

One God? Same God?

Amir Farid

A Common Word (ACW) has certainly started a chain of dialogues, forums and seminars that can help foster our understanding of one another (Christians and Muslims), which could be a model to be followed in regional and national dialogues and forums. It could also be a model for dialogues between our respective religions and others (Buddhists, Hindus, Sikhs, etc.). Bearing in mind that some religions do not believe in a personal god, the emphasis in this case will be just to love our fellow human beings, whatever religion or whatever is our belief about the divine.

But we, Christians and Muslims, can certainly take the lead since our bond has been there for over 1400 years, sharing a common history (albeit with some fundamental disagreements on the historical facts) and much common teaching. Since this ACW dialogue process has been on-going for two years, we should not let the momentum abate but instead ensure that it continues vigorously to inspire friendly discourses and dialogues in all communities where peoples of our faiths live together.

On this note, I am happy to report that on 16 September 2009, which was our National Day, I co-moderated the dialogue session during a "Common Word Roundtable" gathering between about 20 Muslim and 20 Christian religious leaders (including Dr Hermen Shastri), activists and scholars in Kuala Lumpur. We also had observers from the Hindu and Buddhist faiths. The theme was "Unity under the Malaysian Constitution", reflecting some concerns that we have regarding religious issues enshrined in the Constitution which may be impeding our unity. In the spirit of Ramadan, we had *iftar* (breaking of fast) together. I will address specific issues from this in the second part below.

A Common God

I have waited until now to give my comments because I was undecided whether to proceed in writing about my understanding that the main Qur'anic verse (Q. 3:64), quoted by the 138 Muslim leaders and scholars in their "Open Letter and Call" (13 October 2007) to the Christian world (which then became the starting point of the ACW series of forums, dialogues and discussions), has in fact a stronger message to our Christian brethren than has been inferred thus far. Although ACW did comment on the meaning of the oneness of God according to Islam, the real significance of this in their message may have been underestimated, as evidenced from the responses in the conferences and workshops that ensued and in the keynote papers from this group. I believe that it is very important for me to highlight this point, since the phrase *A Common Word* comes from this particular verse.

My hesitation arose from the fact that we have been invited to come together to deliberate on "the results so far" and "to discuss the practical significance of the ideas, proposals and resolutions" that came out of previous deliberations by other people. We are to provide the African and Asian perspectives. From what I have read, everyone has thus far affirmed the two commandments common to us Christians and Muslims (and for that matter, to all believers): to love God, and to love humanity (our neighbours). Therefore I am not sure whether I should "re-open" the discussion and dialogue on the oneness of God, which is theological, and "should be left to the elites" according to some people.

After much contemplation, writing and re-writing, I have decided that if we are not the elites referred to here, then who else? If we avoid discussing it, then who else will do it? So with all humility and without wanting to sound too presumptuous, I believe we have been brought together also to reconsider this issue: what do we mean when we say "The Lord, our God, the Lord is one"?

It is not difficult to convince anyone to love his/her god(s), however that term is perceived. It is more difficult to convince all the people to love their neighbours, as there are people who claim to love their god(s), but revile and despise some of their fellow men, especially those of different sects within their own religion and those outside their religion. Some of them even kill in the name of their god(s) with only the slightest excuse.

I believe the real message of Q. 3:64 is that the object of our love (in this case, God), must not be misplaced. It is a reminder to Muslims and Christians (and Jews), since we claim to be the inheritors of the same religion of Abraham, Moses and all the great Prophets mentioned in the Bible and Qur'an, that our Lord, our God, is not only one in number but also we share the same, one, common God.

There may be other religions which also worship only one god who is totally different from the one we worship (i.e. a non-existent or false god in our context). Thus the main thrust of Q. 3:64 is not just that our God is One; it is also that our God is the *same* one and that we should not ascribe partners to him. *That* is the God we should love with all our hearts and all our souls and all our minds and all our strength.

However, we have irreconcilable differences in trying to agree that we share the same one God, because among others, the God of the Qur'an, who claims also to be the God of the Jews and Christians (People of the Book), describes himself as being one without partners or associates, whereas the Christians describe him as a triune (three-in-one) God made of three co-equal "persons".

I believe there must be a reason why Prof. Christian Troll was moved to invite me although he could have chosen any of the well-known Muslim scholars from Malaysia. I believe God wants me to remind us all of what he meant in Q. 3:64.

An Advance Apology

Before I proceed, please let me re-affirm my commitment to respectful dialogue and discussions, guided by Q. 16:125 to "Invite all to the way of your Lord, with wisdom and beautiful preaching; and argue/reason with them in the best and most gracious ways; for surely your Lord knows best who have strayed from his path, and who have received guidance."

However, I would still like to extend my apologies in advance if my views here and if my quoting some of the Qur'anic verses below are deemed inappropriate for this dialogue.

If our gathering is only to discuss loving God to the utmost (however we understand him) and loving our fellow human beings (of whatever religion, especially between Christians and Muslims in the immediate context), but never to discuss the meaning of the oneness of God, then please ignore what I have written below, as far as this gathering is concerned, and only consider the section from Our Common Ground onwards for our dialogue. Even then we have much to discuss because many from both religions have obviously failed to love their neighbours, and by implication, also failed to love God completely even though they may believe otherwise.

An Invitation

Nevertheless, I would still like to invite discussion on it outside of this gathering if anyone shares my opinion that it is a crucial question that continues to divide us and addressing it could bring us together instead of keeping us apart. Many debates and dialogues over this issue have been held in the past, and are being held all over the world where we co-exist. Although there is a warning that it will require one party to "abandon" his or her religion to accept the opposing version (since the two are irreconcilable), I believe that the Theosophists are right when they say that "Truth is higher than Religion". So be it.

You may question the necessity of such dialogues, if so many have tried and no agreement has been achieved. I believe new dialogue partners may yet give new angles and new perspectives to solving the conundrum. A deeper understanding of each other's basis for sticking firmly to Unity or Trinity can even strengthen our mutual respect – assuming we already start with much of that.¹

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My point is this: the *Shema* attributed to Moses (peace be upon him) in Deuteronomy (6:4-5), and confirmed by Jesus (peace be upon him) in Mark 12:28-31, begins with "Hear O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one..." and only then continues with "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength".

From Adam through Abraham, Moses, David, Solomon, until John the Baptist (Yahya to us Muslims), the Prophets of God (peace be upon them) only spoke of one God. They never mentioned anything about a triune God, a concept which is never mentioned in the Old Testament but only appeared later. Although attributed to Jesus (peace be upon him), the Apostles and the scholars that followed them, it was only confirmed and endorsed at the Council of Nicea in 325CE. I am not trying to teach my Christian friends who certainly know much more of the history and the theological arguments than I do, but I do have an important question: why didn't any of the Prophets tell us the true nature of God if he is indeed eternally triune in nature? I have asked this question many times to my Christian friends but have so far not received a satisfactory answer. I hope Christians in this gathering can provide me with one I can comprehend (even though I may not agree).

To us Muslims, it is partly for this reason (to correct the misconceptions about his nature) that God sent down the Qur'an and his Last Messenger (peace be upon him) to preach that message.

The God of the Qur'an meticulously defines who he is and who he is not and only then commands us to love him to the utmost. Otherwise that intense love may be misplaced.

The God of the Qur'an defines himself as "one" in many instances, and that he has no associates or partners (in Q. 3:64 and many other verses), does not beget nor was begotten (Q. 112:3 and at least 12 other verses). He directly rebuts the Christian concept of a triune (three-in-one) God in many verses and rejects the notion that Jesus is his divine son:

O People of the Book! Commit no excesses in your religion: nor say of God anything but the truth. Christ Jesus the son of Mary was (no more than) a Messenger of God, and his Word, which he bestowed on Mary, and a spirit proceeding from him: so believe in God and his Messengers. Say not 'Trinity', desist, it will be better for you, for God is one God. Glory be to him: (far exalted is he) above having a son. To him belong all things in heaven and on earth. And enough is God as a disposer of affairs (Q. 4:171)

They do blaspheme who say: God is one of three in a Trinity: for there is no god except One God". (Q. 5:73)

And elsewhere in the Qur'an, God says: "So invoke the Name of your Lord and devote yourself to him completely" (Q. 73:8), in line with the Shema.

In a different way, there is a lesson to be learned from the religious extremists and terrorists whose love for God is proven by their willingness to die for him. We cannot match their zeal. Unfortunately their misunderstanding and misconception about what it means to love and serve God to the utmost have caused them to harm and kill their fellow human beings, in direct defiance of God's command for us to love one another. Right action can only ensue from right understanding. Likewise, we need the correct understanding of what God means when he says he is one. Since this is the most important commandment, it deserves much scrutiny.

The Common Word

So let me reiterate the salient points of the "Common Word" verse:

Say: O People of the Book! Come to A Common Word between us and you:

that we shall worship none but God,

and that we shall ascribe no partners unto him,

and that none of us shall take others for lords besides God.

And if they turn away, then say:

Bear witness that we are they who have surrendered (unto him)."

(Q. 3:64)

In the Muslim context, the one, indivisible God of the Qur'an, who has determined that Jesus is neither his partner nor his son, is telling Jews and Christians not to take Jesus (or any of the Prophets (peace be upon them) or anyone else) to be their Lord, God, or his divine partner or son. And if they do, then they have not surrendered to God.

I don't know how else to say this, without wanting to sound insulting, arrogant or disrespectful. Once again, please forgive me. The message of Q. 3:64 must be clearly explained. It was revealed to convey this message and needs to be fully understood.

I have deliberately referred to the author of the Qur'an as the "God of the Qur'an", bearing in mind that anyone is free to reject the Qur'an's validity, authority and authenticity. For us Muslims, there is no other god but him.

Our Common Ground

Even if we respectfully agree to disagree on our understanding of the oneness of God, we can certainly agree on these two commandments: to love him completely (no matter how differently we perceive him to be) and to love one another (regardless of our faiths).

In the desire to love God my sufi training and the guidance of my *shaykhs* have been invaluable. I do however seek counsel and guidance from my learned and respected friends and elders of both religions, gathered for this dialogue, to help me further in this quest, and that I may also impart this knowledge and experience to others.

And the more I love God, the more I find myself loving my fellow human beings, of whatever colour, race or religion. Again, I hope our sharing will enable all of us to truly love one another more intensely and more meaningfully. And hopefully, we can then instil this loving attitude in many others.

For Muslims, although some have alluded to the fact that there is no direct mention of "loving thy neighbour" in the Qur'an, and that the only references are in the Hadith, the second commandment has special meaning when applied to Christians because God reminds us in the Qur'an:

...and nearest among them in love to the believers will you find those who say, 'We are Christians': because amongst these are men devoted to learning, and men who have renounced the world, and they are not arrogant. (Q. 5:82)

Indeed, Christians are the dearest and closest to us. It is a shame that it is against the Christians that we have had to fight most throughout our history. Hopefully a better appreciation of this verse by both sides will help prevent more of such unnecessary and ungodly conflicts and wars.

I end this section with these acronyms by which I live:

ISLAM = I Sincerely Love Allah and Muhammad (peace be upon him), and

ISLAM = I Sincerely Love All Mankind (which is a necessary condition to validate the above).

The Malaysian Context

One advantage of writing this comment late is that I am able to report on the issues discussed in the latest dialogue between Muslims and Christians at our first Common Word Roundtable held just two days before writing.

No religious doctrine or theological issues were discussed. No discussion on the oneness of God or our divergent theology. It was decided that loving God was not an issue. We mostly talked about the problems that have caused divisions between the faith communities and proposed solutions and actions to be taken. It was about solving the practical problems that we face currently.

Malaysia is small nation of about 27million people. According to the Population and Housing Census figures (2000), approximately 60.4% of the population practised Islam, 19.2% Buddhism, 9.1% Christianity, 6.3% Hinduism and 2.6% traditional Chinese religions. The remainder was accounted for by other faiths, including Animism, folk religion and Sikhism; while 1.1% either reported having no religion or did not provide any information.

Inter-religious dialogues in Malaysia have always evolved around the perennial issue of the differences in how the Muslim majority and the others interpret the Constitution. Due to the historical dynamics (into which I will not delve in detail here), our nation was born after "independence" from British colonial masters (in 1957) with a Constitution which was at best a consensus, and at worse a compromise, between the majority Malay/Muslims and the minority races and religions.

We ended up with a Constitution which states that Islam shall be the religion of the Federation, but other religions shall be allowed to be practised in peace and harmony in any part of the Federation (Article 3).

It also states that all persons are equal before the law and proscribes discrimination against any citizen on the grounds of religion, race, descent or place of birth. Yet it affirms the "special position of Malays and natives". Furthermore, the Malays are by definition, Muslims. The conflicts arise from differing interpretations of what is meant by Islam being the official religion and what does "special position" mean, especially when the rights of the others should not be compromised.

The Malay/Muslims (who constituted 87% of the citizens before independence, reduced to just above 50% at independence when citizenship was granted to many non-Malays, and is now slowly increasing to 60% due to their higher birth rate and lower emigration rate, and expected to increase further) have always headed the ruling coalition and determined much of the administrative policies, many of which have been perceived as unfair and unjust by most non-Malays/non-Muslims, depriving them of equal opportunities in many areas.

Much of this unfairness resulted from the affirmative or "positive discrimination" policies implemented to try to bridge the gap between the economic and educational advantage the others had over the Malays. Unfortunately the situation continues despite the policies being in force for several decades, which obviously means the policies failed although they benefited some Malays and caused injustice to many non-Malays/non-Muslims. Fortunately there was a political *tsunami* in the last general elections when the ruling coalition barely won and which forced a re-consideration and dismantling or revision of some of these policies.

The religious disputes however, appear to get worse. There is gradual Islamisation of the nation (in fact, in 2001, the then Prime Minister declared Malaysia as an Islamic state, whatever that means). With the establishment of the Islamic Shari'a for Muslims (applicable to only some of their affairs) running parallel with the secular civil judicial system, there are many instances of conflict of jurisdiction, especially when there are disputes over conversions and marriages where only one spouse converts. Often the children become innocent victims in these fiascos. The right of a Malay or Muslim (including converts) to renounce Islam is much restricted.

Non-Muslims complain of unfair regulations, like having certain restrictions on the building of their churches and temples. Seeking to convert Muslims is also prohibited.

The privileges of the official religion and the rights of the other religions continue to be contentious issues. The latest and most glaring on-going case is the dispute about whether Christians should be allowed to use the word Allah to refer to God in their publications. The government and many Islamic establishments are against it, although there are Muslims who support the Christians' right to do so. Everyone awaits the court decision, which will then go through the appeals process and take many years to resolve.

There is a debate on how much should religion and morality be regulated or should these be regulated at all?

While the non-Muslims seem to be at a disadvantage because the majority (i.e. the Muslims) controls the government and the policies, they are actually better off than the Muslims in having the freedom to practise whatever form or denomination of their religion they wish. Since the government controls Islamic practice, Muslims are only allowed to practise the approved interpretations of Islam. For example, Shi'ism and many sufi *tariqas* are considered deviant and illegal. The "official" *madhhab* is the Sunni Shafi'i school of jurisprudence, though other Sunni *madhhabs* are tolerated.

These are some of the main issues that keep us at loggerheads. Together we agree that secular and religious education should be improved, common values and ethics should be imbued in the children so that they will become good citizens and that more needs to be done to prevent the communities from drifting further apart as each tries to practise more of their respective religion.

Most of all we need to rebuild the trust and mutual respect that our fathers and elders had for one another that enabled them to forge an alliance against the colonialists and bring our nation to birth.

We also cannot forget the fact that people and communities evolve in their thinking and priorities and how much they are willing to *continue* to compromise may change with time. The racial and religious communities trusted one another and compromised sufficiently; the

resulting formula worked well in the beginning. But compromises are unstable situations that need to be adjusted as often as necessary to maintain the equilibrium or stability.

Barely twelve years after Independence, we had our first major hiccup that resulted in racial riots and many deaths. Although we have had only minor skirmishes since then, history tells us that we cannot take things for granted. Furthermore, any dispute from mundane matters can unexpectedly evolve into racial or religious disputes.

We have to continue to enter into dialogue, understand clearly each other's grouses and complaints, listen to proposed solutions, and adjust, accommodate and compromise wherever possible. In theology, we can respectfully agree to disagree, but in fighting for our rights it is not that simple, especially if what is gained is at the price of the other's loss.

There is still much room for improvement and there is much hope that the relationship between the various faith groups, especially between Muslims and Christians, will get better.

As a Muslim, being in the majority, I am sad that my Muslim community has not been the best of leaders, protectors and administrators and has caused some unhappiness among the non-Muslims. I read with pride the just administration of the Rightly-Guided Caliphs and later, the illustrious governments of Islamic Spain (Andalusia), where there was peace and harmony, where non-Muslims sought refuge and prosperity, where God showered the state and people with wealth and happiness, all because the rulers ruled with justice for all, Muslims and non-Muslims.

I hope our Muslim leaders will practise more of their religious values and virtues that will result in a government and policies that will be just and acceptable to all, irrespective of race and religion. May God guide us all, and may he bless us with enduring peace and harmony.

1| *Here, I take guidance from Christian W. Troll, Dialogue and Difference. Clarity in Christian-Muslim Relations, Maryknoll/New York (Orbis) 2009, pp. 47-56, and some rules provided in: Toward a Universal Theology of Religion, ed. by Leonard Swidler, New York (Orbis) 1987, in the Faith Meets Faith Series.*