

# **Beyond Interfaith Toleration to Interfaith Cooperation: Scriptural Reasoning as a Basis for Common Ground for Good Works**

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In many Muslim majority countries, the Muslims circumvent interfaith dialogue and simply expect the rest to conform to Muslim' requirements and demands quietly. On the contrary, in Muslim minority countries, Muslims' are scrambling to promote interfaith dialogue as means to find common ground, sympathy and understanding from people of faith. We should not and cannot any longer mistreat interfaith dialogue as a political means to an end and fail to see the value of its *raison d'être*. Men of faith especially Abrahamic faiths share far more in common especially in their ethical vision of the world than what divides them. We must rise to God's challenge and invitation to not only envision but be part of creating a better world. It is because of our personal relationship with our Creator, we welcome all peoples to promote a community of tolerance, inclusion, non-judgement, respect and above all a just society through socio-economic empowerment and opportunity. It is because of our faith we are kind, compassionate, know that all our action will be held accountable that become driven to make this world a better world. To transform our current pathetic reality where faith has little impact in the world, we must join faith with action. Enough talk of how our religion solves the problems of the world around us; up till now our faith creates more tensions, religious wars, conflict-ridden sectarianism rather than promote unity in diversity. It is only

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when we unite on common ethical ground that we can make a difference. As Moses had stood up against the Pharaoh, and Muhammad against the oppressive tribal system, let men of faith rise again together against oppression utilizing the concepts of tikkun olam and jihad fi sabillah. All men are children of God and so together and only together can we work to create a world that works for everyone.

**Keywords:** interfaith dialogue, common ground, unity in diversity, action.

## **Introduction**

There is almost no country in the world today where multi ethnic, multi religious or multi lingual does not occur, but only to what degree. Fractionalization is the probability that two individuals drawn randomly from the country's groups are not from the same group (ethnic, religious, or whatever the criteria is). Malaysia is fractionalized to a high degree. The only difference is that fractionalization occurred over a very long period time although accelerated during its colonial period with the great influx of workers brought from India and China by the British colonizers. Malaysian independence brought with it, Malay nationalist and their religion to the fore front. Ethnicity and Islam has become a dominant force in Malay political identity and civilization.

Malaysia is not special in it multicultural, multireligious make up. But because Malay identity is closely related to Islam, thus, Islam has become very politicize and is very much controlled and governed by the state governments under the purview of each of the sultan.

Each states therefore, created their own laws to govern Muslims in respect to Islamic laws, personal and family laws. Thus, in Malaysia like most other Muslim majority countries, religion especially Islam is regulated and governed by the state and is influenced by state policy.

Although in Malaysia there are numerous state institutions that initiate interfaith dialogue<sup>4</sup>, but it is more a form of control and appeasement rather than real appreciation of the other or dialogue<sup>5</sup>. Herman Shastri<sup>6</sup> aptly summarizes this condescending attitude of the majority Muslims towards the minority non-Muslims by concluding:

the setting up of a “truly interfaith council” has been hindered by a “majority vs minority” mentality. Malaysia has several interfaith groups such as the Malaysian Consultative Council of Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism, Sikhism and Taoism (MCCBCHST), but Herman pointed out it has yet to form one which engages with the majority Islamic community. “And the reason given to us is, ‘We are the majority, you are the minority’ or ‘Our religion is the religion of the federation, and you are minority religions,’” he said in a webinar yesterday....“Would that in any way give clarification to ‘the dignity of all persons, the equality of all persons and the right of all persons to live together in community and carry out their religious beliefs’?”<sup>7</sup>

When Muslims have this superiority attitude, little can be gained by engaging with others. These Muslims not only consider themselves not equal to others but that for others to be good only when those people conform to their rules and consider their requirements first and foremost.

On the contrary, in Muslim minority countries, Muslims are scrambling to promote interfaith dialogue as a means to find common ground, sympathy and understanding from people of faith<sup>8</sup>.

Why is it we have such different attitudes towards interfaith dialogue when the Muslims are the minority? At these challenging times, when the negative role of religion is highlighted

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<sup>4</sup> <https://worldinterfaithharmonyweek.com/category/country/malaysia/-World> Interfaith Harmony Week.

<sup>5</sup> [https://www.freemalysiatoday.com/category/nation/2020/12/02/no-sign-of-a-truly-interfaith-council-says-religious-leader/-No sign of a ‘truly interfaith council’, says religious leader](https://www.freemalysiatoday.com/category/nation/2020/12/02/no-sign-of-a-truly-interfaith-council-says-religious-leader/-No%20sign%20of%20a%20truly%20interfaith%20council%20says%20religious%20leader)  
**Jason Thomas**, December 2, 2020

<sup>6</sup> Herman Shastri is the Council of Churches Malaysia (CCM) general secretary.

<sup>7</sup> [https://www.freemalysiatoday.com/category/nation/2020/12/02/no-sign-of-a-truly-interfaith-council-says-religious-leader/-No sign of a ‘truly interfaith council’, says religious leader](https://www.freemalysiatoday.com/category/nation/2020/12/02/no-sign-of-a-truly-interfaith-council-says-religious-leader/-No%20sign%20of%20a%20truly%20interfaith%20council%20says%20religious%20leader)  
**Jason Thomas**, December 2, 2020

<sup>8</sup> Interfaith Dialogue. <https://isna.net/interfaith-relations/>. Muslim Council of Britain.  
<https://mcb.org.uk/topic/interfaith>.

over and over again through religious extremist activities<sup>9</sup> ranging from the 911 attacks and other similar attacks in international affairs are played out in the news everyday everywhere<sup>10</sup>, for all to see, fanning the flames of supposedly religions violent nature. The positive political role that religion had and could play in modernization, democratization, development, and peace-building in many parts of the world is totally forgotten and ignored.<sup>11</sup> Even though, there are some scholars who have rejected conflating violence with religion, defending against the avalanched of violence promoted in the name of religion has become so untenable that even R. Scott Appleby alternative solution is argued for the notion of ambivalence<sup>12</sup>, arguing that religion could be part of the problem but also could be part of the solution. The revolutionary moments of the birth and formative periods of a religion may provide us with its perception of use of force and violence to impose its idea of right or wrong.

Xin Mao in referring to Appleby's ambivalence theory aptly criticize it.

We can conclude that Levinasian ambivalence—which is more precisely an ambivalence between infinite ethical responsibility for the other and justice for the third parties—establishes an alternative view on religion's relation with violence, in which

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<sup>9</sup> [https://www.pewforum.org/2020/11/10/in-2018-government-restrictions-on-religion-reach-highest-level-](https://www.pewforum.org/2020/11/10/in-2018-government-restrictions-on-religion-reach-highest-level-globally-in-more-than-a-decade/)

[globally-in-more-than-a-decade/-](https://www.pewforum.org/2020/11/10/in-2018-government-restrictions-on-religion-reach-highest-level-globally-in-more-than-a-decade/) **In 2018, Government Restrictions on Religion Reach Highest Level Globally in More Than a Decade**

<sup>10</sup> Mark Juergensmeyer. [From Bhindranwale to Bin Laden: The Rise of Religious Violence](#). Presentation at Arizona State University/National Bureau of Asian Research Conference, October 14–15, 2004 "Religion and Conflict in Asia: Disrupting Violence".

<sup>11</sup> Philosophy and Progress: Vols. LXI-LXII, January-June, July-December, 2017 ISSN 1607-2278: <https://doi.org/10.3329/pp.v61i1-2.44204> ROLE OF INTERFAITH DIALOGUE IN CHECKING RELIGIOUS EXTREMISM.

See also <https://uu.diva-portal.org/smash/get/diva2:942759/FULLTEXT01.pdf>. Interfaith Dialogue and Religious Peacebuilding in the Middle East Irén Frändå

<sup>12</sup> Appleby, Scott. 2000. *The Ambivalence of the Sacred: Religion, Violence, and Reconciliation*. Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield. See also Avalos, Hector. 2015. Religion and Scarcity: A New Theory for the Role of Religion in Violence. In *The Oxford Handbook of Religions and Violence*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, pp. 554–70. Cavanaugh, William T. 2009. *The Myth of Religious Violence: Secular Ideology and the Roots of Modern Conflicts*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. Kimball, Charles. 2011. *When Religion Becomes Lethal: The Explosive Mix of Politics and Religion in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

violence serves the purposes of justice as telling right or wrong among the subject, the other and the third party.... The ambivalence is more exactly the acknowledgement of violence's possible role in achieving justice, which is demanded by the religious subject's infinite responsibility for third parties<sup>13</sup>.

Can we apply Xin Moa's criticism on religious impositions as violence to a situation which when the laws make impositions on us is also considered as a violence? Why not? When the law imposes on us restrictions, telling us what is right and what is wrong, we rarely question the laws right to do so, and the law does use force to impose the legal will. However, when religion argues that this is right or wrong, we consider these impositions untenable and when force is use either by verbal or physical execution, it is then a violation and a violence upon us. How is one imposition so easily acceptable while another so easily rejected? Is there any yardstick we can use?

Even if we accept that religion by its inherent nature imposes its will not only among its subject but also at times on others it can still be made to have a positive impact on society if and only if we can reach a common ground. Appleby surmises that we must accept the transcendent dignity of human beings.

Rather the common ground established by dialogue is the mutual recognition of the irreducible dignity of each person regardless of race, ethnicity, religious background. Paradoxically however it is precisely the religious imagination that opens one eyes to the transcendent dignity of human beings, whatever their path to the sacred<sup>14</sup>.

I fully concur with Appleby on this, that religion in its bare essence accepts that all men are created by God<sup>15</sup>, possessing transcendent dignity and thus, because of this fundamental belief

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<sup>13</sup> <https://www.mdpi.com/2077-1444/10/11/632/htm>. **Religion's Ambivalent Relation with Violence: From Scott Appleby to Emmanuel Levinas**, Xin Mao

<sup>14</sup> *The Oxford Handbook of Religion, Conflict, and Peacebuilding* by Atalia Omer, R. Scott Appleby, and David Little (eds). Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015. Introduction by Scott Appleby

<sup>15</sup> In a renowned tradition of the Prophet (pbuh) farewell address, he said,

we must restraint ourselves, for abusing one man<sup>16</sup> is abusing God's creation. If we are successful in reminding all believers of all faiths of this fundamental belief then maybe we can start to have respect of each other human dignity and more fairly try to understand and accommodate each other. To discover our common ground should be our motivation rather than to convert the other. Thus, we should not and cannot any longer mistreat interfaith dialogue as a political means to an end and fail to see the value of its *raison d'être*<sup>17</sup>.

For the Abrahamic faiths especially, the role of religion is to guide man individually and whole societies to embrace righteous beliefs that lead to righteous actions. God had been sending revelation to man since the beginning of man, beginning with the prophet Adam culminating in the prophet Muhammad. The basic content of the message is always one and the same, belief in God and man responsibility on the Day of Judgment, and thus, because of this belief, act righteously. However, the language and symbols use in the revelation varied in accordance to the ability man to understand at different times of their civilization. After all, the message it directed at man and not God.

For, Abu Nasr al-Farabi<sup>18</sup>, major proponent of *falsafa*, perceives revelation as the ultimate

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O People! You are created by one God, and you are also the descendants of the same father. So, the Arabs are not superior to the non-Arabs, neither white to the black nor the black to the white except by the degree of righteousness. Albani, A.. (1996). *Silsilatu al-Ahadith al-Sahihah* [Authentic Hadiths Series] (Vol. 6). p. 449

<sup>16</sup> . Hertz, Joseph H. (1959). Authorized Daily Prayer Book. New York. p. 265). Hertz declares that “The belief in the unity of the human race is the natural corollary of the unity of God, since One God must be the God of the whole of humanity

<sup>17</sup>Kayoaglu, Turan . Explaining Interfaith Dialogue in the Muslim World [Politics and Religion](#) 8(2):1-27. June 2015. Kayoaglu conclude that “religious actors’ political theology (in this article, “public interfaith theology”) and institutional state-religion relationships are key factors in explaining the varied trajectories of religious actors’ political engagement. This political engagement has considerable power in explaining Muslim actors’ interfaith engagement.

The problem with this approach to interfaith engagement is that its goal is to appease rather than to work together to achieve a better world.

<sup>18</sup> Abu Nasr Muhammad ibn Muhammad ibn Tarkhan ibn Uzalaj al-Farabi (258/870-339/950) better known in the traditional Islamic sources as simply Abu Nasr, the second outstanding representative of the Muslim peripatetic (*mashshai'* school of philosophy after al-Kindi (185/801-260/873), gave Islamic philosophy its direction Michael Marmura, " The Islamic Philosophers' Understanding of Islam", in Islam's Understanding of Itself, 93. For al-Farabi's place and role in establishing the main framework of Islamic philosophy, see, Muhsin Mahdi, "Al-Farabi and the Foundation of Philosophy", in Islamic Philosophy and Mysticism, ed. by Parviz Morewedge (New York: 1981). 3-22.

culmination of the highest intellectual truths transformed and put into a symbolic language with power to motivate man to right action. Al-Farabi conceives of revelation as being the culmination of the highest intellectual truths transformed into moving expressions capable to be understood by all and most importantly, its moving ability to drive and commit men to action<sup>19</sup>. Revelation, al-Farabi argues does not contradict reason but instead complements it. Where reason only appeals to the intellect, revelation's ability to use moving symbolic language moves all types of people to action, thus, transcending reason limited ability to transform truths into actions. Thus, the culmination of religious beliefs and practises is not only to conclude in achieving a brotherhood of believers but a brotherhood of righteous acting believers.

The great appeal of religion is its ability to motivate men to action. However, not all religions are able to achieve this equally well. Different religions symbolic languages have differing abilities to move people. Thus, al-Farabi argues that since the aim of revelation is to move men to action and different religion have varying abilities to achieve this, thus there are grades of religion in accordance to their ability to convey these truth effectively to transform man's actions.

Men of faith especially Abrahamic faiths share far more in common especially in their ethical vision of the world than what divides them. We must rise to God's challenge and invitation to not only envision but be part of creating a better world. It is because of our personal relationship with our creator, we welcome all peoples to promote a community of tolerance, inclusion, non- judgement, respect and above all a just society through socio-economic empowerment and opportunity. It is because of our faith we are kind, compassionate, know that all our action will be held accountable that drives us to make this world a better world.

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<sup>19</sup> Al-Farabi, *Tahsil al-sa'ada* (Attainment of Happiness), (ed.) Ja'far Yasin, Beirut, 1983. Translated into English by Muhsin Mahdi, part I of *Al-Farabi's Philosophy of Plato and Aristotle*, (Ithaca 1969). *Al-Farabi, Tahsil al-sa'ada*, 89. Mahdi, 44.

## **History of Islamic Interfaith Cooperation: From the State of Weakness to Strength**

### **A. The Protection of Najashi of the Kingdom of Axum (Habasha, present day Ethiopia)**

In a modern globalized world where all countries and places in the world are multiracial and multireligious, it would seem natural since we all live together, we should try to cooperate and understand each other in order to achieve a productive just society. However, this idea of cooperation is not a modern idea but already existed in the past. The survival of the Islamic ummah actually depended on the generosity of a Christian king in the beginning.

In the early period of the prophethood of Muhammad, when his followers were among the poor, weak, slaves and the disadvantaged, around 612 – 622 CE, when these nascent Muslims were persecuted and tortured by the powerful Quraish of Mecca, the Arab prophet heard of a just Christian king, well known as al-Najashi, or the Negus of the Kingdom of Axum, or Habasha in Arab documents, in present day Ethiopia, and told them to migrate there. It is mentioned in Sahih al-Bukhari that his name is Ashamah. Scholars mentioned that his name is Ashamah ibn Abjar who ruled the Kingdom of Axum from 614-631 CE. The prophet told his followers to seek refuge in Habasha. There were two migrations made to Habasha. One, in 613 CE in a group consisting of 11 men and 4 women. The next migration was in 615 CE consisting of 83 men and 18 women. A well-known story of his justice is recorded in Ibn Hisham, Sirah Nabawiyyah and Tarikh al-Tabari or al-Tabari.

The story says the Negus was very hospitable to the Muslims. But after the second migration in 615 CE, the influential Quraish warlords Abu Sufyan and Abu Jahl sent a delegation to Najashi requesting him to expel and hand over the Muslims to them. The delegation presented their case saying that the Muslims were evil youths who escaped to Habasha; that they practised an unknown religion forsaking the religion of their people and therefore should be sent back to their elders. The Negus looked at his bishops for their



reaction. However, his bishops having been bribed, according to the sources, agreed to have the immigrants sent back. The Negus, unsatisfied with such reaction was angry and swear that he would not surrender them to anyone until he investigated what was the religion they entered, for which they had forsaken their religion without entering his or other religion. They were called, and thus, we have this conversation as recorded in the chronicles:

Ja`far ibn Abu Talib, the leader of the Muslim immigrants replied:

We were an uncivilised people. God sent us an apostle who commanded us to speak the truth, be faithful to our engagements, mindful of the ties of kinship and kindly hospitality, and to refrain from crimes and bloodshed. He forbade us to commit abominations and to speak lies, and to devour the property of orphans, and to vilify chaste women. He commanded us to worship God alone and not to associate anything with Him, and he gave us orders about prayer, alms and fasting. So, we believed in him and what he brought to us from Allah, and we follow what he asked us to do and we avoid what he forbade us to do.

Thereupon, O king, our people attacked us, visited the severest punishment on us to make us renounce our religion and take us back to the old immorality and the worship of idols. They oppressed us, made life intolerable for us and obstructed us from observing our religion. So, we left for your country, choosing you before anyone else, desiring your protection and hoping to live in justice and in peace in your midst”.

The Negus was impressed and asked if Ja'far had with him anything that Muhammad had received from God. Ja'far recited for him the first portion of *Surah Maryam* in the Quran, verse 19-32 which tells the story of Isa (Jesus) and his mother Maryam (Mary). On hearing these words, the Negus wept until his beard was wet and the bishops wept until their scrolls were wet. The Negus said, “certainly, this and what Jesus had brought come out of one source”. The Negus said that he would never harm the Muslims.

The Quraysh delegates alleged that the Muslims called Jesus a created being, so the Negus asked Ja'far what he thought of Jesus. Ja'far answered: "Our prophet says he is God's slave, apostle, spirit and word, which he cast into Mary the blessed virgin."

At this the Negus returned the gifts of the Quraysh, calling them "bribes," and "they left his presence crestfallen." The Muslims continued to live with the Negus "comfortably in the best security" until they left for Medina (*sic.* in the 7<sup>th</sup> year of Hijra or 628/9 CE. It was reported that he used his own money to transport the immigrants in two boats to reach Yathrib).

The significance of this story cannot be emphasised enough. What the Negus recognised first and foremost is that religion is ethical teachings and has a universal value transcending ethnicity, race, and geography. The appeal of the immigrants were their ethics. Secondly, despite the Quraish trying to use religion and dogma against the new Muslims, it failed. The Negus clearly being a rational person of knowledge, reject corruption as a means of persuasion. Although clearly, he was of the Arian Christian persuasion in terms of theology whose belief in Jesus was similar as in Islam. Most importantly, when Islam was weak, a Christian king was very hospitable to its early adherents and protected them in his country which certainly was a good example for humanity.

#### B. Dustur al-Medina: A Charter of Cooperation for Peace in a Pluralistic Society<sup>20</sup>

The Quraish boycott of the clan of the Prophet, i.e., the Banu Hashim, the maltreatment of his followers of lower status, and an attempt on his own life due to his teachings prompted the Prophet to seek new allies. The Prophet, Muhammad ibn Abdullah, despite being rejected by his own people was well-known for his praiseworthy character and a man of peace and truth, and this information had reached Yathrib which later became known as Medina. Thus, in

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<sup>20</sup> See Muhammad Hamidullah, "The First Written Constitution in the World", 1941 (pdf) <https://ia800409.us.archive.org/11/items/THEFIRSTWRITTENCONSTITUTIONOFTHETHEWORLD/THE%20FIRST%20WRITTEN%20CONSTITUTION%20OF%20THE%20WORLD.pdf>

See also A. Guillaume's Life of Muhammad – A Translation of Ibn Ishaq's Sirat Rasulallah, Oxford University Press, Karachi:1955. See also Kassim Ahmad, "A Short Note on the Medina Charter". Retrieved on 14 August 2017 from <http://www.constitution.org/cons/medina/kassim2.htm>.

June 622 CE, the Prophet migrated to Yathrib after the invitation of its people who sought his help to negotiate peace between its warring inhabitants, the majority of whom were Jewish and pagan tribes. Some of his followers had migrated to Yathrib earlier due to the ongoing persecution in Mecca. Two months after he arrived in Medina an agreement was reached between Muhammad and the new immigrants, and the Medinan tribes, i.e., the `Aus and Khazraj and their allies in which 20 tribes were involved, and written in a detailed document known as Dustur al-Medina, or Sahifa al-Medina, or the Constitution of Medina, or the Charter of Medina at present. At that time, the number of Muslims were around 300 people while the population was estimated between 4000-5000 people, the majority of whom were Jews and pagans. This was indeed interfaith intertribal cooperation.

The Charter of Medina has 47 articles. For a document which was written 1400 years ago, the Charter of Medina consists of very modern ideas concerning citizenship and alliances (Article 2 and 25 including the rest until article 35), rights and freedom of religion (Article 25-35) , protection (Article 15) equal rights and responsibilities (throughout the document including Article 24 and 37), and the rights of consultation (Article 23), and the allegiance of the affected parties, i.e., the inhabitants of Yathrib, was to the treaty or community, instead of to the tribe as was the norm at the time. This is very significant considering that even present-day Muslim countries hardly apply these values. In fact, in certain Islamic circles these are considered foreign or western ideas. This document is also a moral document. In many places in it, the ethical values of kindness, justice, and good morality in general are mentioned, and also specifically that “God fearing believers shall be against the rebellion, or him who seek to spread injustice, or sin or animosity, or corruption between believers; the hand of every man shall be against him even if he be a son of them” (Article 13); to emphasize that loyalty to God means loyalty to ethics and morality, not to the family nor tribe.

Thus, what made a minority immigrant leader and his followers welcomed and accepted in a foreign land to negotiate a peace treaty among his warring host members was his integrity and brilliance at understanding human nature and the desire to do good can be seen in the document. It cannot be emphasized enough that the Prophet made a paradigm shift in the political allegiance of the people at the time through the Charter of Medina in which he recognizes all the different communities, the Jews, the pagans and the new Muslims both immigrants and Medinan, and their followers who follow its ethics as one ummah, regardless of religion and tribe. This can be seen in article 2 and 25 of the document. It is very important for Muslims who have been dogmatized into the idea that the ummah consists only of Muslims, to realize this. That the Prophet of Islam had already governed and lived in a pluralistic society where each member of society contributes to their wellbeing together as equals, and there was no mention of Islamic statehood.

### C. Covenants with the Christians

As the Muslim polity became stronger, the Prophet invited the Christians to Islam, but some refused and disagree on theological points with the Prophet. True to his idea of freedom of religion as we can see in the Charter of Medina, the Prophet did not reject the Christians. In fact, made many covenants with various Christian communities. One example is the covenant with the Coptic Christians of Mount Sinai, and another is the Christian of Najran. In 628 CE a delegation of Coptic Christians from St. Catherine Monastery in Mount Sinai came to the Prophet to ask for his protection. The Prophet responded with a charter which promised,

This is a message from Muhammad ibn Abdullah, as a covenant to those who adopt Christianity, near and far, we are with them.

Verily I, the servants, the helpers, and my followers defend them, because Christians are my citizens; and by Allah! I hold out against anything that displeases them.

No compulsion is to be on them. Neither are their judges to be removed from their jobs nor their monks from their monasteries.

No one is to destroy a house of their religion, to damage it, or to carry anything from it to the Muslims' houses.

Should anyone take any of these, he would spoil God's covenant and disobey His Prophet.

Verily, they are my allies and have my secure charter against all that they hate.

No one is to force them to travel or to oblige them to fight. The Muslims are to fight for them.

If a female Christian is married to a Muslim, it is not to take place without her approval. She is not to be prevented from visiting her church to pray. Their churches are to be respected.

They are neither to be prevented from repairing them nor the sacredness of their covenants.

No one of the nation (Muslims) is to disobey the covenant till the Last Day (end of the world)

Professor Muqtader Khan<sup>21</sup> has noted that the beginning and the ending of the covenant is very critical. This is a promise of the Prophet of Islam to the Christians of the world for eternity. The Prophet considered the Christians his allies, promised them protection and a generous freedom and rights to practice their religion even to Christians who married Muslims. There was no coercion against the Christians and no meddling their religious affairs nor discrimination on account of their religion. The most striking point that can be observed from this narrative is that as the Muslim polity became stronger, the Prophet extended his protection, became tolerant and inclusivistic, even pluralistic as in the case of the Christians of Najran as recorded by Ibn Hisham.

In 631 CE, sixty Christians from Najran came to Medina. They exchanged information about Christianity and Islam with the Prophet. After a long discussion, they

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<sup>21</sup> See Muqtadar Khan, "Muhammad's Promise to Christian's", <https://karamah.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/Prophet-Muhammad%E2%80%99s-Promise-to-Christians.pdf>  
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decided that they wanted to remain Christians. They disagreed on theological issues with Islam. As they then wanted to pray, the Prophet allowed them to pray in his mosque.

D. *The Convivencia*: The Muslim, Jewish, Christian Civilizational Collaboration

Perhaps, we could look at the reign of the Abbasid Caliphate for the collaboration between various religious communities, but we prefer to look at the *Convivencia*, or Coexistence in Al-Andalus, as a clear example of interfaith cooperation among Muslims, Jews and Christians under Muslim rule. Islam expanded into Spain and Portugal from North Africa in the 8<sup>th</sup> century and made contributions to humanity as a great civilization. This happened due to the new cultures that developed as a result of the experiences shared which are a consequence of the cooperative relationships formed. That "...comparatively cooperative relationship during a time of intense diversity of thought and behaviour facilitated the integration and acculturation, even if not of toleration, of cultures throughout Muslim Al-Andalus", says Lindsey Vaughan<sup>22</sup>. There were Mozarabs, a term that refers to Christians who adapted the customs and styles of the Muslims without converting to Islam, and there were Mudejars, Muslims living among Christians in the centre of a population who are predominantly Christian. There was a significant intermarriage between Muslims, Christian and Jews.

By the tenth century, Cordoba was known as the "Ornament of the World". According to sources, it was famous as "a city of 900 baths, 50 hospitals, a university and 300 colleges, 72 public libraries, public parks, and paved lamp-lit streets whose radiance could be seen some 40 miles away" (Rahat Dewan, *Convivencia Magazine*). This illustrates Al-Andalus vast intellectual wealth aside from its prosperity in the material arena, which made it truly distinct. There were numerous Muslim scientists, physicians, and philosophers among whom Ibn Firnas, the first person to fly; Al-Zahrawi, the father of modern surgery; philosophers such as

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<sup>22</sup> See Lindsey Vaugh, "Convivencia: Christians, Jews, and Muslims in Medieval Spain" Senior Honors Project: December 2003, [https://trace.tennessee.edu/utk\\_chanhonoproj/692/](https://trace.tennessee.edu/utk_chanhonoproj/692/)

Ibn Rushd and Maimonides (Jewish Rabbi and Scholar); and scholars such as Al-Qurtubi, Ibn Hazm, and Ibn Arabi; and Jews studied with Muslim teachers especially in the sciences. The lingua franca of the Jews and the Mozarabs were Arabic. Muslim rule of Al-Andalus also contributed to the “Golden Age” of Jewish culture where the Jews had a flourishing Jewish intellectual, cultural and religious life.<sup>23</sup>

## **Contemporary Response: A New Convivencia**

### **Tolerance to Cooperation**

According to the book of Genesis, Adam (PBUH), as the first human being, was created in the image of God. The term image of God implies, at least, two consequences, firstly, that humankind had some characters of God such as love, trustworthiness, patience and so on. Secondly, all human beings are equal because they came from the same ancestor.<sup>24</sup> This picture can serve as an argument that human beings should be able to coexist peacefully in a harmonious life.

However, as the one who was created in the image of God, Adam (PBUH) could not maintain his likeness to his creator. In a pivotal incident, Adam chose to go against God's will seduced by Satan's offer to eat the fruit that was forbidden for him. As a consequence, Adam had disobeyed enticed by the devil's seduction<sup>25</sup>, his violation not only demonstrated Adam has free will but the exercise of free will has consequences.

Although both Christian and Islamic traditions begin their explanation of evil from the Fall of Adam, their interpretation of the repercussions of this event differs. For the Christians, Adam was cast out to earth as a punishment for his sin. For the Muslims, on the other hand, Adam had asked God for forgiveness for this transgression and his repentance was accepted and

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<sup>23</sup> See Rahat Dewan, "Muslim Spain's Lesson in Multiculturalism" *Convivencia Magazine* <https://convivencia.co/co-existence-in-muslim-spain-might-have-lessons-for-today-c7ee7a504ba0>

<sup>24</sup> Mark L. Winer, "Tikkun Olan: a Jewish Theology of 'repairing the world'" *Sage Journal of Theology Vol. 111, issue number 864*, 434.

<sup>25</sup> Matthew Henry, *Commentary on the Whole Bible Vol. 1*, (Grand Rapids: Christian Classic Ethereal Library, n.d.), 94.

thus, he was forgiven. However, he was sent out from the garden not as a punishment but in order to develop his full potential. The Christian response to the problem of evil is dominated by Augustine's free will argument and its solution, God's grace. St Irenaeus on the other hand, argues that man is an immature creation that requires earthly experience in order to develop his potential. Combining both Augustine and Irenaeus positions may actually provide a more complete answer and is certainly not contradictory. Muslim philosophers integrated both approaches to get the best of both worlds. They utilized Augustine free will and incorporated Irenaeus' fulfillment of man's potential to argue that life on earth though hard but a necessary evil or more accurately a necessary hardship to produce good. These differing understandings of the concept of genesis and evolution evil have practical implications on the concept of man's responsibility and human action although it is not obvious in everyday life.

Human life is not an obstacle for humans to live in harmony, even though that is not an easy matter to build a harmonious life. God's command in Leviticus 19: 18, "love your neighbour as yourself," which means God knows that human beings have a potential to build peace and to live in harmony, even though man already lost the image of God. The command to love each other is echoed by Jesus (PBUH) in Mark 12: 29-31. Jesus (PBUH) even says that loving God and thy neighbours are the most important and the greatest commandment, which means that it is something that humans must pursue in their life; otherwise, human's life would be meaningless. However, human beings tend to always indulge in themselves and live-in luxury as a result of losing the image of God. The tension of pampering ourselves and loving others need a way out. So, Martin Buber proposes an idea that human beings can bring back the character of God that has disappeared from themselves by imitating God.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Mark L. Winer, "Tikkun Olan: a Jewish Theology of 'repairing the world'", 435.



The understanding of loving others has become essential in Jewish ethics and tradition, as they call “*Tikkun Olam*” (repairing the world). Repairing of the world in this respect should be understood in terms of social action, as an application of imitating God. Interestingly, the Christians, who have different theology from Jewish community in general, have participated in *Tikkun Olam*.<sup>27</sup> This is because more than a half of their Scriptures are also the Jewish Scriptures.

Besides, the unfavourable relationship between the Christian community, especially the Catholic, and the Jewish community, has been restored with the issuance of a declaration in the Second Vatican Council. This unfavourable relationship in this respect is because the Jews reject the Messiahship of Jesus and there was an anti-Semitic movement that led to the genocide of Jews, especially in Germany. The restoration of this relationship also includes religious respect for spiritual, moral and cultural values of other religions such as Hinduism, Buddhism, and Islam. The relationship with Islam seems to be a dominant discussion regarding the relationship with Jews which may be misinterpreted as a solely political relationship and not a relationship regarding religion in the Middle East, where religion and politics are seen as indistinguishable.<sup>28</sup>

The openness of the Catholic Church was expanded by an incident in which Pope Benedict had delivered a Regensburg lecture on 12 September 2006 at the [University of Regensburg](#) in [Germany](#), where he had once served as a professor of [theology](#). This lecture entitled "[Faith, Reason](#) and the University – Memories and Reflections" sparked international reactions and controversy. Although Pope Benedict mainly focused on Christianity and condemned what is called the tendency in the modern world to "exclude the question of God" from reason, Benedict quoting a [Byzantine Emperor's](#) strong criticism of [Muhammad's](#) teachings struck a raw nerve and intense condemnation from the Muslim world, but

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<sup>27</sup> Mark L. Winer, “Tikkun Olan: a Jewish Theology of ‘repairing the world’”, 434.

<sup>28</sup> Kail C. Ellis, “Nostra Aetate and Its Relevance for Today” in Kail C. Ellis (Ed.), *Nostra Aetate, Non-Christian Religions, and Interfaith Relations*, (Cham: Palgrave MacMillan, 2021), 1.

astonishingly awaken the Muslim religious community to initiate and promote interfaith dialogue in the form of forming "A Common Word between Us and You". "A common word "may have been born out as a reaction against the Pope controversial remarks on Islam, but since the launch of "A Common Word", hundreds of Muslim and Christian scholars, leaders and intellectuals have approved and commented on the initiative; including political leaders, the Pope and many grand muftis. This initiative fundamental principle is, 'Love of God and Love of the Neighbour' is derived from **'Love of God and Love of the Neighbour' or 'Love of the Good and Love of the Neighbour'**.

In 2010, the World Interfaith Harmony Week was launched at the United Nations General Assembly. The resolution (A/Res/65/5) was adopted unanimously by the UNGA after considerable diplomatic efforts by Arab, Muslim, Central American countries and Russia.<sup>29</sup>

Nevertheless, the rapprochement that occurred between Christianity and other religions, especially Islam, did not always go well. A jihad movement is known as the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) gave rise to Islamophobia. Islam is considered a frightening institution from both a religious and political perspective. This situation is a factor that is detrimental to Islam in establishing good relations with other religions, especially Christianity, in developing interfaith relations. Fortunately, the United Nation has designated ISIS as a terrorist organization so that the fear of Islam as a religion can be reduced even if it does not eliminate Islamophobia.

Below will be discussed two case studies, one from a country where the population is a majority Muslim and another from a country where Muslims are a minority. These two case studies are not directly related to Malaysia but can be a picture for Malaysia in developing an understanding of the cooperation.

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<sup>29</sup> <https://www.acommonword.com/un-world-interfaith-harmony-week/>

Firstly, the Indonesian Peace Generation, a peace program developed by an Indonesian Muslim and an American Christian in the form of educational module which aims to create harmony by overcoming barriers to peace. The authors' main purpose to found and develop the Peace Generation educational program was to provide materials that could be easily and effectively taught by teachers or youth workers. They are not simply hoping that the young generation will reject violence; instead, they want to nurture a generation of peacemakers who will impact Indonesia and even the rest of the world. Also, enable every child and youth to learn peace and empathy by equipping educators with peace education through creative media.<sup>30</sup>

From its beginnings fourteen years ago, this upper elementary and high school educational program now has four versions, English Muslim version, Indonesian Muslim version, Indonesian Christian version, and Acehnese version. Besides, this program is adapted in a similar program in the South of the Philippines. The program is endorsed by a number of leading scholars in the fields of religion, academics and education, among these are the former Chairman of Muhammadiyah, Indonesia, Prof. Dr. M. Din Syamsudin; a previous Director General of the Ministry of National Education, the Republic of Indonesia, Prof. Suyanto, Ph.D; and Professor Abdullah Saeed, a prior Director of the National Centre of Excellence for Islamic Studies, University of Melbourne, Australia. Interestingly, the modules have reached more than 30,000 people, and the Peace Generation program has trained more than 500 teachers and facilitators.

Secondly, Abrahamic Alliance International, a non-government organization (NGO) established by Rod Cardoza, a peace activist, in 2008 with the aim of building peace together among the Abrahamic faiths, who have a common foundation, namely to love God and love others.

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<sup>30</sup> Erik Lincoln, Interview by Author, Bandung, Indonesia, 19<sup>th</sup> of April 2015.

This organization has a fascinating vision, which written as follows:

We envision a world where children of Abraham unite to save lives; where Jews, Christians and Muslims enjoy peaceful coexistence and mutual appreciation as our faith is deepened by meaningful encounters with each other; where understanding, humility and respect replace ignorance, arrogance, and contempt; where diverse yet faithful worshippers of the God of Abraham move beyond dialog to cooperative action, loving our neighbor together until the hungry are fed, the naked are clothed, the sick receive care, and the orphan is raised with love, compassion and generosity. We envision a world where God's faithfulness to bless all nations through Abraham's offspring is expressed in wonderfully new and creative ways through Jews, Christians and Muslims striving to obey all that the prophets have spoken.<sup>31</sup>

Through their mission, one can see that this organization has a Biblical foundation, which is in accordance with the Qur'anic teaching. Furthermore, this NGO provides some services such helping the poor, suffering and marginalised through local community service, and relieving extreme poverty internationally through generosity, educational empowerment and compassionate service.

The leadership of this organization, now, is carried out jointly by those of different religious backgrounds, under the Abrahamic faiths. Besides, the advisory board members of this NGO are filled with people who are well-known in their fields such as Mahmoud Ayoub, Rabbi Reuven Firestone, Abdullah Saeed, and Marvin Wilson.<sup>32</sup>

Conclusion.

Faith and Public Policy

Politician everywhere are getting a bad name and have become less and less leaders of public opinion today. The attack on the American democratic institutions certainly proved this. However, since in democratic countries, politicians are elected and are representatives of the

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<sup>31</sup> [www.abrahamicalliance.org](http://www.abrahamicalliance.org), retrieved on 17<sup>th</sup> January, 2021.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

constituents, their wearing their religious beliefs on their sleeves only demonstrate the power and influence of religion today<sup>33</sup>. Similarly, in most places in the world, religion in public life is in display everywhere to different degrees. Those advocates of the classical secularization thesis arguing that religion is declining in importance in modern societies and may disappear completely are proven wrong with the rise of religious fundamentalism in all religions<sup>34</sup>.

The rise of the importance of religions are real and if not engaged rationally can prove detrimental. Scott Appleby supports the notion of ambivalence<sup>35</sup>, arguing that religion could be part of the problem but also could be part of the solution. I understand how Appleby could have reached this conclusion, however, I argue that if we can reestablish the foundational doctrine in Abrahamic faiths that we all come from the same man, Adam, thus, we are all equal whatever our color or creed are. If we reinvigorate this notion of equality, revive the notion of the sacredness of the person, we could possibly reduce tensions and come realise we are not so difference after all. Maybe then, we will question our actions and not simply our creeds.

Mohammed Hashas reminds us that if we witness a few of the Muslims , Christians or Jews do harm to others, they are not only not reflective of the rest of the adherence of thier faith , but in fact they act contrary to the true teachings of their faith<sup>36</sup>. Jocelyne Cesari adds to Hashas conclusion that the few violent adherents cannot and should not be made representative of the many faithful by pointing out religiously inspired violence cannot solely

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<sup>33</sup> <https://www.pewforum.org/2021/01/04/faith-on-the-hill-2021/>. Faith on the Hill. Nearly nine-in-ten members of Congress identify as Christian (88%), compared with two-thirds of the general public (65%). Congress is both more heavily Protestant (55% vs. 43%) and more heavily Catholic (30% vs. 20%) than the U.S. adult population overall.

<sup>34</sup> <https://www.amacad.org/project/fundamentalism-project>

<sup>35</sup> Appleby, Scott. 2000. *The Ambivalence of the Sacred: Religion, Violence, and Reconciliation*. Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield. See also Avalos, Hector. 2015. Religion and Scarcity: A New Theory for the Role of Religion in Violence. In *The Oxford Handbook of Religions and Violence*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, pp. 554–70. Cavanaugh, William T. 2009. *The Myth of Religious Violence: Secular Ideology and the Roots of Modern Conflicts*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. Kimball, Charles. 2011. *When Religion Becomes Lethal: The Explosive Mix of Politics and Religion in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

<sup>36</sup> Mohammed Hashas, “Why I am still Muslim?”, <https://www.criticalmuslim.io/why-am-i-still-muslim/>

be attributed to text since only a few, relatively small compared to the large number of adherence of the faith, act in this manner.

The problem is that paying attention only to belief or religious texts does not help us understand the vision and strategy of Al-Qaeda or other terrorist groups. Additionally, there are double standards since we do not go to the Bible to understand some forms of political violence related to Christian religious groups. Most academics have moved away from this first approach and have developed a second one in which religion is a proxy for the real factors contributing to political violence, such as social or economic grievances, failed states, or external political interferences.<sup>37</sup>

The Italian Sufi leader Abdul Wahid Pallavicini says in *Islam Interiore* that when a Jew, or a Christian, or a Muslim fight one another, they do not fight because they are so (Jewish, Christian, or Muslim); they fight because they are not so; they fight because they have deviated from the meaning of religion.<sup>38</sup>

The Quran celebrates that God had created male and female and made them different tribes and peoples as a challenge to them. The reason for these differences is positive, not negative. The Qur'an says, 'O mankind, indeed we created you from male and female, and made you peoples and tribes that you may know one another. Indeed, the most noble of you in the sight of Allah is the most righteous of you. Indeed, Allah is Knowing and Acquainted' (49: 13). Thus, the challenge is to rise not in spite of our differences but because of it, to celebrate it and live up to our own ideals of righteous. If only we try to live up to these ideals of the above beautiful, but challenging verse.

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<sup>37</sup> Jocelyne Cesari, *Political Violence in the Name of God: Is It Really About Religion?* <https://berkeleycenter.georgetown.edu/responses/political-violence-in-the-name-of-god-is-it-really-about-religion>

<sup>38</sup> Mohammed Hashas, "Why I am still Muslim?", <https://www.criticalmuslim.io/why-am-i-still-muslim/>