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Seeing Through the Eyes of the Other: Putting a Verse of the Qur'an into Practice

Saleem Bhimji ¹

Text: Qur'an 3:64

Say: "O people of the Scripture! let us agree to a proposition common to us both that we worship none but God and that we associate no partner with Him and that some of us shall not hold others as lords besides God." But if they turn away (refusing) say, "Bear witness that we are the only submitting ones (to one God)."

— Qur'an, Chapter Aal Imran (3), Verse 64

As the culmination of the efforts of 124,000 prophets which God sent for the guidance of humanity – men such as Adam, Noah, Jacob, Moses, Abraham, Ishmail, Isaac, Jesus and Muhammad – the religion of Islam is in a unique position when it comes to discourse and dialogue among peoples of the world – whether they belong to the Abrahamic tradition or otherwise. Muslims, as obligated by the clear verses of the Qur'an, are required to accept and revere many of the same men and women of God that a majority of the peoples of the earth cherish and adore, just as we read, "Say, 'We believe in God and in that which has been revealed to us and in that which was revealed to Abraham, Ishmail, Isaac, Jacob, and his children and in that which was given to Moses and Jesus and to all other Prophets from their Lord. We make no distinction between any one of them (in believing them) and to Him alone do we submit'" (Qur'an, Chapter Aal Imran [3], Verse 84).

Although as Muslims we believe that al-Islam is the "final religion" and the Qur'an is the "final revelation," this does not preclude us from speaking to and interacting with those who follow other faith traditions today. Which brings us to the Qur'anic passage quoted at the beginning.

In the third chapter of the Qur'an, named The Family of Imran (Imran being the family from which Mary, the mother of Jesus, hails), God addresses the Muslims and tells them that one of their needs as practitioners of the faith of Islam is to meet with the People of the Book – the Jews and Christians – and discuss and dialogue with them from common ground. As Muslims believe in many of the same holy personalities mentioned in the Old Testament and revere Jesus as one of God's greatest signs and inviters to the Truth, it stands to reason that we have many commonalities. The fact that the tone of this verse is such that God is not only "encouraging" but rather making it an "obligation" to enter into such discourse has driven the need for Muslims to interact with others who do not share our same faith tradition – in an attempt not to proselytize, but rather to arrive at a common ground of understanding.

In addition, when I as a Muslim look through the corpus of statements of Prophet Muhammad – peace be upon him and his family – and his immaculate successors, I see clear indications of the importance of interacting and speaking to people of different faith

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perspectives. As an example, almost 1,400 years ago, Imam Ali b. Abi Talib, peace be upon him, who was the cousin, son-in-law, and Caliph of the Prophet, stated that “people are the antagonists of that which they don’t know.”²

When we look around the world today, and more so in our own backyard, we see that it is only when people don’t know “the other” that xenophobia, racism, discrimination, and bigotry become manifest. Therefore, when Imam Ali articulated the fact that people are antagonists of that which they don’t know, or of people whom they don’t know or relate with, he was speaking a reality which is clear today. When we don’t know or understand the wide diversity of people whom we live and work with, we cannot really “understand” them.

It is especially for this reason, perhaps among many reasons, that I have been involved with various interfaith initiatives both in Ontario and during the brief stint in which I lived in Edmonton, Alberta. What probably started out as a formality of having regular meetings and discussions has turned into a true manifestation of both the verse of the Qur’an which I began with and the saying of Imam Ali.

The most obvious by-products of my encounters with people of different faiths – and indeed no faith (in a particular religion) at all – is the improved understanding of “the other.” I could have easily read books about “them” and watched YouTube videos from “them.” However, there is no real alternative to sitting down and sharing a cup of coffee (or tea) with an active practitioner of a particular faith tradition to learn about their beliefs and values and see each as a sovereign human being.

At the same time, it has helped to foster a dialogue to introduce “true Islam” to them – a far cry from what the mass media tend to focus on. It helps to break the stereotypes and actually bring into a practical application this verse of the Qur’an: to allow all to come to a common ground.

However, perhaps more important than all of this, a paradoxical benefit which I and other Muslims have gained through active engagement in interfaith dialogue is that it helps us understand our own faith tradition, Islam, much better. Many of us are born and brought up practising the religion of our parents, tribe, home country, etc. We really do not think deeply about our faith. We have probably surrounded ourselves in our formative years with people of our own faith and our only exposure to people of another tradition would be at school or work or in other such chance encounters. So when I have been “forced” to engage in “seeing through the eyes of the other,” it has actually meant that I must first see through the eyes of Islam and not what I have been given to understand are the teachings of Islam – which in many cases is nothing more than culture, draped in the guise of divinely sent teachings.

In my interfaith occasions in which my religious centre has had the opportunity to host joint functions of dialogue and breaking bread together, I have personally had to interact with people of other traditions. To speak in such formal gatherings, I have needed to engage in significant research in the Islamic source works, the Qur’an and *ahadith* (the sayings and utterances of Prophet Muhammad and his successors), rather than merely putting forth my own propositions and presumptions. I have had to ensure that my understanding is based on the core texts of Islam – thus further enhancing my own level of knowledge of Islam.

² *Nahj al-Balāgha*, short saying 172

In conclusion, I feel as an individual and also speaking on behalf of “my” community – especially those who have also had the good fortune of being present in such multifaith gatherings – that these experiences have enriched all of us as we try to better understand those who are around us. In some cases, we have been able to witness and “experience” how they worship God. We are then able to better appreciate the various stances that people take in terms of political issues and social changes.

The goal of such interaction should never be to “win over” or “convert” someone to “your side.” Such alliances can definitely help strengthen the bonds between the peoples of this Earth. Whether we are “brothers in faith” or “equals in creation,” we realize our commonalities, respect our differences, and help each and every one of us to grow in our own faith tradition, thus getting closer to our God and transforming ourselves into better human beings.