



The Fifth Bi-Annual Meeting of the Elijah Board of World Religious Leaders, Oxford (UK), March 2012

On the final day of the meeting, leaders were asked to reflect on what had been accomplished. They were asked to consider three 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.

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*



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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.