



# PEACEFUL INTERFAITH DIALOGUE

Uniting Peace -Loving,  
Spiritual People Globally

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WAHIDUDDIN KHAN



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Spiritual People Globally

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# CONTENTS

Building Unity in Diversity	5
How to Live in a Multifaith Society	6
The Significance of Tolerance	8
Mastering The Art of Difference Management	11
The Importance of Forbearance And Patience	13
Follow One, Respect All	15
Mutual Respect for Coexistence	18
The Relationship Between Mutual Respect and Dialogue	20
Addressing Minds through Dialogue	22
The Importance of Keeping an Open Mind	23
Learning from Each Other	24
Let's Agree to Disagree	25
Every Person is Part of the Divine Family	27
Building Harmony through Mutual Respect	28
Ethical Development Possible Through Inter-Faith Partnerships	30
Duty-Conscious Individuals Form A Better Society	32
The Importance of a Duties-First Approach	34
Peace: The Bedrock of Positive Relationships	36
Principles for Ethical Training	38
All Humankind is a Single Family	38
Love Your Enemy	39
Do Unto Others as You would have Them do Unto You	40
Importance of Peace	40
FAQs About Interfaith Dialogue	41
Q. Is Religion Necessary in Today's World?	42
Q. Is Religion Responsible for the World's Chaos?	42
Q. Will the World be More Peaceful Without Religion?	42
Q. Does Religion Produce Hardliners?	43
Q. If All Religions Claim to be Right, How Can their Adherents be Peaceful?	43

## CONTENTS

Q. Should People Condemn People of Other Faiths?	44
Q. Why are there so Few Interfaith Efforts by Muslims?	44
Q. What is the Real Message of the Quran, Torah, and New Testament?	45
Q. Is Islam a Religion of Peace, or Does it Sanction Violence?	45
Q. Does the Quran Teach Muslims to Be Violent?	47
Q. What Does the Quran Say About Killing Human Beings?	48
Q. What is Islam's Stance on Terrorism and Suicide Bombings?	48
Q. How Can Muslims Overcome Islamophobia?	49
Q. Is Islam Intolerant of Other Religions?	50
Q. Can Muslims Wish Non-Muslims on their Festivals?	50
Q. How Should Muslims Treat Non-Muslims?	50
Q. Does Islam Deny Religious Freedom to Others?	50
Q. How Can People Live in Harmony in Pluralistic Societies?	51
Q. Can Differences be Eliminated?	52
Q. Can Interfaith Dialogue Help to Manage Differences?	52
Q. How Does Tolerance Help to Maintain Positive Inter-Religious Relations?	53
Q. How can trust between people of different faiths be built?	53
Q. How Can Communal Harmony Be Achieved?	53
Q. Can You Share Some Experiences of Interfaith Dialogue?	54
Q. What is Your View of Interfaith Dialogue in India?	54
Q. What Can People of Different Faiths Learn from Each Other?	55
Q. Should Interfaith Efforts Be Judged on Immediate Results?	55

## BUILDING UNITY IN DIVERSITY

Today, we live in globalized societies. These societies are multi-religious, multicultural, and multi-ethnic. How can we live harmoniously and peacefully in such societies? There may be differences in religion and culture among people, but no difference should be made between people in respect and honour. A principle by which we can promote peace in globalized societies is through mutual respect. This formula of mutual respect is given in the Quran in these words: “You have your religion, and I have mine” (109:6). In this verse, the Quran is giving master advice for establishing a peaceful society, i.e., “To follow one and respect all humans beings.”

There are more than a dozen major religions in the world. All religions advocate mutual respect as the basis for interfaith relations. In religion, differences can best be meaningfully and constructively managed through peaceful and positive inter-religious dialogue between adherents of different faiths based on mutual respect. A principal aim of such dialogue should be to seek peaceful solutions to controversial matters. In dialogue, all parties should present their viewpoint supported by arguments while remaining ready to give and take rather than insisting on all their demands being unconditionally met. In this way, they will be able to find peaceful solutions to controversial issues.

Inter-religious dialogue means discovering and appreciating wise and good things in other religions and learning from the insights and experiences of their adherents. If mutual

learning becomes the aim of dialogue, then participants of inter-religious dialogue can grow as spiritual beings and become better human beings—which is surely a goal shared by various religions. Inter-religious dialogue, in this way, can be used as a platform for uniting peace-loving, spiritual people across the globe from different religious backgrounds to work for the common good, celebrate our common humanity, and foster mutual understanding in a globalized world.

## HOW TO LIVE IN A MULTIFAITH SOCIETY

In a multi-religious society, people have to live with religious differences. Such differences are found not only in religions but in all aspects of life. Differences are an essential part of nature. They are a part of God's Creation Plan itself. This means we humans have no option other than to live with differences in religion or any other sphere of life.

To deal with this issue in the best possible manner, we need a formula for difference management rather than a formula for eliminating differences.

I have studied almost all major religions and have found that every religion, including Islam, provides the art of difference management. Every religion tells us how to live in a multi-religious society with peace and harmony. We find this formula, for instance, in the famous words of Jesus Christ: "Love your enemies." (*Luke*, 6:27). To love one's enemies means managing the problem of enmity by the power of love.

A similar principle is given in the Quran: “Good and evil deeds are not equal. Repel evil with what is better; then you will see that one who was once your enemy has become your dearest friend.” (41:34)

There is nothing mysterious about this teaching. It is a well-known Law of Nature. It means that everyone is our potential friend. We have only to turn this potential into actuality.

This principle was beautifully represented by many Sufis in South Asia and elsewhere. For example, a Sufi poet has described this principle: “We do not know the stories of kings and generals. We know only the stories of love and compassion.”

For centuries, Sufis devoted themselves to spreading the universal message of love and compassion. Due to the peaceful efforts of the Sufis and other saints, the spirit of love and compassion became so deeply embedded in our society that it became part and parcel of our value system.

A multi-religious or multicultural society is not evil. Rather, it is a blessing. Trying to eliminate differences destroys the very fabric of our interests. Thus, we have no option other than to adjust to differences. Living in a multi-religious society requires making necessary adjustments to get along well with others, with people who are different from oneself in one or more ways.

Peace and harmony in a multi-religious society are not simply an issue of governance. They also require the active involvement of non-governmental actors, organisations, and individuals. There is a big role here for voluntary



organisations, which can play a role in educating people in this regard and helping them develop the spirit of patience and tolerance.

One can relate many success stories in this regard. To cite just one example, a few years ago, there was tension between two groups in a certain town, likely leading to violence. At this critical juncture, a medical doctor known to the people of the area reached the spot. He met the leaders, and he succeeded in pacifying them. Then, he advised them that instead of throwing stones, they should present flowers to the rival group. They accepted his advice. They purchased some flowers from the market. When the crucial time came, they appeared holding flowers in their hands. They presented these flowers to the leaders of the rival group, saying, “Welcome to you!”

This gesture worked. The tension was defused, and the whole matter was settled within minutes!

## THE SIGNIFICANCE OF TOLERANCE

The ability to be tolerant of the actions, beliefs, and opinions of others is a major factor in promoting peace in society. Intolerance is one of the greatest challenges we face in the 21st century. Intolerance is a rejection of individual differences between religions and cultures. When intolerance becomes organized or institutionalized, it destroys democratic principles and threatens world peace.

The world's prime need today is tolerance and acceptance of others.

One of the stark realities of life is that divergence of views exists between human beings, which impinges at all levels. Differences are bound to exist everywhere, whether at the level of a family or a society, a community or a country. Now, the question is how unity can be promoted, or harmony brought about in the face of human differences.

Some people hold that removing all differences is indispensable for bringing about unity among people. However, this view is untenable, as it is not practicable. You may not like the thorns accompanying the roses, but you cannot pluck out all the thorns and destroy them completely, for if you pluck one thorn out, another will grow in its place. Even if you run a bulldozer over all the rosebushes, new plants will grow in their place, bearing roses bound to be accompanied by thorns. Given this, roses can only be had by tolerating thorns' existence.

Similarly, a peaceful society can be created only by accepting differences and diversities. In this world, unity is achievable only by learning to unite despite disagreements rather than insisting on unity without differences because the total eradication of differences is an impossibility. Therefore, a major secret to attaining peace in life is tolerance and acceptance of differences.

There is nothing wrong with diversity in opinions, beliefs, and ways of life. On the contrary, it is a positive quality that offers many advantages, much like the beauty of a garden

is enhanced when it contains flowers of different varieties and colours.

An advantage of appreciating diversity and differences is that it helps build character. For example, if you are well-mannered towards those whose views are similar to yours, you may be said to exhibit a fairly good character. However, if you behave kindly toward those who hold divergent views from you or who criticise you, you deserve to be credited with having an excellent character.

A society whose members hold similar views and never have any critical discussions will soon find itself in the doldrums. The intellectual development of the members of this society will freeze because personal evolution takes place only where there is the interaction of divergent ideas and ways of thinking. Where there is no such interaction, how can intellectual development occur?

Nobody in this world is perfect. If a person is endowed with some good qualities, he may be lacking in others. This is one reason why differences crop up among people. However, for life as a whole, these differences can be a great blessing; the good points of one person may compensate for the shortcomings of another person, just as a set of talents in one person may complement a different set of skills in someone else. If people could only learn to tolerate and even accept and celebrate others' differences, their forbearance would become a great enabling factor in collective human development.

The habit of tolerance prevents a person from wasting their time and talents on unnecessary matters. If you

are negatively affected by another person's disrespectful behaviour, your mental equilibrium will be upset. However, if you are emotionally untouched by such behaviour, your mind will fully retain its equilibrium, and without wasting a single moment, you will continue to perform your work in the normal way and thus be able to move ahead. A policy of tolerance or forbearance enhances your efficacy, while intolerant behaviour reduces it.

Tolerance is not an act of compulsion. On the contrary, it is a positive principle of life, expressing the noble side of a person's character. The existence of tolerant human beings in a society is like the blooming of flowers in a garden. This is relevant for harmonious relations between members of different communities and adherents of varying belief systems.

## MASTERING THE ART OF DIFFERENCE MANAGEMENT

Today's world is formed of plural societies. Plurality is a law of nature. Every society is plural today, and one can even say that every family is plural!

Studies show that every human being is unique. Therefore, members of any human group, be they of the same culture or different cultures, are bound to exhibit differences in tastes, habits, ideas, likes, and dislikes.

What should be done in such a situation? How can one establish normal relationships and live peacefully with those

different from oneself? How can one establish harmony in one's family or society at large?

The answer to these questions is only one: Learn the art of difference management rather than the art of eliminating differences. Since differences are an integral part of nature, you cannot escape from them. The Creator Himself has created people with differences. At the same time, He has made us so that no one can live as a self-sufficient being. Every human being is bound to live in a society, which is an entity comprised of interdependent and, at the same time, different and unique individuals. This being the case, the only way to lead a happy and successful life is to learn to manage differences positively.

People often think of differences as a disadvantage. The fact, however, is that differences, including in the sphere of religion, are an advantage. They present us with a great opportunity to learn from others and grow. Moreover, differences are responsible for all kinds of human progress. Had there been no differences, the world would not have developed at all.

If you consider differences a positive phenomenon, they will become a boon for you. Differences are not in themselves evil. They lead to discussion and dialogue, and open discussion and dialogue lead to intellectual development. When two ideas meet, a third idea emerges. If you take the difference as an intellectual challenge, it can turn into a big blessing for you. Through different people, you can learn many good and useful things you did not know before.

There is a well-known saying: "If everyone thinks alike, no

one thinks very much.” This saying is based on the Laws of Nature. Uniformity, including in the sphere of religion, is against the scheme of nature. Going against the Law of Nature will certainly lead to disaster.

Welcome differences, including in religion, with a positive mind, and you will certainly be able to turn them into a means for growing as a person.

## THE IMPORTANCE OF FORBEARANCE AND PATIENCE

Whenever a person lives along with others, differences are bound to appear between them, sometimes or otherwise. Complaints might arise from time to time. This will happen in a family, in a society, in a country, and at the global level, too. At whichever level a person lives and establishes interpersonal relations, it is unavoidable that there will occasionally be unpleasantness.

What should be done in such a situation? The answer to this question is tolerance.

In such a situation, people and groups should deal with others according to the spirit of tolerance and forbearance.

Tolerance does not mean inactivity. Neither does it mean that a person opts for a lesser solution when a better course of action is possible. The truth is that in this present world, tolerance is the only feasible and sensible choice. Tolerance is our practical need, rather than being some passive retreat.

A person often finds certain circumstances unpleasant and starts angrily fighting against them. He thinks that this struggle will bring into existence a more propitious situation. However, this is not so. A person's inability or unwillingness to be tolerant can only have a negative outcome.

According to the Creation Plan of God, the present world is designed so that one repeatedly has to face unpleasant experiences inside and outside the home. Now, if people were to fall to wrangling on all such occasions, they would fail to advance along the path of human progress. That is why religion has placed great emphasis on forbearance and patience. In this way, avoiding unpleasantness, man can continue his journey towards the higher goal of self-realisation and God-realization.

The Quran repeatedly stresses patience:

“Endure with fortitude whatever befalls you.” (31:17)

“Have patience. God is with those that are patient.” (8:46)

Patience and forbearance mean exercising restraint in trying situations. This great virtue enables an individual to proceed towards worthy goals undeflected by adverse circumstances or repeated provocations. If he allows himself to become upset by opposition, taunts, or other unpleasantness, he will never reach his goal. He will become enmeshed in irrelevancies.

The only way to deal with the irksome side of daily living is to exercise patience. Patience will ensure that whenever one encounters a bitter experience, one will opt for tolerance

## FOLLOW ONE, RESPECT ALL

rather than reaction. This will enable one to absorb shocks and continue undeterred on their onward journey.

Besides being a practical solution to problems faced in the outside world, forbearance and patience are also a means for positive character-building. One who fails to exercise patience gives free rein to negative thoughts and feelings and develops a negative personality. In contrast, one who remains patient is so morally bolstered by his positive thoughts and feelings that he creates a positive personality.

The relevance of this discussion for relations between members of different religious communities is obvious.

## FOLLOW ONE, RESPECT ALL

Today, we all live in pluralistic societies. To maintain peace and harmony in such societies, good thinking and discernment among people are required, including regarding matters related to religious plurality. A society comprising aware or awakened individuals is one where inter-community harmony can flourish. By promoting awareness among individual members of society regarding religious plurality and the importance of respecting all religions and their adherents, the problem of inter-community conflict can be solved, and inter-community harmony can be established.

Some basic issues that relate to the vital question of properly educating people about the issue of inter-community relations need to be clarified. One of these is the issue of religious differences. A comparative study of the various



religions shows clear theological differences between them. For instance, the belief system of some religious communities is based on monism, while that of some others is based on monotheism. Some religions preach the discovery of truth by oneself, while others believe that truth is revealed to human beings by God through Messengers appointed by Him. And so on.

Some people think these religious differences and distinctions are the root cause of conflicts between religious communities. They believe inter-community harmony can only occur when these differences are somehow destroyed. 'Bulldoze them all!' some such people might demand. However, this approach is so impractical that it is not even worth discussing.

Faced with the reality of religious differences, some people seek to prove somehow that all religions are the same, that they are identical to each other. However, seeking to prove that all religions are identical by extracting portions from different scriptures that resonate with each other is like someone culling portions from the Constitutions of different countries and publishing them together in a single book and then claiming that all the Constitutions of the world are the same and that they all have the same rules and clauses and provisions! This imaginary universal Constitution may greatly please the author of such a book, but it will likely not be acceptable to even a single country. The same holds for those who seek to prove that all religions are identical because there are significant differences among the various religions at the level of theology.

I have studied this issue in detail and found that claiming that all religions are the same does not correspond to reality. There are so many differences between the different religions that it is impossible to prove them to be the same practically. For instance, one religion says that God is one. Another religion talks of several gods. One religion believes a personal God brought the universe into existence, while another religion denies the existence of such a Being. And so on. In such circumstances, to claim that the teachings of all religions are the same may appeal to the minds of people who are given wishful thinking, but it is not logical, and nor does it correspond to reality.

Even if, by some means or another, it could be argued that the scriptures of the different religions are, in fact, the same, the problem of differences will remain unresolved. It is because there are multiple and conflicting interpretations of each of these scriptures, and these various interpretations lead to the formation of numerous sects within each religious community.

The fact is that such difference or diversity is not related to religion alone. The entire world is based on the principle of differences and variety. These differences are so pervasive that no two things or people are without some difference or the other.

When differences are a Law of Nature, how can religion be an exception to this rule? As differences are found in everything else in the world, so are differences between one religion and another. We have not thought it necessary to do away

with differences in other matters but, instead, have agreed to disagree. We should adopt this same practical formula in matters of religion as well. Here, too, we should stress unity despite differences. The fact is that there is only one way to deal with the issue of religious plurality positively, and that is: “Follow one and respect all human beings.”

## MUTUAL RESPECT FOR COEXISTENCE

Islam, understood correctly, is a religion of peace and humanism. Not only Islam but all other religions are religions of peace. The Sufis, in contrast to the theological interpreters, have given the best interpretation of Islam. They have a Persian saying, *sulh-e-kul*, which means ‘peace with all.’ This truly expresses the spirit of Islam.

Here, let me briefly describe some aspects of Islam’s early history. The Prophet of Islam was born in Makkah in 570 CE and received the first revelation in 610 CE when he was forty. It was with these revelations that Islam began. The Prophet started his mission in Makkah and continued there for thirteen years, then migrated to Madinah. Throughout these thirteen years in Makkah, the Prophet only engaged in peaceful activity. He used to tell people that God is One and that they should worship the One God alone. Islam began with a mission of peace. Moreover, its special concern was the Oneness of God.

The Prophet then migrated to Madinah in 622 CE, where he continued his mission till his death in 632 CE. He successfully established the first Islamic society there.

What was the guiding principle of this Islamic society?

The Prophet issued a declaration that, in Islamic history, is called *Sahifat ul-Madinah*, also known as the Covenant of Madinah. A clause in this covenant laid down that the Jews shall profess their faith and the Muslims theirs.

This example shows that Islam prescribes religious freedom to manage religious differences. There is a verse in the Quran to this effect: “You have your religion, and I have mine.” (109:6). This means that the formula for social peace, social harmony and inter-faith relations should be based on religious freedom and peaceful coexistence.

Mutual respect is very important in this regard. The following incident, referred to earlier in this book, exemplifies this: One day, a funeral procession wound its way along a street in Madinah. The Prophet, seated there at the time, stood up in deference to the deceased person. One of his Companions said, “O! Prophet, it is the funeral of a Jew.” The Prophet replied, “Was he not a human being?” (*Sahih al-Bukhari*, Hadith No. 1312)

This humanitarian outlook was typical of the Prophet’s vision of life. He was able to see everyone as a human being. In the above case, he discovered a commonality between himself and a deceased Jewish person. Just as he was a human being, so had the latter been a member of the human family. Just as God had created him, so also had that Jewish person.

As this incident shows, people may have differences regarding beliefs, religion, culture, etc., but a common bond has to

be discovered between them—that is, they are all fellow human beings.

God is the Creator, and all of us fellow human beings, regardless of our religion, are His creations. There is no third position. On the one hand, there is God, and on the other hand, there is God's creation. God is one, and humankind also is one. Thus, there is the Oneness of God, and there is the oneness of humanity. This is a fundamental teaching of Islam. Mutual respect and peaceful coexistence are essential teachings of Islam.

## THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN MUTUAL RESPECT AND DIALOGUE

For harmony to prevail in a multi-religious society, individuals living in it must be broadminded, respectful, compassionate, and well-wishers of others. Only with these virtues can members of society relate positively with others, including those whose belief system is different from theirs. This indicates the importance of mutual respect.

The principle of mutual respect is natural and applies to all areas of social life. This natural principle needs to be upheld and acted upon by the adherents of different religions so that societal structures may be strengthened by stable and enduring human relationships.

After being appointed as a prophet, the Prophet lived in Makkah for thirteen years and later migrated to Madinah, where he lived for ten years until his death. For about half

his period in Madinah, he lived among people of different religions. The Prophet devised a Constitution for these people, known in history as *Mīthāq al-Madina* or *Ṣaḥīfat al-Madīnah*, also referred to as the Madinah Charter. This Charter expressly mentioned that issues concerning the different groups in Madinah would be decided based on their religious traditions—those of Muslims according to their Islamic traditions and those of the others according to their respective traditions.

This sunnah or practice of the Prophet for a plural society carries the same moral authority as other practices of his. This principle can be given in the following words: “Follow one and respect all humans,” which means that while believing in one particular religion, a person can also respect others.

It is human nature to want to share anything good that one has discovered with others. When he realises what he regards as true and good, a person’s innate humanity inspires him to share it with others. In inter-religious dialogue, people who believe in different religions share what they believe and practice and why they believe and practice. This can help them deepen their faith and enable them to develop a better appreciation for the beliefs and ways of life of others.

## ADDRESSING MINDS THROUGH DIALOGUE

Abraham was a Prophet of God. He brought the message of Tawheed (the oneness of God) to King Nimrod of Babylonia.

However, the King refused to accept his message. A part of their conversation is quoted in the Quran (2:258) as follows, which shows how to address the minds of people:

“Have you not heard of him who argued with Abraham about his Lord because God had bestowed the Kingdom upon him? Abraham said, ‘My Lord is the one who gives life and brings death.’ He answered, ‘I (too) give life and bring death!’ Abraham said, ‘God brings up the sun from the east, so bring it up yourself from the west.’ Then, the disbeliever was confounded. God does not guide the wrongdoers.”

This conversation between the Prophet Abraham and the King gives us a very important principle of dialogue. If the other party’s response is not positive, one should not follow the futile course of insistence. Instead, see the other party’s mind and adopt an alternative form of dialogue. For example, when the Prophet Abraham said God Almighty was the Lord who gave life and brought death, the King said he could do likewise. This answer was wrong, but the Prophet Abraham avoided repeating himself and, with a change of stance, he raised a different point. His second point was so compelling that the King became speechless.

This instance gives us a good example of successful dialogue. The best dialogue participant is not obsessed with his mind but can see the other party’s mind, which he tries to address.

It is a fact that there are different kinds of mindsets. Everyone sees things from his angle. Thus, to convince the other party, you must understand their mindset. You must try to address

their mind, even if this might require a change in your argument. This is the right way to have a successful dialogue.

## THE IMPORTANCE OF KEEPING AN OPEN MIND

It is reported that the Prophet of Islam once remarked: “Wisdom is the lost property of a believer. Wherever he finds it, he should take it (for it belongs to him).” (*Sunan al-Tirmidhi*, Hadith No. 2687)

This report tells us the way of a true devotee of God. Such a person is free of all kinds of prejudices. A believer does not discriminate between one person and another. He sees all individuals as God’s creatures, as members of God’s family. Hence, he accepts wisdom wherever he finds it. His thinking is universal, not narrow. He can learn valuable lessons from everything and everyone, including from people of other faiths.

In this world, success is related to wisdom. The universal thinking of a God-oriented person leads him to continue to increase his intellectual treasures by adding new things to them. His life never stagnates. At every juncture, he finds something positive by which he may continue his onward journey in life. He keeps all the windows of his mind open. Hence, it becomes possible for him to keep growing in wisdom.

Various religious traditions and other belief systems are a great source of wisdom. However, no matter what religion



they subscribe to or the community they identify with, each individual and their life experiences can be a valuable source of wisdom for us. We can grow in wisdom by learning lessons from anything and everything in the universe, provided we have the right attitude and are ready to accept any good thing regardless of its source.

For a God-oriented person, everything can provide food for his soul. Like a tree, he keeps on growing. His personality keeps developing, moving towards perfection.

## LEARNING FROM EACH OTHER

Religion is an issue of conviction. When I say that I believe in a particular religion, it means that I take this religion as the Truth, with a capital 'T'. Without doing this, I cannot have a firm conviction in my mind. If religion fails to give me this conviction, it has little or no use, for the basic purpose of religion is to give us conviction regarding the purpose of life and the scheme of existence.

I can say that I have great conviction in Islam. I have discovered Islam as my faith. I believe in it with all conviction. However, I can say that I have never developed hate for anyone because of this belief. I love every human being and every religion. This is a fact. Those who know me can affirm that I do not have an iota of hatred for anyone. On the contrary, I respect every religion from my heart.

I can say that the same thing is possible for every other human, too. This is because a human being has an enormous

## LET'S AGREE TO DISAGREE

capacity. Man can live with many different identities, feelings, and emotions, which is quite possible for the human mind.

So, there is no reason to believe that if someone is of the view that a particular religion is a truth, he is bound to fail to respect other religions. It believes that a certain religion is true and, at the same time, respecting other religions is very much possible. It is not a matter of mere lip service.

As far as establishing harmony between different religious groups and communities is concerned, the best formula is peaceful coexistence based on mutual respect. Moreover, as far as interfaith dialogue is concerned, we should regard it as a process of mutual learning. It is my finding, my experience, and my discovery. For me, this formula is integral to my way of life. By nature, I am a seeker. I always try to learn from others. My spirit of seeking has no end. I learn from secular people and also from people of other religions. There is no difficulty for me in doing this. On the contrary, it has enriched my life.

## LET'S AGREE TO DISAGREE

Thousands of religious groups exist in the world. Given the differences between them, let us consider how to bring harmony between them.

One commonly advocated solution is to spread the conviction that all religions are essentially one: that they are simply diverse paths leading to the same destination. However, experience has shown that repeated attempts to bring harmony have not succeeded.

Islam's approach in this matter is to accept ideological differences as a reality. Having accepted these differences, it advocates a policy of tolerance and respect for one another in everyday dealings. This echoes the principle expressed in the saying, "Let us agree to disagree."

In this regard, a particular Quranic verse is of particular relevance. It says: "There shall be no compulsion in religion." (2:256) In another place, the Quran declares: "You have your religion, and I have mine." (109:6). This principle of freedom of religion was also reflected in the Covenant of Madinah, formulated after the Prophet had shifted to Madinah, which affirmed that the religion of the Muslims was for the Muslims and the religion of the Jews was for the Jews.

The Quran commands Muslims: "Do not revile those [beings] whom they invoke instead of God, lest they, in their hostility, revile God out of ignorance. Thus, we have made all people's actions seem fair. To their Lord, they shall all return, and He will declare to them all that they have done." (6:108) This verse provides valuable guidance for maintaining an atmosphere of harmony between people of different faiths.

A principle derived from this verse can be harmony among people who follow different belief systems. This is a principle whose utility is a matter of historical record. It is evident that in the past and present, wherever harmony has existed between people who subscribe to different belief systems, it has been based on unity despite differences rather than on unity without any differences. It has been based on agreeing to disagree on some matters while at the same time agreeing to agree on some other issues.

## EVERY PERSON IS PART OF THE DIVINE FAMILY

To build a good human society, people must respect, honour, and show appreciation for one another.

How are these feelings of respect, honour, and appreciation to be produced?

The most effective and successful way for this is for it to be instilled in the mind of every individual that the Creator who has created them has created all other human beings, too. Thus, all human beings are, as it were, members of God's family. According to a Hadith report, the Prophet of Islam remarked: "All human beings are God's family." (*Musnad Al-Bazzar*, Hadith No. 6947)

The consciousness that all beings are part of God's family produces the realisation that we should not discriminate against anyone and should value others, irrespective of their religion or ethnicity, just as we value ourselves. If we humiliate another person, we should feel bad at our misdeed, knowing that in having done this action, we have humiliated a member of God's family. On the other hand, if we respect another person, we should feel happy that we have given respect and honour to a member of God's family.

The truth is that there is no greater fortune for a human being than doing something that gives him the happiness that he has shown respect to a member of God's family, no matter their religion, community, or even species. This action makes him deserve a reward in the eyes of God.

By honouring others, one makes oneself a person who is worthy of honour.

## BUILDING HARMONY THROUGH MUTUAL RESPECT

Family unity is based on mutual consideration and respect. This happy state of affairs can easily be extended to the level of communities if enough individuals simply put their minds to carrying it into effect. If the kind of harmony that families achieve through patience, affection and general tolerance is set up as a definite aim by all communities, there is no reason why it should not be attained. It is a question of wishing it to be so, making positive efforts towards it and forgetting all the old scores and grievances.

From my childhood days, I remember a friend who used to recite:

*Kabhi bhul kar kisi se na karo suluk aisa  
Ke jo tum se koi karta tumhen naagawar hota*

(Never, even in a moment of forgetfulness, should you behave with anyone in a manner that you would find unbearable if someone behaved with you in the same way.)

The message contained in this couplet is a vital principle for social life. If we can only call it to mind at crucial moments, both inside and outside the home, all frictions might disappear.

Every incident can be viewed from different standpoints, and it is a mistake to think that one's own is always the correct one. However, if we were all to stop and think that there might be some aspect of another person's argument that is worthy of consideration instead of exaggerating the virtues of one's cause and the vices of the other, there would likely be much less ill-feeling in society and then the causes of quarrels, when viewed coolly and in a spirit of tolerance, would often disappear.

In many multi-religious societies, the factor that most undermines inter-community harmony is an atmosphere of doubt and suspicion that has grown out of complex historical factors. If only this barrier could be crossed, people would likely discover that many communal problems have been resolved. This no doubt requires great self-control and mental effort, but the results would be wonderful to behold. It would be like an aeroplane that takes off in dense fog but slowly climbs above it to an altitude where all is brightness and sunshine.

In reality, many of the problems of this world arise from sheer ignorance, and it takes real wisdom to solve them. This is particularly true of inter-community problems, in which the element of ignorance on the part of miscreants often sparks disputes. If this could be properly understood and the situation treated with wisdom and forbearance, disputes might cease at the very outset.

## ETHICAL DEVELOPMENT POSSIBLE THROUGH INTER-FAITH PARTNERSHIPS

Religions have two essential aspects—theology and ethics. While there are differences in the theologies of different religions, there is little difference between their basic ethical systems.

Theology relates to the set of beliefs or the doctrinal base of religion. In terms of theology, there are obvious differences between religions. For example, some religions have a monistic concept of the Divine, while others believe in a monotheistic concept of God. Differences of this kind have always been the subject of discussion among theologians, and no doubt they will continue to be so in the future. However, like other intellectual discussions about such differences, they are confined to scholars and have little to do with the ‘common’ people. The latter can live out their daily lives without concern or knowing about these issues. These matters concern a few individuals and not the masses of any society, generally speaking.

However, these theological differences are not simply matters about which people may be at odds with each other. They also have a positive role to play. In the sphere of religion, theological differences invite discussion, which can lead to intellectual exchange and necessitate knowing more and more about one’s faith as well as the religion of others. Thus, theological differences can result in intellectual progress by enhancing one’s level of thinking and awareness. In addition,

it can lead to the overall development of religious discipline and understanding.

This shows that such differences are not an unwanted evil. On the contrary, they can be a great good. Therefore, differences have a positive role to play in religious development.

The second aspect of any religion is its ethical system and its code of moral conduct. In this area, there is little difference between various religions. Almost all religions broadly preach the same moral values to be followed in a person's daily life.

Moral development is not simply a matter of individual conduct towards others. It is also profoundly related to the development of an individual's personality. When one engages in good social behaviour, one is simultaneously engaged in the process of self-development. Good social behaviour is thus a great aid in building one's character. Good social behaviour means positive behaviour and positive behaviour instills positive thinking. Good social behaviour makes one a good human being.

Every religion teaches its adherents to adopt a good moral standard. Hence, ethical principles from all faiths can be used to inculcate good moral conduct. Interfaith partnership in ethical training is sure to yield positive results. Such collaboration can focus on the ethical nurturing of individuals from different religious backgrounds in society, helping them become duty-conscious, peaceful, and giver members of the wider society. As more and more people become giver members of society, the process can play a major role in leading towards a more harmonious and peaceful society.



## DUTY-CONSCIOUS INDIVIDUALS FORM A BETTER SOCIETY

Religion stresses individual responsibilities (vis-à-vis God and vis-à-vis fellow creatures of God), while contemporary secular culture, in which religion plays only a very peripheral role, focuses much more on human rights. This is due to a basic difference between the two worldviews. Religion emphasises the reform of the individual and the purification of one's inner state and behaviour, while many secular ideologies emphasise changes in the external structures, processes, and environment of society or the social system. Accordingly, religion focuses on human duties, while, in contrast, many secular ideologies focus on human rights.

The source of all kinds of good and evil lies in human nature and not in society as such. Society has no nature in itself. It is nothing but a collection of individuals. This means that starting from individual change, we can bring about change in society by changing the individuals who comprise it on positive lines. However, if we try to reform society as a whole, our efforts will not yield any positive results. To usher in positive change in a society, we have to address and seek to reform individuals who comprise the society on duty-conscious lines. Then, a collection of such reformed individuals can emerge who can manifest positive change as a group of transformed individuals in society.

This approach to social change is a realistic one. It is based on reality. All changes result from one's will, and the human will is found in the individual, not society. What is of utmost importance in this regard is to address and awaken the will, and this can be done only in and by an individual. The will can be awakened within an individual, not society. This individual-centric approach is the only realistic approach to social transformation. Trying to address and reform society as a whole instead of the individuals who comprise it is not a realistic approach.

The natural fact is that it is not 'the system' or 'society' but, rather, individuals who play all the various social roles, and so, it is individuals who must change if we want society as a whole to change. Since individuals are the building blocks of society, if one wants to bring about any real change in society, one will have to begin one's efforts at the level of the individual. One will have to bring about a change in the thinking and conduct of individuals on positive lines.

This point is directly relevant to relations between religious communities. Harmonious relations between religious communities can only arise so that individual members relate harmoniously. This requires a transformation of the consciousness of individual members of the various communities to value people of other faiths, appreciate the goodness in their religions, cultures, and ways of life, and be committed to living in harmony with them.

## THE IMPORTANCE OF A DUTIES-FIRST APPROACH

Focusing on one's duties or responsibilities towards the wider society helps resolve conflicts and, in the long run, also leads to securing and preserving one's rights. This approach provides two benefits. Firstly, it brings an end to social unrest. Moreover, in the long run, it helps enable people to have their rights. The reason for this is that this concept is based on the laws of nature, and in this world, one can achieve anything positive only by following the laws of nature.

In this context, discourses about human rights that ignore human responsibilities towards the wider society cannot truly give us any positive results and prove counter-productive. This is because when one insists on rights and ignores duties, one is promoting a culture based on the idea of 'we versus them,' which is premised on the notion of the existence of two supposedly antagonistic groups: a group that ought to possess certain rights and a rival group that is thought to have snatched the rights of the former. However, in contrast, when one speaks of human responsibilities towards the wider society, it promotes a 'we-we' culture, informed by the idea that we need to be givers, not demanders or mere takers.

Once, someone asked me, "If, in a certain context, one's human rights are being grossly violated, what should one do? Should one, even in this context, focus only on one's duties and not demand or struggle for one's rights? However,

on the other hand, should one remain silent on violating one's rights?"

My answer to this was that this was an abstract question. In my experience, talk of this kind is flawed because it only looks at one side of the picture and ignores the other. It does not seek to discover the root cause of the phenomenon. It focuses on the victim but does not try to know how the victims became victims of someone in the first place. I believe in this Quranic verse: "Whatever misfortune befalls you is of your own doing" (42:30). This is a Law of Nature, which has also been referred to in the Bible in these words: "A man reaps what he sows." (*Galatians*, 6:7) It is a Law of Nature in giving that we receive. It is impossible to receive something from others continuously unilaterally. The concept of demanding while not giving, speaking about your rights but ignoring your duties towards the wider society, is unnatural and, hence, useless.

One person's duty is another person's right. This being the case, if we all follow the principle of duty-consciousness, automatically, our rights will be taken care of. A duty-conscious person seeks to fulfil the rights of others. Duty consciousness, in developing a giving character in a person, lays the foundation for a better society. Duty consciousness, promoting a 'we-we' culture amongst individuals, is at the root of all good in society. In contrast, a mindset that focuses only on one's rights promotes a 'we-them' culture and produces conflicts and other problems in society.

This discussion is of direct relevance to plural societies where members of different communities might occasionally have complaints against each other. If individual members of communities focus on their duties to the larger society and fulfil them properly, it will automatically earn them and their community the goodwill of people from other communities, and in this way, their rights will also be secured.

## PEACE: THE BEDROCK OF POSITIVE RELATIONSHIPS

Islam, understood authentically, is a religion of peace. The Arabic root of the word ‘Islam’ is *silm*, which means peace. Peace is the religion of the universe. Peace should, therefore, be the religion of man, too. When God created the heavens and the earth, He ordered things so that each part might perform its function peacefully without clashing with any other parts. The Quran says, “The sun is not allowed to overtake the moon, nor does the night outpace the day. Each floats in [its own] orbit.” (36:40)

For billions of years, the entire universe has fulfilled its function in total harmony with God’s Divine plan. While God has imposed the Laws of Nature upon the universe, in submission to which things that comprise the universe follow the path of peace, there remains just one exception to this rule—that of man. God has endowed man with free will to make moral choices. He may or may not choose to follow the path of peace uniformly followed by the rest of

the universe. If human beings, with their freedom of choice, are to be kept on the path of peace, society must be free of corrupting elements. That is why the Quran instructs human beings thus: “Do not corrupt the land after it has been set in order.” (7:85)

The system of nature devised by God already rests on peace; if this system is not disrupted, it will continue in the course set for it by the Almighty. However, peace cannot be artificially imposed upon man. This is something that man must adopt or practice through his own choice, using his God-given free will.

In order to preserve peace from disruption, two important injunctions have been laid down in Islam. One, at the individual level, stresses the exercise of patience. Moreover, the other, at the social level, forbids going on the offensive.

The biggest factor responsible for disrupting peace in daily living is a negative reaction on the part of individuals. It repeatedly happens in social life that one experiences bitterness on account of others. On such occasions, expressing resentment could cause matters to escalate to the point of a head-on collision. Perhaps that is why the Quran enjoins us to tread the path of patience, saying: “Surely the patient will be paid their wages in full without measure.” (39:10). Perhaps the reason for the reward for patience being so great is that it is a key factor in maintaining the desired system of God.

The other injunction designed to maintain peace in human society forbids the waging of offensive war. According to Islam, no one has the right to wage war against another. There

are no grounds on which such a war could be considered justifiable. Only one kind of war is permitted in Islam: defensive war. According to Islamic teachings, only if one country, by deviating from the principles of nature, wages war against another, only then that country may wage a defensive war under attack. However, this must be temporary and subject to humanitarian considerations.

Peace is thus a basic teaching of all religions. Therefore, interfaith efforts should strive to establish peace in the world, which is the bedrock on which all human progress rests.

## PRINCIPLES FOR ETHICAL TRAINING

There are ample references in all the religions that provide a good basis for nurturing more spiritually evolved human beings and promoting a better society. These are the basic roles of religion. Without playing this role, religion becomes irrelevant to humanity.

For decades, I have been undertaking sessions to inculcate character-building in individuals. Here, I would like to put forward some of the principal teachings of Islam and other religions that are of relevance in this regard.

### **All Humankind Is a Single Family**

Islam teaches that all humankind is a single family. The Quran declares: “O mankind! Fear your Lord, who created you from a single soul. He created its mate from it, and the two of them spread countless men and women [throughout the earth].” (4:1)

According to this Quranic verse, all human beings share a common ancestor. It means that all men and women are blood brothers and blood sisters to one another. It also means that there is complete equality between different races and groups of people.

The Prophet of Islam declared: “Mankind is a divine family.” (*Musnad al-Bazzar*, Hadith No. 6947) The Prophet used to rise early in the morning and say after his morning prayers: “O God, I bear witness that all men and women are sisters and brothers to each other.” (*Sunan Abu Dawood*, Hadith No. 1508)

These teachings from Islamic sources can be found in other religions, too. Teachings of this kind in various religions can provide a basis for building a good relationship between people from different faith backgrounds.

In an ideal family, all its members live with a sense of oneness, a sense which inculcates in family members the spirit of unity and harmony. This family culture is also desirable globally among all the nations and religious communities of the world. Various religions endorse this kind of universal relationship. There may be some differences in terms of belief and practice between these religions, but in terms of social life, every religious individual should live in their society just as they ought to live in their family—in harmony with everyone else.

### **Love Your Enemy**

There is a famous saying of Jesus: “But love your enemies, do good to them.” (*Luke*, 6:35). A similar teaching is to be found in the Quran, where it is said: “Good and evil deeds



are not equal. Repel evil with what is better; then you will see that one who was once your enemy has become your dearest friend.” (41:34)

Love or compassion is the greatest virtue, the basis of all moral teachings or requirements. Moreover, it is also a fact that this teaching is found in various religions. Therefore, if we study different religions, we will see that they try to promote love for all.

If we truly understand and appreciate this point, it can go a long way in overcoming prejudices between adherents of different religions and promoting a sense of oneness.

### **Do Unto Others as You would have them do unto you.**

The Prophet of Islam is reported to have said: “Do with others what you want others to do with you.” (*Sahih Muslim*, Hadith No. 45). The same maxim is to be found in Judaism, for instance. Rabbi Hillel the Elder is known to have said: “What is hateful (or hurtful) to you, do not do to any other man.” (*Babylonian Talmud*, 1918, Book 1, Ch. 2, p. 50)

This universal teaching can be found in almost every religion in some form or the other. This teaching gives us a very simple criterion for living as a good member of society and relating harmoniously with people of different faiths and communities.

### **Importance of Peace**

The Quran lays great emphasis on peace. For example, a verse says that “reconciliation is best.” (*Quran*, 4:128) From this,

we learn that in the event of a controversy, one should adopt a peaceful, rather than a confrontational, course of action. This concept is also present in other religions as basic teaching. For example, Christianity teaches: “Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called the sons of God.” (*Matthew, 5:9*)

It is a fact that peace is a common teaching of various religions. It is also a fact that peace is the summum bonum or the highest good, which leads to the building of a better society. Without peace, there can be no individual or social development. Peace provides an environment where every group can flourish without harming others. Peaceful living is the most important part of moral living.

## FAQS ABOUT INTERFAITH DIALOGUE

It is reported that the Prophet Muhammad said, “The remedy for ignorance is asking questions.” (*Sunan Abu Dawood, Hadith No. 336*)

The spirit of enquiry is the hallmark of an open society, and the above saying of the Prophet aptly illustrates this principle. A culture of curiosity and open-mindedness can foster development in society by motivating its members to learn enthusiastically and enrich their understanding of issues. Awareness of one’s ignorance is half of the knowledge as it becomes a stepping-stone to seeking and finding answers. A questioning mind is like a flowing river replenished with fresh thoughts and ideas and continues on its journey.

Here are the answers to some frequently asked questions on

how inter-religious dialogue can help to form harmonious relations between people in multi-religious societies.

**Q. Is Religion Necessary in Today's World?**

**A.** Authentic religiousness is more than necessary for this world. One major reason for strife in the world is that people have become very materialistic. Religion should aim to make people spiritual instead of materialistic. To create a peaceful society, people need to become more spiritual.

Religion is meant to be a spiritual discipline. The sole objective of religion should be to develop a person spiritually so that he can live with a positive mindset that is duty-conscious rather than rights-conscious. Such a person is free from greed and hate and is capable of assessing things objectively. He possesses a predictable character. This kind of personality is the greatest need of the present age.

**Q. Is Religion Responsible for the World's Chaos?**

**A.** The source of chaos in the world is the misuse of their free will by human beings. God bestowed free will upon humanity to put us to the test in this world. Misusing God-given free will creates all kinds of problems in society. Evil is not a part of creation. It is a result of man's misuse of free will.

**Q. Will the World Be More Peaceful Without Religion?**

**A.** Religions and cultures are a must for the society. However, it must be understood that the values required for a peaceful society do not come about independently. For many people,

they come from religion. For millions of people, religion is a principal source of these values.

It is a mistake to believe that the world would be a more peaceful place if there were just one culture or just one language. This will never happen because people will likely still misuse their God-given free will, even if there is just one culture or language.

**Q. Does Religion Produce Hardliners?**

A. Hardliners are not products of authentic religiousness but, rather, of erroneous interpretations of religion. If religion is thought of simply in terms of external forms, it often makes a person a hardliner. However, if religion is understood in terms of its essence and spiritual aspect, it can help people become universal, broadminded, kind-hearted, compassionate, and tolerant—and that should be the purpose of following a religion.

I believe that religion in itself is not a problem. The problem is the erroneous interpretations of religion by some people and elements. Hence, the exploitation and erroneous interpretation of religion, rather than religion itself, must be overcome.

**Q. If All Religions Claim to be Right, How Can their Adherents be Peaceful?**

A. Once, when discussing this point with me, a religious scholar said, “We have been attempting to bring about interreligious harmony for the last one hundred years, but

the results have been quite dismal. It would seem that there are insurmountable obstacles in the way.”

I replied that the goal we want to attain is certainly a proper one; it is simply that the strategy employed is impracticable.

Harmony between adherents of different religions is, without a doubt, a desirable objective. In my view, the only way to achieve this is to encourage people to respect other people’s beliefs and be humanitarian at all times in their dealings with them. It should never be thought that the goal of harmony between adherents of different religions is unattainable simply because people’s religious beliefs differ. It is possible to promote harmony between the followers of other faiths or belief systems if we adopt a realistic approach and accept ideological differences as a fact of life. Having accepted these differences, adherents of religion should follow a tolerance policy and respect each other.

In my opinion, this is the way to achieve the peaceful coexistence of adherents of different religions.

**Q. Should People Condemn People of Other Faiths?**

**A.** Condemnation is not the right approach. The right method is to share your opinion through discussion and dialogue, speaking with genuine goodwill for others. Speaking without wishing well for them leads to strife and has no positive outcome.

**Q. Why are there so Few Interfaith Efforts by Muslims?**

**A.** Many Muslims are concerned only with Muslim

community-related issues rather than inter-religious issues. One reason for this is that after the fall of the Muslim empires in different parts of the world, large sections of Muslims started a campaign to regain what they regarded as their past political glory. This thinking has become so pervasive that even many supposedly well-educated Muslims are not an exception to this kind of mentality. It is this mentality that is mainly the reason for the present scenario.

**Q. What is the Real Message of the Quran, Torah, and New Testament?**

**A.** The common message of these three religious scriptures is monotheism or the concept of the Oneness of God. There is a verse in the Quran (2:62) that states: “The believers, the Jews, the Christians, and the Sabaeans, all those who believe in God and the Last Day and do good deeds, will be rewarded by their Lord; they shall have no fear, nor shall they grieve.”

According to this verse, only true faith and righteous actions are rewarded with salvation. This rule applies consistently to every community. Therefore, God elevates to a high rank only those who have sought to mould their lives according to His Divine scheme.

**Q. Is Islam a Religion of Peace, or Does it Sanction Violence?**

**A.** Islam is a religion of peace in the complete sense of the word. In my opinion, there is only one reason why Islam is being perceived as a religion of violence in the 21st century, and that is the self-styled concept of jihad among a section

of present-day Muslims. All other issues of intolerance, extremism, and violence have branched out from their misconceptions about jihad.

Trying to establish the rules of Shariah by force or through coercion is also an offshoot of this wrong concept of jihad. This concept is rooted in the political interpretation of Islam, which has no basis at all in Islam. It is a misinterpretation of Islam's sources. It is a case of political extremism. The Quran instructs the believers not to be extremists in religion: "Commit no excesses in your religion." (4:171)

The teachings of Islam are a subject of self-following, while the political interpretation of Islam has wrongly projected them as a subject of implementation on others by force. Muslim extremism emanating from the political interpretation of Islam has no sanction in Islamic scriptures. It is a gross error of interpretation.

Through my writings, I have shown the errors of the political misinterpretation of Islam. Once people understand that Islam does not sanction this interpretation and the violence it leads to, they generally stop supporting this ideology. As a result of such awakening, thousands of people have left extremism and have started peaceful work for constructive goals, such as in the fields of education and calling people to God.

A most essential point for Muslims today is understanding the importance of peace. The present age is an age of peace. In present times, one can achieve everything one seeks using

peaceful methods. This is a basic issue that needs to be understood.

Muslims must also disown the terrorism done in the name of Islam and present the true, peaceful picture of Islam before fellow Muslims and others.

### **Q. Does the Quran Teach Muslims to Be Violent?**

**A.** Some people use certain verses in the Quran to project the claim that Islam is a religion of war and violence. However, this is false and misleading. The fact is that these verses relate, in a restricted sense, to those who unilaterally attacked Muslims. They do not convey a general commandment of Islam.

The Quran was revealed from time to time, according to the circumstances, over 23 years. If this is divided into years of war and peace, the period of peace amounts to 20 years, while that of war amounts only to 3 years. Therefore, the revelations during the 20 peaceful years were the peaceful teachings of Islam, which are contained in verses regarding the realisation of God, worship, morality, justice, etc.

This division of commandments into different categories is natural and is found in several other religious books.

When the Prophet of Islam emigrated from Makkah to Madinah, the unbelieving tribes were aggressive toward him. However, the Prophet averted their attacks by the exercise of patience and the strategy of avoidance. However, on certain occasions, no other option existed save that of retaliation. Therefore, he had to do battle on such occasions. It was



these circumstances which occasioned certain revelations relating to war. These commandments, being specific to certain circumstances, had no general application. They were not meant to be valid for all time to come. That is why the permanent status of the Prophet has been termed a “mercy for all humankind” (*Quran*, 21:107).

**Q. What Does the Quran Say About Killing Human Beings?**

**A.** The Quran states: “If someone kills another person unless it is in retaliation for someone else or for causing corruption on the earth, it is as if he had murdered all mankind.” (5:32)

Considering murder as a horrendous act, Islam states that killing a single person without proven justification is equal to killing all human beings. Killing one human being is just as awful as killing all human beings. Such a killing breaks all traditions of respect for life.

The above Quranic verse shows the great importance of peace and security in Islam. If someone is unjustly killed, it should be treated as a matter of the greatest urgency, as if all of humanity were under attack.

**Q. What is Islam’s Stance on Terrorism and Suicide Bombings?**

**A.** According to the teachings of Islam, Muslims are not permitted to commit suicide bombings. It is forbidden in Islam. Strapping explosives on oneself and hurling oneself upon others to destroy them and kill oneself deliberately is

un-Islamic. Such an action represents a misinterpretation of the term shahadat. According to Islamic teachings, one cannot intentionally court a martyr's death. The fact is that suicide is forbidden (haraam) in Islam. Under no circumstances whatsoever is committing suicide lawful, according to Islam. It is not permitted to the point where, if someone is dying and, certainly, he will not survive, even in his final moments, Islam does not allow him to take his own life.

### **Q. How Can Muslims Overcome Islamophobia?**

**A.** I do not believe that 'Islamophobia' actually exists. The irony is that other communities have not coined this term—Muslims themselves have so named it. Thus, 'Islamophobia' is an allegation, not a real phenomenon.

The facts in this matter are contrary to what Muslims generally think. The resentment many non-Muslims have is against certain attitudes and behaviours of Muslims. If Muslims introspect and rectify themselves, they would no longer remain a problem community for anyone. No longer would others have a negative view of them.

What is needed is for Muslims to reform themselves, and then everything, including other peoples' negative perceptions about Muslims and Islam, will be settled. It is a two-point formula: first, Muslims must admit that the phenomenon is 'Muslim-phobia' and not 'Islamophobia.' Second, they must reform themselves—their attitude and their behaviour. Right-thinking Muslims must educate other Muslims in this regard.

**Q. Is Islam Intolerant of Other Religions?**

**A.** Islam is not intolerant of other religions. However, many Muslims behave intolerantly, which tarnishes Islam's image. Tolerance and mutual respect are central tenets of Islam, as stated in the Quranic formula, 'Follow one and respect all humans.' (109:6) Islam teaches its adherents to respect others in the same way they wish to be respected, be tolerant, and engage in dialogue with people of other faiths.

**Q. Can Muslims Wish Non-Muslims on their Festivals?**

**A.** Absolutely! Opportunities for engaging in interaction should never be lost. Greeting others is a part of social ethics.

**Q. How Should Muslims Treat Non-Muslims?**

**A.** Today, we live in a world of equal citizenship. Any categorisation of and discrimination against citizens of a country based on their religion or community is wrong. A person should be regarded as either an immigrant to a country or a citizen of that country, without their religion making a difference to their status. This is the universal norm, and Muslim-majority countries should adopt this principle. They should not differentiate among people based on religion and community. Such a thing would be unacceptable to the modern mind.

**Q. Does Islam Deny Religious Freedom to Others?**

**A.** Religious freedom is a basic human right. The Quran states: "There shall be no coercion in matters of religion." (2:256) The Quran also states: "You have your religion, and I

have mine.” (109:6). The principle we obtain from the above verses can be termed as religious freedom.

With the advent of Islam in the seventh century CE, it was declared for the benefit of humanity that all greatness was God’s exclusive prerogative and that, in God’s eyes, all human beings were equal. Therefore, the Prophet sought to transform society with the idea of human equality.

One must consider all human beings as equal, as equally deserving of respect, and as worthy of religious freedom.

**Q. How Can People Live in Harmony in Pluralistic Societies?**

**A.** Global societies are plural, being multi-religious, multi-ethnic, and multicultural. What the world needs today—perhaps more than anything else—is an acceptable formula for creating harmony in plural societies. In my opinion, harmony between adherents of different religions is necessary for creating harmony in today’s globalized societies.

There are more than a dozen major religions in the world. How can there be harmony in the multi-religious societies of the world? According to my study, the only way for this is to engender a feeling of religious tolerance and full respect for other people’s religious convictions. Everyone should be entitled to follow what they think is best for their inner solace and follow it as necessary. However, this should not prejudice their opinions regarding other people’s beliefs. On the contrary, there should be mutual respect for one another. Following the formula of ‘live and let live,’ the adherents of

different faiths need to interact closely, learn from each other, and benefit from the good each has to offer. Further, learning the art of difference management, they must inculcate the spirit of patience, tolerance, and wishing well for others. This can lay the foundation for peace and harmony in society globally.

**Q. Can Differences be Eliminated?**

**A.** Living in a closely interconnected ‘global village,’ we find ourselves living in a world of multi-religious, multicultural, multi-ethnic societies. Differences naturally exist between people in such pluralistic societies. Some people confront others in efforts to remove these differences, not realising that some differences just cannot be removed. The fact is that nature abhors uniformity and revels in diversity. This means that ‘difference’ is a part of nature. Differences exist in every aspect of life, including in the sphere of religion. For peace to prevail in such societies, we need to learn the ‘art of difference management’ rather than the ‘art of difference elimination.’

**Q. Can Interfaith Dialogue Help to Manage Differences?**

**A.** In the realm of religion today, differences can best be managed through meaningful and positive dialogue between people of different faiths, as this book has sought to show. Such dialogue can serve many important purposes, such as peace-building, conflict-resolution, and, most importantly, helping people grow intellectually and spiritually through learning from others’ insights and experiences. Meaningful inter-religious dialogue is necessary today to promote peace

and harmony in our closely interconnected, multi-religious global society.

**Q. How Does Tolerance Help to Maintain Positive Inter-Religious Relations?**

**A.** A harmonious society is formed by tolerating various viewpoints rather than by bulldozing. The right way to engender tolerance in a society is to bring about the kind of intellectual awakening among people in general that will make them realise that whatever the circumstances, they need to live in this world through an adjustment with and respect for others, including those whose religious beliefs and practices are different from theirs. In this world, the recipe for a peaceful life is to keep all differences on a strictly intellectual plane so that they may not lead to conflict in practical life.

**Q. How can trust between people of different faiths be built?**

**A.** Trust does not happen simply by saying, ‘Please trust each other. For this, people need to remove the negativity that they may have for others from their hearts. Once these negative emotions are removed, feelings of trust will blossom.

**Q. How Can Communal Harmony Be Achieved?**

**A.** Communal harmony is undoubtedly an important need of the time. However, communal harmony is not achieved through communal unification. It can only be achieved through communal adjustment. Diversity is a law of nature that exists throughout the universe. The rest of the universe

accepts diversity. The same is required in human society. We have to accept the diversity of cultures and temperaments within human beings. Efforts to eliminate diversity and differences will indeed prove unsuccessful. I want to conclude that the only way forward to attain harmony in the multi-religious societies of today is through adjustment despite disagreements.

**Q. Can You Share Some Experiences of Interfaith Dialogue?**

**A.** Over the years, I have participated in many such initiatives in different countries. The gist of my experience has been that while religious uniformity is not possible, what is indeed possible is a formula for harmony between people from different religious backgrounds. Moreover, this formula, according to my experience, is only one: it is based on mutual respect and mutual learning.

**Q. What is Your View of Interfaith Dialogue in India?**

**A.** In my view, India stands as a beacon of hope for Interfaith dialogue. India is a multicultural society in which everyone is entitled to follow and preach their own personal and religious thoughts. We only have to learn to live with tolerance, avoidance, and mutual respect with others. We must learn to engage positively with others at a personal, community, and religious level. By following this way, the glimmer of hope will become a fountain of hope.

**Q. What Can People of Different Faiths Learn from Each Other?**

**A.** Life is all about mutual learning. All of us should interact and learn from one another. Learning is a process and is not restricted only to some specific issues. One should imbibe the spirit of learning and learn from one and all. By being different, each person has experiences to share and learnings to offer to others. We can learn from every one, no matter their religion or belief system.

Learning is a continuous process. Learning has no limits. Even if you think you have found the truth with the capital T, you can still learn from others without losing your conviction.

About myself, I can say that although I am convinced about my convictions when I listen to other people expressing their points of view, I do so with an objective mind and seek to learn from them. This nature of mine has greatly benefited me in gaining wisdom and developing intellectually.

**Q. Should Interfaith Efforts Be Judged on Immediate Results?**

**A.** We should not judge efforts to promote inter-religious dialogue only by the immediate results of formally arranged inter-religious dialogue events. The truth is that inter-religious dialogue is not limited to specific meetings involving ‘experts’ in the field of religion. Inter-religious dialogue has assumed the form of a vast historical process—spontaneous and ongoing. The time has now come when it has become a part of a global movement.



If the course of events is any indication, God willing, a day will dawn when the world is no more ridden with religious and other such disputes, and the global human family can live together in peace and harmony. Inter-religious dialogue is likely to play a key role in ushering in such a day.

Q. What is the Benefit of Sustained Interfaith Dialogue?

A. Sustained inter-religious efforts can create a platform for uniting peace-loving people across the globe from different religious backgrounds to work for the common good, celebrate our common humanity, and, most importantly, grow as human beings.

Today, we live in multi-religious, multicultural, and multi-ethnic societies. The path to peace and harmony lies in interfaith dialogue and partnership. When participants in dialogue share their views with mutual respect and a willingness to learn from others, it can bring people closer, foster better relations between communities, and cultivate mutual understanding and peace-building. Interfaith dialogue offers participants the chance not only to exchange ideas and learn from one another but also to create a platform that unites peace-loving individuals from diverse religious backgrounds worldwide.

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