

CULTURAL SYMBIOSIS AND THE ROLE OF RELIGION IN THE CONTEMPORARY WORLD: AN ISLAMIC PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract

The main aim of this paper is to provide an introductory discussion of the issue of the human need for a cultural symbiosis in the contemporary global community and of the constructive role that religion could play in delivering this global need. We will, however, be examining the issue at hand mainly from the perspective of Islam, since it happens to be the religion with which we are most familiar. But our chosen theme of discussion here with an emphasis on Islam is also influenced by other considerations. We realize that the perspective of Islam on the issue in question is little known to many non-Muslims even though it is important in its own right, thus meriting a serious study by scholars. Today, Islam is the second largest religion in the world after Christianity and also the fastest growing. Moreover, for various reasons, Islam is increasingly recognized even by its critics as having the capacity to positively influence world events and global affairs and the future direction of world history. More often than not, Islam's influence is perceived negatively. The association of Islam with violence, as portrayed by many circles today, is a good illustration of this widespread misperception of Islam. In these circumstances, it is therefore important to highlight Islam's positive teachings drawn from its rather rich treasury – spiritual, intellectual, and cultural – that could give a big helping

hand to the present humanity in its task of realizing the goal of cultural symbiosis in this sharply polarized world.

The Meaning of Cultural Symbiosis

The English word ‘symbiosis’ is derived from the Greek word ‘symbiosis’ whose verb form *symbioun* conveys the idea of ‘to live together’ (*syn-*, together + *bios*, life). Thus one widely used dictionary defines symbiosis as “the intimate living together of two organisms, especially if such association is of mutual advantage.”¹ This living together is further characterized as a “relationship of mutual interdependence.”² In this sense, the idea of symbiosis applies both to the natural world of plant and animal organisms and the human world of cultural organisms.

In the former case, we have ‘biological symbiosis,’ the intimate living together of plants and animals on the basis of mutual interdependence. In the latter case, we have ‘cultural symbiosis,’ the intimate living together of two or more cultural entities on the basis of mutual interdependence. On the basis of its sacred book, the Quran, the religion of Islam deals with both kinds of symbiosis in a rather extensive manner. The issue of biological symbiosis has been treated in Islam in various ways but all with the ultimate goal of demonstrating Divine Unity, Wisdom, Knowledge, Justice and Power. In God’s cosmic plan, the world of nature is to display unity within diversity.

Many verses in the Quran deal with the theme of biological diversity,³ but this diversity conveys a message of the interrelatedness and mutual interdependence of all things in the

¹ *Webster’s New World College Dictionary*, Agnes, Michael, ed. (New York: Macmillan USA, 1999), Fourth Edition.

² *Ibid.*

³ For example, verse (35:27-28) says: “Do you not see that God sent down water from the sky with which We brought forth fruits of diverse hues? In the mountains there are white and red, of diverse hues, and

natural world. This particular message is referred to in traditional Islamic science as the message of Unicity of Nature, which forms part of a broader principle known as the Unity of the Divine Acts (*al-tawhid al-rububiyah*).⁴ It is precisely because God wants to display His Unity in all domains of His creation that we have the unicity of nature.

The Quran's emphasis on the idea of mutual interdependence in the animal world is also to be seen in its description of the animal species as being communities (sing: *ummah*) like human beings.⁵ One of the core ideas in the Quranic conception of the *ummah* is that of social organization grounded on mutual interdependence and in conformity with the divine laws meant for that particular community. As applied to the animal species, this would mean the existence of a harmonious relationship between these species and their respective environments.⁶ In Islamic philosophy, it is generally maintained that God has prescribed a *shari'ah* (divine law) for each religious community under the leadership of a prophet and also a *shari'ah* for each animal species.

Each species lives in accordance with its nature given by God and the "natural" law He has promulgated for it. It is a particular divine law that governs social organization and mutual interdependence in each species. But law and order also prevails in the inter-species relationships. Although there are different laws for different species of beings, these laws are interrelated and unified under more embracing laws which are ultimately subject to the one Divine Law governing the whole of creation (*namus al-khilqah*).⁷ Thus, the natural world is

pitchy black; and human beings too, and beasts, and cattle – diverse are their hues. From among His servants, it is only those who know that fear God. Verily God is Most Mighty, Most Forgiving.”

⁴ In the Islamic perspective, what is known in the western religious thought as Natural Theology would deal precisely with this particular dimension of *al-tawhid*.

⁵ Says the Quran (6:38): “There is not an animal (that lives) on the earth, nor a being that flies on its wings, but (forms parts of) communities like you.”

⁶ See my discussion of this theme in Bakar, Osman, *Environmental Wisdom for Planet Earth: The Islamic Heritage* (Kuala Lumpur: Center for Civilizational Dialogue, University of Malaya, 2007), 39.

⁷ For a discussion of the absence in Islam of a cleavage between the “laws of nature” and the “laws of God” as to be found in the modern West, see Bakar, Osman, *The History and Philosophy of Islamic Science* (Cambridge: Islamic Texts Society, 1999), pp. 70-72.

characterized by law and order, and the interrelatedness and mutual interdependence of its inhabitants. More specifically, in the animal world, the dominating idea governing inter-species relationships is not the Darwinian “survival of the fittest “ but rather a biological symbiosis in varying degrees of intensity.

Biological diversity and its attending symbiosis are to set in Islam as a necessary natural background for the treatment of the theme of ethnic and cultural diversity and its corresponding cultural symbiosis. In a sense, cultural symbiosis is supposed to be an extension of the biological symbiosis on a higher plane. A more complex and superior kind of symbiosis is to be expected in the human world of ethnic and cultural diversity, since human beings are spiritual and sentient creatures endowed with the power of reason, choice, and free will.

The problem with human beings as a result, however, is that they are capable of both realizing the loftiest of human ideals and wreaking havoc and destruction not only to themselves and their fellow human beings but also to other creatures, especially of the natural world.⁸ In other words, they are capable of both attaining various degrees of enlightened cultural symbiosis and threatening cultural symbiosis with wars and violence. Contrary to the claim of biological evolutionists, the community life of an animal species and its attending symbiosis, both intra-species and inter-species, is basically a fixed reality. As for the life of a human community, it is susceptible to change, development, and progress. The important point to note is that there is a corresponding relationship between the quality of life of a human community and the quality of cultural symbiosis realized within that community.

As with biological diversity, ethnic and cultural diversity is a major theme in the Quran. Two of its most quoted verses concerning ethnic diversity are the following:

⁸ This dual nature of the human capacity is aptly described by the Quran (95:4-6): “We have indeed created man in the best of moulds; then We abase him (to be) the lowest of the low except such as believe and do righteous deeds: for they shall have a reward unailing.”

*And among His [i.e. God's] signs is the creation of the heavens and the earth, and the variations in your languages and your colors: verily in that are signs for those who know.*⁹

*O mankind! We created you from a single (pair) of a male and a female, and made you into nations and tribes, that you may know each other. Verily the most honored of you in the sight of God is (he who is) the most righteous of you. And God has full knowledge and is well acquainted (with all things).*¹⁰

The Quran defines ethnicity primarily in terms of language and secondarily in terms of skin color. As a result of this linguistic and skin color diversity, humankind is divided into many nations and tribes inhabiting the earth. Ethnic diversity is partly the product of natural factors and partly the product of human cultural development. This means that ethnic diversity possesses two dimensions. One is the natural dimension, which refers to the variations in the physical and biological traits and characteristics of human beings such as skin color and psychological temperament as a result of geographical and climatic factors¹¹; the other, the cultural dimension, which refers to the variations in language formation.

Although the diversity of human languages is treated here as part of the cultural dimension of ethnic diversity in due recognition of the human role in the origin and development of languages, the natural foundation of the formation of human language needs to be understood and appreciated. The possibility of a human role in the formation and development of language presupposes the existence of a natural power and capacity in man for that sort of development.

⁹ *The Quran* (30:22).

¹⁰ *The Quran* (49:13).

¹¹ The famous Muslim philosopher-scientist and medical doctor, Ibn Sina (980-1037), is known to have dealt with climate as an important factor in influencing the diversity of psychological temperament among ethnic groups. See Ibn Sina, *The Canon of Medicine: English Translation of Qanun fi'l-tibb* (Chicago: Kazi Publications, 1999), vol. 1 (adapted by Laleh Bakhtiar).

According to the Quran, man's natural capacity for language is not something that he has gradually acquired through an evolutionary process. While languages may evolve with the passage of time and even subject to the temporal process of birth and death as attested to in human history by the disappearance of many old languages, man's natural capacity for language does not. This capacity is an integral part of the original nature (*al-fitrah*) of man. God has created man with a capacity for intelligent speech. Says the Quran (55:3-4): "He has created man: He has taught him speech (*al-bayan*)."¹² Since man has been created in the image (*surah*) of God, and speech is one of God's Attributes, it follows that man necessarily possesses the attribute of speech.

Following Aristotle, Muslim philosophers of the Peripatetic school (*al-mashsha'iyun*) define man as a rational animal (*al-hayawan al-natiq*). Using the same Arabic expression, we may describe man as a "speaking animal" or an animal endowed with speech. This word, *al-natiq*, translated here as 'rational' is etymologically related to the word *al-nutq*, which has been understood as referring to both intelligence as acquired by man's rational faculty and man's intelligent speech.¹³ According to al-Farabi, man's intelligent speech is comprised of two dimensions: internal speech (*al-nutq al-dakhil*), which refers to ideas and their meanings in the mind; and exterior speech (*al-nutq al-kharij*), which refers to the expression by language of what is in the mind.¹⁴ Interestingly, in the Quran, in referring to Prophet Solomon's miraculous ability to understand the "speech of birds," the word *mantiq al-tayr* has been used.¹⁵ The word *mantiq* is etymologically related to *al-nutq*, and is used to mean both speech and logic.

¹² The Arabic word *al-bayan* conveys the meaning of intelligent speech, power of expression, and the capacity to understand clearly the relation of things and to explain them.

¹³ For a discussion of the relationship between the faculty of reason and man's intelligent speech by a well-known member of the Muslim Peripatetic school, al-Farabi, see Bakar, Osman, *Classification of Knowledge in Islam* (Cambridge: Islamic Texts Society, 1999), pp. 48-49; 66; 131-132.

¹⁴ Bakar, O., *Classification of Knowledge in Islam*, p. 66.

¹⁵ Says the Quran (27:16): "And Solomon was David's heir. He said: "O you people! We have been taught the speech of birds....this is indeed grace manifest (from God).""

There is a profound reason why, in His cosmic Plan, God wants to create man as a creature endowed with speech. According to this Plan, man has been created to worship and serve God. This worship necessitates a spiritual relationship between God and man, and speech is clearly an essential component of this relationship. The essence of worship is prayer, but without intelligent speech no meaningful prayer would be possible. The canonical Muslim prayer to be performed five times daily necessitates the recitation of the Opening Chapter (*surat al-fatihah*) of the Quran and other spiritual formulae invoking God in various ways. Without this recitation, no canonical Muslim prayer is deemed legitimate in the sight of God.

This forgoing discussion demonstrates in a clear manner the deep significance of language not only to the relationship between man and man but also to the relationship between man and God. For this reason, when God wanted to create the first man, Adam, he also decided to equip him with the faculty of speech. The Quran appears to be alluding to this faculty of speech when it speaks of the bodily creation of Adam in the following terms: “Behold! The Lord said to the angels: “I am about to create man, from sounding clay (*salsal*) from mud molded unto shape.””¹⁶ Another verse speaks of the creation of man “from sounding clay like unto pottery (*salsal kal-fakhkhar*).”¹⁷

Taking the two verses together, some commentators understand them as conveying the meaning of man’s bodily shape made from dry clay that is capable of emitting sound. They maintain further that the emitted sound most probably refers to the human capacity for speech.¹⁸ God’s “breathing into Adam of His Spirit” mentioned in the succeeding verse¹⁹ is what enables man to have an intelligent speech with a spiritual content in his communication with God.

¹⁶ *The Quran* (15:28).

¹⁷ *The Quran* (55:14).

¹⁸ A modern commentator writes: “I understand the meaning to be: that man’s body was formed from wet clay molded into shape and then dried until it could emit sound (perhaps referring to speech).” See ‘Ali, Abdullah Yusuf, *The Meaning of the Holy Qur’an: Text, Translation and Commentary* (Kuala Lumpur: Islamic Book Trust, 2005 reprint), p. 513.

¹⁹ *The Quran*: (15:29).

In light of the multi-faceted significance of the human language, Islam expects man not only to show deep respect for the diversity of languages that characterizes ethnic diversity but also to celebrate its underlying divine wisdom and power. The Quranic verse on the “variations in your languages” previously mentioned, in fact, invites man to ponder on this phenomenon as one of the signs (*ayat*) of God, meaning the sign of His Wisdom, Knowledge, and Power. The Islamic respect for the diversity of human languages is further deepened by the Quranic teaching that “there never was a nation or community (*ummah*) without an admonisher having lived among them”²⁰ and “God does not send a messenger to his community except in the language of his folk.”²¹ In other words, God has spoken in the past to the different branches of humanity, and He has done so in their respective languages. This means that God Himself has conferred respect on human languages. Genuine respect for the diversity of languages, whether inspired by spiritual considerations or otherwise, could go a long way toward promoting the cause of cultural symbiosis.

The main purpose of ethnic diversity – the division of humankind into nations and tribes as asserted by the Quran (49:13) – is to enable man to know one another (*lita’arafu*). Quite obviously, as supported by many of its verses, the Quran understands this mutual acquaintance (*ta’aruf*) to be multi-layered and to be productive of other things viewed as indispensable to the development and advancement of cultural symbiosis in human societies. The various levels of knowledge as understood in the Quranic idea of “mutual acquaintance” between different ethnic groups range from knowledge of physical characteristics such as skin color to knowledge of psychological traits, and from knowledge of manners and customs to knowledge of the higher aspects of culture and civilization.²²

²⁰ *The Quran* (35:24).

²¹ *The Quran* (14:4).

²² I have discussed the issue of the Quranic rationalization of ethnic and also religious diversity in more details in Osman Bakar, ‘Inter-civilizational dialogue: theory and practice in Islam,’ Nakamura, Mitsuo, Siddique, Sharon, and Bajunid, Omar Farouk, eds., *Islam and Civil Society in Southeast Asia* (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2001), pp. 164-76; also my ‘Pluralism and the “people of the book”’: an Islamic faith perspective,’ Seiple, Robert A. and Hoover, Dennis R., eds., *Religion and Security: The*

Mutual acquaintance is to lead to mutual understanding (*tafahum*), cooperation and mutual help (*ta'awun*), and mutual tolerance (*tasamuh*), all of which are necessary to the healthy realization of cultural symbiosis. Cooperation and mutual help between members of different ethnic groups, even when acknowledged and pursued at a lower level, is likely to enhance mutual acquaintance and raise it to a new level. This new level of mutual acquaintance can have the positive effect of broadening the scope of mutual understanding, cooperation and help. There is a dynamic interaction between mutual acquaintance and mutual cooperation. The deeper the quality of mutual acquaintance is cultivated the better would be the quality of mutual cooperation it generates. So is the reverse true.

Quite clearly, as implied by the quoted verse on ethnic diversity, the Quran is interested in elevating mutual acquaintance between different and diverse human groups to its ideal level, which it defines in spiritual terms. At the level of thought, the Quran envisages the deepening of mutual acquaintance to the point of all ethnic groups acknowledging that, as different branches of the same human tree, they have a common human origin and ancestor in the form of the first human couple on the planet Earth, identified in the Abrahamic religious tradition as Adam and Eve, and they have a common destiny as fellow planetary citizens. Another ideal enunciated in the cited verse concerns the true meaning of human dignity. The real worth of a person does not reside in his or her social status, his or her blood and color, his or her race or ethnicity, his or her wealth, and not even his or her belonging to a particular creed. Human dignity and honor is to be defined and judged essentially in terms of piety and righteousness.

The Quran insists that these ideals must have their consequences on the practical plane of collective human life. A true belief in our common human origin means that we should always be mindful of our status as members of a single human family. It also means that we should always believe in the universal ideal of the unity of humankind and human

New Nexus in International Relations (New York: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2005), pp. 108-110.

brotherhood. This ideal would serve as an excellent philosophical framework for the societal pursuit of the common good and cultural symbiosis in a pluralistic world through the progressive realizations of mutual acquaintance and understanding and mutual cooperation.

Our commitment to the other ideal, namely the idea of human dignity and honor based on the spiritual principle of piety and righteousness (*taqwa*) that transcends all forms of sectarian considerations provides the much needed antidote to the problems of ethnocentrism, racism, and religious extremism rampant in the contemporary world. From the perspective of the Quran, the correct approach to inter-ethnic, inter-cultural, and inter-civilizational understanding and to the unity of humankind is one that is based on spiritual principles. In short, the human quest for cultural symbiosis in the global community has to be guided by universal, spiritual principles and values if it were to truly succeed. Pure ethnicity by itself without the aid of spirituality, and thus without religiosity – inasmuch as religion is the universally acknowledged source of spiritual principles and values – would not be able to elevate mutual acquaintance between ethnic groups to the point of understanding the underlying wisdom of ethnic plurality and diversity and of acknowledging God as the ultimate source of humanity's common origin. For this reason, the Quran has come up with a spiritual guidance on how human beings should deal with problems arising from ethnic diversity.²³

The necessity of spirituality and religiosity in human life brings with it the problem of religious plurality and diversity. Although from the point of view of the Quran, the core message in the teachings of all prophets and messengers of God is the same, namely the worship of God the One, these teachings have to manifest themselves in the form of different religions as dictated by the changing needs of human societies living in different time and space. As in the case of ethnic diversity the Quran is also deeply aware of the threat posed by

²³ For a discussion of the Quran's approach to the management of human plurality and diversity, see Osman Bakar, *The Qur'an on Interfaith and Inter-Civilizational Dialogue: Interpreting a Divine Message for Twenty-First Century Humanity* (Kuala Lumpur: ISUGU and IIITM, 2006), pp. 15-18.

a perverted understanding of religious diversity to peaceful co-existence and mutual cooperation in human societies. Accordingly, the Quran has invited humankind to really understand why they have to attribute religious diversity to divine wisdom and at the same time to avoid theological disputes and hairsplitting that run counter to the true spirit of religious life itself. Rather, the Quran appeals to humankind to compete with each other in the promotion of virtues and doing of good works:

....To each among you, have We prescribed a Law and an Open Way. If God had so willed, He would have made you a single people (ummatan wahidatan), but (His Plan) is to test you in what He had given you: so strive as in a race in all virtues and good works (al-khayrat). The goal of you all is to God; it is He that will show you the truth of the matters in which you dispute.”²⁴

In the foregoing discussion, we have outlined the salient points in the Quranic conception of cultural symbiosis. In light of these Quranic teachings we are able to better understand and appreciate the phenomena of ethnic and religious diversity that has caught the global attention of our times and why it is our responsibility to advance the cause of cultural symbiosis. Not only that, the Quran has also prescribed and defined the various processes that must be operational in collective human life for cultural symbiosis to be a living reality. Among the most fundamental of these processes are mutual acquaintance (*ta'aruf*), mutual understanding (*tafahum*), mutual cooperation (*ta'awun*), and healthy competition (*tasabuwq*). These processes together will hammer home to man the point of mutual interdependence of all forms of life on the planet earth in general and of human life in particular, which in turn affirms the unity of all life.

The Quranic view of cultural symbiosis has inspired many Muslim thinkers in different ages to offer a philosophical and scientific understanding of it. Undoubtedly, the theme of mutual

²⁴ *The Quran*, chapter 5, verse 48.

interdependence in human society has been a popular one in classical Islamic philosophy. Whenever Muslim philosophers then discuss the subject of human society or human civilization, it is incumbent upon them to dwell on the idea of mutual interdependence as a basis of human social organization. They emphasize the point that human beings are mutually interdependent for their physical needs such as food, shelter, and defense or protection from external danger. This means that mutual cooperation is necessary to the human species, the result of which is social organization or civilization. Echoing the views of many philosophers before him, the famous philosopher of history, Ibn Khaldun (1332-1406) wrote: “It is absolutely necessary for man to have the cooperation of his fellow man. As long as there is no such cooperation, he cannot obtain any food or nourishment, and life cannot materialize for him, because God fashioned him so that he must have food if he is to live.....When, however, mutual cooperation exists, man obtains food for his nourishment and weapons for his defense. God’s wise plan that man should subsist and the human species be preserved will be fulfilled.”²⁵

But human beings are capable of realizing various levels of mutual cooperation, and thus various qualitative levels of social organization, in response to the various levels of human needs, because God has made them to serve the higher purpose of life. The lowest level of mutual cooperation is meant to serve the fulfillment of human physical needs. But man has also non-physical needs. Since Islam views man as a spiritual and sentient being, a view shared by other religions, he has spiritual, moral, and intellectual needs which could only be fulfilled if he were to develop a higher level of social organization and a more refined civilization. In other words, a more developed and refined cultural symbiosis is needed. In religious terms, as asserted by Ibn Khaldun, quoting the Quran, this higher level of cultural symbiosis is to enable man to materialize “God’s desire to settle the world with human beings and to leave them as His representatives (sing: *khalifah*) on earth.”²⁶

²⁵ Ibn Khaldun, *The Muqaddimah: An Introduction to History*, Franz Rosenthal, trans. (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1986), vol. I, pp. 90-91.

²⁶ Ibn Khaldun, *The Muqaddimah*, p. 91.

From Mutual Ignorance to Mutual Acquaintance: The Need for Inter-Cultural Dialogue

We have already discussed at length the virtue of mutual acquaintance and its necessity for the realization of cultural symbiosis. We have referred in particular to the obstacles and challenges to the realization of an enlightened form of cultural symbiosis, as for example articulated by Ibn Khaldun, coming from a perverted understanding of ethnic and religious diversity. The most logical thing to do would be to initiate and pursue dialogues between different ethnic and religious groups so that a perverted understanding of diversity long nourished by deep seated suspicions and prejudices will give way to an acceptable understanding of it. In other words, through dialogues, mutual ignorance should give way to mutual acquaintance.

Looking at our present situation in different parts of the world, the challenge we face is immense. In pursuing inter-ethnic and inter-religious dialogues that are truly meaningful and effective, we are confronted with a host of challenges ranging from the political to the theological. Of all these challenges the most fundamental, hence the most “problematic,” is the challenge of cultural ignorance and the all sorts of prejudices it breeds. The challenge of human ignorance is twofold. There is the challenge of “self-ignorance”, and there is the challenge of “one’s ignorance of the other.” The twofold challenge of ignorance applies to both individuals and groups. However, we are mainly interested here in the challenge insofar as it concerns groups, in particular religious groups.

Moreover, the limited scope of this essay forces us to further limit the discussion to the issue of a group’s “ignorance of the other” and the implications it has for inter-ethnic and inter-religious dialogues. More precisely, we are focusing on the issue of the challenge of “mutual ignorance” among religious groups to which we have referred. In doing so we are not saying that “self-ignorance” among religious groups is of little consequence to the pursuit of dialogues of ethnicities, faiths, and civilizations. On the contrary, self-ignorance can have

negative consequences.²⁷ It is enough to point to the belligerent religious stance of some religious groups toward dialogues, which clearly arise out of ignorance of their own religious tradition. We ourselves have personally experienced such a stance from some Muslims, and we have responded with the argument that the Quran itself explicitly supports inter-ethnic, inter-faith, and inter-civilizational dialogues.²⁸

In the context of this essay in which mutual acquaintance is advanced as a major pillar of cultural symbiosis, we are giving priority to the issue of “mutual ignorance among religious groups.” In our view, there is much ignorance and prejudice on both sides of the world’s cultural and religious divides, no matter which particular cultural or religious divide we have in mind. What we call “misperceptions” and “misconceptions” of the other that under certain circumstances may even lead to unnecessary conflicts and wars are largely the bitter fruits of this cultural ignorance and prejudice. The well known saying “ignorance breeds prejudice, and prejudice breeds hate” constantly reminds us of the fundamental nature of the challenge that cultural ignorance poses to the wellbeing of the human community at its various levels.

The best way to overcome this particular challenge is to promote a spiritually informed “cultural literacy” at the most advanced level possible among peoples of different cultures and religions. Inter-ethnic, inter-faith, and inter-civilizational dialogues would be indispensable to the realization of this goal. What we mean by this statement is that dialogue is not just a means to a cultural goal that we can just throw away or set aside once the goal is attained. It is in itself a cultural goal, indeed one of the most important cultural goals of twenty-first century humanity. A culture of dialogue needs to prevail as an antidote to the

²⁷ Philosophically speaking, “self-ignorance” and the “self’s ignorance of the other” when understood at a much deeper level are so profoundly related in such a way as to influence and reinforce each other. It may be said that “self-ignorance” is the root cause of one’s ignorance of others and all other forms of ignorance. Conversely, the “self’s ignorance of the other” deprives it of external sources of knowledge and wisdom, thus condemning the self to perpetual ignorance. The ancient wisdom “Know yourself and you will know God” affirms “self-knowledge or self-enlightenment” and negates “self-ignorance.”

²⁸ See our previously cited *The Qur’an on Interfaith and Inter-civilization Dialogue*; ‘Intercivilizational Dialogue: Theory and Practice in Islam;’ and ‘Pluralism and the “people of the book”’: an Islamic faith perspective.’

culture of hate that is thriving in many parts of the world. It would be an integral component of the cultural literacy we wish to produce. In the sense we have explained, inter-ethnic, inter-faith, and inter-civilizational dialogue would be a cultural journey through various phases of human interactions with many hurdles of mutual ignorance and stations of common achievement positioned along the way for its traveling advocates. Given the many levels of mutual ignorance that have tended to fortify a particular cultural and religious divide, even advocates of dialogue and those who participate regularly in its activities still have to face hurdles of mutual ignorance.

The challenge of ignorance to dialogue is not just how to convince people at the pre-dialogue stage to believe in the idea of dialogue as an important tool in settling human differences and conflicts, but also once the dialogue process is set in motion, how to sustain it until society accepts dialogue as an integral part of its “culture” and its way of life. Dialogue, especially in our times, should indeed be seen and celebrated as a societal virtue.²⁹ Advocates of dialogue need all the necessary knowledge and wisdom to sustain dialogue. Quite obviously, there is a need to promote a healthy climate for dialogue and to design dialogue programs according to well-ordered priorities that really serve the common interests of partners of dialogue.

In this essay, we will explain what we precisely mean by “cultural literacy” and also suggest some of the concrete things that ought to be done in our attempt to promote a global cultural literacy. While the notion of cultural literacy as conceived and understood here is perfectly applicable to all cultural and religious divides we, for various outstanding reasons, are specifically interested in the “Islam and the West” cultural divide. In view of this, we will be

²⁹ In the last several years, especially following the September 11, 2001 tragedy, we have seen an ‘explosion’ of writings on the ‘virtues’ and many other aspects of interfaith and inter-civilizational dialogues. See, for example, Segesvary, Victor, *Dialogue of Civilizations* (University Press of America, 2000); UNESCO, *Dialogue Among Civilizations: The Round Table on the Eve of the United Nations Millennium Summit*, 2001; Dallmayr, Fred, *Dialogue Among Civilizations: Some Exemplary Voices* (Pelgrave Macmillan, 2003); and Tehranian, Majid and Chappell, David W., eds., *Dialogue of Civilizations: A New Peace Agenda for a New Millennium (Human Security and Global Governance)* (I. B. Tauris, 2002).

arguing for the case of cultural literacy on the basis of some glaring examples of mutual ignorance and prejudices that underlie the present cultural and religious divide between Islam and the West.

The Need for a New Outlook on Ethnic and Religious Plurality and Diversity

Ethnic and religious plurality and diversity is a fact. It was a fact long before we could remember, and it seems certain it will continue to be a fact as long as there are humans on earth. The human family has been destined to be divided along ethnic and religious or ideological lines. We have no choice but to live with this fact, and live with it correctly, creatively, and honorably. Rather than attempting to change the fact into some other “fact” thought to be more desirable for humanity and within its practical reach, it would be far better if we would try to understand the phenomenon of religious diversity and mobilize all our resources to confront the challenges it poses. This sort of outlook and mindset on human diversity is in complete conformity with the Quranic view earlier discussed. It is as dangerous and as futile an attempt to convert the whole world into a single religion as to abolish all religions from the landscape of human life.

True enough religious diversity has given rise to numerous conflicts and wars in the name of God and in the name of religion. But then there is no sure guarantee our world would be a better place to live in if it were to be mono-religious. After all, there have been much more intra-religious wars in world history than inter-religious ones. Likewise, there is no sure guarantee we would be living in a better and more peaceful world if religion were to be abolished. The twentieth century had been a witness to the brutal fact that numerous killings had taken place in the name of atheism and other secular ideologies.

Our world may turn out to be a much more peaceful place if we were to accept the fact of religious diversity with an open mind, to look for its underlying wisdom, and to learn the art

of living together peacefully in a religiously plural world. It is not an impossible goal to achieve. The world history of religious diversity is a testimony to not only religious conflicts and wars but also inter-religious understanding and cooperation.³⁰ If one part of the globe has been ravaged by religious wars and conflicts, another part of it has been simultaneously free of them. This goes to show that the global human community is capable of minimizing, if not entirely eliminating religious conflicts. In short, a global inter-religious peace is both desirable and possible.

The Need for a New Cultural Literacy

Confronted as we are today with widespread religious conflicts it becomes necessary for us to develop and promote the idea of a cultural literacy that is above other things linked to our ability to appreciate and manage religious diversity and pluralism. This new cultural literacy is basically concerned with our capacity to learn about spiritual traditions other than our own, to know commonalities that bind all religions together and differences that set them apart, and to enlist the support and contribution of every known spiritual tradition in the world in the pursuit of the common good. Since mutual learning is a dynamic process, our respective “spiritual positions” are bound to change, and for the better. Thus, this new cultural literacy is also about exploring possibilities that are simultaneously open to us for further broadening and maximizing commonalities and minimizing differences. Of course, we are referring here to mainly differences of the kind that have the potential of generating conflicts. Differences that are free of disputes, no matter how many they are, need not concern us.

³⁰Of late more scholarly voices have been heard in the West praising with ‘nostalgic’ feelings the unprecedented degree of interfaith understanding and peace that prevailed in Muslim-ruled Spain, especially from the tenth to the twelfth centuries, enabling Jews, Christians, and Muslims to embark on a common venture of scientific learning and cultural innovations that was to significantly influence the history of medieval Europe. On one of these voices, see Menocal, Maria Rosa, *The Ornament of the World: How Muslims, Jews, and Christians Created a Culture of Tolerance in Medieval Spain* (Boston, New York, London: Little, Brown and Company, 2002).

Moreover, our new cultural literacy is about having the right attitudes toward both commonalities and differences.³¹ The challenge before us is how to appreciate and celebrate similarities and differences at one and the same time, especially when differences tend to breed prejudices and disrespect and, more disconcertingly, when even similarities tend to be viewed negatively. This is indeed the challenge of cultural literacy for twenty-first century humanity.

If expanding commonalities between religions can be done, then it is going to greatly enhance the pursuit of our common goals and our common good.³² At the same time, it will weaken religious differences thereby helping to reduce and minimize potential sources of conflict. There will be other possible consequences of much importance. One of these would be the creation of an environment conducive for a “re-appraisal” of our own identity in relation to all other identities around us. The capacity for such a re-appraisal in light of the “changing face” of religious diversity at the turn of the twenty-first century would be one of the outstanding demands of the new cultural literacy.

Positive perceptions of commonalities on the spiritual and ethical planes among different belief or cultural systems would help to enhance this identity reappraisal capacity. At the individual human level, such perceptions could have the effect of generating an “identity space” that would overlap with that of the “other.” In looking at the overlapping identity space an individual thus transformed sees not only “a part of me” but also “a part of others.” It would be psychologically rewarding to the individual concerned to be able to see the presence of “others” in “me” and, vice versa, to see “myself” in “others” even if only

³¹See our discussion in *The Qur'an on Interfaith and Inter-civilization Dialogue*.

³²The Quran is emphatic on the desirability of the pursuit of the common good (*al-khayrat*). See, for example, verse 148, chapter 2: “To each is a goal to which God turns him; then strive together (as in a race) toward all that is good (*al-khayrat*). Wherever you are, God will bring you together. For God has power over all things.” For a discussion of the Quran’s view of the pursuit of the common good as one of the objectives of dialogues of civilizations, see our previously cited ‘The Theological Foundations of interfaith dialogues and peaceful coexistence; also *The Qur'an on Interfaith and Inter-civilization Dialogue*.

partially. In the context of a multiethnic and multi-religious society in which “mutual identity reappraisal” so understood is assumed to be taking place at the collective level of each ethnic or religious group it is possible to visualize an expanding common identity space for the plural society in question. The global community stands to benefit from such a societal transformation since it contributes to peaceful and harmonious inter-ethnic and inter-religious relationships.

Expanding the Cultural-Religious Space for a Shared Identity: The Case of Western Muslims

Many religious, ethnic, and cultural conflicts and tensions have arisen in greater frequency in various societies all over the globe, precisely because of their failures to resolve the “identity issue.” As direct encounters between identities largely unfamiliar with each other become ever more commonplace, the possibility of clashes and conflicts between them also increases. Many factors have helped to multiply these direct encounters between religions, ethnicities, and cultures. Migration is one of them. The growing presence of Muslims in the United States, a country now claimed to be founded on Judeo-Christian values, has raised an identity issue that is being debated by both Muslim and non-Muslim Americans, only to be accentuated by the September 11, 2001 terrorist attack on America widely attributed to Muslims. If modern American identity is defined in terms of Judeo-Christian values, then how is it possible for Muslims to reconcile it with their identity that is based on the Islamic heritage? If the two identities – Judeo-Christian and Islamic – do not meet on a common ground, as indeed many have insisted, then Muslims will have no chance whatsoever of becoming an integral part of mainstream American society. If this were the case, then it has also answered in the negative the question many American Muslims have posed whether it is possible for them to be both “good Muslims” and “good Americans!”

A similar clash of cultural identities has flared up in Europe between the indigenous white communities and the mainly Muslim immigrant communities. European countries with relatively large Muslims population such as France, Germany and Holland are fiercely debating the issue of Muslim identity and its “problematic” place and role in relation to their respective national identities. Many Europeans see the immigrant Muslim identity as totally alien to their own that is again said to be based on Judeo-Christian heritage alone, thus making Muslim assimilation into European society almost impossible. The widespread opposition in the continent to Turkey’s membership in the European Union is a clear indication of the strong sentiment many Europeans have against the encroachment of Muslim identity into their societies. It is of course based on the premise that “European” and “Muslim” are two mutually exclusive identities without a common past and a possible common future. On that premise, Turkey cannot become “European” since it is Muslim.

One may argue that the premise is faulty on at least two counts.³³ One is empirical, the other historical. Empirically speaking, there are at present two European countries that are Muslim, namely Albania and Bosnia-Herzegovina.³⁴ They provide good examples of an overlapping of European and Muslim identity spaces. As for historical arguments, there is ample evidence to show that European modernity and Islam had a common past, particularly through the contributions of Muslim Spain centuries ago. Both facts are useful in persuading Europeans and Muslims to accept the idea that it is possible to avoid a clash of identities through the creation of an expanding common identity.

³³ A growing number of Muslims in Europe have openly rejected the premise; so also have a sizeable segment of the white Europeans. The most well-known and also the most articulate critic of the premise is the controversial Tariq Ramadan. Ramadan has consistently argued that it is possible to lead life as a practicing Muslim while living as a ‘good citizen’ in multi-faith, pluralistic, European nation states. See his *To be a European Muslim* (Leicester: The Islamic Foundation, 1999) and *Western Muslims and the Future of Islam* (Oxford University Press, 2004).

³⁴ Albania is predominantly Muslim with more than 70% of the population. In Bosnia-Herzegovina Muslims constitute just 40% but then they are the biggest ethnic group in the country. Both countries are not yet members of the European Union, but with the latter pursuing a policy of gradual integration of the Balkans into the European community their “European identity” seems assured. In the EU’s view, Albania and Bosnia would be able to join as member states sometime in the first half of the next decade.

We believe that what we have been saying about a cultural literacy project focused on expanding spiritual and ethical commonalities would provide the best way out of the present clash of identities, be this in the West or in the Muslim world which in many instances has provided far grimmer pictures of cultural identity conflicts. In this respect, it is an encouraging development to hear voices both in the United States and Europe arguing for an “Abrahamic” family of religions that would include Islam, and for a Judeo-Christian-Muslim cultural legacy in western civilization.³⁵ These initiatives provide a good illustration of how westerners and Muslims might enhance their shared identity. As a revered spiritual figure in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, Abraham would serve as a powerful symbol of unity of the three religions in viewing the world and in dealing with the problems of humanity for the common good. In Abraham Jews, Christians and Muslims find a shared spiritual tradition and a common root of their religious identities.

Similarly, an awareness of the significant contribution of Islamic culture, especially its intellectual dimension, to modern western culture would help to foster a sense of a shared culture among westerners and Muslims, and dispel the widespread western perception that Muslims generally are opposed to modernity. It would also help to correct the erroneous view held by some Muslims that all cultural things of western origin are not good for Muslims.

Through the specific example of the clash between the Muslim identity and the American or European identity discussed above we have seen how it might be overcome through the creation of a commonality that becomes for Jews, Christians, and Muslims an important element of their shared identity. The newly created commonality is membership in the Abrahamic family of faiths. There are other commonalities that the three faiths could create

³⁵ The theme of Abraham as the father of three faiths – Judaism, Christianity, and Islam – has become more popular than ever. See especially the various works of F. E. Peters, for example, *The Children of Abraham: Judaism, Christianity and Islam* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004). See also Feiler, Bruce, *Abraham: A Journey to the Heart of Three Faiths* (Perennial, 2004).

for their shared identity in such a way as to expand its space. But arguments that hold true for the three faiths in their need and approach for a shared identity also hold true for all religions. However, accumulating commonalities would not be easy. For historical reasons, it might be easier to do so in the case of some groups of religions than in others.

Spirit of Inclusiveness and the Sharing of Spiritual Resources

The important thing is to know what it takes in terms of attitudes to achieve a progressive enrichment and strengthening of shared identities. Perhaps most needed is the spirit of inclusiveness. It is this spirit that makes a person inclusive and accommodative in his or her attitude toward others not having the same identity. Likewise, at a collective level, we may speak of a group of people displaying the same inclusive tendencies toward other groups. Individuals or groups imbued with the spirit of inclusiveness have the willingness to include others in their religious or social universe and accept them as having the same rights, the same duties, the same goals, and the same destiny. More than these, they are willing to share resources with one another.

From a certain point of view, the most important kind of resources to be shared among humans would be the spiritual ones. Many humans are most resistant to sharing when it comes to spiritual resources. Real sharing requires both giving and taking. Many people are willing to share their spiritual resources with others, but they are reluctant to participate in the sharing of spiritual resources of others. In other words, when it comes to spiritual wealth, people are likely to be more prepared to give theirs to others than to take from them. The opposite is true in the case of material wealth: people tend to take it from others rather than to give it to them. There is an explanation for this: deep-seated prejudice. It has to do with how humans perceive spiritual salvation. Many of them believe there is no salvation outside their group. Such belief is what we would call “theological exclusiveness” as opposed to “theological inclusiveness” that allows room for more than one way to post-humus salvation

Exclusivists would love to see others attaining salvation as well, which could only mean others have to join their group and share their spiritual resources. Expanding a sharing to include other people's spiritual resources is unacceptable to the exclusivists since this would be viewed as compromising their exclusive theological position. It would mean acknowledging paths to salvation other than their own.

A mutual sharing of spiritual resources may lead exclusivists to rethink their theological position but that in itself, would not necessarily be a loss to them, least of all to humanity. It could be a win-win situation for all with everyone winning and nobody losing, and the main goal of mutual sharing is precisely that. It does not mean that one would lose his or her religious faith and identity or become any less religious as a result of exposure to spiritual resources from other traditions. On the contrary, we have come across inspiring cases of individuals who claim to have been profoundly transformed by their encounters with other religious traditions while remaining faithful to their own religious identity. Of late, there have encouraging developments, especially in the West. A number of small study circles comprising of Muslim and Christian scholars have sprung up in the West dedicated to the mutual sharing of Islamic and Christian spiritual resources in their endeavor to understand better each other's religious perspective. The most well-known of these groups is the "Building Bridges Seminar"³⁶ convened by the office of the Archbishop of Canterbury, England partly in response to the immediate aftermath of the September 11, 2001 tragedy.

There have been Christians who claim to have been enriched by their exposure to Islam's spiritual resources and feel in the process they have become better Christians! In like manner

³⁶ The seminar whose core members comprise of an equal number of Muslim and Christian scholars from different parts of the world is an annual event. Its venues so far have included the United Kingdom, the United States, Qatar, and Bosnia-Herzegovina. The most recent one, the sixth in the series, was held in Singapore. A major feature of this annual event is a comparative Quran and Bible study on selected issues deemed important to the religious vocation of Islam and Christianity both from the theological and societal points of view. Proceedings of these seminars have been published. See, for example, Igrave, Michael, ed., *Bearing the Word: Prophecy in Biblical and Qur'anic Perspective* (London: Church House Publishing, 2005); and Igrave, Michael, ed., *Scriptures in Dialogue: Christians and Muslims Studying the Bible and the Qur'an Together* (London: Church Publishing House, 2004).

there have been Muslims who feel their encounter with Christianity and other religions has strengthened their faith in Islam. Such cases may still be relatively few in number, but from the point of view of cultural goals envisaged in this essay they are loaded with significance. These cases point to numerous possibilities of goodness that are in store for humankind if sharing of spiritual resources were to become a common practice. Mutual sharing of spiritual resources needs not be feared since it does not spell the end of a religiously plural world. It offers instead the best hope for a better mutual understanding between peoples of different faiths as well as the hope for a richer experience of one's own religion.

We would be in a position to better appreciate the immense benefits of mutual sharing of spiritual resources if our understanding of inclusion is not restricted to the theological realm. We may speak of both theological inclusion and political inclusion. As the concept of inclusion is understood here, it is concerned primarily with human responses to the idea of salvation. More precisely, it may be defined as a particular human response to salvation that allows room for individuals or groups with different beliefs to participate in a common quest for a "successful and prosperous life." It is possible to distinguish between two kinds of salvation, namely individual human salvation in the post-humus world and societal salvation on earth. Post-humus salvation, which is essentially individual in nature, is the central concern of theology. In contrast, societal salvation is basically collective in nature, even though it possesses meaning and significance for every individual member of the society in question. It is the central concern of political science. Theological inclusion is a response to the problem of conflicting and competing claims made by different belief-systems to the issue of post-humus salvation just as political inclusion is a response to the challenge of pluralism and diversity in society aimed at ensuring its salvation.

Religions teach salvation theology differently though not without having anything in common between them. It is out of similarities and differences among these theologies that experts in comparative religion have come to the conclusion "one God, many paths to salvation." It is beyond the scope of this paper to discuss in details this delicate and sensitive

but extremely important theological issue. Theological inclusiveness is a perspective that affirms this conclusion. Its core element is the belief that in principle, salvation is a possibility outside one's own faith-system. Its other elements include the affirmation that humanity stands to benefit from the world's theological pluralism. Each theological system has made a contribution to world spirituality by addressing the spiritual needs of a particular segment of humanity. However, when taken together, these seemingly diverse theological systems may be seen as having played an even more significant role in advancing the cause of human civilization. To the extent that these theological systems have interacted in history and shared with each other their spiritual resources, there have been far more positive than negative results coming from their encounters.

At various times in the past, interactive theological approaches to cosmology, science, art, architecture, music, societal ethics and other domains of rational inquiries have made significant contributions to the development and progress of human knowledge. This was true of the interactions between Jewish, Christian, and Muslim theologies during the medieval period, mostly in lands under Muslim rule, and their intellectual impact on various domains of knowledge. Today there is a growing recognition that these three religious traditions have managed then to create a "common intellectual culture."

Muslim-ruled Spain is often mentioned as having provided the best example of such an inter-faith cultural collaboration. In the words of Max I. Dimont, a well-known historian of Jewish thought and civilization, under 500-year Muslim rule "there emerged what has been called the "Spain of three religions and one bedroom" – a Spain where Muslims, Christians, and Jews shared a brilliant civilization that blended their cultures, bloodlines, and religions."³⁷ Referring to Jewish-Muslim relations in particular, not just in Spain but also in the Middle East, their theological and cultural collaborations have produced mutual benefits and achievements in many areas of civilization. These achievements turned out to be some of the

³⁷ See Dimont, Max I., *The Jews in America: The Roots, History and Destiny of American Jews* (Chicago: Olmstead Press, 2001 edition), p. 2.

finest moments in their respective histories. The golden age of medieval Jewry has interwoven with the golden age of medieval Islam.³⁸

Religions are also interested in the issue of societal salvation. For one thing, they share the view that the two types of salvation are closely related. Individual post-humus salvation depends very much on the kind of life one leads in this world. Religions see a certain kind of life in this world that is preferred over other life styles for their respective believers. They insist this preferred life should be conceived in spiritual and moral terms. Since each religion stands for a collective vision of a particular moral order, naturally it would like to see the emergence of a society that is the most compatible to its moral vision.

Each religion defines a society's wellbeing or societal salvation in terms of its own moral values. Does this then mean that different religions cannot coexist and work together in creating a society that could accommodate most if not all their respective moral ideals? Experts in comparative religious ethics tell us religions have many moral and ethical values in common. This means that advocates of dialogue should seek to identify this common body of moral and ethical values and consult and explore them for the purpose of enhancing dialogue and applying them to solve societal problems. These are the kind of values that need to be strengthened in society. These values can bring people of diverse faiths together, help to create a shared cultural identity among them, and provide the much needed resources for creating a common foundation for the development of society and for articulating common approaches to common problems in society.

³⁸ Dimont writes: "The span of the Jewish Golden Age in the Muhammadan civilization corresponded to the life span of the Islamic Empire itself. When the latter broke up, the Jewish Golden Age broke up." See his *Jews, God and History* (New York: New American Library, 2003), p. 195.

Cultural Symbiosis: Practical Measures to Enhance a Spiritually-based Cultural Literacy

In the foregoing pages we have mentioned several cultural goals we have to achieve if we want to see this new spiritually-based cultural literacy becoming a reality in twenty-first century human societies. This cultural literacy needs to be understood as one of the most essential prerequisites for the realization of cultural symbiosis in our contemporary world. Toward the realization of these various cultural goals, we now propose several practical measures that can be adopted and implemented by individuals, groups, and institutions committed to the ideals of inter-ethnic and inter-religious peace and understanding. Firstly, there is a need to develop a new academic discipline that may be veritably called the “science of inter-faith and inter-civilizational dialogues.” Our contemporary society in general and advocates of dialogue in particular need to have a comprehensive handbook guide to the “theory and practice of dialogue.” Secondly, there is a need to institutionalize dialogue and to make it an important part of our way of life. Thirdly, there is a need to identify spiritual and moral values that are common to humanity’s religious traditions and then to strengthen their position and role in society. And fourthly, there is a need for people to realize that religions do have fundamental differences that cannot just be ignored. The new cultural literacy calls for the cultivation of respect for these “irreducible” differences.

Fifthly, institutions of higher learning have an important role to play in helping society to achieve these cultural goals and to contribute to the realization of a spiritually-based cultural literacy in the sense we have defined.³⁹ We may suggest a few concrete measures that universities and colleges ought to take to sustain dialogue and to enhance cultural literacy:

³⁹ Although institutions of higher learning are a bit slow in adopting and implementing inter-ethnic, inter-cultural, and inter-religious dialogue activities and educational programs, be it in the West or in the Islamic world, there have been a few prominent and successful ones that could serve as models for others. I am delighted to have been associated with the two most prominent of these, namely the Center for Civilizational Dialogue at the University of Malaya, Kuala Lumpur founded in 1995 and the Prince al-

- [1] To create a core group of experts in dialogue who will be able to teach and do research on issues of dialogue as well as to provide leadership in the field for the community at large.
- [2] To create the necessary institutional outfit to carry out research and publications in the advancement of the science and art of dialogue.
- [3] To create academic courses that would promote and enhance students' understanding of humanity's spiritual and civilizational heritage and their appreciation of humanity's shared spiritual values and traditions.
- [4] To organize dialogue programs for the campus community that would help to promote the sense of a shared cultural identity, minimize the cultural divide, and strengthen interfaith understanding among its members.
- [5] To seek partners in dialogue and collaborate with them in teaching, research, and publications in the area of cultural dialogue studies as well as in organizing dialogue programs including seminars and conferences at the international level.