the public. They gave a place for poor people to stay in their mosque.

The examples of these large-hearted Muslims illustrate how trust in God and surrender to Him can motivate great acts of kindness going beyond the boundaries of caste and creed. There have been many saintly figures in Christian history who surrendered themselves totally to God so that they gave their life for others. There have been many God-conscious people who worked in difficult places to uplift the life of oppressed people. They never got discouraged when they faced difficulties because they trusted fully in God.

When we surrender ourselves totally to God, we get closer to people in need to serve them tirelessly.

# **Gender Sensitive Interpretations of the Quran**

By Arokia Sundar SJ and Zenith Lawrance SJ

## **Introduction**

Gender-sensitive interpretation of the Quran is a crucial aspect of understanding and applying Islamic teachings in contemporary times. It involves examining the Quranic text in its historical and social context. It considers the perspectives and experiences of both men and women and recognizes the potential for gender bias in traditional interpretations.

As the Quran is the primary source of Islamic guidance, it is important to approach its interpretation with sensitivity to gender issues. One example of the need for a gender-sensitive interpretation of the Quran is the verse from Surah An-Nisa (4:34), which states: “Men are in charge of women by (right of) what Allah has given one over the other and what they spend (for maintenance) from their wealth.” This verse has traditionally been used to justify men’s authority over women in various aspects of life. However, a gender-sensitive interpretation would claim that this verse does not imply male superiority but, rather, emphasizes the importance of men’s responsibility to provide for and protect women.

It is necessary to promote justice, equality, and fairness for all individuals, regardless of gender. This requires a critical examination of traditional interpretations of texts and recognition of the diverse perspectives and experiences of men and women. In this essay, we will explore the views of some individuals who have made significant contributions towards promoting a gender-sensitive approach to the Quran.

## **Gender Sensitivity according to Nayla Tabbara**

Nayla Tabbara is an Islamic scholar and educator who advocates a gender-sensitive interpretation of the Quran. She believes that it is crucial to approach the Quran with a critical lens and to examine

it in its historical and social context in order to avoid promoting harmful gender stereotypes and biases.

Tabbara argues that traditional interpretations of the Quran have often been patriarchal and have prioritized men's perspectives, leading to a lack of consideration for women's experiences and voices. She encourages a more inclusive and equitable approach to interpreting the Quran that promotes justice and equality for all individuals, regardless of gender.

In her teachings, Tabbara emphasizes the importance of listening to women's perspectives and experiences and recognizing the diversity of gender identities and expressions. She claims that the Quran promotes equality and justice for all individuals and encourages scholars and practitioners to challenge patriarchal interpretations. She urges new interpretations that are more inclusive and equitable for both men and women.

*On recognizing the potential for gender bias in traditional interpretations:* She says that we have to be aware that sometimes, the interpretations that we have inherited may have been biased towards men and may not have taken into consideration the context of women.

*On the importance of considering women's experiences and perspectives:* Tabbara stresses listening to the experiences of women, to their voices, to their perspectives, and to their questions. This way can help us understand the context of the relevant Quranic verses.

*On promoting equality and justice for women:* She claims that the Quran promotes equality and justice for men and women. She seems to suggest that it is a duty to strive for this in our interpretations and in our actions.

*On the need to challenge patriarchal interpretations:* She says, "We have to challenge the patriarchal interpretations that have been dominant for centuries, and we have to provide new interpretations that are more inclusive and more equitable for both men and women."

## Gender Sensitivity according to Adis Duderija

Adis Duderija is a scholar of Islamic studies who has written extensively on gender and Islam. Duderija suggests that a gender-sensitive interpretation of the Quran requires recognition of the fact that the Quran emerged in a patriarchal society. He argues that while the Quran acknowledges gender differences, it does not endorse gender inequality or discrimination. Rather, he seems to claim that it seeks to establish a moral framework that values the dignity and worth of all human beings, regardless of their gender.

Duderija emphasizes the importance of contextual analysis when interpreting Quranic verses related to gender. He argues that many of the verses that are commonly used to justify gender inequality or discrimination are taken out of context and misunderstood. For example, he points out that the Quranic verse that states that men are the protectors and maintainers of women (Quran 4:34) has been misinterpreted to justify male dominance over women. In fact, the verse is speaking specifically about the responsibilities of husbands towards their wives. He claims, “The Quranic message does not simply tolerate gender equality, but actively promotes it by affirming the equal worth and dignity of all human beings, regardless of their gender.”

Duderija also stresses the importance of a holistic approach to interpreting the Quran. He argues that a gender-sensitive interpretation of the Quran requires an understanding of the Quranic message as a whole, rather than isolating individual verses and using them to justify a particular agenda. He encourages Muslims to engage in critical thinking and to challenge patriarchal interpretations of the Quran that are inconsistent with what he regards as its overall message of justice, compassion, and equality.

*“And do not covet the things in which Allah has made some of you excel others. Men shall have a share of what they have earned, and women shall have a share of what they have earned; and ask Allah of His bounty: surely Allah knows all things.” (Quran 4:32)*

Duderija notes that this verse emphasizes the importance of economic justice and gender equality. He argues that the Quran promotes a society in which both men and women are entitled to earn and possess wealth, and in which they are treated fairly and equally in matters of inheritance and property. By emphasizing that Allah knows all things, this verse also suggests that women's contributions and abilities should not be overlooked or undervalued.

Overall, Duderija's offers a nuanced and thoughtful approach to understanding the role of gender in Islamic scripture. By acknowledging the historical and social context in which the Quran appeared, and by emphasizing the importance of contextual and holistic analysis, Duderija seeks to promote a vision of Islam that values the full dignity and equality of all human beings, regardless of their gender.

### **Gender Sensitivity according to Amina Wadud**

Amina Wadud is another scholar of Islamic studies who has written extensively on the topic of gender and Islam. Like Adis Duderija, she offers a gender-sensitive interpretation of the Quran that challenges patriarchal interpretations and seeks to promote greater gender equality within Muslim communities.

According to Wadud, a gender-sensitive interpretation of the Quran requires recognition of the ways in which gender shapes our understanding of the text. She argues that traditional interpretations of the Quran have been dominated by male scholars who have largely ignored the perspectives and experiences of women. As a result, many Quranic verses that could be seen as promoting gender equality have been overlooked or downplayed.

Wadud emphasizes the importance of using a feminist lens when interpreting the Quran. She indicates that this requires an acknowledgement of the historical and social context in which the text emerged as well as an understanding of the ways in which gender intersects with other forms of oppression, such as race, class, and sexuality.

Wadud also suggests the need for critical thinking and engagement with the Quranic text. She argues that Muslim women should not simply accept patriarchal interpretations of the Quran. They should actively challenge these interpretations and seek out alternative perspectives. She encourages Muslim women to participate in the interpretive process and to use their own experiences and perspectives to inform their understanding of the text.

*“And their Lord answered them, ‘Never will I allow to be lost the work of any of you, be he male or female: you are members one of another’” (Quran 3:195).*

According to Wadud, this verse highlights the equal worth and dignity of men and women in the eyes of God. It tells that both men and women have a valuable role to play in society, and that their work and contributions are equally valued. Wadud argues that this verse challenges patriarchal norms that place greater value on the contributions of men and promotes a more inclusive and egalitarian understanding of human worth and dignity.

*“O mankind, indeed We have created you from male and female and made you peoples and tribes that you may know one another. Indeed, the most noble of you in the sight of Allah is the most righteous of you” (Quran 49:13).*

Wadud sees this verse as a call to celebrate and value diversity within the human community. She argues that the verse acknowledges the unique contributions and perspectives of both men and women and highlights the importance of mutual respect and understanding between different peoples and tribes. Wadud suggests that this verse challenges patriarchal norms that seek to erase or minimize differences between men and women and promotes a more inclusive and pluralistic vision of society.

By challenging patriarchal interpretations and promoting a more inclusive and egalitarian understanding of the Quranic message, Wadud seeks to create a more just and equitable society for all Muslims, regardless of their gender.

## Conclusion

A gender-sensitive interpretation of the Quran is crucial for promoting justice, equality, and fairness for individuals irrespective of their gender. It is essential to approach the interpretation of the Quran with sensitivity to gender issues as it is the primary source of Islamic guidance. Traditional interpretations have been patriarchal, prioritizing men's perspectives and disregarding women's experiences and voices. Islamic scholars Nayla Tabbara, Adis Duderija and Amina Wadud have made significant contributions to promote a gender-sensitive approach. They advocate for critical examination of traditional interpretations, recognition of the potential for gender bias, and emphasis on the importance of listening to women's experiences and perspectives. By promoting a vision of Islam that values the full dignity and equality of all human beings, they offer a nuanced and thoughtful approach to understanding the role of gender in Islamic scripture. It is crucial to challenge patriarchal interpretations continually and provide new interpretations that are more inclusive and equitable for both men and women. Through this process, we can build a more just and compassionate world that values the worth and dignity of all individuals, regardless of their gender.



“Life is not just a succession of events or experiences, helpful though many of them are. It is a search for the true, the good and the beautiful. It is to this end that we make our choices; it is for this that we exercise our freedom; it is in this -- in truth, in goodness, and in beauty -- that we find happiness and joy.”

— Pope Benedict XVI, World Youth Day, Sydney,

July 17, 2008



## **Faith is the Hope of Things Unseen**

By Ronald Antony SJ

The Letter to the Hebrews in the Bible says, 'Faith is the realization of what is hoped for, and evidence of things not seen.' (Heb 11:1) Although Abraham didn't have any evidence to claim that God would not allow his son to be sacrificed, yet he had faith in God who had promised him that He would bring his generations through his son. Hence, he was obedient to God and surrendered himself to God's providence and will. This leap of faith which hopes for a life in grace after surrendering to the uncertain reality is what I experienced in the lives of the people of Afghanistan during two years of regency with the Jesuit Refugee Services (JRS) in that country.

### **Living in the Presence**

The people of Afghanistan go through a lot of uncertainties in every sphere of their lives. Their faith helps them to encounter this uncertainty. It helps them aspire to a peaceful and prosperous life even when they don't see any trace of peace in their country. Economic and political stability, unity, freedom of expression, equal opportunities, safety, health, education and livelihood are their aspirations for a better life. They understand and accept the uncertainty of life and know that they cannot afford to lose their present opportunities. I understood this reality of life from a young girl of 12 years of age.

JRS had an English program for girls in a small girls' school located in a valley which is home to a group of some 28 villages. Around 60 girls were studying in the evening English class after school hours. One of those girls was from a faraway village and had to walk for almost two hours to reach the school. We came to know that almost all the girls were not having lunch after school hours and waited for almost two hours for the English class. To avoid this inconvenience, we thought of changing the timing of the English class to early morning so that the girls could attend both the English

class and their school in the morning and reach home for lunch. But this would be difficult for the girl coming from a faraway village as she may have had to start around 4 am in the cold weather and walk through the hilly terrain to attend the classes. We thought that she might discontinue the classes. But we later found that she was still regular in attending the class. When Fr Linto SJ, then Program Director of JRS, asked her how she reached the school, she said, “Father, before I used to walk for two hours to reach the school. Now, I run for an hour to reach the school.” In Afghanistan, opportunities are rare and uncertain and hence they cannot be given up. This girl could not wait for another term as no one could be sure what may happen the next day.

### **A Gift to be Shared**

Faith teaches people in situations as in Afghanistan not to hold onto life for themselves alone. The experience of uncertainty helps them to live in solidarity with their neighbours who also experience the agony of uncertainty. This forces them to seek greater meaning in life, to go beyond themselves and to share the gift of life with others. I learnt this from many girls like Raihana.

Raihana was a student of English in one of the education centres of the Jesuit Refugee Services in Afghanistan. One day, she met the JRS Project Director Fr Linto SJ with a copy of a request letter to start English classes in her village with a signed recommendation from her school headmaster and a few signatures of the *shura* leaders, leaders of her village community. At that time, Raihana was studying in the 10<sup>th</sup> grade. It was at of her initiative that she reached out to the leaders of her village to help in the process of initiating an English educational programme in the village so that the villagers could benefit from it. She had made similar requests to the Director even before. However, the difference was that this time, she offered to be a teacher in the proposed education centre. She had been striving harder to improve her language for more than two years just to offer to be a teacher for the girls of her village, some of whom were her classmates.

Fr Linto asked Raihana why she was so passionate about the education program in her village that she made every possible effort to contact the leaders and get their support. She replied that it was to give hope to the dreams of the girls in her village. Raihana's village is located on the hillside. It takes two hours of walking through unpaved roads, climbing uphill and downhill, to reach the JRS Education centre that is located in a nearby town. And so, most of the girls from Raihana's village are not allowed to travel that long. Hence, she felt herself to be fortunate for having got the opportunity to study. Despite the challenges, she continued to study hard to improve her language skills so that she could share the knowledge she had gained with her friends in her village.

Seeing the vision of the young girl of making a difference in her village through education, Fr Linto agreed to visit her village and analyze the possibility of an education program there with the support of the community leaders.

The next day, when Fr Linto visited the village, all the leaders of the community, as well as other inhabitants of the village, gathered for the meeting. Raihana had gone to every leader in the community the previous evening and made all the arrangements for the meeting. She had planned the various ways in which the village people could contribute to the initiative in terms of classrooms and other physical arrangements. Some of her friends came forward to be teachers. Thus, with the support of these young schoolgirls, an English education program was started in the village under Raihana's leadership.

Raihana is just one of many young girls who have greater dreams and aspirations to make their country a better place. I have always felt that every such child I met is a servant-leader in the making. I see a glimpse of Christ in them. They dream of getting an education, not just for themselves. They seek education and other such opportunities to equip themselves so that they can serve their communities and transform the lives of others. They have seen immense suffering, endured huge challenges and hurdles on

their path and have experienced uncertainties in every step they take. Despite this, they continue to dream bigger and hope for a brighter future. No wonder girls' schools are targeted and bombs are exploded in Afghanistan by elements who don't want girls to advance. But despite deliberate threats to their life, these girls have always returned to school with a strong will to achieve their dreams.

Under the present Taliban regime in Afghanistan, girls are not allowed to go to schools, colleges or work. This has shattered the hopes of many. However, the girls have not abandoned their desire to learn. They seek knowledge through the Internet. Some brave people risk their lives to run underground schools to cater to these girls' aspirations. Opportunities to gain an education this way are limited: most Afghani girls are not fortunate to have access to books, the Internet, or underground schools. But I hope that girls in Afghanistan will one day transform the sad state of their country.

### **Raising Again After Falling**

In this broken world, when people are butchered and exploited and treated without human dignity, little acts of mercy, solidarity and compassion can sow new seeds of hope. The women of Afghanistan gave me hope in humanity through their faith, love, and purity of heart. In May 2020, a hospital run by Doctors Beyond Borders in Kabul was attacked by a group of terrorists. This happened during the Muslim fasting month of Ramzan. More than 50 people died and 100 or so were injured in this incident. During the attack, the terrorists entered the maternity ward and opened fire at young mothers and newly-born children: Twenty-four young mothers and newly-born children lost their lives.

This incident disturbed me. I couldn't understand how human beings can even think of shooting newly-born children and young mothers. It was horrifying that someone who claimed to be a believer in God could indulge in such evil, especially during a fasting month that is considered to be a holy period.

But good must overcome evil. The day after the attack, there was a long queue of lactating mothers waiting to feed the newly-born children who had lost their mothers in the attack. Some of these mothers had lost their newborns in the same incident. Their unconditional love was stronger than the guns of the cowards who had butchered innocents the day before. It was a resurrection of love, hope and kindness. It mirrored the resurrection of Christ, indicating that hate can never win the battle over love.

### **Experience of Oneness in the Divine**

The Letters to the Hebrews further says, “By faith, we understand that the universe was ordered by the word of God so that what is visible came into being through the invisible.” (Heb 11:3) This world still has hope. Humanity can indeed be transformed for the better as we work to establish the Kingdom of God on earth. Through even little acts of goodness, we can work towards realizing the dream of becoming the children of God as brothers and sisters in love, going beyond all boundaries that seem to divide us.

There are various things which separated me from the people of Afghanistan. I am a Christian. I am an Indian. My cultural values and lifestyle are different. My language is different. I was not born among the people of Afghanistan. I haven't faced the uncertainties and violence they face every day of their lives. However, I still felt close to them, as a fellow human person. I felt solidarity with them as a brother. I felt part of them in their suffering and uncertainties. I felt one with them in their faith, love and hope.

This bond that I feel in the deepest part of my soul tells me that we are the same and are created in love and love alone. Hence, we as human beings have the obligation to stand for all people who are neglected, marginalized, exploited, and afflicted by violence and robbed of their dignity as human beings.

## Film Review

### Mission: Joy – Finding Happiness in Troubled Times

By Cristóbal Serrán-Pagán y Fuentes

The release in 2021 of this inspiring documentary film from *Netflix* is a follow-up to the *New York Times* bestseller *The Book of Joy: Lasting Happiness in a Changing World*. In this 1 hour and 24 minute film we see Douglas Abrams interviewing the Dalai Lama and Archbishop Emeritus Desmond Tutu, two immensely significant spiritual leaders.

Born in 1935, the Dalai Lama was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1989 for his efforts to promote peace and compassion in Tibet and around the globe. Desmond Tutu was born in 1931 in South Africa and died in 2021 in Cape Town. Like the Dalai Lama, the Anglican Archbishop won the Nobel Peace Prize, in 1984, for his role as a peacemaker during the apartheid regime in South Africa. President Nelson Mandela appointed Tutu as Chair of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, hoping to move the country forward after decades of civil unrest and brutal oppression.

This film was shot in 2015 in Dharamsala, India, after Archbishop Tutu and his daughter Mpho Tutu van Furth travelled to India to celebrate the Dalai Lama's 80<sup>th</sup> birthday. It beautifully captures what happened once the two friends were able to finally meet during a whole week. In this film, we see how the two great spiritual leaders coming from two different historical contexts of oppression and religious upbringing form a strong compassionate bond of friendship that serves them well by offering to a troubled world their own practical guidelines on how to live a more meaningful and joyful life in the midst of occupations, segregations, and diasporas. They share their daily rituals of prayer and meditation and explain to us how integral these contemplative practices are for cultivating the seeds of joy in a fragmented world and in a wounded soul.

To me, the most impressive quality of this documentary film is the fact that the directors allowed the two spiritual giants to be

spontaneous, showing their humour, teasing each other, and above all, displaying intimate moments of mutual trust and respect not just as religious leaders but as true friends. Playful and informal, they break stereotypes and religious protocols. Both of them experienced human oppression and foreign occupations in their homelands but they did not allow these traumatic experiences dictate how they will respond with joy to episodes of real sadness, pain, and suffering.

The full humanity of the two protagonists is now recorded for the whole world to see and to learn some important lessons, such as of humility, forgiveness, kindness, compassion, love, and joy, from their memorable interfaith friendship.

One of the most important scenes in the film is when they both are attending a birthday party at the Tibetan Children's School, and suddenly a Tibetan girl starts crying after telling her story of fleeing Tibet. At this precise moment, we see the leadership in action of these two spiritual giants. The Dalai Lama offers her courage in her storytelling while Desmond Tutu embraces her and brings her personal comfort. Out of compassion, the two friends serve well the needs of the girl and the whole community surrounding her.

I can see why many people will enjoy watching this film when these two religious leaders are speaking from their hearts, playing and teasing each other like children do out of the most profound respect and mutual admiration for each other. The film directors had the courageous vision to capture this rare spiritual friendship unveiled before our eyes between a Tibetan Buddhist monk and an Anglican Archbishop. The film teaches us that compassionate joy is something that we must always work on and cultivate in our daily activities. The film proves how these two spiritual leaders have gained the respect from people around the globe by displaying acts of compassionate understanding and good humour through their lives. Their selfless service to humanity is a great example of how happy and free we can become when we are willing to work in harmony with each other, instead of going against each other as harsh competitors.

One major contribution of the storytelling in this film is the fact that the shared spirituality of joy of the Dalai Lama and Archbishop Tutu is backed up by the latest scientific studies on the art of mindfulness and of being happy and joyful amid troubled times. Here we see Sonja Lyubomirsky explaining the latest research that joy and happiness have on people facing life's challenges. She is a Russian-born American professor in the Department of Psychology at the University of California, Riverside, and author of *The How of Happiness: A Scientific Approach to Getting the Life You Want*. She is a behavioural scientist who believes that in performing selfless acts of compassion and kindness for others we can attain higher degrees of happiness in this life.

There are great lessons to learn when we see the Dalai Lama and the Archbishop dancing, laughing and playing like children. This is what spiritual joy in troubled times can offer to the whole world: an invitation to become more humane in building stronger and deeper relationships in all walks of life by serving others to become enlightened or by helping them to become one with God. It is always a choice, no matter which tradition we might follow.

The Dalai Lama and Desmond Tutu provide us with many examples of how we can find meaning by serving others. They both share a universal sense of responsibility to make the world a happier place to live in. This comes out of a profound and noble conviction of being humble seekers after Truth but with a great sense of purpose and mission using laughter, joy, playfulness, and humility. Both the Dalai Lama and the Archbishop claim to be just students and beginners in learning about important lessons in life, even though to many people believe they are already in the pantheon of enlightened and compassionate beings with a touch of being prophetic witnesses and servants to the Infinite Source of Life that reenergizes and renews each creative force in nature. By becoming the Buddha nature that it is already present in each being (*dharmakaya*) and by finding God or the Cosmic Christ in all things, we bring this new transformative energy to the whole world. As Tutu puts it so well, "The goal is not just to create joy for ourselves but to be



a reservoir of joy, an oasis of peace, a pool of serenity that can ripple out to all those around you.” Similarly, in Buddhism they teach the four unlimited ones: equanimity (*upekkha*), love (*metta*), compassion (*karuna*), and joy (*mudita*). This ultimate joy is shared by enlightened Buddhists and Christians alike in spreading the love and compassion that are so urgently needed in times like ours where hatred, selfishness, greed, avarice, and the rest of the deadly sins bring many of us down to the hellish states of being in the world. But there is a way out in experiencing the infinite joy of being brothers and sisters, especially in a world of fragmentation which is hungry for a more real connectivity experience that you are in me, and I am in you. This is what both the XIV Dalai Lama and Archbishop Desmond Tutu transmit with their human and warm radiance.

I strongly recommend watching this documentary film to anyone interested in interfaith dialogue or pastoral theology. It is also a great means for learning, from two spiritual masters, the art of cultivating spiritual friendship and human compassion. I am positive that any open-minded person will agree that this movie has achieved what many bad episodes in the history of religions have failed in bringing to our attention—which is none other than bringing to the world a spirituality of joy through humour and divine playfulness.



“The Second Vatican Council documents, to which we must return, freeing them from a mass of publications which instead of making them known have often concealed them, are a compass in our time, too, that permits the barque of the church to put out into the deep in the midst of storms or on calm and peaceful waves, to sail safely and to reach her destination.”

— Pope Benedict XVI, General audience, Oct. 10, 2012

## **Summer Course on Islamic studies and Christian-Muslim Relations**

By Ashley Pereira SJ

The Summer course on Islamic studies and Christian-Muslim relations held at the Henry Martyn Institute, Hyderabad, from the 1st to the 5th of May, 2023, was organised by Rev. Dr. Samuel Packiam, the director of HMI and coordinated by Fr. Joseph Victor Edwin SJ. The faculty members were knowledgeable and generous while the staff was hospitable. Participants comprised of a diverse group from the Church of South India, National Council of Churches, Indian members from South India and Sri Lanka along with four Jesuit Scholastics. This course emphasized the importance of humble and open-minded dialogue in interfaith relations over proud and presumptuous polemics. While dealing with various aspects of the Islamic faith and the logic behind them, the course beautifully highlighted what it means to be a Christian or Muslim at heart, because the heart level experience is what unites us all.

The course changed my perspective about my Muslim sisters and brothers as it helped me step into their shoes. I am grateful to Fr. Edwin for this wonderful and enlightening opportunity. Christian-Muslim relations in India have a complex history, influenced by various factors, including religion, politics, and social dynamics. India is home to a significant population of both Christians and Muslims, who coexist and interact with each other in diverse ways across the country. In many regions, they have coexisted peacefully, sharing cultural practices, traditions, and even places of worship. Like any diverse country, India has experienced instances of communal tensions between different religious communities, including Christians and Muslims. These tensions can be attributed to a range of factors, including historical grievances, socio-political issues, economic disparities, and identity politics. Despite challenges, there have been efforts to foster interfaith dialogue and cooperation between Christians and Muslims in

India. Many organizations and individuals work towards promoting understanding, peace, and communal harmony, emphasizing shared values and common goals. This point was very well presented during the course.

It is important to note that the dynamics of Christian-Muslim relations can vary across different regions of India. Local contexts, demographics, and historical factors play a significant role in shaping these relationships, which were explained by Fr. Edwin. Thus, it is essential to recognize that the Christian-Muslim relationship in India is diverse and multifaceted. While instances of tension and conflict exist, there are also numerous examples of cooperation, dialogue, and peaceful coexistence between the two communities.

Visits to different places during the course helped us to understand various aspects of the Islamic religion. My perspective of Islam and Muslims has changed after learning about their reverence for their scriptures, their discipline with regard to their religious practices, a very practical spirituality, the genuine desire for being in God's presence, the sincerity in seeking union with God, obedient submission to God's will and openness for dialogue to attain peace and brotherhood despite differences and challenges in comprehending some aspects of our faith. I gained a lot of knowledge regarding religious, mystical, historical, traditional and cultural aspects of Muslim society and Islamic scriptures and prayer methods. I am convinced that humble dialogue is the most effective way to a deeper discovery of God and true love of neighbour, rather than presumptuous and proud polemics. My understanding of the diversity of God-experience has broadened, I am now more convinced than ever that a personal heart-level God experience is what is required: unique, probably different for each one, yet uniting at a very profound level all people of goodwill as fellow children of God.

## **Fraternity and peace: Global call for unity, transformation**

By Midhun J Francis SJ

**Rome, June 12, 2023:** The World Meeting on Human Fraternity, held under the theme “Not Alone,” was attended by influential figures and Nobel laureates. The June 10 event, organized by the Vatican Foundation in collaboration with St. Peter’s Basilica and the Dicastery for the Service of Integral Human Development, aimed to promote fraternity, dialogue, and peace.

One of the highlights of the gathering was Pope Francis’ inspirational speech, emphasizing the importance of fraternity in building a harmonious world. Cardinal Pietro Parolin also expressed optimism about the Pope’s health and his eagerness to resume his work. This article provides an overview of the event and highlights the key messages from Pope Francis’ speech.

In his address to the participants, Pope Francis stressed the significance of fraternity as the foundation of collective journey towards peace. Drawing from the words of St. Francis of Assisi, he highlighted that God is present where a sense of brotherhood exists. The Pope also stressed the need to move beyond seeing others as mere numbers or objects to be exploited and instead recognize their inherent dignity and worth.

The pontiff emphasized that addressing the world’s conflicts and divisions requires more than superficial adjustments; it necessitates a profound spiritual and social commitment centered on fraternity.

Concrete gestures and shared decisions are essential to cultivating a culture of peace. Pope Francis urged each individual to reflect on what they can contribute to their brothers and sisters, encouraging acts of reconciliation, prayer, assistance to those in need, and spreading words of peace.

The fragility and preciousness of fraternity were highlighted by the Pope, underscoring how it acts as an anchor of truth amidst

conflicts. By invoking the image of brothers and sisters, Pope Francis reminded the world that the feeling of fraternity is stronger than hatred and violence. It unites humanity through shared pain and serves as a catalyst for countering falsehoods. The Pope called for continuous efforts to reject war and uphold peace in the name of God and every individual aspiring to a harmonious world.

Pope Francis underscored that embracing fraternity leads to transformative changes in policies and societal values. Putting the person's welfare above profit and prioritizing the preservation of the environment becomes paramount. The Pope advocated for just wages, welcoming attitudes, hope, justice, and the healing of past injustices through encounters between victims and perpetrators. By choosing fraternity, societies can shift their focus from personal gain to the common good, fostering a future rooted in shared humanity.

Among those present were former Colombian president Juan Manuel Santos who expressed hope that dialogue and cooperation among nations would prevail over conflicts. Former Costa Rican president Oscar Arias Sanchez drew attention to the urgent need for negotiation in war-torn regions, such as Ukraine. Bengali economist Muhammad Yunus emphasized the importance of reevaluating global paths and redesigning our direction as a society.

Yemeni Nobel Peace Prize winner Tawakkol Karman emphasized the importance of amplifying messages of fraternity, fostering a deeper understanding of its true meaning. She called for support to those sacrificing and struggling for freedom, justice, democracy, and peace, rather than favouring leaders who undermine these values.

The meeting served as a platform to nurture a culture of fraternity, dialogue, and peace. The event brought together diverse personalities and youth from around the world to engage in meaningful discussions and collaborative efforts towards a more harmonious future. The meeting ended with a commitment to ongoing dialogue and action, with participants pledging to take the messages of fraternity and peace back to their communities and work towards positive change.

To ensure the sustainability of the momentum generated by the event, the organizers announced the establishment of the Fraternity Fund. The fund aims to support initiatives that promote dialogue, understanding, and cooperation among individuals and communities, fostering a culture of peace and solidarity.

Additionally, a series of follow-up activities were announced, including regional conferences, interfaith dialogues, and educational programs focused on promoting fraternity and peace. These initiatives aim to engage a broader audience and encourage grassroots movements that can make a significant impact at the local level.

The event also highlighted the importance of leveraging technology and digital platforms to connect individuals and communities worldwide. It emphasized the need for responsible and ethical use of technology to foster unity, empathy, and understanding, while also addressing the challenges and risks associated with its misuse.

The meeting served as a powerful platform to promote fraternity, dialogue, and peace. It not only sparked important conversations but laid the groundwork for concrete actions and initiatives to promote fraternity and peace.

From *Matters India*



“It is theologically and anthropologically important for woman to be at the center of Christianity. Through Mary, and the other holy women, the feminine element stands at the heart of the Christian religion.”

- Pope Benedict XVI

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