

What dialogue between Muslims and Christians?

An experience to share and avenues to explore.¹

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Introduction

Let us recognize that interreligious dialogue is a bone of contention, particularly that between Muslims and Christians. Christians can differ profoundly among themselves on the way of understanding Islam and on the nature of this dialogue.

In the Second Vatican Council Document *Nostra Aetate*, the Catholic Church called for an attitude of esteem between Christians and Muslims. It invites us to see commonalities and *"to forget the past and sincerely strive for mutual understanding, as well as to protect and promote together, for all men, social justice, moral values, peace and freedom "*.²

But can we say today that this attitude of esteem is the main accent of the relationship with Muslims? Is it not rather fear and distrust, particularly since the rise of Islamist terrorism?

Regarding interreligious dialogue, the Lausanne Movement's *"Cape Town Commitment"* calls *"to be gentle, but not na  ve; to show discernment, but not credulity; to be alert to all threats, but not to be dominated by fear"*.

It invites us to repent of our inability to seek friendships with Muslim people, as with people of other religious traditions. It also calls for taking initiatives to manifest love, benevolence and hospitality.

Indeed, it affirms *"the legitimacy of dialogue with people of other religions, just as Paul debated with Jews and pagans in synagogues and public places"*.³

For several years I have been trying to live this encounter.

I would now like to share with you my experience with the group *"Muslims and Christians on the way "*.⁴

¹Conference given during the day " Our Muslim neighbours, what implications for the Church in Switzerland ". Saint L  gier, High School of Theology, January 11, 2020.

<https://www.het-pro.ch/agenda/voisinsMuslims/>

²*Nostra Aetate*, Art 3

³ *Cape Town Commitment*, II C. <https://lausanne.org/content/ctc/ctcommitment>

⁴The other places where I have the opportunity to meet and dialogue with Muslims are:

Muslims and Christians on the way

This dialogue group was born in 2014 by bringing together Muslims from various traditions (Sunnis, Shiites, Sufis), as well as Catholic and Protestant Christians, some of whom are linked to the Focolare movement (a Catholic movement with great ecumenical openness to which I am bound since 1994). I have been part of this group from the start.⁵

To date, 5 meetings have taken place in the form of a " *spiritual dialogue* ".⁶ They brought together between 60 and 80 people.

In our deserts, what are our sources?

The first meeting in February 2015 at the House of l'Arzillier in Lausanne explored the theme " *What are my sources?* »⁷

The House of l'Arzillier, of which I was a member of the committee for more than 10 years. Meetings in a multilateral framework, with other religions. See my reflection here:

<https://martin.hoegger.org/index.php/dialogue-interreligieux/325-sous-le-signe-de-la-rencontre>

The Community of S. Egidio which has put prayer and meeting with the most deprived at the heart of its commitment. Then it developed a remarkable ecumenical and interreligious action by organizing a major European meeting for peace each year. Two meetings were also organized with this community in French-speaking Switzerland.

Seeking friendship in the name of Christ with the poor opens us up to all. Putting the poor at the heart of the Church makes it shine towards everyone...also towards members of other religions.

With S. Egidio I was able to meet the poorest. Today in our society many are Muslim refugees. See my article on the last international meeting in Madrid:

<https://martin.hoegger.org/index.php/dialogue-interreligieux/447-paix-sans-frontieres>

The Mont sur Lausanne Migrant Reception Group (GAMM), which prepares a meal every Monday evening for migrants. Many are Muslims. With my wife Chantal, I have taken part in it on a regular basis and each time I could meet Muslim people.

Every year we also invite them to a Christmas party and I had the opportunity to say what the meaning of this party is for us Christians. An interesting exercise! Read here:

<https://martin.hoegger.org/index.php/predications/198-noel-la-culture-du-ciel>

⁵See: <https://www.focolari.ch/fr/page/muslims-and-chretiens-en-chemin>. Before the existence of this group, I participated in several meetings of a similar group in German-speaking Switzerland. See » <https://www.fokolar-bewegung.ch/en/news/muslims-and-christians-in-dialogue>

⁶The document of the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue " *Dialogue and Proclamation* " thus defines this dialogue, which has its legitimacy alongside the dialogue of life, social-ethical dialogue and theological dialogue: " *People rooted in their own religious traditions share their spiritual riches, for example in relation to prayer and contemplation, to faith and to the ways of seeking God or the Absolute* ". §42

http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_councils/interelg/documents/rc_pc_interelg_doc_1905_1991_dialogue-and-proclamatio_en.html

⁷See: <https://www.cath.ch/newsf/rencontre-inter-religieuse-a-lausanne-la-vraie-foi-nest-jamais-violente/?pw=WsGLxF7F>

Muslims and Christians draw from various spiritual sources. Where and how do I resource myself? What gives me strength when I cross a desert?

Life hurts us, it creates openings in us, pluses, but through minuses. This is where springs come to our aid and become resources for us, to transform periods of aridity into moments of grace and blessing.

For Michel Vandeleene, Catholic theologian and member of the Focolare, there is only one source: it is God. Separated from him we are trees without roots. The Almighty is love, his faith tells him, as a mother loves her child and more... " *I will be your fiancé forever* " says the prophet Hosea (2,19).

Jesus teaches us to address God by calling him " *Our Father* ". It is this faith that makes us live, heals us and makes us cross our deserts. But how do we draw from this source? He suggests sources for drawing on the love of God: prayer, the Word of God, our brothers and sisters (" *If we love one another, God is present* " , says the apostle John) and finally the eucharist which is the memory of the total gift of God in Jesus, the moment of the greatest possible union with God, for Mr. Vandeleene.

Sherazad Houshmand , a Shiite theologian of Iranian origin and professor in a Roman university, wonders if there is in the Koran, as in Christianity, an image of a close, merciful God, eager to share his love with us.

Islamic theology does not speak of the incarnation, but of a close proximity to God. (Sura 56.85). God is closer to our breath than we are, to the vein in our neck. (38.7) Muslims, she says, forget that 113 of the 114 suras of the Koran say that God is merciful. But " *Rhaman* " means Love with a capital L. This root expresses the fullness of love that knows no bounds. The only thing God asks is: " *Keep me in you! Protect me in you! Your part is to keep my beauty!* »

For S. Houshmand, the source to which we must constantly return is therefore God-mercy who calls us to love our neighbour: " *I ask you only one thing: love and friendship towards your neighbour* " , says a surah (24.23).

Facing fear, actors of peace

In April 2016, the second day was entitled " *Facing fear, actors of peace* " , still at the House of dialogue, l'Arzillier.⁸

The idea of this meeting was born after the attacks in Paris in November 2015 which spread a climate of fear which has only worsened.

Vahid Khoshideh, head of the (Shiite) Ahl-el-Bayt association, condemns terrorist acts: " *People who preach violence believe in a violent god who thinks only of murder and revenge. In reality they adore themselves. They created a god and gave him the attributes they want in order to justify their crimes* " .

⁸See: <https://www.cath.ch/newsf/ensemble-luttent-contre-peur/>

For him, such a god and his religion also scare Muslims who have been the first victims of these terrorists for many years. It is completely legitimate to be afraid of these groups for whom human life has no value.

According to him, the media help draw attention to a fanatical minority, while the vast majority of Muslims around the world (1.5 billion) want to live in peace and respect for others.

He emphasizes the importance of 'salam', peace, in the Quran and quotes the words of the 6th Imam, Sadiq: " *If you want to use the meaning of 'salam' correctly, you must have piety and peace dominates your faith, your reason and your heart. You must behave in a way that your friends and even your enemies are safe by your actions. For if those near you are not safe because of you, those far from you will not be either. If someone does not use 'salam' in this way his 'salam' is not correct and he is not a Muslim. He is not submitted to God, his "salam" is a lie, even if he says he is a Muslim*".⁹

For the theologian Michel Vandeleene, again the Christian lecturer, " *if we want to face fear, we must strengthen our spirit, that is to say our union with God. Only God can overcome evil, hatred and fear in us. Only his love is almighty*".

"Our (Christian) scriptures say that perfect love casts out fear. The perfect love is the one who is ready to lay down his life. It is pure, gratuitous and disinterested love, merciful love that is no longer afraid of anything. This love is stronger than anything and it is this love that we must ask the Holy Spirit to be able to face the serious events that we witness every day".

Where is my heart going?

The third meeting took place in April 2017 on the theme " Where does my heart go? The meaning of the inner life in our values ", at the Cultural Center of Muslims in Lausanne and ended after lunch at the Protestant Parish Center in Prilly.¹⁰

What's in our heart? What is it oriented towards? How to get to know him better? Aren't the paths of the heart real roller coasters?

The day began with two theological contributions, one from the Protestant pastor Martin Hoegger, the other by Djalel Meskaldji, from the Cultural Center of Muslims in Lausanne.

Both found that both the Bible and the Quran expand the meaning of the word heart. It is not only the seat of feelings (as in English), but it is above all the center of our being, where the human being dialogues with himself, others and with God.

This heart is the most precious, but it has also become hardened. "The most common human disease is not influenza but 'sclerocardia', hard heart," says Hoegger. "According to the Quran the heart can be even harder than the stones. It is covered with rust," says D. Meskaldji.

⁹ Mesbah Al Shariah p. 95.

¹⁰ See : <https://www.fokolar-bewegung.ch/fr/news/ou-va-my-heart-muslims-and-christians-on-the-way>

The " *guard of the heart* " is a constant theme in the Bible and among the Fathers of the Church, those theologians of the first centuries. Guarding your heart is a real spiritual battle, which is the meaning of the word " *jihad* " in the Muslim tradition.

The Koran constantly repeats that the heart needs to be purified by pure water, that of the Word of God: " *it awakens my heart, heals it, breaks its hardness and washes it of its rust which comes above all through the 'pride ,'* " says the Muslim.

The biblical prophets announce that God will one day write his law of love on the heart and that he will put a new heart, a heart of flesh in us. " *Christians look to Jesus Christ in whom this promise is fulfilled ,* " says the Christian.

Mary, model of believers

In September 2018 the gathering took as its theme " *Mary, model of believers* ". ¹¹Imam Abdelwahid Kort , of the Cultural Center of Muslims in Lausanne, considers her, with several Muslim exegetes, as a prophet and as the model of the accomplished woman. " *Mary is a mystery and a bottomless ocean. To its light and its transparency I constantly have to be converted* ".

Mary, he also says, passes from an individual spirituality – her communion with God – to a committed spirituality – in the encounter with others – where she receives even more light through suffering. " *Mary is always animated by the love and contemplation of the Lord. She relies on God in trials. How did she face them? By silence, prayer and altruism. She lived the true fast: that of the heart, of the word and of worldly trivialities* ".

Gwenaëlle Delalande, collaborator at the Center for Interreligious Dialogue of the Focolare, spoke about Mary in three points. First in the New Testament where its presence is rather sober. Each evangelist recounts a passage in his life, from the mystery of the incarnation to that of the resurrection of Jesus.

Then she went through a few key moments in Mary's life, trying to see how they can shed light on certain stages of our lives.

For example on the subject of the Angel's Annunciation to Mary, she asks the question: " *Have we not also experienced a moment of 'annunciation'? A specific moment in our life when God manifests himself to us...and calls us to respond to him?* »

And finally, she spoke of Mary in the spirituality of the Focolare Movement which emphasizes above all the link between Mary and the Word of God. She is " *fully clothed in the Word of God* " and invites us to put into practice the word of her son, as she said at Cana: " *do whatever he tells you* ". (John 2.5)

Then Gérard Testard, founder of the Efesia movement and Abdelhak Sahli, president of the Muslim scouts of France, presented the initiative " *Together with Mary* " which brings together thousands of Muslims and Christians in several French cities.

<https://www.ensembleavecmarie.org/>

¹¹See: <https://www.fokolar-bewegung.ch/fr/news/marie-un-pont-entre-chretiens-et-muslims>

Fraternity, urgency or utopia?

The fifth meeting, in November 2019, made it possible to deepen the theme of "*brotherhood , urgency or utopia* ", by working on the " *Document on human fraternity* " signed at the beginning of the year by Pope Francis. and the Grand Imam of Al Azhar.¹²

For Adnane Mokranjy, professor of Islamology in Rome, this document constitutes a new horizon for the Islamic-Christian dialogue, because it highlights the theological and ethical bases common to the two religions, thus promoting dialogue and the common mission in the service of the humanity, while insisting on freedom and diversity as a divine gift.

It is on the theme of the failure of reconciled fraternity that Giovanna Porrrino, professor of biblical theology at Sophia University (near Florence) then leads to the " *biblical sources of fraternity* ", noting that this abstract notion does not exist in the Old Testament, marked above all by stories of brothers and sisters with their success stories or failures.

She goes on to recall that the book of Genesis, which opened with the failure of brotherhood (with Cain and Abel), ends with the reconciled brotherhood of Joseph with his brothers.

Finally, it is after his resurrection that Jesus calls his disciples " *brothers and sisters* ". It is the presence of the Risen One among his disciples that gives brotherhood its deepest meaning in the New Testament.

Avenues to explore

- **Speak to the intelligence and to the heart.**

These meetings take place over one day. They begin with a presentation by two speakers, one Muslim, the other Christian.

After the conferences, follow some testimonies, then a time of dialogue with the assembly. Testimonies are very important because we see how the spiritual life influences our actions and gives impetus to fraternal initiatives. It is concrete life that pleases and interests people above all!

A meal then brings us together: a very important time of conviviality! Then a moment of prayer in two different places depending on the religion. To respect the identity of each religion, we do not pray together. But some Christians attend Muslim prayers and vice versa. However, we begin the days by reading suras and biblical verses related to the theme, to place the meeting before God.

During the afternoon, small groups are formed to deepen the theme.

I emphasize the importance of hospitality and having a united preparation team. Songs and music also embellish the meeting.

Apart from these days of dialogue and group meetings, we visit each other.

¹²See: <https://www.fokolar-bewegung.ch/fr/news/rencontre-muslims-chretiens-la-fraternite-utopia-ou-urgence>

- **Intra-religious diversity, a richness**

The preparation group for these days meets regularly. It is made up, on the Muslim side, of members of the Union of Muslim Associations of the Canton of Vaud, the Ahl-el- Bayt Associations of Geneva and Lausanne (Shiite Associations) and the International Sufi Alâwiyya Association. And on the Christian side by Catholic and Protestant Christians linked to the Focolare movement.

There is therefore an approach that is both inter-religious, but also intra-religious. Our Muslim friends are grateful to have the opportunity to meet in their diversity: Sunnis, Shiites and Sufis. And Christians also belong to various churches. I would be happy to see more evangelicals participating in these days. They have so much to offer!

- **The link with a spiritual movement**

In 2018, some took part in an Islamic-Christian congress, near Rome, organized by the Focolare Movement, to which several Muslims are now linked and adhere to certain points of its spirituality: as God-Love; the Word of God to live; the will of God to be discerned; the call to live the golden rule; Mary as a model of discipleship. *" Muslims are very sensitive to unity, because it is the central attribute of God in Islam. But Chiara Lubich (the founder of this movement) gave her life for unity. Muslims are then attracted by his testimony ,"* a Muslim friend told us during this congress.

In Algeria, Muslims linked to the Focolare also wanted to live this spirituality, so much so that the movement today is made up of 95% Muslims. An unexpected development that may seem confusing!

Moreover, the Statutes of the Focolare provide that members of other religions can join this movement insofar as they wish to live its spirit, as much as this is possible for them (Art. 1 and 135).

Our Swiss-French-speaking group is also linked with a similar group in German-speaking Switzerland (*" Muslims and Christians in dialogue "* and in Germany. In addition, we are linked to the World Center for Interreligious Dialogue in Rome, from which we have experiences meetings between Muslims and Christians from all over the world. Sharing experiences is a great wealth.

The dialogue promoted by the Focolare is based on a spirituality of communion and dialogue, in particular on this central point: the love of God to which everyone is invited to respond. This finds an echo in other religions and cultures thanks to the Golden Rule: *" Do unto others what you would have them do for you "*. It is in the application of this Rule that a fruitful dialogue is established.

- **The invitation to live the "Golden Rule"**

The symbol of the House of l'Arzillier is a bridge. How to build a bridge to span a valley? You must have at least one pillar on each side to connect them.

To make a spiritual bridge, you need a will to join the other and to recognize in the other this desire for encounter. The ground on which the pillar is built must also be solid. This solid ground, I constantly experience, is this extraordinary "golden rule", which is found in one way or another in the various religions and spiritualities.

Jesus gave it in a positive form: " *whatever you want people to do for you, do the same for them* ". For him, it summarizes everything we have to do in our life, everything God expects of us: " *It is the Law and the prophets* ", he says (Matthew 7,12). This tells us how much it is close to God's heart and how much he desires that all human beings make it their rule of life.

It is found in the Muslim tradition in this Hadith: " *None of you is a true believer unless he desires for his brother what he desires for himself* " (Hadith 13, according to Al- Bukhari.)

Putting this golden rule at the heart of the meeting, remembering it, trying to live it, is a solid common basis for building the " *living together* ". Slowly, modestly, but surely confidence grows.

Naceur Ghomraci, imam and prison chaplain of the Canton of Vaud, sharing his impressions of a congress between Muslims and Christians organized by the Focolare, in Rome in April 2019, said: " *The strength and commitment of Chiara are a great discovery and an example for every believer. Her invitation to put the golden rule at the base of everything marked me. With this spirituality, we can go much further in dialogue. I felt that it is a real project of God to which everyone must contribute* ".

- **Let's challenge each other!**

In one of our meetings, Shiite theologian Sharzad Houshmand called for a dialogue nourished by silence, because theologians build structures that they do not want to lose. This dialogue is difficult but allows us to discover the beauty of the other. And it helps us to rediscover our own beauties.

She participated in a meeting where Pope Francis told a group of theologians from the Gregorian University, Rome, (where she also teaches) that theologians are narcissistic because they think they have the right way of speaking of God. For Sharzad, " *Allah akbar* " means that he is " *always greater than anything you can imagine* ."

These meetings helped me not only to better understand Islam but also certain aspects of my Christian faith.

For example, we Christians sometimes forget the transcendence of God, the respect due to him. Islam awakens in me this awareness that God is God. I must allow myself to be challenged by the Koran on this point, just as I hope that the Muslim will be challenged by my faith in the incarnation and in the resurrection of Christ, insofar as I make it my lifestyle.

- **Combine dialogue and announcement**

For the Focolare movement the encounter with people of other religions must be a " *relationship of charity and truth* " (Article 38 of the Statutes).

The charity report, I spoke about it above with the putting into practice of the golden rule.

The relation of truth consists, in my opinion, of two points.

First, if we should rejoice at the numerous points in common between Islam and Christianity¹³ (the themes tackled during these meetings underlined them), we should not hide nor be afraid of the differences.¹⁴

In the Koran we find almost all of Judaism and Christianity, but with a particular orientation marked by its understanding of God. We cannot meet by evacuating the content of the coherences that make up our deep identity. Just as we must resist the temptation to accentuate the differences to the point of creating a gap between Muslims and Christians, so we must resist concordism.

Sometimes, those who discover this dialogue indeed exclaim: " *but we have the same faith, what is the problem?* ". However, this is precisely where a problem lies, because behind common points hide different perspectives that must be brought to light if we want to have a real dialogue.

Secondly, a relationship of truth implies, for us Christians, not to silence our faith in the uniqueness of Christ.

Sharing is all the more relevant if it is preceded by respectful listening and friendship.¹⁵ My experience is that at some point, the truth of dialogue also involves sharing the roots that make us live. Dialogue and witness must be distinguished but not separated. For us Christians, our roots are in Jesus. Our Muslim friends understand this and often ask for clarification on what our faith says on this or that subject.

But if we want to share Jesus, as the heart of our faith, we must first live him, following his humble and simple lifestyle. Elsewhere I have written that " *for a Christian, dialogue is not an ideology, nor a doctrine, but consists in following a person, whose life has been a constant dialogue, in its horizontal as well as vertical dimensions. And to follow Jesus is to live his words. By living the Gospel, we become imbued with the spirit of dialogue of Jesus* ".¹⁶

¹³Let us point out, for example, the large work of D. Masson, *Monothéisme coranique et monothéisme biblique. Doctrines comparées*, Desclée De Brouwer, 1976 (2e éd.), 823 p.)

¹⁴ The Evangelical Reformed Church of the Canton of Vaud invites us to respect differences in its "Constitutive Principles": "In dialogue with religions, it (EERV) favors mutual questioning for peaceful coexistence and better understanding. It respects difference while *continuing to proclaim the Gospel*. It encourages clairvoyance towards the various forms of spirituality. (§ 9). <http://eerv.ch/qui-sommes-nous/constitutive-principles>

¹⁵The ecumenical document " *Christian witness in a multi-religious world* " published by the World Council of Churches, the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue (Vatican) and the World Evangelical Alliance, insistently calls for living the proclamation in a spirit of dialogue and friendship: "The mission belongs to the very nature of the Church. Announcing the Word of God and witnessing to it in the world are essential for every Christian. At the same time, it is necessary to do so in accordance with the principles of the Gospel, with full respect and love for all human beings". <https://www.oikoumene.org/resources/documents/christian-witness-in-a-multi-religious-world>

¹⁶ Witness and / or Dialogue. <https://www.hoegger.org/article/temoignage-et-ou-dialogue/>

- **A fruit of joy and friendship**

The fruit of this attitude is joy and friendship. What strikes me at each meeting of this group is a great joy at the end of the day. I think it comes from God who manifested in our midst.

I conclude with these few testimonies: *"This meeting was very beautiful and left its perfume and its taste in the heart"*, confided to us Sandrine Ruiz president of the Union of Muslim associations of Vaud. Safia Bauer, a member of the Alâwiyya Sufi Association, marvels that she has brought together Sunnis, Shiites and Sufis. *" I came back from this rich day in praise and in deep gratitude "*. And Vahid Koshideh, imam of the Ahl-el-Bayt Association in Geneva: *" Participating in these meetings is always a great pleasure. We feel fraternity and peace there "*.

Martin Hoegger