

The questions:

- 1. What does *Interreligious Friendship* mean to you?**
- 2. How do you practise *Interreligious Friendship*?**
- 3. What messages and practices of *Interreligious Friendship* can you take back from this meeting to your community?**

Some chose to respond independently to each question while others integrated their answers:

Swami Amarananda

Interfaith friendship (IF) means to me the following:

It means (i) my effort to fetch my interlocuter belonging to a religion which is not my own, to the milieu where he can comprehend my religion, at least to the level of appreciating certain broad features of it, (ii) my adventure into the garden of another religion to do the same, and if possible, derive some benefit out of it in course of my intimate spiritual practice, (iii) deriving pleasure in seeing the mosaic of religious patterns and in enjoying the warmth of heart from a distant “neighbour”..

Evidently, IF presupposes for me that I do not think that my religion is not imperative for all, that I have no prejudice against other religions, and that I am able to do auto-criticism (which means, among other things, I am able to take a balanced view regarding the positive as well as the negative points of the behaviour pattern of my co-religionists).

Practising IF:

I should have an open mind regarding all religions. But I should be cautious about only those religious groups who derive their inspiration from masters who have not passed the test of time. (There are charlatans in every domain of life. Their number in the field of religion is menacingly great. I am talking about fake spiritual masters.)

I should do many things--reading, listening, thinking, correlating, participating, interrogating the so-called “other”—when I begin to take the IF seriously.

Taking IF to my community (certain steps, list not exhaustive):

To talk about the great mystics of other religions .

To highlight certain good habits generally observed in this or that religion.

To ask people to become bold to distance themselves from certain practices or attitudes which hinder religious harmony

To have a grasp on the basics of major religions.

To tell people that ideas about God may be quite different from God as understood by greatest mystics who had purity, patience and interiorisation.

To turn away from the practice of double talking—one thing to one's own community, and quite another thing in the interfaith milieu.

To be able to see the negative things in books considered holy in their historical context.

And many other things

Bishop Gali Bali

1. What does interreligious friendship mean to me?

Interreligious friendship is a gift of God given to two persons because it is God's grace that has brought them together with mutual understanding and love. The friends begin to realize that they are walking together on a spiritual journey to the home of their ultimate destiny; they further understand that unless the Lord is with them to guide and inspire their journey they would go astray; they gradually feel a sense of brotherhood or sisterhood since we are children of the same Heavenly father. Mutual sharing, helping and thus enriching with spiritual goods that will then naturally happen.

2. How can I practice it?

I view my life as a garden irrigated by the grace and love of God and I love to see in any garden as many flowers as possible with beautiful colours. I consider a person of another religious tradition coming into my life as another beautiful flower blossoming in the garden of my life.

I will try to invite the religious leaders of different traditions and establish friendly relations with them. I will then form a kind of stable group or association and start sharing understanding of scriptures, festivals, rituals, customs etc. We will also discuss ethical issues affecting the society in order to enlighten the public at large. When occasions arise we will raise our voice through the media condemning atrocities, violations of human rights, cases of injustice, corruption etc. I will accept invitation to attend the religious functions, weddings and other such events of other religious leaders.

3. What can I bring back to my community?

- I will promote interreligious understanding to my priests, sisters, teachers and other educational laity.

- I will try to convince my fellow bishops in my state to provide space in their schedule and meetings for religious fellowships.

- I will explain about the good work being done by the Elijah Interfaith Institute and treat it as a source of inspiration for our interfaith programmes.

- I will ask our faithful to pray for peace and harmony among religions and have a positive attitude towards other religions.

Rabbi David Bigman

From the perspective of the Jewish ethos, and I believe this is also true of the Muslim ethos, the language of obligations and responsibilities towards the other, just as towards all of God's creation, precedes talk about love. But since I recently entered into an extended discourse about the concept of 'loving' God with my students and love was a central motif at the Oxford conference, I want to focus my reflection on the last few days around that concept. The magnificent landscape, the blossoming flowers and the wildlife, and the human creativity evident in the marvellous architecture of the place where we gathered for learning, provided an atmosphere where one had new points of contact for the heart on its journey towards love of the Creator. Also, the diverse human landscape expands the heart and, more than that, provides new ways of fulfilling the commandment of loving God [through loving those created in the image of God]. A conversation between a person committed to Torah and someone deeply committed to another faith is very special. The religious language of a person committed to Torah is enriched a thousand times, exponentially, rich in multiple colors. A meeting like this provides insights that cannot be gleaned from even the most poetic of writings. The person who stands before you is laden with his religious experiences in their range of colours that are far beyond any narrow definitions you can get from scholars of religion or experts of a particular culture. He is full of appreciation for the Creator, even if he uses different language to express that. He is also full of appreciation for his fellow human, created in the Divine image, and he brings ethical dimensions into efforts to improve the lot of humanity and to spread the word of God. The recognition and appreciation he has for human life and for a life lived under the shadow of the eternal is infectious and seductive. Love of the Creator is increased through the recognition of the multiple possibilities to experience His glory, filling the earth. The words of the prayer 'Even if our mouth were as full of song as the sea, and our tongue as full of joyous song as its multitude of waves, and our lips as full of praise as the breadth of the heavens, [we still would not be able to fully thank Him]' (from Shabbat prayers) receive new significance as a person is filled with admiration for the innumerable possibilities that the Creator planted in His creatures to know Him and to express their recognition of Him. At the same time, the sense of the limitations of religious language is intensified.

Rabbi Yuval Cherlow

Interfaith dialogue for me is an opportunity to enhance areas of life, on a variety of levels and dimensions. First and foremost, this is a deeply personal experience of opening worlds, with all their richness and diversity, a re-examination of basic assumptions, 'cleansing' my faith from what is unnecessary in it and importing new ideas in other areas in my soul that I did not know before. This itself is an experience of modesty, humility, humanity and striving for inner peace. Furthermore, this is an opportunity to enrich my knowledge areas, the various options that are available for the relationship between man and God, and on to another. In a larger perspective, it is an opportunity for hidden dreams – creating possibilities and skills to make the world, or at least the community in which I function, a better place to live.

I will find expression for interfaith dialogue in various fields. As a religious leader, I will be more open, more tolerant, more humane, more listening and open. Also, I'll try again and again to confront racism, discrimination, arrogance, contempt and disregard of the humane side of existence. On another level, I'm working on 'Ethics' and I will continue to increase the emphasis on the complex relationship between ethics and religion, through collaborating with all the religions. There are two directions where Ethics and Faith can influence simultaneously. One is the significant contribution that religions can make to Ethical issues,

using their knowledge and Holy Scriptures in order to evaluate the Ethical aspects of every situation in the world. The second direction is the contribution of Ethics on the practice of religion itself, promoting this phenomenon and making it religion more consistent with Ethics. Religious leaders of all faiths in the world need to review their ethics with a view to enhancing the ethical conduct of religious leaders (I wrote about this in an article in a Hebrew published in a book named: "The Rabbi – a Challenge").

This gathering will affect the circles around me in two key ways. The first is a result of the nature of the meeting itself, dialogue, listening, silence, self-examination, the right of self-criticism, striving for perfection and the realization that it's far away, richness and diversity. I will try to emulate these qualities in the meetings I create. The other aspect is the constant striving to make this world a better place. I think the religious leaders are seen today as the problem rather than the solution, and I'll try to promote, as a result of this conference, a greater emphasis on brotherhood between people who describe themselves as 'religious leaders'.

Imam Plemon El-Amin

Another Hero

I'm in Oxford, England, this week with the Elijah Interfaith Board of World Religious Leaders focusing on the theme of 'Friendship Across Religions'. This Board of sixty includes Archbishops, Cardinals, Swamis, Chief Rabbis, Sheiks, Monks, Nuns, Grand Muftis and even the Dalai Lama. Tomorrow, we will meet and dine at the London home of Chief Rabbi, Jonathan Sacks.

I'm here among this august crowd because of my hero, Imam Warith Deen Mohammed, whose work and wisdom earned him the Board seat that I have humbly occupied since his death in 2008.

Thirty-seven years ago, Imam W Deen Mohammed awakened my life and the lives of hundreds of thousands to the depth, broadness, practicality and spirituality of the Quran, the Prophet Muhammed, the Muslim life in particular, and religious life in general. With God's Help and Guidance, he single-handedly dismantled the secretive, separatist and peculiar self-help organization founded and led for 42 years by his father, the Hon Elijah Mohammed. Imam Mohammed transformed the 'Nation of Islam' into an authentic Islamic community of God-conscious Muslims regardful of both their global and American identities. He said, "The future of American Muslims will be well-served when we serve the best interests of humanity. We must work for a productive mind that will enter and affect a change of the soul not just for one people, but for the benefit of all people".

One of the esteemed religious leaders who is here in Oxford with this Board, Sheikh Muhammed Nur Abdullah of Sudan, was asked yesterday what was his first in-depth interreligious experience. He said that for five years in the 1980s he worked under Imam Warith Deen Mohammed in Chicago, and the Imam introduced and inducted him into the spirit and practice of interfaith work and friendships. Imam Mohammed would often say, 'Stop trying to get together as Muslims, Christians and Jews; trust, respect and appreciate our common essence and get together as believers and true human beings.'

I followed and studied under Imam Warith Deen Mohammed for 33 years. I assisted him directly and travelled the US and the world with him for nearly 20 of those years, sitting with such dignitaries as US Presidents, Pope John Paul II, Nelson Mandela, Governors, Mayors

and multitudes of ordinary people. He was always the same humble, reflective, insightful, humorous, wise, God-conscious and regardful of both the individual and collective soul.

Several months before his passing in 2008, he asked me to once again represent him at that year's Elijah Interfaith Board meeting in Amritsar, India, hosted by the Dalai Lama. I asked him was there any particular message he wanted me to deliver. He said, 'Yes. Tell them that our differences are a strategy from God.'

Enough said.

Closing Paper on Interreligious Friendships:

Personal Observations and Recommendations

I think we need to address interreligious friendship on at least four crucial levels:

1. Between religions
2. Between religious leaders
3. Between adherents and
4. Among the general populace.

Here in Oxford, our focus has primarily been on the religious leaders and, to a lesser degree, on the adherents of the various faiths.

We have concluded that religious leaders can, should be and are, in quite a few of our cases, friends (although some leaders had difficulty naming friends of different religions.) The common experiences, responsibilities and ethics made friendship across religious lines desirable and reasonable to most leaders. However, the question of whether or not their religions can find harmony, support, mutuality, understanding and compassion, between the various beliefs, practices, traditions and scriptures was not addressed. Of course in the midst of many similarities, there are stark differences, but I think both must be given serious attention if we expect the friendship of the leaders to have longevity, depth and substance.

Our gathering gravitated to the idea that the more engaged and adherent was/is in his/her own religion, the stronger an interreligious friendship could become. It was concluded that the best candidates for cross-religious relationships were those NOT dissatisfied with their faith, and therefore secure in their exchanges with the other. It was also clearly decided that the open or hidden desire to instigate conversion was unacceptable in sincere interreligious friendships.

The fourth area which was not addressed was the status of this type of friendship as it relates to the casual member of a religion of, for that matter, the general religiously-aware population. Personally, I envision great difficulty in bringing the conversation we had this week to general populations or even congregations. My experience has convinced me that friendship can supersede even religion if opportunities for either heart-to-heart or mind-to-mind or soul-to-soul exchanges are made. Choosing friends is certainly a complex process of thoughts, feelings and experiences beyond my ability to explain even if perhaps I think I can grasp it. But what I do know, give any random group the time and opportunity to exchange, and people will pick and choose friends with little regard to religion. And it is later, when they realize their friend is so likeable to some extent because of the impact and influence of their particular faith, that the other becomes open, amenable, and respectful of the religion

of his/her friend. That's what works, even with leaders, personal interaction, exchange, and familiarity.

May we keep up the good work of Elijah and let's think about the subject of 'Sacrifice' (which is involved with friendship) as a future focus.

Thanks for all you do.

Alessandra Gerolin

1) Interreligious friendship for me means to share the basic needs of the human hearth (the desire for beauty, truth, good) with people coming from different faiths. Sharing the deepest aspects of our humanity allows us to do a part of our path towards the destiny together (this means also that any good aspect of another tradition becomes part of my path without losing my identity). This is very different from sharing opinions and it doesn't mean only to share common values (also if it's very important). It means to share our lives in a companionship which involves all the aspects of our humanity and not just a "religious concern" if the latter is intended in an abstract way. I don't believe that the interfaith dialogue can happen through a mere "dialogue", if it wants to be really transformative personal relationships and engagement are crucial.

2) This dialogue can happen on a personal level and at the level of communities: I think we have to cultivate personal encounters and through these encounters going to the depth of our faith. Interfaith dialogue can help us to deepen our identity, to notice its originality, and to rediscover it. From my personal point of view I have friends coming from different faith traditions, and I always tell them why Christianity has struck me so much, because I've tested in my life that the contemporaneity of Christ within the Church is the answer to the profound needs of my hearth. In doing so people feel free to share their own experience, they feel free to be "religious" as well (whereas contemporary society often tend to "privatize" their beliefs) and a profound friendship with some of them has started. As member of the movement Communion and Liberation every year the Rimini Meeting represents one the most important occasion in Italy to come in touch with people from different faiths, with whom we establish a relationship which goes on throughout the year. More practices need to be developed on a local level, in particular with muslim immigrants through works of charity, which can be able to overcome fears and stereotypes.

3) To my community I bring back the importance of establishing an interfaith discussion: till few years ago in Italy it was almost impossible to come across somebody who was not a Roman Catholic. During the last decade the situation has changed a lot because of the massive migrations. I think we have to start to create interreligious dialogue with other religious communities inviting some of them to share matters of common concern. The Church is doing a lot in this direction, but also lay people have to involve themselves in groups of dialogue etc., also creating places of dialogue where people can share a common spaces, have meals together etc. I think that in order to develop the interreligious dialogue in Italy people have to know more about their own faith and about other faiths: to listen to people who talk about their own faith is not enough for developing an authentic "critical" view, which is necessary for not reducing the other to an "alter ego". I think we should create interreligious working groups who work for the common good starting from matters of primary concern such as social justice, human rights etc.

During these days I've also realized how my view of the other faiths has become wider: a lot of stereotypes have been overcome in meeting real people who tell their experiences from a

practical perspective rather than from a purely doctrinal perspective (even if the knowledge of the “doctrine” is also crucial). I think that the knowledge of the differences is crucial in order to start to work together on matters of primary concern, probably starting from a local level (in Italy for example we have the problem of immigrants, who migrate to Italy and as they cannot find a job some of them start being associated with criminal groups etc. so one topic could be related to the way in which local religious communities can help the immigrants in order to prevent them from being involved with crime, for example helping them to find a job etc) up to big social and civic issues.

Shrivatsa Goswami

22 March 2012

It is my existential predicament hence it is a life enriching process for me. Coming from Vrindavan, which came into being as a holiest of holy town of the Hindus in 1598 as a result of the friendship between my ancestors well known as the Six Goswamis and the Mughal Emperor Akbar. Interfaith encounter may prompt one to either reject or ignore the other or engage. The Goswamis and Mughals both engaged with each other and the results were amazingly beneficial to both and for the humanity at large.

This friendship brought peace to the religio-political hotspot and thus economic prosperity flourished. Cultural and artistic activities got boost. Music, dance, theatre, literature, architecture, paintings--all got to a new height in their creativity. Thus interreligious friendship means peace and peace means prosperity and human good—all round.

Professionally, as a priest I get my ritual utensils, thrones, dresses, ornaments and other things thanks to Muslim artisans. Locally the Muslims are cattle traders, hence our cattle, specially cows come from them. The Christian community, basically missionaries, offer education and healthcare to the Hindu majority. Vrindavan, thus, today survives on the practices of interreligious friendship.

What I want to bring from Elijah to Vrindavan is more intensity to the friendship. For that (a.) I shall propose to the community more social interaction and (b.) formation of local interfaith committees (c.) which will be active for interfaith education in the lower schools, using Elijah tools.

Inshallah!

Bishop Frank Griswold

Interreligious friendship exposes me to an expansive and ever-expanding encounter with the Divine, mediated by my friend who has been shaped and formed by a different symbol system and perhaps sacred texts and rituals. This exposure, however, is above all and exposure to a person who renders concrete and specific the faith tradition he or she possesses. It is the person with whom I sense a relationship who makes me eager to explore the realm of mystery within which he or she lives and moves and from which they draw their sense of being.

Here I must say that I believe that all of humanity is bonded together by the force and power of love, a love which is united with the force and power of creation. Deep spiritual friendship

occurs when all that occludes this binding force of love is removed. This means removing barriers of fear and suspicion and ego investment in one's own tradition as the superior or only way. Love can have its own way and surprise us by unleashing elements of affections which break down barriers and leave us undefended and receptive in the face of another whose way of naming and responding to the transcendent is very different from our own.

Occasions such as this gathering create the possibility to encounter one another in this deep and personal. It is the conversations around the edges – meals, walks, tea – fuelled by the formal sessions that allow us to open ourselves trustfully to particular 'others' to whom we are drawn. In that way, we can ask and be asked questions and share perspectives that deepen our encounter with the force that unites us which some will name as 'God'.

All this is a process whereby the mind descends into the heart and it is at this level – understood as the core and centre of personhood – that true insight, revelation and transformation occur. For this to happen, spiritual practice prepares the way. It attunes the ear of the heart to hear the voice of the Divine in the tradition and embodied reality of the other.

Since much of my life is given over to teaching ways of spirituality and giving retreats, I plan, with new enthusiasm and urgency to share what I have learnt and set out above.

Rev Dr Katharine Henderson

Wednesday March 21, 2012

I now see the invitation to come to this conference as a sign of interreligious friendship, and I'm grateful to have been here. The meta-frame take away is that all of us gathered here under the banner of Elijah and all of our efforts at home are truly part of an international multifaith movement that can change the world. For all of us toiling in our separate "vineyards," it is essential to reframe our activities through touching others who feel the same. So, this conference has allowed us to experience a sense of belonging to each other as "friends," who belong to God—members of the household of God. Our interfaith efforts are the attempts to make the world "homespace," to reclaim God's good creation for God. For me to be together in this way is to glimpse the realm of God. It has been particularly valuable to extend my friendship broadly to include Sikhs, Muslims, Buddhists, Hindus from around the world since much of my work at home is more focused on Abrahamic traditions.

1. Interreligious friendship is not abstract or theoretical but made manifest through story. The stories of interreligious friendship—Sikhs feeding Hindus, religious leaders in Sweden interpreting Halal dietary laws or Jewish circumcision, an Imam in India speaking about other religious traditions in his sermons thereby giving space to the other in his sacred space; the story of how fasting was the motif that enhanced and renewed the faith of two men—these are the ways we see God's spirit working through us in the world. Could it be that we are on the cusp of a new religious age where God is revealing GodSelf in a new way, particularly through interfaith friendships writ small and large, as religious leaders and people take one another's part, work on one another's behalf in re-creating/re-claiming public/civic space for God's purposes of love, understanding and justice?

Which gets me to the insight that was a thread through our small group the whole time: Do the religions need each other? Are we sufficient unto ourselves (as religious groups/religious individuals) or do we need the others to truly know God. In Christianity, God's love comes to us through God's grace as gift given, but others are often the vehicles or means of God's grace

and love. As Srivatsa said of his relationship with Muslims and all they had contributed to the aesthetic/beauty of his own celebration rituals: “This has benefitted me in the whole of my being. It has made me aesthetically complete.” And, this is my experience too, right down to my own reconnection to the church after a profound atheist period in my youth, when the religious other in the form of a Benedictine priest in Germany reconnected me to my faith through giving me access to the Eucharist, through the beauty of worship.

It is why to this day I am profoundly moved by the worship and prayer of other traditions—I can access God as truly or sometimes even more so through the strangeness of another’s worship space/ritual as my own.

2. How can I practice interreligious friendship? I practice this all the time every day on many levels because of the work Auburn does and because interreligious work is my vocation. What I realized from being here and reading the papers provided is that friendship of any kind is at risk today because of the press of our daily lives, of our addiction to technology (which can aid or inhibit friendship). The ideal of friendship outlined in the book—through which one is led into a deeper relationship with God—takes enormous time, space, concentration, deliberate focus and attention. Because I work on macro change a lot (like Israeli-Palestinian issues or Islamophobia in America) I am going to intentionally begin a micro-interreligious friendship exercise and cultivate one or two special and particular interreligious friendships, perhaps including text study and certainly focused, deep conversation.

3. What can I bring back to my community?

- A realization through conversation with my small group that what we are trying to do at Auburn to promote the role of religious leader in the public square is something others around the world are also working on. That the invisibility of the religious leader around pressing public issues is at risk—an afterthought for the press, for politicians—that all of us are trying to carve out this space for ourselves and it is something we can try to help each other with. The context and reasons for invisibility may differ from context to context but in some way we are all wrestling with the same thing as we try to amplify God’s message of understanding, respect, compassion and love.

- Elijah Institute has taken up space now in my imagination which means that I can try to leverage Elijah’s partnership, role and identity in and through Auburn’s work and contacts. I can think about potential partnership now in a way that could potentially help leverage Elijah’s visibility in our context. This would include our existing multifaith partnerships, seminaries in North America and the world of theological education, as well as more grassroots connections and multifaith efforts.

- We are working on similar efforts at Auburn around media attention. I hope I can continue to be helpful to Elijah Institute as it tries to craft a media strategy that is both possible and effective.

Imam Ilyasi

What does interreligious friendship mean to me?

Interreligious friendship means to the Elijah Interfaith Institute, it brings us the religious leaders of different faiths to come on the common platform and speak our heart out in the gathering of faith leaders around the globe and across the other cultures. Interreligious

friendship means to me the friendship between Rabbi Alon and my father which later on I look forward the touch of friendship, peace and brotherhood with him going on and on the path of peace and love and the message of commonality between the Abrahamic faiths. Journey doesn't stop here and it is just the beginning. We all have to work hard to achieve success and success means to me interreligious friendship.

How can I practice it?

As we had a session of practical applications in the moderated interfaith discussions, I found it very useful and made a practical approach in front of our moderators. In India there is an Islamic school of thought in Maharashtra state. It is one of the big schools of thought, with 10,000 to 12,000 students, which produces about 3,000 students every year to become an Imam. Now comes the practical application in light, where we can bring over 5 Rabbis at the time of the graduation ceremony of the students at the Madrasah (School of thought) to give a platform for the Rabbis to speak a message of peace and also to speak about the importance of togetherness of the Abrahamic faith and give examples from the Hadith which can actually let the students know the commonalities between the Abrahamic faiths. Next stop will invite the speakers from other faiths, too.

What can I bring back to my community?

The Imam organization deals with the welfare of the Imams in India and it has a representative body of half a million Imams in India. I bring back the message of love, peace and brotherhood to the Imams who are the representatives of the organizations and also the representatives of Islam. In Islam it's clearly mentioned to respect other faiths and live in peace and harmony with the people from other faiths.

Imam Muzaffar Iqbal

1. What does interreligious friendship mean to me?

Personal growth, expansion of horizon, deeper understanding of all faiths.

2. How can I implement it?

By deepening interreligious friendships, by further study of other traditions and by further interactions with other faith communities

3. What can I bring back to my community?

Stories of personal encounters; discourses we have had, understanding of practices of other traditions as we shared them, memories of persons and places, and events.

Bishop Lennart Koskinen

1. Interreligious friendship is for me a deep source of understanding more about myself as a person, my own faith and tradition – but also about the Other I meet. 'Meeting' is the key word, not only socializing and having a good time together.

Meeting always takes place on an individual level, even if it happens within a social framework. Meeting is being present, not only physically but with all your senses, (even the sixth), your intuition, empathy and curiosity. It is listening but also sharing. It goes beyond all dogmatic, theoretic and practical implications. It is very rare but it has occurred during this meeting, as well during the previous I have attended.

2. It is easy (relatively) in this gathering, but much harder in your own environment. I try to exercise the skills I have learned, to listen beyond words when I read an article in media, a book from an unknown author or when seeing an interview on the TV. There is always more than what is shown.

Practically, I intend to attend and support the numerous groups of interfaith dialogue locally in my country, trying to share my experiences where I can, as well as writing some articles to promote a fruitful debate.

The most important area where a wide interfaith effort can make a change is about environmental global warming. No force is as strong as a common spiritual understanding and willingness to take our responsibility for the survival of our common world. Religious leaders, scholars and lay people who are united can together make a difference!

3. Action starts in the mind. That my Buddhist friends have taught me. I will carry back the vision of one fundamental Force, Power, Deity beyond the multitude of gods and theological systems. The common name beyond all names is Love. It/ he/ she perpetrates everything existing and is interpreted in numerous ways. Love has taken, and is taking, shape through holy men and women, holy places, symbols, rituals and words. But we can never grasp all of them. That's why our own tradition is the best guide for us to find the path of our own lives. I am Christian, and for me Jesus Christ is the utmost authority and role-model, but more and more I realize and respect other revelations. No tradition contains the whole truth; that's why we should learn more from each other. That's why interreligious meetings are needed on all levels to promote human and spiritual growth, foster peace and understanding between nations, peoples and religions.

That is the vision I will carry with me and work for.

Ven Dr Bhikkuni Kusuma

1. What does interreligious friendship mean to me?

Congratulations, Elijah Interfaith, for our friendship.

The world is engulfed by Science and Technology but in spite of the great strides of modern living, science and technology has no ethics and morality for the human mind.

It is like a powerful car with no steering wheel and brakes, heading for disaster.

All religions have some dimension of ethics and morality which must be practiced in daily living. Thanks to Elijah for seeing eye-to-eye all religions.

All religions in one voice must appeal to the modern world for morals and ethics if we want the future generations to survive on earth.

Interreligious friendship means dissolving all differences and supporting the common good.

Forget the past – it is dead and gone! The future is conjecture. The present is the only living moment.

2. According to Buddha, the practice is:

'Refraining from evil, doing good, purifying the mind'

The message of all Buddhas:

'Forbearance is the highest asceticism. Nirvana is the highest good'

One who hurts and worries another in no recluse, is no spiritual person.

Not blaming, not criticizing, living by the precepts undertaken.

Moderation in eating, living in renunciation, away from hearth and home, and practicing yoga and meditation, contemplation on the mind, body, environment, developing wisdom.

This is the message of all Buddhas.

It will be noticed that there is no religious dimension in Buddhist ethics except Karmic responsibility of each individual.

We don't pay for the sins of our forefathers!

3. What can I take back to my community? Interreligious friendship!!

Metropolitan Nikitas Lulias

What does inter-religious friendship mean to me?

Inter-religious friendship means allowing the walls of separation to come down because of the trust, understanding, mutual respect and bonds (of love, as understood in the Greek verb "philo") that have been established. Friendship in this context means seeing, sharing and walking a common path of cooperation with the vision of shared goals. This form of friendship should also include a type of sensitivity that is characterized by humility where the "me" is transformed to become the "we". While I may believe that my religious is Truth, I can accept that the seeds of Truth are found in the teachings of my friend's faith and religious tradition.

How can I practice it?

I can practice and express inter-religious friendship in everyday events through interpersonal relationships through the following ways:

1. Inviting clergy of other faith traditions to share in my own religious holidays (the meals associated with these) and my attending and sharing in the experiences of his/her tradition.

2. Attending services at the church, temple, space of worship on important feasts of other religious communities to demonstrate the bond of friendship that exists - and, to support

that the local clergy (representative) in his/her struggle to show others that we have a bond of unity called friendship.

3. When making a visit to a hospital and visiting those ill, I can take a moment and speak, act, reach out to the "other" person, who might share the room, be in the hallway or some other area.

What can I bring back to my own community?

1. I can bring the resources and knowledge that I found in other communities - these may include things like music, hymns, art, foods, etc. - all things that can be used to strengthen understanding and bonds of friendships

2. I can bring children from my community to "play" with the children of another community - by establishing a playground for them and also having them share a common meal in the course of the day

3. Sponsoring trips for young people to live in "other" areas/places of the world where my young people become the "strangers in a strange land" - where they must learn another language, eat other foods, live with a family of another faith, etc.

Archbishop Boutros Mouallem

1 - As a Christian and a Bishop, interreligious friendship means essentially to me trust and love. In the Tradition of my Church Christ is called Philanthrops = Friend of Man(kind).

2 - We can implement it by respecting the Other, whatever may be his race, colour, religion, social or political ideas. Although different from me, I trust him and love him.

3 - I bring back to my community the rich experience we lived in Oxford. I already wrote and published a long article (in Arabic) on this topic.

With my best wishes and deep interreligious friendship. God bless you !

What does interreligious friendship mean to me, how can I practise it, and what can I bring back to my community?

Alison Murdoch

I'm very grateful for the great work being done by the Elijah Institute, and for your generous invitation to take part in this meeting. My understanding of both friendship per se, and of interreligious friendship, has greatly deepened as a result. Thank you!

As a newcomer to Elijah, the meeting was itself a progressive experience of interreligious friendship: from arriving, a little anxious and knowing nobody, to enjoying some wonderful and profound personal encounters and discussions. The conditions that made this possible included: trust and safe space; time and space; well-prepped, high calibre and highly motivated participants; conducive surroundings; and the emphasis on storytelling.

The meeting helped me appreciate the simplicity and directness at the heart of the Buddhist approach to friendship. Buddhist teachings see friendship as a natural, logical and preferred way of relating to other beings that can be deliberately developed and deepened through the gradual elimination of obstacles to friendship - such as fear, pride, jealousy, competitiveness, anger, resentment and low self-worth. Using the tool of mindful attention to my mental processes, the opportunity to develop my aptitude for friendship is therefore present in every encounter and conversation that I have.

I reflected on how these obstacles to friendship can also be classified according to what Buddhism labels the 'three poisons' of attachment, aversion and ignorance. Attachment might involve wanting to be friends for personal gain, such as money, fame, or knowledge. Aversion could manifest as prejudice of some kind. Ignorance would include a shallow or mistaken understanding about our relationship with the other beings on this planet – for example not remembering that we are all interconnected, and in a continual state of flux.

HH The Dalai Lama offers a living example of someone who has dealt with his inner obstacles to friendship, and seems to be in a state of continual openness, curiosity, equanimity and delight. In photos and audiovisual footage, we see how people quickly feel at ease in his presence. He creates warm personal relationships wherever he goes – with drivers and cooks just as much as with prelates and politicians.

The English poet TS Eliot refers to “a condition of complete simplicity costing not less than everything.” One of my insights from the Elijah meeting is that true interreligious friendship leads us beyond religion, or any kind of difference, to a state in which we are simply living beings who are compassionately opening up to each other. Eventually, even the consciousness of being a separate living being will fade away.

I appreciate that this Buddhist approach to friendship may seem simplistic in view of the stories and life experiences that others brought to the meeting. For example, as a western Tibetan Buddhist I wasn't able to identify any group memory or angst which would be an obstacle to interreligious friendship. The barriers that I experience are more in the area of identity and psychology – particularly in being a convert, which initially caused me to be more private and reticent about my faith than I might otherwise have been.

In the 25 years since then, I've engaged many times in Buddhist/Christian dialogue (and possibly my Buddhist/Christian marriage) precisely because of my familiarity and ease with Christian theology, culture and vocabulary. However I don't feel that joint projects with people of other faith traditions necessarily support the development of interreligious friendship. Buddhism sometimes classifies busy-ness as a form of laziness – in this case, the danger of being too busy 'doing' to allow time for 'being'. In contrast, the Elijah meeting created a retreat-like environment in which we could simply 'be' with others and rapidly move into a profound exploration of what interreligious friendship can look, feel and taste like. We weren't just talking about the subject, we were experiencing it!

On this basis, the immediate things that I take back to my community are a deeper personal understanding of and respect for what interreligious friendship involves and demands, greater enthusiasm to develop such friendships, and an appreciation that the conditions under which it can arise are rare and special.

Dr Adamou Njoya

1. To reach the heart of the communion with the creator: to achieve the noble duty, joining man and the above, faith and action.
2. In my ideas, in my thinking, in my actions and activities the other always will be present, the human being is at the centre.
3. I shall tell my community that over the world there are people working for friendship. That means doing what we are doing in applying ethics with the base of human beings as the centre of love, of acts.

The Very Reverend June Osborne

To be human is to be open, responsive and interdependent through friendship, and interreligious friendship is a natural extension of that vocation. Without our relatedness to the other, we are not fully human and will not inhabit well-being or find true meaning.

In particular, interreligious friendship:

- Generates wisdom for both the individual and the formation of religious community
- Contributes to religious authenticity
 - no religious tradition is sufficiently complete or spiritually deep as and of itself;
 - God is always beyond our manifestations and language and through interreligious friendship we are reminded that our desire to define Him and search for certitude risks limiting our sense of His mercy, compassion and forgiveness. We are encouraged to know God to be greater than our needs allow.
 - We are encouraged to take our own faith traditions more seriously.
- Is a way of testing 'true religion' and helping us to live by it. All religious communities and institutions live within their history of violence, oppression or abuse and are tempted to corruption in their present existence. Interreligious friendship helps us see ourselves as others see us and offers solutions which produce better religion.
- Offers a way of challenging our social fear of difference. It protects those who may be victimized and celebrates the strength of diversity.
- Makes the empowerment of women more likely across the global community.

How can I practice it?

- By ensuring that I give time and priority to particular friendships across faith traditions.
- By raising the profile of interreligious networks and relationships in my own setting
- By inviting those from other faith traditions to share hospitality with me, in particular seeking out those of other faith traditions in my own diocese and exploring with them what are the options for interreligious friendship.

- Putting the Elijah Institute website in my 'favourites' list.

What can I bring back to my community?

1. The photo we took this morning and reflections from our meeting
2. A sense that interreligious friendship is important to me and could be transformative for our life.
3. The development of interreligious friendship across the Muslim-Christian divide in Sudan and South Sudan. Sheikh Nur and myself are pledged to develop our friendship and to arrange a meeting of Christian and Muslim leaders in September in the UK as a starting point for further dialogue.
4. To look for symbolic actions and images which convey to the visitors to our Cathedral and to the wider world that faith leaders model reconciliation and are committed together to social justice.
5. To affirm and, if possible extend, the interfaith programs done by our Education Department.

Rabbi David Rosen

1. Interreligious engagement means not only overcoming misunderstanding, being understood and understanding the other, thereby eliminating or at least overcoming prejudice and stereotypes, thus serving as enlightened self-interest; it is not only engagement for the pursuit of shared values: it is the greater encounter with the Divine Presence beyond my own religious revelation of that Presence (as all understandings/ encounters with the Divine are partial.

Friendship is just a greater intensification of the encounter with the 'other', and when this is done in the sense and appreciation of that, it is a Divine encounter. It is a profound religious experience.

2. I am blessed to be able to do so daily and look forward to continuing to do so throughout my life.
3. The overcoming of prejudice and bigotry; the deepening of theological modesty; greater human solidarity; perhaps also some healing for their wounds and paranoia.

Gilla Rosen

Interreligious Friendship Through the Prism of the Elijah Interfaith Institute

There is a human need and a human longing for friendship that is often bounded by ethnicity or belief or garb or prejudice. The first step is to allow for the non-essential to drop away in order for the essential being and person to connect to others in friendship which is probably (as far as science can make out today) a natural state for the human being. In other words,

interreligious friendship may be viewed as a natural outgrowth rather than a battle to be won.

The one who is deeply involved in another faith tradition is a natural possibility for a friend. There is a journey we are both travelling; there are ethical issues we are both debating using as tools both our texts and traditions and our own consciences which have been formed in relationship with our backgrounds; our souls have similar longings. Sometimes it is also enriching to share happiness or sorrow with someone both a part of and apart from our immediate experience. The deep questions are shared – the ways that they can be perceived and worked on are enriched by the contact with difference.

On a personal level this is intelligible and does happen. But deep friendships can actually foster exclusivity – they are by nature creations based on a finite number of individuals (usually 2). What is the relationship between these deep and beautiful friendships and interreligious coexistence? Are they necessarily helpful?

Are 'loving your neighbour as yourself' and 'This is the Book of the generations of mankind' prescriptions for great individual occurrences of connection to a particular friend based on the self or of G-d in the other? Or are they demands to go beyond the natural need for friendship to attempt to relate to many (or all?) others in this way? 'Acquire for yourself a friend' relates to the individual need; Rabbinic understanding of loving your neighbor relates to a broader attempt at friendship.

One takes back one's friendship to one's community because one's friends are a part of oneself. In my case, I have students waiting for a discussion about the week scheduled for next week. In addition, my new friends' ways of looking at ideas and emotions will influence my prayer and teaching. Some of my students who are [baalei teshuva] [newly religious] on their journeys are waiting to deal together with issues raised by these friendships. These relationships are different from academic relationships shared with very different others (also from other faiths) because of the levels of being and belief which are accessed in these relationships but not in academic ones. The importance of chemistry in particular relationships is similar to that found in other relationships both within family and cultural milieu and interculturally generally. The difference lies in the depth of the shared dimension despite its exceedingly varied, and at times even jarring, garb.

However, beyond the natural friendships there is the dimension and the demand to seek the possibility of friendship in as many directions as possible, in as organic a manner as possible in order to foster networks of positive relationships.

In this vein, we have exchanged ideas about programs in our different communities as well as problems and hesitations and sacrifices. We are also thinking about the difference between the possibilities for communities like Israel or the Sudan in which different religious/ethnic groups are in clear conflict and ones like the US or the UK in which work may be just as essential but easier. I would like to think in terms of at least two different types of interfaith friendships – ones in which faith plays an important part – essential for religious leaders – and one in which the recognition of the Godly humanity of the other is the essential goal and substance may vary.

The music and the view create a tranquility which foster the work that needs to be done. What about taking the whole of humanity on a trip?

Imam Sajid

Honest conversation between two people of different cultures, based on unconditional love and care in true praise of God. It may start with a cup of tea or sharing a meal but turn into a loving relationship. This personal conversation requires commitment to do something together for the common good.

I practice this in my home town based on a principle mentioned in the Holy Quran 41:34 that 'evil and goodness cannot be equal. If we change evil with goodness then the person who hates can become friend and intimate.'

I share with my community the rich experience I had here with the Elijah Interfaith Institute 'Friendship Across Religions' conference, held here at the Brahma Kumaris Global Retreat Centre near Oxford and try to build my connection with Elijah on more strong bonds of mutual respect and love.

Bhai Sahib Mohinder Singh

First and foremost, one should genuinely, and authentically, practice one's own faith, engage in intra-faith friendships, before venturing into interfaith.

Inter-religious friendship or any friendship for that matter, demands courage and sacrifice.

Interfaith friendship should be rooted in the love of God. It enriches one, while it strengthens one's own faith. Loving God as a friend makes one love all God's creation. In the Sikh Dharam, many friendly names are used to address God. He is addressed as *Dost, Yaar, Beli, Meet, Mitter, Sai, Rakha, Takhur, Pitta, mata, Swami*, etc.

As per the Fifth Guru, a Sikh is guided to become a friend of all, having enmity with none. In this context, the Ninth Guru states, "*God lives in the hearts of those, who consider friend and foe alike*"

A friend should never use friendship as an excuse to exploit one's friends. One should always be able to correct one's friend for friendship's sake. A friend should always try to uphold one's friend's dignity and honour.

Commitment:

One should practise interfaith friendship through engagement within the interfaith movement, locally, nationally, and internationally. One can further this through promoting inter-religious education, through being part of interfaith forums, and through supporting interfaith activities.

One should bring back to one's community much love and goodwill, promoting a culture of peace at the same time. This can further lead to prosperity for all.

Sukhbir Singh

The Sikh scripture says that the only meaningful friendship is with the One God.

My friendship is with the One Lord alone; I am in love with the One Lord alone. The Lord is my only friend; my companionship is with the One Lord alone. My conversation is with the One Lord alone; He never frowns, or turns His face away. He alone knows the state of my soul; He never ignores my love. He is my only counsellor, all-powerful to destroy and create. The Lord is my only Giver. He places His hand upon the heads of the generous in the world. I take the Support of the One Lord alone; He is all-powerful, over the heads of all. The Saint, the True Guru, has united me with the Lord. He placed His hand on my forehead. The Guru led me to meet the greatest Lord and Master; He saved the whole world. The desires of the mind are fulfilled; I have attained my pre-destined Union with God. Nanak has obtained the True Name; He enjoys the enjoyments forever. (Guru Granth Sahib p250)

All other friendships and attachments are futile.

All that what you are watching (family, friends) is not going to go with you. They shall not go along with you, so why do you focus your attention on them? (Guru Granth Sahib p918)

How will the above translate into practical action? This action is two-fold. Firstly, upon recognising that the only permanent friendship is with God alone, to increase personal efforts to get closer with Him. This may mean more concentration and focus while meditating or praying. Next, to see God in every person. This two-fold effort leads to more interconnectedness with every person, as the friendship is with the God inside each person. This will translate practically with increased interfaith friendship. From these friendships will originate and come many opportunities to foster and sustain friendships.

I have attended a few conferences and meetings where various scriptures have been studied. Personally I have learnt a lot from this. I would like to start an interfaith scripture study group that would meet every two months.

Rabbi Awraham Soetendorp

Interreligious friendship is my life.

In my parents' home, great leaders from Catholic, Protestant and Moslem spiritual traditions were part of one family. I cherish so many memories of Monsignor Ramselaar at our seder, of teaching Pastor Kroon, right after Bar Mitzvah, regularly, Hebrew, of sharing confidences with my professor of Bible, Piet de Boer van Goudoever, truly friends of my parents who became my own friends.

Shortly after my ordination, I travelled by train together with Imam Bashir. He took the opportunity to share with me, 'You have become my young friend. There is trust between us. And thus I am able to ask you factual questions that generally I would not dare to ask a Jew.'

One question referred to the attempt by an Australian tourist of disturbed mind to set fire to the El-Aksa Mosque in Jerusalem. Bashir asked, 'Why do the Jews want to destroy our Mosque?' Our conversation from heart to heart took away all stumbling blocks or prejudice. And it gave me insight in one of the blessings of friendship, to feel free, unburdened to speak in the deepest, sometimes very painful frankness.

When I speak of friends, I realize that these are often people I have not maintained uninterrupted long-time friendships with but with whom my heart has been touched forever. There follow some names and experiences:

Grand Mufti Sheikh Ahmed Kuftaro: I spoke about our friendship on Monday night. I would like now to add how this friendship originated.

During a Board meeting of the Global Forum of Spiritual and Parliamentary Leaders in Moscow, just before the opening of the conference in January 1990, the Sheikh moved in, supported by his assistant and physician. It was the first time he joined us in his capacity as new co-chair. I thought it was strange that the meeting had stopped in order to welcome him. I asked my mother, of blessed memory, should I stand up to greet him or would that look ostentatious? And she answered, 'Don't make it difficult. Do what your heart tells you to do.'

I got up, stumbled forward, making noise, turning chairs and tables in the embarrassing attempt to reach him before he could sit down. And I introduced myself to him, welcoming him with expressed gratitude for our co-operation.

Years later, when we had celebrated our meetings and conversations, his assistant asked me, 'Do you know why you have such a deep relationship? It is because you got out of your seat.' Towards the end of his life, when unfortunately I had not been able to visit him in Damascus – at the last moment I would be refused a visa, I had a chance to meet with a world-renowned physician, who told me that he was going to a conference in Damascus. Knowing of the frail health of Kuftaro, I asked him whether he would agree to see him. He gave me his hotel details.

I called just before Shabbat, that Friday afternoon, his home in Damascus. I spoke to his wife, and gave her the details. She answered in surprise, 'You really called to share this information out of concern for my husband?' After my answer in the affirmative, there was a long pause. Then she cried and shared how moved she was.

When I write these lines, I am moved deeply, thinking of my older brother. In some way, I have found in my new brother, Ilyasi, whom I fortunately encountered forever in Amritsar, the continuation of the presence of Kuftaro, his memory be a blessing.

Reflecting further, I think of my friend from the East, Akio Matsumura, my gifted friend from Japan and New York. We met each other in a small room in 1987 in the house of Parliament in the Hague. And immediately a bond was established which has only been strengthened. It was on the basis of this friendship that the work of the Global Forum has flourished. I had found in his visionary works the combination of the mystery and commandment, the spiritual and practical, which echoed my life-long longing.

I think of Vaswani, the Hindu Guru, his wisdom and kindness. The very first time we met, during the Global Forum meeting, in Kyoto in 1993, he said to me, 'Can I be your student?' I answered him emphatically, 'I am honoured to be your student.' He replied, 'You who have gone through suffering but have not become bitter are my teacher.'

How did he know? What did he see? It has moved me till today.

In South Africa in 1991 at the Parliament of World Religions, I received the news that my aunt had received permission by doctors after a prolonged process of consultation required by the Dutch law, to terminate her life. (She had had a stroke and was very ill.) I went to Vaswani to take leave. He comforted me. Just before, he had made a comparison during one of his speeches, between the slaughter of animals and Auschwitz. It upset my colleagues deeply. I realized that while being disturbed by the terminology, it did not create a barrier. Just when I ventured to leave, I turned around and asked on an impulse whether I would be allowed to bless Vaswani. He smiled and bent his head. And I blessed him with the Biblical

priestly blessing. When I opened my eyes, I saw that Vaswani had gone into meditation. I closed my eyes and joined the meditation. Slowly, an image appeared, an undulating blue water-surface that was surrounded by a beautiful, god, ever-enlarging circle. This was an abiding example of transference and fusion of different ways of prayer.

During this beautiful encounter across religions, I realized the deep value of our efforts in the Netherlands over the years to organize an interspiritual gathering at the main church building in the Hague, hours before the opening of Parliament. It has grown to a true milestone of cooperation, attended by the Dutch cabinet representatives of all walks of life – over a thousand participants, among them hundreds of pupils.

The astounding assembly is veritably based on true friendship established over many years. Friendship is hard work. It is, when forged, the way to open the gate to the flow of loving long-standing cooperation. And this is the more important in Europe today, where a wave of populism is trying to sweep this good-will aside.

I am awed by the developments at this meeting of Elijah, which I consider the culmination of my experiences in the past. It is my privilege, together with Joseph, to suggest a far-reaching project in India and on the road to Rio de Janeiro, a project to foster the expressing of a unified voice for change in our behavior, towards a clean and just society.

The newly found friendships here strengthen my resolve to continue to strive for the impossible. Thus in a few hours I am going to suggest cooperation towards realizing a voluntary taxation of an extra 0.1% every year to help alleviate poverty and take measures to turn the climate-change cause into a blessing. It is to be done.

Sri Sri Sugunendra Theertha Swamiji

Recommendations from His Holiness Sri Sri Sugunendra Theertha Swamiji of Jagadguru Sri Madhwacharya Moola Maha Samsthanam, Sri Puthige Mutt, Udupi, Karnataka, India. 21st March 2012, Oxford, United Kingdom

Q. What does inter-religious friendship mean to me?

According to me, inter-religious friendship means freedom to practise one's religious faith without any disturbance or hindrance. 'Freedom' means respect and co-operation on the basis of equal rights. "This world is created not only for me but for all similar beings as well". In my understanding, when this message which is based in reality, is taught by all religious leaders along with their inherent religious teachings, then inter-religious friendship is established everywhere.

All religious leaders should emphasise this message along with their routine preaching. They should give prominence for collective thinking rather than individual or sectarian approaches in their speeches and practices.

Religious leaders should also add that each one should try to sacrifice as much as possible, through their actions, expressions or practices, which would be hurtful to other's sentiments.

Religious leaders should be objective and present their views and leave the final decision or judgement to the individual rather than imposing their views.

For example, a bee collects nectar from various flowers and builds its own honeycomb. Similarly, religious should encourage people to be open-minded, study various religions and assist them in making their own judgements rather than imposing doctrines and views. **“Be a Bee”** should be their final message.

The preaching of the religious leaders should diminish the ego of their followers and make them more open minded rather than fuelling the ego of their followers in a false direction. Ego should be **“blasted out”** rather than **“boosted up”**.

Religious leaders should take the place of pleaders rather than judges.

In my view, the above mentioned points are some of the ways in which we can practice inter-religious friendship.

It is also important that we should not be silent spectators of people who are trying to spoil and misuse their inter-religious friendships for their narrow ends.

Q. How can I practise it?

We will propagate this message in schools, colleges and universities where the personalities are moulded. We will also propagate it through our lectures all across the world, along with practising this message. We will use all other opportunities and possibilities that may come up to spread this message.

Q. What can I bring back to my community?

Creating awareness of this message will be one of the main things. For this we can arrange many programmes such as retreats, debates, classes and camps. Along with this, we will be creating special events for propagating this message.

Dr Suheyl Umar

Friendship across Religions

As a prelude to noting down my personal conclusions on the question of interfaith friendship I would like to define friendship as I understand it. Friendship is the affinity and complementarity between two persons. A same ideal, a same spirituality– or a same level of spirituality– creates an affinity. Proceedings on the basis of this definition I would describe interfaith friendship as a process of discovering affinities, both religious and spiritual, between myself and persons of other faiths. Through inter-faith friendships I get the opportunity to gain information, dispel prejudices and arrive at a better understanding of the religious other. It confirms my belief that the multiplicity of religions is a divinely ordained situation. The Absolute cannot be exhausted by any of its manifestations and identifying the expression of the Sacred within a particular religious universe with the Absolute itself is a mistake. Since there have been other expressions of the Absolute in other religious universes, one should not be led to the denial of the Absolute itself, (as is the case with relativistic secularism), and to the claim that everything is relative and, therefore, there is no Sacred as such. The truth of the matter is that the very multiplicity of sacred forms in different religions, far from negating the sacredness of things, only confirms the richness of the Source of all that is sacred, the infinite creativity of the Divine Origin of all sacred forms. When I encounter, in the religious other, significant, and in some cases dazzling, examples of the embodiment of the very same principles and values and cherished spiritual ideals that my

tradition stands for, or else I notice that certain aspects of thought and praxis that have been eclipsed within my own tradition feature prominently in the thought and practice of the other, it invites me to self correction and healthy competition. Because I believe that the diversity of religions is to be seen as an expression of the will of God. According to my lights, the fundamental message of the Qur'an as regards all previous revelations is one of inclusion not exclusion, protection and not destruction. Arguably the most important verse of the Qur'an in this regard is: *'We have revealed unto you the Scripture with the Truth, to confirm and protect the Scripture which came before it ... For each of you We have appointed a law and a way. And if God had willed He would have made you one people. But (He hath willed it otherwise) that He may put you to the test in what He has given you. So vie with one another in good works. Unto God will ye be brought back, and He will inform you about that wherein ye differed (5:48).* This diversity of revelations and plurality of communities is intended to stimulate a healthy 'competition' or mutual enrichment in the domain of 'good works' and inter-faith friendship provides me with a good opportunity to come out of my isolation and benefit from it and celebrate an aspect of Divine Richness and All-Possibility. The inevitable differences between the religions are not only tolerated but also celebrated: tolerated on the outward, legal and formal plane, celebrated on the inward, cultural and spiritual plane. As the verses indicate, differences of opinion are inevitable consequences of the very plurality of meanings embodied in diverse revelations; these differences are to be tolerated on the human plane, and will be finally resolved in the Hereafter.

Practice of inter-faith friendship can take two forms in my situation: working with my Christian friends in Pakistan for social work and collaborative efforts for inter-faith initiatives and, secondly, work on academic projects and inter-faith initiatives of mutual interest and benefit in collaboration with my inter-faith friends outside Pakistan.

My theological approach and religious position on the question of the religious other and my practice of inter-faith friendships is well known in my community. In that sense I would not bring back anything new to my community. However, participating in the Elijah meeting of the religious leaders had given me the opportunity of forging new friendships and has worked as a reinforcement to my commitment.

In the end I would like to add a few words about love and comradeship. Love is the attraction between two beings of different sex who have on the one hand an affinity, either perfect or sufficient, and on the other a complementarity, likewise either perfect or sufficient. There is also familial love, that of the older generation for the younger and that of the younger generation for the older, which implies at the same time generosity and gratitude, intimacy and respect; always as a function of piety, which is the fundamental vocation of man.

Comradeship is the agreeable, and in any case tolerable relationship that exists between companions in work or by circumstance; it requires essentially piety and good manners. It must not be confused with friendship, which presupposes personal affinity and complementarity. When comradeship goes beyond its natural limits, and poses, in practice, as friendship, it ruins dignity and becomes tyrannical; between opposite sexes, it ruins love or the possibility of love, for love *a priori* requires dignity, distance and mystery; only then does it permit, and even require, naturalness, simplicity, joy, childlikeness.