

One God in a Divided World

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One God in a Divided World

Rabbi Dr. John Levi AM

Let me begin with a story which I assure you is absolutely true –well, almost true!
You will remember that Moses the liberator and law- giver stammered and was forced to use his brother Aaron as his mouthpiece. After Moses was given his marching orders by God he turned to Aaron and started to speak to him.

“The Lord has commanded us to lead his children out of slavery to C-C-C-Canada”. But Aaron , of course, thinks that he has said “the Land of Canaan” and leads the Children of Israel the wrong way- through the Sea of Reeds and not the Atlantic Ocean.

We are left to consider. What would have happened to the Jewish People and the Bible had they all ended up in Canada and not Canaan ? Or better still in the quiet and peaceful South Island of New Zealand ? Probably-absolutely nothing! The anvil on which our traditions are shaped was the iron anvil of ceaseless struggle.

I have been brooding about this evening’s discussion at this Forum for some time. I don’t want to underestimate how much the three great Monotheistic Faiths share. And I also don’t want to belittle the differences that divide us because they are also very important and, very often, illuminating. I must confess my intention to tackle these differences was shattered when, a few weeks ago, I opened my *Age* morning newspaper and saw the bold purple colored advertisement for St Michael’s Church and its Uniting Church minister, the estimable Dr. Frances MacNab which simply read:” The Ten Commandments, the most negative document ever written”.

That advertisement says everything we need to know about interfaith discussion and ongoing relationships. That advertisement certainly wins the prize for *Chutzpah!* It is crude, rude, and offensive and will be forgotten long after those “most negative” commandments are remembered and honoured as the foundation stone of Western Civilization.

Certainly, the slogan may have been an effective advertising ploy but what does it really say to the man, woman or child in the street, at business or at home?

The “most negative document ever written” tells us that lying is wrong, it forbids us to betray our marriage partner. It says we may not covet. It is a constant reminder that we must honour our parents. The “most negative document” actually begins by extolling freedom. It warns us that even beasts of burden and slaves are entitled to one day off a week and it tells us that God is beyond any graven image that we can create.

Yes, I would concede that the text is couched in the language of 3 000 years ago. It was written to be remembered by people who didn’t have books. But we also know that they relied upon memory and that those memories would be committed to writing hundreds of years later. It is true that the Ten Commandments reflect ancient wisdom. We can also see that it is not the only law code embedded in the Hebrew Bible, but it is an important living part of an evolving religious civilization in which we all share.

It is a fragment from the traditions of a people who shared their world with the Pharonic tyrants of Egypt, with the kings of Babylonia and Sumer and with the tribes of the desert. It is far more ancient than the Magna Carta and much more significant than the 18th Century’s Declaration of the Revolutionary Rights of Man in the Age of the Enlightenment.

Those shared memories are the source of our shared spiritual heritage and they deserve our mutual respect. In a very real sense we all still stand at Sinai.

And now, with that off my chest, let me specifically address our topic “One God in a Divided World- a Celebration of a Significant Centenary”.

The radical concept of God One is the basis of my faith.

What makes Judaism tick? Jews are few in number. We are a mere thirteen million but we have been up there and out there on the frontiers of spirituality and insight for a very long time. I think it was Hilaire Belloc who sarcastically observed: “How odd of God to choose the Jews” to which came the rejoinder: “It is not so odd, the Jews chose God.” And we ask “Why”.

So let share with you a really true story. The famous Brooklyn born Nobel Prize winner in Physics Isidor I Rabi was once asked: “Why did you become a scientist, rather than a doctor or a lawyer or a businessman like every other immigrant child in your neighbourhood?” Rabi replied: “My mother made me a scientist without ever intending it. Every other Jewish mother in our neighbourhood would ask her child after school ‘Nu? What did you learn at school today?’; but not my mother. She would always ask me a different question. ‘Issy’ she would say ‘did you ask a good question today?’ That difference made me become a scientist.”

At its best, Jewish tradition asks questions. We have a tradition of arguing about everything that is important. Of course, you know that already.

The Book of Genesis tells us that Abraham is the father of the Jewish People. And there is a Midrash, which incidentally is also to be found in the Quran, of a time in Abraham’s childhood when his father Terach who was a maker of idols, left his son in charge of his workshop while he went out. It is said that the boy played with the idols and accidentally sideswiped the largest clay statue in the shop and it crashed to the floor and broke. Frantically the youngster place a large stick into the arms of another idol and when his father returned to the workshop the boy told him that the statues had argued and the largest idol had swept the other idol off the shelf and broken it. Abraham’s very angry

parent shouted ‘You know very well that idols can’t do anything like that. They are made of clay.’ To which the boy responded: “ If what you say is true and the idols can do nothing why then do we pray to them?’ And so began his search for the living God.

The Hebrew Bible’s great story about Abraham occurs after he has left home and when he pleads with God for the lives of those who live in the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah (Genesis 18:23). “Will you sweep the innocent along with the guilty? What if there be fifty innocent people within the city...shall not the judge of all the earth deal justly?” And so the game begins. Forty-five. Then, forty. Then, thirty. Then, twenty and then ten and, at that point, Abraham’s argument with God ceases. But he has made a powerful point that is never to be forgotten: “Shall not the judge of all the earth do justly?”

And then there is Moses in the desert of Sinai who confronts the Divine Presence and the voice of God at the bush that burns and is not consumed. The voice commands hi to go back to Egypt and confront Pharaoh and Moses replies: “Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh and free the children of Israel from Egypt...What if they do not believe me and do not listen to me? Please, O Lord, I have never been a man of words, either in times past or now. I am slow in speech and slow in tongue. Please, O Lord, make someone else your agent” And he loses that argument.

And later, in the desert, following the painful episode of the molten calf, Moses argues again with God and pleads for his people. “Let not the Egyptians say it was with evil intent that he delivered them only to kill them off in the mountains and annihilate them from the face of the earth. Turn from your blazing anger and renounce the plan to punish your people”. And we are told, “God renounced His punishment”. There is a pattern here. We are not automatons. We can choose our own fate. The omnipotent God gives each one of us free choice-sometimes with tragic results.

And then there is the prophet Jonah who is so embarrassed when God has mercy on Nineveh and Jonah begs for death saying: “I would rather die than live”. Or Job, who

argues with God so bitterly that God responds out of a whirlwind and asks: “Who is this that darkens counsel without knowledge? Gird up your loins like a man!”

The gentle, elderly author and poet Jacob Rosenberg, who sadly died in Melbourne only last week, recalled a remarkable scene:

“In the summer of 1944 on a Friday afternoon in dying days of August-as a silky sheen like a calcium white gauze invaded the air over Birkenau-a group of six bewildered men, whose fate had been sealed with their birth, sat in a circle between blocks 5 and 7. ‘Friends’, my despairing father said, ‘Thousands of innocent people-men, women and children are murdered here day after day. If God is Almighty, and there is no question that He is, then surely He is guilty of murder. Therefore He must be condemned and sentenced to death’. Our verdict was unanimous. The sentence was proclaimed. Resigned, almost swooning from the ordeal, my emaciated father stood up, five pairs of eyes bored into his extinct face. Perhaps, I thought he was already outside, beyond the boundaries of his body. And yet, a moment later, I was amazed to hear his voice come strong and resolute.

‘ Jews’, he said, ‘the trial is over. It is time for the afternoon prayer’.”

It takes extraordinary courage to believe that here is a God in a world that is tragically incomplete and far from perfect.

In a preface to the ancient prayer at the heart of the synagogue’s service there is a warning written by the twentieth century Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel: “ Prayer cannot bring water to parched fields or mend a broken bridge or rebuild a ruined city, but prayer can water an arid soul, mend a broken heart and rebuild a weakened will.”

And in another place in the same book: “Pray as if everything depended on God; act as if everything depended on you.”

From the very first words of the Bible to its very end we find a doctrine of social responsibility. Why is it important for Genesis to tell us we are created in the image of the One God? To affirm this statement is to effect change in the way we treat the world. God asks Cain a question: “Where is your brother?” Of course, God knows he answer; but Cain replies: “*Hashomer achi anochi?*”. Which means: “ Am I my brother’s keeper?”. And we know the answer. Of course we are. We are made in the divine image. We all belong to the same family.

There is a Jewish version of the saying by : “Render unto Caesar that which is Caesar’s.” It is a story of a confrontation between a rabbi and a Roman aristocrat who says, “Caesar is obviously divine. Look at his image that you can see on every coins”. And the rabbi responds: “My King stamps His image on every human being and miraculously every person is different.”

Quite simply, Judaism does not believe that it is the only path to God or to salvation. Again, to pick up a saying of Jesus (from the Gospel of John) “In my father’s house are many mansions”.

We are each products of our own history and sometimes we are able to transcend that history and reach out beyond our own frontiers and boundaries.

The orthodox English rabbi Jonathan Sacks asks in his book “The Dignity of Difference” exactly the same question.

“Can we speak for difference? Can we hear the voice of God in a language, a sensibility, a culture not our own? Can we see the presence of God in the face of a stranger? Religion is no longer marginal to international politics. After a long period of eclipse it has emerged with immense and sometimes destructive force”.

The encounter of religions with one another is unprecedented in human history. It is a direct unmediated encounter. It is the underlying issue of pluralism and of freedom. For

the first time the other is no longer another. The other is the neighbour who lives next door. That neighbour is only a fingertip on the Internet. No coercive power can interfere with this kind of unmediated freedom. The counter reaction to all this unfamiliar immediacy is fundamentalism, fear and violence. For religious people who reject violence as the basis for living up to the best that is within their own religious tradition we simply must be open to the radical idea that the infinite God speaks in differing ways to different people.

On my most recent visit to Israel I heard a heart-breaking story.

Somehow or other the victims of genocide in Darfur have heard about Israel. To get there they have to cross one desert after another. They have to negotiate a way over the Nile and over the Suez Canal and across the harsh desert of Sinai. They are illegal intruders and moving targets for itchy trigger fingers. The Sudanese Government has urged Egypt to take tough measure against any Sudanese citizen trying to enter Israel, a country with which the Sudan remains officially at war. The Sudanese Refugee Commissioner, Mohammed Ahmed Al Aghbash, said in July 2007 that any Sudanese citizen willfully wishing to enter Israel was pursuing a Zionist agenda and asked Egypt to severely penalize them.

And so when they finally reach the border fence with Israel bullets fly and innocent people die.

The young eighteen year old Israeli conscripts who guard their side of the order spend their time watching for the refugees, Christian, Moslem and Animists, emerge across the desert dunes and when they come near the wire the soldiers hold up their hands and shout "Welcome" and that gesture gives them the status of legality and life.

"You shall not murder" says "the most negative document ever written".

One God in a Divided World

Professor Anne Hunt OAM

Australian Catholic University

Greetings, distinguished guests, each and every one of you.

I firstly acknowledge the indigenous people, the original custodians of this land, and their elders past and present. Secondly, I would like to congratulate The Catenian Association on its centenary and commend its work in service to the Church and to society more broadly in the 100 years since the beginnings of the Association in 1908. I thank you for the invitation to join you this evening, and to share the podium with Rabbi John Levi and Professor Ismail Albayrak, who are esteemed scholars and respected leaders in their communities. It is a great honour to be here with them.

Our topic this evening: One God in a Divided World. That we live in a divided world: sadly, there can be no dispute or disagreement about this. It is estimated that there are currently about forty areas of civil war or unrest around the world, and, sadder still to say, the majority of those situations have at least a component of interreligious tension, if not as the direct cause, as an exacerbating element in the deadly mix. Consider, for example, Iraq, Northern Ireland, India, Indonesia, Sudan, the West Bank, the list goes on.

I do not propose to speak on “our Divided World.” I propose to spend the short time available to us this evening on the other dimension of our topic: that of “One God.” For while interreligious tension is there in the mix of most trouble spots in the world, here, in our faiths, lie the seeds of hope, an interreligious hope, for a better and more peaceful world.

One God?

For Roman Catholic Christians, the declarations of the Second Vatican Council in the 1960s settled without equivocation the Roman Catholic position on the question of the One God.¹ *Lumen Gentium* (The Constitution on the Church in the Modern World), for example, stated with patent clarity that Muslims and Christians believe in the one same God: “they [Muslims] worship with us the One God” (LG 16). In the course of his pontificate, Pope John Paul II repeatedly stressed that Muslims and Christians believe in and worship one and the same God. Perhaps this was nowhere more tangibly demonstrated than in John Paul II’s invitation to representatives of the world religions to come to Assisi in January 2002 (just a few months after 9/11) to pray together for peace. Moreover, it was no accident that John Paul II chose Assisi for that momentous gathering, for it was St Francis of Assisi who had entered into dialogue with Islamic leaders in the course of the Fifth Crusade, some eight centuries ago, in 1219.

We are in no doubt on this: It is the same God, the God encountered by Abraham and Moses, the God in whose name the prophets spoke, the God whom John the Baptist proclaimed, and the God whom Jesus taught his disciples to call *Abba*, who is the one same God who is worshiped by all three communities of believers.

This we share. Divided though the world indisputably is, each of us believes in the one God as the supreme source of all that is. There is no other. This monotheistic faith we share. And, herein lies our hope.

Different perspectives on the mystery of God

But, while we believe in and worship the one God, it is also true that we come to the mystery of God, we see it, so to speak, through different lenses, and from different perspectives. It is, I think, rather like the experience of looking at a hologram, with each

¹ Second Vatican Council also spoke in no uncertain terms of salvation outside the Church, speaking in terms of the truth and grace in other people of other faiths and indeed in people of no religious faith. We can rejoice that the days when the Catholic Church spoke in terms of no salvation outside the church are gone.

of us approaching the mystery from different angles, seeing and privileging somewhat different aspects of the divine being.

The mystery of God is greater than any one of us. It is incomprehensible, ineffable, immeasurably beyond our capacity to understand. The God of whom we speak is the God of our understanding. But God is ever greater, ever more mysterious, ever more wonderful than any of us can imagine. When we talk about God, then, it is not an either-or situation: either you are right or I am right. It can be a both-and situation. Indeed, so we have so much to learn from each other!

It seems to me that one of the great challenges and one of the great blessings of our time is the new sense of urgency for interreligious dialogue. Genuine dialogue is to bring our true and best selves, our most profound understandings, and our most sincere convictions to the encounter. It is to come ready and eager to speak and to hear, to listen and to learn. There will be no resiling or backing away from what we believe in and understand of the mystery of God. But there will be a sense of humility too, a recognition that the mystery of God ever exceeds our capacity for understanding.

I want to talk now about the distinctive features of our faith as Christians. I want to talk about what might otherwise be the elephant in the room, there for everyone to see but no one prepared to name it: the Christian faith in God as Trinity.

Our Christian understanding of God as Trinity

As Christians, we believe that God's revelation has been given to the world pre-eminently and unsurpassably in Jesus Christ, a man who lived in Galilee about two thousand years ago, who was crucified on a cross, executed by the local authorities, and deserted by most of his friends and disciples. It was an ignominious death, calculated to terrify and subdue any other would be rebels. No wonder, given such a shocking end, that the Christian claim that Jesus was Lord and God was, to use the Apostle Paul's words, a scandal to the Jews, and a folly to the Greeks.

Had his death been the end of it, that would have been the end of it. There would have been no Christians, no Church. He might have been remembered in history as a very

good man, healer and miracle worker, teacher and prophet, one in a stream of prophets sent by the master to the vineyard.

But his death was not the end of it. He rose from the dead. His resurrection changed everything! It was precisely in and through the resurrection that the disciples came to a realisation of the mysteries in which we as Christians believe: (i) that he, Jesus, is truly, really and fully God; (ii) there is another, whom we call Father, the author of this great plan for our salvation; (iii) and that there is a third, whom we call the Holy Spirit. There in the resurrection of Jesus lie the grass-roots from which our faith in this mystery of the Trinity bursts forth.

It is these mysteries that define us as Christians: that God become incarnate in Jesus, and that God is Trinity, these Three in the One God. So we, like our Jewish and Muslim friends, are monotheists. But we are trinitarian monotheists: we believe that the one God, author and creator of all that is, is One, but somehow Three within that oneness.

Now, I can understand the shock and dismay of my Jewish and Muslim brothers and sisters when I speak of our faith in God as Trinity. I can see that it looks to them very much like tritheism. The fact that we Christians call the Three ‘persons’ only adds to the consternation, for in current everyday usage, the word ‘person’ means autonomous and free human beings. If that is what is actually meant when we speak of God as three persons, that is indeed tantamount to tritheism.

But, we don’t actually mean that they are persons in the way that you and I are persons, not even persons of such perfection as to be so united in love as to think and to work as one. No, no, no! We don’t mean that at all. Why then do we call them persons?

Because no one yet, not even St Augustine or St Thomas Aquinas, no one, in almost two thousand years of reflection on the mystery of the Trinity, has yet come up with a better word for what we call those three.

In this, our Jewish and Muslim brothers and sisters rightly remind us of the hazards of the language of persons. They remind us to be particularly suspicious of the language of persons when we speak about God. But this serves as a good example of the more

general problem of the inadequacy of language. And it is an inadequacy that is always with us. We need to use words to say what we mean, but no words can express the inexpressible, the incomprehensible, the ineffable God. All of our God-talk is another “raid on the inarticulate” (to use T S Eliot’s words).

Drawing to a conclusion

We as Christians believe that Christians, Jews and Muslims worship the One God. But, for us as Christians, Oneness is not the last word. In the Christian vision of God, the Oneness of God admits a threeness, it admits otherness, it admits diversity, a mutual exchange of threefold life and love, a community.

So struggle as we do to express this inexpressible mystery (and the struggle is perennial in trying to understand and express the mystery that God is both One and Three), we believe that God is these Three. We call them “Father, Son and Holy Spirit,” and those particular names have a privileged place in our tradition, because they are given in Scriptures. We also recognise that, despite their privilege, they too have all the limitations of all of our God-talk.² We could name the first person as Mother, indeed some of the great mystics of the Christian tradition do. We could call the Three “Creator, Redeemer, Sanctifier,” but those names speak of God only in relation to ourselves and to what God has done for us, and we should be mindful that God is so much more than simply what God does for us.

Moreover, because God became human, in the particular person of Jesus Christ (this is what we call “the scandal of the particular”), we as Christians dare even to draw pictures of God. We not only speak of God in ever new ways, we make images of God and decorate our churches with them. (We make images not just of Jesus Christ, but even the Trinity itself. Never as idols, but as aids to prayer and contemplation and as teaching

² The Fourth Lateran Council provided a classical statement of the ever-greater dissimilarity compared to the real but limited similarity in our discourse about God. Our language about God is necessarily limited, and there is a greater dissimilarity than similarity inherent in all of our descriptions of God.

aids.) This is another source of considerable consternation to our Jewish and Muslim brothers and sisters. And again, the logic or the rule of theological discourse applies: No word, and similarly no image, can ever encapsulate the mystery of God; each and every one of them is a raid on the inarticulate, a raid on the mystery.

Conclusion

It is my joy that we are here together, with our brothers and sisters from all over the world and from different faiths, learning from each other. My hope and my dream is that we will keep talking, keep learning from each other, keep opening our minds and our hearts to each other, and work ever more closely together to help build a better, more just, more hospitable and more peaceful world. Together, we can eradicate bigotry, eliminate intolerance, overcome prejudice, correct distorted understandings of each other, foster respect, nurture compassion, and together promote common works of social justice and work for peace. Moreover, the world needs us to enter into dialogue. The world needs us to collaborate in the interests of peace, reconciliation, economic justice, political stability and a healthy and sustainable environment. We have so much to learn from each other. None of us has the full grasp of the mystery of God. Our God is so much bigger, greater, and more mysterious than the limits of our understanding.

Once again, many thanks and heartfelt commendations to The Catenian Association, to my fellow speakers, and also to my colleague Professor Raymond Canning for his work in organising this evening, and to all of you for coming, listening, learning, and pondering.

One God in a Divided World

Professor Ismail Albayrak
Australian Catholic University

The topic, One God in a Divided World, is wide ranging. Our time is limited. So perhaps it is best if I divide it into two parts, discuss each part separately, and show the connection between these two parts by way of conclusion.

Allah is the Arabic name for God, the name by which he identifies Himself in the Qur'an. Unlike the English word god, it has no plural or feminine form. This name occurs 2700 times in the Qur'an, a number sufficient to show how central Allah, the one unique God is to Islam. But this is shown too in the first sentence of the Muslim profession of faith. *la ilaha illa Allah* (There is no deity but God). From this alone we should realize the magnitude of this centrality. As one of the three Abrahamic faiths, Islam shares this great concept of God's centrality equally with Judaism and Christianity. The famous Prophetic tradition clearly points to this commonality: The best sentence that I and the prophets before me have uttered is, 'there is no deity but God'.³ Thus God is focal point at which and in which the truth of the three Abrahamic religions meets. He is the Absolute Truth, the Truth of the Highest and the Highest Truth of all, and as the great mystic Ghazali (d.1111), puts it: "He existed before the creation of the universe, He exists now, and He will continue to exist for eternity." We could describe the issue in the words of the mystical maxim, "You do not need a candle to see the sun".

Expressing the core of Islamic belief in this way is not intended to minimize the truth in the other Abrahamic faiths, or to challenge their belief systems but as a way of restoring,

³ *afdalul ma qultu ana wa al-anbiya' min qabli la ilaha illa Allah*

reconstructing and improving our relationship with God by declaring His Oneness, *tawhid*, the belief we all share.

The Prophet Jonah's cry in the darkness of the night is a very good illustration of this shared commitment: *There is no God but You! Glorious beyond compare are You! Indeed, I have done wrong!* (21:87). Such a profession of faith and confession of unworthiness is an indication of the recommitment of all of us to the primal covenant, Adam and all his progeny of which God established before time began reminds the Prophet in Surah A'raf (7:172) *Recall when your Lord drew from the loins of Adam their seed, and that of all their descendants, and had them give testimony to Him for themselves (by answering the question that He put to them) Am I not indeed your Lord? They replied, yes indeed, we so testify.*

The concept of God being one is multi-dimensional. It is a unique way of expressing, and so establishing a genuine harmony between God and humankind, humankind among themselves, and between humankind and the world of nature. *Since all knowledge belongs to God and everything comes from Him, and since east and west belong to Him* (2:115), such a reconnection with God in the modern world is imperative. Without it, disharmony between humankind and God will lead to disorder within the individual, to anarchy amongst humankind, and eventually to disorder between humankind and the world of nature.

In Islam, all creatures come from God and ultimately they will return to Him. I am sure that this belief is also part of Judaism and Christianity. In this – coming from God and returning to Him - I see a parallel with the ritual circumambulation around Ka'ba – the house of God –during the Meccan pilgrimage. The pilgrim completes his/her circumambulation at the same point at which he or she began. This may be seen as a symbol of eternity. Just so, a connection with God also means a connection with eternity. So preserving this precious relationship, this commonality with all the Abrahamic family should be our *raison d'être*. Belief and trust in God are encoded in our genes, just as our basic biological needs. Human beings are created to believe instinctively in One God.

Since God is One Absolute Lord, our response should be complete submission, serving Him properly and in the only possible way that the servant can relate to the master. The Qur'an expresses this obligation in a striking metaphor (2:138) *Take on the dye of God. Who better than God can tincture with a dye. Indeed, we are worshippers of Him (alone)* or in the words of the Prophet: *takhallaqu bi-akhlaq Allah*, - "Take on the qualities of God"- for support in a time of Godlessness.

Recognition that each of us shares one God with the other children of Abraham is an important motivation of commonality to help us move forward together through this divided world of ours. The affirmation of this basic commonality empowers the children of Abraham in their divided, diverse and multicultural world. The Prophet Muhammad invites the people of the Book to gather around this commonality as God commands him to say: (3:64) *Say: O People of the Scripture! Come to an agreement between us and you: that we shall worship none but Allah, and that we shall ascribe no partners unto Him, and that none of us shall take others for lords beside Allah. And if they turn away, then say: Bear witness that we are they who have surrendered (unto Him).*

There is a hadith narration that the Prophet Muhammad had this verse written at the back of the letter which he sent to Heraclius, the Emperor of Byzantine in 627. Fourteen centuries later, in 1985 Pope John Paul II addressed a vast crowd of young Muslims at a stadium in Casablanca. He presented to them the same message, "The God of Muslims and Christians is the same and we are brothers and sisters in the faith of Abraham."

Having summarized the importance and various impacts of belief in One God in the life we all share, we can now move to the second part of our topic, to address the reality of diversity in this world, and the way in which we can realize unity in this diversity. At this point we shall focus on two questions:

- a) How do Muslims approach diversity, or the issue of a divided world?
- b) How can the diversity in a divided world contribute to the common good?

First of all, it should be noted that in Islam the place of both Jews and Christians is very well established. As the verse of the Qur'an quoted above (3:64) *O People of the Scripture! Come to an agreement between us and you that we shall not worship but God* indicates, they are all "the People of the Book". In contrast to non-believers, they are spiritual cousins of Muslims, and worship the same God. As far as genealogy is concerned, Islam considers Isaac as the ancestor of Prophet Moses and Jesus whereas Ishmael is considered as the ancestor of Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon them all). Both Isaac and Ishmael are sons of Abraham. So, for Muslims, the Abrahamic ancestry is precious because the Qur'an reveres both of these sons of his as heirs to the covenant made with God. Both are prophets, and the Qur'an states: *We make no distinction between any of His prophets* (2:285). In a well-known tradition, the Prophet Muhammad proclaimed that he was the closest man to the Son of Mary. Moreover, he introduced all the prophets as his brothers who had the same father but different mothers.⁴ The great mystic Mawlana Jalal al-Din Rumi (1207 – 1273) elucidated this prophetic tradition in his own way by saying that "it is the same light (the light of God) emitted by different lamps."

Likewise, their religions have a common line of descent, and present a kind of monotheistic pluralism. For this reason, Muslims have seen the people of the book as their natural allies. The best example of this occurred around 615, during the first part of the Prophet's mission. Since they faced persecution from hostile Meccans, some vulnerable Muslims were advised by the Prophet to take refuge from this persecution with the Emperor of Abyssinia. This is a sign of a close relationship between Muslims and the People of the Book at that time.

There is another example of this close relationship in the occasion of revelation of Surah al-Rum (The Byzantines). Around 614 there was a major war between the Persians and the Byzantines. The first verse of this surah refers to the outcome of a particular battle. The Byzantines were Christians, so the Muslims sympathized with them, due to the

⁴ Muslim, *Sahih al-Muslim*, İstanbul: Çağrı Pub. 1992, II.1837

commonality of their beliefs whereas the Meccan pagans sided with the Persians. When the Persians conquered Syria and Palestine, even occupying Jerusalem, in the fifth year of Muhammad's Prophethood, i.e. 615, the Muslims became dejected. They suffered not only from the oppression and hostility of the Meccan pagans, but also from their exultant boasting due to victory of the godless Persians. This is why Surah al-Rum was revealed, to reassure the Muslims about a coming reversal of fortunes, and the victory of the Byzantines over the Persians that would take place within a few years' time. The Quranic prediction was fulfilled nine years following the revelation.⁵

Despite the close relationship between the people of the book and Muslims, Islamic sources do not disregard some of the distinct theological differences between religions. These differences bring us to the divided nature of our world. The Qur'an emphasizes the separate character of each community as a specific entity (5:48) *For each, We have appointed a divine law and a traced-out way. Had Allah willed, He could have made you one community.* The great commentator, Ibn Kathir (d.1372) interprets this verse in words similar to our topic heading: An agreement concerning One God (*tawhid*) and diversity concerning the community (*sharia*) are the will of God. In other words, existence of religious plurality is a phenomenon willed by God. In addition to this, the Qur'an states, *And of His signs are the creation of the heavens and the earth, and the difference of your languages and colors. Lo! Herein indeed are portents for men of knowledge.* (30:22). There is a divine wisdom in racial, cultural and religious dissimilarities which should be recognized. This clear divine intention behind pluralism should not be overlooked. One word of wisdom that is worth mentioning in this context is *ta'aruf*, namely, the purpose of getting to know each other:

O mankind! We have created you male and female, and have made you nations and tribes that you may know one another. Lo! The noblest of you, in the sight of Allah, is the best in conduct (Taqwa).... (49:13). It is safe to assume that one of the key words of the Qur'an concerning plurality lies in this verse. *Ta'aruf* (mutual recognition) necessitates

⁵ Tabarî, *ibid.*, XI.16-20

dialogue. Knowing each other should be reconsidered in the context of finding common ground for the coexistence of diverse religious communities. This is the meeting place of different horizons. Addressing all people in this verse the Qur'an draws attention to equality in regards to gender, proposing dignity for all. Thus, no one belonging to a particular class or race should boast of an inherent superiority over others. This verse also rejects cultural homogeneity. The existence of our divided world of diverse religious communities is a unique chance for the preservation of our difference in the age of globalization and mass information technology. It is not an exaggeration to claim that only our diverse religious world can offer an antidote to cultural homogenization and the destruction of a fruitful cultural diversity.

It is also worth remembering that from a Qur'anic perspective, it is Satan who cannot tolerate diversity. Moreover, the Qur'an insistently defines the claims of superiority of one people over another on the basis of race, social status etc., as *Jahiliyya*, a word which means ignorance. Our value is proportional to our good deeds not to our pedigree. At the end of the day, as the Prophet Muhammad stated : *We are all from Adam, and Adam is from clay. O servants of God become brothers (and sisters).*

As stated above, the Quran sees the differences between peoples as a fact not as a problem. In addition to this, diversity is considered on one hand as a great blessing and yet at the same time as a difficult test for humanity. The Qur'an also opens the space for the diverse communities to utilize their differences by establishing a relationship based on competing with one another in doing good. There are number of verses which encourage the competition between diverse groups in society. *And each one has a goal toward which he turneth; so vie with one another in good works. Wheresoever ye may be, Allah will bring you all together. Lo! Allah is able to do all things (2:148).* We believe that in this competition of doing good, pious and sincere believers have not been left without divine guidance and aid. The prophetic tradition supports this approach: *God is in the help of His servant as long as His servant helps his brother and sister.* Clearly, what the Qur'an suggests is not just a dialogue, talking to each other but a further cooperative action in a divided world. It is imperative for monotheistic faiths to form

alliances that work together for the common good and also to address challenges that confront them all. It is also important to respect and learn about each other, value differences, reject unfair stereotypes by discovering common ground in our divided world. These are important steps in creating effective interfaith relations. These are times for interactive relations, where nations and communities need each other more than ever. Regular interactions which keep develop closeness in mutual relations are increasing with globalization.

The Qur'an tells of humankind as the Viceroy of God. (2:30). As a vicegerent of God on earth humankind carries a great load on its shoulder. It bears God's *amanah*, responsibility for the trust that God offered to the heavens, and the earth and the mountains. They refused it, but humankind accepted it (Qur'an 33:72). This trust is nothing less than a global responsibility to benefit from the rich diversity of our world. Failure to fulfill such a supreme goal may lead us to conflict. The holy Qur'an says: *if God had not enabled some men to hold others back, hermitages, synagogues, churches and mosques, where the name of God is often called upon, would have been demolished* (22:40). In another verse it says that the entire world would be corrupt. These days, one of the biggest sins we are committing is that we are focusing on our own interests even when they conflict with the interests of others, and dealing only with our own businesses instead of concentrating on problems common to whole humankind. In other words, we are losing the balance needed to establish peace, liberty, social justice, and moral values.

On the other hand, if we preserved the balance, worked harmoniously in solving common problems, tried to satisfy the spiritual needs of people, appreciated the rich diversity of cultures, and listened to others, this would allow us to go further and give us the power to "compete" with each other in good deeds, not in amassing wealth.

To conclude, Muslims deem their fellow Muslims as brothers in religion, the People of the Book as their spiritual cousins, and all others as fellow creatures. The One God we worship is everybody's God. Together, we share His bounties and blessings. The diversity we experience in our modern world too, is a gift from God. Therefore, the

desire for a bland homogeneity is an impossible and senseless dream. However, competing in doing good, acknowledging differences, sharing common values and working together are achievable objectives. Today, as representatives of the heritage of our father Abraham, we have a global responsibility to overcome mutual ignorance in our divided world. Equally, we have a responsibility to create a culture of peaceful coexistence, and to establish social order and justice.