

SHARED WISDOM

INTERFAITH DIALOGUE
FOR A BETTER WORLD

MAULANA WAHIDUDDIN KHAN

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Interfaith Dialogue
for a Better World

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CONTENTS

FOREWORD	9	Tolerance: Its Significance Today	47
CHAPTER ONE		Tolerance Leads to Respecting Differences	50
LIVING IN HARMONY IN A GLOBALIZED WORLD	15	Tolerance, Forbearance and Patience	51
Interaction in a Globalized World	16	How to Live in a Multifaith Society	53
Follow One, Respect All	18	Interfaith Dialogue Leads to Social Harmony	56
Cultural Differences	21	The Importance of Interaction	58
Practical Division between Religion and Politics	23	CHAPTER THREE	
Follow Nature's Lead: Be Beneficial to All	25	DIFFERENCES LEAD TO LEARNING	61
Community and Commitment	26	Inter-Religious Dialogue	62
Human Responsibilities and Human Rights	28	Managing Differences through Interfaith Dialogue	63
Duty-Conscious Individuals Form a Better Society	30	Peace Activism	64
Duties Before Rights	32	Every Person is Part of the Divine Family	66
Interfaith Partnership For Ethical Development	35	Learning From Each Other	67
Some Principles For Character-Building	37	Peace and Tolerance In India	68
CHAPTER TWO		India: A Potential Spiritual Superpower	70
TOLERANCE: THE SECRET OF SUCCESSFUL DIALOGUE	41	Working Together for Progress	72
Religion Should Produce Right Thinking	42	Hindu-Muslim Amity	73
Interfaith Reconciliation	44		

CONTENTS

Successful Hindu-Muslim Dialogue	74	The Significance of Tolerance in Faith Communities	113
Positive Jewish-Muslim Relationship	76	Successful Dialogue Addresses Other People's Minds	114
Christianity and Islam	78		
Christian-Muslim Endeavours for a Better Society	81	CHAPTER FIVE MUTUAL RESPECT AND PEACEFUL COEXISTENCE	117
Purpose of Inter-Religious Dialogue	84	Respect and Coexistence	118
Peaceful Coexistence	86	Peace: The Bedrock of Positive Interfaith Relations	120
Interfaith Dialogue for Peaceful Coexistence	88	Original Religion Vs Self-Styled Religion	123
Inter-Religious Coexistence Despite Differences	91	A Peaceful Struggle	124
		Terrorism is Forbidden	127
CHAPTER FOUR PEACEFUL DIALOGUE FOR MUTUAL LEARNING	93	Importance of Freedom of Choice	130
Dialogue in Islam	94	Positive Status Quoism	132
Dialogue for Mutual Learning	95	Universality of Religion	134
Religious Belief and Social Harmony	98	Religion of Nature	137
Learning from Others	99	Essential Teachings of Islam: Oneness of God and Peace	138
Tolerance and Humanitarian Behaviour	100	CHAPTER SIX ETHICS OF DIALOGUE	141
All Human Beings are Equal	101	Need to Live in Harmony	142
Why Respect All Human Beings	103	Peace and Tolerance	144
Have a Good Opinion of Others	104	Winning Hearts	144
Actions that Promote Fraternal Feelings	106	Reconciliation is Best	146
Principles of Dialogue in Islam	107	Agreeing to Disagree	147
The Culture of Dialogue	111	Learn the Art of Difference Management	149

CONTENTS

Keep an Open Mind	151	CHAPTER EIGHT QUESTION-ANSWERS ON INTERFAITH DIALOGUE	203
Mutual Respect	152	Some FAQs Related to Interfaith Dialogue	204
Unilateral Ethical Behaviour	153	Is Religion Necessary in Today's World?	204
CHAPTER SEVEN MY PERSONAL EXPERIENCES OF INTERFAITH DIALOGUE		Who is Responsible for the World's Chaos: Religion or Humans?	205
Interfaith Efforts for the Common Good	156	Will the World be More Peaceful Without Religion?	205
The Way of Tolerance	157	Does Religion Produce Hardliners?	206
The Need to Become a Giver Group	161	If all Religions Claim they are Right, How can their Adherents Peacefully Coexist?	206
Interfaith Dialogue Promotes Proximity	163	What is Your View About Those Who Condemn People of Other Faiths?	207
Avail Interfaith Opportunities through Wise Planning	179	Why Have Muslims Launched So Few True Interfaith Dialogue Initiatives?	207
Outstanding Outcome of Positive Action	182	What is the Real Message of the Quran, the Torah, and The New Testament?	208
Manage Differences through Tolerance	185	Is Islam a Religion of Peace or Does It Sanction Violence?	208
Achieving Harmony in Pluralistic Societies	192	Does the Quran Teach Muslims to be Violent?	209
Look at Everyone as a Human Being	195	What Does the Quran State About Killing Human Beings?	211
Attain Social Harmony through Adjustment	199		
A Fountain of Hope	200		

CONTENTS

<p>What Is Islam’s Stance On Terrorism and Suicide Bombings? 211</p> <p>What do Muslims Need to do to Overcome Islamophobia? 212</p> <p>Is Islam Intolerant of Other Religions? 212</p> <p>Is it Permissible for Muslims to Wish Non-Muslims on Their Festivals? 213</p> <p>How should Muslims Treat Non-Muslims Living in Muslim-Majority Countries? 213</p> <p>Does Islam Deny Religious Freedom to Others? 213</p> <p>How Can People Live in Harmony in Globalized, Pluralistic Societies? 214</p> <p>What is the Formula to Promote Harmony Between Adherents of Different Religions? 215</p>	<p>What is a Practicable Formula for Living Peacefully in Multi-Religious Societies? 216</p> <p>How Should We Live in a Multi-Religious Society? 216</p> <p>What is the Purpose of Inter-Religious Dialogue? 216</p> <p>What is the Importance of Tolerance in Maintaining Positive Inter-Religious Relations? 217</p> <p>How Can Trust be Built Between People of Different Religious Communities? 217</p> <p>Can You Share Some Details of Your Involvement in Inter-Religious Dialogue? 217</p> <p>Should We Judge Interfaith Efforts Based on Immediate Results? 218</p> <p>What are Some Things People of Different Faiths can Learn From Each Other? 218</p> <p>LAST WORD 220</p>
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FOREWORD

We live today in an age of information, an age of knowledge explosion. Today, everyone wants to know more and more about everything, including religion. At the same time, we live in a world of differences—multi-religious, multi-cultural, and multi-ethnic societies. Some people fight amongst themselves to remove differences, not realizing that some differences cannot be removed. It is rightly said that Nature abhors uniformity. It means that ‘difference’ is part of Nature and exists in every aspect of life, including in the sphere of religion.

There may be differences in religion and culture among people, but no difference should be made between people in respect and honour. 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.”

There are more than a dozen major religions in the world. Religions have two basic types of teachings—one related to theology and the other to ethical values. While there are significant differences in the theologies of various religions, there is no basic difference in many of their ethical values. The most important ethical values taught in various religions are peace and tolerance. This is because authentic religiousness seeks to make a person a spiritually developed human being and a person who has elevated his spirituality

cannot afford to be violent or intolerant. The behaviour of a truly religious person is always one of peace and tolerance. The philosophical ground of peace and tolerance in some religions is derived from the concept of the manyness of reality or of truth being plural. On the other hand, the philosophical base of peace and tolerance in certain other religions is their belief in the principle of the oneness of reality or the idea that truth is one. However, no matter what their different philosophical ideas are in this regard, 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.

The second aim of inter-religious dialogue can be mutual learning. Inter-religious dialogue does not simply mean telling others about one's religion. It also means discovering and appreciating wise and good things in other religions and learning from the insights and experiences of their adherents.

The third purpose of inter-religious dialogue is to help create a platform for uniting peace-loving people across the globe from different religious backgrounds to work for the common good and to celebrate our common humanity.

The fourth purpose of inter-religious dialogue can be to help individuals grow as spiritual beings, to become better

human beings—which is surely a goal shared by various religions. In addition, ethical principles from various religions can be used to inculcate good moral conduct in people. Such ethical training of the adherents of religion is sure to yield positive results.

I have participated in many inter-religious dialogue programmes. In these programmes, I have always tried to establish the point that, given the theological differences between various religions, religious uniformity at the theological level is not possible, but what is possible is to find ways to maintain peaceful relations and harmony between different religious communities, or, in other words, people who follow or identify with different belief systems. The foundation for this should be mutual respect and mutual learning.

While participating in inter-religious dialogue meetings, I present the Islamic perspective while remaining ready to learn from others. Such an approach is a prerequisite for a successful dialogue.

Regarding inter-religious relations, problems sometimes arise when some insist others accept their viewpoint unconditionally. This is not at all a healthy approach. On the contrary, I find that dialogue can become a blessing when people present their point of view with sincerity and are ready to listen to and consider other people's viewpoints and accept reality as it emerges after discussion.

After listening to my presentation of Islam, people often ask me why the version of Islam I present differs from that of many others. I explain to them that I present Islam as

enshrined in its sources—the Quran and the Sunnah (the practice of the Prophet of Islam). In contrast, many other people take the actions and views of Muslims as Islam’s position on any issue. It is a basic error. To form a correct understanding of Islam, we need to differentiate between Islam, on the one hand, and Muslims, on the other. Islam is a religious worldview, whereas the position of Muslims on any matter is often determined by the sentiments and conduct of community members.

When I distinguish between Islam and Muslims, many common misconceptions about Islam are cleared. This way, I can promote a positive and open attitude among dialogue partners and engage in positive interactions with them.

I have found that 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: “Love your enemies.” (*Luke*, 6:27)

Once, during a visit to the USA, I was invited by a church to deliver a lecture on Islam and Peace. After my lecture, a Christian scholar asked: “In Christianity, there is a moral injunction: ‘Love your enemies.’ Can you cite any such teaching from the Islamic scripture?”

I replied in the affirmative. Various religions have this same precept in common. It is said in the Hebrew Bible, “Hatred stirs up dissension, but love overlooks all offences” (*Proverbs* 10:12). In the New Testament, Jesus said: “You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall love your neighbour and hate your enemy.’ But I say to you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you.” (*Matthew*, 5:43-44). Similarly,

FOREWORD

the Quran says: “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)

God created human beings and provided them with a mind and resources to develop civilization. Today, we live in a materially advanced stage of civilization that has resulted from continuous efforts on the part of all of humankind. Those who sincerely ponder over this entire history may be led to acknowledge their Creator as the Giver of all blessings and, secondly, to look upon all of humanity as their benefactors. This realization can dispel the ‘we versus they’ concept and promote a ‘we-we’ culture.

The fact is that every other person is our benefactor, in some way or the other, in actuality or potentially. Awareness of this fact promotes the ‘love for all’ culture. This is the best formula for universal fraternity. In this world, the most realistic formula to live by is that of ‘love for all.’

Wahiduddin Khan

New Delhi, India

15 January 2020

CHAPTER ONE

LIVING IN HARMONY
IN A GLOBALIZED WORLD

INTERACTION IN A GLOBALIZED WORLD

Today, we live in a globalized world, where there is much interaction between people from different religious backgrounds. Interaction is unannounced dialogue. When positive interaction between people who subscribe to different belief systems grows, the purpose of dialogue is served on its own.

Today, we live in a globalized world. The industrial revolution and modern communications have added such vast dimensions to human relations that the entire world has been converted into a veritable global village. With distances drastically shortened, a confrontational attitude must give way to compromise, adjustment, and appreciation.

Today, people who hold different religious beliefs are coming closer to each other on a global scale. This interaction serves as an informal and ongoing inter-religious dialogue. Interaction in itself is unannounced dialogue. As a result of circumstances, when positive interactions between people of different beliefs increase, the purpose of dialogue is served on its own.

Today, in educational institutions and offices and through various national and international activities, adherents of different religious traditions are meeting on a scale hitherto never witnessed before. During this continuous and vast interaction, people from different backgrounds seem less like strangers to each other. A great gap has been bridged. People are learning new languages in order to interact with each other. They are also becoming familiar with one

another's cultures and religions. Making concessions to one another has become a basic social need.

These factors have brought people all over the world closer. Moreover, it is a psychological truth that closeness and interaction serve the purpose of practical dialogue. In this way, a natural dialogue has come into existence and has become an ongoing process at all times and in all places. Probably the most dramatic result of this historical process is that religious intolerance has been universally rejected in theory after a long intellectual struggle. At the theory level, religious intolerance has now been replaced with complete religious freedom. Today, under the auspices of the United Nations, all the world nations have signed the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. This Declaration has accepted religious freedom as a natural birthright of all human beings. As opposed to practices in ancient times, today, in theory, at least, no one can persecute anyone based on religion. This change has elevated the sphere of religious differences to that of peaceful negotiation.

The effects of this change can be seen in all walks of life. Every one of us, consciously or unconsciously, plays a part in making peaceful inter-religious coexistence a reality. Inter-religious dialogue becoming a part of the historical process holds great promise for us, as in this way, its success is assured. This is how every great revolution in history has got underway. Whenever a movement goes beyond the stage of individual or group efforts and joins the historical process itself, the continuity of the movement is ensured, and nothing can stop it from reaching its goal.

FOLLOW ONE, RESPECT ALL

Today, we live in multi-religious societies. As such, there is only one way to deal with the issue of religious plurality meaningfully, and that is: 'Follow one, and respect all.'

Today, we all live in pluralistic societies. To maintain peace and harmony in such societies, what is required is to promote good thinking and discernment among people, 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 somehow or the other prove that all religions are the same, that they are identical to each other. However, seeking to prove that all religions are the same or 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 the religions are the same may appeal to the minds of people who are given to wishful thinking, but it is not logical, and nor does it correspond to reality.

Even if, by some means or the other, 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 multiple 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."

CULTURAL DIFFERENCES

Cultural differences characterize social groups. These differences can best be handled based on tolerance and acceptance.

Cultural and religious differences characterize social groups. Some people regard these differences as the root of all conflicts. They argue that to end conflicts, these differences in the name of culture and religion should be completely wiped out, and a society characterized by cultural and religious unity should be established. However, this proposal is simply impractical. Cultures cannot be made or destroyed by individuals at will in this way. A culture always emerges from a long historical process. It cannot be invented by someone sitting in an office preparing a 'cultural plan.'

In the wake of the Second World War, numerous ideologues emerged in different countries. They began calling for the establishment of a monocultural society in the hope that this would promote national unity. This approach was promoted, for instance, in Canada, but it proved impractical there and was soon abandoned. Canada has officially adopted multiculturalism as its policy and has dropped monoculturalism for good.

The same happened in the USA as well. After the Second World War, a movement to promote 'Americanization' emerged, which sought to impose a single culture on all Americans. However, this movement failed because it was

impractical. Thus, it was abandoned, and now in America, too, multiculturalism is the recognized policy.

The fact is that cultural differences are not a matter of differences only between two communities. Such differences can also be found among and between different sub-groups in each community. That is why to promote harmony between different cultural groups, what is required is not trying to do away with all differences (which is impossible) but, rather, promoting a commitment to ‘live and let live’ among people.

However, some people still advocate the failed experiment of monoculturalism and have given it the name ‘social engineering.’ Through this project, they seek to respond to cultural diversity among different communities by calling for restructuring their culture so that society is free from cultural differences and all citizens of a state share a common culture.

No matter what name it is called, the result of the effort to manufacture and impose a single culture on all people remains the same—pointless. It is impractical and unrealistic, no matter what it is termed—as ‘social engineering’ or by any other phrase. Moreover, to pursue anything impractical from the perspective of the Laws of Nature is simply pointless.

In this regard, my difference with ‘social engineers’ is practical. What they want to bring about is simply impractical and unrealistic. This sort of uniformity is impossible in line with the Laws of Nature. It has never been possible in the past, nor will it be possible in the future. Cultures always

develop according to their laws. It is simply impossible to sit in an office and invent a cultural map of your choice and then impose it on every person and social group in a particular country. It is the case, in this regard, we should do exactly what we generally do about all other divisive issues—we should handle this issue based on the principle of tolerance and acceptance of difference and diversity while at the same time being committed to promoting a sense of oneness that transcends difference and diversity.

PRACTICAL DIVISION BETWEEN RELIGION AND POLITICS

As far as the political and social commandments of religion are concerned, they should not be taken up until the entire society might become conducive to them. No practical steps should be taken to enforce them as long as a society collectively is not in favour of this.

Very often, religion is invoked in communal conflicts. Repeatedly, political and communal controversies are turned into religious controversies, and then people's religious passions are roused, leading to confrontation and violence between members of different religious communities. Because of this, many people have become opponents of religion itself. They say that human beings do not need religion at all and that, hence, religion must be destroyed. Without this, they contend, social unity is impossible.

This, however, is an extremist response to an extremist stance, an extremist reaction to religious extremism, which is neither possible nor useful. The fact is that religion in itself is not a problem. On the contrary, religion is a vital part of human life. The political exploitation of religion by some opportunist elements is the problem. Hence, the exploitation of religion, rather than religion itself, must be overcome.

Religion has two dimensions: personal and collective. The personal dimension of religion includes beliefs, worship, morality, and spirituality, while the collective dimension of religion includes its political and social commandments. In this matter, the right approach would, under general conditions, be to only stress the personal dimension of religion. The entire focus should be on enkindling the spirit of religion for the spiritual growth of individuals. As far as the political and social commandments of religion are concerned, they should not be taken up until the entire society might become conducive to them. These commandments can be established only through the collective consent of the entire society. That is why no practical steps should be taken as far as these rules are concerned as long as the collective consent of the society is not in favour of this.

This approach can be termed a practical division between religion and politics. This is the wise approach to adopt in this matter.

FOLLOW NATURE'S LEAD: BE BENEFICIAL TO ALL

When human beings interact, everyone should benefit in one way or the other from everyone else. When two human beings meet, it is the meeting of two living beings who should be examples of mercy and blessing for each other. It applies to the interaction between people from different religious backgrounds as well.

Nature is based on the principle of selfless munificence. In Nature, everything benefits others while charging them nothing at all for their services. Here, duties are carried out without rights being an issue.

The sun gives light and heat continuously to the world, on an unconditional basis. In every corner of the world, at every moment, the air supplies oxygen, which is indispensable for people to remain alive. However, the air has never presented anyone with a bill for this service. Without which life would be impossible, water is available at a universal level, and Nature arranges for this free of charge. Trees give shade, flowers, and fruits but do not demand any price. The earth grows all kinds of crops which are a support for humans and animals, but it does this without wanting any reward. Everywhere, we hear beautiful birdsongs, but the birds do not expect any appreciation from us.

Human beings are also a part of Nature. Therefore, we, too, should adopt the same approach and way of life as the rest of the world of Nature has done on a vast scale. No other method of life is desirable in this world. Relating this to the issue of inter-religious relations, one can say that people

from diverse religious backgrounds should contribute to the common good, to the wider humankind, and even to the rest of the creation, and not be concerned only about their co-religionists. This is how people from different religious backgrounds live in peace, harmony, and goodwill with each other.

Humans are social beings. A person generally leads his life amongst many other people, constantly in contact with them. When human beings interact with one another, everyone should benefit in one way or the other from everyone else, going beyond the boundaries of religion and community. When two human beings meet, it is not like the meeting of two stones. Rather, it is the meeting of two living beings who should be examples of mercy and blessing for each other, no matter their religion or ethnic background.

COMMUNITY AND COMMITMENT

The solution to communal conflicts lies in changing the attitude of the individuals who make up each community.

What is it that draws members of society together in close-knit unity so that they live, at least for the greater part of the time, in mutual peace and harmony? Some of the reasons for this are found in the history of a people and the geography of their environment—elements shared in common by every member of the society. However, often, common ideals are a great cementing factor, being in many cases derived, consciously or unconsciously, from religion. In their daily

lives, members of the different communities are motivated, in varying degrees, by the fundamental tenets of their faith. Given that the standards set by their respective religions are all very much concerned with honesty and decency, it may seem surprising that different communities living side by side fail to live in peace with each other in many parts of the world. In such cases, genuine appreciation of each other, a desire to help one another, and a generous acceptance of their differences are absent.

When we are all members of the same human race, all supposedly imbued with time-honoured ideals, why is it that when we attach different labels, such as community and religion, to ourselves and one another, we often forget that all of us belong to the one family of God, the One who has brought all of us into being?

When we look for a solution to inter-community conflicts, we find that it lies with the individuals who make up each community. It is a change of attitude on their part that is required. Each individual must begin to think of members of their community and other communities as if they were all brothers and sisters, belonging to the same family of God. It would then be found that the solution to joint problems would be as easy as the solution to family problems. Whenever friction arises in a family, its members are constantly alert about how divisive a force this is. Regardless of the irritation or discomfort they may be experiencing; they eventually control their feelings to bind themselves together again. Even more importantly, they prevail upon the younger and more hot-headed members

to do likewise. The family as an entity is put first, and the individual members of the family second.

This provides a valuable lesson for harmonious inter-community relations. We need to focus on our common humanity, regarding that as primary, before all other identities.

HUMAN RESPONSIBILITIES AND HUMAN RIGHTS

Live in society as a giver, not as a taker. Then, by the Laws of Nature, you will receive from others. However, first, people must become duty-conscious, and their rights will be secured. This is a very important principle for harmonious living in a multicultural and multi-religious society.

These days, 'human rights are a much-talked-about subject. However, in addition to human rights, individuals owe many human duties or responsibilities to the wider society. However, somehow, these do not seem to be talked about much.

According to my analysis, human rights are a by-product of human duties. If people are made duty-conscious, their rights will then certainly be secured. On the other hand, if one insists on human rights and neglects human duties, it is tantamount to putting the cart before the horse—and this will produce no beneficial result at all.

Is it possible, one might ask, to arrive at a harmonious balance between human rights and human responsibilities?

The fact is that it is not a question of merely balancing the two. Rather, it is a question of opting for a natural strategy that is in harmony with nature. Moreover, it is a question of making the right starting point. You can reach the sought-after end if you begin from the right starting point. However, if you make a false start, you can never reach the end you hope for.

The right starting point is to emphasize human duties. In doing so, people's rights can later be achieved.

In other words, the starting point must be inculcating in people the consciousness of the need to perform their duties towards the wider society first. If only rights are focussed on and not duties, nothing can be achieved—neither rights nor duties.

Focussing on duties rather than only on rights is not tantamount to ignoring human rights or being indifferent to people's sufferings. According to the Laws of Nature, no one will give you anything for free. You always only receive that which is by your actions. As the well-known saying puts it: "As you sow, so shall you reap." This suggests that those who focus on rights and ignore duties are going against the Laws of Nature. In contrast, those who stress duties are by the Laws of Nature.

An answer to the issue of rights versus duties is reflected in a Hadith report in the *Sahih al-Bukhari*, in which the Prophet of Islam is reported to have said, "Give to others what is due to them, and ask your dues from God." (*Sahih al-Bukhari*, Hadith No. 7052) From this, we learn that living in society; one should perform one's duties towards the wider society

honestly. Moreover, as far as one's problems are concerned, they will be solved through the Laws of Nature. In other words, one should live in society as a giver, not just as a taker. The formula "It is in giving that we receive" will come true in one's favour. If one lives as a giver, one will receive from others by the Laws of Nature. You shall flourish if you prove to be useful to the wider society. In other words, if you prove to be a benefit to others, you will certainly find a proper place in society.

This point has immense relevance for living in a religiously plural society. For example, suppose members of a particular religious community want to enjoy the respect and consideration of the wider society. In that case, they should focus on doing their duties and contributing to the general good, the good of the wider society, which includes people of other religious communities. Such an approach will likely earn them the respect and appreciation of others, ensure the preservation of their rights, and go a long way in building harmonious relations between them and members of other communities.

DUTY-CONSCIOUS INDIVIDUALS FORM A BETTER SOCIETY

We can bring about a positive change in society by reforming the individuals who comprise it on duty-conscious lines.

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 emphasizes the reform of the individual, and the purification of one's inner state and behaviour, while many secular ideologies emphasize 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-centred 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 has direct relevance for 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.

DUTIES BEFORE RIGHTS

A duty-conscious mindset seeks to fulfill the rights of others. Duty consciousness, in developing a giving character in an individual, lays the foundation for a better society and can help promote relations between different communities in a plural society.

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 one to receive their rights. The reason for this is that this concept is by 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 fulfill 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 fulfill 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.

INTERFAITH PARTNERSHIP FOR ETHICAL DEVELOPMENT

Interfaith partnership can play a role in developing a positive character in people and help them become duty-conscious, peaceful, and giver members of society, not mere takers.

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 religion 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 inculcates 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 religions can be used to inculcate good moral conduct. Interfaith partnership in ethical training is sure to yield positive results. Such partnership can focus on the ethical nurturing of individuals in society from different religious backgrounds, 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.

SOME PRINCIPLES FOR CHARACTER-BUILDING

Principles and values in all religions can be used to inculcate ethical training in individuals. In addition, faith-based groups can partner in projects 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 various religions, we will find 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 Be Done By

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.

Peace

The Quran lays great emphasis on peace. For example, a verse says that “reconciliation is best.” (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.

CHAPTER TWO

TOLERANCE: THE SECRET OF SUCCESSFUL DIALOGUE

RELIGION SHOULD PRODUCE RIGHT THINKING

Religion should produce the right thinking in a person. Someone who has truly discovered the Supreme Reality should speak and act with self-restraint, for they know God hears and sees what they do.

Religion can be defined as a set of beliefs concerning the cause, nature, and purpose of life and the universe, especially when considered to create a supernatural agency. Religion is the answer to the question, “Who am I?” Religion should provide man with the right philosophy of life. Religion should serve as a guidebook for life, bringing a man out of the darkness of ignorance and leading him into the light of reality. Religion should make a man a good citizen. Religion should give him a moral code that helps him to lead his life in society as a truth-loving human being. Religion should enable him to become a person who creates no problems for others. Religion should make a person a giver and not just a taker. Religion should produce the right thinking in a person. Religion should enable a person to ‘see’ things invisible to the physical eye.

Religion is man’s companion in times of difficulty. It saves him from becoming a victim of adversity. It is, in effect, the art of crisis management, from which man derives inspiration and guidance in times of dire need. Religion gives us conviction. Religion gives us a sense of purpose. Religion gives us our system of values. Religion is a guide for our actions.

However, being born into a devout family or being associated with some pious group does not make one a religious person. This is a mere external matter, not religion's real essence. The actual purpose of religion should be the realization of oneself and the realization of God.

Someone blessed with true religiousness of this nature becomes a completely different person from what he was before. Filled with thoughts of the Supreme Reality, he forsakes all delusions of personal grandeur. When he speaks, it is with control and self-restraint, for he knows that God hears all he is saying. When he acts, he is principled and responsible, for he knows that God sees all he does. His thoughts always centre on pleasing God. His dealings with fellow mortals are conducted as if with God Himself, so scrupulous, and honest is his behaviour.

True religiousness makes a person conscious of his accountability to God. Such a person is aware that he should deal with kindness and compassion with all of God's creatures, including all human beings, no matter their religion, community, or ethnicity.

INTERFAITH RECONCILIATION

True religiousness is to realize that the universe has one Lord and Maker—God Almighty—to whom we will have to answer for our actions on Judgement Day. Therefore, the discovery of God and the realization of one's answerability before Him are integral parts of true religiousness.

Despite recent improvements in global communications, there is still widespread ignorance and misinterpretation of different faiths, and this often leads to religion being used as a divisive rather than a cohesive force. Therefore, there is an ever-increasing need to promote a better understanding of all major faiths so inter-religious harmony may prevail. Given our multi-religious world, we must cultivate the transcendent genius of spirituality so that conflicting religious identities do not cause a disintegration of the socio-political framework of any country or wrongly channel people's energies. Religions must play a positive role in inter-community bridge-building.

Interfaith dialogue assumes particular in this regard. In such dialogue, the basic truths about different religions need to be emphasized so that superficial interpretations of one another's scriptures may not be used, wittingly or unwittingly, to aggravate inter-community tensions. Scriptures should be read not to find their faults but to grasp their underlying spirituality. Religious traditions must be understood in depth. They must be lived in order to be known.

Moreover, we must avoid judging any holy book by the conduct of its adherents. Rather than judging the Quran or the Bible, for instance, by what Muslims or Christians do, we should follow what the scriptures prescribe. Above all, we must respond to each other's scriptures and communities with considerable tolerance of difference and appreciation of their virtues.

In the modern world, several religions prevail. Now, the question arises about creating an atmosphere of unity among the adherents of various religions and facilitating interfaith bridge-building. Here I would like to quote a well-known Sufi formula: *sulh-e-kul*, which means 'peace with all.' This formula echoes a Quranic verse that teaches that '*as-sulh khair*,' that is, 'reconciliation is best' (4:128). This means that in a situation where there is a conflict or controversy between two parties, peaceful reconciliation is the best policy. In every situation, we should strive to adopt a peaceful rather than violent method.

The difference is a part of life, and religion is no exception in this regard. Now, the question is: How should one deal with religious differences? The Quran gives us a simple formula: "You have your religion, and I have mine." (109:6) This principle, based on mutual respect between followers of different religions, may also be expressed in these words: "Follow one, and respect all."

This principle illustrates what can be called 'the art of difference management.' The essence of this teaching is that while one follows one religion, he respects all others. This principle of mutual respect can form the bedrock of

peaceful living in a multi-religious society. This is because differences are an integral part of nature. So the only way we can live peacefully in a society characterized by religious differences is by practicing religious tolerance and respecting other people's religious convictions. Of course, everyone is entitled to follow what they think is best for their inner solace. However, mutual respect should be for each other and their deeply-held convictions.

While studying major religions, I found that every religion, including Islam, teaches the art of difference management. Every religion tells us how to live in a multi-religious society with peace and harmony. A spiritually evolved person lives in society as a disciplined person, a harmless member of society, and a no-problem person to his neighbours. In short, such a person's attitude and behaviour towards all fellow human beings, irrespective of religion, should be human-friendly.

The One God has created this vast universe and everything in it, including people who look different and subscribe to different belief systems. If we are conscious that one day we will have to return to God and answer for all our actions while we were on Earth, it may help us deal kindly and gently with all of God's creatures whom we may meet, including people from different walks and ways of life, religions and communities. Such God-consciousness can help us relate with goodness with everyone who comes into our life, irrespective of their religion or another such identity marker.

TOLERANCE: ITS SIGNIFICANCE TODAY

A peaceful society can be created only by fostering a spirit of tolerance towards and acceptance of diversity.

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 best unity can be promoted or harmony is 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 differences, 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 accepting differences.

There is nothing wrong with the diversity of opinions, beliefs, and ways of life. On the contrary, this is a positive quality which has many advantages. For example, the beauty of the garden of life is enhanced if the flowers are of different sorts 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 criticize 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 there be intellectual development?

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 talents 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 different belief systems.

TOLERANCE LEADS TO RESPECTING DIFFERENCES

In social life, we all face differences in terms of religion, culture, and personal preferences. Tolerance means respecting others despite differences and giving consideration to them.

Tolerance is a great human quality. It is a noble virtue. It has been referred to as gentleness, softening the heart, and being kind to all creatures. Tolerance means making concessions to others and considering their needs and feelings. Lack of tolerance shows that people consider only themselves. They are unaware of the needs and feelings of others.

When an individual attains true religiousness, they rise above the evils of selfishness. They start seeing others with eyes of love; this becomes second nature to them. They do not expect anything from others. Thus, if others are not good to them, they maintain their tolerant attitude towards them.

Tolerance enables a person to respect others in all situations, whether they are good to him or not. A tolerant person lives amongst others with the best human values in all situations. In all situations, he treats people with sympathy and well-wishing, even if they are unsympathetic towards him.

Tolerance means being conciliatory towards others. In social life, one is unavoidably faced with differences in religion, culture, tradition, and personal preferences. In such a situation, the best course is to tread the path of concession and broadmindedness while at the same time adhering to

one's principles. In his matters, a person should be a man of principle, and when it comes to others, he should be ready to make adjustments if necessary. Naturally, he should subject himself to self-criticism, but he should be lenient, kind, and broadminded with others. True religiousness produces such a high standard of character in people.

TOLERANCE, FORBEARANCE AND PATIENCE

The only practical formula for social harmony and progress is tolerance, forbearance, and patience. Human civilization cannot evolve without this.

Whenever a person lives along with others, differences are bound to appear between them, some time or other. Complaints might arise from time to time. This will happen in the 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, a man may continue his journey towards the higher goal of self-realization 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 simply 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 the way of tolerance rather than the way of 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 develops a positive personality.

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

HOW TO LIVE IN A MULTIFAITH SOCIETY

A multi-religious or multi-cultural society is not evil. Rather, it is a blessing. Living in a multi-religious society requires adjusting to get along well with others.

In a multi-religious society, people have to live with religious differences. Now, differences are not found only in religion. They are found 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 multi-cultural 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, organizations, and individuals. There is a big role here for voluntary organizations, 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!

INTERFAITH DIALOGUE LEADS TO SOCIAL HARMONY

The only way to avoid social strife is to exercise tolerance. One must ignore or tolerate the behaviour of others if and when one faces some grievance from others.

In the course of a debate on the social conditions of India, a participant asked what the secret was to establishing harmony in a plural society like India. I conceded that the participant's question was valid but pointed out that there should be one change in wording: "What is the secret of harmony in any society?"

Often, when people think of the question of harmony, they assume, consciously or unconsciously, that it is a question that concerns only a plural society. However, this is a fallacy. In effect, this is an issue in every society, in fact, every country.

The truth is that exercising tolerance is the only way to avoid social strife. That is, one must ignore or tolerate the behaviour of others if and when one faces some grievance from others. Maintaining a friendly relationship with another person is vital despite occasionally being unpleasant.

In today's pluralistic societies, people from different faiths and communities live together in the same space. As such, it is almost inevitable that at some point or the other, discord will rear its head. It is an inescapable fact of life, that the secret of harmonious living lies in finding a strategy to establish harmony, notwithstanding the existence of real reasons for strife. One such strategy is a dialogue that aims

to promote a spirit of tolerance between people of different faiths and communities.

While engaging in such dialogue, we must remember that society cannot escape being governed by that same law of Nature that produces roses, but only when accompanied by thorns. Roses are inseparable from their thorns. Even if people everywhere join in loud protests about these thorns, there is no way that they would go away. Even if they bulldozed all rose plants out of existence except one tiny plant, that little plant would produce its roses, and multiple thorns would still accompany them.

In this way, nature tells us that bringing about harmony in society between different groups. We must learn to live in such a way that we accept that there will always be some 'thorn' things that we may not personally like or approve of but must tolerate to maintain the peace. Instead of quarreling with these 'thorns', we should tolerate them to have the 'roses' we like. We should know that without tolerating the 'thorns,' we simply cannot access the 'roses'. As George Bernard Shaw so aptly put it: "Though all society is founded on intolerance, all improvement is found on tolerance."

THE IMPORTANCE OF INTERACTION

Interaction is not just a form of social behaviour. It is also great wisdom of life that promotes mutual understanding and appreciation. Moreover, it is a process that leads to intellectual development.

Interaction is no simple or ordinary matter. It is a ladder for all kinds of human progress. In a society without human interaction, everyone will suffer from severe limitations. No individual or group will be able to make appreciable progress.

Interaction is a Law of Nature. It underpins ongoing progress throughout the whole universe. Trees cannot physically interact with one another, but they have the medium of air to unite. The stars in space are far from each other, so they cannot come together physically, but light is the medium by which they are connected.

Interaction can thus be said to be a universal culture. It is a culture that should be adopted by human beings, too. This is because the system of the rest of the universe is functioning harmoniously through positive interaction. In the same way, human life can function harmoniously when people adopt this universal culture.

When two or more people come together in an interaction, it is the coming together of hearts and minds. Such coming together promotes mutual appreciation and understanding. It is a process that is conducive to intellectual development. People learn new things from each other's experiences.

THE IMPORTANCE OF INTERACTION

This is true of inter-religious dialogue, too, when people from different faith backgrounds interact positively.

Interaction is not just a form of social behaviour. On the contrary, it is one of the pillars of a truly meaningful life.

CHAPTER THREE

DIFFERENCES LEAD TO
LEARNING

INTER-RELIGIOUS DIALOGUE

Inter-religious dialogue is not just about telling others about one's religion. It is also a means to learn about and appreciate wise and good things in other religions.

'Dialogue' is a much talked about issue these days. People also talk about dialogue between religions, which means dialogue between people who claim to follow different religions.

The term 'inter-religious dialogue' can sometimes be interpreted by some people to give the unrealistic impression that to establish harmony in society, all the differences that exist in the teachings of different religions need to be done away with. As any sensible person would agree, doing away with all these differences is quite impossible. However, what is indeed possible is to find some achievable and practicable formula for harmonious living between people who subscribe to different religions.

In this regard, we need to adopt what is achievable and avoid that which is unachievable. Achieving harmony between people adhering to different beliefs is attainable. However, the differences in the doctrines of various religions are natural. They cannot be eliminated.

The only workable formula of harmony between people who subscribe to different religions is that which is based on mutual respect. This principle of mutual respect can be found in the following verse of the Quran: "You have your religion, and I have mine." (109:6) Through this verse, the

Quran is giving master advice for establishing a peaceful society, i.e., “To follow one and respect all.”

From this verse, it can be understood that Islam recognizes that there are differences in religion. However, at the same time, it advocates mutual respect. Without this formula, we cannot live in harmony in a religiously plural society. Therefore, religious harmony means harmony between people who subscribe to different religions and who agree to live together in harmony despite the theological differences that exist between their religions.

MANAGING DIFFERENCES THROUGH INTERFAITH DIALOGUE

A major purpose of interfaith dialogue should be to seek peaceful solutions to controversial matters. There might be differences in religion and culture among people, but absolutely no discrimination should be made between people in respect and honour.

People often adopted a confrontational course in ancient times whenever major differences arose. However, democracy has ended this way of settling matters and has introduced a culture of peace.

Differences are in themselves, not a curse. Rather, they can be a big blessing. History shows that differences of opinion lead to dialogue, which results in intellectual development, which is a boon for everyone concerned. Difference of opinion also leads to high thinking, which is the key to all human progress.

In the realm of religion today, differences can be successfully handled only through meaningful, positive, peaceful dialogue. Therefore, a major purpose of such dialogue should be to seek peaceful solutions to controversial matters. In such dialogue, the parties should present their viewpoint supported by arguments while remaining ready for giving and take—a prerequisite for a successful dialogue—rather than insisting on all their demands being unconditionally met. Further, the parties should recognize that while differences in religion and culture are a reality, no discrimination should be made between people regarding respect and dignity.

PEACE ACTIVISM

People seeking to promote harmony and peace between different faith groups must educate people to accept certain differences as a natural reality rather than striving to eliminate all differences.

Differences are a natural part of God's Creation Plan. Therefore, we need to learn to live with differences rather than trying to eliminate them. People working for peace activism and interfaith harmony must educate people to respect all people despite their differences. Rather than trying to eliminate all differences, they must accept certain differences as a natural phenomenon. Rather than seeking to eliminate all differences, they should seek to foster among people the spirit of respect for one another despite

their differences, accepting certain differences as a part of life or nature.

Merely lamenting or protesting against ‘communalism’ is also not a successful method for promoting inter-religious harmony. This working method can hardly bring about a positive change in people’s consciousness. It cannot transform their hearts and win their minds. To promote interfaith harmony, we must change people’s minds by adopting a realistic approach. We must educate and train people toward peaceful living so they can live with people of different faiths in a spirit of mutual respect.

A result-oriented method of peace activism for promoting interfaith harmony is to counsel people to cultivate respect for people who follow different faiths. Therefore, a peace activist should possess the quality embodied in this famous saying of Jesus: ‘Love your enemies. (*Luke, 6:27*) Even if someone appears as one’s enemy, one’s conduct towards him should be determined by high moral principles. This is a trait that peace activists ought to possess, and they must also impart this to others.

There are some other essential qualities of being a peace activist. A peace activist is someone who is at peace with his Creator, with himself, with his family, and with his neighbours. In other words, peace work, like charity, “begins at home.” Those who preach peace must first be peaceful with God, themselves, and their surroundings. Only such people can be called ‘peace activists’ in the true sense.

EVERY PERSON IS PART OF THE DIVINE FAMILY

All human beings are God's family. Therefore, one should not discriminate against anyone. Moreover, one should value others just as one values oneself.

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 realization 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 deserving of reward in the eyes of God.

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

LEARNING FROM EACH OTHER

As far as social harmony is concerned, we should adopt the principle of coexistence. Moreover, we need an interfaith dialogue as a process of mutual learning.

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 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 particular 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.

PEACE AND TOLERANCE IN INDIA

Tolerance is an integral part of India's traditions. Adhering to tolerance creates an environment where everyone finds room to carry out their constructive activities.

What is tolerance? If you consult an English dictionary, it might tell you that 'tolerance' means the capacity for, or the practice of, recognizing and respecting the beliefs or practices of others.

Tolerance is a highly valuable quality of social life. There are differences among people in terms of various aspects. Given this, if people act only according to their own perceived interests and do not care for others, it is bound to create intolerance, which might even lead to violence. Therefore, the best policy to adopt is tolerance. Tolerance is the only way to establish peace in society and for an individual to live in peace with others. Moreover, adhering to the way of tolerance creates an environment where everyone finds room to carry out their constructive activities.

Tolerance is an integral part of India's traditions; India is a multi-religious society and has a long history of the culture of tolerance. Almost all the major religions have a presence in India. One can say that India has proved to be a haven for different religions and cultures. In this sense, one can say that India is like a garden in which all kinds of plants and trees flourish. It is part of the identity of India. India embodies the spirit of tolerance.

India is a historical example showing how different religions and cultures co-exist. How did the people of a country have so many religious beliefs, and how could they live together, from the past to the present, with this diversity? This was not due to any coincidence. It was due to the deep-rooted traditions of tolerance in Indian culture. This kind of tolerance is a great strength of India. It gives India a special place on the world map.

INDIA: A POTENTIAL SPIRITUAL SUPERPOWER

India's potential to be a spiritual superpower is based on its ancient traditions of tolerance, plurality, and mutual acceptance embodied by its Swamis and Sufis.

I have always maintained that India is a potential spiritual superpower. Why is this so? This is traceable to India's long spiritual traditions. Since ancient times, India has been engaged in spiritual activities. India has also been a land of pluralistic and multi-religious societies. Indian Swamis and Sufis followed the principle of inclusiveness. The pluralistic and inclusive nature of Indian society is not by accident. It is directly due to the Indian way of thinking. India believes in pluralism.

A major school of religious thought in India is based on what can be called Monism. Monism means that the Divine Reality, One, is manifested differently and is present in every particle of the universe. According to this religious philosophy, everything in the cosmos is a part of a manifestation of the Divine. Adherents of this way of thinking believe that every human being, indeed every creature, is a particle of the Divine. This concept accords equal position and respect to everyone, regardless of religion, ethnicity, caste or class.

This way of thinking is a major component of the culture of tolerance in India. It resonates with something that the well-known Indian thinker and reformer Swami Vivekananda (1863-1902) declared at the 1893 Parliament of the World's

Religions: “We believe not only in universal toleration, but we accept all religions as true.”

According to the Indian Constitution, which came into effect in January 1950, all citizens of India have equal citizenship rights, and there is no discrimination based on religion. There are thousands of mosques, madrasas, and various Islamic organizations in India today, and they are flourishing and working smoothly. Muslims have a presence in every field of Indian society. For example, the President of India holds the highest office in the country. In the history of independent India, four Muslims have, to this date, held the office of President. They were Dr Zakir Hussain (1967-1969), Mohammad Hidayatullah (July-August 1969), Fakhruddin Ali Ahmed (1974-1977) and Dr A.P.J. Abdul Kalam (2002-2007).

If there are some issues that Muslims in India face, they are due to the Laws of Nature. Differences are a part of the Laws of Nature. Thus, it is natural that there will be some issues in every society that are different. According to the Laws of Nature, having a totally problem-free country is impossible. No country is an exception in this regard.

I have established my mission in India under ‘The Centre for Peace and Spirituality International.’ It has spread throughout India as well as abroad. We have never received the slightest problem from the Indian administration. The spiritual greatness found in India is what makes India potentially a spiritual superpower. However, to make this a reality, we need to usher in a spiritual revolution in this, the second decade of the 21st century.

WORKING TOGETHER FOR PROGRESS

Instead of labelling a situation as 'oppression', view it as a challenge. Then, as per the Laws of Nature, your capabilities will be awakened, and your latent potential will come to the fore.

Once, I visited a certain city in India, where I met two men, one a Hindu and the other a Muslim. The two men were once friends, but later, they quarrelled. Finally, after several months of trying to patch up, they still were not on talking terms; the Hindu man said to the Muslim man, "Come, let us set aside our differences and work together on issues we do not have differences about."

I feel this is how Muslims, Hindus, and others should relate as communities.

There was another case of this sort that I heard of from Mumbai. A Muslim and a Jew were business partners. At the very outset, the Jew had told the Muslim, "There are no differences between us on business matters, but there is one issue we do not see eye-to-eye—the question of Israel. So let us both decide that we will never talk about the issue of Israel." Moreover, that is what happened. The two men never raised this contentious issue, because of which their joint business venture was very successful.

Religious communities living in a plural society should use the same formula, working together in harmony and focusing on what brings them together, including their shared issues. They should be inspired by the common concern that their country should progress.

HINDU-MUSLIM AMITY

Every man is a human being. He temporarily becomes an enemy when provoked. Responding with positive behaviour makes him return to his nature. One who earlier appeared as an enemy now becomes a friend.

At a seminar on 'Religion and Humanitarianism' held under the auspices of the Zakir Husain Institute of Islamic Studies, at the Jamia Millia Islamia, in New Delhi in 1993, one of the speakers, Dr. Bishambhar Nath Pandey, recalled how a Hindu procession, led by Swami Satya Dev through Bala Ghat in the Indian state of Madhya Pradesh in 1926, had been planned. A ten thousand-strong procession with beating drums and slogans arrived in front of a mosque, exactly at prayer time.

Mr. Karamat Husain, a reputed political activist in the city, had gained prior knowledge of this plan. Before the arrival of the procession, he reached the mosque along with one hundred of his colleagues, each was provided with a garland. When the procession came to a halt in front of the mosque, he asked the other Muslims who had come there to pray to remain silent. Then, initiating a pre-planned move, he came out of the mosque with his colleagues and walked towards the procession. He neither told the procession to go by another route nor demanded that they stop shouting slogans. Instead, he said: "We welcome you!" And then he and his colleagues began garlanding the Hindus one by one. Now the entire atmosphere underwent a sea change. The processionists stopped forthwith. A charged atmosphere changed into one of amity.

Every man is a human being. He becomes an enemy—only temporarily—when he is provoked. However, with wise handling, his temper cools, and he returns to the real nature he was born with. That same person, who had appeared in the guise of an enemy, can become your friend.

SUCCESSFUL HINDU-MUSLIM DIALOGUE

Hindu-Muslim dialogue held with full sincerity, cooperation, and acceptance of differences with an objective mind will open a new chapter in the history of India, making both partners on the path to progress.

Islam and Hinduism, both representing two great traditions, have co-existed for more than one thousand years. It is very important to understand the relationship between these two religions. There are two divergent views on the subject of this relationship. One view is that both traditions are very similar to each other. I once happened to meet a Hindu scholar who with great enthusiasm said, “I do not find any difference between the two religions. When I read the Quran, I feel that I am reading the Gita and when I read the Gita, I feel I am reading the Quran.” The second view is that Islam and Hinduism are both very different from each other and that their only meeting point is (heated) debates. This view was particularly widespread during the British rule in India and reached its zenith at that time.

It would be more intellectually and academically productive to assess the merits of the two religions in the context of

intellectual development. Such development can come about only as a result of social interaction, intellectual exchange, and interfaith dialogue. I give herein certain principles for successful dialogue.

The dialogue, if it has to succeed, should not take the form of polemics. Participants in the dialogue should not become spokesmen of their respective communities. What should be uppermost in their minds is the vaster national interest and what the path is for the betterment of both communities.

Both the parties in the dialogue will have to commit themselves to differentiate between issues and non-issues; they will not hold any matter as a prestige issue; they will not adopt the way of claim and counterclaim; they will only say something keeping the result before them; that they will be impartial; that while pressing their demands they will also be willing to concede that while taking from others they will also be willing to give.

I would like to emphasize that the dialogue is not a meeting of rivalry but a brotherly meeting. Such noble tasks are performed by rising above the defeat-victory psychology. The dialogue aims to solve the matter and not confound it. The feeling at work behind dialogue is one of reconciliation and not one of rivalry.

Dialogue means an attempt to solve controversial matters through negotiation rather than through confrontation. If a dialogue is started with this spirit its success is certain. A dialogue keeping this spirit in view can surely open the closed door provided it is conducted with true spirit, and results in the progress of the country and each community.

I am of the firm opinion that the Hindu-Muslim dialogue held with full sincerity will open a new chapter in the history of India. In my experience, differences in religion are not an evil but a blessing. We require only an acceptance of these differences with a positive mind so that we can learn from each other and live as partners, rather than as rivals. Life is all about cooperation and coexistence, and the relationship between different religions must be based on the acceptance of this principle.

POSITIVE JEWISH-MUSLIM RELATIONSHIP

A peaceful method is more effective than a violent one. Peaceful relations between Jews and Muslims can indeed be established. It is certainly possible.

The Prophet Muhammad migrated from Makkah to Madinah in 622 C.E. At that time, some Jewish tribes were living in Madinah.

The Madinan period of the Prophet's life gives us some authentic examples to share the Prophetic model of Jewish-Muslim relations.

It is said that the Prophet accepted invitations from Jewish leaders of Madinah to visit their homes and have an exchange on mutual issues. This shows the importance of interaction between Jews and Muslims.

Al-Bukhari narrates a very interesting story according to which, one day, the Prophet of Islam saw a funeral

procession passing on a street in Madinah. He was seated at that time. On seeing the funeral procession, he stood up in respect. 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 report shows that the Prophet of Islam discovered a commonality between himself and a Jewish person. Moreover, that commonality was based on the concept that both were human beings, having been created by the same God.

These experiences from the life of the Prophet of Islam give us a model for how Muslims can live peacefully with Jews and settle the problems between their two communities.

Here, I would like to remove a misunderstanding in this regard. Some verses in the Quran refer to Jews as opponents. However, these verses are neither general nor absolute. These verses were related to only some Jewish contemporaries of the Prophet of Islam. These verses have nothing to do with the Jewish community as a whole.

The following instruction from the Quran gives us a very clear direction: *as-sulh khair* (4:128). This means that reconciliation is best. According to the Quran, this is the formula of difference management. In line with this formula, Muslims must follow the course of peaceful conciliation, rather than violent confrontation, with others, including members of the Jewish community.

There is a relevant teaching of the Prophet of Islam that states: “God grants to non-violence what he does not grant

to violence.”(*Sahih Muslim*, Hadith No. 2593) This means that peaceful methods are far more effective than violent methods.

In light of the above teachings, we can safely say that the so-called Jewish-Muslim ‘enmity’ is not advisable. It is an artificial state of affairs. We can and should work to establish peaceful relations between Jews and Muslims.

CHRISTIANITY AND ISLAM

Awareness of the initial mutual goodwill and understanding between adherents of Islam and Christianity can help build Christian-Muslim relations today on positive lines.

Unfortunately, the initial mutual goodwill and understanding between adherents of Islam and Christianity have been considerably eroded over the centuries. Perhaps a perusal of the accounts given below of early encounters between adherents of the two faiths will encourage a return to that enviable state.

Muhammad, the Prophet of Islam (570-632 AD), was twelve years old when he accompanied his paternal uncle, Abu Talib, on a caravan journey to Syria. When they camped at Busra, he met a Christian monk known as Bahira, who was well-versed in Christian scriptures. One day, as the latter emerged from his cell, he saw Muhammad, in whom he recognized the signs of prophethood. After some conversation, he advised Abu Talib to hasten back to

his land with his nephew and protect him against enemies, for a great future lay in store for him. Somewhat alarmed, Abu Talib took him back to Makkah soon after he finished trading in Syria. Much later, at the age of forty, when the Prophet was meditating in a cave called Hira, situated near Makkah, he was visited by the Angel Gabriel, who came to him with the first revelations contained in the Quran: "Read! In the name of your Lord, who created: created man from a clot [of blood]. Read! Your Lord is the Most Bountiful One who taught by the pen, taught man what he did not know." (96:1-5)

After this extraordinary experience, Muhammad rushed back home to his wife Khadijah, to whom he said, trembling, "Cover me with a cloak, cover me with a cloak." Then, having recovered a little, he told her of his experience and said: "I feel my life is in danger." She responded, "No, never! God will never bring you to grief." Then she took him to her cousin, Waraqah ibn Naufal, who had become a Christian.

Waraqah commented: "The One who came to you is the same Namus (the specially appointed Divine Messenger) who came to Moses. I wish I were a young man and could live till the time when your people will expel you."

The Prophet asked, "Will my people expel me?"

Waraqah replied: "Yes, no one has been before, who brought the same thing that you have brought, without the people turning hostile to him." (*As-Sirah* by Ibn Hisham, Vol. 1, p. 238)

Another such encounter took place a few years after Muhammad's receiving prophethood. At this time, Makkah

was dominated by idolaters who, rejecting monotheism, set about persecuting the Prophet and his Companions. The Prophet, therefore, advised his followers to leave for Abyssinia (now known as Ethiopia), a justly ruled Christian kingdom, “until God leads us to a way out of our difficulty.” (*As-Sirah* by Ibn Hisham, Vol. 1, p. 322) About eighty Muslims then emigrated to Abyssinia, where they lived under the protection of the Negus, the Christian ruler of the land, until after the Prophet emigrated to Madinah.

The Makkans, upset at this Muslim exodus, immediately sent a delegation to the Negus asking for the emigrants’ extradition to Makkah. However, the Negus refused to yield to their appeal until he had heard the refugees plead their case. This was ably done by Jafar ibn Abi Talib, who briefly described the teachings of Islam. At the request of the Negus, he recited certain Quranic revelations. When the patriarchs heard the first part of the chapter of the Quran entitled ‘Mary,’ confirming the message of the Evangel, they were pleasantly surprised and said: “These words must have sprung from the same fountainhead from which the words of our Lord Jesus Christ have sprung.” The Negus then said, “What you have just recited and that which was revealed to Moses must have both been issued from the same source. Go forth into my kingdom; I shall not extradite you at all.” (*As-Sirah* by Ibn Hisham, Vol. 1, p. 336)

These examples help us understand the goodwill between many adherents of Islam and Christianity in early times. Reviving this goodwill can help build Christian-Muslim relations on positive lines today.

CHRISTIAN-MUSLIM ENDEAVOURS FOR A BETTER SOCIETY

Avoiding theological differences, if we build a platform based on common moral ground, it could pave the way for good relations between Christians and Muslims.

Since Christians and Muslims make up more than half of the world's population, a viable relationship between them is crucial if there is meaningful peace in the world. Moreover, Muslim-Christian unity is essential for building a better global society, for no such great task can be performed without joint effort. Finding common ground between the two religious communities to maintain a stable equation is not just a matter of polite exchanges taking place on religious matters between selected leaders. There must be a change of hearts and minds, too.

There are many similarities between Muslims and Christians. For example, their religions belong to the same 'Abrahamic' religious family, with a common spiritual ancestor, the Prophet Abraham. Recognizing their similarities can provide a conducive atmosphere for Muslim-Christian unity.

The Quran is the authentic text of the religion of Islam. Regarding Muslim-Christian relations, it is worth mentioning that there are frequent references to Christianity in the Quran. For example, while 'Muhammad' and 'Ahmad' are referred to in the Quran five times, 'Isa' (the Prophet Jesus) and 'Masih' (The Messiah, i.e., Jesus) are mentioned thirty-six times, and 'Maryam' (Mary) is referred to thirty-

four times. This shows that Islam gives a special position to key figures in Christianity and desires that Muslims develop high respect for them.

A study of the Quran shows that it attaches special importance to building good relations between Muslims and Christians. The classical literature of Islam has many appreciative references to Jesus. For example, the Quran calls Christ the “Spirit of God” (4:171), and of Mary, it says: “We breathed Our Spirit into her and made her and her son a sign for all people” (21:91). Jesus is also mentioned in the Quran as “The Messiah,” “A Mercy;” “Prophet,” “Messenger,” “Word from God,” “Spirit,” “A Sign,” and “One brought near (to God),” “Upright,” “Servant,” “Eminent,” “Blessed,” “A Witness,” and “A Parable.”

The Quran says about Jesus and his followers: “We gave him the Gospel and imbued the hearts of those who followed him with compassion and mercy” (57:27). Elsewhere, the Quran states: “the nearest in affection to them are those who say, ‘We are Christians.’ That is because there are priests and monks among them; and because they are free from pride.” (5:82) In addition, the Quran enjoins on Muslims to follow the method of the disciples of Jesus: “Believers, be God’s helpers, as Jesus, son of Mary, said to the disciples, ‘Who will be my helpers in the cause of God?’ The disciples said, ‘We shall be God’s helpers.’” (61:14)

A Hadith report demonstrates the early Muslims’ positive evaluation of Christians. Mustaurid al-Qurashi, a Companion of the Prophet, reported that the Prophet said: “The Day of Judgment will not come until the Christians

outnumber all other people.” (*Sahih Muslim*, Hadith No. 2898; *Musnad Ahmad*, Hadith No. 18022)

‘Amr ibn al-‘As, a senior Companion of the Prophet, endorsed this, remarking, “The Christians have four characteristics. They are the most forbearing in times of adversity; they do not allow their spirits to be broken but promptly recover from every setback; they are the first to charge again after retreat; and they are the best of all in caring for the deprived, downtrodden, and the weak.” (*Sahih Muslim*, Hadith No. 2898; *Musnad Ahmad*, Hadith No. 18022) Amr then added that there was a fifth feature of the Christians, which is the best of all: that they restrain their kings from perpetrating injustice and oppression. (*Sahih Muslim*, Hadith No. 2898; *Musnad Ahmad*, Hadith No. 18022)

A major requirement for promoting Muslim-Christian relations today is to provide opportunities for adherents of both faiths, Islam and Christianity, to interact with each other repeatedly through interfaith dialogue. Christians and Muslims participating in interfaith dialogue must strive to highlight the positive moral values common to both religions. Avoiding theological differences, they must try to build a common platform based on the common moral ground between Christians and Muslims. It can pave the way for good relations between the two.

PURPOSE OF INTER-RELIGIOUS DIALOGUE

A major purpose of interfaith dialogue, or dialogue between members of different religious communities, is for dialogue partners to understand and learn from each other.

What is the scope of interfaith dialogue? For example, should it focus on people from different faith backgrounds trying to understand each other's religions? Or should it also include trying to understand each other's economic, social, and political conditions and problems, which are often a major cause of inter-community conflict? In other words, should such dialogue be theological, sociological, or both?

Social issues are common in nature. Discussion on social issues is our common worldly requirement. Here, the formula of the well-known thinker Jeremy Bentham is applicable: "The greatest good for the greatest number." That is, many people sit together to discuss social issues of common concern, and whatever jointly emerges from the discussions could be adopted by all.

However, the arena of religion is quite different. Religion is related to the issue of Truth. Every individual should seek to discover Truth by themselves, to find out what the Truth with a capital 'T' is. Without making this kind of finding, a person will live in confusion.

We need, therefore, to differentiate between social issues

and religious issues. Of course, dialogue should be at both levels, but their purpose is distinct.

I believe a major purpose of inter-religious dialogue should be the search for Truth. In this process, dialogue partners can understand and learn from each other in a spirit of mutual respect. Therefore, they should present the views of their religion and their insights and experiences and at the same time be willing to learn from others when they present their religious views, insights, and experiences. This is how they may jointly progress in their search for Truth.

Dialogue on religious issues is important in the search for Truth. It is extremely useful for people of various religions to share their experiences searching for Truth through such dialogue. It can help increase one's knowledge, and learning from others may immensely benefit one's journey in searching for Truth. If one thinks one has found what he regards as Truth with a capital 'T', he can share it with others through dialogue. Moreover, if one is yet to reach the final goal in terms of Truth, dialogue with others can assist him in his search.

About myself, I can say that although I am convinced about my faith when I listen to others' points of view, I do so with an objective mind and learn useful and good things from them. This attitude of mine has been greatly beneficial for me. It has greatly helped me grow in my understanding.

So, even though you may feel your belief system is true, it does not mean you should ignore or be blind to the good things many other belief systems contain. On the contrary, one should be open to learning and benefitting from others

because everyone has at least something we can learn and gain from.

Some people might feel that appreciating the good things in other religions may weaken their faith, so they ignore the good things other religions contain. Unfortunately, this is an all-too-common tendency. However, this kind of thinking is wrong. Only ignorant or very prejudiced people can think in this manner.

PEACEFUL COEXISTENCE

In this world, a recipe for a peaceful life is to keep all differences on a strictly intellectual plane, so they do not lead to conflict.

Bringing about harmony in human society is undoubtedly a noble goal. However, harmony relates to social behaviour rather than simply adopting a theoretical position. For example, if we want to encourage a warm relationship between two people, one wearing a yellow shirt and the other a blue one, this will not come about by abhorring the difference in the colour of their apparel or insisting on uniformity of colour. On the contrary, the establishment of harmony between these two individuals is possible only if they accept the difference in the colour of their shirts and agree to be on good terms despite this difference.

The same principle applies to harmony between social groups and communities living in a plural society.

The natural formula for promoting a sense of fraternity

among people from diverse social, including religious, backgrounds is to accept their differences and to show proper respect for one another's rights and feelings. This is also the correct Islamic viewpoint in this matter. However, unfortunately, many misunderstandings on this subject have been created by taking certain verses from the Quran out of their context to wrongly claim that the Quran commands the waging of war on, and the subjugation of, the whole world. Based on this erroneous claim, it is contended that the adherents of Islam cannot live peacefully with the followers of other religions. However, this is a sheer misunderstanding. Wherever the Quran has indicated that warfare is in order, it is solely based on self-defense.

Possibly all the nations of the world have it enshrined in their Constitutions that if any country or group attacks them, they will fight to defend themselves. These nations are nevertheless living peacefully under the umbrella of the United Nations. The same is the case with Islam. Islam issues no injunction for war except in case of self-defense, and that too under very clearly specified conditions. In the absence of aggression, no fighting is permissible. The general rule in Islam is peaceful coexistence, with fighting only as a last resort when circumstances might make it completely unavoidable.

Differences are a part of life. Psychological and biological studies have proved that no two human beings think alike. It is so marked a feature of the human psyche that each of the trillions of cells of the human body bears its stamp. Hence, any formula that seeks to eradicate differences to

bring unity is impossible. In this regard, the only possible and practicable formula is to tolerate and accept differences so that all people may live in unity and harmony.

A harmonious society is formed by tolerating various viewpoints rather than by bulldozing. The right way to engender tolerance is to bring about that intellectual awakening that will make people realize that whatever the circumstances, they must live in this world through the adjustment to others if they want to lead a peaceful and fulfilling life. In this world, the recipe for a peaceful life is to keep all differences on a strictly intellectual plane, so they do not lead to conflict and violence.

INTERFAITH DIALOGUE FOR PEACEFUL COEXISTENCE

There are differences in the beliefs of the different religions. However, moral values cut across religions and are a common ground for achieving the goal of peaceful coexistence.

There is a great deal of interfaith dialogue activity happening nowadays. However, what is the true meaning of dialogue?

Some people confuse inter-religious dialogue with inter-religious debate. However, there is a big difference between the two. In a debate, a person advocates a particular position and seeks to prove the other side wrong. Such an approach is not conducive to promoting understanding and tolerance. Instead, it promotes hate and intolerance.

Dialogue, in contrast, is based on the principle of live-and-let-live, of mutual respect. Therefore, one has to acknowledge the other party's point of view fully and, simultaneously, present one's view in a manner understandable to the former. In this way, dialogue conduces to peace and harmony, whereas debate produces hatred and distrust.

Given this, we have no viable option before us but peaceful dialogue. In the present situation, this kind of dialogue is essential because human beings have experimented unsuccessfully with the culture of war for a very long time, and now they are left with no other recourse but to experiment with the culture of peace.

Religion has two fundamental aspects—theology and moral values or ethical principles. As far as theology is concerned, there are obvious differences in the beliefs of different religions. However, moral values cut across religions and are a common ground for achieving the goal of peaceful existence. The Quran refers to the common ground between religious communities in these words: “Say, ‘People of the Book, let us come to a word common to us that we shall worship none but God and that we shall associate no partner with Him and that none of us shall take others, besides God, for lords.’” (3:64)

The ethical principles of all religions can serve as a common ground to initiate inter-religious dialogue. However, the present age is an age of global interaction. Now, the whole world has become a global village, and all the boundaries have been merged. In such a scenario, the formula of peaceful co-existence between adherents of different religions, which

is based on acknowledging and celebrating the common ground between the religions, is very important.

There is a great deal that Islam shares with other religions. This common ground provides a sound base for a joint platform to establish a new world of peace and tolerance. This fact has been successfully demonstrated by many Sufis, for instance. Using the potential presented by common grounds between religions, they established a rich history of peaceful coexistence between people from different religious backgrounds. Many Sufi hospices were international religious centres for the followers of various faiths. One of the greatest contributions of Sufis was their application of the principle of peaceful coexistence in the field of religion. The secret of the Sufis' success was that they kept their activities in the non-political field. As a result, they distanced themselves from all kinds of controversies.

The approach of the Sufis can be best expressed in a term that they coined, *sulh-e-kul*, that is, 'peace with all'. The spirit of *sulh-e-kul* needs to be adopted and adapted for the modern age. It is a fact that peaceful coexistence, peace with all, is the only sensible and affordable way of existence in this world.

Many Sufis worked in an age long before the advent of the modern mass media when the means of communication were few and opportunities for interaction were very limited. However, today, in an age of almost instant communications, we have vast opportunities to spread the message of peace worldwide. We can rightfully say that what was earlier possible only at a local or regional level has now become possible to achieve at the global level.

INTER-RELIGIOUS COEXISTENCE DESPITE DIFFERENCES

If the common ground for agreement between two or more parties cannot be arrived at on an ideological basis, practical coexistence must be adopted.

Religious differences have always existed between people. That is why inter-religious dialogue has been found, in one form or the other, since ancient times. For example, some 1400 years ago, the Prophet of Islam held a multi-religious get-together in a mosque in Madinah to exchange views on religious issues. Such attempts have repeatedly been made in history. The circumstances that unfolded following World War II led the Catholic Church, in particular, to pay great attention to this issue. Through its continuous efforts, dialogues of this nature are regularly held in various countries, including between Muslims and Christians.

The first and foremost principle for any meaningful inter-religious dialogue is finding a mutual basis for peaceful coexistence. Finding common ground in secular matters is comparatively easy, for perhaps nothing is held as absolutely sacred in secularism. However, in contrast, many things are considered sacred in religion, which is why it sometimes becomes difficult to find a basis for agreement in religious matters. However, despite all difficulties, we must continue our peaceful efforts in this direction. The Quran points to common ground in the form of worship of the One God: “Say, ‘People of the Book, let us come to a word common to us that we shall worship none but God and that we shall

associate no partner with Him and that none of us shall take others, besides God, for lords.” (3:64)

A second principle for inter-religious dialogue is purely a matter of pragmatism. Nevertheless, some matters should be settled on practical grounds. One of these is accepting religious diversity as a fact of life. Guidance for this is provided in the following verse of the Quran: “You have your religion, and I have mine.” (109:6)

This Quranic verse reflects the principle of religious co-existence, ‘follow one and respect all.’ If common grounds for agreement between two or more parties cannot be arrived at on an ideological basis, then practical coexistence must be adopted.

CHAPTER FOUR

PEACEFUL DIALOGUE FOR MUTUAL LEARNING

DIALOGUE IN ISLAM

One purpose of dialogue is to resolve controversial matters through negotiations rather than confrontation.

Dialogue is fully in accordance with the teachings of Islam. The Hudaibiyyah Peace Treaty in Islamic history is a great example of a successful dialogue. After the Prophet emigrated to Madinah, relations between Muslims and non-Muslims in Arabia deteriorated considerably. Several battles and skirmishes ensued, and walls of prejudice and hatred barred the two from coming closer to each other. Finally, peace could only be established at Hudaibiyyah, near Makkah, in 628 C.E., through peaceful negotiations between Prophet Muhammad and non-Muslim Makkan leaders. Such dialogue has great relevance in our times, too.

If dialogue is to succeed, it should not take the form of polemics. Representatives should not become spokesmen of only their respective communities during the discussions. What should be uppermost in their minds are the vaster interests of humankind and the paths of progress and harmony for all. All parties should commit themselves to differentiating between issues and non-issues. While presenting their position, they must also be willing to concede to others. While taking from others, they must also be willing to give.

True dialogue is not a meeting of rivals. Rather, it should be considered a brotherly meeting of two or more individuals or groups. In true dialogue, participants seek to rise above the victory-defeat psychology. The aim of such dialogue

should be to solve problematic issues, not to aggravate them. The feeling at work behind a dialogue should be one of reconciliation, not rivalry.

DIALOGUE FOR MUTUAL LEARNING

The purpose of authentic inter-religious dialogue is neither to discover any supposed complete uniformity among religions nor to establish any claim of the supposed superiority of one religion over other religions. On the contrary, inter-religious dialogue is important for mutual learning.

It is often thought that inter-religious dialogue's main or sole purpose is to establish harmony among religious groups. Inter-religious dialogue for this purpose has been going on for a long time. Perhaps the earliest such dialogue was held in Chicago in 1893. In this dialogue, people from all the major religions were present. However, despite many such exercises, harmony among different religious groups remains a distant dream. The question is, why did these exercises not succeed?

According to my understanding, two major inter-religious dialogue models exist. The first model was based on the concept of uniformity. According to this concept, all religions are the same, and there is an essential uniformity in all religions, which needs to be discovered, highlighted, and promoted through inter-religious dialogue. According to this way of thinking, achieving uniformity among

all religions is how harmony can be expected between religious groups.

Experience, however, shows that this exercise has not succeeded. This is because it is based on an unreal concept as religions are diverse (while also having some elements in common). The fact is that there is no uniformity in nature. Nature revels in differences. Both the material and human worlds are based on differences. We cannot find any two men or two women who are identical. This is true of religions, too. The word ‘uniformity’ is found in the dictionary but not in the human world. Hence, the formula of establishing religious uniformity through inter-religious dialogue is unrealistic, so it has not been able to make much headway.

The second major model for inter-religious dialogue was based on debate or polemics. Unfortunately, this model was bound to fail in producing harmony between adherents of different faiths since, by nature, debate and polemics, fired by unwarranted supremacist and exclusivist claims, lead to conflict and not to reconciliation.

This situation requires that we reassess the whole matter of inter-religious dialogue. However, first, we need to find a formula other than the above two.

I have studied this matter in detail. I have also participated in many worldwide dialogues at the national and international levels. After my study and based on considerable personal experience, I can suggest a third model for interfaith dialogue, one in accordance with the Creation Plan of God and hence is realistic and feasible.

This third model of inter-religious dialogue is based on positive discussions between people who believe in different religions, leading to mutual learning. This indicates that the purpose of inter-religious dialogue should be neither to discover any supposed complete uniformity among religions nor to establish the claim of the supposed superiority of one religion over other religions. Instead, according to the third model, the major purpose of inter-religious dialogue should be for people from different religious backgrounds to learn about each other and their religions together in a spirit of mutual respect, a process that enriches all dialogue participants.

This formula is not specifically religious. It can be said to be a universal formula. In every walk of life and discipline, we use the same formula—of mutual learning based on mutual respect. We try to learn from others everywhere in education, industry, business, or social life. Mutual learning is the basic formula of life. So, why not apply it to the sphere of religion as well? If we apply this universal formula to inter-religious dialogue, such dialogue becomes part of a universal process based on mutual learning, leading to mutual progress.

RELIGIOUS BELIEF AND SOCIAL HARMONY

Efforts for inter-religious dialogue must be undertaken for mutual learning and sharing. Furthermore, we need to adopt the tested formula of peaceful coexistence for social harmony.

The principle for inter-religious dialogue from the Islamic point of view, is neither religious uniformity nor inter-religious debate but, rather, mutual learning between people from different religious backgrounds based on mutual respect.

We are all seekers, in some way or the other. We need to try to find the truth about life and the universe. This seeking is a continuous process. In the course of this journey, we seek to achieve a conviction. For this, we have to study and interact with others. Inter-religious dialogue is important for mutual learning and sharing in seeking truth. Dialogue participants can freely share their experiences regarding truth, and others can try to learn and benefit from them. It is a healthy interaction. Interaction, dialogue, and exchange of thoughts are very important. However, they are not meant to establish claims of superiority over others. They should be only for learning. Learning has no end. There are limitless things that we can learn. The universe of facts is limitless: it has no end. Thus, our learning process can continue throughout our life.

As far as social harmony is concerned, we need to adopt the tested formula of peaceful coexistence. Moreover, as far as

inter-religious dialogue is concerned, we need to take it as a means for learning, exchanging ideas and experiences, and sharing. By following this method, we can achieve two goals simultaneously: to grow in our realization of truth and to promote harmonious relations between individuals who subscribe to different belief systems. This is according to the Laws of Nature, or the Creation Plan of God.

This, to me, is the only meaningful model for inter-religious dialogue. Dialogue for the sake of dialogue is nothing. We must be very clear if we want dialogue to have some purpose. According to my experience, the purpose of such dialogue should be sharing, mutual learning, and interaction between people with different religious beliefs or understandings, which helps all parties in a dialogue to grow as human beings and thereby lead a more meaningful life.

LEARNING FROM OTHERS

Not benefitting from others is the greatest loss. If someone finds something lacking in himself, he can compensate for it by learning from others. This can happen, for instance, through inter-religious dialogue, where one can learn many good things from people of different faith backgrounds, each of whom has their own insights and experiences.

According to a Hadith report, the Prophet of Islam once remarked: “Seek guidance from the wise, and you will be

guided, and do not go against that. Otherwise, you will repent of it.” (*Musnad Al-Shahab*, Hadith No. 722)

This report highlights the importance of learning from others.

It is a fact that no two human beings are cast in the same mould. Some have less knowledge and experience, while some have more. Some are gifted naturally with more wisdom and understanding, while some are less well-endowed in these respects. These differences exist so that people may benefit from one another. If a person finds something lacking in himself, he might be able to compensate for it by learning from others. This can happen, for instance, through inter-religious dialogue, where one can learn many good things from people of varied faith backgrounds, each of whom has valuable insights and experiences.

We should develop the habit of listening to and learning from others, from wise people, no matter who they may be, the community they belong to, and the belief system they subscribe to. This is very useful for our personal growth.

TOLERANCE AND HUMANITARIAN BEHAVIOUR

Inter-religious harmony can be achieved by encouraging people to respect other people's beliefs and be humanitarian in their dealings with adherents of other faiths.

Harmony between people who subscribe to different religions is a very desirable objective. The way to achieve this

ALL HUMAN BEINGS ARE EQUAL

objective is to encourage people to respect other peoples' beliefs and be humanitarian at all times in their dealings with adherents of other religions. We must promote this harmony by respecting the long-cherished beliefs of other religions.

There may be differences in religious beliefs between people, and to relate to these, we should adopt a positive and practical approach. A positive and practical approach is something that people regularly resort to in matters of their daily existence. As such, it is a known and acceptable method for handling differences. This should be applied to the issue of religious differences, too. Whether a religious scholar or a 'common' person, everyone must respect people of other faiths, exercise tolerance towards their beliefs, appreciate the goodness in their belief systems and practices, and be humanitarian while dealing with them. Honest and sincere efforts ensure inter-community harmony in a religiously plural society.

ALL HUMAN BEINGS ARE EQUAL

Being created by the One God, all human beings are equal. It is one's inner character and conduct, not the outward appearance, which counts in God's eyes. In the final analysis, one's character and conduct alone matter.

It is reported that the Prophet of Islam, while preaching a sermon on the occasion of the Final Pilgrimage, stated: "O people, no Arab is superior to a non-Arab and no non-Arab

is superior to an Arab, no white is superior to a black, and no black is superior to a white, except in religiosity and God-consciousness.” (*Musnad Ahmad*, Hadith No. 23489)

The Creator of all human beings is the same. Moreover, all humans are children of the same primal parents, Adam and Eve. As such, then, all human beings are equal.

Many different ethnic groups that inhabit Planet Earth are dissimilar. For instance, some have white skin and some black. However, all such differences are solely about external appearances related to the physical body. In reality, there is no difference in essence between one person and another. They are essentially the same.

A good society can be built only by giving an equal position to all human beings, no matter what religion they follow or the community they identify with. In a society without equality, peace and prosperity will not flourish. On the contrary, such a society will be eternally beset by tension and conflict.

The difference between one person and another is not based on race or community, skin colour, or language. Rather, it is based on character and conduct. It is one’s character and conduct that is the true criterion for gauging a person. This is important to remember when seeking to help promote better relations between people who subscribe to different religions or belief systems. No matter what religion or community people identify with, good character and conduct are most important.

WHY RESPECT ALL HUMAN BEINGS

God-oriented living means that one looks at all human beings with respect and honour, whether they belong to one's religion or community.

As mentioned earlier in this book, it is said that the Prophet of Islam was once seated at a place in Madinah when a funeral procession was passing by. The Prophet stood up in deference to it. 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)

From this incident, one can conclude that a basic principle of the God-oriented way of life is that one should look at every person with respect and honour, no matter what their religion or community. Such respect and honour derive from all humans having the same Source—the One God.

When you look at a person, and your eyes are focused on your differences, what sets you apart from him, you might want to maintain a distance from him. You might imagine that you and he have little or no commonality. However, on the other hand, if you look at him as a fellow human being and focus on his good points, you might be led to discover him as a unique masterpiece of God's creation and realize that he and you share much in common. His existence might remind you of one or more of the attributes of God. In such a situation, you might forget the apparent differences between you and him, and you might be lost in the beauty of the Divine creativity that he reflects.

In the mirror of creation, you will find God. In the form

of a fellow human being, no matter what their religion, ethnicity, or social class, you can discover a fellow being who, just like yourself, has been created by the One God and who, therefore, is just as worthy of respect as you think you are. His relationship with God is equal to your relationship with God.

When a devotee of God respects a person, it could be said to be an expression of the sublime feelings aroused in him related to God as the Creator. The expression of these feelings has no limit. Such feelings find expression in all kinds of human beings, not just those who are related to themselves or belong to the same religion or community. This is why one must respect all human beings, regardless of background, religion or community. One must respect all creatures since they are all from the One God.

HAVE A GOOD OPINION OF OTHERS

One must hold a good opinion of others. When engaged in inter-religious dialogue, it is essential to follow this principle.

It is reported that the Prophet of Islam once observed, "Holding good opinions about others is a form of worship." (*Musnad Ahmad*, Hadith No. 7956)

In life, occasions repeatedly arise when a person comes to mistrust another. For example, this may happen if a person is suspicious about someone. Then, consciously or unconsciously, he comes to regard him as evil, which is why he thinks of being engaged in wrongdoing.

Another major reason for mistrust is the lack of information. Sometimes, an individual is not fully informed about another person's circumstances. His knowledge is only partial, and because of this, he is not able to view the person in the right manner. He then suffers as a result of this misunderstanding. Due to such misapprehensions, forming a correct opinion is sometimes difficult. If a person forms an opinion of another person due to prejudice or incomplete knowledge, he will be doing a grave injustice to a fellow human being. In such a situation, one must rid oneself of biased thinking. Moreover, before forming an opinion, one should try to understand the matter completely. This makes the question of holding another person's good opinion an issue of striving. Perhaps because of this, holding a good opinion of others has been accorded the status of a form of worship.

Holding a good opinion of others is not always a simple matter. Sometimes, it entails rooting out a bad opinion about a person and replacing it with a good opinion. This is an internal struggle, which is why this act will merit a great reward.

When engaged in inter-religious dialogue, it is essential to follow this principle. One must hold a good opinion of one's dialogue partners who subscribe to a religion other than one's religion. One needs to cleanse oneself of prejudices and biases and try to see one's dialogue partners as they truly are, and not through the prism of preconceived notions and stereotypes.

ACTIONS THAT PROMOTE FRATERNAL FEELINGS

Complaints and hatred need to be replaced with love and well-wishing. This will help cement relationships and build a more harmonious society.

An important principle of Islam is promoting brotherly feelings with fellow human beings. The Prophet of Islam once observed: “O people, shake hands; this will obviate malice. Give others gifts. This will foster love among you and will help in putting an end to enmity.” (*Muwatta Imam Malik*, Hadith No. 694)

Human society is a collection of individuals who have their feelings and sensitivities. When such people live together in unity, it promotes good human relations. Greeting and shaking hands with one another create a good ambiance in society. Being pleasant when meeting people, regardless of their belief system or community, helps nurture a more harmonious society. Even such a small gesture as a smile and a few sincerely meant kind words can help overcome feelings of alienation and replace them with feelings of amity and closeness.

This is of immense importance in efforts to promote better relations between people who subscribe to different religions. Being genuinely courteous and friendly with people from different faith backgrounds can go a long way in improving inter-community or interfaith relations.

Cultivating fraternal feelings for each other at the level of

individuals can go a long way toward promoting positive relations between members of different communities. However, positive propensities need to be promoted at the level of individuals and communities. An atmosphere marred by complaints and hatred must be replaced by love and compassion, thus promoting healthy relationships.

PRINCIPLES OF DIALOGUE IN ISLAM

Islam prescribes dialogue or peaceful negotiation. This can only take place in an atmosphere of peace. One should inculcate goodwill and well-wishing for others.

One aim of inter-religious dialogue should be to seek peaceful solutions to controversial matters. Differences between people are a part of human nature. In ancient times, people often adopted a confrontational course when differences arose. They knew only one way to settle disputes, and that was war. However, democracy ended this way of settling matters and took the man out of the jungle culture and introduced him to the culture of peace.

Dialogue, or peaceful negotiation, is the path prescribed by Islam. Violence is forbidden in Islam in general. There is only one exception: in a situation that calls for self-defense in the wake of external invasion. However, even in this situation, a declaration of war in self-defense is solely the prerogative of an established government. According to Islamic teachings, non-state actors have no right to unleash violence.

The Prophet of Islam started his mission in 610 C.E. His mission was to communicate his message to people by talking to them, listening to their objections, and trying to convince them of his viewpoint through arguments. One of the initial Quranic verses revealed to him was that he should spread the ideology given by God to the Prophet among the people (74:2). The Prophet's ideology was based on monotheism, whereas his Arab contemporaries believed in polytheism. Therefore, it was natural that his mission should become subject to bilateral negotiation. However, the Prophet and his Companions continued to perform their task as true well-wishers of their addressees and maintained unilateral peace during the process.

The Prophet of Islam would communicate his message to people, listen to their responses, and give them further explanations. In this way, his mission became a practical demonstration of what we now term inter-religious dialogue. To make this dialogue fruitful, the Quran lays down certain meaningful guidelines. The Quran says, "Invite to the way of your Lord with wisdom and goodly exhortation, and argue with them in ways that are best and most gracious." (16:125)

This verse shows that one's conversation with others should be carried on in the best and most gracious way. This means that bickering with the other party has to be completely avoided.

The Quran also instructs: "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)

This verse suggests that no one is, by nature, an enemy of all time. On the contrary, everyone is one's friend, actually or potentially. This is so because everyone is born with the same basic human nature. From this, we learn that we should seek to mend broken relationships between individuals and communities and promote friendly relations, and doing good deeds or acts of service for others are very important.

Another verse of the Quran relevant to discussions about inter-religious relations says: "Revile not those whom they call upon wrongfully besides God, lest they revile God in their ignorance" (6:108).

We can gather from this verse that when dialogue takes place between two parties on a controversial subject, it is essential that an amicable atmosphere be maintained. On the other hand, if people on both sides are engaged in spreading antagonistic feelings, an unfavourable atmosphere will be created, and no fruitful dialogue can occur.

Another principle of dialogue is supported by the action of the Prophet of Islam in entering into the Hudaibiyyah Peace Treaty. This treaty was agreed upon after long negotiations between the Prophet of Islam and the Quraysh. It is a matter of historical record that the conclusion of this treaty was possible because the Prophet unilaterally accepted the conditions laid down by the Quraysh. The principle of dialogue derived from this action of the Prophet is that both parties in a dialogue should present their viewpoint, supported by arguments while remaining ready to give and take—an important prerequisite for a successful dialogue—rather than insisting on all their demands being

unconditionally met. In practical matters, Islam advocates flexibility to the ultimate possible extent.

Islam not only lays down principles of dialogue but also gives practical demonstrations of it. For example, in the presence of the Prophet of Islam, tripartite talks were held between representatives of three religions—Islam, Judaism, and Christianity—in the Prophet’s Mosque in Madinah. (*As-Sirah* by Ibn Hisham, Vol. 2, p. 553-54; *Dala’il al-Nubuwwah* by Al-Bayhaqi, Vol. 5, p. 384) This historical event, which took place in a place of worship, shows the importance of peaceful dialogue in Islam.

The above examples relate to the golden age of the Prophet and his Companions. That is why the practice of dialogue in terms of negotiations enjoys the position of an established principle in Islam.

It becomes clear from the above discussion that the method of Islam is that of peaceful dialogue. The Quran says, “God guides to the ways of peace all who seek His good pleasure” (5:16). There is another Quranic verse from which we can gauge that negotiation and arbitration should be adopted in controversial matters. (4:35) There is a tradition attributed to the Prophet to this effect: “Do not desire or seek confrontation with the enemy, but rather ask for peace from God.” (*Sahih al-Bukhari*, Hadith No. 7237)

Islam aims to usher in a transformation in human beings by introducing them to their Creator, making them understand the Creation Plan of God, and striving for a society in which spiritual, ethical, and human values are cherished. However, as this can only occur in an atmosphere of peace,

devotees of God must seek to inculcate tolerance and well-wishing for all people.

THE CULTURE OF DIALOGUE

Islam prescribes the practice of shura, or mutual consultation and discussion for family, social, and national life. This can lead to mutual learning and intellectual development. Moreover, such mutual consultation can be useful for promoting more harmonious relations between adherents of different religions.

Dialogue is a significant aspect of the culture that the Quran seeks to promote. This is mentioned thus in the Quran: “They conduct their affairs by mutual consultation” (42:38). This verse indicates that Muslims should base their dealings on dialogue and mutual discussion.

The debate is quite different from the dialogue. Debate is conducted between two parties, each of which tries to prove its claim of superiority over the other. In contrast, the essence of dialogue is mutual learning without seeking to put the other party down. There are also two or more parties in authentic dialogue, just as in a debate, but no party tries to establish its supposed superiority over the other. Instead, each tries to learn from the other. Each seeks to increase their knowledge and insights through the mutual sharing of experiences. Dialogue is a healthy practice, whereas debate is a kind of unwanted intellectual wrangling.

The practice of consultation (shura) was common among the Companions of the Prophet of Islam. For example,

Umar bin al-Khattab, the second Caliph, reported that he used to learn from everyone. This means engaging in serious dialogue with people he met was a general habit. He would thereby learn something new to enhance his wisdom and knowledge.

There is great benefit in the mutual discussion, as everyone can gain new knowledge or experience. Moreover, when one conducts a serious dialogue with another, both people benefit from the process. Both enrich their minds and progress on the path of intellectual development.

The Quranic word *shura* is generally considered a political term, but it need not be confined to only the political realm. 'Political shura' may be a way of proceeding in some Muslim societies, but this is only an occasional occurrence. On the other hand, in the non-political spheres, shura or consultation should be part of Muslim daily life. It is good to develop the habit of mutual consultation in family, social, and national life. It leads to intellectual development for everyone. In the course of this process, one learns from others. Mutual learning takes place. One presents what one has discovered or thinks and listens to and benefits from what the other person has to offer from their discoveries in life.

Such consultation and mutual exchange are useful for promoting more harmonious relations between adherents of different religions.

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF TOLERANCE IN FAITH COMMUNITIES

While believing in one religion, a person can at the same time respect other religions, too.

Some argue that if a person firmly believes in a particular belief system, he is bound to be intolerant of other belief systems and those who subscribe to them. However, this is not true.

It is incorrect to claim that when someone believes his religion to be true, he will not be able to respect other religions and their adherents—such apprehension results from underestimating the capacity of human beings. While respecting his mother, a man can also show due regard for other people’s mothers. Respecting one woman as his mother does not render him incapable of respecting other mothers. Similarly, while believing in one particular religion, a person can also respect others. It is possible to “follow one and respect all.”

It is human nature to want to share anything good that one has discovered with others. It is only very selfish and narrow-minded people who like to reserve the good things of this life exclusively for themselves. When he discovers what he regards as true and good, a person’s innate humanity inspires him to share it with others. The discovery of truth and goodness and the sharing of this discovery are, in fact, inseparable. However, such action has nothing to do with conversion. It is only the communication of what one holds to be true and good. Such action should result from a

feeling of well-wishing for others welling up in one's heart rather than manifesting any notion of supposed superiority. 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 as well as enable them to develop a better appreciation for the beliefs and ways of life of others.

SUCCESSFUL DIALOGUE ADDRESSES OTHER PEOPLE'S MINDS

Successful dialogue is that which addresses the minds of others, even at the cost of making a change in your argument. We should present our views such that they address the minds of others.

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 as follows:

“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.” (2:258)

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.

CHAPTER FIVE

MUTUAL RESPECT AND
PEACEFUL COEXISTENCE

RESPECT AND COEXISTENCE

Islam is a religion of peace and humanism. Mutual respect and peaceful coexistence is a sine qua non for Islam. 'Peace with all' truly expresses the spirit of Islam.

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 C.E. and received the first revelation in 610 C.E. 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 C.E., where he continued his mission till his death in 632 C.E. 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 humankind. This is a fundamental teaching of Islam. Mutual respect and peaceful coexistence are essential teachings of Islam.

PEACE: THE BEDROCK OF POSITIVE INTERFAITH RELATIONS

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

Islam, understood authentically, is a religion of peace. The Arabic root of the word 'Islam' is *silm*, which means peace. In the Islamic tradition, one of God's names is *As-Salaam*, which means 'The Source of Peace.' Prophet Muhammad is said to have been sent to the world as a mercy to humankind (Quran, 21:107). The very first verse of the Quran reads: "In the name of God, the Most Merciful, the Most Compassionate." The fact that this phrase is repeated in the Quran no less than 113 times shows Islam's importance to such values as mercy and compassion. According to the Quran, the ideal society is *Dar as-Salam*, 'The Home of Peace' (10:25). Islam, understood correctly, attaches great importance to 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 so ordered things 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.

ORIGINAL RELIGION VS SELF-STYLED RELIGION

To clear misconceptions and discover the true face of Islam, we need to differentiate between Islam, on the one hand, and Muslims, on the other. We should gauge Muslims based on Islamic teachings and not vice versa.

People often ask me why the understanding of Islam I present to them is different from the picture of Islam they receive from elsewhere. I explain that in the earlier phase of Muslim history, people derived their religion directly from the Quran and the Sunnah (the practice of the Prophet of Islam), so their association with the original Islam remained intact. However, today, self-styled interpretations of the Quran and the Sunnah have gradually placed a veil over the original content of these sources. Thus, the original Islam has been completely obscured from our view, leading to many misconceptions. This is why we witness two different versions of Islam: one that is found in the sources of Islam — the Quran and the Sunnah—and the other that is reflected in the lives of present-day Muslim communities.

One must conceive of Islam purely in the light of the sources of Islam, the Quran and the Sunnah. Moreover, one must refrain from equating the Muslim community with the religion of Islam as contained in its sources. When one does this, one realizes that many misconceptions people have about Islam have nothing to do with Islam. Instead, they are due to the actions of people who call themselves ‘Muslims’.

Islam is a religious ideology, whereas the position of Muslims is determined by the sentiments and conduct of a community. This being so, the student of Islam must not gauge Islam by the personal deviations of the human beings making up the community known as ‘Muslims’. Instead, to see the true face of Islam, one must gauge Muslims in the light of Islamic teachings.

To discover the original message of Islam, one must differentiate between Islam, on the one hand, and Muslims, on the other, and judge Muslims based on Islamic teachings, not vice versa.

Through my writings, interactions, programmes and lectures, I seek to present the true face of Islam based on the Quran and the Sunnah. From this, people can form a more authentic understanding of Islam on issues about which there is much confusion and debate, such as jihad, Muslim militancy, suicide bombings, blasphemy, religious freedom in Islam and the position of women. In this way, they can clarify many misunderstandings.

A PEACEFUL STRUGGLE

‘Jihad bin nafs’ refers to making the maximum effort to keep control over one’s negative feelings. ‘Jihad with the Quran’ refers to engaging in sharing the message of the Quran with others.

The word jihad literally means ‘struggle.’ A sincere effort for the cause of goodness can be called jihad. Man’s lower

self leads him to evil. So, waging a struggle with one's lower self is a form of jihad. Sometimes, friends or acquaintances might pressure you into engaging in activities that are not right from a moral standpoint. At that time, refusing to yield to such pressure and sticking firmly to a good attitude was a form of jihad. Exhorting people to goodness and making them refrain from indecency are tasks entailing a great struggle, and this is also jihad. Calling people to God whilst bearing many hardships is also jihad. If having been treated with bitterness by neighbours or acquaintances or after suffering any other kind of provocation, one refrains from reaction and retaliation and maintains pleasant relations unilaterally; this also can be a form of jihad.

Among the different types of jihad, one, which is internal, is waging jihad with one's lower self (*jihad bin nafs*). Another external form is the effort to share God's word through the Quran. (25:52)

'Jihad bin nafs' refers to making the maximum effort to keep control over negative feelings in one's self, such as arrogance, jealousy, greed, revenge, anger, etc. In social life, it happens time and again that all sorts of base or negative feelings well up within a person, sometimes leading him to succumb to desires and temptations. The internal psychological effort made in such a situation to overcome temptations and remain unswervingly on the path of righteousness is the truly Islamic jihad bin nafs. This struggle is a permanent feature of the life of a devout believer.

Jihad through the Quran (25:52) refers to peacefully sharing the Quran's constructive message with others. Therefore,

all who embark upon such a course must study the Quran and the Sunnah dispassionately and objectively. Only after passing through this intellectual jihad will one be able to articulate a true representation of the faith.

Two necessary conditions have been laid down for communicating the message of Islam to people—well-wishing and trustworthiness. Well-wishing reflects an earnest desire on the part of the communicator for the well-being not just of his immediate audience but for the whole of humanity. One should be so rooted in this well-wishing that it remains undiluted even if one encounters injustice and oppression. Overlooking people’s negative behaviour towards them, one who seeks to share God’s message with others should continue to remain their well-wisher.

The element of trustworthiness is important in that it ensures that the message God has sent to the world will be presented to people without deletion, addition or distortion. For instance, if God’s message is Hereafter-oriented, it should not be projected as world-oriented; if it is spirituality-based, it should not be presented as politics-based; if it confines struggle only to peaceful efforts, it should not be misinterpreted as violence-driven.

In the context of the above discussion, it is important to recall the verse in the Quran that says: “God calls man to the home of peace” (10:25). Thus, our target should be peace. Thus, our efforts should be directed toward peace. Therefore, we need to proceed towards peace. So, that is the true criterion by which to judge whether our activities are authentically ‘Islamic’ or not. If our activities lead in the

direction of peace, then they are 'Islamic'; otherwise, they are un-Islamic.

TERRORISM IS FORBIDDEN

Terrorism can be defined as using arms by actors other than the state. Terrorism assumes, broadly, two forms: proxy war and guerrilla war. Both of these forms of terrorism are haraam or forbidden in Islam.

If properly understood, Islam is the opposite of terrorism and has nothing to do with it. The word 'Islam' is derived from the root *silm*, which means 'peace.' Hence, Islam, correctly interpreted, is a religion of peace. Naturally, a religion that describes itself as a religion of peace can have no relation with terrorism if that religion is interpreted in the right manner. In the Quran, the Prophet Muhammad is referred to as *rahmat al-'aalamin* or 'a mercy to the world.' (21:107) He is said to be a mercy for all humankind, not just Muslims. Naturally, then, his teachings, properly understood, can have no room for terrorism at all.

According to a Hadith report, the Prophet Muhammad is said to have declared, "All creatures are part of God's family." (*Musnad al-Bazzar*, Hadith No. 6947) This is a wonderful expression of true universalism. It indicates that all of humankind, irrespective of religion or community, belongs to the same family of God. This Hadith report resonates with the slogan about the world being a global village with which we are familiar today.

Given the clear teaching of Islam that all creatures are members of God's family, it is ironic and unfortunate that some Muslims are engaged in killing innocent people, and that, too, in the name of Islam. This is wholly un-Islamic. Violence is not the right approach when conflicts arise between Muslims and other communities. The Quran instructs us that "reconciliation is best" (4:128). The proper way to solve conflict is not through violence but through peaceful discussion and dialogue. One must seek to adopt constructive, not destructive, approaches to conflict resolution.

Terrorism can be defined as using arms by actors other than the state. Terrorism is, thus, illegitimate violence resorted to while seeking to have one's demands met. Those Muslims who seek to present their terrorism supposedly as jihad are making a mockery of Islam. Jihad in the sense of qital or war can only be declared by a regular government or state authority, not by ordinary citizens or non-state actors.

Today, terrorism broadly takes two forms: proxy war and guerrilla war. I can confidently say that both are haraam or forbidden in Islam. According to Islam, a proxy war is illegitimate because Islam requires that a declaration of war be explicitly made before war can actually be waged, and proxy war is, by definition, one that is unannounced and engaged in indirectly. Likewise, guerrilla war is also forbidden in Islam because such a war involves civilians taking up arms against an established government, and this cannot be considered legitimate jihad because, according to Islam, the right to declare jihad in the sense

of qital, as I mentioned earlier, rests only with established state authority.

Today, there is violence in various parts of the world, which some self-styled Islamist groups claim to be Islamic jihad. The fact is that this violence is clearly a combination of proxy war and guerrilla war, and so it is haraam or forbidden, according to Islam. Some Muslims complain that the media is unfair by describing this terrorism as 'Islamic terrorism', thereby giving Islam a bad name. However, the question is, when people who call themselves 'Muslim' engage in this sort of terrorism in the name of Islam, can we blame others for referring to this violence by this name? It is for Muslims to desist from this un-Islamic violence and stop giving Islam a bad name by wrongly claiming this terrorism to be jihad.

According to another Hadith report, God gives in return for gentleness what He does not in the case of hard-heartedness (*Musnad Ahmad*, Hadith No. 16455). This report relates to the consequences of one's behaviour or approach. If one has a dispute or conflict with someone, fighting him or her will not solve the matter. The only way to solve it is through peaceful dialogue and exchanging views.

IMPORTANCE OF FREEDOM OF CHOICE

Religious freedom is a basic human right. The Quran says: "There shall be no compulsion in religion." (2:256) Islamic jurists hold that any attempt to coerce a person to accept Islam is a grievous sin.

Religious freedom is a basic human right whose violation has caused conflicts, wars, and bloodshed in both ancient and modern societies. Centuries ago, the Quran declared, possibly for the first time in human history: "There shall be no compulsion in religion." (2: 256) The Quran also states: "You have your religion, and I have mine." (109:6)

The principle reflected in the above two Quranic verses can be referred to in today's context as 'the principle of religious freedom'. Given the prohibition of compulsion in matters of religion, Islamic jurists hold that forcible conversion to Islam is, under all circumstances, null and void. Any attempt to coerce a person to accept Islam is a grievous sin. According to this principle of 'non-coercion,' it is not permissible to exploit or manipulate personal weaknesses or calamities (e.g., poverty, sickness, famine, etc.) for religious conversion.

Once, a Jewish widow came to the Caliph Umar asking for some financial aid. Umar promised to take care of her needs and presented Islam to her. However, the woman refused this offer. Umar then gave her more than she had asked for. When she departed, Umar raised his hands towards heaven and said: "O God, bear witness that 'There shall be no compulsion in religion.'" (*Al-Muhalla*, Ibn Hazm, Vol. 12, p. 120)

The principle of non-coercion mentioned in the Quran (2:256) has not been confined to religious freedom alone. Rather, it has been extensively elaborated upon and widely applied to other social, cultural, and political spheres of society. This is conducive to developing a culture where individuals enjoy the freedom of expression, dissent, and criticism without fear or restriction.

Two examples may explain how this fundamental human right was observed in some early Muslim societies.

Once, Umar, the second Muslim Caliph, came to a well of the Banu al-Harith, where he met an outspoken person named Muhammad ibn Maslamah. "How do you find me?", he asked Muhammad ibn Maslamah.

"By God, I find you just as I would like you to be and as it would please any well-wisher to see you. I see you are good at accumulating money, but you keep your hands clean, distributing it equitably to others." "But" Muhammad ibn Maslamah went on "if you adopt a crooked course, we will straighten you, just as we straighten swords by placing them in a sheath."

At these aggressively critical words, Umar exclaimed, "Praise be to God, who has put me among a people who will straighten me when I become crooked." (*Kitab al-Zuhd wa al-Raqa'iq* by Ibn al-Mubarak, 512)

The second incident again involves the Caliph Umar. This was at a time when in Madinah, Muslims, with their increasing affluence, began to settle huge dowers on their daughters. At this time, Umar, in his capacity as Caliph, ordered that no one should demand or pay a dower that exceeded

four hundred dirhams and that anything in excess of this amount would be confiscated and deposited in the public treasury. After the proclamation of this ordinance, when Umar came down from the pulpit, an old woman stood up and confidently said: “The Quran has set no restrictions on this matter. Therefore, Umar has no right to set an upper limit to the dowers.” To back up her contention, she loudly recited a verse of the Quran: “If you desire to replace one wife with another, do not take any part of her dower back: even if you have given her a treasure.” (4:20)

At this, Umar responded: “May God forgive me, everyone knows better than Umar (*Sunan Sa'id bin Mansur*, 598), everyone knows better than you, even ladies.” (Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyya - *I'laam ul Muwaqqi'een*, Vol. 2, p. 193)

These incidents from early Islamic history show the importance Islam attaches to freedom of expression and healthy criticism.

POSITIVE STATUS QUOISM

A great benefit of positive status quoism is that by adopting this policy, one can instantly avail of opportunities for carrying out one's projects. One can then utilize one's energies fully in one's mission without wasting even an iota of effort.

A very important principle from Islamic teachings is positive status quoism, accepting the prevailing situation. Using this principle, one can maintain unilateral ethics at all times.

Here are a few examples of the Prophet of Islam in this regard:

When Prophet Muhammad began his mission of tawheed (unity of God) in the town of Makkah, there existed, as usual, a status quo. The Quraysh had assumed the town's leadership, and according to their beliefs, they had established an idolatrous system. Now, the question arose about how Prophet Muhammad should begin his work. It might have appeared that the status quo under the hegemony of the Quraysh would have to be abolished, and only then would the path be cleared for the Prophet's mission. At this juncture, certain basic guidance was revealed to the Prophet. God declared in the Quran: "Surely with every hardship there is ease; surely, with every hardship, there is ease." (94:5-6)

These verses highlighted that despite obstacles, by the very Law of Nature, opportunities for the furtherance of the Prophet's aims also existed side by side. Therefore, any attempt to change the status quo was not to be made in the first stage itself. Instead, without disturbing the prevailing situation, such opportunities as in other fields were to be utilized to promote the Divine cause.

The method that Islam prescribes for the achievement of goals, and the model that we find exemplified in the life of the Prophet, can be described in brief as a method based on positive status quoism—that is, remaining in harmony with the status quo and engaging in one's efforts in the sphere of the possible. In this respect, it may be called 'positive status quoism'.

However, the status quoism of the Prophet did not simply mean accepting the extant set of circumstances for all time. It meant, rather, carving out a path for oneself by adopting a non-confrontational policy within the existing set-up. Far from leading to a state of inertia, this was a planned course of action.

The Prophet of Islam followed this principle in his life at Makkah and Madinah. This is one of the reasons for his achieving such great success—within a short period of twenty-three years—as had perhaps never been achieved by anyone prior to this in human history.

The great benefit of such status quoism is that, by adopting this policy, one can instantly avail of opportunities for carrying out one's projects. One can then utilize one's energies fully in one's mission without wasting even one iota of effort. Moreover, by avoiding unnecessary clashes and confrontations, one can devote oneself to constructive activities to the fullest extent.

UNIVERSALITY OF RELIGION

Universality is an inseparable part of true religiousness. A person starts thinking at the universal level about having discovered God and about having peace and well-wishing for all humankind.

A study of the Quran shows that it aims to produce a universal approach in people. Universality means high thinking and an unbiased approach. The Quran addresses us thus: "O

man” and “O humankind”. This shows that the approach of the Quran is based on universality. This shows that the approach of the Quran is based on universality. The Quran (1:2) introduces God as “The Lord of the worlds” and not as “The Lord of the Muslims”. The Quran cites the Prophet of Islam as a messenger sent for all humankind, not just for the Arabs: “We have sent you forth as a mercy to all mankind” (21:107). In another place, the Quran says: “Blessed be He Who has revealed *Al-Furqan* (The Criterion) to His servant, so that He may be a warner to all humankind.” (25:1)

This universal approach can be seen in many other Islamic teachings. The universality of the Quranic message should bring about a universal approach in those who believe in it. For instance, at the end of salaah or the prescribed form of worship in Islam, the faithful turn their heads towards the right and the left and utter this greeting: *Assalam-o-Alaikum wa Rahmatullah*, which means, “Peace be upon you, as well as the mercy of God.” This is meant for all humankind, inhabiting the lands towards the east and the west, the north and the south. It is, in fact, a universal greeting.

Islam understood correctly, teaches love and peace and seeks to develop human-friendly behaviour in its followers. The same God has created all human beings, so they all belong to one great family. As far as their earthly origin is concerned, they are all descendants of the first pair of human beings created by God—Adam and Eve.

When all human beings are created by the One God and are descendants of the same primal progenitors, it means that all are, at root, equal: no one is, in essence, superior

or inferior. The distinction between great and small is not between one human being and another but between God and human beings (and other creatures of God). Moreover, before God, all human beings are essentially equal; all are equally His creatures and His servants, for God does not discriminate among His creations.

At every moment, God reaches out to His servants; man may find God at any moment of his seeking. No barrier exists between a man and God, and intercession is unnecessary. When a person enters the eternal world of God, he finds his Maker right there before him, where he stands. In the Quran, God Almighty says: “When My servants ask you about Me, say that I am near. I respond to the call of one who calls, whenever he calls to Me: let them, then, respond to Me, and believe in Me, so that they may be rightly guided.” (2:186)

Universality is an inseparable part of the Quranic worldview. One who adopts the Quranic way in its true spirit will start thinking at the universal level. His personality will be linked with the entire human community. Despite being located in a particular region; he becomes global in his thinking.

RELIGION OF NATURE

The goal of Divinely-revealed religions has always been to give man a proper knowledge of His Creator so that he may properly understand the universe and the purpose of human life.

In the search for truth, the most reliable source is authentic religion. The reason people take authentic religion to be a reliable source of truth is that the teachings of authentic religion are based on Divine revelation.

God created the universe. He knows best its creation plan. He has full knowledge of which path leads to success and which path leads to failure. Therefore, God-given guidance is entirely trustworthy.

After the creation of the universe, when man first appeared on the earth, God decreed that in every age and nation, certain individuals would be raised as prophets to guide humankind to the path of God. God, who has absolute knowledge, sent His guidance to man. He did this by means of revelations that were given to the Messengers that He appointed. Many of these revelations are contained in the sacred books on which the world religions are based. These sources have guided human beings over many centuries. In every era, a large number of people have found in them, light for their minds and solace for their hearts. The goal of Divinely-revealed religion has always been to give man a proper knowledge of His Creator so that he may properly understand the universe and the purpose of human life. Divinely-revealed religion informs man of his beginning

and his ultimate end. It enables man to lead his life in this world according to the Creation Plan of God so that he may be entitled to reward in this world and the Hereafter.

A religious system generally includes beliefs, worship, ethics, social behaviour, etc. One of the important contributions of an authentic religious system is that it provides man with a lifelong centre around which his intellectual and emotional being may revolve. It offers man an ideology for living, a worldview in which he may believe with all his heart and soul, and an understanding of the purpose of life. It gives man the conviction that he is in communion with a power higher than him. Divine religion is the religion of nature. On finding it, man feels he has become a co-traveller with the rest of the universe, a member of the universal brotherhood.

ESSENTIAL TEACHINGS OF ISLAM: ONENESS OF GOD AND PEACE

Quranic teachings can be summarized under two broad headings: tawheed, or the Oneness of God, and salaam, or peace. The Quran (36:40) presents the universe as a model of harmony and peace.

The teachings of the Quran (and Islam) can be summarized under two broad headings: firstly, tawheed, that is, the Oneness of God, and secondly, salaam, that is, peace.

Tawheed gives us the Divine ideology of life, which covers man's entire existence. However, Islamic teachings are not

system-based: they focus on the individual. So they cover his thinking, his speech, his behaviour, his everyday dealings, and his spirituality.

Tawheed means that God is One. It is God who has created everything and every being, including man. It is God who has settled man on Planet Earth. It is God who has created the spectacular life support system on Earth. It is God who has created life and death.

Moreover, it is God who will reward or punish man after the man leaves this present world. God is All-Powerful. There is no deity but the one God, and He reveals His guidance through prophets.

Salaam, or peace, is the bedrock of Islam. Without peace, it is impossible to follow Quranic teachings properly. Only a peaceful mind or soul can truly understand the Divine message and act in line with it. Therefore, the importance of peace is not merely theoretical but practical.

In our world, there are millions and millions of people, each with their agenda. A peaceful atmosphere is, therefore, a prerequisite for all people if they are to carry out their respective plans. Without social peace, there can be no constructive activities. In this sense, peace is central to all authentic religious teachings, including the Quran.

The main objective of the Quran is to make people aware of the Creation Plan of God. According to this Divine plan, man has been created as an eternal being. The Creator has divided man's life into pre-death and post-death phases. The pre-death period of man's life is that period when he is on

Earth and is being put to the test. The post-death period is when man will be rewarded or punished, depending on how he conducted himself in the pre-death phase. The former period is temporary, while the latter period will last for all eternity.

The test of man in the pre-death phase of life is essentially freedom-based. A person who has misused his freedom will be deprived of God's blessings, while someone who has used his freedom properly will be rewarded with eternal Paradise. The Quran gives all the details necessary to understand this Divine scheme.

The Quran presents the universe as a model characterized by harmony and peace (36:40). 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 part. For billions of years, the entire physical universe has fulfilled its function in total harmony with the Creator's Divine plan. In contrast to the rest of the universe, God has given man freedom. What He wants from a man is that despite having freedom, man should live a disciplined and God-oriented life, just as is being done by the rest of the creation. This is the essence of the Divine plan.

CHAPTER SIX

ETHICS OF DIALOGUE

NEED TO LIVE IN HARMONY

Tolerance is one of the greatest factors in stabilizing human relationships. Viewing differences in a spirit of tolerance will often make differences simply disappear.

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. Islam prescribes people to show love, tolerance and kindness to others in society, as per the following prophetic traditions:

“No one truly believes until he loves for his brother what he loves for himself.” (*Musnad Ahmad*, Hadith No. 13146)

The Prophet said, “Show kindness, tolerance and you will receive the same in return.” (*Musnad Ahmad*, Hadith No. 2233)

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 most 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 just 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 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 which 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.

PEACE AND TOLERANCE

Two of the most important ethical values of all religions are peace and tolerance. These are issues of self-management so one can enjoy peace of mind.

Individual peace has to be maintained unilaterally by individuals. If we as individuals want peace, we need to be able to exercise tolerance, appreciate the rights, concerns, and interests of others, and live as giver members of society in every way, contributing to the greater good. This is an issue of self-management, and only one who can do this can enjoy peace of mind.

Tolerance is the price of peace. In a society where tolerance is absent, peace will be non-existent. We live in a world of differences that cannot be eliminated. Therefore, tolerance is the only viable option if we want to maintain peace and harmony. This applies equally to family life and social life. It applies at the level of the individual and communities. It applies at the national as well as international levels.

WINNING HEARTS

Good behaviour in return for bad behaviour wins hearts.
Revenge only increases a problem, while the way of
winning hearts solves it.

When the Prophet of Islam began to communicate the message of monotheism, he met with stiff opposition in Arabia. As a result, violence was used against him and his Companions. However, the Prophet did not take any retaliatory measures. On the contrary, he behaved well with his opponents so that he might win their hearts.

The Prophet's hometown was Makkah. The people of Makkah subjected him to so much oppression and violence that he was forced to leave the town. Then, a time came when he entered Makkah as a victor. After that, Makkah came under his control. Many of his inveterate Makkan antagonists were brought before him at that time. They had stiffly opposed him, but he did not decree any punishment for them. Rather, he freed them unconditionally. The result of this positive behaviour was that they accepted Islam.

Similarly, the Hawazin tribe rebelled against the Prophet and attacked his people. The Prophet was then forced to fight with them. In Islamic history, this is known as the Battle of Hunain. The Prophet was victorious in this battle. Many people of the Hawazin tribe were arrested and brought before him. With them as well, the Prophet did not take any revenge. On the contrary, he released all of them with honour. This sublime demonstration of ethical

behaviour was so powerful that the whole tribe accepted the Prophet's message.

Taking revenge is not the way of Islam. Instead, good behaviour is presented in return for bad behaviour that can win a person's heart. Moreover, there is no other way more powerful than winning hearts.

The way of revenge turns the entire society into a jungle of harmful activities. In contrast, the way of winning hearts produces an atmosphere of virtue in society. This is because revenge only increases a problem, while the way of winning hearts solves it.

RECONCILIATION IS BEST

Reconciliation in controversial matters is great wisdom. It prevents one's time and energy from being spent futilely and channelizes them towards constructive ends. Reconciliation inevitably leads to success, while confrontation only leads to failure and ruin.

In giving instructions regarding the relationship between a man and a woman, the Quran says: "If a woman fears ill-treatment or indifference on the part of her husband, it shall be no offense for her to seek reconciliation, for reconciliation is best. However, people are prone to selfish greed. If you do good and fear Him, surely God is aware of what you do." (4:128)

Reconciliation, a common natural process, is the best policy. It relates to problems at all levels, from the home to the international domain. Whenever an individual or group

AGREEING TO DISAGREE

experiences unpleasantness involving another individual or group, the wise approach to adopt is that of reconciliation, not confrontation.

The policy of reconciliation in controversial matters is not one of retreat or cowardice. On the contrary, its purpose is to prevent one's resources from being spent futilely and channel them towards some worthwhile endeavour.

The opposite of reconciliation is conflict or violence. Both parties reach a dead end in a situation of conflict or violence. Their journey stops at the point of the confrontation itself. This fact highlights the importance of adopting a policy of reconciliation so that one may continue one's journey toward one's destination without interruption

The way of reconciliation might appear to some at first sight to be a way of loss. However, if we keep our eyes on the future rather than on the present, we shall find that it inevitably leads to success. On the other hand, a policy of confrontation cannot do anything other than lead to failure and ruin.

AGREEING TO DISAGREE

Religious harmony is based on unity despite differences rather than unity without differences. It is not based on agreeing to agree but, rather, on agreeing to disagree on some things and agreeing to agree on others.

Thousands of religious groups exist in the world. Given the differences separating 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." (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 matters.

LEARN THE ART OF DIFFERENCE MANAGEMENT

People living in plural societies should take differences as an intellectual challenge. If they do so, these differences can be a blessing for them. If we welcome differences with a positive attitude, we can turn them into stepping stones toward success.

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

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

created 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 comprising 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 religion, with a positive mind, and you will certainly be able to turn them into a means for growing as a person.

KEEP AN OPEN MIND

The God-oriented person keeps all the windows of his mind open. While growing in his understanding, his personality keeps developing.

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.

MUTUAL RESPECT

Mutual respect is necessary to strengthen societal structures through stable and enduring human relationships.

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.

For much of his life, the Prophet of Islam lived in a society where adherents of other religions existed alongside believers in Islam. However, when most of the denizens of Makkah subscribed to different beliefs, his conduct

consistently conveyed his high moral character. He communicated to the people the message of *Tawheed* (the Oneness of God) with love and kindness and fulfilled their rights. That is why the people of Makkah, irrespective of their religious beliefs, had great confidence in him. They continued to do this up to the last days of his stay in Makkah.

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.

UNILATERAL ETHICAL BEHAVIOUR

One should maintain unilateral ethics, seeking to join hands with those who sever relations with them, even those who behave unjustly towards them.

The Prophet of Islam is reported to have said: “Should I not tell you what the best moral course is in this world

as well as in the Hereafter?” Then the Prophet said, “If someone separates from you, join with him; if someone deprives you of something, give it to him; if someone is unjust to you, forgive him.” (*Musannaf* of Abd al-Razzaq, Hadith No. 21307)

In this world, a person sometimes faces such bitter experiences that he succumbs to anger and seeks revenge. However, this is not high thinking. The superior human being responds rationally rather than reacting emotionally. His attitude is governed by well-considered principles rather than a knee-jerk reaction. The mind of such a person does not get disturbed by another person’s attitude. His mental maturity enables him to rise above reaction and find a level of existence superior to it. As a result, he behaves well towards everyone, even if he receives bad behaviour from others.

This high thinking enables such a person to continue to join hands with those who wish to sever relations with him. He is happy to give, even to those who do not want to give anything to him in return. Even those who are not good or unjust to him are forgiven by him unilaterally.

Maintaining such unilateral ethics is imperative for promoting positive interpersonal relations. The relevance of this for harmonious inter-religious relations, too, is obvious.

CHAPTER SEVEN

MY PERSONAL EXPERIENCES
OF INTERFAITH DIALOGUE

INTERFAITH EFFORTS FOR THE COMMON GOOD

Interfaith dialogue can be used to create a platform to unite peace-loving people from different religious backgrounds worldwide to work for the common good.

I have participated in many dialogues. Interfaith and intercommunity dialogue can achieve peace in pluralistic societies and promote harmony, mutual learning, and peace-building. From my experience, I can say that differences can best be meaningfully and constructively managed through peaceful and positive 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 my view, inter-religious dialogue does not simply mean telling others about your religion. It also means discovering and appreciating wise and good things in other religions and learning from the insights and experiences of their adherents. Therefore, I say that inter-religious dialogue should be for mutual learning. Ethical principles from various religions can be used to inculcate good moral conduct in people. Such ethical training of the adherents of religion is sure to yield positive results. When dialogue is undertaken in this manner, it can help individuals grow as better human beings.

In this way, we can create a platform for uniting peace-loving people across the globe from different religious backgrounds to work for the common good. I share

here some of my personal experiences and interactions with people.

THE WAY OF TOLERANCE

Religious discord is another name for communal discord. We cannot eliminate it. We can, however, protect ourselves from its harm through tolerance.

A large institution under the Christian Church called De Nobili College in Pune houses an 'Institute for the Study of Religion.' In collaboration with an American institution, they organized a conference on religions from November 2-6, 1991, in Pune, India. The conference's theme was 'Religion and Society'. An invitation to the conference prompted me to journey to Pune.

The conference sessions took place at the Blue Diamond Hotel, spanning three days. The program began with the worship of different faiths each day: on the first day, it started with Hindu worship; on the second day, it started with Islamic worship; and on the third day, it began with Christian worship. Representatives from each religion performed their respective forms of worship.

The Pune Religious Conference provided opportunities to present Islamic perspectives in various sessions. For instance, on November 3, the participants were divided into three groups. About a dozen individuals in my group were affiliated with Islam, Hinduism, and Christianity. Each shared their influences regarding religion. In one meeting,

the issue of religious authorities was discussed. I asserted that in Islam, the main emphasis lies on ‘spirituality’.

During the meeting on the evening of November 3, some people said that Islam is a religion of jihad (in the sense of warfare). Clarifying this point, I said that Islam is a religion of peace. In Islam, war is only defensive and as a last resort when all peaceful measures have failed. The term used for war in Islam is *qital*, not jihad. Jihad means struggle. Any sincere effort for the cause of religion will be called jihad. Furthermore, war (*qital*) can only be declared by an established government in defense. No individual, group, or organization can declare war. Someone asked why Prophet Muhammad fought so many battles. I explained that it was related to the context of the time and age, not the teachings of Islam itself. The traditional age was a time marked by religious persecution. Therefore, during that time, every new religion had to go through a phase of violence. Today, we are in an era of freedom. Hence, there is no opportunity for such circumstances to arise in general situations.

In the morning meeting of November 4, various people expressed the teachings of their respective religions. When it was my turn, I said I had studied Islam extensively. I found that Islam is based on two fundamental principles: belief in God and being beneficial to humanity. For the first principle, I elaborated on chapter 112 of the Quran: “Say, ‘He is God, the One, God, the Self-sufficient One. He does not give birth, nor was He born, and there is nothing like Him.’” To explain the second principle, I shared a Quranic verse, “Whatever is of use to man remains behind.” (13:17)

I further said I had received education primarily in an Islamic madrasa (Islamic seminary). After completing my education at the madrasa, when I interacted with people around me, I realized that what we are taught at the madrasa is not in keeping with modernity. I explained that Islam has been taught in a traditional idiom for more than a thousand years. After a deeper self-study, I realized that there are many aspects of Islam that, if explained, can be applied to describe Islam in a contemporary style. Having spent a lifetime studying Islam and modernity, I can say that Islam is entirely compatible with the modern age. My writings present Islam in a contemporary idiom.

I also explained that after graduating from the madrasa, I extensively studied Islam and other religions in a structured manner. Then, the truth of Islam was revealed to me again, and I discovered Islam again. In this way, Islam is a personal discovery for me rather than merely an inherited traditional belief.

I further said that besides Islam's innate teachings, what particularly influenced me was its historical aspect, for Islam has obtained unique and exclusive historical credibility.

In a meeting, the issue of religious values was discussed. I stated that the real significance lies in the 'spirit' of Islam. If you read the Quran, you will find that it emphasizes matters related to the soul or spirit. There are relatively fewer explicit legal injunctions in the Quran. The Quran contains more verses about issues concerning the spirit.

In another session, I mentioned that all principles of Islam are based on common sense. Common sense is a creation

of God. Similarly, the Quran is also the divine word sent by God. Hence, there is perfect harmony between the two. If people keep their common sense in their natural state, they will find Islam perfectly aligned with their common sense.

After the Pune Interfaith Conference, I arrived in Solapur on November 11, 1991. I stayed at the Dak Bungalow there. A press conference was held there, which was attended by more than a dozen editors and journalists from various newspapers. One of them was an editor of an Urdu newspaper. The remaining were associated with Marathi newspapers. A representative from a Marathi newspaper stated that the most crucial task at hand is to eradicate religious hatred. I argued that what is often termed as religious discord in contemporary times is indeed another name for communal discord. We cannot eliminate it; however, we can protect ourselves from its harm with prudent measures. Such prudence is tolerance. There is nothing beyond it.

A unique program in Solapur was organized under the auspices of the Rotary Club, where people from different religions participated, and everyone listened to my speech with keen interest.

The following individuals contributed significantly to the success of the Solapur program: Shri Bala Sahib Jadhav, Shri Mohan Pasnor, Shri K. C. Mude, Shri Shanti Lal Batda, Shri Ramesh Grewal, and others.

I received a letter dated November 29, 1991, from Dr. Ramesh Eshwardas Agarwal, the Secretary of the Rotary Club, Solapur, who had listened to my address. The letter included the following words:

THE NEED TO BECOME A GIVER GROUP

“We were very pleased to hear you speak on a rare subject: Islam and science. Your lecture has truly clarified doubts in the audience’s minds regarding Islamic contributions to the development of science.”

I have often received such positive responses when I explain Islam to people during such dialogues.

THE NEED TO BECOME A GIVER GROUP

My advice to Muslims is, “Stop being only a ‘taker group’ and become, on the contrary, the ‘giver group’.

The daily newspaper ‘Urdu Samachar’ of Nagpur organized a convention on ‘National Unity and Secularism.’ Mr. S.Q. Zaman is the managing editor of this newspaper. This ‘Convention for National Unity, Harmony, and Secularism’ was held in Nagpur’s Ravindra Deshpande Hall (which is Nagpur’s largest hall) on November 10, 1992. The participants and writers were assigned the following three topics:

1. The role of the government in promoting secularism and national unity.
2. The role of religion in strengthening national unity and uniformity.
3. The role of Urdu in preserving national unity and secularism.

I presented my thoughts as a speech on the second topic.

The vast hall was full of people. Mostly, Marathi language

programs are held here. This was probably the first occasion for such a large-scale Urdu program in this hall. The entire event was video-recorded. Representatives from Akashvani (All India Radio), Doordarshan (Indian Public Service Broadcaster), and various newspaper journalists were present in large numbers. Besides me, many distinguished individuals expressed their thoughts through speeches or articles. For example, Mr. Kuldeep Nair, Mr. Mohan Chiraghi, Justice Bhawohane, Mr. Shamim Tariq, Justice M. M. Qazi, and Mr. Tej Singh Rao Bhonsle MP, among others. The following day, all local newspapers prominently published reports on this convention.

In my speech, I mentioned that this was an opportunity for Muslims in India to guide the people. But there was a price to become a beacon to the countrymen, and that was patience. Even amidst unpleasant experiences from fellow countrymen, they had to endure steadfastly. Since they did not adopt the method of patience, they failed to attain leadership skills. The local Urdu newspaper “Urdu Samachar” made headlines in its issue dated November 11, reporting on the convention and highlighting its significance. It wrote, “Leadership is earned by those who endure.”

Mr. Kuldeep Nair, in his speech at the convention, said that after partition (1947), when he came from Sialkot to Delhi, he met Maulana Hasrat Mohani (d. 1951) and became close to him. He shared that, at that time, he used to read Urdu poetry a lot. Maulana Hasrat Mohani advised him that he should leave Urdu poetry and work hard in English journalism. He said that he benefited greatly from Maulana Mohani’s advice.

On the way, I read the English newspaper of Nagpur, *Lokmat Times* (November 11, 1992). It had a detailed report on the evening convention. Referring to my speech, the following news was given in the newspaper:

“The President of the Islamic Centre and editor, *Al-Risala*, New Delhi, Maulana Wahiduddin Khan, said there was a need for introspection as to why the India of our dreams could not be realized. Blaming both the Hindu as well as Muslim communities, Mr. Khan said that there was almost an obsessive attempt to create a uni-cultural India. He blamed the Muslim community for not having played a creative role in the post-independence period. He said that the feeling of insecurity that had crept into the minority community had prevented them from playing a creative role. He said that they should stop being only a ‘taker group’ and become, on the contrary, the ‘giver group.’”

INTERFAITH DIALOGUE PROMOTES PROXIMITY

Distance creates misunderstandings, while proximity eliminates them, turning strangers into friends. Interfaith dialogue is the way to promote proximity.

In the second half of December 1992, a ‘Shanti Yatra’ (Journey of Peace) occurred after the Ayodhya incident. It involved travelling to many places, including Delhi, Pune, Nagpur, and Mumbai (Mumbai), and back to Delhi. In this

journey, a total distance of approximately six thousand kilometres had to be covered. This was the first journey of its kind that I participated in in my life. It was a journey in the form of a team. Besides me, the participants included Acharya Sushil Kumar, Swami Chidanand, Shantilal Muttha, Anna Hazare Sahib, and Justice Chandrashekhar Dharmakari.

Acharya Sushil Kumar was a non-contentious figure in India who had dedicated his entire life to promoting peace. The unrest resulting from the Ayodhya incident made him restless. Meetings of leaders of every religion—Hindu, Muslim, Sikh, Christian—were held in New Delhi. Finally, it was decided that some practical steps should be taken in this series to promote peace.

This series began with a T.V. program on December 14, 1992. People of various religions gathered at Defence Colony (New Delhi). The T.V. team arrived there. Everyone was asked the same question: “What would you like to say to the country’s people in the current situation?” Representatives of every religion said that at this time, it is most important to establish peace and eliminate hatred. I also expressed the same sentiment in my own words.

I further said that when people come together, differences arise between them, whether in one house or one country, which often leads to discord. Therefore, practically, the only way peace can be established is when the people adopt the path of peace and love despite differences.

Another program aired on TV Today was a panel discussion. Acharya Sushil Kumar, Bishop Gregorios (Dr. Paulos Mar Gregorios), and I participated in it. Each of us presented

our thoughts on the theme of religion and peace. I said that religion is essentially a spiritual system that purifies human nature. Due to the decline of religion in the present era, people have started giving more importance to external forms, leading to conflict. People with true religious spirit will emphasize their internal qualities more, and the conflict will naturally be resolved.

Commenting on these T.V. programs, someone said that Doordarshan did an excellent job by allowing people to speak on the current situation. Previously, Doordarshan used to bring leaders or secular intellectuals on such topics. However, there is no practical benefit in making political leaders or secular intellectuals talk about religion and humanity. Religious people should address these matters. This program had a good impact on people.

I departed from Delhi to Mumbai on December 15, 1992, at 8 a.m. I read a report in *The Indian Express* (dated December 15) while on the airplane—the report, written by Mr. N.D. Sharma, bearing the dateline of Bhopal, highlighted that the annual congregation of the Tablighi Jamat was scheduled to take place from December 19 to 21 in Bhopal. According to expectations, two lakh people were to participate in this gathering. However, due to disturbances, a curfew was still in force in Bhopal, causing concern to the state administration. The ruling party of Madhya Pradesh (BJP) suggested that the gathering be held briefly and inconspicuously, to which the Jamaat people agreed. The report stated:

“As an alternative, the ruling party leaders have requested the organizers to keep it a low-key affair, and they have agreed.” (p.12)

This was an excellent decision. If such adjustments are made in delicate situations, most social conflicts will naturally be resolved. This temperament is aptly described in a tradition of Prophet Muhammad that compares a believer to grass in the field: when the wind blows from one direction, it bends in that direction, and when it blows from the other direction, it bends accordingly. (*Sahih Muslim*, Hadith No. 2810; *Sahih al-Bukhari*, Hadith No. 5644)

The Shanti Yatra began in Pune on December 16, 1992. A jeep ahead played peace song recordings, with our convoy of cars following behind it. This scene continued until the end. The impact of the songs being played from the jeep was profound. One of the verses of the song was:

*Yadi bhala kisi se kar na sako to,
Bura kisi se mat karna.*

“If you cannot do good to anyone,
Do not harm anyone.”

Another verse from the song was:

*Asha ki deepak jalne do,
Toote hue dil ko judne do,
Sab ko ek raah dikhana hai,
Baadhayein door hatana hai,
Itihaas ke panne likhne do,
Ganga Jamuna ko milne do.*

“Keep the lamp of hope burning,
Let the broken heart heal,
Show everyone a path,
Remove the obstacles,
Let history be written,
Let the Ganga and Jamuna meet.”

Upon hearing the final verse, my heart felt an inexplicable sensation. It felt like the words of the song were echoing through the streets, echoing what Swami Vivekananda had said a hundred years ago: “I see with the eye of my future that Islam and Hinduism are together building a splendid new India.” A desire arose in my heart that these streams of the Ganga and Jamuna could become one and create a great flood of unity and hope.

The ShantiYatra started in Pune on December 15, 1992, and ended in Nagpur on December 21. From Pune, the journey was to go through 35 different places such as Chakan, Manchar, Sangamner, Nandgaon, Maligaon, Rampur, Nwasah, Aurangabad, Jalna, Beed, Osmanabad, Latur, Ahmedpur, Nanded, Parbhani, Hingoli, Akola, Amravati, Sewagram, Wardha, and finally reach Nagpur, which was the last destination of this journey.

All arrangements were completed in advance through telephones in every area. Due to tensions in the region, public gatherings were entirely prohibited. However, due to the efforts and influence of Pune’s Shantilal Muttha, permissions were obtained everywhere, and all this was accomplished within a few days.

The method used during the Shanti Yatra was initially to enter a neighbourhood and undertake a padayatra (pedestrian journey) for one or two hours.

During this time, people would join our caravan in large numbers. Thus, the Shanti Yatra progressed, reaching specific destinations. A stage was already set at each stop, where we would pause and deliver speeches emphasizing peace and development. This same approach continued at all the locations throughout the journey.

Everywhere, people were remarkably enthusiastic. I observed that during our travels, someone would warmly welcome us with sweets when we reached a place. Another person would bring garlands for us. Some other person would give us flowers. There was a strange fervour among the people. And when we held the final session to leave that place, I observed that people participated in large numbers everywhere.

Seeing this scene, the voice of peace and tranquillity echoed in every person's heart, which resonates with the strings of human nature. And when the call is in accordance with human nature, nothing can obstruct its response from the people.

After entering Chakan, the padayatra and other programs were conducted. During the meeting, a gentleman from Chakan asked me, "What is your purpose in conducting the Shanti Yatra?" I replied, "The purpose is to awaken human nature. The current atmosphere of conflict in the country is due to the fact that some people have led others astray from their true nature by spreading falsehoods. We want to bring people back to their nature. In this world, deviation from nature leads to destruction, and adherence to nature results in progress."

Then I said, “A society of tolerance is built by tolerating intolerance. It is necessary to cultivate in people the attitude that if something bitter comes up, it should be ignored. Because sometimes a contrary opinion will inevitably arise. You know, even flowers have thorns. Then how can our society be devoid of such things when even God’s garden, the Earth, is not free from thorns?”

As we entered Sangamner, these words echoed on the front jeep of our convoy, “Let the Ganga and Jamuna meet.” One party member said, “Our country is the Sangam of Ganga and Jamuna.” Similarly, this country is also a confluence of different cultures. If Sangamner becomes an example of a facet of the country, it will be the best thing for it in terms of its name.

During this journey, wherever we went, we gained new experiences. On December 16, we reached a place while walking on the roads of Nandgaon. Many shops appeared burnt. Smoke was still rising from one shop, and water was being poured through a pipe to extinguish it. Seeing this was a shock to the heart. I thought that when it is one’s own shop, a person decorates it with utmost enthusiasm, but when it belongs to someone else, they destroy it mercilessly. Selfishness is indeed strange.

Moving forward, we arrived at a school where young children in uniforms joined us and started walking alongside us with their tiny feet. Seeing them reminded me of a saying: “Whenever a child is born, it is a sign that God has not given up His hopes on humanity.” Swami Chidanand mentioned that such violence had occurred in Nandgaon

for the first time. Let it be decided that it is the first time it happened and it is also the last.

In Shri Rampur, all programs went on as usual and were quite successful. During the meetings, an enlightening story from Shri Rampur emerged.

There is a grave here. After December 6, some wicked person vandalized the grave at night. Such incidents usually lead to tension between two communities, and then bloody turmoil ensues. But this did not happen in Shri Rampur.

The reason was that when this incident occurred, Hindu and Muslim residents of the village gathered and rebuilt the grave together. They then placed a standard cover over it. In this way, they diffused the bomb of discord. I learned about this incident on December 17 when the Shanti Yatra reached Shri Rampur.

We reached Nivasa on the evening of December 17. After the padayatra, the usual meeting occurred, during which our companions delivered speeches. In my speech, I said that conflicts arising in life are natural. They will always happen, whether in one society or another. Then what is the solution? While narrating some incidents, I presented two simple prescriptions as solutions. First, the distance between people should be reduced, meaning that people from one group should interact with people from another group. They should eliminate mutual distance. Then, many misconceptions will automatically vanish. Secondly, I said that when disputes or differences do arise, you should not follow the principle of confrontation but that you should follow the principle of dialogue. We should diffuse the

explosive situation to nip the conflict in the bud. If you do this, you will end the conflict at its very first stage.

After my speech, some Hindu youths approached me. After listening to me, they said they had never thought this way before. But today, they understand that this is reality, and this is what they should do.

After the padayatra, there was a large gathering in Jalna. People were seen as far as the eye could see. The speeches went on until evening. A curfew was in place there from evening until morning. People were listening with great interest. However, due to concerns about the curfew, they began to disperse. The superintendent of police of Jalna was sitting on the stage in front of the podium. He immediately announced that people should ignore the curfew, listen to the statements here until the end, and then return home peacefully. Consequently, the proceedings of the meeting continued smoothly.

In my speech in Jalna, I said that there were so many people here that it was as if the entire town had gathered. It shows how much people desire peace and tranquillity. The truth is that everyone prefers peace to violence. So why is it that there are riots among us sometimes? I said this is because some things meant for goodness are turned into evil actions. When the Creator created human beings, along with it, He created something else, which you call a rose. A rose flower is the king of flowers. It is indeed beautiful. But the rose flower also has thorns. This, it seems, is giving us a message in the language of nature that there will always be thorns along with flowers. If you want to take flowers here, you

must ignore the thorns. Without ignoring the thorns, you cannot find something as precious as a flower in this world. We should live our social lives based on this principle.

We reached Beed on December 18. Countless people participated in the Shanti Yatra there. Finally, when the meeting took place, so many people gathered that people were visible far and wide. I also gave a detailed speech along with others. After the speech, many people had an extraordinary impression of my speech. A local Hindu journalist, Rajendraman, told me he was sitting near the stage, and shared, “The Collector, Mr. Sanjay Kumar Sharma, was sitting nearby. He was listening to your speech very attentively and was positively affected by it.” Then, he said that he saw tears in Mr. Sharma’s eyes while listening to my speech.

After completing the Shanti Yatra program in Ahmedpur, I met a Hindu leader, Mr. Kedar. He said that after December 6, some incidents occurred in the city. A temple was also demolished. After that, Hindus and Muslims gathered there. Everyone condemned this act and decided to rebuild the temple together. Therefore, people from both communities rebuilt the temple with their own hands. No government aid was accepted.

During this journey, I felt that my Hindu companions preferred to hear about Islam with interest. Whenever I wanted to say something in general without reference to Islam, they requested me to tell them about Islam. We want to hear about Islam from an Islamic scholar.

On December 20, we were in Akola. After the program ended, we had dinner there at Mr. Dilip Kothari's place. After dinner, I was washing my hands in the washbasin. A young man brought a towel for me. He said, "Maulana Sahib, my name is Mahboob; please pray for me." When I looked at him, he appeared healthy and cheerful. He said, "These people respect me a lot. They don't let me suffer." Then Mr. Kothari said, "There are no differences among us in our area. Look, this Muslim boy has been working as a domestic servant in our house for ten years. But we treat him like our son. We arranged his marriage with a Muslim girl. Both of them are happily living in our house." I felt that people generally live on the level of nature, and on the level of nature, there are always good relations between people. However, our leaders misguide people, and this is where corruption begins. These incompetent leaders are working to disrupt the system of nature, which is forbidden in the Quran: "Do not spread corruption on the earth after it has been set in order." (7:56)

After December 6, there were some disturbances in Akola and a loss of life and property. Mr. Ravinder Kumar said that there is a Muslim shrine here. On the morning of December 6, some Hindus attacked the shrine and caused damage to its building. But later, the Hindus themselves expressed regret for it. On the same day, in the evening, many Hindus reached the shrine. They started its repair and construction. They worked all night long. By the morning of December 8, the shrine had been rebuilt.

Listening to this incident, I said that the rebuilding of the shrine was indeed a testament to human nature. There is a

deep feeling of repentance in human nature. After making a mistake, a person always falls into remorse. If the other party does not stop the action of human nature by making another mistake, then this nature will continue to work; it will feel ashamed and engage in the work of reconstruction.

We arrived in Amrawati on December 20, 1992, during the Shanti Yatra. After the usual pedestrian march, we stopped at a place during our journey. A large gathering had gathered there. Acharya Sushil Kumar and Swami Chidanand appealed to the people to maintain peace while they made their speeches.

When I stood up, I saw the environment of hatred and scenes of destruction all around. Tears flowed from my eyes. When I began my speech, these words came out of my mouth: “Why was the Shanti Yatra undertaken? This Shanti Yatra was undertaken so that the fire that the fire brigade could not extinguish could be extinguished by the tears of saints and the fakirs.”

It is a coincidence that after returning from the Shanti Yatra, *The Times of India* (December 29) carried the news referring to Prime Minister Narasimha Rao. Swami Vivekananda delivered a sermon at the conference of Chicago in 1893. On its seventieth anniversary, a ceremony of national consciousness was held in Kanyakumari. Prime Minister Narasimha Rao participated in it. While speaking, he said, “The country is now in crisis. In this crisis, we need the help of spiritual and religious leaders. Because they can understand the people’s emotions better than politicians. If this happens, this country will become a better place to

live. I am searching for this real path on which the future of this country should walk.” According to the report of *The Times of India* (December 29, 1992), he said, “As a Prime Minister, I was like a thirsty traveller looking for water. But instead of water, I stepped into a mirage.” (p. 4)

One member of our Shanti Yatra team was retired Justice Chandra Shekhar Dharmadhikari. In one of his speeches, he recounted an incident from around 1920, before independence. It happened at a gathering in Lahore, where a Muslim barrister, Mr. Alam, was delivering a speech. From the audience, someone asked him whether he was a Muslim or Indian first. The barrister replied that the question was incorrect. He said the proper way to ask such a question would be to ask whether someone was born to his mother or father first. He explained that a person is born to his father and mother simultaneously. Similarly, he said, he is both a Muslim and an Indian simultaneously.

Justice Chander Shekhar delivered this speech on December 21 at a peace conference in Nagpur. Upon hearing it, I remarked that this is the most natural answer to such a question. Some of our leaders saying ‘I am Muslim first and then Indian’ is undoubtedly a meaningless statement. It has no relation to Islam or reason.

The peace caravan consisted of several vehicles. Acharya Sushil Kumar, Swami Chidanand, and I were in one vehicle. The driver of this vehicle was a Muslim.

The organizers had stocked fruits, snacks, tea, etc., in sufficient quantity inside the vehicle. Whenever something was taken out to eat, I noticed Swami Chidanand insisting on

sharing it with the Muslim driver. Throughout the journey, he continued to treat the driver with absolute equality.

Once, the driver took a wrong turn. After going quite far, it became apparent that we had taken the wrong route. Then we turned around and got back on the right track. Because of this, we were delayed by about one and a half hours in reaching our destination, and the program got disrupted.

At that moment, Swami Chidanand emphatically told us that upon reaching the destination, no one should say we arrived late due to the driver's mistake. We should take responsibility for the delay upon ourselves. He strictly advised against blaming the driver. Accordingly, this was done, and the driver was saved from reprimand.

On December 21, after the session at Sevagram, I said that the atmosphere there was one of peace. We wished for this atmosphere of peace and tranquillity to prevail throughout the country. I said that Mahatma Gandhi mobilized the masses in the freedom movement based on non-violence. We want to mobilize the movement for the nation's reconstruction again based on non-violence. While Mahatma Gandhi's mission ended in 1948, from there, we have to start our mission again.

The Shanti Yatra ended in Nagpur. On December 23, 1992, I spent the day in Bombay. I met and conversed with several people. One significant meeting was with Mr. Rajendra Sudarshan Jain who was 37 years old then. At the age of 9, a firecracker caused damage to one of his eyes. When he had surgery, both of his eyes remained damaged due to the surgeon's mistake, and now he was completely blind. I

observed that he easily dialled phone numbers like a person with sight would. I learned that he runs a large business. He controls the entire business himself, even conducting business trips to foreign countries and handling significant business deals. I asked him if he had that thing inside him which is called the sixth sense. He replied that the sixth sense is not something mysterious. He explained that when you lose something from within, nature compensates for it, and something else emerges within you. He said that he often finds that things turn out just fine without seeing, and it's often accurate.

The principle of compensation is in the entire system of nature. Whenever you lose something, you should believe in advance that with the loss, there must have already emerged causes that would compensate for your deprivation.

From Bombay, I returned to Delhi. After reaching Delhi, the peace march ended. But I thought that the real work was now to be started. That means we have to extend the experience of the Shanti Yatra further. So, Mr. Shantilal Muttha said we will carry this peace movement throughout the country.

Swami Chidanand Saraswati is the chairman of the largest ashram in Rishikesh. His mission is spread across Europe, America, and Australia. He travels around the world throughout the year. After returning, I received a telephone call from Swamiji from Rishikesh. He said he is arranging books on Hinduism and Jainism. They will be titled 'Hinduism and Daily Life' and 'Jainism and Daily Life'. He also wanted me to write a book on Islam titled 'Islam and

Daily Life'. This book could be about three hundred pages long. He said that he intends to publish these books in ten languages worldwide.

At the beginning of the Shanti Yatra, I spoke in secular terms without mentioning Islam. However, during private sessions, I often discussed the Quran and Hadith with people. After listening to a couple of speeches, Swami Chidanand said, "Maulana Sahib, the teachings of the Quran and Hadith that you tell us, please share them in the session as well. They are very enlightening for us." Therefore, in subsequent speeches, I started presenting my point with reference to the Quran and Sunnah.

Before the Shanti Yatra, neither did I know Swami Chidananda, nor did he know me. Both of us were unfamiliar with each other's names as well. However, the result of spending two weeks together was that after that, we became friends, and he became a reader of my magazine *Al-Risala*; he wanted me to write a three-hundred-page book on Islam so that it could be printed and spread worldwide. Again, I would reiterate that distance creates misunderstandings, and proximity eliminates misunderstandings, turning strangers into friends.

After returning from the journey, a friend asked if there was any religious basis for works like Shanti Yatra. I said that, in its essence, it is a kind of work that resembles the Hilf al-Fudul. Before his prophethood, some esteemed individuals in ancient Makkah had formed a society called 'Hilf al-Fudul'. Its purpose was to prevent social unrest and voice the grievances of the oppressed.

Although this incident occurred before the prophethood, the Prophet endorsed it even after he had received prophethood, saying, 'If I were invited to it in Islam, I would respond.' (*As-Sirah* by Ibn Hisham, Vol. 1, p. 134).

From this, it is evident that the way of cooperation to protect social harmony and common social interests is precisely in accordance with Islam. Participating in such joint programs is a religious demand whose importance is proven through the teachings of Prophet Muhammad.

AVAIL INTERFAITH OPPORTUNITIES THROUGH WISE PLANNING

Opportunities come from all directions. If we keep our minds open, we can discover the opportunities, and avail them through wise planning.

An incident occurred on January 3, 1993, when I was in my office in Delhi when two strangers entered the room. Until that day, I did not know them; they, too, knew nothing about me.

Introducing themselves, they mentioned that they were residents of the historical city of Vedisha in Madhya Pradesh. They were attending a gathering in Vedisha on Swami Vivekananda's birthday on January 12. They had come to Delhi as part of this event. They introduced themselves as Vimal Kumar and Pitru Ashishi.

They told me that they read an interview in today's edition of *Jan Satta*, a Hindi newspaper in Delhi. Before that,

they knew nothing about me. However, after reading the interview, they were convinced that I was the speaker they were looking for in their session at Vedisha. They said that, therefore, they wanted me to accept their invitation and take me to Vedisha to be their main speaker for their session on January 12.

It was a difficult situation for me. At that time, news of sectarian disturbances was coming from Madhya Pradesh as well. I had only heard the name Vedisha. However, due to the sincere insistence of these gentlemen, I accepted their invitation.

On the evening of January 11, 1993, I left for Vedisha from Delhi via Malwa Express. When I woke up on January 12, the Vedisha railway station was nearby. The Conference organizers met me as soon as I got off the platform. I accompanied them to the city. My stay was at Mr. Chadha's home.

I had lunch on January 12 at an *Ashram* adjacent to a hospital. Most of the expenses of this Ashram were borne by a local Hindu trader. After the evening prayer on January 12, the session was arranged. When I arrived, a large canopy was set up with many educated Hindus seated under it. A Hindu brother whispered, "All these people have come to hear you."

I was in a great dilemma. Even at the last moment, my mind could not decide what to say to the audience that day. In this state of uncertainty, I was sitting on the stage when the announcement came, "Now, Maulana Sahib will guide us."

I came before the mic in such a state that tears welled up in my eyes due to a sense of helplessness. In silent words, I prayed, “Oh God, these souls created by You have gathered here to listen to the truth. But I do not know what to say to them. God, make me a playback speaker today to say what you like.”

After that, I began my speech and spoke almost for an hour. I do not remember what I said in my speech. But later, Mr. Madhu Mehta of Bombay told me that people were so mesmerized during my speech that they were not even blinking. Tears flowed from the eyes of many; even women were seen crying.

Perhaps the most important event of the trip to Vedisha was meeting Mr. Madhu Mehta. Before that, both of us were completely unaware of each other. We met for the first time at Vedisha. Discussions were held on the current state of the country. He listened to my speech during the session. Afterward, he said that he was looking for a ‘Muslim scholar’ who could help us solve the serious problem that had arisen in the country due to religious differences. He said he believed he had found this Muslim scholar in my person.

Mr. Madhu Mehta was one of the distinguished personalities of Bombay. He had high-level connections with the Hindus there. He was the Chairman of the Hindustani Andolan. He said, “Come to Bombay. Present your teachings based on ‘Peace and Social Harmony’ to the people there. I will provide you with all kinds of support in this regard.” Consequently, availing of his invitation, I made several

trips to Bombay. By the grace of God, every trip was extraordinarily successful.

Through the above experience, I realized that opportunities come from all directions. If we keep our minds open, we can discover the opportunities, and avail them through wise planning.

OUTSTANDING OUTCOME OF POSITIVE ACTION

Positive action yields positive results, while retaliatory behaviour is resultless.

Dr. Ahmed Sultan of Bangalore, Karnataka, shared with me some incidents that have had outstanding outcomes of positive action here. Dr. Ahmed Sultan is a regular reader of the monthly magazine *Al Risala*, which is published by our organization, and he entirely agrees with our mission of peace and spirituality.

On January 8, 1993, Dr. Ahmed Sultan accompanied his son, who was riding a motorcycle. A Hindu was coming in his car from the front. Unfortunately, his vehicle collided with the bike. Dr. Ahmed Sultan fell on the road. He suffered severe injuries to his legs. The car driver, who was Hindu, wanted to put him in his car and take him to the hospital.

But Dr. Ahmed Sultan did not say anything to the Hindu and told him to sit in his car and leave immediately from there, as many people knew him there. They would gather there

and would surely harm him. They will not spare him. Insisting in this way, he persuaded the driver to leave. After that, he went to the hospital with his son and got his wounds dressed.

The next day, the car driver visited Dr. Ahmed Sultan's house. He fell at Dr. Sahib's feet. He said that he had been very kind to him. Dr. Sahib told him that it was just a coincidence that his car collided with their motorcycle. There was no ill intention on his part.

When people came to know about this incident, many Muslims told Dr. Sahib many things like: This person was anti-Muslim. He was the same person who once caused Hindu-Muslim riots in Bangalore. Revenge was necessary. You should say that he had deliberately collided his car with your motorcycle. Now, they had a golden chance to harm him. They should not have lost the chance and should have immediately reported it to the police.

Dr. Sahib responded to those Muslims, "Forgive him; now he will never cause mischief again. The person who was unwilling to say sorry before today has come to touch my feet." In my view, this incident is a beautiful example of positive action. People consider retaliatory action a defense, although not retaliating is a bigger defense.

Dr. Sahib also shared an experience from when he visited Shimoga in 1991. The people there informed him that a Ganesh Chaturthi procession would pass through the mosque route, which they feared could incite violence and potentially lead to riots. They sought Dr. Sahib's advice on how to prevent this outcome, as they were unsure of what to

do besides attempting to reroute the procession. However, they also understood from their past experience that trying to stop the procession might lead to further destruction.

Dr. Sahib told the people that they considered stopping the procession as a strategy, but he felt that not stopping the procession was an even bigger strategy. Doctor Sahib advised those people to remain completely silent for the time being. He told them not to take any retaliatory action. However, when the date of the procession arrived, he advised them to buy garlands of flowers from the market, about 20-25 in number, and put them on a tray, when the Hindu procession arrived in front of the mosque, he advised the people to come to the road with these garlands and welcome all the Hindu leaders leading the procession by putting flower garlands around their necks.

The Muslims of Shimoga said to Dr. Sahib that the strategy he proposed seemed absurd. They thought it could, potentially, make them more emboldened to harm the Muslims. They were concerned about the repercussions. However, Dr. Sahib explained to them the rationale behind his suggestion, emphasizing that they had already witnessed the negative effects of their previous approach. He encouraged them to consider the potential positive outcome of adopting this new strategy. The Muslims of Shimoga, trusting in Dr. Sahib's wisdom, decided to follow his advice.

When the Muslims of Shimoga implemented Dr. Sahib's suggestion by presenting garlands of flowers to the Hindu leaders, it had a remarkable effect. The gesture unexpectedly dissolved any negative sentiments harboured by the

leaders. The act of offering garlands symbolized respect and goodwill, fostering a sense of unity and understanding between the communities. Instead of slogans and drums, people began hugging each other with joy. Moreover, when the time of the procession came the following year, those people themselves changed the route of their procession. This is the result of positive action.

MANAGE DIFFERENCES THROUGH TOLERANCE

Differences are a reality of life. The only way to manage differences, both in secular and religious fields, is to live according to the principles of tolerance.

Some educated Hindu gentlemen arranged a four-day seminar in Vrindavan. I embarked on this journey upon invitation. A brief account of this journey is given here.

On January 14, 1993, we drove from Delhi to Vrindavan. There were four people in our caravan—Dr. Rajkumar Bhatia, Dr. Mahesh Sharma, Dr. Surender Sharma, and me. Upon reaching Vrindavan, we went to Geeta Ashram. Both our lodging and the seminar were arranged there. Upon entering the Ashram, we discovered the seminar was already in progress. Consequently, we went straight to the hall and participated in the seminar.

Lodging for the seminar, participants was arranged at Geeta Ashram. Two people were accommodated in one room. I

was accompanied by a member of the RSS who was highly educated and counted among the intellectuals. We shared the room. We both used to wake up at dawn.

One day, I asked him a question when he woke up after sleeping while sitting on the bed. I asked, “Tell me, what do you want from Muslims? What should Muslims do so that your complaints against them get resolved? Do you want Muslims to adjust to Hindus unilaterally in this country?”

He immediately replied, “No, Maulana Sahib, it’s not like that. We want Muslims to become equal citizens. We only want one thing from our Muslim brothers: that they consider this country as their own.” These were the words of a person who holds a high position in the organization.

During the conference, everyone was free to express their thoughts openly. I give here some excerpts from the discussions there.

Swami Agnivesh said, “It seems to me that people have fixed notions. People already believe that if someone is a Muslim, then he will be like this, and if he is a Hindu, then he will be like that. We need to change this way of thinking. Otherwise, nation-building cannot be successful.”

One gentleman said that today, political figures determine the country’s agenda. This is a matter of concern. The country cannot be handed over to the political interests of a few individuals.

A Hindu youth said, “The country is being led astray. Chaos is being created. We must stand against this. Otherwise, the country will be ruined.”

Dr. Mahesh Sharma said that today's problem is that people do not respect each other. What is in others is also in me. This ability to see is not present in people. All wise people say that if there is an enemy, it is within you. But now we have changed our enemy. Now, we understand that the enemy is not within us but outside. This mindset needs to change. We should be ready to hear bitter truths about ourselves.

One gentleman said, "At this time, India is in a critical condition. We, the 85-crore people, are at odds today. People do not know where to go."

Another gentleman said, "Ram Manohar Lohia used to say to heat the country. So, we heated the country. However, after seeing the result, it is understood that Lohia's slogan was wrong. The better slogan is 'to cool down the country.'"

Yet another gentleman said, "We should not be arrogant under any circumstances. There was a time when communism was considered an unassailable ideology worldwide. But today, it is being understood differently."

One gentleman was an expert in Gandhian studies. He mentioned in his speech that Mahatma Gandhi once wrote in his newspaper that Hindu-Muslim unity is essential for the country's progress, and without it, the country cannot progress.

B. K. Rai, a Professor of history at Allahabad University, said that he went to the Kumbh Mela which was attended by more than a crore people, yet he didn't see anyone hungry. Even if someone doesn't have a penny, he still gets food. This is the power of religion.

Differences are a reality of life. In our daily lives, both inside and outside the home, we encounter differences. How should we handle them? We should live according to the principles of tolerance. This approach should be adopted in matters of religion as well.

A gentleman said, “Nation-building work could not be done after 1947.” He further said that people still do not pay attention to fulfilling their responsibilities. After December 6, nation-building is number one on my agenda.

A Swami ji from Vrindavan asserted that the supreme power is known by many names, such as Jagannath, Allah, God, Rab, and Waheguru. However, despite these varied appellations, we ultimately supplicate ourselves before that singular Supreme Power. The conflict does not arise from differences in worship or its methods; rather, it stems from material interests, often leading to communal tensions in society, manifesting in various forms. Therefore, it is imperative to cultivate a spirit of tolerance in society—embodying the principle of ‘follow one and respect all.’

The seminar at Vrindavan took place in a large hall with carpets spread. About sixty people were sitting in a circle in the seminar. Different people were expressing their opinions on the current state of the country. Amidst all this, a boy entered the hall carrying a plate. On the plate was a cut radish sprinkled with salt. The boy passed by with the plate. Everyone took a radish according to his wish and started eating it. In the end, tea was brought, and a cup was placed before everyone.

This is an example that indicates how simple Vrindavan’s seminar was and how its proceedings were conducted in

such a casual manner. It was precisely according to my taste because simplicity is in my nature. I prefer simplicity in every matter. The focus of the seminar was on sharing one's views with others.

A gentleman said that first of all, we need to determine what is dominant. Is it the country that is dominant, or is it religion? Some people have made religion supreme. We have seen that the country itself has come under threat. Therefore, now we should make the country dominant.

In this seminar at Vrindavan, I realized that if Muslims remained silent, Hindus would respond better and more effectively. Many times, it happened that someone said something negative about Muslims in a speech. I remained silent. After that, a Hindu stood up and responded compellingly, so much so that if I had responded, perhaps I could not have given such a powerful response.

A gentleman from Udaipur, Kishwarsant, delivered a profoundly emotional speech. He said that today, people talk about everything in the name of Gandhi. I ask, is this what Gandhi wanted? The violence that erupted from this movement is opposite to the principle of non-violence, which is what Gandhism stands for. Then how can this be Gandhism? Gandhism is synonymous with non-violence. I have seen Gandhi's era. But seeing what is happening today makes me very sad. The fire of hatred is widespread today. Gandhi's country no longer exists. Darkness prevails all around. The country is undergoing a period of moral decline.

A Hindu scholar during his speech mentioned an incident that Gandhiji wrote about in his autobiography. He wrote that he met Allama Iqbal in London during the Second Round Table Conference (1931). Iqbal introduced himself by saying, “I am a Kashmiri Pandit.”

Before 1947, Hindus and Muslims generally conversed in this manner about their lineage. But, due to the unnatural movement of the ‘two-nation theory’, the mood on both sides had changed. Now, such talk arouses nationalistic sentiments.

Doctor Mahesh Sharma has been associated with the RSS from a young age. During a conversation one day, I said tolerance is now essential for national unity.

He said that the followers of Golwalkar do not like the word tolerance. They say that we don’t just tolerate others; we welcome them. They say, “Be truthful, and you will be welcomed.”

Many people say we should not pay so much attention to religious disputes. Other issues are more worthy of attention, such as education, economics, creating national character among the individual, etc. Today, the most essential task is to prepare the new generation to play their proper role in the country’s development.

Mr. Ram Bahadur Rai, the editor of Jansatta, spoke the least. I observed that people listened to him with great attention whenever he spoke. Seeing this, I thought that some people consider speaking more important but speaking less is even more important. But to say less, one needs the power of tolerance, and very few people possess that.

A gentleman said that violence has increased significantly in the country. We intend to counter violence with non-violence; this is our resolution, and we must depart from here with this determination. We, the people, must rise above all kinds of divisions and differences. Humanity is paramount; we must leave here believing in this. Humanity comes first, followed by religion and other considerations.

Mr. Raj Narain Singh was a police officer in Azamgarh. In his speech, he said that Muslims must consider the country's past ancestors as their own. Without this recognition, nothing can be achieved. If it is said that only one belief is correct and all others are wrong, how can adjustment and brotherhood be established in such a situation? The relationship between Hindus and Muslims is a very important issue.

A gentleman said that we talk about non-violence but want to bring it through force. This is contradictory. Whenever we talk about action and implementation, we start talking about violence. Then, the question arises: what do we want to do? Do we want to bring about democracy or anarchy in this country?

A gentleman said that we were heavily involved in Jayaprakash's movement; we hoped that something good would come from it. But Jayaprakash said in response that nobody listens to me. Similarly, Gandhiji said that my words didn't matter after independence.

After the seminar, I returned to Delhi on the evening of January 16, 1993. When we passed through the market in our car, I saw that the people in the market were busy with

their normal business activities. Here, forgetting the Hindu-Muslim question, people were engaged in their work. Through their actions, they said that our biggest concern is earning a living. We have nothing to do with your speeches. When I went out of the city, the world seemed even broader. Here, the world of nature was giving a divine message. The vastness of the sky was firmly established. The trees were proudly displaying their greenery. The system of the sun and the moon was firmly in place. The breeze was giving its comforting message.

I thought that people get excited about inflammatory speeches. But why is there a need to get excited or heated over a voice so worthless that it dissipates in the air as soon as it is spoken? Or why be excited or enthusiastic about something printed in the newspaper that ends up in a waste basket by evening?

ACHIEVING HARMONY IN PLURALISTIC SOCIETIES

When different people live together in modern pluralistic societies, one inevitably receives discomfort from others. To achieve harmony one should avoid or ignore the discomfort caused by others.

On January 12, 1993, when I was in Vidisha, Madhya Pradesh, for a program, I met Mr. Madhu Mehta. He was the Chairman of the well-known 'Hindustani Andolan' movement, whose headquarters were in Bombay. It was my

first meeting with him. He was impressed with my thoughts when we discussed the current national situation. After returning to Delhi, I received several phone calls from him. He wanted to organize some programs in Bombay for me. At his insistence, I made a trip to Bombay. On the morning of January 31, 1993, I left for Bombay and returned to Delhi on the evening of February 5.

On the evening of January 31, 1993, at 5 O'clock, a meeting was held at the Governor's House with the Governor of Maharashtra, P. C. Alexander. Apart from me, Acharya Sushil Kumar, Swami Chidanand, Madhu Mehta, Justice Dharmadhikari, Anna Hazare, and several other people were present. The Governor said he had read some of my English articles and seen the Shanti Yatra video. He was quite impressed by it. He said that political figures cannot resolve this serious issue in the country; only religious and spiritual personalities can solve it.

The report of this meeting was published in the Bombay edition of the 'Times of India' (February 1, 1993). It also explicitly stated that this meeting was held at the Governor's request.

On the evening of February 1, 1993, a meeting was held at Mr. Madhu Mehta's place. Many educated people from Bombay participated in it in large numbers. I addressed the gathering.

A Question-Answer session was also conducted. A young man named Rahul Sharma said that Muslims identify themselves with Pakistan. What is your opinion on this? I said that according to my information, this was not correct.

Perhaps there is no Muslim here who identifies himself with Pakistan. Some Muslim boys make childish moves during cricket matches between the two countries. I find such actions absurd. However, they should be ignored. Forming an opinion about Indian Muslims based on this is not correct.

The special correspondent of 'The Times of India', Mr. Allwyn Fernandes conducted a detailed interview. This interview was recorded in Room No. 305 of the Regency Hotel. It was published in *The Times of India* on February 2, 1993.

Most of the questions were about Muslim issues. I said one thing that Hindus and Muslims should clearly understand is that when different people live together in a society, it is inevitable that one may cause discomfort to the other. This always happens. And it happens in every society, whether in India or any other country.

What to do in such a situation? The only thing to do in such a situation is to learn to avoid the discomfort caused by others, which is inevitable in pluralistic societies.

On February 2, I met General S. K. Sinha and S. Ramakrishnan at Mr. Madhu Mehta's residence. Mr. Ramakrishnan said that after listening to my speech yesterday, he felt like someone was speaking from the heart, not the lips.

Mr. Harender Dubey is the editor of a Gujarati newspaper, "Janm Bhoomi" (established in 1934). He conducted a detailed interview with me for his newspaper. Mr. Harendrade is of a spiritual disposition. He said that

LOOK AT EVERYONE AS A HUMAN BEING

when he prays, he asks God to do whatever good is intended for him.

On the evening of February 4, my speech was at Khilafat House at 5 o'clock. Dr. Rafiq Zakaria was presiding over it. The hall was filled. There were also quite a few people standing outside. Starting my speech, I asked the question, "Why did I come to Bombay?" Continuing my speech, I said, "I came because the story you tried to write repeatedly with the ink of blood could not be written. Now, let us try to write that story with tears. Maybe God will accept our heartfelt plea. The story that couldn't be written with the ink of blood might be written with tears."

As I was saying these words, tears were flowing from my eyes. In the meantime, a young man stood up and started shouting, "We won't listen. You go back." I remained silent and sat back in my chair. Many people from the audience told him that they wanted to listen to me and asked him to leave. There was noise for a while. Finally, that boy went outside. After that, I spoke for an hour and a half, and the entire assembly listened silently, and attentively.

LOOK AT EVERYONE AS A HUMAN BEING

People tend to divide society into groups and sects. This thinking is baseless. We should see everyone as a human being, and behave with them accordingly.

I undertook a journey to Madras (Chennai) in February 1993. The trip was organized under the Shanti Yatra

(Peace Mission). The route was as follows: Delhi, Madras, Kanchipuram, Mangalore, Sringeri, Bombay, Pune, and Delhi. Along with me, the following individuals were also part of this trip: Acharya Sushil Kumar, Swami Chidanand, Madhu Mehta, Shantilal Muttha, and Nigel Edmond Tully.

We departed for Madras from Delhi via Indian Airlines Flight 439. Acharya Sushil Kumar, Swami Chidanand, and Nigel Tully were part of this caravan from Delhi. Upon reaching Madras, Mr. Madhu Mehta and Mr. Shantilal Muttha joined us. Both of them had come directly from Bombay to Madras.

During the journey from Delhi to Madras, Acharyaji and Swamiji discussed how peace and harmony can be established in the country. Both agreed that unbiased and selfless religious personalities should come forward. Only such people can play an effective role at this time. Swamiji said that the biggest obstacle to better human relations is the ego. The 'I' creates conflict in the mind; if the 'I' could be eliminated, there would be unity.

I had to go to Sringeri from Madras. So, from there, we departed for Kanchipuram by car. We reached there around 1:30 p.m. We met for almost two hours with the Shankaracharya of Kanchipuram—Jagat Guru Shankaracharya. He was both venerable and humble. His simplicity was quite impressive. Although he seemed very straightforward at first glance, it became evident after the conversation that he was brilliant. He was fully aware of the circumstances and gave a well-thought-out opinion on every matter. He also appeared quite knowledgeable about the conditions of Muslims.

The Shankaracharya's remarks summarized that the dispute between temples and mosques should be resolved so that the country's peace is not disturbed. Because if there is no peace in the country, nothing else can be done afterward.

On the same day, we returned to Madras from Kanchipuram. We went from Madras to Mangalore via Indian Airlines. Our plane landed at Mangalore Airport at 10 a.m. From there, we travelled by car. This journey was made to meet the Shankaracharya of Sringeri.

I had a wonderful encounter with the Shankaracharya. He fully supported our Peace Mission. During our conversation, he mentioned that righteousness does not mean religion but duty. It is the political figures who have equated righteousness with religion. Righteousness is an individual's conduct, like the righteousness of a man, a king, and so on. The term 'Hindu' is not found in our scriptures. These leaders are the ones who have given 'Hindu' the meaning it holds today.

Mr. Madhu Mehta added that everything in this country has become a business; even spirituality has become a commodity.

Swami Chidanand kept sharing interesting insights. Once, he said, "Love is a currency that operates everywhere in the world." Then he added poetically, "Illuminate with the light of love, and dispel the darkness of enmity."

At 10 o'clock, we arrived at Mangalore Airport. We spent some time in the lounge. People were conversing among themselves. I was quietly listening. A Hindu brother said

we cannot afford the politics of hate and communalism. He also mentioned that he owned a factory in Bombay where he manufactured goods for export. There has not been any communal unrest in his area, but 95% of his workforce flees when news of communal violence spreads. Now, my industry is stagnant. How can the country progress like this?

We boarded an Indian Airlines flight to Bombay from Mangalore. After spending two hours in Bombay, according to the program, we departed for Pune via car. Mr. Shantilal Muttha asked me to sit in the rear seat. After almost an hour, I got up and sat in the back seat. I was looking out of the window. Shantilal Muttha asked whether I would like tea, a cold drink, etc. I said no. I could get down and pray if a mosque was on the roadside. He said the mosque was behind us. Immediately, the car stopped. I got down, prayed there, and then we proceeded ahead.

At sunset, we arrived in Pune. Initially, we stayed in Mr. Shantilal Muttha's office. After some time, Mr. Abdul Samad and Mr. Mohammad Yunus arrived. I went with these people to New Era Colony. My stay was at Mr. Mohammad Yunus's place. Many people from Pune came here after hearing the news. We kept talking with them until around 11:30 at night.

I particularly emphasized the need for better Hindu-Muslim relations. Most Muslims tend to divide society into groups and sects, saying so and so is from this community; and so and so is from that community. This kind of thinking is entirely baseless. The actual Islamic teaching is to see everyone from a human perspective. Group affiliations are

always secondary. The fundamental thing is that everyone is a human being, and we should deal with them accordingly.

ATTAIN SOCIAL HARMONY THROUGH ADJUSTMENT

The only way forward to attain harmony in the multi-religious societies of today is through adjustment despite disagreements.

I want to conclude by mentioning an incident on April 11, 1993, when I travelled from Delhi to Patna. This journey was on the invitation of Lok Swaraj Andolan, whose convenors were General S. K. Sinha (retired) and Secretary Mr. Ramesh. On the evening of April 11, 1993, a public meeting was held in the Bhartiya Nritya Kala Mandir auditorium. Hindus and Muslims participated in large numbers in the symposium on “Communal Harmony.”

Various people gave speeches. In my speech, I said that 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.

A FOUNTAIN OF HOPE

People should engage positively with others at a personal, community, and religious level by learning to live with tolerance and mutual respect for others.

Summarizing my experiences, I share an incident that showed a 'glimmer of hope' for India. I received an invitation from Mr. Madhu Mehta and Mr. Arvind Deshpande of Bombay, which stated that the Lok Swaraj Andolan is organizing an All-India Citizens Convention in Bombay. This convention will be held in Bombay at the Indian Merchants Chamber on April 3, 1993. Its invitees included prominent citizens like Mr. B. K. Nehru, Mr. N. A. Palakhiwala, Mr. Minoo Masani, Mr. Justice C. S. Dharmadhikari, Mr. Ramkrishna Bajaj, Mr. Pratap Bhogilal, Mr. Alok Jajodia, among others. The theme of this convention was, 'The survival of India as a nation.'

I want to share two things that the participants of the convention shared. In his speech, Mr. C. Subramaniam emphasized that no society exists as a single religious entity. Given the multi-religious nature of societies worldwide, India cannot afford to isolate itself spiritually. We must ensure that all religions have equal opportunities for worship, growth, and expression, similar to standards upheld by other nations. Every individual has the right to

practice and share their faith, as long as one respects the rights and beliefs of others. In conclusion, the chairman acknowledged India's challenges but expressed hope for the future.

I agree with the above two statements. In every multicultural society like India, 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.

CHAPTER EIGHT

QUESTION-ANSWERS
ON INTERFAITH DIALOGUE

SOME FAQs RELATED TO 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.

In this section, let us find answers to some frequently asked questions regarding inter-religious dialogue and harmonious living in multi-religious societies.

Is Religion Necessary in Today’s World?

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.

Who is Responsible for the World's Chaos: Religion or Humans?

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 the misuse of free will by man.

Will the World be More Peaceful Without Religion?

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.

Does Religion Produce Hardliners?

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.

If all Religions Claim they are Right, How can their Adherents Peacefully Coexist?

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 adherents of different religions 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 for the peaceful coexistence of adherents of different religions.

What is Your View About those Who Condemn People of Other Faiths?

Condemnation is not the right method. The right method is based on speaking out of well-wishing for others. Speaking about others without wishing well for them leads to strife. It has no positive outcome.

Why have Muslims Launched So Few True Interfaith Dialogue Initiatives?

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.

What is the Real Message of the Quran, The Torah, and the New Testament?

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.

Is Islam a Religion of Peace or Does it Sanction Violence?

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: 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.

Does the Quran Teach Muslims to be Violent?

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 as are contained in verses regarding the realization 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” (21:107).

What does the Quran State about Killing Human Beings?

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 horrendous 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.

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

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 deliberately 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 forbidden 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.

What do Muslims Need to do to Overcome Islamophobia?

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.

Is Islam Intolerant of Other Religions?

Islam is not intolerant of other religions. Many Muslims, however, do behave intolerantly, thus giving Islam a bad name.

Islam teaches its adherents to give respect to others, to be tolerant of and to engage in dialogue with people of other faiths.

Is it Permissible for Muslims to Wish Non-Muslims on their Festivals?

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

How should Muslims Treat Non-Muslims Living In Muslim-Majority Countries?

Today, we live in a world of equal citizenship. Any categorization 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.

Does Islam Deny Religious Freedom to Others?

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 religious freedom.

With the advent of Islam in the seventh century C.E., 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.

How can People Live in Harmony in Globalized, Pluralistic Societies?

Global societies are plural, being multi-religious, multi-ethnic, and multi-cultural. 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.

What is the Formula to Promote Harmony Between Adherents of Different Religions?

There are about a dozen major religions worldwide and innumerable smaller religions and sects. Differences and disagreements might occasionally arise that can sometimes lead to conflict. So, how can we create an atmosphere of acceptance among the adherents of these religions to live in peace and harmony?

Two solutions are often offered in this regard: (1) Removing religion altogether and (2) Accepting all religions as equally true and thus as the same.

Removing religion altogether, even if it is possible (which is not), will not solve anything. The urge to believe in a greater power is strongly inherent in human nature, and human nature cannot be changed. On the other hand, the idea that all religions are identical does not accord with facts and also may not give inner conviction to a person who believes in a particular religion.

Hence, the only workable solution lies in adopting a policy of religious tolerance and respect for other people's religious convictions. Everyone should be entitled to follow what they think is best and profess their belief in it while respecting the beliefs of others. This is based on the principle of mutual respect which is the way to promote harmony between people who subscribe to different belief systems.

What is a Practicable Formula for Living Peacefully in Multi-Religious Societies?

Today, we all live in pluralistic societies, with members of different religious backgrounds closely interconnected. Therefore, to live in harmony, they need to interact closely, learn from each other, and benefit from the good they have to offer while being committed to the formula ‘Live and let live’.

How should We Live in a Multi-Religious Society?

In my view, the way to live harmoniously in a multi-religious society is by learning the art of difference management. Every religion gives us principles for this. In any country, maintaining peace and harmony in society needs the efforts of the official administration and non-governmental agencies—individuals, organizations, or social groups. They should work together to inculcate the spirit of patience, tolerance, and wishing well for other people. This can lay the foundation for peace and harmony globally.

What is the Purpose of Inter-Religious Dialogue?

A. One purpose of inter-religious dialogue, or dialogue between members of different religious communities, is for dialogue partners to develop respect for each other, show kindness and forbearance towards each other, and understand and learn from each other’s ideas, insights, and experiences. In this way, they can grow as human persons.

In addition, such dialogue can help them evolve spiritually and intellectually.

What is the Importance of Tolerance in Maintaining Positive Inter-Religious Relations?

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 realize 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.

How can Trust be Built Between People of Different Religious Communities?

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.

Can You Share Some Details of Your Involvement in Inter-Religious Dialogue?

Over the years, I have participated in many such initiatives in different countries. The gist of my contribution 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.

Should We Judge Interfaith Efforts Based on Immediate Results?

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.

What are Some Things People of Different Faiths Can Learn from Each Other?

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 everyone, 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.

LAST WORD

Peaceful inter-religious dialogue is necessary today to promote harmony in our closely interconnected multi-religious global society.

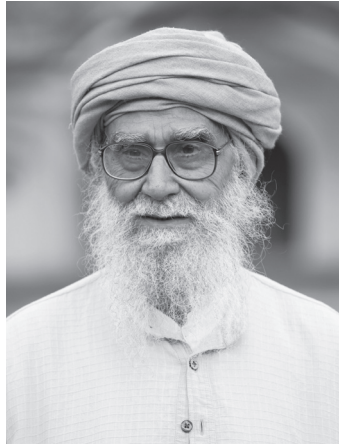
Living in a closely interconnected ‘global village’, we find ourselves living in a world of multi-religious, multi-cultural, multi-ethnic societies. Differences naturally exist between people in such pluralistic societies. Some people confront others in efforts to remove these differences, not realizing 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 simply learn the ‘art of difference management’ rather than the ‘art of difference elimination.’

How should we manage differences? 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. Over the years, I have participated in many interfaith initiatives in different countries. The gist of my experience

from them is that while religious uniformity is not possible, what is indeed possible is a formula for harmony between people from different religious backgrounds. Moreover, the formula for peaceful interfaith dialogue, according to my experience, is only one: it is based on mutual respect and mutual learning.

One purpose of inter-religious dialogue, or dialogue between members of different religious communities, is for dialogue partners to develop respect for each other, show kindness and forbearance towards each other, and understand and learn from each other's ideas, insights, and experiences. In this way, they can grow as human beings. Such dialogue helps the participants evolve spiritually and intellectually by learning from each other, so they become better human beings—which is surely a goal shared by various religions.

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.



Maulana Wahiduddin Khan (1925-2021), an Islamic scholar, spiritual leader, and peace activist, was internationally recognized for his seminal contributions to world peace. The Government of India posthumously honored him with the Padma Vibhushan Award in 2021 for his contributions to spirituality. Maulana authored over 200 books that delve into Islam's spiritual wisdom, the Prophet's non-violent approach, its relationship with modernity, and other contemporary issues. His English translation of the Quran and Quran Commentary are widely appreciated for their simplicity, clarity, and ease of understanding. In 2001, he founded the Centre for Peace and Spirituality International to promote a culture of peace and convey the spiritual message of Islam at a global level. CPS International Network is taking the legacy forward.

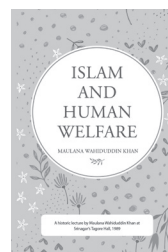
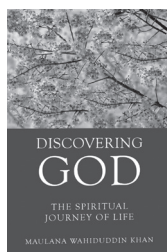
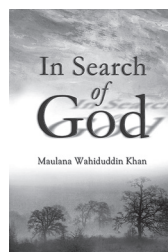
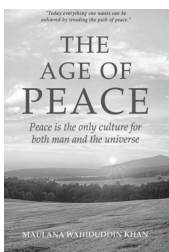
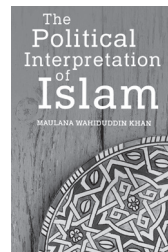
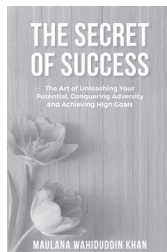
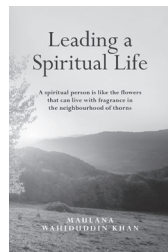
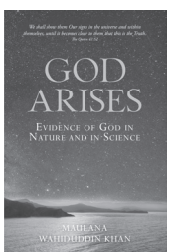
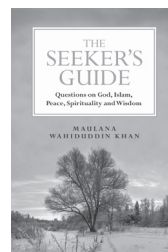
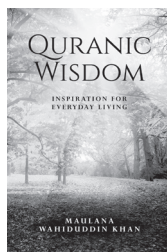
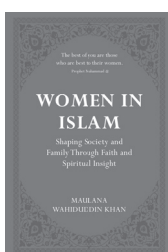
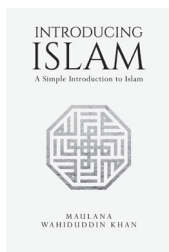
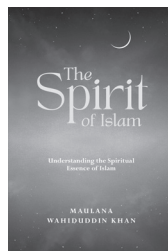
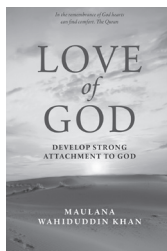
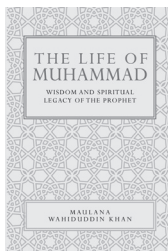
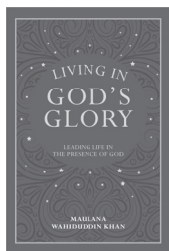
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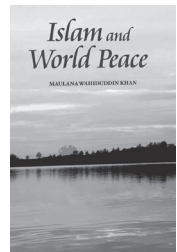
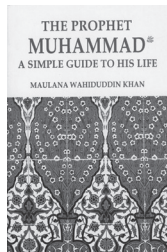
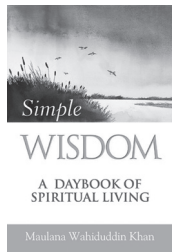
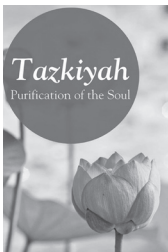
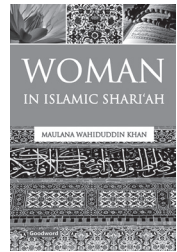
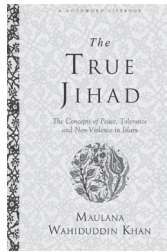
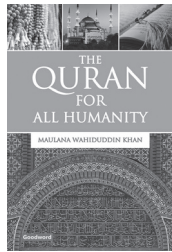
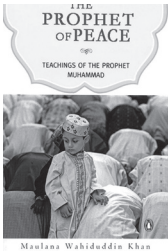
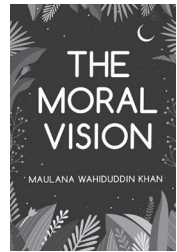
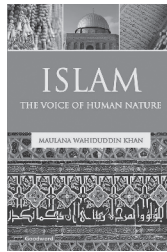
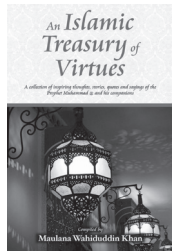
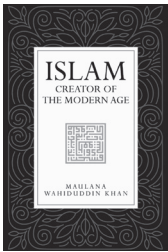
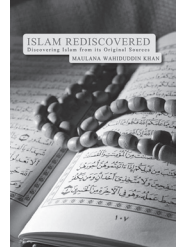
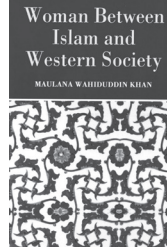
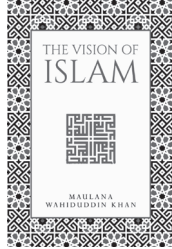
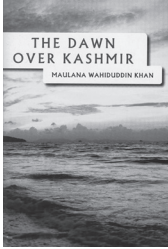
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Books By Maulana Wahiduddin Khan



Books By Maulana Wahiduddin Khan



*I*nter-religious dialogue is essential for fostering peace and harmony in today's global pluralistic societies. Maulana Wahiduddin Khan reflected on his journey of inter-religious dialogue, guided by principles like tolerance, mutual respect, and the willingness to learn from others. When participants in such dialogues openly share their perspectives and remain receptive to insights that emerge, it can bring people closer, enhance relations between communities, and build mutual understanding.

This process not only allows participants to share their beliefs but also to learn from one another, creating a platform to unite peace-loving individuals from diverse religious backgrounds in working for the global good.



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