

In the Name of God Most High

Religious Resources in Peacemaking Between Muslims and Christians

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Let me begin by expressing my thanks to al-Azhar University, to the Grand Imam, Sheikh Ṭanṭāwī, to the Rector of the University, Prof. Dr. Al-Tayyeb, to the hard-working staff of the University, and to the people and government of Egypt for their leadership in organizing this important conference, and for their warm hospitality which makes us all feel that we are among our brothers and sisters.

I write these words at a very painful time for me personally, after events which make us acutely aware of the urgent need for peacemaking. I write from the city of Nouakchott, Mauritania, where two days ago Al-Qā'ida in the Islamic Maghreb murdered a very dear friend and colleague of mine, Chris Leggett. I have known Chris personally for several years, and his daughter is a good friend of my daughter. Chris was Director of a humanitarian organization which provides vocational training to poor, unemployed Mauritians and to prisoners in Mauritanian jails. He was well-known throughout the city of Nouakchott for his warm, friendly personality, for his humility, for his integrity and high moral character, for his concern for the poor, and most of all for his deep love for the Mauritanian people. He loved the people of Mauritania so much that I know he would have been happy to give his life for them. Chris's father told the press yesterday, "Knowing Chris as we know him, he would have been willing to help those who brought harm to him, had he only had the chance."



The whole city of Nouakchott is overwhelmed with grief at this time – Mauritians and foreigners alike, Muslims and Christians alike. Many, many people loved Chris, and many Mauritians whom I do not even know have approached me in the street to express their condolences over his death. At the same time, I have read anonymous blog postings on the internet which attempt to justify his murder in the name of Islam, and which call for a general jihad against all Westerners and Christians. Chris leaves a wife and four children, aged 6-14. His children will grow up fatherless, wondering what could motivate people to murder such a kind and humble man or to justify such a murder in the name of religion. These children need to hear a strong message from the religious leaders of the Muslim world, expressing compassion upon them, and assuring them that Chris's murderers have betrayed Islam because "Whoever kills a soul unjustly, it is as though he killed the whole human race."

من قتل نفسا لغير نفس فكأنه قتل الناس جميعا.

Chris's death is a sign of the need for peacemaking in our world today. But it is also a sign of hope for peace. When Christians are willing to lay down their lives in love for Muslims, and when Muslims are willing to lay down their lives in love for Christians, then perhaps there is hope for peace. When Muslims, Christians and Jews all agree that they would rather give their

own lives in love than take others' lives, then there is hope. This kind of self-giving love does not come from secular sources: it can flow only from deep faith in God.

Secular critics of religion look at such events and argue that religion itself is the problem. If only the human race would stop being so religious, they argue, we would not have so much conflict and violence in the world. However this is clearly not a practical proposal.

First, it is not practical because the genocides committed by Joseph Stalin, Mao Zedong and Pol Pot (to name just a few) in the name of secular ideologies demonstrate that the suppression of religion will not bring peace.

Second, it is not practical because in recent years the world is becoming more religious, not less so. A recent worldwide study conducted by the Gallup organization found that "With the exception of Kazakhstan, majorities of those surveyed in Gallup Polls of countries with substantial Muslim populations (as high as 98% in Egypt, 96% in Indonesia, and 86% in Turkey) say that religion is an important part of their daily lives. This compares with 68% of respondents in the United States."¹ Similarly a 2005 BBC-Gallup study on the comparative roles of religion and nationality in shaping identity found that 60% of Pakistanis say that religion is "most important" to them, compared to fewer than 10% who say that nationality is "most important." The same study found that more than 90% of Egyptians say that religion is "most important," compared with fewer than 5% who cite nationality as "most important." In North America the contrast is less sharp, but there too religion is more important than nationality (32% versus 23%).²

Of particular interest to this conference at al-Azhar is the fact that people worldwide trust their religious leaders more than they trust their political leaders. A Gallup study for the World Economic Forum found that when asked what kinds of leaders they trusted, more than three times as many people worldwide replied "religious leaders" than replied "politicians." This contrast was particularly marked in Africa and the Middle East, but also in North America and elsewhere.³

If religion is "very important" to the world's people, and if they trust their religious leaders more than they trust their political leaders, then religious leaders have a crucial role to play in creating conditions for peace. Politicians and diplomats will not be able to make peace unless the peoples they represent allow them to do so, and those peoples are not likely to support peace unless they hear messages of peace from their religious leaders.

This does not mean that religious peace will automatically bring about peace in the world. Northern Ireland is an example of a place where people calling themselves "Protestants" and "Catholics" continued to kill one another long after Protestant and Catholic religious leaders had made peace with one another and called for an end to violence. Darfur is a place where Sunni Muslims are killing Sunni Muslims, and both sides cite religious justification for their fight, even

¹ John Esposito and Dalia Mogahed, *Who Speaks for Islam?*, p. 47.

² BBC-Gallup survey, September 2005. Source: <http://news.bbc.co.uk/>, accessed September 2005.

³ Gallup International, "Voice of the People" Survey, January 17, 2008, http://www.weforum.org/en/media/Latest%20Press%20Releases/PR_VoP_170108, accessed May 27, 2009.

as the worldwide Muslim community calls for an end to the fighting. So religious peace must be coupled with political will if genuine peace is to be achieved. But religious peacemaking is an indispensable *component* of peacemaking in this world.

Allow me to illustrate this with one negative example and one positive example:

Certain Christian and Jewish leaders have argued that God's promises to Abraham in the Torah apply exclusively to Abraham's physical descendants through Isaac and Jacob (peace be upon them), and therefore the entire historic land of Palestine must belong exclusively to the Jews, and may not be shared with Arabs, whether Muslims or Christians. Certain Muslim leaders have argued that the entire historic land of Palestine is *waqf* (an Islamic religious endowment) and therefore must belong exclusively to Muslims and may not be shared with Jews or Christians. If the Muslim, Christian and Jewish publics are convinced that their respective religions do make such exclusive claims, then there is no way that peace can ever be achieved in the Middle East. President Obama, President Abbas and Prime Minister Netanyahu and their diplomatic envoys can talk as much as they like, but they will never achieve peace if the peoples they represent believe that God requires them to make mutually exclusive absolute claims. In such a situation their respective peoples will not *allow* them to make peace in any meaningful way. On the other hand, other Christian and Jewish leaders argue that God's promises to Abraham in the Torah are equally applicable to Abraham's descendants through Ishmael and to Abraham's spiritual descendants who share his faith in one God. The message of the Gospel is that "It is those [from all nations] who have faith who are the children of Abraham" (Galatians 3:7-9). And other Muslim leaders argue that the Islamic concept of *waqf* need not be interpreted as forbidding Muslims from sharing the land of Palestine justly and peacefully with Jews and Christians. If the Muslim, Christian and Jewish public can be convinced that their respective religions do allow for just sharing of the land, then peace will become possible.

A more positive example comes from the Sudanese civil war which violently divided North from South for many years, until the signing of the Nivasha Accords. The U.S. Special Envoy to Sudan, former Senator John Danforth, who was tasked with seeking a peaceful resolution to the conflict, says that as long as he limited his meetings to political leaders from the North and South, he was unable to see significant progress toward peace. But he says that when Muslim and Christian religious leaders from the North and South came together face-to-face, they were able to reach mutual understanding much more quickly, and this paved the way for political peace.⁴ Nonetheless at the Nivasha peace talks, with representatives of the international community present, at one point talks reached an impasse and broke down. At that point one of the Kenyan hosts made the remarkable suggestion that all parties should take some time to pray and ask for God's guidance. After this time of prayer, the impasse was quickly resolved, and agreement was reached, leading to the Nivasha Accords.⁵

Clearly religious leaders and religious convictions have an important role to play in peacemaking. They are not the only thing needed for peace: political leaders and diplomats also have a crucial role, and religious peace can lead to political peace only if it is accompanied by

⁴ Personal conversations in 2004 and 2006 with Senator John Danforth (who is an alumnus of Yale Divinity School).

⁵ Personal conversation with the Kenyan host, February 2007.

political will. But the role of religious leaders and religious beliefs is indispensable to peacemaking in today's world.

What can religious leaders uniquely bring to the table, apart from the fact that their peoples trust them more than they trust politicians? Several contributions might be mentioned here. For example religious leaders are often free to meet with one another across sharp lines of division, when political leaders are unable to do so. I have been present at very productive meetings between Iranian Muslim leaders and American Christian and Jewish leaders, including both conservative and progressive leaders on both sides, in which much progress was made toward mutual understanding. U.S. government policy and Iranian government policy have sharply restricted contacts between American and Iranian political and diplomatic leaders, but religious leaders are able to meet together without compromising their deeply-held convictions.

It is precisely those deeply-held convictions that I wish to highlight as a key contribution which religious leaders can make toward peace. On certain matters we hold differing convictions, and none of us is interested in ignoring or minimizing those differences. But on other matters we hold to similar or common values and moral convictions, and those values and convictions can make an important contribution to peace. This is particularly true for Muslims, Christians and Jews, who among them constitute 55% of the human race.

Thus, Muslims, Christians and Jews agree that One God created the entire human race from one ancestor, and that therefore, in all our human diversity, we form a common family and we each have equal dignity before God. Christians and Jews would agree with the Qur'ānic affirmation: "O people, we have created you from male and female and caused you to be peoples and tribes, so that you would come to know each other." We agree that God has put humankind on the earth as stewards with a responsibility to care for creation and not to destroy it. The recent Common Word initiative has called the world's attention to the fact that Islam, Christianity and Judaism all call upon us to love God with all of our being and to love one another (including loving those who are different from us) as we love ourselves.

One could cite many other shared or similar religious convictions which have important implications for peacemaking, and other scholars have published excellent articles on these. I would like here to highlight especially one specific area of belief which is shared by Muslims and Christians, but which is often neglected in interfaith conferences, despite the fact that it has extraordinary potential for promoting reconciliation and peace. I refer to certain of our convictions regarding Jesus Christ (*al-Sayyid al-Masīh*) (peace be upon him).

Of course Muslims and Christians have certain other convictions regarding Jesus Christ on which they undeniably differ from each other, and it is not my purpose to go into those here. Differing beliefs about Jesus' ontological status, about his identity, and about his death (*wafātihī*) and his raising (*raf'ihī ilā al-samā'*), are extremely important, and they cannot be minimized. But at the same time Muslims and Christians agree on certain important convictions. They agree that Jesus is a Prophet and Messenger, and they agree that his teachings and the example of his life are normative for us.

One might ask why this focus on Jesus (peace be upon him), rather than on all of the other Prophets whom Muslims and Christians both recognize. Allow me to suggest two reasons why shared convictions about Jesus are an especially powerful resource for promoting peace and reconciliation in today's world. The first reason is that, among all of the Prophets, Jesus is particularly known for teaching about peace, love, humility and forgiveness.

If we are honest with ourselves, we must admit that neither Christians nor Muslims have put those teachings and example into practice in our treatment of one another through the centuries. And we must admit that if we would put them into practice today, then world peace would be much easier to achieve.

To illustrate this, a few examples from the Islamic tradition (*ḥadīth*) and from the Holy Gospel will be helpful:

Islamic Tradition:

“Jesus used to say, ‘Charity does not mean doing good to him who does good to you, for this is to return good for good. Charity means that you should do good to him who does you harm.’”⁶

Holy Gospel:

Jesus said: “You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of your Father in heaven; for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous. For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have?”⁷

Islamic Tradition

“The man said, ‘How can a servant be truly pious before God?’ Jesus replied, ‘The matter is easy. You must truly love God in your heart and work in His service, exerting all your effort and strength, and be merciful toward the people of your race as you show mercy to yourself.’ He said, ‘Teacher of goodness, who are the people of my race?’ Jesus replied, ‘All the children of Adam. And that which you do not wish done to you, do not do to others. In this way you will be truly pious before God.’”⁸

Holy Gospel:

One of them, a lawyer, asked him a question to test him. “Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?” He said to him, “‘You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.’ This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.”⁹

⁶ Quotations from the Islamic tradition are taken from Tarif Khalidi, *The Muslim Jesus* (Harvard University Press). The present quotation is from Aḥmad ibn Ḥanbal, in Khalidi, p. 73.

⁷ Quotations from the Bible are taken from the New Revised Standard Version. The present quotation is from Matthew 5:43-46.

⁸ Aḥmad ibn Ḥanbal, in Khalidi, p. 79.

⁹ Matthew 22:35-40.

But wanting to justify himself, he asked Jesus, “And who is my neighbor?” Jesus replied, “A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and fell into the hands of robbers, who stripped him, beat him, and went away, leaving him half dead. Now by chance a priest was going down that road; and when he saw him, he passed by on the other side. So likewise a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. But a Samaritan while traveling came near him; and when he saw him, he was moved with pity. He went to him and bandaged his wounds, having poured oil and wine on them. Then he put him on his own animal, brought him to an inn, and took care of him. The next day he took out two denarii, gave them to the innkeeper, and said, ‘Take care of him; and when I come back, I will repay you whatever more you spend.’ Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?” He said, “The one who showed him mercy.” Jesus said to him, “Go and do likewise.”¹⁰

Islamic Tradition:

“Christ said, ‘If you desire to devote yourselves entirely to God and to be the light of the children of Adam, forgive those who have done you evil, visit the sick who do not visit you, be kind to those who are unkind to you, and lend to those who do not repay you.’”¹¹

Holy Gospel:

Jesus said: “Let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven.”¹²

Jesus said: “Whenever you stand praying, forgive, if you have anything against anyone; so that your Father in heaven may also forgive you your trespasses.”¹³

Jesus said: “When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on the throne of his glory. All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats, and he will put the sheep at his right hand and the goats at the left. Then the king will say to those at his right hand, ‘Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.’ Then the righteous will answer him, ‘Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink? And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?’ And the king will answer them, ‘Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did it to me.’”¹⁴

Jesus said: “Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you. If anyone strikes you on the cheek, offer the other also... If you lend to

¹⁰ Luke 10:28-37.

¹¹ Ahmad ibn Hanbal, in Khalidi, p. 88.

¹² Matthew 5:16.

¹³ Mark 11:25.

¹⁴ Matthew 25:31-40.

those from whom you hope to receive, what credit is that to you? Even sinners lend to sinners, to receive as much again. But love your enemies, do good, and lend, expecting nothing in return. Your reward will be great, and you will be children of the Most High; for he is kind to the ungrateful and the wicked.”¹⁵

Islamic Tradition:

“It is written in the Gospels: ‘Son of Adam, as you have mercy, so shall God have mercy upon you. How do you hope for God’s mercy if you do not have mercy upon His servants?’”¹⁶

“Jesus said, ‘The merciful in this world is the one who will be shown mercy in the next world.’”¹⁷

Holy Gospel:

Jesus said: “Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy.”¹⁸

Jesus said: “Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful.”¹⁹

Islamic Tradition:

“God revealed to Jesus, ‘Be in gentleness toward people like the earth beneath their feet, in generosity like flowing water, and in mercy like the sun and the moon, for they rise upon both the good and the evil.’”²⁰

Holy Gospel:

Jesus said: “Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of your Father in heaven; for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous.”²¹

In the foregoing examples we see the Islamic and Christian traditions as agreeing in depicting Jesus as teaching love for neighbors, love for enemies, forgiveness of wrongdoers, mercy toward all humankind, kindness toward those who do us wrong, generosity toward the sick and the needy, and other similar values. These are precisely the values which are needed for peacemaking in today’s world, and they are common to the Islamic and Christian traditions. They are the reason why Jesus (peace be upon him) is often referred to as the Messenger of Peace (*Rasūl al-Salām*). I would add that I believe that these are the values by which Chris Leggett lived his life in Mauritania, and they represent the attitude with which he gave his life for Mauritania.

I said earlier that I would suggest two reasons why shared convictions about Jesus are an especially powerful resource for promoting peace and reconciliation in today’s world. The first,

¹⁵ Luke 6:27-35.

¹⁶ Abū al-Layth al-Samarqandī, in Khalidi, p. 134.

¹⁷ Abū al-Ḥasan al-‘Āmirī, in Khalidi, p. 138).

¹⁸ Matthew 5:7.

¹⁹ Luke 6:35.

²⁰ Abū al-Ḥusayn Warrām ibn Abī Firas, in Khalidi, p. 198.

²¹ Matthew 5:44-45.

then, is that Jesus' teachings were particularly focused on these values of love, forgiveness, generosity and mercy which are critical to peacemaking. These teachings represent a large and important area of common ground between Muslims and Christians which unfortunately is often overlooked in interfaith peacemaking efforts.

The second reason for emphasizing this area of common ground is that I have seen what a powerful effect it can have when it is remembered in the political sphere. Often my Muslim friends ask me: "How can we help Western Christians to understand what deep harm is caused by the things which they do? How can we help Western Christians understand how we feel about the invasion of Iraq, or about their support for Israeli settlements in the Palestinian territories, or about public insults to the sacred symbols of Islam, or the killing of civilians in Afghanistan, etc.?"

I reply: "Your best ally in this is Jesus Christ."

Of course many American Christians (including myself) opposed the invasion of Iraq, but others did support it. If you ask these why they supported a war against a country which had not attacked America, they will likely answer in secular terms about America's right to defend itself against a (mistakenly) anticipated attack, or about freeing the world of a dictator. Such a discussion does not usually lead to fruitful dialogue. But if you ask American Christians whether Jesus would have supported the invasion of Iraq, you will receive a much more constructive response. Your Christian friend will not be able to deny that he/she should follow the example and teachings of Jesus, nor will he/she be able to deny that Jesus would not support launching a war of this kind.

Similarly most Western Christians oppose public insults to the sacred symbols of Islam, but some Christians consider such insults to be permissible. If you ask them why they would do such a thing, they may reply that they have a right to pay back Muslims for insulting the Bible when Muslims say that the text of the Bible is corrupt and counterfeit (*muḥarraf wa-muzawwar*). Such a discussion will not likely lead to fruitful dialogue. But if you ask a Western Christian whether Jesus would support such retaliation, and whether Jesus would behave in such an insulting manner toward what is sacred to another person, then you will receive a much more constructive response. Clearly Jesus would *not* do such things, and clearly those who claim to be Jesus' followers should not do them either.

Let me close with a story which will illustrate this. A few years ago a prominent American Congressman stated publicly that if Muslim terrorists attacked America with weapons of mass destruction, then America should retaliate by bombing Mecca, by "taking it out" (*bi-maḥwihā*). This statement caused great distress across the Muslim world, but he was unwilling to withdraw his remarks.

Some months later I participated in a conference in Washington, DC, in which prominent leaders from many nations and many religions came together to consider the role of prayer in our lives. At this conference we had interesting discussions between Muslims and Christians about the teachings of Jesus.

At the end of the conference I had an opportunity to go with a small delegation of Arab Muslims to meet privately with the very Congressman who had proposed to bomb Mecca. In our little delegation were three people from Saudi Arabia – one from Mecca itself, and two from nearby Jeddah. The Congressman received us warmly and was very gracious and polite. The Arab guests were too polite to ask him about his controversial remarks about Mecca, but everyone knew that this was the unspoken question in everyone's minds.

Finally I spoke up: "Congressman, I know that the members of our delegation are wondering about your remarks about bombing Mecca. Among us are one person from Mecca, and two from Jeddah. If America bombed Mecca, they would very likely be killed." Do you have anything that you would like to say to them about that?

The Congressman replied that America has a right to self-defense. He pointed out that although his guests were right to be concerned about their own countries, nonetheless the American people had elected him to defend the interests of the United States. He stood by his remarks.

Then a brother from Jeddah spoke up. "Congressman," he asked, "Do you believe in Jesus?"

"Yes, of course," the Congressman replied, and he went on to tell about his commitment to prayer and his commitment to his church.

"Congressman," asked the brother from Jeddah, "We have been talking a lot at our conference about the teachings and example of Jesus. I am a Muslim, and I too believe in Jesus. I am wondering: do you believe that Jesus would bomb Mecca? Can you imagine Jesus dropping the bombs?"

The Congressman was silent for long time, and then said quietly, "I can't answer that." There followed a long, embarrassed silence.

Again the brother from Jeddah spoke up: "Congressman, would you be willing for us to pray for you before we go?" The Congressman accepted, and so a group of Arab Muslims gathered around this Congressman for *du'ā'*, and asked God Most High to bless him, to bless his family, to bless his country, and to show him how Jesus would want him to behave toward Arabs and Muslims.

When we finished praying, I saw tears flowing down the Congressman's face. I believe that God touched his heart that day. Perhaps he had never before in his life experienced being genuinely loved by Muslims who challenged him to think about Jesus in a new way. I do not know exactly what happened in the Congressman's heart that day, but I do know that after that experience he stopped making public statements about bombing Mecca.

This is what I mean when I tell my Muslim friends: "Your best ally is Jesus Christ."

Yes, of course, Muslims and Christians will continue to disagree with each other over a number of doctrines which we hold regarding Jesus Christ (peace be upon him). But if we remember that

we do share important convictions about Jesus' teachings and example, this can be an extraordinarily powerful resource for peacemaking.

The values of love, forgiveness, mercy, humility and kindness to the poor are the values by which my friend Chris Leggett lived his life in Mauritania, and I believe Chris's father was right when he said, "Knowing Chris as we know him, he would have been willing to help those who brought harm to him, had he only had the chance."

This kind of self-giving, forgiving love – which seeks the other's good, and which gives itself for the other, even for the enemy, and even unto death – is what is needed for peacemaking in today's world. Secular sources cannot inspire such love: it can flow only from faith in God. If just a few Muslims and Christians are inspired to live by that love in our relations with one another, then Chris will not have died in vain.