

MUSLIM-CHRISTIAN RELATIONS: REINVENTING THE COMMON GROUND TO SUSTAIN A PEACEFUL COEXISTENCE IN THE GLOBAL ERA*

M. Amin Abdullah

State Islamic University Yogyakarta Indonesia

Introduction

In the year of 2007 and beyond, the community of the world religions has one more an international document concerning the Muslim-Christian relation, namely *A Common Word Between Us and You*, an open letter addressed to the Pope and Christians leaders, by 138 Muslim scholars coming from all over the world of Muslim communities. Together with the document of the Second Vatican Council, *Nostra Aetate*, these two documents are considered as a major change in the human history, especially in the world religions history, at least in the level of an available written document from Christianity and Islam. A historical document that can lead both Christians and Muslims to work better in the future for the common good of society.

Finding common ground between Muslims and Christians is not simply a matter for polite ecumenical dialogue between honorable selected religious leaders. All adherents of Islam and Christianity all over the world should carefully and seriously read and study the documents, especially those who are community and religious leaders living in the grass roots level and even the politician, member of parliament in the country, teachers and lectures in the university. The Christianity and Islam are the largest and the second largest religions in the world and in history. Christians and Muslims reportedly make up over a third and over a fifth of humanity respectively. Together they make up more than 55 % of the world's population, making the relationship between these two religious communities the most important factor in contributing to meaningful peace around the world. If Muslims and Christians are not at peace, the world cannot be at peace.

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The challenge of humanity today does not only come from the terrible weaponry of the modern world, global warming and environmental crisis but also comes from the intended or unintended impact of promoting the idea the clash of civilization by Huntington's thesis in 1990, which is in essence is the clash between Christian and Muslim civilizations. Today, with Muslims and Christians intertwined everywhere as never before, no side can unilaterally win a conflict between more than half of the world's inhabitants. Thus our common future is at stake, the very survival of the world itself is perhaps at stake.

Love of God and Love of The Neighbour

A careful study on the Bible and Qur'an, as the document of *A Common Word between Us and You*¹ tells us, delineates that these two religions similarly emphasize the primacy of Loving God and Loving the neighbour. These principles are found over and over again in the sacred texts of Islam and Christianity The Unity of God, the necessity of love for Him, and the necessity of love of the neighbour is thus the common ground between Islam and Christianity. The following are only a few examples:

Of God's Unity, God says in the Holy Qur'an: "He is God, the One ! God, the Self-Sufficient Besought of all!" (Al-Ikhlās, 112: 1-2).

Of the necessity of love for God, God says in the Holy Qur'an: "So invoke the Name of thy Lord and devote thyself to Him with a complete devotion" (Al-Muzammil, 73:38).

Of the necessity of love for the neighbour, the Prophet Muhammad said: "None of you has faith until you love for your neighbour what you love for yourself."

In the New Testament, Jesus Christ said: "Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is One. / And you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind, and with all your strength. This is the first commandment. / And the second, like it, is this: "You shall love your neighbour as yourself." There is no other commandment greater than these.' (Mark 12: 29-31)

¹ *A Common Word*, Halal Books Australia, 2008

There are still many other verses in the Holy Qur'an and the Holy Bible recorded in that open letter addressed to Pope and the sayings of the prophet Muhammad and the prophet Jesus which are parallel, not to say that those sayings are the same, which clearly underline the necessity of love for God and love for neighbour. It is the duty of every Muslim and Christians to go and to consult the verses of their Holy Book and the saying of Moses², Jesus, Muhammad and other religious seers of the past and highlight their common commitment to monotheism and responsible lifestyles connecting humans with their Creator and with one another. The Qur'an commands Muslims to invite the followers of Moses and Jesus to help them identify common grounds and promote cooperation for doing good and preventing harm. The Qur'an commands: "Say, O People of the Book (followers of Moses and Jesus)! Come to common terms (ground; word) between you and us, that we will worship none but God, that we will not associate partners with Him, that we erect not from ourselves patrons other than God" (Al-'Imran, 3:64)

The "family resemblance", to use Wittgenstein's terminology, of Christianity and Islam is not merely on that two issues. It is more wide and deep as one may suppose. Dr Kenneth Atkinson tells us that there are at least eight areas of 'family resemblance' between Christianity and Islam³ The first is that Christianity and Islam emerged from the same cultural sphere in the Middle East. Both claim Abraham as their spiritual ancestor. The Christian and Islamic cultural, historical and religious traditions all emanate from the same geographical and historical source. Second, Christianity and Islam are religions of ethical monotheism. Both claim that there is only one loving, just God who is the source and sustainer of creation, and who expect humans to love one another. Third, Christianity and Islam are historical religions. Both believe that God acts through history.

Fourth, Christianity and Islam are religions of revelation. Christianity and Islam teach that God has communicated or revealed something of God's own self and will in special ways through particular persons for the edification and salvation of humanity. Fifth, both traditions teach that revelation comes through two special vehicles: scripture

² Particularly for Jews and Muslims relations, see Firestone, Reuven, *Children of Abraham: An Introduction to Judaism for Muslims*, The American Jewish Committee & Ktav Publishing House, Inc., Hoboken, NJ., 2001, 237-40

³ Atkinson, Kenneth "Introduction", Joey Green (Ed.), *Jesus and Muhammad: The Parallel Sayings*, Seastone, Ulysses Press, Berkeley, California, 2003, xiv-xv.

and prophet. Sixth, Christianity and Islam are both religions of the Book. Followers of both faiths look to their scripture for guidance. Seventh, Prophets are central to both Christianity and Islam. The Christian community considers Jesus part of the ancient Israelite succession of prophets. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus discusses the Jewish Scriptures and emphasizes their relevance. He stresses that his teachings do not conflict with earlier Jewish revelation, but are continuation of the ancient prophetic teachings of the Hebrew Bible. Like Jesus, Muhammad taught that his own ministry was a continuation of what came before Jesus and Muhammad stressed their connection with previous revelation, which they considered still valid (Qur'an: 3: 84).

Eighth, Many Christian as well as Muslims will be surprised to learn that Muslims view Christianity in much the same way Christians regard Judaism. Christianity considers itself a continuation of the message spoken by the prophets in the Hebrew Bible. Christianity therefore accepts the Hebrew Bible as a book that still speaks to contemporary Christians. Likewise, Muslims consider the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament to be prophetic revelations that speak to contemporary Muslims. Muhammad made it clear that he considered the Hebrew Bible and New Testament sacred scripture when he said: "I believe in whatever Scripture God has sent down" (Al-Shura: 15). Islam recognizes the validity of other prophetic teachings, since these earlier Jewish and Christian revelations speak of the same God worshipped by Muslims.

How do we read the Holy Scripture: inclusivist or exclusivist type of reading?

From the above comparative narration, whether normative-textual-scriptural or empirical-historical narration, it seems it is very easy for the Christians and for Muslims to read their own scripture and they will not find any difficulties to read Torah, Bible and Qur'an. That easy type of reading scripture commonly known as the inclusivist type of reading. This type of reading is optimistic type of reading the scripture. Not all the adherents of religion, especially those who are in position as religious leaders, are able to read their scripture as the above exemplified reading. Realistically, the proponent of that type of reading is seriously challenged and severely attacked by the proponents of its opposite type reading the scripture in exclusivist type of reading. For that difficulty and

controversy in reading a scripture, we have to be carefully aware in facing that difficulty in initiating a dialogue among the adherents of Abrahamic religions.⁴

One of the larger problems facing participants in Christian-Muslim relations is the interpretation of certain Biblical and Qur'anic verses which are generally interpreted in highly exclusivist ways and often cited by the opponents of dialogue. This problem is too serious to be neglected. The challenge from the exclusivist type of reading scripture, if not dealt properly, will lead to a deadlock and impasse. The evil and hatred, sinfulness, and even massacres and other horrible crimes have been perpetrated in the name of each of these religions due to the conflict between these two types of reading holy text and scripture. The purpose to delineate this issue here is to imagine the ways in which a new matrix for dialogue which is more fruitful and more grounded in orthodox/mainstream tradition than those currently available. Let us begin with a review of these verses and then move on to envision the possibility of having a new matrix of dialogue in effort to reinvent the common ground between the adherents of Abrahamic religions. And after being familiar with the serious difficulties confronted by the adherents of Abrahamic religions in reading their own scripture and the scripture of other, then I will move to see the contribution of Fethullah Gulen in breaking this serious difficulty toward building a new matrix in having interfaith and intra-faith dialogue in the real global era.

It is obvious that Qur'an and Bible do not only contain verses which clearly declare the divine ordainment of religious diversity, advice to engage in dialogue, and the presence of piety and righteousness in religions other than Islam as mentioned above. It also contains polemical verses. For example Qur'an says:

O ye who believe! Take not the Jews and the Christians as *auliya'* (friends, protectors, helpers.) They are friends but *auliya'* of each other. And if any amongs you takes them (as *auliya'*), then surely he is one of them. Verly, Allah guides not those people who are the *Zalimun* (wrong-doers and unjust) (al-Maidah: 5:51)

And the Jews say: Uzair (Ezra) is the son of Allah, and the Christians say: The Messiah is the son of Allah. That is their saying with their mouths, resembling the

⁴ Ayyoob, Mahmood, *Dirasaat fi al-'Alaqaat al-Masihyyah al-Islamiyyah*, Markaz al-Dirasaat al-Masihyyah al-Islamiyyah, Lebanon, 2000, 205-10.

saying of those who disbelieved aforetime. Allah's curse be on them, how they are deluded away from the truth! (al-Taubah, 9:30)

A common radically exclusivist interpretation of these verses is that Jews and Christians are corrupted peoples practicing corrupted traditions of worship and belief. As such, they can never be trusted to be "friends or protectors" to the believers. Moreover, these peoples are understood to be the enemies of the faithful since God himself "fights them" (*qatalahumu llahu*).

The New Testament has its own fair share of verses which have conventionally been interpreted in highly exclusivist ways. Such verses include are those that: Present Jesus as the 'one (and only) mediator' between God and humanity (1 Tim 2: 5); that there is 'no other name under heaven' by which persons can be saved (Acts 4: 12); that 'no one comes to the Father except through me [i.e., Jesus] (John 14: 6); that Jesus is the only begotten Son of God (John 1: 14); and that whoever sees him sees the Father (John 14: 7). Hence Jesus is viewed as the only one who truly and fully reveals God. It is, in part, on the basis of verses such as these that Jesus is claimed to be the particular and unique savior of the world.⁵

What the traditions of exclusivist interpretation of both these verses have in common is that they tend to be uninformed from within as well as from without. By "informed from within", according to a young Indonesian Muslim scholar, Dr Syafa'atun Almirzanah, means that they are usually unwilling to listen to the alternative interpretative possibilities from within their own tradition. While "uninformed from without," means they are usually articulated with little to no experience of genuine encounter with the other, or if there is experience of communication and encounter with the other, it is short-lived and highly negative⁶

⁵ See this discussion in Knitter, Paul, *No Other Name? A Critical Survey of Christian Attitudes Toward the World Religions*, New York: Maryknoll Orbis Books, 1985; Knitter, Paul, "The World Religion and the Finality of Christ: A Critique of Hans Kung's On Being A Christian," in *Interreligious Dialogue*, Richard W Rousseau, ed., Ridge Row Press, 1981; Kung, Hans, et al., *Christianity and the World Religions, Path of Dialogue with Islam, Hinduism and Buddhism*, New York: Doubleday, 1982; Young, Frances, "A Cloud of Witness," in *The Myth of God Incarnate*, John Hick, ed. London: SCM Press, 1977.

⁶ Almirzanah, Syafa'atun, *Path to Dialogue: Learning from Great Masters*, La Convivencia Center for Human Rights and Religious Values and International Institute of Islamic Thought, Yogyakarta, 2009, 192

In the midst of confronting this very difficult issue, Muslims need another clear example and role model from their own Muslim coreligionists who are able to tell them that it is truly valid to be Muslims in the modern secular community, having a good relationship with other adherents of religions wherever and whenever they are. This type of being Muslim in the modern, secular, global era is Fethullah Gulen from Turkey.

Fethullah Gulen's contribution for interfaith dialogue in the globalization era

How to bridge this huge and deep gap in reading Scripture? The deep gap between inclusivist and exclusivist type of reading the Scripture? As far as I know, from the Muslim intellectuals in the contemporary era, the most articulate effort in bridging this gap is the restless efforts pioneered, motivated, conducted and sponsored by Fethullah Gulen. Fethullah Gulen, is a 67-year-old Turkish Sufi cleric, author and theoretician, from Turkey. Millions of people inside and outside Turkey have been inspired by Gulen's more than 60 books and tapes and videos of his talks⁷. This movement not only talking in the level of intellectual discourse but delving into real practice in real life of modern societies in the global era. Gulen movement is not only active in its country origin, Turkey, but also very active in initiating and holding interfaith and intercultural dialog in all over the world to enhance the mutual understanding and respect among the adherents of Abrahamic religions and beyond. Many books had been published by this global movement to promote the genuine ideas interpreting the verses of the Qur'an in inclusivist type of reading the Qur'anic text⁸ What is unique in this movement is its restless efforts *to revive the loss tradition of inner-spiritual-mystical (Sufism) type of reading the holy scripture in its creative combination with modern scientific methods in science and contemporary humanism, flavored in a multicultural aroma*. Not only that, this movement runs a hundred schools in Asia, Africa, Europe, Australia and United States. It is reported that it has more than 500 schools in all over the world⁹ The notion of globalization and multiculturalism can be approved that in Thailand, for example, the

⁷ Masood, Ehsan, "A Modern Ottoman", reprinted from *Foreign Policy* #167, July/August 2008, Caglayan A.S., Izmir, Turkey, 15

⁸ For further reading, see Unal, Ali & Williams, Alphonse (Ed.) *Fethullah Gulen: Advocate of Dialogue*, The Fountain, Virginia, 2000; M. Fethullah Gulen, *Toward a Global Civilization of Love & Tolerance*, The Light, Inc., New Jersey, 2004.

⁹ Yavuz, M. Hakan and Esposito, John L., *Turkish Islam and The Secular State: The Gulen Movement*, Syracuse University Press, New York, 2003, 234-7.

administrators of Fatih College regularly visit Buddhist authorities and priests and report to them the progress of the (Buddhist)Thai pupils in the Gulen schools. In Russia, Romania, Georgia, South Africa, Senegal and so on, the praxis is the same.¹⁰ What kind of religious and cultural transformation undergoes in the mind of Gulen people in all over the world ? This is the important and significant question observing this new way of being Muslim in the modern, secular, and global era in Gulen's view.

It comes to mind how this Gulen's global movement works and runs its schools in its international - multicultural setting, especially when faced with the problem of Qur'anic and Biblical verses cited above. It is obvious that the way they read and interpret the Scripture is very different from those agents who work only in its 'local' religious movement, which is merely confronted and circumscribed by local issues and not the global and multicultural one. It is clear that *the infinite potential for meaning* inherent in the nature of divine revelation is much more underlined than that is more segmented and sectarian type of understanding the idea of religious salvation. Under the wide umbrella of the deep insight of religio-mystical tradition of Islam embedded in its rigorous multicultural flavor, Fethullah Gulen undoubtedly utilizes and practices hermeneutical method in understanding and interpreting the Qur'an. It is important to underline that an interfaith and intra-faith dialogue using hermeneutical approaches by no means require an a priori dismissal of the more exclusivist interpretations of Qur'anic verses. In fact, it would be a misuse of the new matrix of dialogue to load it with a particular political or philosophical agenda other than the foundational conviction that interfaith (and intra-faith) dialogue is inherently good and necessary for the welfare of the participating traditions as well as for the welfare of the human family in general¹¹. Rather, what this principle would do is remind the participants in dialogue who are aware of these verses and their exclusivist interpretations, that *other possibilities for interpretation exist which may well be equally defensible within the context of the larger tradition*, as the new tradition of globalization steadfastly stand for a good example, and thus, depending on the authoritative consensus of the community of believers (local, regional, global, national, transnational or international) may be equally or even more orthodox in nature. Gulen

¹⁰ *Ibid*

¹¹Unal, Ali & Williams , Alphonse, *Ibid.*, 259

interprets the Qur'an from the perspective of new context, a modern diaspora context, in which many Turkish Muslim scattered in all over the world¹².

The infinite potential of scriptural meaning, would encourage two complementary activities when faced with any scriptural text that posed a challenge (either positive or negative) for dialogue, cooperation, and mutual understanding and trust. The first of these activities is by delving as deeply as possible into all the contextual resources available for interpreting these texts. This not only means reading Qur'anic or Biblical passages in light of other proximate and otherwise related Qur'anic or Biblical passages. It also means using all the available tools of historical research and even historical development to uncover key elements of the original context of a given passage's revelation (in the case of the Qur'an)¹³ and a given passage's composition (in the case of the Bible). The second of these activities should involve a certain imitation of the field actors who have real-living experience in being together politically, economically, and culturally with the religious other in their own country or abroad, beyond their country of origin. Fathullah Gulen communities in all over the world have this genuine living experience. They have actual experience of being global. In this case, the experience that would be most significant would be that of the encounter the cultural and religious other. This real experience of the infinite potential for meaning of scripture would encourage interpretations of all scripture – especially passages which purport to speak about the religious other – to be rooted in actual experience of that other. Simple reason dictates that any interpretation of what the Qur'an, for example, says about Jews and/or Christians is de facto misleading if it cannot stand in the face of a given Muslim's authentic relationships with Jews and/or Christians. Instead of using a dichotomous view of classical Islamic jurisprudence of *dar al- harb* (country of war) or *dar al-Islam* (country of Islam), Gulen movement uses a new terminology, *dar al hizmet* (country of service). As a

¹²Yavuz, M. Hakan and Esposito, John L., ***Turkish Islam and the Secular State: The Gulen Movement***, p 235. It is the only Turkish civil society entity that has established institutions in so many different countries. With Gulen's global vision in mind, ***Zaman*** is published in sixteen countries, sometimes in a bilingual format. It is also the first Turkish daily to be published on the Internet, and very recently its English version was launched. Also with this global vision in mind, Samanyolu TV broadcasts to Europe, Central Asia, and Caucasus. Gulen's books in English, Turkic language, Russian, Albanian, and other languages are sold in several countries.

¹³This new and contemporary methodology in reading and interpreting Qur'an can be traced in Saeed, Abdullah, ***Interpreting The Qur'an: Towards a Contemporary Approach***, Routledge, London and New York, 2006, especially chapter 12, Epilogue.149-154

result, the concepts of *dar al-ahd* (country of treaty, covenant), *dar al-aman* (country of security), *dar al-sulh* (country of peace) and *dar al-darura* (country of necessity) have come into operation, in which it is held that Muslims can live according to their religion in non-Muslim lands perhaps with difficulty but peacefully.¹⁴

Another point which is also pertinent in the case of scriptural interpretation is the *Oneness of being*. This matrix can help the dogmatic reduces their absolutism, rigidity and narrow-mindedness in religiosity. This matrix dictates that God's presence and influence can be found in all traditions, thus, any interpretation and understanding of sacred Scripture which suggests otherwise would be suspect. >From the perspective of Gulen movement, no passage of the Qur'an or Bible should be interpreted to suggest that any group of people, by virtue of their beliefs and cultural practices, live outside of a relationship with God.¹⁵ This does not mean that no distinction can be made between "believers," for example, and "unbelievers." It also does not mean that one tradition cannot be perceived of as superior to another. What does mean is that the exaggerated pride of decreeing God to be "with us" and not at all "with you" cannot be accepted at all. This statement, of course, will be sensitive for the closed religious societies and will create much and serious difficulty in the traditional culture, prior to the culture of globalization.

From this dictum, then our deep insight touches the reality of *the limit of language*. A language used by human beings in all cultures and also used by any scriptures is bounded by this serious shortage and undeniable difficulties in the same time. The idea of the "naming of God" can be put as a good example. Given the importance of our doctrinal formulation to the integrity of our respective traditions, we must never fall into the arrogance of believing either that these formulations are equivalent with the reality, namely God, of which we speak, or the arrogance of believing that they amount to little more than disposable conjecture in our quest for the truth. In this sense, we are asked to be never losing sight of our creaturely limitations – especially the inherent inadequacy of our modes of discourse to convey an understanding of God. Again this is the fruit and the peak of mystical experience that we cannot said accurately what we experience about the world, human and ourselves, not to say religion. This is to say that we do not preserve the integrity and sacredness of our doctrinal formulations by

¹⁴Yavuz, M. Hakan and Esposito, John L., *op cit*, 234

¹⁵Almirzanah, Syafa'atun, *op cit*, 194

absolutizing them in such a way as to exclude all others. Rather we preserve this integrity and sacredness precisely by humbly recognizing that the deepest understanding of these inherently limited linguistic formulations must leave the room for validating and dignifying the religious experiences and doctrinal formulations of others, no matter how different they may be from our own.

Finally, the new matrix for the possibility of having interfaith and intra-faith dialogue in a calm and tranquility atmosphere has to do with philosophical dimension of our anthropological structure, namely the human ability to clearly distinguish between “God created by the believer,” in one side, and the “Godhead,” on the other. The border and the demarcation between the two is so blurry. Because of its blur and vaguely perceived, it is very slippery. These two terminologies are like one coin with two faces. It can be clearly differentiated, but unfortunately it cannot be separated. Due to its impossibility to be clearly separated, so many times the religious actors mixes and intermingles it. It depends on who, whose, where and why and the stage and the play ground on which they play the role. In this point. Fethullah Gulen reminds us that however passionately and devoutly we may perform our rituals, the moment we begin to use the self (who, whose, where, why, whom) over others is the moment we mark ourselves as servants of our own egos rather than of God. Again, this explanation justifies the importance of hermeneutic in religious thought and practices. By interpreting scripture with hermeneutic of the infinite potential of meaning, by never forgetting the oneness of Being, by recognizing the limit of our theological language and our ability in distinguishing between “God” we create and the ultimately ineffable “Godhead”, human being can delve the depths of our relationship to God and in the same time able to open ourselves to the goal at the heart of both Christianity and Islam to transform into better beings, more deeply committed to the service of God and one another.

On top of all the above descriptions concerning Gulen’s contribution to the necessity of interfaith and intra-faith dialogue in the global era, the new fundamental values and the new legacy descended by Fethullah Gulen is the ethical values defined by modesty, self-sacrifice, altruism, togetherness, service without expectations, and by depth of the spirit and heart with no anticipation for personal gain for any intention or deed are strongly underlined by this global transnationalistic movement. When all participants of dialogue between Christianity and Islam and beyond have these fundamental values in their mind and heart, any obstacles in reading their holy scripture can be removed aside

paving the way for the primacy of sustaining a peaceful and respectful coexistence between Christians and Muslims in this small global village.

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