

Peaceful co-existence in a multi-religious society : Islam and Christianity perspectives

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Abstract : It is estimated that the population of the adherents of the two most popular Abrahamic religions, Islam and Christianity, accounts for more than half of the world population, and over 80 percent of what is said in the media about religion refers to Muslims and Christians, while majority of intra and inter faith fracas is traced to the two religions. Sadly, these two religions seem to have been scrambling to “outdo” each other. The onus of playing it safe thereby lies with their followers who are expected to learn to tolerate each other and go about their *Da’wah* (invitation to faith) and Evangelical activities in such a way that peace and security of the entire human race is not jeopardised. This paper discusses peaceful co-existence in the two religions by plying memory lane to promote tolerance and peaceful co-existence laid down by the two religions so as to serve a roadmap for the faithful to give peace a chance and live together in peace with their neighbours.

Keywords : Co-existence, Tolerance, Peace, Multi-religious.

Introduction

The escalation of religious conflicts around the world today has intensified the yearning for peace and security. The spate of confrontations between adherents of Christianity and Islam in recent history is worrisome. Local and international treaties signed in this regard to declare violence illegal seem to be active on papers only and not in practical terms, because the conventions have relatively failed to achieve the desired goal. It is, therefore, imperative to make a paradigm shift to the major stakeholders in religious phenomenon and use religious dimension to address the situation in a more subtle way to convince different parties involved that violence, hatred and religious bigotry does no one any good. This paper, therefore, attempts to persuade the members of the public especially Muslims and Christian to revive the culture of peaceful co-existence demonstrated by early believers of the two faiths. Early Muslims and Christians lived together in peace and practiced their faiths without fear of harassment or intimidation. The paper shows that peace and tranquility can be ensured only by tolerance and peaceful co-existence.

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Peaceful co-existence in Islam

Contrary to the insinuations in some quarters that Islam is inclusive and intolerant to other religions and their followers, the religion could be regarded as the most tolerant faith on the surface of the earth. However, the overzealous actions of some Muslims, which may be at times direct antithesis of what the Islamic faith teaches, have led some non-Muslims to conclude that such people act according to the teachings of their faith. Jamal Badawi captures this scenario when he writes :

As a religious faith, normative Islam is not identical with the actions of its 'followers'. Like other religions, followers or claimed followers are imperfect, fallible human beings. There are times when their actions conform, in various degrees, to the normative teachings of their faith. But there are also times when their actions are either independent of or even in violation of such normative teachings. Outsiders may see these offending acts as part of the practice of faith. Sometimes, these acts are committed, falsely, in the name of faith. These claims are made as a result of ignorance, 'sincere' misinterpretations, or even deliberate misrepresentations that are intended to provide sanction and authority for such acts.ⁱ

To evaluate whether a given act or argument conforms to the normative teachings of a given religion or not, Badawi argues, there must be some criteria for such evaluations, as the history of various religious communities is replete with aberrations as well as successful implementation of the norms of their faiths. Human successes or failures are not always identical with ideal norms.ⁱⁱ To identify these norms, Islam advises that its primary sources, the Qur'ān and the authentic *Sunnah* (sayings, deeds and silent approval of Prophet Muhammad SAW) should be the preferred point of reference :

O you who believe! Obey Allāh and obey the Messenger (Muhammad SAW), and those of you (Muslims) who are in authority. (and) if you differ in anything amongst yourselves, refer it to Allāh and his Messenger, if you believe in Allāh and in the Last Day. That is better and more suitable for final determination.ⁱⁱⁱ

Therefore, in discussing peaceful co-existence from Islamic perspective, one should focus on precedents laid by Prophet Muhammad (SAW) in the multi-religious city-state of al-Madīnah. The Prophet migrated to the city of Madinah (Yathrib earlier) as a Messenger of Allāh and as a statesman to unite warring tribes, who have been torn apart by incessant civil wars. Having met the Jewish community in Madinah, the Prophet (SAW) sought their cooperation in moving the society forward and to defend it against internal oppression and external aggression. As a way of concretising this agreement, the Prophet (SAW) proposed a constitution for the city-state which encompassed both the *Ansār* and *Muhājirūn* (the hosts and immigrants) as the stakeholders on the one hand, and the Jewish community on the other. The document served as the terms of reference for their accord. It acknowledged the Jewish citizenship and legitimacy of their religion. It also spelt out the rights and duties of both parties in society.^{iv} An extract from the constitution reads thus :

In the name of God, the Compassionate, the Merciful. This is a covenant given by Muhammad to the believers and Muslims of Quraysh, Yathrib, and those who followed them, joined them, and fought with them. They constitute one *Ummah* (nation) to the exclusion of all men... Any Jew who follows us is entitled to assistance and the same rights as any one of us, without injustice or partisanship... The Jews of *banu Aws* are an *Ummah* alongside the believers. The Jews have their religion and the Muslims theirs. Both enjoy the security of their own populace and clients except the unjust and the criminal among them... The Jews shall bear their public expenses and so will the Muslims. Each shall assist the other against any violator of this covenant... The town of Yathrib shall constitute a sanctuary for the parties of this covenant. Their neighbours shall be treated as themselves as long as they perpetuate no crime and commit no harm... The people of this covenant shall come to the assistance of one another against whoever attacks Yathrib... God grants His protection to whosoever acts in piety, charity and goodness.^v

Motivated by the news of this accord, the Christian Arabs of Najrān also visited the Prophet SAW to negotiate their own place in the emerging society. The Prophet (SAW) invited them to Islam, some embraced, while the majority refused. This did not in any way prevent them from being granted autonomous status as their Jewish counterparts. After presenting them with some gifts, the Prophet SAW directed that they should be escorted back to their place of abode by a Muslim bodyguard and a Muslim statesman, Mu'ādh bin Jabal to serve their interest.^{vi} According to Muhibbu-Din, this constitution guaranteed the freedom of faith and opinion, the inviolability of the city, human life, property and prohibition of crime. Its application also paved the way for unprecedented development by first of all uniting the Arabs and accorded them a leading role in all facets of human endeavours. The Jewish community, however, later relented in their promise to abide by the constitution and acted against the accord, which earned them expulsion from the city.^{vii}

This baton of tolerance and peaceful co-existence was also carried on by the Prophet's successors, especially by the second *Khalīfah* 'Umar bin al-Khattāb (581-644), as manifested in his treatment of the Jews and Christians of Byzantium after the fall of Jerusalem. The treaty of surrender of the city, according to al-Fārūqī, was written by Mu'āwiyah (602-680) and signed by the *Khalīfah* and Sophronius (560-638), Patriarch of the city, on behalf of the Christians, which partly read thus :

In the name of Allāh, the Beneficent, the Merciful. This is the guarantee granted to the inhabitants of Aelia by 'Umar, Servant of God, and commander of the believers. He guarantees for them the safety of their persons, of their goods, of their churches and crosses – whether in good state of repair or otherwise – and generally of their religion. Their churches will not be changed into dwellings, nor destroyed. Neither they nor their other properties will suffer any damage

whatever. In matters of religions, no coercion will be exercised against them; nor will any of them be hurt... The inhabitants of Aelia shall pay the *jizyah* (tax) like those of other cities. It will be their duty to eject the Byzantines (i.e., the troops of Byzantine Empire) and their clients from the city. Those that leave voluntarily will be granted safe passage. Those who choose to remain in the city may do so provided they pay the *jizyah* like the other inhabitants. The citizens of Aelia who wish to leave with the Byzantines may do so, and may carry with them their goods, properties and crosses. Safety is hereby granted to them as well... This treaty is given under the guarantee of God and the honour of the Prophet, of the *Khulafā'* and the believers on condition that the people of Aelia pay the *jizyah* due on them.

Witnesses : Khālīd bin al-Walīd, 'Amr bin al-'Ās, 'Abd al-Rahmān bin 'Awf, Mu'awiyah bin Abī Sufyān who wrote it with his own hand in the year 15AH.^{viii}

Another remarkable event took place during the days of 'Umar bin al-Khattāb. On his entry to Jerusalem, he found himself inside a Church at the time for one of the five daily prayers, when the patriarch, who was accompanying him, offered him to perform his prayers in the Church. The *Khalīfah* declined, and made his famous remark : "If I do so, the Muslims may infringe upon your rights in a future age pretending to follow my example." Instead, 'Umar performed his prayers on the steps outside the Church.^{ix} As reported by al-Bukhārī (810-870) in *Fūṭuh al-Buldān*, which is also documented by Al-Fārūqī. The same terms in the above treaty were granted by Khālīd bin al-Walīd to the inhabitants of the towns of Damascus, al-'īrah and 'Anat, as well as to other provinces brought under the sovereignty of Islam.^x Commenting on these developments, Michael Nazir-Ali^{xi} argues that the tolerance exhibited by Muslims paved the way for the penetration of Islam to many Christian cities of the Middle East :

Many of the leading cities of the Christian Middle East that capitulated to the Muslims in those days did so because they believed that Muslim rule would be more tolerable than the rule of Byzantium. So, the gates of Damascus were opened to the Muslim armies by the Christians of the town. Jerusalem capitulated without a fight, and a similar situation existed in Egypt. For Christians, it is a matter of repentance that the oppression by the Christians of the eastern Roman Empire against their fellow-Christians was of such intensity that people in Syria and Egypt thought that it was better to have Muslims as their rulers than their fellow-Christians.^{xii}

The interaction of the *crème de la crème* of Muslim generations with other religious communities in the city-state of al-Madīnah and in other parts of the world speaks volumes about the tolerance demonstrated by the Prophet SAW and his followers, which implies the acceptance of plurality in human societies. In other words, forcing people to believe in God runs against His decree of free will, which includes the fact that some will reject Him. The ultimate reward or punishment for accepting or rejecting belief in God is

deferred until the Day of Judgment. This value inculcates the attitude of being non-judgmental and accepting people as they are which was clearly stated in the Madinah constitution, and practically implemented by the Prophet SAW and his companions. However, acceptance of plurality, according to Badawi, does not mean accepting the plurality of ultimate truths, nor does it preclude sharing or compromising one's faith with others and even inviting them to it. Plurality means peaceful co-existence with those who hold differing beliefs and convictions.^{xiii} Acceptance of plurality in human societies, which is an imperative platform for peaceful co-existence, is explicitly explained in the following verses of the Glorious Qur'ān :

And if your Lord had so willed, He could surely have made mankind one *Ummah* [nation or community (following one religion only i.e. Islam)], but they will not cease to disagree.^{xiv}

And had your Lord willed, those on earth would have believed, all of them together. So, will you (O Muhammad SAW) then compel mankind, until they become believers?^{xv}

The above verses and others in their ilk warn the believers not to go beyond presentation of the truth, or try to compel their audience to belief in what has been presented to them. In other words, they are forbidden from interfering with non-Muslims' decision of accepting or rejecting the message. Similarly, an extension of being tolerant is to be humane to every member of one's society whether Muslims or non-Muslims. Prophet Muhammad SAW was reported to have said in a Hadīth narrated by 'Abd Allāh bin 'Umar (RA) :

(Angel) Jibrīl never ceased urging me repeatedly to be kind to my neighbour, until I thought he will make him one of my heirs.^{xvi}

He also says :

Anyone who believes in Allāh and the Last Day let him be kind to his neighbour. Anyone who believes in Allāh and the Last Day let him be hospitable to his guest.^{xvii}

The above quotations underscore the importance Islam attaches to tolerance and peaceful co-existence with neighbours and other members of one's community. Likewise, these Qur'ānic and Hadīth texts disqualify the notion of narrow partisanship that may lead to hatred or even violence against communities who perceive themselves as followers of other Prophets, as well as humanity as a whole. Due to the unity and universality of the core teachings of all Prophets, Islam makes no distinction among the Prophets of Allāh :

The Messenger (Muhammad) believes in what has been sent down to him from his Lord, and (so do) the believers. Each one believes in Allāh, His angels, His Books, and His Messengers. They say, 'We make no distinction between one another of His Messengers' - and they say, 'We hear, and we obey. (We seek) your Forgiveness, our Lord, and to you is the return (of all).'^{xviii}

The Glorious Qur'ān gives various reasons why each human being must be honoured and dignified on account of being human and irrespective of his or her chosen beliefs. Such honour is symbolised by the way the Qur'ān describes Allāh's creation of human in the best of moulds and commanding the angels to bow down in respect to Ādam. The Qur'ān also explains how the Almighty Creator honoured the children of Ādam and raised them above other creatures.^{xi} Therefore, violating the sanctity of human life or dishonouring any human with no justification is tantamount to dishonouring what Allāh Himself has honoured.

Rejection of belief in God will surely have consequences in the afterlife. However, it is up to God, the Almighty to determine these consequences. Such future determination has no bearing on the respect of the humanity of every person in this life. After all, the human beings are free agents and are given the choices of belief and disbelief :

And say : "The truth is from your Lord." Then whosoever wills, let him believe, and whosoever wills, let him disbelieve. Verily, we have prepared for the *Jālimūn* (polytheists and wrong-doers, etc.), a Fire whose walls will be surrounding them (disbelievers in the Oneness of Allāh)...^{xx}

As such, each is individually responsible before God for his or her beliefs and moral choices. A person may be held accountable in this life only if such a moral choice infringes on the rights of individuals or society, such as the commission of crimes or acts of aggression. In other words, no human is entitled to dehumanise or punish another on the sole ground that the later is following a different religion. This value implies that peaceful co-existence among the followers of all religions and respecting their humanity is not only possible, but also mandated in the Qur'ān and Hadīth, the primary sources of the Islam.^{xxi} Furthermore, Islam gives free choice in case of religion because, "sword can win territories but not hearts, and force can bend heads but not minds"^{xxii}.

***Da'wah* and free Will**

Having attempted to explain Islam's recognition and respect for the free will bestowed on individuals to choose a religion or no religion,^{xxiii} and denunciation of forcing peoples to a belief, one may ask : Is calling people to accept another faith not compulsion or infringement on their free will? Answer to this question is provided in the following verses :

Invite (mankind, O Muhammad) to the way of your Lord (i.e. Islam) with wisdom (i.e. with the Divine Inspiration and the Qur'ān) and fair preaching, and argue with them in a way that is better. Truly, your Lord knows best who has gone astray from his path, and He is the best aware of those who are guided.^{xxiv}

Say : 'Obey Allāh and obey the Messenger', but if you turn away, he (Messenger Muhammad) is only responsible for the duty placed on him (i.e. to convey Allāh's Message) and you for that placed on you. If you

obey him, you shall be on the right guidance. The Messenger's duty is only to convey (the Message) in a clear way (i.e. to preach in a plain way).^{xxv}

It may be inferred from the above verses that sharing information about a religion or propagating one's faith, known in Islam as *Da'wah*, is not the same as forcing it on others. Religions, so to say, may be regarded as goods or commodities in the market. The owner's efforts to persuade passers-by to buy the goods by describing and eulogising his wares might not be tantamount to compelling them to purchase, as the final decision lies with the individuals. According to Badawi, the Qur'an only makes it a duty on believers to communicate the message of Islam to fellow humans and to be witnesses to humankind. Being witnesses for Allāh SWT, he argues, includes both witnessing through righteous deeds and sharing what one believes is the truth, which is beneficial to humankind. The invitee has every right to accept or reject that 'invitation'. Conversely, compulsion, threats, bribery, deception, manipulation, and exploitation of the invitee's vulnerability (such as hunger, illness, disaster, etc) are inconsistent with the notion of invitation :

And had your Lord willed, those on earth would have believed, all of them together. So, will you (O Muhammad) then compel mankind until they become believers.^{xxvi}

Therefore, no Muslim can threaten or dehumanise a fellow human just for not being a Muslim, as Allāh (SWT) made it clear that it is He who guides, and no one. Even the Prophet (SAW) cannot singlehandedly guide anyone to the right path except by the permission of the Almighty :

Verily! You (O Muhammad) guide not whom you like, but Allāh guides whom He wills. And He knows best those who are the guided.^{xxvii}

Not upon you (Muhammad) is their guidance, but Allāh guides whom He wills.^{xxviii}

***Jihād* and peaceful co-existence**

The above discussion necessitates brief clarification on the misconception about the Islamic concept of *Jihād*. Islam does not condone an iota of injustice from any quarters, and no matter who the oppressed are. At this juncture, looking at the meaning of *Jihād* and the context it is used in Islam will provide an insight into what the *Jihād* is all about. According to Jamal Badawi, the Qur'anic Arabic term *Jihād* has been commonly mistranslated as "holy war". He argues that the Qur'an was revealed in Arabic, not in English. The Arabic equivalent of the English expression "holy war", he explains, is '*arbutun muqaddasah*, an expression that is not found anywhere in the Qur'an or in the authentic sayings of the Prophet s.a.w.^{xxix} Even when the Qur'an speaks about defensive war, it never glorifies it or calls it "holy"; rather, it is described as something which is inherently hated.^{xxx} However, as a last resort, it may be better than doing nothing in the face of aggression or oppression.^{xxxi}

Scholars assert that “*Jihād*” literally means “to strive” or “to exert efforts”. Thus, in Islam, “to carry out *Jihād*” is “to show effort, or to struggle” in the path of Allāh.^{xxxii} According to Abdul Majid, *Jihād* consists of two dimensions : the inner *Jihād* that seeks to curb negative and self-destructive forces within, and the external *Jihād*, which is a struggle against violence and tyranny by means of words and actions.^{xxxiii} According to Jamal Badawi, *Jihād* is an Arabic term derived from the root J-H-D, which means, literally, “to strive or exert effort.” It is the same root word from which the legal term *ijtihad* is derived, as *ijtihad* refers to the exertion of intellectual effort by scholars so as to come up with an informed religious opinion on a new issue or problem.^{xxxiv} Prophet Muhammad SAW once admonished his companions that “the greatest *Jihād* is the one a person carries out against his lower soul.” “Lower soul” here means selfish desires and ambitions. On another occasion, the Prophet SAW addressed his companions, saying : “We are now returning from the lesser *Jihād* to the greater *Jihād*.”^{xxxv} When asked what the greater *Jihād* was, he replied, “It is the *Jihād* against your passionate souls.” Abdul Majid maintains that this greater *Jihād* is therefore the inner battle to purify the souls of its imperfections, to empty the vessel of the soul of the pungent water of forgetfulness.^{xxxvi} Apart from spiritual meanings, struggle in the physical sense is also considered as “*Jihād*” for which the exact word is *Qitāl* (fighting). However, Islam spells out the strict principles of *Qitāl* which should be in defence when one is attacked, to eradicate corruption from the earth, for the elimination of persecution, or for getting moral, religious and physical freedom for oppressed people. If for these purposes *Jihād* is waged, it could be regarded in the way of Allāh, which is a just war for sacred causes.

Muslims are ordained to observe certain rules during the war. When Islam forbids the old cruel and barbaric practices in war, it makes its own rules for the conduct of hostilities – if situation demands, among which are : Non-combatants are not to be made to suffer on account of war. Even against the combatants, one can use only that much force which is necessary to achieve the purpose of “just war” but not going beyond the limits. “Allāh does not love those who go beyond the limits.”^{xxxvii} Furthermore, if the enemy offers peace, one has no choice but to accept, and stop all hostilities. In the same vein, one cannot commit excesses or cruelties during the actual conduct of hostilities and war. In other words, acts of arson and pillage are prohibited. Destruction of properties, plants and crops is also forbidden. Women, children, aged ones, and handicapped should also be spared. All the terms of treaties and other agreements have to be strictly adhered to, and places of worship are to be spared and protected.^{xxxviii}

In a nutshell, the sole essence of the message of Islam and the mission of its Prophet SAW as expatiated by the Qur’ān and the *Sunnah* is mercy to the entire mankind and other creatures of Allāh, which include animals and plants. “And we have sent you (O Muhammad) not but as a mercy for the ‘*Ālamīn* (mankind, jinns and all that exists).”^{xxxix} This aim is however defeated, if anyone, in the name of Islam scares away, through his deeds and speeches, the very people who are meant to receive mercy and thus makes peaceful co-existence unattainable. Furthermore, al-Fārūqī puts this essence in a wider perspective when he writes :

The essence of religious experience in Islam, we may say... is the realisation that life is not in vain; that it must serve a purpose, the nature of which cannot be identical with the natural flow of appetite to satisfaction to new appetite and new satisfaction.^{x1}

Islam unequivocally prohibits acts of violence against any person, non-Muslim inclusive. Even during the period of war, Prophet Muhammad (SAW) exclusively warned the Muslim armies not to destroy non-Muslim places of worship and even directed his followers to save the crops and other vegetation in their fields.

Peaceful co-existence in Christianity

Co-existence in a multi-religious environment is not a new experience to Christianity. This experience, according to Dewi Hughes, dates back to the first period of the Church's history when Christians were in contact with the religions of Greece, Rome, Egypt and, of course, Judaism. With the collapse of the Roman Empire from the fourth century on, he argues, the Church was again faced with a hostility of non-Christian world. Despite all these challenges, the Church responded with a vigorous and successful missionary drive.^{xii} Furthermore, Christianity co-existed peacefully with other religions in those turbulent eras. For example, the leaders of the Jewish religion considered the truth claims of Christianity blasphemous, and, as a result, the leaders attempted to kill those who followed it whenever they could.^{xiii} But the Christians did not, therefore, view it as their duty to revenge their persecutors. Rather, they acted in accordance with the teaching of the Scripture which says : "If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone."^{xiiii} In other words, attempts to execute wrath upon others are totally contrary to the teachings of Jesus and the Apostles.

Similarly, the Second Vatican Council, otherwise known as Vatican II, was another watershed in the history of Christian relation with other religions, especially Islam. Pim Valkenberg opines that the declaration of *Nostra Aetate*^{xliv} on the relation between the Church and non-Christian religions during this council marks the beginning of a new era in the Christian theology of religions.^{xlv} Likewise, social and religious realities of the modern era which saw Muslims and Christians living side by side both in the Arab and Western worlds also influenced the statements of Vatican II on Islam and Muslims. The Catholic Church and the World Council of Churches changed their images of and attitude to Islam. The Vatican Council II enumerated some positive elements that it recognises in Islam. This is quite unlike the past when the Christians saw all that was wrong and negative in Islam, but could not see anything right and positive in it. The council even went further not only to list some of these positive elements such as : One God, obedience to God, resurrection of the dead, prayer, alms-giving and fasting, but actually to acknowledge these as values Christianity and Islam both share. This, according to some analysts, is a sign of positive change, and a major turnaround in the Church's attitude to other religions in general and Islam in particular.^{xlvi}

For the purpose of searching for a common ground for peaceful co-existence, according to Sarbah, it may be inferred that the Council puts humanity, not the Church, at the centre of deliberations, which demonstrates, in clear terms, its inclusivity view of other religions, which some analysts believed to be a welcome development in the history of Church relation with other religions.^{xlvii} This stance by the Catholic Church was further buttressed by the hand of friendship that the late Pope John Paul II stretched out to the Muslims during his visit to Nigeria in 1982 when he addressed them by saying :

... Why do I speak of these issues with you? Because, you are Muslims, and like us Christians, you believe in the one God who is the source of all the rights and values of mankind. Furthermore, I am convinced that if we join hands in the name of God we can accomplish much good. We can work together for harmony and national unity, in sincerity and greater mutual confidence. We can collaborate in the promotion of justice, peace and development. It is my earnest hope that our solidarity of brotherhood, under God, will truly enhance the future of Nigeria and all Africa, and add to the good ordering of the world as a universal civilisation of Love.^{xlviii}

While describing the impacts of this Council on the relation of the Catholic with other Christians as well as other religions, Risto Jukko argues that the overall importance of the Council cannot be overestimated in any sense. The unexpected decision announced by Pope John XXIII on January 25, 1959, to convoke the Church's 21st ecumenical council, according to him, may have opened the Roman Catholic Church to the world, including the non-Christian religions.^{xlix}

Similarly, looking at peaceful co-existence through the lens of the Bible, one will discover that the Scripture admonishes that living in peace with neighbours and overlooking shortcomings of fellow humans are some of the fundamental teachings of Christianity. Numerous verses of the Bible dwell on peaceful co-existence, quoting some of them here could serve as a reminder :

Therefore, as God's chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience. Bear with each other and forgive whatever grievances you may have against one another. Forgive as the Lord forgave you. And over all these virtues put on love, which binds them all together in perfect unity.ⁱ

Therefore, as we have opportunity, let us do good to all people, especially to those who belong to the family of believers.ⁱⁱ

And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds.ⁱⁱⁱ

Keep on loving each other as brothers. Do not forget to entertain strangers, for by so doing some people have entertained angels without knowing it. Remember those in prison as if you were their fellow prisoners, and those who are mistreated as if you yourselves were suffering.ⁱⁱⁱⁱ

Do not go about spreading slander among your people. Do not do anything that endangers your neighbour's life. I am the Lord. Do not hate your brother in your heart. Rebuke your neighbour frankly so you will not share in his guilt. Do not seek revenge or bear a grudge against one of your people, but love your neighbour as yourself. I am the Lord.^{liv}

How wonderful and pleasant it is when brothers live together in harmony!^{lv}

These verses on the one hand clearly indicate that fanning ember of hatred and holding grudges against one another is alien to the teachings of the Christian faith. On the other hand, the teachings therein demonstrate how keen the faith is on peaceful co-existence with fellow believers, neighbours and every segment of the society.

In addition to the second Vatican Council, other efforts towards peaceful co-existence and Christian-Muslim dialogue have been initiated by various groups and organisations among which is the World Council of Churches (WCC). The WCC affirms that the Muslim world has also been forthcoming by offering opportunities for dialogue on the need for interfaith understanding and respect between Christians and Muslims, example of which was the one held in October, 2007 that centred on the "Love of God" and "Love of Neighbour".^{lvi} In the same vein, a similar event was held in 2008 and 2009 by the Global Initiative for Dialogue under the auspices of King Abdullah bin Abdul Aziz of Saudi Arabia in Madrid, New York and Geneva.^{lvii} In one of those conferences, Catholicos Aram I argued that "living together in community must take the centre stage of Christian-Muslim dialogue," and that the solid foundation of such a community is laid in a local context where Christians and Muslims can build a shared life that encompasses and transcends differences at the local level. According to him, this can be achieved by : i) moving from isolation to integration, since unconditional love of neighbour and hospitality towards the stranger are essential features of the two faiths; ii) moving from exclusion to participation, where values interact and identities are integrated to build a community of reconciled diversities; iii) moving from reaction to interaction, when the self-understanding of identity is marked by creative openness and dynamic interaction with the others, which will enables us to move towards building a common life.^{lviii}

In the 2008 International Intra-Christian Consultation in Geneva where issues on Christian Self Understanding in Relation to Islam were discussed, the various church groups that were represented, according to the World Council of Churches, presented different opinion papers in response to the these questions : What is the theological approach of your church/or communion toward Islam? What resources has your church/communion developed about the issue? How has this approach been expressed in the church/or communion's response to A Common Word?^{lix} Highlighting some of the views presented by different speakers and presenters on behalf of their organisations could go a long way in helping to understand various initiatives by such Christian denominations in relation to Islam and peaceful co-existence.

On Orthodox theology's relation to Islam, Emanuel Clapsis from the Holy Cross Orthodox School of Theology, representing the Ecumenical Patriarchate, maintained in

his paper that the Church does not reject whatever holy and true that exists either in history or in other religious communities, because it considers them as rays of the divine truth that enlighten and lead all people to God. On the Catholic approach to Islam, Maurice Borrmans, who represented the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue, presented a detailed reflection on the Roman Catholic Church, which is rooted in the *Nostra Aetate* declaration with emphasis on implications of the Love of God and Love of Neighbour, and on the importance of interreligious dialogue in advancing the work for peace and justice for all humanity. As for the Lutheran perspectives on relations to Islam, Simone Sinn, representing the Lutheran World Federation highlighted four relevant themes for Lutheran relations to Islam, namely; seeking to acquire adequate knowledge about Islam and Muslims, fostering interfaith cooperation, engaging in joint theological explorations and bringing together faith, hope and love.^{lx} Johnson Mbillah, General Adviser of the Programme on Christian-Muslim Relations in Africa (PROCMURA), representing the World Alliance of Reformed Churches (WARC), argued that the reformed theology in the context of relationship with Islam and Muslims should uphold the value of human relations as a family, and at the same time recognise that such relationship involves sharing, a give and take. Such give and take involves a presentation of the gospel in word and in everyday living.

The Anglican approach to Islam, presented by Clare Amos and David Thomas of the Anglican Communion Office and the Anglican Communion's Network for Interfaith Concerns, emphasised 'Hospitality' as one of the characteristics of the Anglican engagement with peoples of other faiths. An Evangelical approach to Islam was presented by Thomas Schirmacher of the World Evangelical Alliance (WEA). He dwelled on the importance WEA attaches to Christian-Muslim relations, which is based on a number of reasons among which are; 1) the two religions (Christianity and Islam) comprise more than half of the world population; 2) almost 89% of what is said about religion in the media today is related to either Christianity or Islam; 3) some violent history behind the two religions is still remembered, although Christians and Muslims of today are not responsible for what had happened 500 or 1000 years ago; 4) unlike other religions, Islam's holy book includes many statements about Christianity and therefore Muslims know about it from what they read in the Qur'ān, which is not exactly how Christians understand their faith; 5) Islam is different from Christianity when dealing with issues concerning the relationship between religion, society and state; 6) the question of Islam-West relations is on the daily agenda of Christian-Muslim dialogue today. According to him, more than 80% of WEA members live in the South and do not see Christianity as a Western religion. But Muslims view it to be so, hence, they sometimes held it responsible for all the military or political actions taken by secular western governments.^{lxi}

The joint press release issued at the end of the consultation on 22nd October, 2008 by the World Council of Churches and the World Alliance of Reformed Churches could also be seen as another watershed in the ongoing efforts on peaceful co-existence among the adherents of the world's largest religious communities. Therefore, enumerating some of

the vital points of the press release could serve as an impetus in understanding and appreciating such initiative.

1. Participants acknowledged a history of “mixed” relationships between Christians and Muslims, with both positive and negative dimensions. On their part, Christians have seen Muslims both as friends and rivals, neighbours and strangers.
2. Christian communities should improve their knowledge of Islam, be good neighbours to Muslims and bear witness to their faith in an appropriate manner.
3. Participants agreed that Christianity teaches love of the neighbour regardless of race, gender or religion. Even more, Christian self-understanding depends and is ever challenged through relationships with Muslims, while Christians themselves are better informed by entering into dialogue with them.
4. While attitudes among Christians towards Islam are diverse and rich, different contexts and experiences of living together with Muslims inspire different theological approaches.
5. The consultation identified a number of issues to be addressed to further dialogue with Muslims, among which are : human rights, conversion, concepts of secularism, pluralism, and citizenship, as well as the use of religious symbols for political ideologies and religiously motivated violence.
6. Participants also recommended further Christian-Muslim collaboration on issues such as social and economic justice, climate change, peace and healing of memories.^{lxii}

Analysing some of the above presentations, one could perceive the readiness and eagerness of the leadership of the two faiths to work out modalities for peaceful co-existence at various levels. If these initiatives are further nurtured and carried beyond seminar and consultation stages to practical and implementation spheres, it could pave the way for a more secured and peaceful world.

Conclusion

This paper has dwelled on peaceful co-existence in the two largest Abrahamic religions, Islam and Christianity. It based its arguments on the premises of various texts from the Holy Books of the two religions, practical live experience and remarkable events. In order for these theories to materialise and transform into meaningful experience in today’s world, all and sundry must abide by the teachings of their respective faiths and strive to emulate the Messengers of God who brought those religions. By so doing, our world will be safer and better for all to live in.

Endnotes

- i Jamal Badawi, "Muslim and Non-Muslim Relations : Reflections on Some Qur'ānic Texts," <<http://islamonline.net/english/Contemporary/2005/04/Article01.shtml>> (accessed 21 May, 2011).
- ii Ibid.
- iii Sūrah al-Nisā', 59.
- iv Muhibbu-Din, M. A. *Ideal Moral and Spiritual Guidance in a Multi-Religious State (Nigeria) : An Islamic Approach*, Birmingham : Centre for the Study of Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations, 1992), 4-5. Also see Ismā'īl al-Fārūqī, "Islam and other Faiths : The World's Need for Humane Universalism," in Altaf Gauhar (ed.), *The Challenge of Islam* (London : Islamic Council of Europe, 1978), 131-150.
- v Haykal, M. H. *The Life of Muhammad*, translated by Ismā'īl R. Al-Fārūqī (Lagos : 1982), 180-183. Also see Muhibbu-Din, 5-6.
- vi Ibid. also see Islam and other Faiths, 147.
- vii Muhibbu-Din, 6.
- viii Al-'abarī, ibn Jarīr, *Tarīkh al-Rusul wa al-Mulūk*, (Cairo : Dar al-Ma'ārif, 1979), vol. III, 609. Also quoted by al-Fārūqī in his book : *Islam and other Faiths*, Ataulloh Siddiqui (ed.). (Leicester : The Islamic Foundation, 1998), 295-296.
- ix Ishtiaq H. Qureshi, *The Religion of Peace* (Karachi : Royal Book Company, 1989), 102.
- x al-Fārūqī, *Islam and other Faiths*, 296.
- xi Michael Nazir-Ali was born on 19th August, 1949 in Karachi, Pakistan to Christian parents, James and Patience Nazir-Ali. His father converted from Islam to Christianity. Michael Nazir-Ali was the 106th Bishop of Rochester in the Church of England and retired as diocesan bishop in September 2009.
- xii Michael Nazir Ali, *The Root of Islamic Tolerance : Origin and Development* (Oxford : Oxford Project for Peace Studies, 1990), 3.
- xiii Badawi, "Muslim and Non-Muslim Relations : Reflections on Some Qur'ānic Texts".
- xiv Sūrah Hūd, 118.
- xv Sūrah Yūnus, 99.
- xvi Related by al-Bukhārī and Muslim.
- xvii Related by al-Bukhārī, Muslim, Ahmad and others.
- xviii Sūrah al-Baqarah, 285.
- xix Sūrah al-Isrā', 70.
- xx Sūrah al-Kahf, 29.
- xxi For more on peaceful co-existence, see : Jamal Badawi, "Muslim and Non-Muslim Relations : Reflections on Some Qur'ānic Texts".

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- xxii Quoted by Abdul Majid in a paper titled : “Peaceful Co-existence of Various Cultures and Religions : An Islamic perspective with special reference to Spain”, 8. <<http://www.metanexus.ntc/conference>> (accessed 2 June, 2011).
- xxiii “And say : “The Truth is from your Lord. “Then whosoever wills, let him believe, and whosoever wills, let him disbelieve.” (Sūrah al-Kahf, 29).
- xxiv Sūrah al-Nahl, 125.
- xxv Sūrah al-Nūr, 54.
- xxvi Sūrah Yūnus, 99.
- xxvii Sūrah al-Qasas, 56.
- xxviii Sūrah al-Baqarah, 272.
- xxix Jamal Badawi, Muslim and Non-Muslim Relations : Reflections on Some Qur’ānic Texts.
- xxx Sūrah al-Baqarah, 216-217.
- xxxi Jamal Badawi, Muslim and Non-Muslim Relations : Reflections on Some Qur’ānic Texts.
- xxxii Abdul Majid. “Peaceful Co-existence of Various Cultures and Religions”, 8.
- xxxiii Ibid.
- xxxiv Jamal Badawi, Muslim and Non-Muslim Relations : Reflections on Some Qur’ānic Texts.
- xxxv Quoted by Harun Yahya, *Islam Denounces Terrorism* (New York : Tehrike Tarsile Quran, Inc, 2002), 94-95; also available at : <www.islamdenoucesterrorism.com> (accessed 21 May, 2011).
- xxxvi Abdul Majid.
- xxxvii Sūrah al-Baqarah, 190.
- xxxviii Abdul Rahmān, *The Peace* (Muscat Oman : Batna Printing Press, 1999), 128-129. Also quoted by Abdul Majid in “Peaceful Co-existence of Various Cultures and Religions,” 9.
- xxxix Sūrah al-Anbiyā’, 107.
- xl Al-Fārūqī, R. I. *Islam and Other Faiths*, 17.
- xli Dewi A. Hughes, “Christianity and other Religions : A Review of some Recent Discussion,” millionaire e-Library, <<http://www.millionaire-library.com/source/searchview.php>> (accessed 21 May, 2011).
- xlii Example of such persecutors was Saul of Tarsus, who persecuted Christians. (See Acts 9).
- xliii Romans 12 : 18. Also see Hebrews 12 : 14.
- xliv *Nostra Aetate* is as a Latin expression, which is translated into English as : *In our Age*. It is the declaration on the relation of the Church with non-Christian religions of the Second Vatican Council. This declaration was passed by a vote of 2,221 to 88 of the assembled bishops, which was officially promulgated on 28th October, 1965, by Pope Paul VI.
- xlv Pim Valkenberg, *Sharing Lights on the Way to God : Muslim-Christian Dialogue and Theology in the Context of Abrahamic Partnership* (Amsterdam : Editions Rodopi B. V., 2006), 194.

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- xlvi The Conciliar and Post Conciliar Documents, “*Nostra Aetate* (Declaration on the Relation of the Church to Non-Christian Religions)”, in *Vatican Council II*, ed. Flannery A., (New York : Costello Publishing Co., 1992), 3. Also see Cosmas J. E. Sarbah. “A Critical Study of Christian- Muslim Relations in the Central Region of Ghana with Special Reference to Traditional Akan Values” (PhD thesis, University of Birmingham, 2010), 128.
- xlvii Cosmas J. E. Sarbah.
- xlviii Extract from Pope John Paul’s address to the Muslim community in Kaduna during his visit to Nigeria in 1982, quoted by Dan’Azumi T. Shekarau Ankuwa in a paper titled : “Islam and Christianity Cordially Invite you to Mission, Peace And Justice,”
<http://nigerdeltacongress.com/articles/islam_and_christianity_cordially.htm> (accessed January 2, 2011).
- xlix Risto Jukko, *Trinity in Unity in Christian-Muslim Relations* (Leiden : Koninklijke Brill, 2007), 1-2.
- l Colossians 3 : 12-14.
- li Galatians 6 : 10.
- lii Hebrews 10 : 24.
- liii Hebrews 13 : 1-3.
- liv Leviticus 19 : 16-18.
- lv Psalm 133 : 1.
- lvi See Rima Barsoum, “Christian self Understanding in Relation to Islam” a summary report of the International Intra-Christian Consultation, held in Geneva between 18th and 20th October, 2008. <<http://www.oikoumene.org/es/documentacion/documentos/programas-del-cmi/interreligious-dialogue-and-cooperation/christian-identity-in-pluralistic-societies/christian-self-understanding-in-relation-to-islam.html>> (accessed 22 May, 2011).
- lvii Ibid., 7.
- lviii Ibid.
- lix Ibid., 8.
- lx Ibid., 11.
- lxi Ibid., 15.
- lxii Ibid., 29.