



## SACRED SCRIPTURES AND INTERFAITH DIALOGUE

TERRY MATHIS<sup>268</sup>

### Abstract

M. Fethullah Gülen encourages Muslims to be tolerant and accepting of people in other religions and to enter in to interfaith dialogue with them. He succeeds in doing this because the Qur'an sets the ground for this interfaith stance. Christians and Jews are often not aware that their Scriptures also promote interfaith dialogue. The paper shows that Jewish and Christian Scriptures, somewhat in keeping with the Qur'an, allow for interfaith relationships that are respectful and peaceful. To this end, the paper briefly examines some of the Old Testament and New Testament passages that promote interfaith dialogue. In the OT, the story of the Prophet Jonah is first examined to set the stage for an interfaith understanding of the story of Abraham and Melchizedek, the life of Ruth, her great grandson, King David, and finally, the Jewish restoration after the dispersion in Babylon and Persia. In addition to these OT themes, which Christians take as their own, the paper gathers similar interfaith themes in the NT. Christ is seen to encourage interfaith dialogue, as does James, the early Church leader. The paper finds that the Apostle Paul (the author of most of the NT) develops the implications of an interfaith theology in his letter to the Romans. The paper will conclude with some consideration of why the adherents of Christian and Jewish traditions seldom take their Scriptures to advocate interfaith dialogue and how the work of Mr. Gülen suggests a way forward to create more such understanding and dialogue.

The Sacred Scriptures of Islam, Judaism, and Christianity each allow for interfaith dialogue. We will consider some of the ways in which the Scriptures of these religions provide for such dialogue, and the work of M. Fethullah Gülen will illuminate the issues. He has for many years promoted interfaith dialogue between Muslims and adherents of other religions. We will find that he has provided keen practical insight that may encourage others outside of Islam to engage in interfaith dialogue.

Mr. Gülen's use of various passages of the Qur'an will inform the Muslim position. Jewish and Christian positions will be informed by my own use of the respective texts, and in any of these cases, I am aware that my use of the various texts may be offensive to some readers. Although I hope not to

---

<sup>268</sup> He is the Campus Minister at the University of California in Riverside, where he directs the University Religious Conference, which promotes interfaith activity on campus. He received his PhD in philosophy from Claremont Graduate University. Faculty positions have included Associate Professor at Rosemead School of Psychology in California and at Northern Arizona University at Lake Havasu. Current interests: the metaphysical and psychological conditions that allow for interfaith dialogue, and the history and rise of secularism. Relevant publications: *Against John Hick: An Examination of His Philosophy of Religion* (Lanham: University Press of America, 1985) and *Review of Christians and Religious Pluralism* by Alan Race (TSF Bulletin, Vol. 7, No. 5, June 1984). He has been to Antarctica three times with the United States Antarctic Research Program and accordingly has a keen interest in the relationship between science and religion. Ordained with the Church of the Brethren, his pastoral expertise includes counseling and university outreach.



be offensive, various approaches or uses of Sacred Scripture are often personal, and different from mine. While it is my intention to revere the way in which other people use Scripture, there are at least two groups who may nevertheless find my approach inappropriate and even disrespectful to their own standard use of the texts. Conservative Christians will tend to reject my assumption that revelation occurs outside of the Bible. The other group is secular. This group will find my use of texts naive in light of their materialist worldview.

Mr. Gülen addresses both of these groups. One of the hallmarks of the thought of Fethullah Gülen is his vision for a relationship of tolerance and dialogue between Muslims and people of other faiths, but he also sees the influence of materialism as a threat to the possibility of interfaith dialogue.<sup>269</sup> In a pivotal essay entitled “The Necessity of Interfaith Dialogue,” Mr. Gülen laments that the influence of religion in contemporary social life is often shunted by the western materialist world view. Materialism keeps people from reconciling the material and spiritual realms, which reconciliation is crucial. We must first be at peace with God if we are to have personal integrity and thus experience peace and justice in the world. From a viable relationship with God come reconciliation between the material and the spiritual, and thus the realization of the desired contemporary social life in which society can flourish.<sup>270</sup> In contrast, to the detriment of society, when experience of God is called into question by the assumptions of secular scientific materialism, the social conditions that flow from living in the presence of the divine are interrupted. People become less able to engage in dialogue of any kind, including interfaith or intercultural dialogue. In response to the influence of the secular scientific world view of the West, an optimist, Mr. Gülen all the more calls for Muslim dialogue with others. Intrinsic to the nature of true religion is positive influence. The faith of the Muslim in dialogue with Christians and Jews and others will provide a corrective influence to a destructive materialistic world view.

---

<sup>269</sup> Modern secular materialism includes metaphysical and epistemological assumptions that impact the use of language to talk about God, and these various linguistic restrictions may tend to cause the different world religions to become competitive. The way the materialist notion of “truth” and “certainty” are construed, it is difficult if not impossible to talk meaningfully about God, and more important for interfaith dialogue, given this notion of truth, the secular model often requires that only one religion be representative of the truth. The materialist account of language often does not allow the possibility of the truth of conflicting statements from different religions. Accordingly, a conceptual framework for dealing with religion has grown up in the universities of the West to cope with the metaphysical assumptions of materialism and its account of the use of language. At one extreme there is thought to be exclusivism, while at the other extreme is pluralism, inclusivism perhaps in the middle. Most religions are thought to include a core of exclusivist stance, most fundamentalists maintaining that their religion is the only true religion, and thus they are generally completely under the influence of modern epistemological assumptions of Western culture, although they are typically without awareness of this influence. Inclusivists, perhaps the least affected by modern secular assumptions, often suppose that God can somehow accommodate the various different religions. Although inclusivists may suppose that God can accommodate most religions, one’s own religion is usually thought to be the best. Pluralism is generally the dominant position in most religion departments in Western universities. Pluralism tends to mesh with the assumptions of materialism thus elevating the factual capacity of scientific language while still allowing religion to have significant meaning but of a different value than that of science. In pluralism, typically, the various different religions are all equally interesting and valuable (we should promote world peace) but religious language is often thought not to be factually reflective of material reality. Some recent thinkers are attempting to create different models for understanding religion in the West. See, for example, Knitter, P (2002) *Theologies of Theologies* (New York, Orbis Books). Knitter’s attempt to create new labels for the issues seems to weight in favor of pluralist assumptions, and he seems to conflate a number of the issues. For a critique of secular assumptions with respect to theology see Diamond, M “The Challenge of Contemporary Empiricism” in Diamond, M (1975) *The Logic of God / Theology and Verification* (Indianapolis, Bobbs-Merrill Company). We shall not be concerned with these issues except to note that Mr. Gülen is attempting to cut through the detrimental effects of materialism.

<sup>270</sup> Gülen, F (2006) *Essays – Perspectives – Opinions* (New Jersey, The Light, Inc.), 34.



The role of the sacred text is central to Muslim faith. Mr. Gülen's views thus naturally have their origin in the Qur'an, which refers to the various persons of faith in the different world religions as "People of the Book." Jews and Christians, when persons of faith, are People of the Book. Muslims have some advantage over other People of the Book with respect to interfaith dialogue because Islam is open to dialogue. As an example of this openness, along with the Prophet Mohammed, Mr. Gülen, as a Muslim, says of himself and other Muslims, "... I accept all Prophets and Books sent to different peoples throughout history, and regard belief in them as an essential principle of being Muslim. A Muslim is a true follower of Abraham, Moses, David, Jesus, and all other Prophets."<sup>271</sup> The advantage the Muslim has for engaging in interfaith dialogue, Mr. Gülen continues, is thus that they "... acknowledge the oneness and basic unity of religion, which is a symphony of God's blessing and mercy, ...embracing all races and beliefs, a road bringing everyone together in brotherhood."<sup>272</sup> Like Christians, moreover, Muslims believe that Jesus will return when the end of the world is near, though perhaps not physically, but as the underlying conditions of a Godly society. Near the end of world history, from society will emerge values such as peace, love, forgiveness, and mercy. As these values are also central in the Hebrew Prophets, there will be cause for cooperation between Islam, Judaism, and Christianity.<sup>273</sup> Muslims have already engaged in this activity with Jews, who were welcomed into the Ottoman Empire when expelled from Spain.

Despite these various factors that predispose Islam to interfaith dialogue, Islam is not well understood and this misunderstanding contributes to difficulties.

Christendom's historical portrayal of Islam ... has weakened Muslim's courage with respect to interfaith dialog. For centuries, Christians were told that Islam was a crude and distorted version of Judaism and Christianity, and so the Prophet was considered an imposter, a common or ingenious trickster, the Antichrist, or even an idol worshipped by Muslims. Even recent books have presented him as someone with strange ideas who believed he had to succeed at any cost, and who resorted to any means to achieve success.<sup>274</sup>

In the extreme, misunderstanding of Islam has often erupted into violence. When wrongly understood as a political system, rather than a religion, Islam is sometimes seen as an ideology promoting social instability and conflict that must be eliminated. So misunderstood, Islam has been under siege, more Muslims killed in the last century than throughout history. Accordingly, when non-Muslims call for dialogue, Muslims may meet this call with suspicion.

Again the optimist, Mr. Gülen insists that Muslims engage in dialogue for the reasons that religious leaders such as Massignon, Pope Paul VI, and Pope John Paul II have recognized. Muslim faith in God is not a political ideology aimed at self interest, but a life changing spiritual experience that results in compassionate and cooperative representatives of universal peace.<sup>275</sup> The fountainhead of this virtuous disposition of true Muslims is the teaching of the Prophet Mohammad, who through the revelation of the Qur'an lays essential ground work for interfaith dialogue.

---

<sup>271</sup> Ibid.

<sup>272</sup> Ibid., 34-35

<sup>273</sup> Ibid.

<sup>274</sup> Ibid., 37-38

<sup>275</sup> Ibid.



In referring to people of faith outside of Islam as the “People of the Book,” the Qur’an issues one of the greatest calls to interfaith dialogue that can be found.

“O People of the Book! Come to common terms as between us and you: that we worship none but God; that we associate no partners with Him; that we take not, from among ourselves lords and patrons other than God.” If then they turn back, say you: “Bear witness that we are Muslims (surrendered to God’s Will).” (3:64)

If this call to dialogue is rejected, Muslims are to continue on their path and allow the other person to continue on their path as well. But those who respond to the call find their path opens to salvation that is available for all who respond to this call. A person experiences salvation, roughly, in the event God graciously allows this person to enjoy both this life and the next.<sup>276</sup> The dialogue following this openness that leads to salvation should avoid argumentative unproductive debate and rather revolve around caring relationships. The Qur’an states;

God forbids you not, with regard to those who fight you not for (your) Faith nor drive you out of your homes, from dealing kindly and justly with them: for God loves those who are just. (60:8)

Further describing the degree to which God may provide a measure of salvation through revelatory interaction with non-Muslims, the Qur’an states of itself:

This is the Book; wherein there is no doubt; a guidance to the pious ones. (2:2)

The pious ones later described as those

Who believe in the Unseen, are steadfast in prayer, and spend out of what We have provided for them; and who believe in what is sent to you and what was sent before you, and (in their hearts) have the reassurance of the Hereafter. (2:3-4)

The Qur’an here proclaims the beneficial providence of God at work in the lives of some non-Muslims. We thus find that Mr. Gülen’s vision for interfaith dialogue has influenced many people, in part, because of the way in which his views naturally have their origin in the Qur’an. The admonition toward dialogue that Mr. Gülen promotes flows naturally from the Qur’an, and the authority of the Holy Book provides him with authority. He directs Muslims to engage with others because the Prophet Mohammad first conveyed this message in what was revealed to him.

We will find that this divine message of encouragement toward universal tolerance and acceptance of others (the call to interfaith dialogue), is less explicit in other religions, but we will limit our discussion to a Christian and Jewish understanding of interfaith dialogue as found in the Bible. We begin with the Old Testament, which is not only a fundamental source of Jewish outlook on interfaith dialogue, but also foundational for many Christians. As will also be the case later on when we look at the New Testament, it is beyond the scope of this paper to utilize contemporary critical studies of the OT, which studies are extremely valuable when on occasion they can be used in such a way that they do not rule out the implications of the Sacred texts this paper attempts to gather.

<sup>276</sup> For the purpose of this paper, I shall assume that this brief understanding of salvation will suffice for each of the religions represented here. Buddhism and other religions are obviously of a different ilk.



A most interesting interfaith OT story is that of the Prophet Jonah. Some time in the eighth century BCE, God told Jonah that he must carry a message of God's forgiveness to the people of Nineveh, the capital of Assyria, an enemy of Israel. Nineveh seems to have been representative of Assyria. Jonah's task was to instruct the Assyrians to repent from their destructive ways or God would destroy them. God's forgiveness was thus conditional, and there was surely a chance they might not meet these conditions.

Jonah was understandably reluctant to obey God. Assyrian warfare was vicious. After victory in battles with Israel, Assyrians sometimes deported Jewish prisoners to languish and die in exile in Assyrian territories. To these hated adversaries Jonah was asked to bring a message of salvation.

His initial response was to flee from the task. He boarded a ship headed for Tarshish (probably southwest Spain) traveling in the opposite direction of Nineveh. But God caused a storm that threatened the ship. At Jonah's own request, the mariners threw him overboard. The sea immediately calmed and God then "... appointed a great fish to swallow Jonah." (1:17) After three days and nights in the stomach of the fish, the fish vomited Jonah onto dry land, and God asked Jonah a second time to go to Nineveh. This time Jonah obeyed. After hearing God's message the Assyrians repented. They asked God to help them turn from their wicked ways (3:8), and then God relented from the calamity that would have been brought upon Assyria. God's mercy toward Assyrians made Jonah so angry he wanted to die, and "he prayed to the Lord and said, 'Please Lord, was this not what I said [would happen] when I was still in my own country? Therefore, in order to forestall this I fled to Tarshish, for I know that you are a gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and abundant in loving-kindness'..." (4:2).

God then tries to show Jonah that saving the Assyrians was the right thing to do. God causes a plant to grow up to shade Jonah, and then the plant dies, illustrating that as the plant is worthwhile to Jonah, God finds the Assyrians worth saving. The interfaith contrast is such that despite Jonah's Judaism, including his special knowledge of God as a Prophet of God, he also needs to repent. He needs to be saved from his destructive ways as much as the Assyrians do.

The story of Jonah suggest that non-Jewish religion is not the immediate issue for God, or at least that the Assyrian view of God was not the issue, but rather the problem was the destructive violent way in which the Assyrians were living. The Assyrians were not asked to become Jews to experience God's favor. They were asked to look to God to change there way of living life. They did so and were saved.

Something like interfaith dialogue occurs on a practical scale, orchestrated by God. The Assyrians are confronted by a weak (perhaps despised) person about God's concerns. Jonah and the readers of his text are in turn confronted by God about their attitude toward the Assyrians, their powerful enemy. The Assyrians are not required to become Jews, and the Jews are asked to accept and even care for the enemy, the Assyrian non-Jew or anti-Jew. There is a kind of dialogue between two different religious groups, and the result is a more peaceful co-existence, or at least the potential for a more comfortable co-existence between Jews and Assyrians.

These interfaith implications of the Book of Jonah were not new to the Jews. Abraham, the great patriarch of various religions, including Islam, Judaism and Christianity, is the main character of most of the book of Genesis and a central figure in the Qur'an and the New Testament. Abraham, through his wives Hagar and Sarah, was called to make great nations. He is an iconic example of God's covenant purpose for humankind. But well after God's covenant relationship with Abraham had been established (Gen 13:14-18), he meets with a mysterious character, "... Melchizedek king of Salem



...priest of God Most High (Gen 14:18). Melchizedek blessed Abraham who paid tithes to Melchizedek. Abraham on his covenant pilgrimage is helped and strengthened on his way by someone outside of God's newly formed covenant with Abraham. Both figures benefit from each other and respect the divine connection each has, even though different kinds of relationships with God are evident. Abraham believed God and was accordingly called to be the father of many nations; Melchizedek was the king of Salem and a priest. Both individuals were God's people and though different, one could bless the other, and the other paid worshipful respect with a tithe in response.

Another non-Jewish minister to Jews is Jethro, the father-in-law of Moses. While Jethro was not a Hebrew, as a Midianite and perhaps a descendent of Ishmael (Gen 37:28), Jethro helped design an effective structure for Moses' governance of the Hebrew people, and though not a Hebrew, led Aaron (often thought to be the father of the Jewish priesthood) and the other elders in worship before God (Ex 18:12-24).

Another interfaith life changing interaction comes from the life of Ruth in the Book of Ruth. This brief OT history tells of Elimelech and his wife Naomi who sojourned in the land of Moab while there was a famine in their home town of Bethlehem in Judah. Ruth was one of two Moabite women who met and married Naomi's two sons while they were in Moab. Elimelech and Naomi's two sons died, and Ruth followed Naomi back to Judah when the famine had passed. This Moabite woman aggressively secures food for herself and Ruth and succeeds in acquiring Naomi's relative, Boaz, as her husband and the women's redeemer. Ruth has a son, Obed, the father of Jesse, the Father of David. Naomi, as a surrogate mother, has the joy of helping raise Obed.

While Naomi adheres to Jewish tradition, she does not appear to require Ruth to do the same. Also, when Naomi's other daughter-in-law, Orpah, had started on the journey back to Judah with Naomi, Orpah decides to return to Moab. Naomi says to Ruth at this juncture, "...your sister-in-law has gone back to her people and her gods, return after your sister-in-law." (1:15) Ruth, as we have noted, decides to stay with Naomi, but Naomi is not possessive of Orpah and Ruth, concerned to keep them with her so that they might become Jews. Naomi is comfortable with the non-Jewish Moabite religion of her daughter-in-laws. While Ruth eventually embraces Naomi's religion there is no requirement that she do so.

Some years later, this comfort level seems to also exist in her great grand child, David. Before he was king, when hiding from King Saul who wanted to kill him, David often goes to Moab. After David and his band of follows leave their hiding place in the cave of Adullam, "... David went from there to Mizpah of Moab; and he said to the king of Moab, "Please let my Father and Mother come and stay with you until I know what God will do with me." (1 Sam 22:3)

David, the author of many of the Psalms, a person of unique spiritual insight, does not presume to inform the Moabite king about the nature of God, but assumes that the king can track with his frustrating experience of exile brought on by the attempts of king Saul to murder David.

Even as the king of Moab helped David and his family and seemed open to David's sense of providence, some time later, one of the kings of Persia, Cyrus, seems to have had a similar outlook of acceptance for people in other religions, though this was not true of his predecessors.

To secure the lands they conquered, the Persian kings deported populations in mass resettlements to places where control of these people would be easier. When Persia conquered Babylon, some of the Jews already in captivity in Babylon were moved to Persia. When Cyrus eventually became king of



Persia, many Jews were not only allowed to return to their homeland, Cyrus sometimes financed their trip and gave them back their religious artifacts and places of worship. Cyrus, unlike many of his predecessors, seems to have believed that God wanted the restoration of the religions of conquered people. Cyrus thus helped with the restoration of the Hebrew religion. In recognition, the Prophet Isaiah says of this restoration that it was the work of God. "It is I who say of Cyrus, he is My shepherd. And he will perform all My desire. And he declares of Jerusalem, she will be built, and of the temple, your foundation will be laid." (Is 44:28)

The Hebrew Prophet Isaiah thus extols the pleasure of God for Cyrus' interfaith activity. As one of many of Cyrus' restoration projects, many Jews did return to Jerusalem from captivity in Persia and the Temple was rebuilt, and Isaiah says that God enabled Cyrus to carry on this restoration, which clearly reflects some kind of ancient interfaith initiative on a massive scale.

These OT examples supporting interfaith activity should be as significant for Christians as for Jews. For many Christians, the meaning of the relationship of the Old Testament and New Testament is literally a relationship between Old Covenant and New Covenant. Christians often think that the books of the New Testament depict a New Covenant or agreement with God that is at least a more complete account of God's grace and mercy than the Old Covenant found in the OT. If so, the previous OT examples of interfaith activity in the OT should provide a bias toward an understanding of interfaith material in the NT, or even more than mere bias. Some people find the grace and goodness of God in the OT just as profound and wonderful as that which is found in the Qur'an and the NT. A further complication is that, unlike the Qur'an, not everyone agrees about what should be included in the NT and the OT. Many Christians, such as Roman Catholics and Greek Orthodox, include deuterocanonical and apocrypha books into the canon of Scripture. In any event, the scope of this paper must be limited by the assumption that the OT is usually taken to be foundational for the NT, and with this assumption in hand, we turn now to focus on NT Scripture.

Were we to ask Christians the question, "What should be the relationship between Christianity and other religions?" the answer appears differently at different times in the history of Christianity. Something similar also occurs in Islam and Judaism, although we shall only consider Christianity in this regard.

The Christian movement in the first century was often taken by Jews to be heretical perversion of Judaism. The man eventually known as the Apostle Paul, for example, first known as a conservative Jew named Saul, tried to destroy the early Christian movement. In his zeal to preserve Judaism, Saul sometimes authorized the killing of innocent people, as we learn from the story of Stephen in Acts chapter eight. The people of the early Christian movement, on the other hand, often took themselves to be open to other religions, God being the Father of all viable religion. The early movement often worshiped in Synagogues with Jews, though they were first called Christians through their involvement with gentiles outside the Jewish tradition in Antioch (Acts 11:26). Centuries later, after Christianity had become institutionalized, the tables were turned. As an institution, Christianity has often taken a hostile stance toward any other religion that might question or even merely differ from the standards of orthodoxy that happen to be in place at a given time, these standards generally reflecting the history of philosophy.

The early church, due to the able influence of Augustine, incorporated Plato. Latter Thomistic tradition created a larger paradigm in which Neo-Platonism was integrated with Aristotle, in no small part because the crusades brought Moslem theology with its link to Aristotle back to Europe. The likes



of Galileo, Descartes, Locke and Hume later set the stage for a secular materialist world view. Kant and the philosophical theology of thinkers Kant influenced, such as Friedrich Schleiermacher and John Hick, lead us into the modern era and the current post modern developments. Given these philosophical theological trends that shape the outlook of any given historical Christian institution or movement, Christians have generally exhibited a brittle defensive reaction to religions that have not held a corresponding acceptance of these trends.

Utilizing a focus similar to that of Mr. Gülen, who looks to the Qur'an, we will for the moment leave aside the history of Christianity, and in what follows we will briefly consider the position of the early Christian movement as found in the New Testament. We will again do this in a non-critical way, that is, we will not utilize extra-biblical textual criticism, which is nearly always a part of the study of the gospels. We begin with the gospels.

The story of the Christ Child in the Gospel of Matthew (2:1-12) often leaves people puzzled about the identity of the wise men from the East who came to Jerusalem looking for the king of the Jews. Were they priests, philosophers, or perhaps astrologers? They followed a star to the baby Jesus, and when they found him they fell down and worshipped him and presented him with precious gifts. Though they are not Jews, they are sensitive to God and seem to have had revelation from God that was so significant that they left their homes in the East, traveled a considerable distance, engaged in an act of worship, and gave costly gifts. Since these wise men were not identified as Jews, their activities would not have been possible unless God's favor and revelation extends outside the religious context of the Jews of the first century.

Another NT account will help shape our thinking. There was an incident in the life of Christ that we find in both Mark and Luke. One of the disciples saw someone casting out demons in Christ's name, though this person was not a part of the band of disciples, so the disciples tried to stop him and came to Christ for help. Christ responds, "Do not hinder him, ... For he who is not against us is for us." (Mk 9:39-40, Lk 9:49) Is Christ simply telling them to be tolerant? Or is Christ assuming that God is at work in the lives of people who are not involved in Christ's ministry? It seems that there are people who are appropriately religious though outside the group of disciples, and Christ is at least asking his followers to have an attitude toward others that could easily lead to interfaith dialogue.

Much more to the point in a different passage, consider the words of Christ as the "Good Shepherd" in the Gospel of John, chapter ten. We find a metaphor. There are sheep and there is a shepherd. The disciples are obviously the sheep, and Jesus represents himself as the "good Shepherd," who will protect and care for the sheep even to the point of laying down his life for them. He says,

I am the good shepherd; and I know my own, and my own know me, even as the Father knows me and I know my Father; and I lay down my life for the sheep. And I have other sheep which are not of this fold; I must bring them also, and they shall hear my voice; and they shall become one flock with one shepherd. (Jn 10:14-16)

Who are the "other sheep" who are not apparently among the immediate band of Christ's disciples? These "other sheep" shall hear his voice, shall become one flock, and shall have one shepherd. The assumptions that often prevent Christians from seeing Muslims and Jews, respectively, as such flocks with their own shepherds have largely been the cultural and philosophical trends mentioned above. But aside from these trends, why not understand that the various world religions are the flocks in question, Islam being one in particular, with the shepherd of Islam being Mohammad and the faithful imams following the Prophet



In keeping with Christ's indication that the other sheep would hear his voice and would have one shepherd, might we suppose that the Prophet Mohammad somehow mysteriously, from Christ's perspective, stands in the place of Christ?

Many Christians would be troubled by the suggestion that we might see Christ in Mohammad, but that this may be possible is suggested by the way in which the Apostle Paul sometimes viewed Christ. In writing his first letter to the Corinthians, many of them gentiles, he interestingly refers to the Jews wandering in the wilderness, immigrating from Egypt to Canaan, as the fathers of the Corinthians, saying, more importantly for the point here, that when they drank from the rock at Horeb, that rock was Christ. (I Cor. 10:4) The OT story tells us that the Israelites were thirsty and complained bitterly to Moses, who then struck a rock with his staff, and water came out of the rock. (Ex 17:6) The source of this satisfying refreshment, says Paul, was Christ. The rock was Christ. But if that rock was Christ, similarly, Mohammad might be seen by some as a form of Christ.

Christians might recoil that Christ and Mohammad are entirely different. The problem for many Christians is that they elevate the status of Christ to deity and hold everyone else to the status of mere humans, who are accordingly not thought to have the capacity for divine activity of Christ except through the use of spiritual gifts, a kind of supernatural ability to do God's work (Rom. 12; Eph. 4; 1 Cor. 12-14) and through prayer. To the contrary, a statement suggesting the possibility of greater human capacity is found in Paul's letter to the Colossians. Paul says, "Now I rejoice in my sufferings for your sake, and in my flesh I do my share on behalf of his body (which is the church) in filling up that which is lacking in Christ's afflictions." (Col. 1:24) Paul seems to be saying that Christ's suffering is not sufficient for the needs of the church, so that Paul must also contribute his sufferings. If so, why not assume that Mohammad's contributions also have measure in God's economy as did Paul's and Christ's contributions.

Another NT example that suggests a commonality between Christianity and other religions comes from James, often thought to be the brother of Christ. As a good Jew and a leader of the early Christian movement, in his NT epistle James encourages relationship with God in a way that is typical of many other religions. He says that if we cleanse ourselves and draw near to God, God will draw near to us (4:8-10). In writing this, James does not create a religion superior to other religions, but rather, after identifying himself as "a bond-servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ," (1:1) he does not then tie true religion to Christ, but says that "... pure and undefiled religion in the sight of our God and Father ... [is] to visit orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained from the world." (1:27) In this early Christian account of religion, James appears to intend to define religion across the boundaries of the various world religions. As the leader of the early Christian movement, he is known for reconciling different groups within the early church (Acts 15:13). Similarly, in keeping with his calling as the shepherd of the early church, his account of religion, selects the core elements that many religions have in common that have to do with a quality of life that seeks the well-being of others. Keeping oneself from the destructive processes of the world, the truly religious person has the resources to care for those who are in need, some who are even weak and helpless, such as widows and orphans. James' enduring account of religion seems to be altogether compatible with Islam and Judaism, and given the likelihood that James has given us the religion of Christ, it is significant that the religions of Mohammad and Moses are compatible with James' account.

Might we even say that, to some degree in light of the Epistle of James, the religion of Mohammad is the religion of Christ, and thus, that from an interfaith perspective, Mohammad reflects the spirit of



Christ, even as Muslims may feel that Christ reflects the spirit of Mohammad. James has allowed for this kind of reciprocal exchange.

Many Christians can easily see Abraham and Moses and David as God's people. So can some Muslims, who also revere Christ. But Christians and Jews do not readily reciprocate with Muslims. Christians and Jews can often not see Mohammad as a prophet. But this short sightedness is out of keeping with the Apostle Paul's account of a prophet.

A prophet, says Paul, is one who speaks to people "...for edification and exhortation and consolation." (1 Cor.14:3, 25) In Paul's view, the prophet engenders qualities of life that help people overcome grief and anger with success. The prophet is supposed to give insight that leads to Godliness. Although Paul is addressing a Christian audience, there is reason to think he saw a larger context that would, on his own account of the prophetic, include Mohammad as a prophet.

Consider Paul's Epistle to the Romans for its interfaith implications. This letter is a bit more general and comprehensive than most of his correspondence and it develops an inter-religious understanding of God's dealings with humankind. Although known as a Jew, Paul identifies himself as the apostle to the gentiles in the first chapter, thus qualifying himself to deal with non-Jewish religion through his appointment by God to do so (Rm 1:5). In chapters two through four there is a basic contrast between Jews and people of non-Jewish religion (gentiles), and it is here that Paul implies that God's hope for all people is that they be in a personal relationship with God, despite whether they are Jews or gentiles. God's relationship with a person preferably develops in response to a person's faith. Though Paul did not have Muslims specifically in mind, had he lived later in history, he no doubt would have seen practicing Muslims as people of faith, people who may transcend the category of Jew or gentile (Rm 3:28-30). Then turning to the transforming effect of faith, more or less, in chapters five through eight Paul explores why transformation may or may not occur. An outgrowth of the earlier discussion, chapters nine through eleven wrestle with questions about the relationship between an all-powerful God and responsible free agents. The remainder of the letter, chapters twelve through sixteen, deal mainly with the way in which faith affects a community of people of faith. Paul considers the relationship between the well-being of an individual and the well-being of the group in which this person may live, a group that includes vast differences (Rm 15:7-13), and he concludes with personal notes and greetings to individuals mainly in Rome. While the terminology of the letter addresses and presupposes a Hellenistic world, a mix of Jewish, Greek, and Roman culture and philosophy, its monotheistic overtone is nevertheless compatible with that of the Qur'an.

This letter to people living in Rome was meant to convey what Paul had hoped to say in person (Rm 1:9-15). Given that he was unable to visit Rome (as least prior to the writing of this letter), Paul felt compelled to write to these people to give them his account of God's way of dealing with people. Presumably this letter contains Paul's basic message to all the groups he encountered and attempted to influence, and if so, its significance is heightened.

Touching on some of the points that are obviously related to interfaith dialogue, we find in Romans chapter two that gentiles, who do not have the benefit of the Jewish law, can nevertheless find favor with God, even if they are not circumcised (Rm 2:14-16). The practice of circumcision is used to illustrate that faith in God runs deeper than the act of circumcision (Rm 2:28-29). A gentile, who has faith in God, though not circumcised, may thus experience God's favor. Paul argues, for example, that Abraham experienced God's favor prior to circumcision, and then when later circumcised, this circumcision is merely a sign of the faith that he had while uncircumcised. So it is faith in the grace



and mercy of God that ultimately makes the person acceptable to God, and as Abraham exemplifies this life of faith, Abraham is an archetype or spiritual father of all who have faith. The kind of religion in which the faith is expressed is not at issue for Paul (Rm 4:9-16). If faith in such instances is like Islamic submission, we again find parallels between Islam and the early Christian movement.

But perhaps most significant for the discussion of interfaith implications in Paul's letter to Rome is found in what has become chapter four (the original manuscript had no chapters or verse numbers). Here Paul uses two individuals to illustrate salvation by faith. Paul obviously has the work of God in Christ in view. He has just explained the role of Christ's death, burial and resurrection in God's plan for salvation in chapter three. Who should he use as examples of people who found favor with God through Christ? Did Paul develop an illustration through the life of Peter, the well known disciple and early church leader, or James, who was possibly the brother of Christ, or John, the disciple Christ seemed to love more than the others (Jn 13:23)? We find that the two people Paul used to illustrate a relationship with God were Abraham and David. Despite the various examples available, Paul hails these two non-Christian individuals as examples of *Christian* faith (Rm 3:21-4:25). For our purpose we should emphasize that neither of these persons knew Christ personally, nor did they know the culture and theology that are usually required for orthodox Christianity. More succinctly, while Paul had developed the role of Christ in God's salvation in chapter three, to illustrate this, that is, to exemplify the person of faith who has been saved through Christ, Paul did not use Christians, but rather two well known Jews, David and Abraham. Abraham is importantly seen as having faith before he was circumcised, because this precondition of faith further shows that it is by faith (or submission to God), and not merely by following a religious tradition, that God's eternal favor is received. Knowledge of Christ is not necessary. The obvious intent of Paul's argument is to show that God deals with people from all religions (gentiles as well as Jews) under the same conditions.<sup>277</sup> Accordingly, we must surmise that all people who are in fact God's children are faithful and submissive to God as were Abraham and David. By implication, as Paul intended, we should suppose that such people can be found in a Mosque, a Synagogue, a Temple, a Monastery, or in ordinary everyday circumstances located in Asia, Berlin, South Africa, Antarctica, or Detroit. Christians may come to see that Mohammad is like Christ, and some Christians may see that Mohammad was a Prophet through whom God's word was revealed as the Qur'an.

One controversial NT passage should be mentioned because it is used to argue that Christianity is exclusively God's only one true religion. In the Gospel of John Jesus says, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life; no one come to the Father, but through me." (Jn 14:6) This passage is used to argue that only explicit knowledge of Christ can result in salvation. For example, contemporary conservative Christians usually maintain that for a person to experience salvation, this person must realize (must somehow explicitly know) that Jesus provides substitutionary atonement for their sins, although the language describing atonement may vary. It is often held that the person must pray a prayer to bring Christ into this person's life. But consider a different interpretation of this text.

Another standard alternative interpretation of this verse (though seldom known or accepted by conservative Christians) is that "through Christ" means to live in a way that is the same as the way

---

<sup>277</sup> For a scholarly commentary that supports my reading of Romans see Ziegler, J (1989) Paul's Letter to Rome (London, JLM Press).



Christ lived.<sup>278</sup> A closer examination of the larger context of the Gospel of John does suggest (perhaps in addition to mysterious metaphysical conditions somehow only realized through Christ) that the meaning of this text in John has to do with living the kind of life that Christ lived. The background of the verse includes the disciple's realization that Christ will soon die. They are disappointed, fearful and concerned. They had believed that he would overthrow Roman rule and restore world control to the Jews. As they understand his insistence that he must die, and his reassurance that despite his death, they will one day be with him again in heaven, Thomas (doubting Thomas) confesses, in essence, that he does not know how to get to heaven. Christ responds, "I am the way, the truth, and the life; no one come to the Father, but through me. If you had known me, you would have known my Father also; from now on you know Him and have seen Him." (Jn 14:6-7) The issue for Thomas is whether or not he knows the Father, who is God. Implied in Christ's response to Thomas, if Thomas really knew Jesus, he also knew God. So while salvation, as some Christians understand salvation, is only through Christ, this passage in John does not actually require a person to endorse a certain kind of twentieth century theology. We have found this to be the case in the examples of salvation used by Paul in the Epistle to the Romans. David and Abraham did not know Jesus, even though Paul indicates that they were saved through Christ.

What is entailed in knowing another person is beyond the scope of this paper, but the simple message may be that to know a person like Jesus is to know God. Perhaps David came to know God through his grandmother Ruth, if she was still alive when David was a boy. Ruth may have provided mothering for David even as Naomi was a surrogate mother for Obed. In knowing his Moabite grandmother, David would have come to know God. Likewise, people who knew David knew God, people who knew Abraham knew God, and people who knew Moses knew God. So why should Christians and Jews and others not take the matter a step further and say that people who knew Mohammad knew God, and that people continue to get to know Mohammad through the Qur'an. And thus through the Qur'an, people continue to grow in their knowledge and relationship with God.

In conclusion, the broad strokes used to pull together the various religious traditions represented herein indicate that the Sacred Scriptures of Islam, Judaism, and Christianity each encourage intercultural tolerance and acceptance. While the Qur'an gives implicit instruction for Muslims to interact with the followers of other religions peacefully under most conditions (Mr Gülen embodying this instruction), the Scriptures of other religions are not so explicitly instructive, though we have found that Jewish and Christian Scriptures can be read to support and advocate interfaith dialogue. The stories of the lives of Jonah, Ruth, Abraham, and David are telling. Similarly, Christian Scripture on the whole includes an understanding of deity that embraces all of humankind, and as Christianity depends upon the OT, we see this embrace of humanity occurring through the religion indigenous to the region in which a person lives. Whether a person is an Assyrian, Moabite, Roman, or Jew, in each case the implications if not the directives (somewhat tacitly) toward interfaith dialogue are for the larger purpose of promoting peace and well-being among all peoples of the world.

This interfaith outlook in Scripture is often not apparent when, as the insight of Mr Gülen would have it, religion is used for self proclaimed personal ends apart from God, especially political ends.<sup>279</sup> When religion is used to inflict torment and suffering and to gain political control, the Scriptures in

<sup>278</sup> For an exhaustive account of the various views of atonement, especially the one I have sketched here see Moberly, R. C. (1904) *Atonement and Personality* (London, John Murray).

<sup>279</sup> Gülen, *Essays*, 37.



this case are not being used in accord with their purpose as divine revelation. The influence of materialism may provide impetus for such abuse of Scripture in that unbelief and skepticism in the lives of religious leaders may distort their use of Scripture, so that they perhaps foster indifference or scorn for people outside their own cultural norms.

Cutting through the effects of materialism in the life of faith, Mr Gülen finds that the powerful effect of a loving relationship with a person of faith provides a cure. He therefore encourages Muslims to reach out in friendship to non-Muslims so as to counter the effects of the secular world. The cure for the ill is love. He finds that religion

...commands love, compassion, tolerance, and forgiving.... Love is the most essential element in every being, a most radiant light, a great power that can resist and overcome every force. It elevates every soul that absorbs it, and prepares it for the journey to eternity. Those who make contact with eternity through love work to implant in all other souls what they receive from eternity. They dedicate their lives to this sacred duty, and endure any hardship for its sake. Just as they say "love" with their last breaths, they also breath "love" while being raised on the day of Judgment.<sup>280</sup>

According to the Gospel of John, Jesus, like Mr Gülen, similarly encouraged people to love one another despite their differences and problems. An instance of this is found in John's account of the Last Supper.<sup>281</sup> Prior to the meal, Jesus got up from the table and took a towel and a basin of water and washed his disciple's feet (13:1-30). According to John, this feet washing was an act of love (13:1), which was in part to show the disciples (and all disciples to follow) how they should lovingly treat one another (13:14). Jesus enacted a metaphor to depict a deep caring relationship that would sooth and overcome the affects of brokenness and pathology in the lives of people of faith (it seems that even saints have dirty feet from time to time).<sup>282</sup>

A bit later, when the meal begins, Jesus again reaches out in love to Judas, by seating Judas at the place of honor at the head of the table where they could talk to each other. When they were finally seated, Jesus confronted Judas (13:26), but rather than entering into dialogue with Jesus about his dissatisfaction with Jesus' views, such as, we can imagine, the theology of the story of the Good Samaritan (Lk 10:30-37), or their various excursions into non-Jewish Samaritan territory to help non-

<sup>280</sup> *Ibid.*, 48-49

<sup>281</sup> Many scholars do not think this passage is an account of the Last Supper because the first verse (13:1) specifies it was before the Passover Feast, and moreover, John's account is different than the other gospel accounts. However, these scholars seem to fail to see the entire context. The text says "...before the Passover Feast, Jesus knew that his time had come..." referring back to Jesus' awareness, when the Greeks wanted to talk to him sometime earlier (12:20), that the time of his death had come (12:23). The passage seems simply to be saying that this occasion in John's gospel is the Passover Feast, but before the feast began, Jesus already knew he was about to die.

<sup>282</sup> The meaning of Jesus' metaphor is somewhat obvious when he says of Judas, after having washed Judas' feet, "...not all of you are clean..." (Jn 13:10) for Judas must have been clean. Judas was the disciple who was perhaps the most respectful of Jewish tradition. He would have bathed before the Passover meal, yet wearing sandals, his feet would have become soiled by walking through the city streets to the place of the Passover meal. When under normal circumstances the servant at the door would have washed his feet, he would have become clean all over again (in accord with ritual requirements). Only in this instance, Jesus took the place of the servant and in an act of love, washed Judas' feet, but then strangely said that Judas was not clean. (Jn 13:10-11) John reiterates that this condition of Judas (not being clean) is an indication of the betrayal that is about to take place (Jn 13:10).



Jewish people (Mt 15:21-28), or caring for tax collectors (Lk 19:1-10) and women of the night (Lk 7:36-39), Judas mounted a passive aggressive attack and managed in short order to kill Jesus.

It appears that Jesus was committed to something like intercultural dialogue which Judas rejected. Judas may have been some sort of Jewish exclusivist who could not tolerate the openness to people that Jesus expected. Jesus was apparently aware of Judas' rejection and hence gave Judas the place of honor at the table (an act of love no less than feet washing) no doubt so that Judas and Jesus could iron things out.

While few Christians emulate Jesus by loving their enemies, it appears that Mr Gülen is willing to place himself in this risky position. He has taken the place of Christ, not as a Christian, but as a Muslim, offering peaceful dialogue to Christians and Jews and people of all religions. Mr Gülen's insistence that love is the essential element that will solve the problems related to interfaith dialogue places him squarely in the non-violent peaceful tradition of the Jew named Jesus that Christians claim to follow. Christians and Jews and people of the various world religions would do well to emulate Mr. Gülen.