

CAN CHRISTIANS AND MUSLIMS PRAY TOGETHER?

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IF ANY EVENT IN CHURCH HISTORY since the Second Vatican Council deserves the adjective ‘epoch-making’, it would be the interreligious encounter at Assisi on 27 October 1986, to which Pope John Paul II invited representatives of the most important Christian denominations and also of the world religions to pray for peace. Assisi was not about discussing prayer together; rather, all the participants were gathered in the same place, at St Francis’ tomb, so that each religion or denomination might pray in its own way for peace. At the beginning of the meeting the Pope explained:

Religions are many and varied, and they reflect the desire of men and women down through the ages to enter into a relationship with the Absolute Being. Prayer entails conversion of heart on our part. It means deepening our sense of the ultimate Reality. This is the very reason for our coming together in this place.¹

Assisi and the Consequences

Not least through the creative commitment of the Sant’Egidio community, the prayer-meeting in Assisi became the model for a world prayer movement for peace that includes believers of all faiths and embraces the whole earth across the boundaries of individual nations. In fact, since Assisi, awareness of a common dependence on God and a common responsibility for peace has grown among adherents of all

¹ John Paul II, address to the representatives of the Christian Churches and ecclesial communities gathered in Assisi for the World Day of Prayer (17 October 1986), n.4, available at http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/speeches/1986/october/documents/hf_jp-ii_spe_19861027_prayer-peace-assisii_en.html.

religions—particularly among believers of the three monotheistic world religions. At the same time, admittedly, the voices and forces opposed to such a common religious consciousness and way of acting embracing the individual religions have also grown everywhere.

In 2003 the German bishops published *Leitlinien für multireligiöse Feiern von Christen, Juden und Muslimen* ('Guidelines for Multireligious Celebrations by Christians, Jews and Muslims').² After the example and model of the prayer-meeting in Assisi, which, as the bishops write, 'avoided the danger of intermingling (syncretism) and respected the other's sincere search for God', multireligious celebrations between Christians and Jews, between Christians and Muslims, and between Christians, Jews and Muslims, are encouraged. The bishops make a distinction between 'multireligious celebrations', in which 'each religious group is responsible for its own contribution',³ and what they call 'interreligious celebration ... in which all turn to God together with words and signs carried out by all'.⁴ They reject the latter form of celebration categorically, 'because here there is the danger of appropriating the other and blurring real differences'.⁵ With respect to Christian–Muslim multireligious celebrations the German bishops say:

In shared celebrations Christians and Muslims can experience the fact that their lives are directed to the one God, despite different conceptions of God So Christians and Muslims can discover that, as recipients of God's peace, they are called and obliged to mutual respect and, furthermore, to commitment to peace and respect for human rights in the world.⁶

In 2006 Cardinal Joachim Meisner published 'Archbishop's Guidelines on Multireligious Celebrations in Schools' for the archdiocese of Cologne. Such celebrations, he writes, are,

... not meaningful in the school context, because for children and young people it is difficult to distinguish between multireligious

² (Bonn: DBK Secretariat, 2003). Second revised edition under the title *Leitlinien für das Gebet bei Treffen von Christen, Juden und Muslimen* is available at <http://liturgie.de/liturgie/pub/op/download/ah170.pdf>.

³ *Leitlinien für das Gebet bei Treffen von Christen, Juden und Muslimen*, 20.

⁴ *Leitlinien für das Gebet bei Treffen von Christen, Juden und Muslimen*, 20.

⁵ *Leitlinien für das Gebet bei Treffen von Christen, Juden und Muslimen*, 20.

⁶ *Leitlinien für das Gebet bei Treffen von Christen, Juden und Muslimen*, 23.

celebrations and Catholic and ecumenical services, so that there is danger of confusion. Therefore in the archdiocese of Cologne no further celebrations should take place for pupils in schools.⁷

This decision by the cardinal is to be seen as the result of his considered religious pedagogy and pastoral judgment. The Hamburg auxiliary bishop Hans-Jochen Jaschke, spokesman on interreligious dialogue for the German Bishops' Conference, said a few days later on German radio that, in his rejection of this form of celebration in schools, Cardinal Meisner was basically keeping to the 2003 guidelines of the German Bishops' Conference. The prohibition of such celebrations came from concern for children and respect for non-Christian religions' different conceptions of God. In his view multireligious celebrations in school should nevertheless be possible in individual cases.⁸

However, the Cologne guidelines add another statement to the sentence quoted:

The image of God in non-Christian religions is not identical with the God, who is Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. For that reason services together with members of non-Christian religions are not possible. And thus, every community can only pray alone to its God. If this happens in common, the other group must remain present in silence.

In the first sentence of this statement the image of God in non-Christian religions is compared 'with the God, who is Father of our Lord Jesus Christ'. There is a confusion of levels here. Correctly, an *image* of God should be compared with another image of God. If we start from the difference between images of God, even among the three so-called 'Abrahamic religions', does it necessarily follow from this difference that prayers said together by Christians and Muslims, and interreligious celebrations in this sense, must count as 'impossible' from the Christian point of view?

In my opinion: hardly. Certainly the image of God in the Islamic faith is not identical with the image of God in the Christian faith—to simplify,

⁷ Available at www.koeln.de/artikel/INC/koelns-Kardinal-Meisner.

⁸ See *Katholische Nachrichten Agentur Pressebild* (11 December 2006) and *Frankfurter Rundschau* (9 December 2006).

and not to take into account the fact that, within both contemporary Islam and Christianity, there are extensive variations among images of God. And yet their respective images of God share such important elements that under certain circumstances Christians and Muslims can, and even should, pray to God together.

Against the background of these events, I would like to consider three questions. First: do Christians and Muslims believe in the same God? Secondly: can the prayer of Christians and the prayer of Muslims be considered a locus of their inner relatedness and closeness? Thirdly: can Christians and Muslims encounter one another in prayer?

Do Christians and Muslims Believe in the Same God?

The question of whether Muslims and Christians, in one way or another, can and should pray to God together, leads immediately to the question of whether they worship the same God. Before we go into this fundamental issue we ought first to take seriously the scarcely disputable fact that Islam and Christianity, together with Judaism, are monotheistic religions, that is, religions that confess the uniqueness and unity of God. In other words: Judaism, Christianity and Islam have a common root, as regards their respective confessions of God as one and unique, that distinguishes them from religions with mythical, impersonal or polytheistic concepts of God. Breaking away from myth characterizes monotheism as a particular path in the history of religions. This was first adopted by Israel and, following in Israel's footsteps, also by Christianity and Islam.

All the same, the considerable difference between the Christian and the Muslim confessions of God's unity should not thereby be relativised in any way, nor its significance undervalued. The Christian faith professes God's unity as a relationship of personal, triune love. The Muslim confession of God's unity dissociates itself explicitly, consciously and vehemently from this. If we want to live and promote honest, constructive relationships between Christians and Muslims, then we should on the one hand recognise the weight and importance of this difference between us, with all its consequences, but on the other hand keep in view the significance of the encounter between Christians and Muslims that is really possible, a meeting in the act of living faith, in the effective direction of the whole of life to the living God.



Benedict XVI prays at the Sultan Ahmed mosque in Istanbul

Islam is not simply a Christian heresy, as some theologians have presented it. Certainly the Qur'ān, and thereby Islam, knows the person of Jesus and recognises him as a prophet. Further, the Islamic faith is penetrated by many elements of biblical tradition. Nevertheless, deep differences in belief make Islam a religion distinct from Christianity. One of these is the Islamic denial of both the physical death of Jesus on the cross and the saving role and power of this crucifixion; and another is the rejection of the mystery of God as Trinity.

Clear recognition of these differences, and others related to them, contributes on both the Christian and Muslim sides to living the mutual relationship in its reality. Recognition of these differences—with all their effects on the totality of the present faith-world and faith-view—is, as the Dutch–Egyptian expert on Islam Christian van Nispen tot Sevenaer rightly maintains, an expression of mutual respect.⁹ But recognition of these serious differences does not mean that we should simply deny the depth and meaning of the encounter that Christians and Muslims can and should live in their faith in God.

⁹ Christian van Nispen tot Sevenaer, *Chrétiens et musulmans frères devant Dieu?* (Paris: l'Atelier, 2004), 106–109.

Recognition of the Differences—and of the Points in Common

The faith of Muslims—their witness to the unity and uniqueness of God, as well as their prayer, the whole of their worship, of which the alms tax, fasting and the pilgrimage to Mecca form part—is directed towards the living God, infinitely greater than all creation, who, as such, is at the same time infinitely close to His creatures. It is directed towards the Creator of heaven and earth, whose Being infinitely surpasses what we can imagine or name, and who is at the same time ‘nearer to [us] than [our] jugular vein’, as the Qur’ān itself expresses it.¹⁰

This God of Islamic faith has raised many true worshippers and servants of God, women and men, in the community of Muslim believers, the *umma*, who have all, following Muhammad’s call, been guided by Abraham, the father of obedience in faith. Abraham prays in Sura 26 (*al-Shu’arā*), 83: ‘O my Lord! Bestow wisdom on me, and join me with the righteous’. And in Sura 3 (*al ‘Imrān*), 190–195, it says:

Behold! In the creation of the heavens and the earth, and the alternation of night and day, there are indeed signs for men of understanding—men who celebrate the praises of Allah, standing, sitting and lying down on their sides, and contemplate the wonders of creation in the heavens and the earth, with the thought ‘Our Lord, not for naught hast Thou created all this! Glory to Thee! Give us salvation from the penalty of the fire. Our Lord! Any whom Thou dost admit to the fire, truly Thou coverest with shame, and never will wrongdoers find any helpers. Our Lord! We have heard the call of one calling us to Faith, “Believe ye in the Lord”, and we have believed. Our Lord! Forgive us our sins, blot out from us our iniquities, and take to Thyself our souls in the company of the righteous. Our Lord! Grant us what Thou didst promise unto us through Thy Messengers, and save us from shame on the Day of Judgment, for Thou never breakest Thy promise.’ And their Lord hath accepted of them, and answered them: ‘Never will I suffer to be lost the work of any of you, male or female’.

Christians can and must recognise that the God in whom Muslims believe is not a creature, not an idol, not merely a lofty idea or pure

¹⁰ Qur’ān 50:16. The English translation used here is Abdullah Yusuf Ali, *The Holy Qur-an, Text, Translation and Commentary* (Lahore: Sh. Muhammad Ashraf, 1934).

representation, but the God in whom Christians also believe. That is true, despite the stated differences in views about God, with all their far-reaching consequences with respect to what both sides profess as crucial and central to their respective faiths, and what as a result should be accepted and followed as God's paramount and decisive main commandment.

In *Lumen gentium*, the Constitution on the Church, Vatican II established that:

... the plan of salvation also includes those who acknowledge the Creator, in the first place amongst whom are the Moslems: these profess to hold the faith of Abraham, and together with us they adore the one, merciful God, mankind's judge on the last day.¹¹

This community in faith in the Creator, Preserver and Judge, and in prayer to the one God, according to the measure of Abraham's faith, allows Christians and Muslims an encounter in this faith, which enables us to stand 'together before God' in a real way. Indeed, then, it demands and implies that in this encounter we allow God absolute priority and thereby recognise that it is God Himself who binds us together and whose gift the encounter is. This is exactly what helps us also, Christians and Muslims, to live our profound differences in genuine respect for one another, while remaining true to our own consciences.

In so far as our faith is a real personal act and not simply a social inheritance taken on without thinking, and provided that, and in so far as, Christians and Muslims seek to live their relationship with God out of deepest conscience, we can also be together where we are different. We may say this because, and in so far as, we believe in one and the same God, and in this belief perceive the mystery presented by each person's journey with God. In this understanding, Christians and Muslims are brothers and sisters in God. Thus Pope John Paul II said to the Muslim representatives in Davao in the Philippines on 20 February 1981:

I deliberately address you as brothers we are especially brothers in God, who created us and whom we are trying to reach, in our

¹¹ *Lumen gentium*, 16.

own ways, through faith, prayer and worship, through the keeping of his law and through submission to his designs.¹²

In other words, real and profound differences in faith do not have to mean absolute separation as we stand together before God. Of course, if talking about God turns into a tournament or a battlefield, so to speak, very soon there is the danger of no longer talking about the living God who is, for all of us, first of all ineffable mystery. But what does 'mystery' really mean? In theological language, 'mystery' does not mean 'conundrum' but refers to something that grasps and encompasses us, rather than something we can grasp or encompass. The mystery invites us: not to eschew understanding, but to surpass what understanding can reach with its own power. Mystery is given through grace, through disinterested love. The mystery of divine love is in fact the real mystery, into which we enter by gift. It invites us to build a community of life with God Himself, which transcends every human idea about community and relationship.

Any physical unity, any unity which is not the unity of love, can be broken and divided. True unity is the unity experienced between persons, the unity of love. The more authentically persons are united through true love, the more unbreakable will their unity be. Experience of such unity in human love can allow us to accept the mystery of divine unity, the mystery of the greatest imaginable love.

Jesus Christ opens to us and shares with us the mystery of this love 'to the end'; better, 'to completion' (John 13:1). He receives himself as total love of the Father; in a similar way he gives himself without reserve to God, his Father, in complete surrender to his disciples, indeed to all people. So he reveals himself as Son of God from all eternity. The mystery of God's triune life invites to share in the divine life—a life of connectedness and endless love—in which the unity itself is the absolute unity of absolute love.

Abraham as Model

Certainly the Qur'ān and, following it, the whole tradition of Islamic religious thought, constantly emphasizes that it is not given to the

¹² *Interreligious Dialogue: The Official Teaching of the Catholic Church from the Second Vatican Council to John Paul II (1963–1995)*, edited by F. Gioia (Boston: Pauline Books and Media, 1997), n. 363.



Abraham and Isaac, by Caravaggio

human being to enter into the intimate life of God; the human being is not allowed to fathom the 'inner' life of the divine Being. But here too difference from the Christian belief does not mean total opposition; because it must not be forgotten how far the spiritual life of countless Muslim believers has been, and is, nourished by meditation on the 'Most Beautiful Names of God' (*asmā Allāh al-husnā*). Muslims have the task of imitating and living the 'attributes of God' (*sifāt Allāh*), as they await the appearance of the just and merciful Lord of Judgment.

The area in which Muslims come nearest to the mystery of God is undoubtedly, however, where they try to follow God's unsearchable will according to the model of Abraham. The Abraham of the Qur'ān was ready at God's command to sacrifice his own son, without being able humanly to understand God's decision in any way. Through his submission and dedication (this is the meaning of the Arabic verbal noun 'islām'), supported by believing trust, Abraham became the absolute model of the Muslim ('muslim': one who submits himself or herself to God).

In this unconditional and total submission Muslims can be granted a remarkable sense of the mystery of God: indeed in such a way that, according to Muslim faith, God's plan for a person can radically surpass what the believing Muslim is able to understand. This determination of the faithful Muslim to submit to the mystery of God's will reveals real greatness of faith, particularly in the face of the mystery of death.

Anyone who suggests that this attitude is simply a form of fatalism ignores its true meaning or misinterprets it. Christian van Nispen mentions in this connection the example of the notable Egyptian writer Tawfiq al-Hakim (1898–1987). In one of his novels al-Hakim describes how he experienced the trauma of his little son's early death. During the funeral he ran after his son's coffin and repeated, 'Your wisdom, Lord! Your wisdom, Lord!' (*hikmatuka, yā Rabb*).¹³

In Jesus Christ, the Christian faith discovers the unity of communion and love as the ultimate meaning of God's unity and uniqueness. For in him we discover that God is first of all non-violent, self-giving love, and that thereby divine love is the key to understanding the final meaning of all the qualities, or Names, of God. In Jesus we Christians also find the true meaning of the divine greatness—God's greatness makes itself known as the greatness of His self-sacrificing love, which surpasses all human imagination. God's true greatness reveals itself most radically when, in Jesus, He makes Himself the Messiah, the non-violent servant of each and every human being.

At the heart of Muslim faith is the resolute defense of divine greatness. One of the central expressions of the Islamic faith is '*Allāhu akbar*', God is ever greater, is great through and through, infinitely great. Alongside this it is sobering to note that again and again in the past there have been, and that there are also today worldwide, Muslim groups that strive for political ends in practice by using force, and in doing this do not consider themselves primarily as politicians, warriors or terrorists, but as consistent Muslims. These Muslims consider themselves to be, and behave as though they are, the only authentic, consistent Muslims. Groups of Muslims with these convictions sometimes develop an explicitly sectarian mentality. With that comes a radical fanaticism that can go as far as planning and carrying out suicide attacks in the

¹³ Van Nispen tot Sevenaer, *Chrétiens et musulmans*, 144.

name of Islam and can under some circumstances accept the killing of innocent civilians.

Christians may develop relations of dialogue with Muslims and thereby wish to make living and fruitful the religious and spiritual bonds between Islam and Christianity that have been mentioned. But, for the sake of the good cause, they should carefully consider what kind of Islam their dialogue partners advocate. Furthermore, how such persons or groups see their relationship to non-Muslim partners is important in the social and political realities of our time.

This prudence, which calls for a discerning knowledge, is also indispensable because there is scarcely a form of 'teaching office' in Islam that would correspond even approximately to the current evangelical or orthodox Christian form, and certainly not to the Catholic form of the teaching office. On the contrary: Muslims reject the idea of a teaching office decisively, and are on the whole proud of the fact that, as individuals or as group, they can work out and represent their own understanding of the Qur'ānic message.

Islamic Fundamentalism

Today we are witnessing groups of Muslims, some of them very influential, who promote a decidedly 'Islamist' view of Islam in the name of the Qur'ān, and seek to realise it by political, and sometimes militant and terrorist, means. Such groups consider to be infidels (*kuffār*)—who should be deprived of power, at least gradually, as it may be possible—not only non-Muslims, including Christians, but also Muslims who do not adhere to their own radical Islamist views, or even oppose them. These groups acknowledge and support democratic structures only to the extent that they serve the development of Islamic political power-structures, the final establishment of which throughout remains their objective.

It seems to me that there is no point in religious–spiritual dialogue with Muslims and Muslim groups who are attached to such a view of Islam, because the indispensable basic presuppositions for it to succeed are lacking. Genuine religious and spiritual dialogue in the context of our modern societies seems to me meaningful only with Muslims and Christians who share our fundamental secular, democratic values and, logically, therefore ultimately recognise the separation of politics and religion, and are not working towards an Islamic, or for that matter a

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Christian, Jewish and Muslim clergy at an interfaith service

Christian, state. An alleged religious and spiritual dialogue with proven Islamists does not serve the truth. It represents a deception and bafflement of genuine servants of God, whether of the Christian or Islamic faith.

In accordance with Jesus Christ's teaching, topically embodied in the documents of Vatican II, the Church calls its members to live in conformity with Christ and to make the final revelation of the true divine greatness in Jesus visible and tangible, by authentic and creative exercise of service to one's neighbour, especially where that neighbour is marginalised and forgotten. Then the greatness of God will become a place of fruitful spiritual contest, instead of being an object of quarrel and dispute, pride and unkindness between Christians and Muslims.

From all this it emerges that Christians and Muslims are invited, first of all by God, but then through the silent expectation of so many people, to be 'witnesses to the One and Unique', in the difference of their views of faith, in sometimes painful respect for this difference, and in encounter. Understood in this way encounter can create genuine solidarity, a certain unity—deep and mysterious also in the difference between the Christian and Muslim views of faith. This will to unity in difference honours God, to whom both Christians and Muslims pray,

and honours human beings, 'created in God's image' as the Bible says (Genesis 1:26–29), and placed as 'God's vicegerent on earth' (*khalifa*) as the Qur'ān (2:30) and the Bible (Psalm 8:6–9) teach.

Prayer as Space for Inner Relatedness and Closeness?

If Christians and Muslims are fundamentally brothers and sisters before the one God, and if Muslims, in the words of *Lumen gentium*, 'along with us adore the one and merciful God, who on the last day will judge mankind',¹⁴ then the spiritual efforts of the Muslim faithful cannot leave believing Christians unmoved. Pope John Paul II said on 22 December 1986, looking back on the meeting for prayer in Assisi already mentioned:

Every authentic prayer is under the influence of the Spirit 'who intercedes insistently for us ... because we do not even know how to pray as we ought', but he prays in us 'with unutterable groaning' and 'the one who searches hearts knows what are the desires of the Spirit' (Romans 8:26–27). We can indeed maintain that every authentic prayer is called forth by the Holy Spirit, who is mysteriously present in the heart of every person. This too was seen at Assisi: the unity that comes from the fact that every man and woman is capable of praying, that is of submitting oneself totally to God and of recognising oneself to be poor in front of him. Prayer is one of the means to realise the plan of God among men.¹⁵

In all religions prayer is the place, *par excellence*, where the faithful live and express their relationship with God. While the specific behaviour of the believer, in word and action, is the most radical realisation of his or her faith, prayer represents the very spirit of this faith. Often prayer is marked by the same paradox as everything that we say about God. If God is really at the same time 'the absolute', 'the whole', 'the wholly other' and 'the absolute mystery' which surpasses all understanding and speech, then prayer as relationship with this God is both fullness and richness, and yet emptiness and powerlessness.

Without starting to discuss other religions here, I think that what has been said applies both to Islam and to Christianity. In this I am

¹⁴ *Lumen gentium*, 16.

¹⁵ *Interreligious Dialogue*, n. 572 see *Ad gentes*, 3.

thoroughly aware of the danger and the reality of various forms of distortion in contemporary belief and prayer as practised in any specified religion. At all events we can speak fittingly about prayer only with respect and a certain restraint, because in doing so we touch on what is quite simple and at the same time ineffable, most sublime and most precious in the life of people of faith.

The religions differ with regard both to attitudes in prayer and to the content of prayer. From this it is understandable that Christian and Muslim prayer are not the same or interchangeable. This difference is to be respected. It is certainly also true that along with the possibility of an encounter in faith in the one living God there is also the possibility of such an encounter in prayer. Further, the obligation of Muslims and Christians to recognise one another before the one Creator and Judge, to share with one another and, in short, to encounter one another in dialogue, is likely constantly to evoke desire and perhaps to arouse awareness of the obligation—precisely in a world which largely forgets God—to witness to this common task, glorifying together before God, and constantly to ask God together for help to know our common responsibility and to carry it out better.

Obligation to Dialogue—Obligation to Prayer

It is no easy matter to hold the two ends of this paradox together somehow—the difference in views of faith and attitudes to prayer, on the one hand, and the commitment to encounter one another in prayer, on the other. But simply to make a contradiction out of this tension and paradox is inadmissible and highly damaging. This is the more true as today the tendency is predominant to present Islam and Christianity as fundamentally opposed to one another, even as completely and essentially in conflict with one another.

There is in Christianity, with its numerous denominations, an endless number of types and forms of prayer. There is liturgical prayer, the high point of which is the Eucharist or Holy Communion. There are the prayers that belong to the celebration of the various sacraments, and also the official communal prayer of the Church, the Divine Office. Finally there are all the forms of devout and free prayer carried on individually or congregationally. Christians know that in all their prayer they are taken up through God's Spirit into the movement of the risen Jesus to the Father, in which he receives everything from the

Father and hands everything over to the Father. So prayer is life, and life is prayer.

In Islam—Sunni with its four schools or rites, and Shi'a in its various forms—the ritual prayer (*salāt*) is first of all, according to the creed, the prime duty of religious observance. It forms the second Pillar of Islam. It is to be made five times a day, at fixed times and according to an established ritual. So its rhythm is stamped on daily life. At midday on Friday, this prayer has a still stronger obligation and a specifically communal character. It follows immediately after the Friday sermon. On the two great feasts, the breaking of the fast at the end of Ramadan and the sacrificial feast in Dhū'l-Hijja, the pilgrimage month, the morning prayer has a special significance, as do the prayers on particular occasions such as funerals.

Alongside official and ritually prescribed prayer, there is in Islam the 'Prayer of Invocation' (*du'ā*), a free prayer consisting chiefly of insistent requests and enquiries, but which may also contain praise, thanksgiving and petitions for forgiveness. It is free, which however does not mean that known texts cannot be found in it. Such prayer exists for all occasions and with all possible intentions. However, there is no complete separation between the prayer of invocation and the official ritual prayer, since within the ritual prayer there are moments when prayers of invocation can be inserted silently.

The nature of the prayer of invocation makes it possible to allow interreligious encounter a regular and recognised place in it. We can pray for one another before God, the Living and the One, Christians for Muslims and Muslims for Christians. Muslims have constantly said to me, 'Father, pray for me, pray for my children'. And when in return I ask the Muslims to pray for me, they are pleasantly surprised.

Can Christians and Muslims Encounter One Another in Prayer?

In the light of these facts a further question occurs: whether we, Christians and Muslims, can encounter one another in prayer. What seems to me to be of primary importance regarding such encounters is precisely what does not seem important, but is very close to everyday experience. Becoming self-aware and interiorly recognising the fact that we are standing 'together before God' are already a first step, initially invisible but effective all the same, towards living together in peace. This step signifies an inner approach to one another and at the

same time an opening to God. It can be strengthened through occasions of being together before God in silence. Further, each in his or her own prayer can, so to speak, 'carry the other before God', precisely during regular ritual or liturgical prayer. During or after such prayer there is the opportunity to pray specifically for one another before God.

An encounter in prayer can also take place through silent participation in the other's liturgical prayer, admittedly without full accompaniment in speech and symbolic gestures. Here it is a matter of discreet participation in liturgical prayer by the Muslim or Christian as guest, in an attitude of respect and prayerful presence.

Then, in personal contacts and especially in significant life events—important decisions, occasions of great joy or of pain and suffering—it is certainly meaningful and appropriate for Christians and Muslims who already know and value each other as spouses, relatives, neighbours, colleagues and fellow combatants in the struggle against dishonesty and injustices in society, to know that they stand together before God. It is meaningful and appropriate for them to put their feelings of gratitude, joy or apprehension and their requests into words together—words to the common Lord of our hearts and our fate.

Lastly there is the possibility at certain group meetings of opening an inner space of prayer together. How such prayers, spoken in common by Christians and Muslims as a group, can proceed will depend strongly on the type and nature of those taking part, and they will certainly always remain exceptional. For the practice of common prayer remains constantly marked by the element of simplification and reduction on both sides, and by the risk, one to be taken extremely seriously, of reducing prayer to the lowest common denominator of both faith-worlds. Here it is important to ensure that the common prayer of Christians and Muslims does not eventually replace all other practices of prayer within the religions, as can happen particularly quickly in schools and religiously mixed youth-groups.

We must maintain one thing above all. If prayer is to remain genuine, believers need constantly to remain bonded with their own faith-community's practice of prayer, with the 'sacred space' from which they come and with which they are familiar. Children and young people, particularly, must first of all grow in this space and put down deep roots in it. Those officially concerned with interreligious dialogue

have said useful things about this; collections of prayers from Christianity, Islam and other religions have been published. Above all, the genuineness of the encounter is important. It is not the spectacular that counts; what is decisive is whether what is done symbolically and expressed in words represents the reality and quality of the participants' meeting.

A particularly beautiful prayer is that of the 'Religious Brotherhood' in Cairo, which has met monthly for decades. At the beginning of a meeting all the participants, Muslims, Jews and Christians, say the following words together:

God, to You we turn,
 In You we place our trust,
 It's You for whose help we ask.
 Urgently we ask:
 Give us the power of faith in You
 And the power to act rightly through the guidance of Your
 prophets and messengers.
 And we ask You, O God, to make every one of us
 Loyal to his faith and his religion,
 Without narrow-mindedness which harms us ourselves,
 Without fanaticism that does injustice to our fellow
 citizens.
 We beseech You, our Lord,
 Bless our religious brotherhood.
 Grant that sincerity determines us here,
 Justice be the goal pursued here.
 Peace be the good we find here.
 O Thou Living, Thou Eternal
 To Thee be praise and honour.
 Amen.

Together before God

To the question of common prayer with Muslims there is no single and also no unambiguous answer. The possible times and places, the forms and particular situations of prayer are really too various. Moreover, the question of common prayer throws up countless fundamental questions of theology and of Christian-Islamic dialogue as such. With this question we are moving on to sensitive ground.

However, this fact will and should in no way prevent Christians from desiring encounter with Muslims before God and in prayer, from knowing themselves to be responsible before God jointly and mutually with Muslims. Nor should it prevent them from finding themselves together—wherever there are meaningful opportunities—for common supplication of God, for praise of the one whom both faith-communities confess as their Creator, Preserver and Judge, by whom they know themselves to be called in common responsibility.

In 1964, in his ground-breaking encyclical *Ecclesiam suam*, Pope Paul VI named four virtues that should characterize dialogue. These virtues can also be related to common prayer between Muslims and Christians. Paul VI wrote that there is need of clarity, meekness, confidence and prudence.¹⁶ Guided by these virtues, the common prayer of Christians and Muslims, in its various forms and on different occasions, can bring forth something lasting. It will advance the quality of living together on the part of Christians and Muslims as neighbours and also of many others marked (or even no longer marked) by religion in the increasingly pluralised societies of our one world. Thus it will offer worthy honour and praise to the Father of all.

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translated by Patricia Harriss CJ

¹⁶ *Ecclesiam suam*, n.81.