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## **Dialogue Between Islam and Christianity & It's Impact on Global Peace**

### Introduction

In the words of Annemarie Schimmel , the great contemporary Islamologist and Orientalist, "Among all the religions which Christianity had to confront and deal with, Islam was both misunderstood and attacked most intensely. For more than a millennium Islam seemed to be a major-if not the major- threat for the people of Europe, and this feeling has contributed to the fact that Islam and those who confessed it, the Muslims, were regarded as arch enemies of Christianity and Western Civilization. While Qur'an, the sacred-book of Muslims, as we shall examine later on, amongst the "People of the Book " has the most friendly view

towards the Christians and says: "Thou wilt surely find the nearest of them in love to believers are those who say we are Christians, that is because some of them are priests and monks, and they wax not proud, and when they hear what has been sent down to the Messenger, thou sees their eyes overflow with tears because of the Truth they recognize..." .

Also, the two great religious traditions of Islam and Christianity, with each of them having about twenty percent of world population as their followers and each establishing a great civilization in the East and the West respectively, have had a long history of contact since the birth of Islam, most of which has been characterized by constructive interaction and scientific, cultural, economic, philosophical, and especially in recent centuries, technical and industrial relations, which has been beneficial not only to their respective societies, but to the mankind as a whole.

It should also be mentioned that, according to the assessment of scholars of religion, both Islam and Christianity are so-called "international" religions by nature, i.e. surpassing racial, and or geographical boundaries. In other works, they are not like, for example, Judaism that is a racially-based religion or, let's say, Shintoism which is a nationally or geographically- based religion. Obviously, the presence of such a characteristic in Christianity and Islam, which extends them far beyond the territories of their origin, has necessitated some kind of exchange and interaction outside their geographical boundaries. Sometimes this interaction has had a friendly and cooperative tone and some other times, a hostile and negative coloring, which we will discuss in more details later on.

1. Islamic term for so-called Abrahamic religions, especially Jewish and Christian Traditions

### **I. Christianity in Quran**

One of the main features of Islam and Qur'an is that belief in preceding "Prophets" and "Books" is considered a prerequisite to belief in the Prophet of Islam and the Holy Book of Qur'an. On the characteristics of "god-fearing people" Qur'an says "they are those who believe in what has been sent down to thee and what has been sent down before thee". Naturally, in such a context, Jesus the Christ and Gospels have a special place in Qur'an, to the extent that one full chapter of Qur'an is named after "Mary" (surat al-Maryam).

I have discussed "Christianity in Islam" in much details, in a separate book titled "An Introduction to the History of Religions in Qur'an". Here, it is worth mentioning that Qur'an begins the story of the life of Jesus the Christ by the life of Mary and states that she was amongst the "chosen" people of God, and that she guarded her virginity and so she got pregnant by the Spirit of God! and delivered Jesus unnaturally. On Jesus the Christ, Qur'an says that he was a "sign" of God and "prophet" since childhood, and was confirmed by the Holy Spirit, and possessed many miracles, and was of those Nearest to God and attested the Book before him (i.e. the Torah).

Anyhow, as we said before, the number of verses of Qur'an about Jesus the Christ is so many that even a brief reference to them in a short article is not possible.

Also, Qur'an considers Gospel, the sacred-book of Christians, containing guidance and light, and states that faith of the Disciples in God and in Jesus the Christ was because of God's inspiration, and describes the persons of Disciples as God's helpers and believers in Him. Furthermore, Qur'an asserts that Jesus the Christ was not crucified by his Jewish enemies and that they were mistaken in this and only a likeness of Jesus was shown to them, and that God Almighty raised Jesus up unto Himself.

Finally, Qur'an states that all the People of the Book, i.e. Christians and Jews, will believe in Jesus the Christ before passing away and that on the Day of Judgment, Jesus will be a witness against them all, a very amazing passage of Qur'an indeed. Also, as it was said before, amongst the followers of Semite or Abrahamic religions, Qur'an considers the Christians to be the nearest to the Muslims.

## **II. Historical Background**

Muslims trace back the history of Christians - Muslims contact to a Muslim trade caravan travelling through Syria and passing through a Christian monastery, whose abbot invited them because of Mohammad's presence in that caravan, whom the abbot had recognized by the "signs" of the new Prophet given in the Gospels. And also, later on, the emigration of a group of Muhammad's companions to Abyssinia, taking refuge in the just Christian ruler of that territory. In the words of W. Montgomery Watt: "The Arabs had many opportunities of contact with Christians and Jews. The Byzantine Empire, whose power and higher civilization they greatly admired, was Christian, and so was Abyssinia. Even in the Persian Empire Christianity was strong...".

This same point, i.e. contact between Arabs (Muslims) and Christians, has also been noticed by Annemarie Schimmel, she says: "Now and then in ancient Arabic poetry, Christian motifs appear: wandering monks, or the light that shines forth from a hermit cell. The country was situated in the sphere of influence of Byzanz and Persia, both trade partners of Meccans, and this facilitated contact with Jacobite, Melkite, and Nestorian Christians".

On one hand, the Holy Qur'an openly announces that the People of the Book know the (rightfulness of the) Prophet of Islam as they know their own sons, and that Jesus the Christ, when he was assigned to Israelites, while confirming the truthfulness of Taurat (Old Testament), gave the good news of a messenger who will come after him and whose name shall be Ahmad and, on the other hand, Qur'an states that the characteristics (or the prophecy of the coming) of the "unlettered" prophet had been mentioned in then existing scriptures.

Naturally, the exact meaning of these verses, and their historical denotations have long been discussed between Islamic and Christian theologians. According to Professor Annemarie Schimmel educated Muslims often consider modern biblical criticism to be proof of the Koranic statement that changes in both the Old and the New Testament have taken place.

Prophecies about the future appearance of Muhammad are found in several passages of the Bible, especially the promise that the "Paraklet" will come as a reference to Muhammad, for Sura 61.6 speaks of Ahmad "the highly praised one", in Greek perikletos, which Muslim scholars assume was intended by the term parakletos. This highly praised one, Ahmad or Muhammad (both

come from the same root) was to bring the full and finite revelation“.

Although it is not our intention to pursue this discussion into too much details, it is worth mentioning that although in recent years one of the clergies of the Qum Seminary has written a book titled "Ahmad, the promised one of Gospel" another scholar of the same seminary has written an article arguing that the term paraklet which has been discussed in four passages of the book John (in 14. 15-17; 14.25,26; 15.26&27; 16.5-15) has the same meaning of "consoler", and that there has been no displacement, intentional or unintentional, between the two terms, i.e. Perikletos and Parakletos. He then proceeds to say that other passages of the Old Testament, like this announcement of Moses to the Israelites that: "The Lord thy God will raise up into thee a Prophet from the midst of thee, of thy brethren, like unto me; unto him ye shall hearken" (Deuteronomy, chapter 18, verse 15), or this other statement that: "I will raise them up a Prophet from amongst their brethren, like unto thee, and will put my words in his mouth; and he shall speak unto them all that I shall command him. And it shall come to pass that whosoever will not hearken unto my words which he shall speak in my name, I will require it of him" (Deuteronomy, 18: 18-19) are giving the good news of the coming of Prophet Muhammad, because in these two passages it is announced that the promised prophet will be from "the brethren" of Israelites, which are Ismaelites, and not from amongst Israelites. As we read in the New Testament:

"And this is the record of John, when the Jews sent priests and Levites from Jerusalem to ask him, Who art thou? And he confessed, and denied not; but confessed, I am not the Christ. And they asked him, What then? Are you Elias? And he said, I am not.

Are you "that prophet"? And he answered, No. "(St. John, I. 19-20). This demonstrates that, from the view of the Jews living at the time of John and Jesus, "that prophet" of the Old Testament has been different from the Christ, because St. John answers that I am neither the Christ nor "that prophet" .

This long discourse shows that theological discussions on this subject have been going on between the Christians and Muslims since the early days of Islam. Also, setting the law of "Jizya", or the special tax of the "People of the Book" who live within Muslim communities, in Islam shows that since the dawn of Islam Jewish and Christian minorities have been present in the so called "Dar al-Islam" or abode of Islam.

It is also interesting to note that the wide and long presence of Christianity in the East, from Egypt, Iran, Iraq, Lebanon. etc. to other parts of Ottoman Empire and Muslim rule in the Middle East, Asia, and (at some juncture in history) Europe, and the same kind of presence of Islam in Christian West, including Europe and America and parts of Asia and the Middle East with a Christian majority, have inevitably caused a long history of interactions and exchanges of goods, and widespread scientific, cultural, trade, political, literary, social, architectural and other forms of cooperation, to the extent that some very distinguished and internationally renowned contemporize Muslim scholars hold that the scientific progress of the Christian West after the age of enlightenment (Renaissance) is largely indebted to Islamic science, and an other scholar points out that from the ninth to fifteenth century the domain of Islamic sciences was so vast that Gilbert, who became the archbishop of Rome and Pope in 999 had studied near Muslim scholars in Spain.

Alfred North Whitehead, the prominent English philosopher of twentieth century, whom a leading contemporary Shi'ite scholar praises as one of the most outstanding Western scholars of our times, holds that "the distinction separating the Byzantines and the Muhammadians-Islamic from the Romans is that the Romans were themselves deriving the civilizations which they spread. In their hands it assumed a frozen form. Thought halted, and literature copied. The Byzantines and the Muhammadians were themselves the civilization. Perhaps it comes to some people's minds that how such brilliant and advanced civilizations have entered into war and hegemonic policy during the course of the time and have turned part of their respective histories into periods of hostility, destruction, and hatred? Without engaging in a detailed discussion about the military expeditions of early Islam, the Crusades, colonialization of the Eastern nations by Western powers, and other examples of hostile relations between Islam and Christianity, one possible answer to the above question is that wherever violence, rudeness, terrorism and war have appeared in a religious culture / civilization, this has originated from ambitions and greedily desires of some religious leaders (clergies), rulers and men of power of those communities, and not from the genuine teachings of those traditions.

Obviously, as one can not contribute the violence and autocratic judgment of the Church against the reformists in the middle ages and the enlightenment period, or the extremist behavior of the crusaders in the Crusades, to the Jesus of Nazareth and the teachings of Gospels, the aberration and fanatics of Taliban (in Afghanistan) and the terrorism of the eleventh of September too can not be attributed to the teachings of Prophet Muhammad and the Holy Qur'an. Along the same line, the hostile political attitude of the West, especially United States, towards some Muslim countries



should not be misunderstood with the friendly and spiritual approach of the Church and the person of the Pope towards non-Christian countries and communities. Needless to say, the political apprehensions and social approaches of most Islamic countries at the present time are not a true demonstration of genuine Islamic beliefs and practices.

### **III. The Need for Dialogue**

Undoubtedly, the past confrontations, along with wrong information of the Christian community about Islam, has caused some misunderstanding and unpromising attitude of Christian Europe and America towards Islam and Muslim communities. On the other hand, there exists a similar misunderstanding and ignorance amongst some Muslim scholars and laities towards Christianity and its followers.

A quick review of the contemporary situation indicates that, on one hand, Muslim societies have been unable to provide a sound picture of Islam to non-Muslims and, on the other hand, at least some Christians (especially in Europe) have not been so eager to obtain a positive, realistic, and honorable picture of Islam. That is why, nowadays, an honest try to clear the past misunderstandings and misconceptions, and a tireless effort to pave the way for a better understanding and cooperation, based on the profound legacy of Islamic / Christian civilizations, is the need of our time and is a necessary tool to overcome different crises threatening mankind on the verge of twenty first century.

In our opinion, on the globalizing age of our time and the global village developed after the World War Two, and the vast progress

in the field of information technology and communication, the two so-called "international" religions of Islam and Christianity, which have a widespread presence in all five continents, have no choice but dialogue – or even trilogies among all three Abrahamic faiths – mutual understanding, positives exchange of ideas, cooperation, religious toleration and coexistence, all under the shadow of intellectuality and spirituality. Otherwise, they have to pursue the path of hostility, divergence, destructive criticism, rejection, and lastly lack of tolerance, all under the banner of vengeance and prejudices. In the intertwined world of today, there is no third alternative of staying away from world community and living independently.

At the dawn of twenty-first century, the world is so interdependent and attached that it can not afford to live collectively under a "clash of civilizations" approach. Therefore, Islam and Christianity, as two outstanding civilizations enjoining great Abrahamic religious heritage, can pioneer an approach based on intercivilizational dialogue, and fruitful cooperation, thus rejection the notion of clash and hostility. There is no question that any call to violence and confrontation, amongst some clergies, intellectuals, or politicians of either camp should be considered as a non-religious, if not unreligious, attempt trying to put a religious tradition at the service of violence and radicalism and so should be abandoned promptly. On the positive impact and outcome of the Islamic civilization, Alfred North whitehead says: "In the last few hundred years, European races have been apt to forget the greatness of the Near East, whose populations, with no predecessors to guide them, carried mankind from the stage of semi-barbarism only half-erect from the soil, to peaks of civilized life, in art, in religion, and in adventure, which remains unsurpassed". Such kinds of ignorance and misconceptions can be corrected only in an atmosphere of

civilizational dialogue, building a culture of mutual understanding and respect. Respect to the other people's beliefs, customs, and traditions. If, in the past history of mankind, such an atmosphere of toleration and interfaith dialogue was to some extent non-existent, and dogmatism and obstinacy were prevailing in the minds and thoughts of men of power and religious authority, today, in the light of new trends and developments, interreligious and inter-civilization dialogue is a dominant trend and is culminating in a new "pluralistic" mentality and approach.

Also, one should not be disappointed due to yet limited spread of this approach, because this new outlook, in its recent form, is not yet hundred years old and so, like many newly developed issues such as comparative religious studies, religious pluralism, globalization of culture, etc., has time to strike root and spread. The role of the true believers, reformists, and religious clerics and intellectuals, within both Christian and Islamic traditions, as the advocates of two supra-national and supra - racial great traditions comprising almost half of the world population and striving for the betterment of human condition, is to prevent any kind of discourse not based on interfaith dialogue and understanding and mutual appreciation and cooperation, to prevail the religious, political, and cultural atmosphere between various nations and communities, though there are always some extremist groups and individuals that, for special benefits and purposes, pursue different goals and objectives.

Fortunately, the visible abundance of the centers for religious studies and inter-religious dialogue, especially in Europe and America, which are the cradle of Christian civilization, and in the Middle East and Asia and elsewhere, and different seminars and conferences celebrated in recent years in this respect - the present

conference being one of them - indicate that the prevailing trend in both Islam and Christian camps is in the right direction.

Nowadays, in the Islamic / Shi'ite community of Iran, there are quite a few active centers for religious studies and intercivilizational dialogue which promise a better understanding of Christianity and the Western / Christian values in the future.