

## **Hope and Interreligious Dialogue**

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بسم الله الرحمن الرحيم

I would like to start with offer this greeting of peace be with you, سلام عليكم

For me, as I said, today is a very important day not only because I see many lovely people but also because being here brings back lots of good memories. And I would like to start by sharing the way in which my serious involvement in dialogue started. Of course, I was never in a situation to doubt dialogue but actually being involved in dialogue started with my encounter with the Focolare and I always thank the Focolare for being a very good window for understanding the Christian world. It was actually through the Focolare that I managed to make friends with many other movements, orders and denominations within Christianity, but the experience with the Focolare was very important.

### **Visiting Ampleforth Abbey**

When we were here in Hope University, which I think was in 1997, next to me was sitting Father Jonathan who was kind and we had good conversation. I told him that I was hoping to visit Christian seminaries because whilst I had studied Western philosophy at the Tehran University, my main training comes from being in a Muslim seminary. He suggested to visit Ampleforth, which is not a seminary but a place for formation of monks. After sometime together we visited Ampleforth Abbey where we stayed overnight. I was very impressed with the spiritual atmosphere of Ampleforth and beautiful chants of the monks and the fact that their life is built around prayer (like Muslims they pray five times a day) and work.

Abbot Timothy Wright, who used to be the abbot of Ampleforth, welcomed me there invited me to go again and visit them and so I went with my wife and children. Sometimes we stayed for a week in the guest house of the monastery. In this way, Father Jonathan helped me to get into the Benedictine world to which I will be referring later.

### **Attending Mariapolis**

When we came to our first meeting here, we were very impressed by the love that Focolare had for God and for people. Being away from Iran which is a religious country and from Qum which is a very religious place we felt that we were somehow strangers in this secular society but when we came here and saw our Focolare friends and their love for God it was

a source of power and assurance for us. Then we decided to take part in Mariapolis. The first Mariapolis that we attended was in the Lake District and we were the only Muslim family. Then we continued to meet up with the Focolare; we attended the Mariapolis in Stirling and again in the Lake District.

### **Going to Rome**

In 1999 we were invited to go to Rome. There was a celebration for the Eve of the New Millennium organized by the Vatican but also the Focolare was holding a convention for Muslims. There were, I think, more than 300 Muslims there. That was an important opportunity for us to get to know more about the Roman Catholic Church and the Vatican. We also went to Loppiano with other guests but we decided to stay longer. We stayed two or three nights. We had a very wonderful guide with us - Marite. We used to call her our local Chiara. She is very kind and like a mother, thinks about everything.

In 2000 again I visited Rome and this time Dimitri was my host. I really had wonderful time with Dimitri. I called him my encyclopedia on Christianity, full of information, experience and wisdom. So we visited many places in Rome. Then he took me to Assisi and I loved Assisi, a very spiritual and peaceful place. I also visited Focolare houses in Padova and Perugia.

### **Giving talks in Ampleforth Abbey**

One of the beautiful things that happened in my dialogues with the Benedictines in Ampleforth was that I had the opportunity to give some talks as well. After several years of friendship in 2000 when I had finished my PhD, I was in Manchester. Abbot Timothy asked me "Mohammad, would you like to give a talk on Islam?" I said that I would be happy to give a talk on Islam. "What are you going to say?," he asked. I replied "Maybe I will give an introduction to Islam, then I will talk about Islamic spirituality and then I will talk about some practical instructions given by Muslim mystics". Abbot Timothy said, "Mohammad, why don't you come three times and give three talks? The first would be an introduction to Islam, the second on Islamic spirituality, and the third on the practical instructions given by Muslim mystics". We fixed a date according to the English calendar, but it just so happened that the first talk coincided with the anniversary of when the prophet Mohammad passed away. So it was significant for me that on this day I would be meeting my Benedictine friends to talk about Islam. Thanks to God, the talk were received well and they used to tell me that what I was saying was in the Rule of Saint Benedict. At that time I had not read the Rule of Saint Benedict, but the reason for similarity was that the roots of the rule of Saint Benedict and all other spiritualities are the same i.e. our search for God and the guidance we have received from God through different channels.

### **Catholic Shi'a Dialogues**

In 2002 Abbot Timothy and Father Wulstan visited us in Qum and we had wonderful time there. They were very impressed by the openness of the Shi'a clerics because in the seminary we invited everyone to come and we always ran over time.

Once we were in the car driving from Qum to Tehran (I mention this because I want to say that sometimes you do not know the significance of the moment and this is very important to know that these moments can change your life and the life of many people.) So, we were in the car and talking about organizing some sort of dialogue, Catholic-Shi'a dialogue in the UK. They thought it would be a very good idea and we could hold it in Ampleforth. This was in 2002. I said I would love to come to Ampleforth, of course, but large part of our community live in London. So I suggested having one day in London and then the rest of it could be continued in Ampleforth. They said they would have to go back to the UK and find a good partner for the project who could host us in London. Abbot Timothy and Fr Wulstan went back and they found that Heythrop College would be interested in hosting our dialogue. That was good not only because we had a place to host us but also it brought the academic input of Jesuits to our dialogue.

So the first Catholic Shi'a Dialogue meeting took place in July 2003. It was considered by *The Tablet* to be "the first major British encounter of Catholic theologians with Iranian Shi'a thinkers and theologians." (These were the exact words of *The Tablet*.) We decided to publish a book based on the papers. We also planned another visit. So in 2004 the book was published: *Catholic and Shi'a in Dialogue: Studies in Theology and Spirituality*. Then in 2004 Abbot Timothy and Father Bonaventura and two people from Heythrop College, Anthony Mahony and Michael Barnes SJ, visited us. During their visit we planned the second round of our dialogue for 2005. So once again in 2005 we had a day's discussion in Heythrop, followed by a few days in Ampleforth. This time our dialogue was based on reason and faith. So again we decided to publish our discussions in a second volume, *Reason and Faith, in Theory and Practice*. A third round of dialogue took place, this time at Heythrop College and Worth Abbey, since Abbot Timothy was no longer abbot at Ampleforth. This time an Anglican lady was also involved in the planning. After that we published: *A Catholic Shi'a Dialogue: Ethics in Today's Society*. Then, unfortunately, for some time we were not able to continue with this pattern of dialogue because Abbot Timothy moved to Rome.

The fourth round of Catholic Shi'a dialogue took place in Rome at St Anselmo. This time our dialogue was based on prayer and spirituality. Following this we published the book: *Monks and Muslims, Monastic and Shi'a Spirituality in Dialogue*. The first three publications were printed in the UK, whilst the fourth was published in the United States by Liturgical Press which belongs to Saint John's University, which has a Benedictine foundation.. And then the fifth round of talks were planned to be in Qum. So we had it in Qum and ten Christians from eight countries, including the Abbot Primate and Abbot Timothy, came and our theme this time was friendship. That was a very good time because we really felt friendship. I cannot express it in words. You just had to be there to see how much God gifted us with real sense of friendship. A publication followed this round too: *Monks and Muslims (2) Creating Communities of Friendship*. A sixth round of talks then took place, this time in October 2015 in Assisi. The dialogue in Assisi was based on the

idea of community because I think community is very important and the book of this sixth round is coming out soon in London.

### **The relation with other groups and denominations**

But this was only one aspect of what we have been doing. We were then involved in dialogue with Jesuits, Anglicans and Mennonites. We had six rounds of dialogue with Mennonites who are Anabaptist Christians. We also took groups to visit different branches of Christianity. Twice my wife and I took a group of ladies to Canada to the Canadian Mennonite University. Last year we took a group of people to the United States which was historic: a group of 10 ladies from Qum going to the United States. We had very good time with our Mennonite friends at the Eastern Mennonite University.

### **Training students for dialogue**

About 6 years ago the seminary of Qum, which is the largest Shi'ite seminary in which we have more than 70 thousand Iranian seminarians and more than 10 thousand international students from more than 100 countries, accepted my suggestion to establish a new centre. This centre is called the International Institute for Islamic Studies and where people come to specialize. Our language is Farsi but for this institute they have to be fluent in English or Arabic. The programmes are designed in such a way that they understand Islam in the modern context and they are not only able to serve our community abroad but also to build bridges, to be active in dialogue.

Now we send our students to different places so that they can get into this world of dialogue. For example, I sent two of my students to the Saint Ottilien Monastery in Munich in Germany to spend five weeks with the monks, to share in their experience. One of our very good and special experiences happened last February/March when we took a group of 7-8 ladies to Loppiano. This was their second visit of Loppiano. The first visit was very short; we just stayed there for one night but we had several days in Rome and Castel Gandolfo. The second time I wanted them to stay longer in Loppiano so that they can feel what is life is like in Loppiano especially for those who go for formation. So our Focolare friends, who also had visited us in Iran in May 2014, worked hard to develop a programme. It was new for them to have Muslims in Loppiano for such programme. My wife and I took a group of six women from the seminary to Loppiano. We stayed for almost a week, but their programme was for four weeks. They studied for half a day and worked another half a day. So it was a very nice experience and we have kept up the contact with Loppiano, wanting to see what will be the next thing that God wants us to do together. One of the beautiful moments was when we met in Sophia University with Piero Coda and his students. He was very happy with the way that the session on dialogue and wisdom had gone.

### **My understanding of Focolare**

I have been observing the Focolare movement for years, from 1997 until now and I took every opportunity to visit them not only in different Focolare houses in the UK, from

London, Liverpool, Leeds up to Glasgow and Edinburgh but also in other countries, such as Poland, Philippines, Lebanon, the United States, Canada. In Italy, I visited them in different cities. So for me a few things were established as facts.

One of the beautiful things I found in the Focolare which is very important for me and I do not know how much the people of the Focolare themselves know this or how important is for them but for me it is very very important: that is, that you always find the same spirit. A person who you have known for years and a person who meets you for the first time behave almost the same way. Yes, a person that you know, of course, you have more history with each other, but you find the same love and attitude in the one that you have newly met.

The people of the Focolare may look different, some are eastern, some are western, they speak different languages but they act the same. This is very important for me because it is similar to some of the characteristics of the companions of the twelfth Imam which are mentioned in the narrations. We Shi'a believe in 12 imams and the twelfth Imam is alive but we cannot identify him as he is hidden in 'occultation' and will come at the end of time. According to Islamic hadiths, he will come with Jesus. The two of them will come together to establish justice. In our narrations about the companions of the twelfth Imam something is written which I have found it in the Focolare. It says:

كانما رباهم اب واحد و ام واحدة

It is as if they are brought up by the same father and mother.

So maybe someone from China, someone from the US, someone from Iran, someone from Iraq, someone from Brazil may speak different languages and they are of different colours, but when you look at their understanding, mentality, spirituality you think that they are brought up by the same father and mother. And I was able to see this in the Focolare and it was very important for me. It shows that, first of all, something like this is possible and, secondly, God through Chiara has gifted the Focolare with this spirit which is very important. Then the hadith says:

قلوبهم مجتمعهم بالمحبه و النصيحة

"Their hearts are united with love and wishing good for each other".

### **Some of my reflections on dialogue**

So gradually, as I was engaged in interreligious dialogue, I tried to reflect on Islamic teachings about this. Now I will just mention some of these reflections which I thought might be interesting to you and we might be able to work on in order to have a common spirituality which would be appealing to Muslims, Christians and other faith communities.

The first reflection actually came to my mind in Castel Gandolfo and then developed further in Loppiano. I said in our meetings: "It seems that in the world we have two major

problems: one problem is that there are people who have never experienced love for God. For us it is very difficult to understand how much a person suffers when he has no God in his or her life, because we have always been gifted with this. But a person who does not believe in God and does not have love for God and is not sure that God loves him, is a stranger in this world. He just feels he does not belong anywhere. It is like an orphan who has been an orphan from all different possible angles. They suffer a lot. We have joint responsibility to call them towards God. If I as a Muslim or a Christian alone call them towards God I do not think it has the same power and attraction as it would if all of us together called them towards God, because then they would not say this is something sectarian or biased. We have to call them towards God together. Unfortunately the sad reality is that sometimes either we ourselves are in conflict or that some people try to make us clash, so that our voice does not reach anyone. In fact, some people say “Look at these religious people, they are the source of all the troubles”, which is not the case. However, this is what some of the irresponsible media try to say, that religious people create all the problems and that if we get rid of religion we will not have any problem. So we should do the opposite. We should show that we together can call everyone towards good and towards God.

Another problem in the world is found in the people who love God but in a way which is not right. It seems that we have two types of love: possessive love for God is one type. “I love God but I want to own God, I want to possess God. That is my God not your God. You have no rights to claim that you love my God.” Even in some countries nowadays Muslims and Christians have difficulty over whether they can use the name God or Allah, which is ridiculous. I think the root is either ignorance or ego: “I want to have monopoly over God. Instead of me becoming an agent for God, I want to make God serve my interest. I want a god that can justify my selfish work.” You see people refer to God to justify slavery, terrorism, killing and injustice: a god who is brought down to the level of some selfish people, of course, can do that. A god in that manner can be very harmful and destructive because that is not really a god. It is a human being who is projecting his ego onto God.

But another type of love for God is when you try to be possessed by God. Instead of bringing God to the level of human beings and making Him god of a person, or a tribe or a sect, you try to rise to become closer to God so that you will be a Godly person. We do not want to have a god who is a person with all the limitations, all the selfishness and egoism. We want to be like God and the more we go towards God, the more we are able to love everyone. We are able to wish good for everyone because we are no longer human beings. We are now vicegerents or agents of God. We are the people who are speaking and doing everything according to will of God.

So we have a choice to make: either we want to possess God, possess religion and have the monopoly on it, in which case all the conflicts, all the restrictions and limitations will continue, or, we want to be owned by God and possessed by God and so become Godly

and then from God's perspective see all people as children of God. We would not, in fact, be limited to viewing just human beings in this way. We would love animals and we would love plants because for us everything created by God is sacred. For or a person who has brought God to the level of human beings, however, there is no such thing as sacredness, except for their own interest. That is the only thing which is sacred for such people. Nothing else is sacred.

Then I was able to find a good comparison between Prophet Abraham and Satan. You know that Satan worshiped God for so many years, according to Islamic tradition it was for 6 thousand years. He had no problem in worshipping God. Indeed he was enjoying worshipping God a lot. But then came a real test and that was when God asked him to prostrate himself before Adam. Your relationship with God is only really tested when another person is involved, because between us and God there can be no problem, but when God says that you have to love people starting with your wife, your husband, your children, your neighbours or strangers, that is when the problem comes. So, Satan for 6 thousand years worshipped God and I always say that if you can do something for 6 thousand years it means you can do it forever. But when God asked him to prostrate himself before Adam all the problems which were hidden appeared. He said "Why I should prostrate myself before Adam?" He refused. He insisted and so he was rejected by God.

But the opposite attitude was then seen in Prophet Abraham, who is very important for all of us and a very important meeting point for us. Abraham had the habit of inviting people to share a meal with them. He was very hospitable. Sometimes when he did not have a guest he used to go out looking for a guest. But he also used to shut the door so that no one would disturb his family. There is a story which says that once when Abraham returned home he found a person who looked like a human being in his house and he was surprised: "I shut the door and no one had made any arrangement to be in my house. Who is this person?" So he asked that person: "With whose permission did you enter this house?" Abraham did not fight the person. He gave him chance to defend himself. This is very important. So he asked him a question and the reply was: "With the permission of the Lord of this house." Abraham did not say: "I am the lord of this house." No, he realized that it was God who had sent this person, because we are not the lord of this house or any house. Then that person who was an angel told him: "Someone has been chosen by God to be His friend and I have come to inform him." This is very important. It is, I think, a big test for imams, for priests for everyone. If you are in the situation in which you are someone like Abraham with the merits that he had (he was an apostle of God and he had many other good qualities) where he knows the people around him to be either without faith or if they do have faith they depend on his guidance, and this angel is found in his house and he says "There is someone who has been chosen by God as His friend and I want to inform him" what would your understanding be? You would say "It is me. Thank you very much for bringing this news to me". You would not even wait for him to say "Who was that person?" You think "It must be me". But Abraham did not think like that. Abraham said "Who is that person who is chosen by my God as His friend, so that I can serve him until I

die?” This is important. This is the quality that we religious people, we people who love God should have. Are we able to volunteer for serving people who love God and are loved by God or do we say that we are the only people who love God as no one else has done anything for God? Abraham volunteered to serve any person. He did not say “First of all let me see who that person is; if he looks like me, if he thinks like me then I am going to serve him?” No, it was not important for him. Any person who is chosen by my Lord as His friend, I am going to serve him until I die. Then the angel said: “it is you”. And again Abraham did not say “Thank you”. He said: “Why?” Why has God chosen me as His friend?” Because he did not think of himself as being special in any way. So there is a big contrast between Abraham and Satan.

So now it is a big question for us. Do we want to follow the path of Satan in worshipping God in a way which is selfish, in a way which has no place for any other person or any other group, or do we want to serve God in a way which can accommodate others? This is a big test, I think, for religious people. We have people who have no experience of loving God and we have people who have a strong experience of loving God but in a very misguided way. So this was one of my reflections.

The second reflection that I am sharing with you is one that I had very recently. So the first was a few years ago, whereas the reflection I will share now is very recent.

When we were in Loppiano last February, one day we were sitting with some priests. There is a house in Loppiano for the priests. During our visit to them I said: “In my understanding there is a way that God has designed to guide us. In the course of history God has sent different prophets in different times, different places and different languages. God sent Moses, Noah, Jesus, Prophet Mohammad in different times, different places and they spoke different languages. Sometimes they addressed the same issues and sometimes different issues depending on the requirement of the time, but these are teachers, guides who are sent by the same authority. They do not have their own independent authority or educational system. They are just sent by one God but the requirements of actual human historical life forced them to speak differently. But I think that at the end of time when Jesus, Imam Mahdi and perhaps other leaders all come together, we will not have different schools, one school for Jesus, one school for Prophet Mohammad, one school for Moses or other prophets in which they teach separately, using different text books, different syllabuses. No, our hope is that at the end of time we would have only one school and that is the school of God, but we would have different teachers, different classes, but one syllabus. That is what we are going to reach, that unity is going to be established and it is up to us to make it happen sooner or than later, but I think that it is the plan of God that is going to happen. But God does not force His plan. We can make it faster or we can do nothing and leave it for other people to do it”.

As a Shi’a cleric, I think the experience and the spirituality of the Focolare can play a great role in reaching that level of unity. I said to my friends, the priests, “Every one of us is like



a drop of water. As drops, what can we do? Even one million or billion drops of water cannot do that much. But if these drops of water become united then you can have a nice lake and for me the Focolare is a nice lake built by thousands of drops getting together. But we should have an ocean. Now we have this lake and we should reach a point that we have an ocean of human beings who are united". I said "I do not know whether this lake is going to grow and become an ocean or if there will be similar lakes which will merge and become that ocean. No matter how is this going to happen, our prayer is that this lake will grow and that we will reach the point of having that ocean of unity. If one person as a drop of water can be an image of God and can reflect God then you can see what united humanity can do. The way that we can reflect God when we are united is different. A drop can reflect the sun but an ocean can reflect the sun in a very different way".

So we hope that our Focolare friends and all people who have the same mentality will day by day become more united and more strong and that we will try to do whatever we can to spread this message which is no longer the message of one group: this is message of all of us and I see no problem in saying as a Muslim that I love the Focolare, I respect the Focolare and that the spirituality of unity is useful for all human beings.