

**TO BE RELIGIOUS IS TO BE INTERRELIGIOUS:
AN ISLAMIC PERSPECTIVE**

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**Paper Presented at
Public Lecture, The Center for Islamic Studies, Graduate Theological
Union, Berkeley, California, February 13, 2007**

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**Berkeley
California, USA
2007**

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Introduction

Once popular theories of global progress and secularization commonly held that modernization would relegate religion to an insignificant role in public affairs.¹ Even today, when we try to assess the value of religion over and against other dimensions of civic life, we often do so with the assumption that religion *per se* shares nothing, as an idea or even as an experience, with the pluralism, liberalism, and secularism that are regarded as the defining criteria of modern democratic societies. Many of us still regard religion as irrelevant because our understanding of it in the postindustrial world of material and social advancement does not require it to be part of the overall human equation.

But the surge of Islamic political activism that crossed a first threshold of historical visibility in the Iranian revolution of 1979 demonstrated the erroneousness of these predictions and thus, among other things, opened the way for Bernard Lewis and Samuel Huntington to reintroduce religion as a relevant category for understanding post-Cold War geopolitics in their “clash of civilizations” thesis.² According to Richard Bulliet, Huntington’s phraseology shifted the discourse of Middle East confrontation that had been dominated by nationalist and Cold War rhetoric since the days of Gamal Abd al-Naser in 1950s and 1960s, back to a much older and more time-honored Western discourse—that of the ‘Islamic threat.’

Along with repentant secularization theorists such as Peter Berger, Bryan Wilson, observes as far back as 1969 that, although modern secular society “has little direct regard for religion” and “does not appear to depend in any direct way on the maintenance of religious thinking, practices, or institution,” one can nonetheless witness “the still persisting influence of past religion even further.”³ Like Wilson and Berger, most contemporary sociologists are persuaded that religion is as much a force today as it ever

¹ See Peter Berger, ed. *The Desecularization of the World: Resurgent Religion and World Politics* (William B. Eerdmans, July 1999)

²In his review of this thesis in his *The Case for Islamo-Christian Civilization* (Columbia U. P., 2004), Columbia Middle East Historian Richard Bulliet observes that the phrase “clash of civilizations” seems to have first appeared in a 1926 book portraying Islam as essentially militaristic entitled, *Young Islam on Trek: A Study in the Clash of Civilizations*, by Basil Mathews. See Bulliet, pp. 2-3.

³ Bryan R. Wilson, *Religion in Secular Society* (Penguin Books, new edition, 1969), p. ?

was, though there can be no doubt that the religious landscape and the trajectories (route, path) of religious influence have altered substantially.⁴

Thus, to assume that we are living in a secularized world is to make a false assumption. The world today is as fervently religious as it ever was, and in some places more so than ever. It is no exaggeration to say that, in today's day and age, religion is one of the most powerful and pervasive forces on earth

However strongly one may assert the contemporary religious 'resurgence,' there can be no doubt that, for quite some time now, science and technology have constituted a substitute for religion or even a 'pseudo religion' which some have dubbed "scientism." Nevertheless, for decades, in the post-modern era, there has been a renewed interest in spirituality in which people are rejecting blind belief in science and technology. As Naisbit and Aburdene point out in their book *Mega Trend 2000*, the rise of interest in spirituality is largely because, as important as they may be for modern existence, for most ordinary people science and technology do not give meaning to life.

If, therefore, religion is "here to stay," what role does and can it play in an increasingly pluralizing and globalizing context? Even the most cursory glance at the history of religions tells us that, throughout most of recorded history, humanity has experienced a rich plurality of religions. From certain theological perspectives, this phenomenon is due to the manifold nature of divine revelation and of its human response in an astonishing variety of different cultures and historical contexts.⁵ Many, however, are quick to point out that the contemporary globalizing context of religious pluralism is unlike any of its precursors in that never before have so many different religious communities and individuals existed in such close proximity to—and even interdependence on—one another. In fact, I would argue that the very existence of the fairly recent interreligious movement is an indication that today the world's religions are interacting on an unprecedented scale. If the shelves of bookstores from Berkeley to New York, to Rome, to Istanbul, to my native Yogyakarta are any indication, there seems to be an increasing curiosity about other religions—sometimes positive, sometimes negative—as the phenomenon of reading each other's scripture and reading about each other's religions seems to grow more popular.

Depending on our own socio-cultural location, those of us who engage in interreligious inquiry are variously inspired, perplexed, and—in some cases—even repulsed—by what we surmise as each other's insights and practices. Optimally speaking, we find that our various traditions share some of the same fundamental values that each of us cherish in our own religions, albeit expressed in different ways. We also realize that we are being challenged to articulate our own religious identities in an increasingly religiously plural setting where others are, in many ways, listening and asking questions of us as we do so. What this means is that, whether we like it or not: *to be religious today is to be inter-religious*. That great pioneer of the modern discipline of the history of religions, Friedrich Max Muller once famously wrote, "He who knows one

⁴ Compare for example, Smith, Christian, ed., *The Secular Revolution: Power, Interests and Conflict in the Secularization of American Public Life*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003

⁵ Pope John Paul II in Asisi, 27 Oct 1986

religion knows none,” perhaps largely referring in his own scholarly context to those who aspired to become experts in the study of a particular religious tradition. Yet today, this dictum seems to have significance well beyond the membership of the American Academy of Religion and similar scholarly societies. In today’s increasingly religiously plural social contexts, these words suggest not only that a failure to engage pluralism is an act of self-marginalization within our own social contexts. They also suggest that, without some understanding of the faith of our neighbor, the religious person (or community) living in a religiously plural society cannot even understand oneself (or itself).

Theological explanations of this plurality vary from tradition to tradition, as well as within a single tradition. In the Abrahamic faiths such explanations tend to fall into two distinct, but not always mutually exclusive, categories. There are those explanations that attribute religious plurality either to ignorance of the truth, or perversity in the face of truth. And there are other explanations which suggest that religious plurality is somehow a part of the divine design to bring humanity together as one family before God. Suffice to say, it is this second category of explanations that one most often finds at the theological heart of most efforts at interreligious dialogue.

In Islam, the Qur’an is the single most important source of inspiration for interreligious dialogue. It may be that the Qur’an is unique among the Abrahamic scriptures—and perhaps other scriptural texts as well—in the explicit manner in which it refers not only to dialogue between adherents of different faith-communities, but also to the divine ordainment of religious diversity, and, in consequence, to the spiritual validity of these diverse religious paths. Quranic discourse presents these paths as so many outwardly divergent facets of a single, universal revelation by the unique and indivisible Absolute.

There are at least two quranic verses which are frequently interpreted as the basis for an Islamic theology of religious pluralism which recognizes the degree to which such pluralism can be seen in a positive light. The first (*Sūrat al-Mā’ida*, verse 48—5:48) speaks of human communal, and perhaps therefore cultural and religious plurality, to be part of the divine design. The reason it offers for this plurality is so that different groups of human beings will “compete with each other in virtue.”

The second (*Sūrat al-Hujurāt*, verse 13—49:13) has a very similar theme. It suggests that God has “appointed” cultural and perhaps even religious diversity for the human race in order that human beings may be faced with the challenge of coming “to know each other” and striving with one another to be the “most honored in God’s sight” by being the most God-conscious (*atqā*).

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks asserts that part of the creative genius of Rabbinic Judaism was that it pioneered not one, but two ideals of peace.⁶ The first is the ultimate “messianic” peace in which all divisions among humankind will be dissolved and all tensions resolved. Perhaps the most well-known biblical text expressing this messianic

⁶ See Jonathan Sacks, *A Clash of Civilizations? Judaic Sources on Co-Existence in a World of Difference* published on Sacks’s website at

ideal is Isaiah 11:6-9, beginning with the famous words, “The wolf shall live with the lamb, the leopard shall lie down with the kid, the calf and the lion and the fatling together, and a little child shall lead them.” As beautiful as this vision may seem, for Sacks the genius of the biblical tradition lies not so much in developing the ideal of the messianic peace, as it does in developing the idea of *darkhei shalom* or “the ways of peace” and *eviah* or “[the avoidance of] ill-feeling” as an “ideal of peace in an unredeemed world.”⁷ For Sacks, the genius of Jewish teachings regarding peace is that it complements the messianic ideal with a practical ideal of a “here-and-now peace which depends on different groups with incompatible ideals living graciously or at least civilly together without attempting to impose its beliefs on others.”⁸

From a Christian perspective, there have been many biblical passages attested in support of interreligious dialogue and peaceful coexistence (Gen. 1:27; Isaiah 56:1-7; Mark 9:40; Luke 9:50). In the meeting of religious leaders from all over the world which took place in Assisi in October of 1986, the late Pope John Paul II summarized a basic insight common to many Christian theologies of religious pluralism and dialogue when he said, addressing the assembly: “Religions are many and varied and they reflect the desire of men and women throughout the ages to enter into relationship with the Absolute Being.”⁹ In this address, John Paul echoed the teaching of the Second Vatican Council and its document *Nostra Aetate* that “the Catholic Church rejects nothing that is true and holy” in the other religions of the world.¹⁰

If we leave the realm of specifically Abrahamic discourse on religious pluralism and interreligious dialogue, we encounter those who—in ways which are more consonant with the epistemologies of certain forms of Hinduism and Buddhism than they are with traditional Abrahamic epistemologies—articulate a thesis of radical complementarity based on a perception of the contextual limitations and specifics of every human tradition. V. F. Vineeth argues that religions are life expressions of the experience of revelation in a given historical context. They are, therefore, limited by factors of history, culture, language, etc. If we are ever to transcend these limitations, each of us in our own limited traditions must aspire precisely to encounter other religious or cultural traditions. According to this view, no religious expression is complete and thorough. Thus, “one way to advance in the experience of the fullness [of truth] is to become more and more

⁷ *Ibid.* p. 9. Sacks traces the roots of this non-messianic ideal of peace to Jeremiah 29 and the instructions to the Israelites now captive in Babylon: “Build houses and live in them; plant gardens and eat what they produce. Take wives and have sons and daughters,,and do not decrease. But seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the Lord on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare.”

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 10.

Pope John Paul II in Assisi, 27 Oct 1986

¹⁰ *Nostra Aetate* (October 25, 1965). Plurality is also the very texture of GTU and its educational project

enriched by the contributions of complementary expressions.”¹¹ According to Vineeth, with the encounter of a new religion, a concealed jewel of truth is now awakened, and a new potential comes to blossom. For example, Thomas Merton had a new interpretation of Christian Religious experience after his encounter with Buddhism.¹²

The current global crisis we are experiencing raises questions which, in the view of many, transcend the differences of culture and religion. This crisis and its suffering stand as a challenge to the various religious communities of the world, to forsake isolationism, and to work together to address social ills. Though these ills are not caused by religion, interreligious dialogue and activity can possibly become a basis for joint reflection and action.

In this paper I want to support the dictum that in today’s world *to be authentically religious one must be authentically interreligious*. I want to do so by integrating my approach to this issue as both a historian of religion and a Muslim theologian. My basic argument will be that the challenge to be authentically interreligious is inherent in the challenge to be authentically Muslim in today’s world for two important reasons. The first is that the concept of justice (*adl*), stands second only to the concept of realizing the oneness of God (*tawhid*) as one of the most elemental teachings of the Qur’an. Quranically speaking, Islam itself is about working toward justice in every relationship in which the human being finds her or himself: in relationship with the divine Creator, in relationship with each other, and in relationship with all of the created order of which we human beings are an integral part. The second reason why the challenge to be interreligious is inherent to the challenge to be authentically Muslim in today’s world is that the establishment of justice in the inter-human realm and between human beings and the environment necessitates the universal establishment of human rights—both political and economic—and universal care for the earth. Neither of these goals—each of which must be at the center of what it means to be a Muslim in today’s world—can be meaningfully achieved without interreligious coalitions of thought and action.

The Qur’an and Liberation

The essential message of Islam, which is also that of the other prophetic traditions, is that all human beings are called upon to transform the world and to create a just social order. This call begins with the individual Muslim who, rooted in the particularities of his or her own circumstances, must struggle to deepen his or her personal commitment to justice and the common good. Thus, according to Islamic teaching, every believer lives under the moral imperative to act justly in his or her personal life and to cooperate with others who are equally committed to justice in order to build communities—be they as small as families or as large as nation states—which

¹¹V.F. Vineeth, CM, "Interreligious Dialogue: Past and Present. A Critical Appraisal", in *Journal of Dharma*, no 1, vol xix, jan-march, 1994, 37

¹²Vineeth, "Interreligious Dialogue", 37., cf. *The Asian Journal of Thomas Merton*, (New York:New Direction Book, 1973, cf. also Thomas Merton, *Mystics and Zen Masters*, New York, 1967; Knitter in his dialogical odyssey has the same experiences, when he encountered with Buddhism. See, Paul Knitter, *One Earth Many Religions, Multifaith Dialogue and Global Responsibility*, New York: Maryknoll Orbis Books, 1995.

affirm the dignity of humanity and of the rest of the created order.

There are two key qur'anic concepts which can be roughly translated as "human being." They are *bashar* and *insan*. Unlike *bashar*, which always relates to the human being as a biological entity—a specie among the species—the word *insan* is related to the animating breath breathed into the human by God and therefore is indicative of the special relationship the human person has with God. The human being is the creature who observed the divine attributes and who is thus responsible for reflecting these attributes in his or her life. The human being as *insan* is the only creature who volunteers to bear the *amanah*, or divine "Trust" which God "offered to the heavens and the earth and the mountains," each of which, despite their majesty and strength, declined to bear it (33: 72). It was the human being alone who opted to accept the *amanah* to uphold divine law, thus holding himself or herself accountable for the building of just societies.¹³ It is in this sense that the human being is responsible to "enjoin the good and forbid the evil," thus fulfilling his or her role as *khalifa* or "vicegerent" of God. Being a "vicegerent" of God, however, ought never be interpreted as permission to exert dominance and ownership over a creation which belongs only to God. Rather, it is a sacred responsibility to nurture and care for one's environment and especially one's fellow human beings by living out a commitment of service to all.

To appreciate how and to what extent Islam created an atmosphere conducive to socio-economic and political liberation and justice in this world, it is useful to know the type of people among whom the Prophet Muhammad had to work. Contrary to the common historical stereotype—particularly popular among Muslims themselves—the pre-Islamic Arab contemporaries of Muhammad were quite a "civilized" people. While a good portion of them in the days of the Prophet were nomadic, a sizeable percentage seemed to belong to a sophisticated urban civilization. In particular, those who lived in the Hijaz and in Mecca—the cradle of Islam—were involved in international trade and commerce.

Islam was a great liberating religion. It challenged the powerful establishment of rich Meccan traders which at the time had begun to form itself into an entrenched oligarchy. They accumulated this wealth by ignoring the needs of the poor. Thus, social-unrest arose because of the great gap between the "haves" and the "have-nots." The most marginalised sections of Meccan society were black slaves, women and the poor (orphans and widows included). They had no rights in that society. Islam not only treated them as equal human beings but gave them a sense of dignity and proclaimed the most liberating doctrine of equal honour for all the children of Adam.¹⁴ Thus all the weaker sections of Meccan society – slaves, poor, women and the youth who aspired for change rallied round the Messenger of Islam because they found his teachings and vision for a new social order to be the most liberating of all.

The ultimate point around which the call of the Prophet revolved was the concept of *tawhid*, from the root *w-h-d*, which means 'to be alone', 'one', 'an integrated unity'.

¹³Fazlur Rahman, "The Qur'anic Concept of God, the Universe, and Man", *Islamic Studies*, March, 1967, VI, I, 9

¹⁴The Qur'an says, 'We (God) have created you (human beings) into (different) peoples and tribes so that you may (all) get to know (understand and cooperate with) each other; the most honorable among you in the sight of God are the pious (righteous) ones'.

Commitment to *tawhid* constituted ‘faith in God, the Solitary without a partner, the Embodiment of unity, the One whose Unity is unceasing and with whom there is none.’¹⁵ As the foundation of the Islamic worldview, *Tawhid* implies that the universe and all that is in it forms an integral whole which reflects the uncompromised unity and wholeness of God. Instead of dividing life into unrelated components such as the physical and the spiritual, the here-and-now and the hereafter, the doctrine of *tawhid* teaches the profound interconnectedness of it all as the created order of the one divinity. According to the Iranian sociologist of Islam, Ali Shari`ati, *tawhid* signifies the integration of this world and the hereafter, the natural and supernatural, substance and meaning, spirit and body.¹⁶ Thus, *tawhid* constitutes a special view of the world that shows clearly a universal unity in existence, a unity between three separate hypostases: God, nature, and the human being. The unity inheres not in their essence, but rather in their origin—no one is separate from the other, no one is foreign to the other, no one is opposed to the other.¹⁷ This idea of the one Almighty God carries with it the idea of the one human family whose members are equal in their call to serve God and one another. Thus, a strong sense of the brotherhood and sisterhood of all humanity and their equal status in the eyes of God, is also another basic teaching of Islam.

As any other prophets, Muhammad was the prophet came from his own community, to be sent to reform the society into which he was born from infidelity to the teachings of *tawhid*. He was called to bring them out of immorality into the standards of righteous living taught in the revealed Word of God—*al-kitāb*—so essential to *tawhid* (62: 2). He did not disdain commerce, but he strongly condemned the lying or cheating merchants. He denounce monopolists and speculators who keep back grain to sell at a higher rate, and bade the employer to give the labourer the wages ‘before his or her perspiration dried.’ He also prohibited the taking or giving of interest.

Islam also condemns exploitation, oppression and the domination of one people by another. God is also portrayed as solicitous with respect to the plight of the oppressed or *mustaḍ`afūn*. The condemnation of the *kuffār* (usually, but misleadingly and inadequately translated as “unbelievers”), does not only have what we would typically describe as a doctrinal connotation, but refers essentially to a person whose refusal to recognize his or her indebtedness to God rises to the level of a loss of all social conscience. To be an “unbeliever” in this context means to be a person who hinders the creation of a just society, free from any kind of exploitation and oppression. Thus, the quranic concept of *kāfir* does not only mean an “unbeliever,” but also a person who is an active and conscious obstacle to in the establishment of a truly just social order. In fact, from this perspective even those who formally admitted belief in God, but delightfully accumulated the wealth through the exploitation of others and through over-consumption, while many went is hungry, can be categorized as *kuffār*. In this sense, the Qur’an thus links *kufṛ* (“unbelief”) to the refusal to display mercy toward others. This is more explicit in chapter 107:

¹⁵Ibn Manzur, *Lisan al-‘Arab*, 6vols., Cairo: Dar al-Kitab al-Masri, n. d. 6, 4761

¹⁶Ali Shariati, “The Worldview of Tauhid,” in *On the Sociology of Islam*, tr. from Persian by Hamid Algar, Berkeley: Mizan press, 1979, 82

¹⁷Shariati, “The World view of Tauhid,” 83

Have you observed the one who belies al-din?
That is the one who is unkind to the orphan,
And urges not the feeding of the needy.
So, woe to the praying ones,
who are unmindful of their prayers,
They do good to be seen,
and refrain from acts kindness (107: 1- 7)

From the verses above, it is obvious that a person who ritually expresses his or her belief and piety, but who lets others go hungry, is not a true believer. To love and to know God is to love and to do justice to one's neighbor. Love and knowledge of God are meditated through one's neighbor. This does not mean that prayer and worship are not important. Prayer is essential if we come to know the will of God. However, "without a concrete commitment to a justice that alters the condition of one's neighbor, both prayer and worship are empty rituals."¹⁸

The Meccan mercantile aristocracy rejected Mohammed's teaching, because God who was the subject of his faith declared inoperative the political and faith presuppositions of the people, particularly those of the dominant social groups. Thus, it threatened the position of the privileged Meccans. They saw it as a double threat to their interests.¹⁹ First, it threatened their cultic practice, specifically the worship of various deities whose totems, images, and symbols were stored in the *Ka'bah* (the cubed-shaped sanctuary in Mecca) that was the object of Arab pilgrimage. During this annual pilgrimage, Meccans got a great deal of money from pilgrims; and they were afraid of losing this source of income if Muhammad succeeded in his preaching. Second, the aristocracy was threatened by the Prophet's insistence that the rich take care of the poor. The Qur'an asserts that wealth does not belong entirely to the rich.

Because Islam came to change the status quo in support of the oppressed and exploited, no society which perpetuates exploitation of the weak and the oppressed can be deemed "Islamic," even if the call to prayer echoes through the streets five times a day. The Prophet, in one of his sayings, has equalized poverty with *kuf'r* (i.e., unbelief) and has asked for protection to God from both. Thus, abolition of poverty is the *sine qua non* of an Islamic society. Another tradition of the Prophet makes it clear that a country can survive with *kuf'r* (unbelief), but not with *zulm* (i.e., oppression)²⁰

It can be said that if in the Jewish tradition, Moses is the liberator of the enslaved Israelites, then in Islamic tradition, Muhammad was the liberator of the whole of humanity, sent a he was with "good news" to the weak among them. He launched a powerful struggle right at the outset against the rich and the mighty of Mecca.

It is thus understood that the message based on the belief in one Almighty and Merciful God, in the brotherhood and sisterhood of all humanity was the message of

¹⁸Jack Nelson, *Hunger for Justice, The Politics of Food and Faith*, New York: Maryknol Orbis Books, 1980, 191

¹⁹Fazlur Rahman, "Islam's Origin and Ideal," in Nimat Havez Barazangi, M. Raqibuz Zaman and Omar Afzal, eds., *Islamic Identity and the Struggle for Justice*, University Press of Florida, 1996, 12

²⁰Asghar Ali Engineer, *Islam and Liberation Theology, Essays on Liberative Elements in Islam*, new Delhi, Sterling Publisher Private Limited, 1990, 5

liberation and justice, not only for the weak and the downtrodden, but also for those who are loaded with money. Islam came to liberate both, one from the pressure and hardship of poverty and the other from the evils which follow the love of money.

For this reason, Islam puts as much emphasis—if not more—on right practice as it does on right belief. This aspect of Islam reverberates through many verses of the Qur'an. In some ways, the paradigmatic person of faith is, from the quranic perspective, the *mujahid*, literally the “one who strives, fights for righteousness.” Thus the Qur'an proclaims that, “Those believers who sit still, other than those who are [physically] disabled, are not on a par with those who strive in the way of Allah with their possessions and lives.” Further on the Qur'an says, “Allah hath conferred on those who strive with their wealth and their lives a rank above those who sit at home”(4: 95). The Qur'an also makes clear that this *jihad* (struggle) is not for promoting one's own interest or the interest of any particular establishment; it must be for promoting the cause of the oppressed and the weak. “And how should you not fight,” says the Qur'an, “for the cause of Allah, and for the weak among men, women and children who are crying: Our Lord! Deliver us from this city of oppressors. Oh give us from your presence some protecting friend! Oh send us from Your presence someone to help us” (4: 75). It is in this context that the essence of Muslim praxis is defined as the struggle for righteousness'. Here I am borrowing Rebecca Chop's notion of praxis as “conscious action undertaken by a human community that has the responsibility for its own political determination . . . based on the realization that humans make history.”²¹ Correlatively, the noted South African Muslim liberation theologian Farid Esack has written that “given the qur'anic comprehensive use of the term and the way *jihad* is intended to transform both oneself and society, one may say that *jihad* is simultaneously a struggle and a praxis.”²²

The Qur'an and Option for the poor

Although the “preferential option for the poor” has become the trademark of Catholic social teaching in Latin America and elsewhere, it must become the option exercised not only by the Catholic and other Christian churches, but it must become the option of all believers. The word “preference” comes from the Latin verb *praeferre*, to put before. “Option” comes from Latin word *optio*, a free choice. “A preferential Option,” then, is to make a free choice to put someone or something before another. It is not exclusive by neglecting the other.²³

We understand that liberation theology arose in Latin America in a very distinctive socio-economic context which was especially characterized by exploitation and repression. It is the “creative and authentic attempt to give a genuinely Christian answer to the situation of real suffering.”²⁴ Today, we find ourselves in a world of

²¹Rebecca Chopp, *The Praxis of Suffering*, New York: Orbis Books, 1989, p. 137

²²Farid Esack, *Qur'an, Liberation and Pluralism*, 107

²³Thomas J, Paprocki, “Option for the Poor: Preference or Platitude?,” in *America v 172n 14*, Apr 22, 1995, 11-14, See <http://newfirstsearch.oclc.org/>

²⁴Norbert Greinacher, “Liberation Theology in the ‘First World’?,” in Leonardo Boff and Virgil Elizondo, eds., *Option for the Poor: Challenge to the Rich Countries*, Edinburgh: T & T, Clark Ltd, 1986, 81

accelerating change, shrinking distances and mounting political crises that have deep economic roots. We therefore need a theology which is relevant to this situation.

Christian liberation theology takes as its starting point the everyday life of people of faith.²⁵ John Sobrino, for example, sees suffering and exploitation as the point of an encounter between God and the poor.²⁶ Ethics, Sobrino says, does not arise from hearing the verbal demands of Jesus but from experiencing the 'total reality of Jesus' as one encounters the exploited, depressed, and ignored.²⁷ In the same expression, Esack said that, "to be engaged in the Qur'anic hermeneutic in a situation of injustice is to do theology and to experience faith as solidarity with the oppressed and marginalized in a struggle for liberation."²⁸ Jews, Christians, Muslims and others also believe that the transcendent God has intervened and is intervening in history. This intervention, however, can make no sense other than within the framework of humankind's existence here on earth. Thus, to know God is to do justice and righteousness, to uphold the cause of the poor and needy (Jeremiah 22: 17-21). To claim to know God while doing injustice is a contradiction in terms. So, God and justice are inseparable: 'act justly, love tenderly and walk humbly with God, '(Micah 6: 8). The closest to the Lord are those who serve the people, as the Gospel Matthew said, "and whosoever wants to be the first (chief) must be the slave of all." (Matt 20: 27)

We know by recapitulating the basic facts about world hunger, that of a total of six billion human beings, one quarter live below the international poverty line.²⁹ Such poverty has consequences, "worldwide, 34,000 children under age five die daily from hunger and preventable diseases."³⁰ "Two of five children in the developing world are stunted, one in three is underweight and one in ten is wasted."³¹ Realizing the reality above, we have a sense not only of moral responsibility, but if we realize that the Almighty gave so much to us, in turn we must use that blessing to help the less privileged. Just believing in God and going through the ritual is not enough. One also has to be a good human being. When the believers are addressed in the Qur'an, it always says, "those who believe and do good deeds." In other word, a Muslim has a dual function, one toward God and the other toward fellow human being. Centered in God and self-critical, Muslims believe that although God had given them the Qur'an and the

²⁵Thomas, L. Schubeck, "Notes on Moral Theology, 1994: Ethics and Liberation Theology", *Theological Studies*, v. 56, March, 1995, 107-22

²⁶John Sobrino, *Jesus the Liberator*, San Salvador, 1991, 423-25

²⁷John Sobrino, *Christology at the Crossroad: A Latin American Approach*, Trans. John Drury, Maryknoll, New York: Orbis, 1978, 111

²⁸Esack, *Qur'an, Liberation and Pluralism*, 110

²⁹World Bank: World Development Report 1999/2000, Oxford University Press 1999, see <http://www.worldbank.org/wdr/2000/fullreport.html>.

³⁰U.S. action Plan on Food Security, at <http://www.fas.usda.gov:80/icd/summit/usactplan.pdf>; March 1999

³¹UN Food and Agricultural Organization, at <http://www.fao.org/focus/e/sofi/child-e.htm>.

Prophet had exemplified its teachings, it was their responsibility to implement its message in the societies that they were creating.

To make an option for the unprivileged is to opt for people. It is a commitment to acting and living from the point of view that respects people, especially those who are not treated with respects in our society. It is “to proclaim by one’s actions that people are more important than the systems that deprive them of their basic rights – the rights to eat, the rights to work, the rights to participate in decision-making, the rights to worship according to their conscience, and even the rights to life itself.”³²

According to Gutierrez, preferential option for the poor must take two paths, the path of service to the poor and the path of actually being poor oneself. To be poor is a way to think, a way to have friends, a way to suffer and a way to die. It does not entail imitation of the poor but rather life lived in solidarity with the poor—being committed to the poor, and entering the world of the poor. Truly to opt for the poor, it is not enough to provide services for them. It must be in some way with them, sharing at least some of their experiences, suffering and hoping with them.

In the Qur’an, this preferential option for the poor is reflected in the particularized identification of God Himself with the oppressed, the lifestyles and methodology of all the Abrahamic prophets, the quranic condemnation of the powerful and the accumulation of wealth, and the Qur’an’s message of liberation to women and slaves. Furthermore, there are a number of verses which link faith and religion, on the one hand, with humanism and a sense of socio-economic justice, on the other. A denial of these is linked with a rejection of justice, compassion and sharing (107: 1-3, 104; 22: 45). “There is a very close connection between our relationship to God and our relationship to our neighbor,”³³ and “the more deeply human we are, the more easily we can be touched by God.”³⁴ And “the living God is one who fosters life and sides with those who struggle for food, freedom, dignity and community against all systems of death and subjugation.”³⁵

The Qur’an uses the word *mustad’afun* for poor and marginalized, from *d-’f*, a root referring to weakness and thus to someone who is oppressed or deemed weak and therefore of no consequence to the powerful and wealthy. The *mustad’afun* are thus, people of ‘inferior’ social status who are vulnerable, marginalized or oppressed in the socio-economic sense. The Qur’an also uses other terms to describe the lower, poor and deprived classes of society, such as *aradhil* (marginalized) (11: 27; 26: 70; 22: 5), the *fuqarā’* (poor) (2: 271; 9: 60) and the *masākīn* (indigent) (2: 83, 177; 4: 8). The major difference in the term *mustad’afun* is that someone else is responsible for that condition. One can only be *mustad’af* as a consequence of the behavior or policy of the arrogant and powerful.

³²Donal Dorr, *Spirituality and Justice*, New York: Orbis Books, 1993 77

³³Donal Dorr, *Option for the Poor, A Hundred Years of Catholic Social Teaching*, New York: Maryknoll, Orbis Books, 1992, 237

³⁴Dorr, *Spirituality and Justice*, 22

³⁵Samuel Rayan, “Irruption of the Poor: Challenge to Theology,” in Leonardo Boff and Virgil Elizondo, eds., *Option for the Poor*, 106

According to the Qur'an, nearly all the prophets, including Muhammad, came from peasant or working-class backgrounds and the option for the marginalized seems to be implicit in their very origins. All the Abrahamic prophets mentioned in the Qur'an had their origins among peasants and were generally shepherds in their formative years. The singular exception, Moses, was destined to dwell in the desert of Madyan temporarily where he was employed as a shepherd for eight or ten years (28: 27). We may call it as a process of 'deschooling' in the ways of the powerful, in anticipation of his mission as a prophet of God and a liberator of his people.³⁶

The selection of prophets from specific social origin and the appeal which their message had, and continues to have, for the marginalized and the oppressed demonstrates the revolutionary content of their messages, which threaten to destroy socio-economic systems based on exploitation or beliefs systems based on *shirk* (polytheism) and superstition.

The preferential option for the *mustad'afun* is particularly manifest in the Sunna, or "way of life" of Muhammad and his early followers in Mecca. He was commanded by the Qur'an to remain committed to the marginalized in spite of the short-term financial and economic advantages for Islam which would have followed the subsequent entry into Islam of the wealthy and the powerful had he abandoned them (80: 5-10)

This identification with the marginalized was also a personal choice of the Prophet, as is obvious from his prayer to 'continue living among the poor, to die among the poor and to be raised among the poor.'³⁷ His wife, "Aishah, described his character as a 'living reflection of the Qur'an.'³⁸ This is important and is equally relevant to the option that he engaged with the *mustad'afun*. Muhammad's personal way of life and path also reflect the Qur'anic bias. It was the result of a particular choice that he had made for himself when wealth was available. He washed his own clothing, patched it, repaired his sandals, served himself, gave fodder to his camel, ate with his servant, kneaded dough with him, and carried his own goods to the market.³⁹ Anas ibn Malik says: "dates were presented to the messenger of God and I saw him eating them. Due to hunger he was sitting on the support of something."⁴⁰

Those were, however, not merely a choice based on personal ascetism but were part of the Qur'anic objective of an egalitarian social order. (28: 28). Righteousness consists of: "just belief" plus "just action," including faith, prayer, wealth-sharing, equitable and compassionate behavior, and patience in the face of hardship and difficulty.⁴¹ And as we know, the voice of the poor is God's voice. 'When we open our

³⁶Esack, *Qur'an, Liberation and Pluralism*, 99

³⁷See, Ibn Majah, *Al-Maqasid al-Hasanah fi Bayan Kathir min al-Ahadith al-Mushtahar 'ala al-Sunnah*, ed. Muhammad ibn Abd al-Rahman al-Sakhawi, 4 vols. Beirut: Dar al-Kutub al-'Ilmiyah, 1979

³⁸Ibn Hambal 1978, 2, 188

³⁹Ibn Fudi *Bayan Wujub al-Hirjan ala 'l 'ibad*, tr. and ed. F. H. El-Masri, Khartoum and Oxford: n.p., 1978, 152

⁴⁰Al-Tirmidzi, *Sama'il al-Tirmidzi*, tr. Muhammad ibn 'Abdurrahman Ebrahim, Johannesburg, Dar al-Nasr, 1990, 138

⁴¹Hassan, "Members, One of Another," 4

hearts and minds to that voice, we discover that our spiritual and economic well-being are intimately tied to the well-being of our brothers and sisters who live in our neighborhoods and throughout the globe.⁴²

Global Muslim identity cannot be located in a renewal of personal piety—as important as this is. It also cannot be rooted in making societies more ritually “Islamic” (i.e., women in hijab, shops closed for prayer) without the essential commitment to global justice. And this commitment—if it is to be truly universal—must be interreligious because without partnering with other faith communities, it’s unlikely the work of justice can ever be effectively accomplished.

To day, if religion has to be meaningful, closely integrated with human destiny, both in mundane and sublime sense, it will have to be liberated from sterile ritual and theological rationalization. I do not in position to say that ritual is not important. I would like to throw some light here on fundamental values which make human beings really religious in spirit. If one faithfully performs one’s religious rituals but violates these fundamental values or ignores them, one cannot be said to have fulfilled one’s religious obligations. This is why God condemned people who perform *shalat* (worship) but neglected the needy(107: 1- 7). A truly religious person is more conscious of these fundamental values rather than of rituals. It is also to be noted that rituals can be performed without hurting ones selfish interests but values demand great sacrifice from us. No wonder then we stress rituals more than the values. In any case one has to keep ones selfish desires under control, if one wishes to practice these values.

In fact rituals in symbolic sense are instruments for realising these values. But these rituals become ends in themselves and hence religion becomes dogmatic, static and indifferent to human suffering and in some cases even cause of suffering.

It is the time to realize and understand the meaning of experience faith as solidarity with the oppressed and marginalized in a struggle for liberation. *Iman* (belief) is an “active quality, one that commits the person and by which he (or she) is caught up into a dynamic relationship with his (or her) fellows. It is the ability to see the transcendent, and to respond to it, to hear God’s voice and to act accordingly.”⁴³ And it is in this way that all religions can cooperate.

In today’s condition the primacy of liberative praxis over verbal affirmations of dogma is needed because, as Rida said, “there is no right greater than justice and no wrong worse than tyranny.”⁴⁴ Thus, during the period of enslavement in Egypt, for example, Moses’ prophetic responsibility was essentially to act in solidarity with the Israelites rather than preaching to them. We cannot ask everybody to be a Muslim, or other religions before we act.

⁴²Jack A. Nelson, *Hunger for Justice, The Politics of Food and Faith*, New York: Maryknol Orbis Books, 1980, viii

⁴³Cantwell Smith, *The Meaning and End of Religion*, New York: Mentor Books, 1991, 112

⁴⁴Muhammad Rashid Rida, *Tafsir al-Manar*, Beirut: Dar al-Ma’arif, 12 vols., 1980, 4, 45, cited by Esack, *Qur’an, Liberation and Pluralism*, 198

Just as the Qur'an recognizes the messengers beyond any religion's exclusive list⁴⁵ it is also recognizes those who undergo the suffering of messengers in their attempt to bring humanity out of corruption and bloodshed, those who want to spread justice and compassion among us. Thus, who call for justice are recognized in the class of messengers, for they are faced with the same call to mission the most sacred recognized by the Qur'an.⁴⁶ Religion should no longer stays in the realm of preaching, but through direct practical observation of reality.

February 13, 2007
Syafa Almirzanah

⁴⁵The Qur'an 40: 78; 10: 47; 34: 24

⁴⁶The Qur'an 57: 25

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MUKHTAR ALI

Ph.D. Candidate, University of California, Berkeley

Guest Lecturer, Fatima Islamic Society of California, Los Angeles

Thursday, February 8, 12:30-2:00 pm

Title: *Islamic Mysticism in the Context of the Islamic Sciences*

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SYAFA'ATUN ALMIRZANAH

Ph.D. Candidate, Islamic University, Sunan Kalijaga and Lutheran School of Theology, Chicago

Chief Associate Professor of Comparative Religions, Islamic University Sunan Kalijaga in Yogyakarta, Indonesia

Tuesday, February 13, 12:30-2:00 pm

Title: *To be religious is to be interreligious*

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SADDEKA AREBI

Ph.D. University of California, Berkeley

Department of Religious Studies, Santa Clara University

Thursday, February 22, 12:30-2:00 pm

Title: *Discerning Islam: Access, Voice and Contexts of Interpretive Responsibility*

Richard S. Dinner Board Room, 2400 Ridge Road, third floor

MUNIR JIWA

Ph.D. Columbia University

Mellon Post-doctoral Fellow, University of Toronto

Monday, February 26, 12:30-2:00 pm

Title: *Imaging Islam, Mediating Muslims: Aesthetics, Politics and Religion*

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