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Interfaith is a Gate Towards Coexistence

Imam Ahmed Youssef¹

As an Imam who believes in the importance of dialogue among followers of different faiths, I have participated in many multifaith meetings inside and outside Canada. This experience helped me to have more understanding of others' beliefs. Canada as a multicultural country encouraged me to go this way. The peaceful meetings and the respect that I have found among multifaith groups have empowered me to increase my communication and broaden my outreach activities.

Although I studied different religions and beliefs during and after university, I did not have the chance to attend regular multifaith meetings in which we discussed different beliefs and what religion means for us. Being in touch with real followers of different traditions is something more interesting than what you read in closed rooms. In other words, what is written in books in the theoretical domain could describe a phenomenon, but it is missing the complete reality if there is no interaction and physical presence. If you are there where the action takes place, you will look to the people or events with a different eye. As the Qur'an describes it, "To know with knowledge of certainty, and to see with the eye of certainty."²

When you listen to the feelings and personal experiences of people who follow religions other than your own, you discover the reality that God has created human beings diverse and has made them into different cultures and faith perspectives. It is the will of God, and we work alongside it. The Qur'an clearly considers diversity: "And if your Lord had willed, He could have made mankind one community; but they will not cease to differ."³ It behooves us to consider this diversity, enhance mutual understanding, and work together to strengthen our commonalities with one another.

Multifaith discussions helped me understand the impact of religious beliefs on social life. It is very difficult to interpret or understand the behaviour of individuals if it is isolated from faith. When you see certain behaviours without being aware of the impact of belief, you may fall into the trap of misinterpreting or stereotyping. Multifaith discussions are gates to eliminate such diseases that may affect the solidarity of the community. Lack of understanding of belief may be the cause of the current phobia we find around us.

Multifaith meetings are not only conversations and chatting but also an effort to bring the community together and develop practical solutions for matters that concern our lives. One beneficial suggestion that came out of one of our meetings was to organize a multifaith hockey game. It was a unique experience to see teams of different faiths playing together. Youngsters and elders had smiles on their faces as they were playing. Some people may think that religions and beliefs are causes for conflict. However, in the hockey game we saw that people can be united because of their beliefs. Through these activities and others we are

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² Qur'an 102:7

³ Qur'an 11:118

ensuring that religions are sources of integrity and passion. It is our responsibility to change how we perceive things and how we interact.

My experience of discussions among followers of different religions is very important because it reflects the spirit of coexistence in the community and its capacity to accept others. It is a big challenge not only for politicians but also for religious organizations and workers for social integrity to keep this peaceful environment. I would suggest that leaders of different faiths make more efforts to involve their congregations in these discussions and plan more social activities that gather all those who believe in human integrity.