

THE SCHOLARSHIP OF INTER-FAITH ENGAGEMENT IN THE WRITINGS OF SELECTED CONTEMPORARY MUSLIM SCHOLARS

Fatmir Shehuⁱ

ⁱ Assistant Professor, Department of Usul al-Din & Comparative Religion, Kulliyah of Islamic Revealed Knowledge and Human Sciences, International Islamic University Malaysia. fatmir@iium.edu.my

Abstract	<p><i>The acts of pride, arrogance, superiority, selfishness, enmity and disrespect to others have created since the very beginning of human history a very hostile environment. It has been an immense obstacle for the construction of a friendly and mutual engagement among people. Such engagement can take place in different aspects of peoples' daily activities, like religious, civilizational, political, sociological, cultural, economic and so on. The most important engagement concerning peoples' spiritual and material aspects of life, is inter-faith engagement. The thrust of this study will be on the scholarship of inter-faith engagement in the writings of four selected contemporary Muslim scholars - Isma^oil Raji al-Faruqi, Murad Wilfried Hofmann, ^oIrfan ^oAbdul Hamid Fattah and Mahmoud Ayoub. Inter-faith engagement as a scholarship has been introduced in our contemporary time. But the guidelines for this scholarship have been addressed in the Quran and applied by the Prophet (PBUH) fourteen centuries ago. Therefore, this paper has firstly attempted to discuss the scholarship of inter-faith engagement as promoted by the Quran and its application in the lifetime of Prophet Muhammad (PBUH). Secondly, the approaches of three selected contemporary Muslim scholars towards this scholarship have been explored and dealt with. The descriptive and analytical methods have been employed in the entire study. The findings of this study will assist people of different religious and cultural backgrounds to have better understanding of others while dealing with them.</i></p> <p>Keywords: <i>Muslim, scholars, contemporary, inter-faith, understanding.</i></p>
-----------------	--

INTRODUCTION

The global world of our time is witnessing many complicities and challenges in all aspects of relationships, like political, social, cultural, religious¹, etc. In order to bring peace and harmony to our society we have to know as well as understand one another before we enter into a conversation or communication. People have to dialogue with one another, regardless of their background. However, religious people have a different way of dialogue, which can take place through inter-religious or inter-faith engagement.

Although the real meaning of religious conviction is related to the inner aspect of people's consciousness about existence and life, which assists them to put a balance between the spiritual and material needs and progress, yet people present this religious conviction differently. For instance, in Islam, the Arabic word *iman*, which is translated usually in English as "faith", has a greater scope than this word. It is a religious conviction that denotes "a spiritual intuition by which man's consciousness is filled whenever it seeks the universe and realizes that the infinity of space is unreachable, and whenever it seeks to encompass all being within itself, realizing that every species in existence lives, changes,

¹ Religion is a way of life that focuses primarily on the immutable aspects of life and existence, and governs all aspects of a religious adherent's life, the seen and the unseen. Whereas the political, social, and economic systems that do marginalize or negate religion, concern only about certain variable social aspects of our worldly life without refereeing to the afterlife.

and dies in accordance with laws and patterns, and that all existence realizes the divine pattern and fulfils the cosmic laws of its Lords and Creator".² Thus, *iman* deals with knowledge and conviction (Isma'īl Raji al-Faruqi, 1998) of the people, who are eager to know of and search about the truth with the help of their reason according to their capacity.

The Quran addresses *iman*, as the intellectual discourse of human character (Sayyid Abul A'la Maududi, 2004), which denotes that "a particular belief, thought, or doctrine has been rooted so deep and strong in the mind and heart that there is no place for adverse thought" (Abul A'la Maududi, 2004). However, there are two different aspects of this *iman* (Abul A'la Maududi, 2004) based on its usage: (a) religious *iman* denotes that one's conviction will govern both aspects of life, religious and worldly or *al-dini* and *al-duniawi*; and (b) worldly *iman* denotes that one's conviction will govern the worldly affairs only.³

Hence, the focus on one aspect of progress will lead humanity to the destruction of more important core values, i.e., spiritual values of one's religious conviction, or faith,⁴ which help society to sustain and balance its progress and development as well as to create a friendly relationship between the people regardless of their race, colour, cultural, faith, and so on.

The multifaceted understanding and implementation of religious conviction or faith by the people in general and religious adherents, like, Jews, Christians, Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists, etc., in particular, have led to the development of a multi-faith community. In order to sustain peace and harmony in such type of community, there is a need for the construction of inter-faith engagement. However, the focus of discussion in this paper will be on the understanding of inter-faith engagement with others according to the Quran, the Prophet (PBUH), and the writings of four selected contemporary Muslim scholars: Isma'īl Raji al-Faruqi, Murad Wilfried Hofmann, Irfan 'Abdul Hamid Fattah, and Mahmoud Ayoub.

QURAN ON INTER-FAITH ENGAGEMENT

The Quran, which means "recitation," was orally revealed to Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) by the Angel Jibril AS, according to Islamic belief. It did not descend on earth in scriptural form strictly considered, but the message itself confirms to be from a "Heavenly Book"⁵ preserved in the presence of God (Frederick M. Denny, 1985). It was revealed by Allah SWT to humankind as a remembrance and guidance, the preservation of which He has vouchsafed.⁶ The Quran,⁷ thus, is the divine guidance of Allah SWT revealed to benefit those who follow it among human beings in order to achieve a progress in both aspects of their life, *al-dunia* and *al-akhirah*. Also, the Quran is revealed as a divine

² This is the statement of Isma'īl Raji al-Faruqi in the conclusion of the translated work of Muhammad Husayn Haykal, *The Life of Muhammad*, reprinted by Islamic Book Trust, Malaysia, 2009, p. 564.

³ This means that one's faith is established and developed according to his/her perception and application of the reality on which his/her individual and communal progress of spiritual and material life is based.

⁴ The spiritual values are in their nature ethical and moral, which enable people to build their own identity and personality that will help them to attach themselves to a particular way of life, called religion. This inclination is done through their religious conviction, which has been developed as a result of their altruistic and conscious reasoning of their being and the being of others who really exist and live like they do as well as interact with them in their day-to-day endeavours. The adherents of revealed religions and manmade religions or ideologies, i.e., Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Buddhism, Hinduism, and Secularism, etc., have attached themselves to these different ways of life according to their conviction or faith.

⁵ "Nay, this is a Glorious Quran, (Inscribed) in a Tablet Preserved! (Lawhin Mahfuz)" (al-Quran. al-Buruj: 21-22). For the translation of Quranic verses the author will refer to: A. Yusuf Ali, *The Holy Quran: Text, translation and commentary*, (Maryland: Amana Corporation, 1989).

⁶ "We have, without doubt, sent down the Message; and We will assuredly guard it (from corruption)" (al-Quran. al-Hijr: 9).

⁷ The Holy Quran is the Word of God, the Lord of the worlds, which has descended from the High Throne of God, in which God's Beautiful Names are manifested at the highest level. It is God's commands for humankind as a whole (not for the Muslims alone), and it is God's Communication to all the creatures of the heavens and the earth. It is also the book of wisdom containing all the necessary verdicts and principles for man's judgments in order to achieve harmony and happiness both in *al-dunya* (earthly world) and *al-akhirah* (the world to come).

guidance squarely aimed at man, which calls itself “guidance for mankind - هُدًى لِلنَّاسِ” (al-Quran. al-Baqarah: 185) (Fazlur Rahman, 1994), and “guidance for pious people – هُدًى لِّلْمُتَّقِينَ” (al-Quran. al-Baqarah: 2). Although, the Quran is a divine guidance revealed to humanity at large, yet most of them do not treat it justly.⁸ Those who treat Quran fairly are the pious, obedient and devoted people, who call themselves real Muslims.⁹

The Quran is, for those who believe in it among human beings, who then are called Muslims, the foundation of their society and its constitution (Mahmoud Ayoub, 1983). However, the community established by the Prophet (PBUH) based on the Divine Commandments extracted from the Quran, consisted of people with different religious, cultural, and social backgrounds. Even today, the Muslim community co-exists with other communities characterized by multiplicity of faiths, cultures, races, and languages. Does this mean for a Muslim that he/she does not have to engage with others who are part of the society, but different in terms of faith? Also, does this mean that a Muslim has to live alone in isolation without sharing his/her values and knowledge? What does the *Quran* say about a Muslim’s engagement with others?

The Quran addresses to humanity at large and Muslims in particular, the divine plan of Allah SWT towards their creation as a community with differences in terms of their culture, tradition, and language, in order to know and engage with one another. The main criteria that should prevail in this engagement, is the sense of mutual respect, righteousness and better understanding of one another. Allah SWT says:

﴿يَا أَيُّهَا النَّاسُ إِنَّا خَلَقْنَاكُمْ مِنْ ذَكَرٍ وَأُنْثَىٰ وَجَعَلْنَاكُمْ شُعُوبًا وَقَبَائِلَ لِتَعَارَفُوا إِنَّ أَكْرَمَكُمْ عِنْدَ اللَّهِ أَتْقَاكُمْ﴾

Which means, “O mankind!¹⁰ We created you from a single (pair) of a male and a female, and made you into nations and tribes, that ye may know each other (not that ye may despise each other). Verily the most honoured of you in the sight of Allah is (he who is) the most righteous of you” (al-Quran. al-Hujurat: 13).

This verse shows that *din al-Islam* promotes the utmost amicable inter-faith engagement among humans, where mutual respect and better understanding of one another should dominate (Jamil Farooqui, 2004).

The wisdom behind the creation of humankind from a single pair of male and female and their division into tribes and nations, constructs the bases for inter-faith engagement, where people can identify, know, engage, understand and coexist with one another. The humans’ physical features, languages, customs, cultures, mores, as well as the geographical distribution on earth (Mahmud °Awan, 1995) have paved the way for mutual self-identification. Furthermore, the Quran shows to the Muslims that amicable inter-faith engagement with others requires wisdom and fair exhortation:

﴿ادْعُ إِلَى سَبِيلِ رَبِّكَ بِالْحُكْمَةِ وَالْمَوْعِظَةِ الْحَسَنَةِ وَجَادِهِمْ بِالنِّبَاتِيِّ هِيَ أَحْسَنُ﴾

⁸ Allah SWT says: ﴿وَلَقَدْ صَرَّفْنَا لِلنَّاسِ فِي هَذَا الْقُرْآنِ مِنْ كُلِّ مَثَلٍ فَأَبَى أَكْثَرُ النَّاسِ إِلَّا كُفُورًا﴾

Which means, “And We have explained to man, in this Quran, every kind of similitude: yet the greater part of men refuse (to receive it) except with ingratitude!” (al-Quran. al-Isra’: 89).

⁹ A real Muslim is he, who in a sincere manner, submits himself/herself totally to Allah’s Will and obeys His divine commandments revealed in the Quran and reflected in the Sunnah. It is a Muslim’s inner conviction based on his/her total submission and obedience that will dictate his continuous activities throughout his/her worldly life. If he/she listens to this conviction then happiness and felicity in *al-duniawi* and *al-ukhrawi* life awaits him/her.

¹⁰ The term “mankind” includes all humanity even though they differ among one another in terms of race, colour, culture, location, beliefs and classes.

Which means, “Invite (all) to the Way of thy Lord with wisdom and beautiful preaching; and argue (dialogue) with them in ways that are best and most gracious: (amicable conversation)” (al-Quran. al-Nahl: 125).

﴿وَلَا تُجَادِلُوا أَهْلَ الْكِتَابِ إِلَّا بِالَّتِي هِيَ أَحْسَنُ﴾

Which means, “And dispute ye not with the People of the Book, except with means better (than mere disputation)” (al-Quran. al-^oAnkabut: 46).

﴿وَلَا تَسْتَوِي الْحَسَنَةُ وَلَا السَّيِّئَةُ ادْفَعْ بِالَّتِي هِيَ أَحْسَنُ فَإِذَا الَّذِي بَيْنَكَ وَبَيْنَهُ عَدَاوَةٌ كَأَنَّهُ وَلِيٌّ حَمِيمٌ﴾

Which means, “Nor can Goodness and Evil be equal. Repel (Evil) with what is better:¹¹ then will he between whom and thee was hatred become as if he was thy friend and intimate!” (al-Quran. Fussilat: 33-35).

PROPHET MUHAMMAD (PBUH) ON PROMOTING INTER-FAITH ENGAGEMENT

Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) has promoted friendly interactions and communication with followers of other faiths 14 centuries ago. His life is full of examples of tolerance and non-violent ways of politely communicating Allah’s Word to the others (Muhammad Shafiq & Mohammed Abu-Nimer, 2007), during the Meccan and Medinan periods of his Prophecy. He (PBUH) always favoured polite interaction and engagement with Muslims and others. In his Prophetic life, the beautiful manners of the *Quran* while conversing¹² with followers of other faiths,¹³ have been reflected.

The Prophet (PBUH) initiated and accounted many inter-faith engagements with the followers of other faiths. However, the most important engagement that took place between the Prophet (PBUH) and others, was the event that occurred in Medina when a delegation of the Christians of *Najran* (including religious and political leaders) came to the Prophet (PBUH).¹⁴ Their coming to Medina was to establish a peace covenant with the Muslim state that would guarantee for them religious freedom and social independence (Mahmoud Ayoub, 1991). In other words, the Christians of *Najran* wanted to clarify their position in the Islamic State and that of the state towards them (Isma’il Raji al-Faruqi, 1998).

The Prophet’s exemplary attitude towards the inter-faith engagement is shown since at the moment he welcomed the Christians of *Najran* in the mosque.¹⁵ Thus, the Prophet’s mosque was used for this inter-faith engagement, where the Prophet (PBUH) called upon them to recognise the Unity of God and the spiritual unity of mankind, as a part of his prophetic mission. On the other hand, Christians of *Najran* were defending their trinitarianist doctrine as well as the divinity of Jesus. However, most Christians of this delegation asked the Prophet (PBUH) about the Prophets whom he believed in (Muhammad Husayn Haykal, 1986). Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) addressed them:

¹¹ The phrase “what is better” is expressed by the Holy Quran as an important way to deal with others while conversing with them in order to arrive at the acquired knowledge about the real Truth. It is important to know that the “goodness” expresses a peaceful method, as the “evil” expresses a violent one. Thus, the Quran has chosen the non-violent method and the tolerant way for the construction of inter-faith engagement between Muslims and others.

¹² In his encounter with Christians, the Prophet (PBUH) used the *hikmah* (wisdom). The spiritual, intellectual and physical qualities inherent in the *Hikmah* are an integral part of the *sirah* and the *Sunnah* of the Prophet (PBUH). In order to build a fruitful engagement with followers of other faiths, Muslims ought to study, analyze, understand, and practice the *sirah* of the Prophet as well as his *Sunnah* (Kalim Siddiqui, 1996).

¹³ Once Aishah RA was asked about the Prophet’s spiritual and moral standing towards inter-faith engagement with others. She asked: “Do you not read the Quran?” They replied: “Yes” She then said: “The Prophet (PBUH) is the living Quran” (Hadith. Abu Dawud. Book of Prayer, Chapter on Night Prayer. No. 1342).

¹⁴ They approached the Prophet (PBUH) after hearing that Islamic state of Medina founded by Muhammad (PBUH) became increasingly recognised as the principle religio-political power in Arabia.

¹⁵ The *Najran* Christians had an amicable inter-faith communication with the Prophet (PBUH) for three days in Medina; and they stayed as the Prophet’s guest in the mosque where they also offered their prayers.

﴿قُولُوا آمَنَّا بِاللَّهِ وَمَا أُنزِلَ إِلَيْنَا وَمَا أُنزِلَ إِلَىٰ إِبْرَاهِيمَ وَإِسْمَاعِيلَ وَإِسْحَاقَ وَيَعْقُوبَ وَالْأَسْبَاطِ وَمَا أُوتِيَ مُوسَىٰ وَعِيسَىٰ وَمَا أُوتِيَ النَّبِيُّونَ مِن رَّبِّهِمْ لَا نُفَرِّقُ بَيْنَ أَحَدٍ مِّنْهُمْ وَنَحْنُ لَهُ مُسْلِمُونَ﴾

Which means, "Say ye: 'We believe in Allah, and the revelation given to us, and to Ibrahim, Ismacil, Ishaq, Ya^cqub, and the Tribes, and that given to Moses and Jesus, and that given to (all) prophets from their Lord: We make no difference between one and another of them: and we bow to Allah (in Islam)" (al-Quran. al-Baqarah: 136).

From this amicable inter-faith engagement can be derived the following important principles: first, the Prophet's tolerant stance by allowing the Christian delegation to perform their prayers in his mosque; second, the construction of an inter-faith relationship based on mutual respect and friendly engagement between the Prophet (PBUH) and the Christians of Najran after they theologically disagreed had taken place; third, the Prophet (PBUH), via the Quranic Text, has laid down a unique principle regarding the inter-faith engagement between Muslims and others;¹⁶ and fourth, the universal mission of Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) rejects compulsion: "Let there be no compulsion in religion" (al-Quran. al-Baqarah: 256), while engaging with the followers of other faiths.

SCHOLARSHIP OF INTER-FAITH ENGAGEMENT IN THE WRITINGS OF SELECTED CONTEMPORARY MUSLIM SCHOLARS

The Muslim scholars have built their approach towards inter-faith engagement on the Message of Din al-Islam. In the history of the inter-faith relations between Muslims and others, especially Muslim-Christian engagements, there have been written many master pieces and treatises by Muslim scholars. Although, there are many writings about the scholarship of inter-faith engagement with others presented by the Muslim scholars, the focus of discussion in this paper will be on the writings of three selected contemporary Muslim scholars: (1) Isma^cil Raji al-Faruqi; (2) Murad Wilfried Hofmann; (3) Irfan^c Abdul Hamid Fattah; and (4) Mahmoud Ayoub.

Isma^cil Raji al-Faruqi¹⁷

He is considered the first Muslim thinker who has advocated the need for the Muslims to attain the transition from apologetic or polemic attitude to mutual respect and unbiased understanding of Christians' and others' way of belief. Being the first pioneer to initiate inter-faith engagement with others through his pen and practice, he has become a major force in Islam's dialogue with the Christian Tradition in particular and other world traditions in general. Al-Faruqi regards inter-faith engagement, especially with Christians, as a more objective, scholarly shift of study (John L. Esposito & John O. Voll, 2001).

He emphasises that Islam's theory of engagement with followers of other faiths, provides those involved in inter-faith dialogue with (Ismail Raji al-Faruqi, 1998): (a) the best foundation for an inter-faith engagement in which the people of different faiths honour one another's convictions without denying their own; (b) the only legitimate foundation for seeking religious unity in humankind.

A genuine inter-faith engagement, al-Faruqi asserts, can take place only when people of different faiths are interested in each other's claims by means of a friendly

¹⁶ A complete autonomy has been granted by the Quran to every religious community, which enjoys not only freedom of faith and worship in its own way, but is free to follow its own laws and decide cases through its own judges. See Muhammad Hamidullah, 1995).

¹⁷ Isma^cil Raji al-Faruqi (1921-1986), recognized as an authority on Islam and comparative religion, has been an active Muslim participant in the field of inter-faith engagement with others, especially Muslim-Christian dialogue. His understanding of inter-faith engagement is reflected in the content of his following best known writings: *Christian Ethics* (1976), *The Great Asian Religions* (1969), *Historical Atlas Of The Religions Of The World* (1974), *The Life Of Muhammad* (1976), *Tawd: Its Implication For Thought And Life* (1982), *And The Cultural Atlas Of Islam* (1986). *Meta-Religion: Towards A Critical World Theology* (1986); *Islam And Christianity: Diatribe Or Dialogue* (1992), etc.

engagement, which is the altruistic extension of all religious Traditions. He looks at inter-faith engagement as “a dimension of human consciousness ... the fulfilment of the command of reality to become known, to be compared and contrasted with other claims, to be acquiesced in if true, amended if inadequate, and rejected if false”. Hence, such inter-faith engagement becomes “the removal of all barriers ... and disciplines our consciousness,” and is “the only kind of inter-humane relationship worthy of man!” (Isma‘il Raji al-Faruqi, 1992).

Inter-faith engagement is, thus, a necessity that may well bear fruits, when carried out with mutual respect and an attempt to truly understand the other’s way of belief. A Muslim, for al-Faruqi, is obliged by his *iman* to engage in inter-faith dialogue as a means of presenting Islam to others. Also, a Muslim should be prepared to listen to others’ account of their faith. Such inter-faith engagement is a two-way affair “freedom to be convinced as well as to convince, of the truth” (Isma‘il Raji al-Faruqi, 1979) and a kind of simultaneous conversion not to Muslims’ or Christians’ or anyone’s conviction, culture, mores, or political regime, but to the Truth (Isma‘il Raji al-Faruqi, 1992).

Murad Wilfried Hofmann¹⁸

A fruitful inter-faith engagement with others, Hofmann comments, will take place when there is a truism in their cooperation to solve contemporary problems faced by humanity. In order to have peace in this Global Village, Hofmann urges Muslims, Christians and others to engage in inter-faith dialogues under the climate of mutual respect and better understanding of one another. As far as the Muslim and Christian engagement is concerned, he argues that a peaceful co-existence between Muslims and Christians will happen only when Western Christians have a serious understanding of Islam, on the one hand, and the Muslim World towards Western Christianity, on the other (Murad Wilfried Hofmann 1993).

There will not be another alternative to such dialogue between the two major monotheistic religions, if a clash between the Occident and the Orient is not avoided (Murad Wilfried Hofmann, 1997). Therefore, their coming together is the only solution to block the destructive means of tyrant leaders against the weak nations in general, and the Muslim world, in particular. The Muslims, for Hoffmann, have two major references: a definitive Book and a definitive example (Prophet Muhammad (PBUH)), which are historical certainties that all other religions lack (Murad Wilfried Hofmann, 2001).

It is in the light of these two sources that the Muslims can construct a peaceful co-existence with followers of other faiths, i.e., Christians, Jews, Hindus, Buddhist, etc., respectfully living next to each other. In fact, the Holy Quran aims beyond that, insisting not only on unity but also on diversity (Murad Wilfried Hofmann, 1998). In other words, Hofmann’s stance towards inter-faith engagement with others, especially engagement of Muslims and Christians, reveals that Islam did not come to reject other faiths in general, and Christianity in particular, but to purify these systems of faith from certain deviations from the original Abrahamic Monotheistic foundation.

¹⁸ Murad Wilfried Hofmann, who converted to Islam on 25 September, 1980, through his writings, i.e., articles and books, has shown his true commitment to Islam and the Muslims. Among his writings are, *Islam The Alternative* (1993), *Solving Contemporary Problems Through Cooperation Between Islam And Christianity – Some Observations* (1997), *Religion After Religion: Secular Anti-Modernism And The Study Of Religions* (2001), etc.

ʿIrfan ʿAbdul Hamid Fattah¹⁹

The purpose of inter-faith engagement, for Fattah, will be achieved only when there is a common understanding and mutual respect between Muslims and others, i.e., Christians, Jews, Buddhists, Hindus, etc., towards each other's way of belief. In inter-faith engagement, the Muslims have to adapt themselves with the Islamic norm felt towards the Christian fellows and others by understanding and accepting them as they are, and why they are so, and not imposing subjective, normative claims in the form of why they are not.

In other words, they have to replace the monopolistic methodology of the early Muslim scholars, which was built on two attitudes: refutation versus justification, with inter-faith dialogue that is built on mutual respect and better understanding of the others' way of belief in general, and that of the Christians, in particular (ʿIrfan ʿAbdul Hamid Fattah, 2004).

Fattah has built his stance towards inter-faith engagement between Muslims and others, on the Quran and the Sunnah of the Prophet (PBUH). He argues that if Muslims want to have a successful inter-faith engagement with others in general, and the Christians, in particular, they have to adapt themselves with the following rulings: (a) to commence an openness in faith with the followers of other Traditions who believe in One God, on the Judgment Day, and do good deeds, which ought to be consistent with the Quranic stance and the Prophetic way of conduct; (b) to recognise the purpose of the Quran through its twin stances: confirmation and ratification, otherwise its coming after the Torah and Gospel becomes insignificant; (c) to acknowledge the eternal Quranic attitude of honouring the children of Adam as the family of God regardless of their languages, races, cultures, or religious convictions (ʿIrfan ʿAbdul Hamid Fattah, 2004); and, to build their stance towards inter-faith engagement with others on foundations that maintain the human dignity in every aspect of life, and not on the foundations of militant dogmatic confrontation (ʿIrfan ʿAbdul Hamid Fattah, 2005).

Mahmoud Ayoub

Mahmoud Ayoub has decades of experience in inter-religious and inter-faith dialogues and has authored several books and articles in this area. Therefore, he is confident to say that "Muslim-Christian dialogue is as old as Islam itself". According to him, people today are living in a pluralistic world. Although people are the same in terms of their creation and outlook, yet there are differences among people, like culture and religious communities (Mahmoud Ayoub, 2007).

For him Muslims are different, and this is God's will that Muslims are like this. It might be a wisdom behind this, because God says in the Quran: "*surely in the diversity of your languages and your colors (and that would include cultures as well), there is a divine sign if you can only understand*" (al-Quran. al-Rum: 22). But these differences do not mean that we cannot collaborate with others, especially with Christians, because in Quran is used the term *ahl* that means "family" and the term *ahl al-Kitab* that means "family of the book". This concept can unite us. All the people of the book are the spiritual and physical descendents of the monotheistic faith of Abraham (Mahmoud Ayoub, 2007).

The purpose of inter-faith engagement or dialogue ought to be better understanding, peaceful coexistence and the establishment of a fellowship of faith among people of faith. For Mahmoud Ayoub, there are two reasons why we as Muslims

¹⁹ The contribution of ʿIrfan ʿAbdul Hamid Fattah (1933-2007) towards inter-faith engagement is of a great importance. He has participated and presented papers in many ecumenical conferences as well as written a lot of articles and books related to this topic, like *al-Murtakazat al-Asasiyyah Allati Hafizat li al-Ummah Kayanaha* (1997); *al-Itar al-Fikri al-ʿAmm li Nazariyah al-Maʿrifah fi al-Qurʿan al-Karim* (1999); *al-Yahudiyyah: ʿArdun Tarikhiyy wa al-Harakat al-Hadithah fi al-Yahudiyyah* (2001); *al-Fikr al-Islami Fi Muwajahati Al-Daʿwat Ila al-Hiwar Bayna al-Adyan* (2004); *Dirasat Islamiyyah: 2* (2004); *al-Nasraniyyah: Nashʿatuha al-Tarikhiyyah Wa Usul ʿAqaiduha* (2005), etc.

should collaborate more with Christians; *first* is that they are the nearest people in amity to us, and *second* because their monks and learned priests recognize the truth when they hear it and shed tears of humble gratitude for God's guidance. Christianity and Islam are both universal faiths meant not for any particular race or ethnicity but for all of humanity. This principle can help in achieving the goals and opportunities for dialogue (Mahmoud Ayoub, 2007).

Mahmoud Ayoub says that the most important goals which both communities have to strive for are: (a) the mutual acceptance of the legitimacy and authenticity of the religious tradition of the other as a divinity inspired faith; (b) Genuine and sincere respect of the faith of the other, including their beliefs, ethical principles, social values, and political aspirations; (c) The acceptance by both Christians and Muslims of the other as an equal partner and not an opponent in inter-faith dialogue; (d) To let the two traditions speak for themselves, that is, to represent themselves in dialogue; and (e) To strive for absolute fairness and objectivity in drawing any comparisons between the two traditions (Mahmoud Ayoub, 2007).

Mahmoud Ayoub mentions four types of dialogue between Christians and Muslims that are: (a) the dialogue of life; (b) the dialogue of beliefs; (c) the dialogue of witnessing to one's faith; and (d) the dialogue of faith. Mahmoud Ayoub believes that the main obstacle for a real Christian-Muslim dialogue on both sides is, their unwillingness to truly admit that God's love and providence extend equally to all human beings, regardless of religious identity. In other words he says that the ultimate goal of all interfaith dialogue ought to be the ability of all women and men of faith to listen and to obey the voice of God as it speaks to all communities through their own traditions and humbly listen to the same voice speaking to each individual through her own faith tradition (Mahmoud Ayoub, 2007).

CONCLUSION

This paper has reached at the conclusion that inter-faith engagement is a very important means to acquire knowledge about the faith of others and respect the value of what is believed and practiced by this otherness as it is, without any discrimination or vilification. The Quran reminds all people and Muslims in particular, the divine plan of Allah SWT in their creation as a community with differences in terms of their conviction, culture, tradition, and language, in order to engage with and know one another. This engagement should be based on mutual respect, righteousness and better understanding of one another.

The universal mission of Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) and his Sunnah rejects compulsion, while engaging with the followers of other faiths. The writings of the selected contemporary Muslim scholars mentioned in this paper, reflect the Quranic and Prophetic spirit towards the scholarship of inter-faith engagement, which can be the only means to change the current nature of relations between Muslims and the followers of other faiths, i.e., Christians, Jews, Hindus, Buddhists, etc., from vilification to mutual respect and better understanding.

REFERENCES

- Abul A'la Maududi. 2004. *Understanding Islamic Civilization*. Translated and edited by Muhammad Khalid Farooqi. New Delhi: Markazi Maktaba Islami Publishers.
- Fatmir Mehdi Shehu. 2008. *Nostra Aetate and the Islamic Perspective of Inter-religious Dialogue*. Kuala Lumpur: International Islamic University Malaysia Press.
- Fazlur Rahman. 1994. *Major Themes of the Quran*. Minneapolis: Bibliotheca Islamica, 2nd ed.
- Frederick M. Denny. 1985. "Islam: Quran and Hadith" in *The Holy Book in comparative perspective*. Edited by Frederick M. Denny & Rodney L. Taylor. USA: University of South Carolina Press.
- Isma'il Raji al-Faruqi. 1998. *Islam and Other Faiths*. Edited by Atallah Siddiqui. Herndon, USA: The International Institute of Islamic Thought.

- Isma'îl Raji al-Faruqi. 1979. *Rights Of Non-Muslims Under Islam: Social And Cultural Aspects*. Journal of Institute of Muslim Minority Affairs. Vol. 1. No. 1. Summer 1979.
- Isma'îl Raji al-Faruqi. 1992. *Islam And Christianity: Diatribe Or Dialogue. In Muslims in Dialogue: The Evolution of Dialogue*. Edited by Leonard Swidler. USA: The Edwin Mellen Press.
- Jamil Farooqui. 2004. *Ummatic Unity: Challenges And Strategies*. The Islamic Quarterly. vol. 48, no. 2. June.
- John L. Esposito & John O. Voll. 2001. *Makers of Contemporary Islam*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Kalim Siddiqui. 1996. *Stages of Islamic Revolution*. London: The Open Press Ltd.
- Mahmoud Ayoub. 1983. *The Great Tidings: Interpretation of Juz' 'Amma, the Last Part of the Quran*. Libya: The Islamic Call Society.
- Mahmoud Ayoub. 1991. *Islam And Christianity Between Tolerance And Acceptance, Islam And Christian-Muslim Relations*. Vol. 2, No. 2, (December).
- Mahmud 'Awan. 1995. *The Faith Community And World Order In The Perspective Of Islam. In Trialogue Of The Abrahamic Faiths*. Edited by Isma'îl Raji al-Faruqi. USA: Amana Publications.
- Muhammad Shafiq and Mohammed Abu-Nimer. 2007. *Interfaith Dialogue: A Guide for Muslims*. Herndon, USA: The International Institute of Islamic Thought.
- Muhammad Hamidullah. 1995. *The Emergence of Islam*. Islamabad: Islamic Research Institute.
- Muhammad Husayn Haykal. 1986. *The Life of Muhammad (Hayat Muhammad)*. Translation from the 8th edition by Isma'îl Raji al-Faruqi. India: Crescent Publishing Co.
- Murad Wilfried Hofmann. 1997. *Solving Contemporary Problems Through Cooperation Between Islam And Christianity - Some Observations*. Encounters, vol. 3. no. 1. (March).
- Murad Wilfried Hofmann. 1998. *The Protection of Religious Minorities in Islam*. Encounters. vol. 4. no. 2. (September).
- Murad Wilfried Hofmann. 2001. *Religion After Religion: Secular Anti-Modernism And The Study Of Religions*. The Muslim World Book Review. vol. 21. no. 2.
- Murad Wilfried Hofmann. 1993. *Al-Islam Ka Badil*. Translated by Muhamad Gharib Gharib. Kuwait: Majalah al-Nur al-Kuwaytiyyah.
- 'Irfan 'Abdul Hamid Fattah. 1999. *al-Fikr al-Islami fi Muwajihati al-Da'wat Ila al-Hiwar Bayna al-Adyan*. Journal of Islam in Asia. Issue no. 1. (June).
- 'Irfan 'Abdul Hamid Fattah. 2004. *Dirasat Islamiyyah: 2*. Maliziya: Dar al-Tajdid.
- 'Irfan 'Abdul Hamid Fattah. 2005. *al-Nasraniyyah: Nash'atuha al-Tarikhiyyah wa Usul 'Aqaiduha*. Maliziya: Dar al-Tajdid.
- Yusuf Ali. 1989. *The Holy Quran: Text, Translation And Commentary*. Maryland: Amana Corporation.

Disclaimer

Opinions expressed in this article are the opinions of the author(s). Al-Qanatir: International Journal of Islamic Studies shall not be responsible or answerable for any loss, damage or liability etc. caused in relation to/arising out of the use of the content.