

The Principle of Love as the Key to Peacemaking
in the Abrahamic Faiths and in the Teaching of Jesus
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Let me begin by expressing my thanks to the State of Qatar – Emir, government and people – and also to the Doha International Center for Interfaith Dialogue and to the University of Qatar for their leadership in organizing this important conference, and for their warm hospitality which makes us all feel that we are among our brothers and sisters.

All of us attending to this conference have come because we care deeply about making peace among the world's Muslims, Christians and Jews, and because we believe that peacemaking is central to the teachings of our faiths. Our three religious communities represent, among them, about 55% of the world's population. If we make peace, the world will be at peace. But all too often in the world today our communities are in conflict with each other.

When Christians think about peace, we immediately think of the teachings of Jesus in the Gospel: "Blessed are the peacemakers" (Matthew 5:9). "Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you. If anyone strikes you on the cheek, offer the other also" (Luke 6:27-29). "Be at peace with one another" (Mark 9:50). Muslim and Jewish participants in this conference will think of similar texts in their own sacred Scriptures.

But when we look around us in the world today, we see that our fellow-Christians, fellow-Muslims and fellow-Jews are not always practicing these teachings. Some time before the worldwide scandal broke at Abu Ghraib prison, the military policeman who was the chief perpetrator of the atrocities there wrote a letter to his family in which he said: "The Christian in me knows that it is wrong, but the law enforcement officer in me loves to make a grown man piss his pants." We know now that nearly all of the "interrogation techniques" which he used at Abu Ghraib had been specifically authorized by the Secretary of Defense, and that he believed that he was doing what his military superiors wanted. So his conscience as a Christian came into conflict with his role as a military policeman, and the military policeman in him was able to suppress his Christian conscience. We can think of similar examples of Muslims and Jews who have perpetrated acts of violence contrary to the peaceful teachings of the faiths which they profess to hold.

Last year when I spoke at this conference, the gracious journalists from al-Jazeera kindly invited me to be interviewed on their program. First they showed a number of short video clips – such as violence and oppression in the Palestinian Territories, and reactions to the Danish cartoons, and images from Iraq and Abu Ghraib – and then the interviewer asked me: "The Doha Conference on Interfaith Dialogue has been meeting for five years now. Would you say that you are making progress in making peace, or is conflict getting worse?"

Though I am deeply persuaded that we are indeed making progress in our discussions, and though we must recognize that it takes *time* to change the attitudes of the societies which we represent, nonetheless it was difficult to deny that the conflicts in the world are grave indeed and perhaps getting worse.

In fact, given the growingly violent rhetoric on all sides, and given that Muslims, Christians and Jews together constitute the majority of the human race, and given the terrible weaponry at their disposal, one must agree with a group of prominent Muslim scholars who recently wrote: “The future of the world depends on peace between Muslims and Christians.” They might have added “and Jews.”

This is a quotation from an open letter, which was itself a ray of light in a dark world. The letter is titled “A Common Word between Us and You,” and it was addressed to the leaders of all Christian churches worldwide on Eid al-Fitr 2007 by a group of 138 Muslim leaders and scholars, including many of the most prominent leaders in the world from all major branches of Islam. In it the Muslim scholars say that the key to peacemaking in today’s world is in the two commands to love God with all of our being and to love our neighbors as we love ourselves, as taught in all three Abrahamic faiths. One month later a group of 300 prominent Christian leaders, from all major branches of Christianity, organized by Yale University Divinity School, published an open letter of response, titled “Loving God and Neighbor Together,” in which they welcomed the Muslims’ initiative and sought to open a discussion about the meaning of that love of which we speak.

To speak of love is to take the meaning of peace to a deeper level. The word “peace” can mean simply the absence of conflict. If we separate from each other, so that we are not killing each other, then we have a certain kind of peace. But if our vision of true peace involves loving God with all of our being and loving one another as we love ourselves, then this requires a very different kind of behavior from mere separation.

People hesitate to speak about love in the international arena. This is perhaps partly because they fear that the word “love” is not a practical word. One hears politicians speak of “peace,” but I cannot recall ever hearing any politician (with the single exception of President Jimmy Carter) speak of “love.” The word “love” sounds nice, but what practical implications does it have in every day life? What would a “policy of love” look like?

Perhaps another reason why people hesitate to speak about love in the international arena is that the word “love” has different meanings to different people, so it is unclear what we mean when we say it. In 2003, before the illegal U.S. invasion of Iraq, I participated in several demonstrations against the war. At these demonstrations I saw young people holding up signs which said, “Make love, not war,” by which they meant “Engage in sexual license, instead of war.” I agreed with them that love is the correct alternative to war, but I strongly disagreed with their interpretation of what “love” means. Instead my own children made a sign on which they wrote: “President Bush: What would Jesus do?” by which they meant that Jesus – who taught us to turn the other cheek – would not invade a country which had not attacked him. I believe that this is a better understanding of the meaning of true love.

Allow me to take a few minutes to address these two concerns which I have described – whether “love” has practical implications for everyday life, and whether we can clarify what we mean by the word “love.”

First, regarding practical implications, of course if we love one another as we love ourselves, then we will not kill each other. I cannot say to you, “I love you,” and then kill you. So we must make peace. But love takes us further than that.

The letter “A Common Word between Us and You,” speaks of the importance of mutual respect as an expression of love. In the world today Muslims often feel that Christians behave in ways that are disrespectful toward Islam and Muslims and the things which Muslims hold sacred. Christians similarly feel that Muslims often show disrespect toward Christianity. And Jews feel disrespected by both Muslims and Christians. In the Bible, in Acts 17 we read that the Apostle Paul visited Athens and was deeply distressed by the idols which he saw there. But when he spoke, he demonstrated nothing but the deepest respect for what was sacred to the Athenians. If we can be respectful toward those who worship idols, then surely we can show respect for what is sacred to the faith of others who share our belief in One God. Similarly we read that when the Caliph Omar ibn Khattab entered Jerusalem, he declined to pray in the Church of the Holy Sepulcher, so that people would not convert the church into a mosque.

Both the “Common Word” letter and the Christian response which I have described speak of the importance of religious liberty as an expression of love. The “Common Word” letter says “justice and freedom of religion are a crucial part of love of the neighbour.” The Christian response says “When freedom to worship God according to one’s conscience is curtailed, God is dishonored, the neighbor oppressed, and neither God nor neighbor is loved.” If we love one another as we love ourselves, then we must safeguard the freedom of one another’s consciences.

Just as it is important to understand what the word “love” means, so also we must understand the word “freedom.” The late Pope John Paul II pointed out that the Christian concept of freedom does not mean simply “freedom to do whatever you feel like doing.” Rather, it means “freedom to do what your conscience tells you is morally right.” This is the teaching of the Gospel in Romans and 1 Corinthians. And I believe that when Islam teaches that “There is no compulsion in religion,” it intends something similar. True freedom is not simply licentiousness: it is freedom of conscience.

But what happens when the principle of respect (as an expression of love) and the principle of freedom of conscience (as an expression of love) come into conflict or tension with one another? I hope that you will not be offended if I cite a recent example which stirred strong feelings on both sides. These two principles – respect and freedom – were much discussed after the baptism of Magdi Allam in Rome this last Easter. Muslim commentators asked: “Should he not show more respect for Islam and for what is sacred to Muslims?” Christian commentators replied: “Should we not respect the freedom of his conscience to profess his faith and to say whatever he truly believes?”

It is not my place as a Protestant Evangelical Christian to propose how the tension between these two principles – respect and freedom – should be resolved in this particular case. But I believe

that both concerns – those of the Muslims for respect, and those of the Christians for freedom – are legitimate, and I believe that it is imperative that we talk together about how we can reconcile these two principles in practice. In recent years this question has arisen again and again – in relation to the Danish cartoons (though the newspaper involved was a secular – not a Christian – newspaper), and in relation to remarks which various Evangelical leaders (who do not speak for most Evangelical Christians) have made about Islam and about the Prophet Muhammad, and in countless other situations. If we can talk about this question and come to some kind of mutual understanding about the relationship between the two principles of respect and freedom, then I believe that we will prevent many conflicts in the future.

I have cited above a very sensitive issue in relationship to the principle of love. Whatever one may feel about this issue, surely no one will say that the principle of love does not have practical implications for our everyday life.

Allow me to cite one more practical example, which may be even more sensitive than the first. When I was a young minister in my first years of ministry in the church, I preached a sermon one Sunday in which I cited Jesus' teachings about love, and I called upon the church to demonstrate love toward our Muslim neighbors. After the service, some of the members of the church came to me to tell me that a new mosque had just opened in our neighborhood, and the goal of this mosque was to invite us to embrace Islam. The Christians asked me, "How can you speak about love, when these Muslims are attacking us in this hateful way?"

Later I met the imam of this mosque, and he did indeed invite me to embrace Islam. But he did not see this as an act of hate: he saw it as an act of love. Although he respected my Christian faith, he believed that Islam was the light of true guidance, and he desired for me to experience the joy – in this world and in the next – of knowing true Islam. The Christians saw his *da'wa* as an act of hate, but he saw it as an act of love.

Similarly, in many countries around the world, Christians evangelize Muslims. In fact, statistically speaking, Christians evangelize *less* among Muslims than among any other religious or nonreligious group of people on earth. The overwhelming majority of Christian evangelism in the world is done among other Christians and among followers of tribal religions. Nonetheless a significant amount of evangelism takes place among Muslims. Often the surrounding Muslim community feels that this is an attack on them, and that it must be motivated by a hateful colonialist mentality. The Christians, however, believe that what motivates them is love for their Muslim neighbors. Just as the Muslim imam desired for me, so they desire for their Muslim neighbors to experience the joy – in this world and in the next – of knowing Jesus Christ.

Da'wa and evangelism take place in both directions every day in many countries around the world, and it is increasing in both directions from day to day. Islam is a religion which believes in *da'wa*, and Christianity is a religion which believes in evangelism, so this is likely to continue to increase. I personally have friends who have converted from Christianity to Islam, and others who have converted from Islam to Christianity.

How can it be that what one group does believing that they are motivated by love is received by the other group as a hateful attack? Part of the problem is that each side perceives the other side

to be using unworthy means – financial inducements to the poor, coercion of various kinds, hidden political agendas, targeting children without the permission of their parents, etc. These are things which I think we would all agree are wrong.

This issue of Islamic *da'wa* and Christian evangelism is extremely sensitive, and we may not come to agreement. But if we talk about it together, making the principle of love the foundation for our dialogue, then surely we can make progress toward ensuring – at least – that the *da'wa* and evangelism which do take place are done in a loving and respectful manner, without the kinds of unworthy means which are so clearly contrary to the principle of love. And if we do this, we can prevent conflicts and contribute to peace.

I said above that I would also attempt to clarify what we mean by the word “love,” since this word means different things to different people. When we were translating the Christian response to the “Common Word” letter into Arabic, we found that this raised interesting questions. When Christians say “God is *agape*” (i.e. “love”), do they mean the same thing as Muslims mean when they say that God is “*al-Wadud*” (i.e. the “Loving One”)?

One of the questions which many Christians have asked is whether Muslims understand love as being unconditional. Does God call us to love everyone, whether righteous or unrighteous, and whether Muslim, Christian, Jewish or other? Or does God call us to love only certain people?

The signatories of the Common Word letter affirmed that when the Prophet said, “Your Islam is not complete until you love for your neighbor what you love for yourself,” he was speaking not only of Muslim neighbors but also of non-Muslim neighbors. Last week I had the honor of hosting in my home for a meal Dr. Abdul-Fattah Al-Bizem (Mufti of Damascus) and Dr. Hussam-Eddin Farfour (the President of al-Fath Islamic University in Damascus), and we discussed this question. They pointed out that at the time when the Prophet spoke this hadith and other hadiths about the rights of neighbors, most of the Muslim community – whether in Mecca or Medina – had Jewish, Christian and pagan neighbors. The Prophet himself had non-Muslim neighbors.

Similarly, when Jesus Christ was asked what was the greatest of all of God’s commands, he replied, “The Lord our God, the Lord is one; and you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength. The second is this: You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” Then the questioner asked him, “But who is my neighbor?” Jesus replied with a story about a man who showed love toward a needy person who was from another country and another religion (Luke 10:27ff.). In other words Jesus says that we must unconditionally love all people, regardless of their nationality or religion. Indeed Jesus says that we must even love our enemies (Luke 6:27).

Of course both Christians and Muslims have often failed in putting this unconditional love into practice. Both Christians and Muslims have been guilty of hating those who are different from us. But the principle in both of our faiths is clear.

Another important point for Christians in clarifying what we mean by the word “love” is that our love for others must be rooted in our love for God. As we have seen, Jesus explicitly made a link

between the Second Commandment – to love others – and the First Commandment – to love God. Without God’s help we are not able to love one another as we should.

Furthermore, for Christians our love for God and for one another must be rooted in God’s love for us. The Bible says, “We love because he first loved us” (1John 4:19). It is God’s love for us which makes it possible for us to love and which teaches us *how* we should love. And for Christians God’s love for us is an overflow from the fact that God *is* love in his very being. The Bible says “Beloved, let us love one another; for love comes from God... Whoever does not love does not know God; for God is love” (1John 4:7-8). “God is love and whoever abides in love abides in God and God in them” (1John 4:16).

One of the things I have very much appreciated about the annual Doha Conference on Interfaith Dialogue is that the organizers and many of the speakers have drawn the connection between our relationship with God and our relationship with each other. If indeed true peacemaking must be rooted in love, and if our love for one another must be rooted in the love of God, then it is important that our dialogue include reflection about God and about our love for God, and not only about issues of politics, culture, etc.

One final point in clarifying what love means for Christians. I am almost afraid to mention it because through the centuries Christians have failed to practice this love in relationship to Muslims and Jews. But it is so central to the Christian faith that I would be remiss if I did not mention it.

In the teaching of Jesus, true love must be self-giving. That is, if we truly love another person, we will not only give them *things*, but we will be willing to give ourselves to them and for them. This includes being willing to give up our lives unto death because of our love for another person. If we would love one another in this way, then we would have peace such as the world has never known.

In the Gospel we read that Jesus said, “Greater love has no one than this: that they lay down their life for those they love” (John 15:13). Elsewhere we read, “This is how we know what love is: that Jesus laid down his life for us, and so we must lay down our lives for others” (1John 3:16). And “Walk in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us” (Ephesians 5:2). Jesus said, “The Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many” (Matthew 20:28).

I know of course that most Muslims have a different view from Christians regarding the death of Jesus Christ. I have written an article on this, in which I examined the major qur’anic commentaries, including Tabari, Fakh al-Din al-Razi, Qurtubi, Baydawi and Sayyid Qutb, on this question. But what is important here is not the historical question of crucifixion. What is important here is the principle of love expressed by a willingness to lay down one’s life for the other. This is true regardless of whether we lay down our lives in death or lay down our lives in humble service which is noticed by no one but God.

As a Christian I believe that the greatest evil in human history was the Crusades. This is not because the atrocities committed were the worst in history. Timur Lang committed comparable

massacres, and Hitler and Stalin certainly killed far more people. And, in fact, perhaps more people have died in Iraq in the last five years than died in the Crusades. But what was uniquely evil about the Crusades is that they were fought under the banner of the Cross.

According to the Gospel the Cross should be a sign of love which calls us to love others so much that we would gladly lay down our lives – even die – so that others may have life. But for millions of Muslims and Jews who experienced the Crusades, the Cross became a symbol of hate which signified the readiness of Christians to kill them. The same thing happens today when anyone – Muslims, Christians, Jews, Hindus or others – use the cover of religion to justify acts of violence and kill others under the banner of religion. This is a crime not only against the victims of violence, but also against God.

What the world needs today is people who love one another with a love which is self-giving and unconditional, and which is rooted in their love for God and God's love for all humankind.

The peace of the Lord be with you all.