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**CHRISTIANITY AND ISLAM: A POSSIBLE WAY
FORWARD IN PEACEFUL COEXISTENCE**

Moderator

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A Long Essay Submitted in Partial Fulfilment of the Requirements for
the Ecclesiastical Degree of Baccalaureate in Sacred Theology

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STUDENT'S DECLARATION

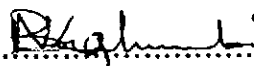
I, the undersigned, declare that this long essay is my original work through my personal reading, scientific research method and critical reflection. It is submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Ecclesiastical Degree of Baccalaureate in Sacred Theology. It has never been submitted to any other college or university for academic credit. All sources have been cited in full and acknowledged.

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This long essay has been submitted for examination with my approval as the College Supervisor.

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GENERAL INTRODUCTION

0.1 Motivation for Choosing this Topic

I have chosen the topic of my research as; **Christianity and Islam: A Possible way forward in Peaceful Coexistence**. The reason for me to choose this topic is connected with the area of my mission. I am a missionary to the Sudan. We have our presences in the North Sudan which is predominantly Muslim. We work and interact with the Muslims on a daily basis. Therefore I thought it would be necessary to know more about Islam and also to identify the possible unifying elements between Christianity and Islam. My intention is to enhance a peaceful interaction and mutual respect in all areas of our lives. I do not intend to convert Muslims into Christians but to find a common platform where we could interact and share our ideas and even share our faith. I am well aware also of the challenges ahead of me in this endeavor.

0.2 Methodology

The first two chapters I have used the literature review as the main source of my research. I have come across a vast number of books that deal with many of the issues I am dealing here in these chapters. But for the last chapter I have used more of personal experiences of people from both religious backgrounds. This chapter is in a way a synthesis of the personal interviews I had with Muslims and Christians in the Sudan.

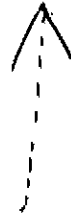
0.3 Process of My Research

To begin my enquiry I would like to define the basic terms of my study. In this regard I have dedicated my first chapter to find out the “Similarities and

Differences in Basic tenets of Islam and Christianity.” This chapter will give a fair understanding of Islam and Christianity as practiced today. As for Christianity I will limit my area of focus to Catholic Christianity.

Chapter two will proceed to another degree where we look into the person of Jesus in both Islamic and Christian points of view. I believe that the person of Jesus could be a possible unifying factor in both the religions. I am also aware of the differences of opinion existing between Muslims and Christians regarding the person and life of Jesus. But these differences should not shy us away from finding a common ground where we can identify the person and mission of Jesus.

Chapter three would go one more step higher to find a ‘way forward’ in a peaceful co-existence of Christians and Muslims. In order to reach this goal I would like us to get back to the fundamental issues in Christian-Muslim dialogue over the centuries. From this point I would like us to look at real experiences of people of both faiths. How a Muslim perceives Christianity and vice versa. After getting to know the views from people of both faiths I have ventured to propose some recommendations towards peaceful coexistence in view of tolerance and acceptance of each other as they are.



CHAPTER I

SIMILARITIES AND DIFFERENCES IN BASIC TENETS OF ISLAM AND CHRISTIANITY

1.0 Introduction

This chapter will expound a bit on definition of terms before we get into the real crux of the matter under scrutiny. So we would spend some time to examine what is Islam, what are the fundamental articles of faith and the pillars of Islam. Then we shall look into what is Christianity and what are the fundamental beliefs in Christianity. This would finally take us to look closely at the similarities and differences in some of the basic concepts in both Islam and Christianity.

1.1 What is Islam?

Practically all the religions in the world take their names either from their founders or from the community or nation in which they were born. But in the case of Islam it is an exception. Islam enjoys a unique distinction of having no such association with any particular person or community¹. Islam originally comes from the Arabic term '*Salam*' which means peace, with time it came to acquire the

¹ Cf. ABULALA MAWDUDI, *Towards understanding Islam*, p.17

present meaning that is, submission, surrender and obedience to Allah. Hence, we can say that Islam means peace attained through self surrender to God. In short a Muslim is the one who strives to submit himself to Allah.²

Islam is not simply a system of doctrines and religious practices, it could be considered as a civilization itself. It is a faith, a rite, a law, ethics and it is also a political institution and a culture by itself and spirituality. Statistically Islam is the world's second largest religion with over a billion followers.³ Quran 3:19 mentions Islam as the religion of submission to the will of Allah. Muhammad himself mentions that, "Islam is to worship Allah alone and none else, to perform *salat*, to pay *zakat*, and to observe fast during the month of Ramadan".⁴ *Sura* 42:15 describes the mission of Islam in the following words,

Now then, for that reason, call them to faith, and stand steadfast as thou commanded, nor follow thou their vain desires; but say: I believe in whatever the book of Allah has sent down; and I command to judge between you. Allah is the Lord and your Lord... Allah will bring us together, and to Him is our final goal.

The complete acceptance of the teachings and guidance of God 'Allah' as revealed to His Messengers Muhammad is the religion of Islam. Islam enjoins faith in the oneness and sovereignty of Allah, which makes man aware of meaningfulness of the Universe and of his place in it. This belief frees him from all fears and superstitions by making him conscious of the presence of Allah and of man's obligations towards Him. This faith must be expressed and tested in actions, faith alone is not enough. Belief in one God requires that we look upon all humanity as one family under the universal Omnipotence of God the Creator and Nourisher of all. Islam rejects the idea of chosen people, making belief in God and good actions

² Cf. FREDERIC N MUYUMBI, *Journey into Islam*, p. 15

³ Cf. http://www.religioustolerance.org/isl_numb.htm

⁴ FREDERIC N MUYUMBI, *Journey into Islam*, p. 16

the only way to heaven. Thus, a direct relationship is established with God, without any intercessor.⁵

Islam is not a new religion. It is, in essence, the same message and guidance which Allah revealed to all Prophets. Adam, Noah, Abraham, Ismael, David, Moses and Jesus. But the message which was revealed to Prophet Mohammed is in its comprehensive, complete and final form. The Quran is the last revealed word of Allah and the basic source of Islamic teachings and laws. The Quran deals with the basis of creeds, morality, and history of humanity, worship, knowledge, wisdom, God-man relationship, and human relationship in all aspects. It is also the basis of sound systems of social justice, economics, politics, legislation, law and international relations. *Hadith*, the teachings, sayings and actions of Prophet Mohammed meticulously reported and collected by his devoted companions. Explained and elaborated the Quranic verses.⁶

1.2 Fundamental Articles of Faith in Islam

The fundamental articles of faith in Islam are; ^f Faith in the unity of God, Belief in God's Angels, faith in the books of God, faith in God's prophets and belief in life after death. Now let us examine each of them in brief.

1.2.1 Faith in the unity of God (Tawhid)

There is only one true God and his name is Allah. Allah is all knowing, all-powerful and sovereign judge. Yet Allah is not a personal God, for he is so far above man in every way that he is not personally knowable. The emphasis of the God of Islam is on judgment and power, not grace and mercy. To the Muslim mind, calling God father connotes sexual relationship.⁷

⁵ Cf: <http://www.islamguiden.com/arkiv/uni.pdf>

⁶ Cf: <http://www.islamguiden.com/arkiv/uni.pdf>

⁷ Cf: <http://www.truthnet.org/islam/whatisislam.htm>

Perhaps there is no other religion which is so theocentric in its character as Islam. The creed (*shahadah*) which starts with the confession of the only one God, follows each Muslim through his entire life. Recitation of the *shahadah* is first thing he hears before the daylight and it is the last words that accompany him before he go to bed. For a Muslim his whole life is a gift from Allah, because Allah created the world and all within it. Allah is not only the creator but also the sustainer, so nothing happens in this world without his will.⁸

Allah! there is no God but He, the living, the self subsisting, eternal. No slumber can seize him nor heavens and on earth. Who is there can intercede in his presence except as he permitteth? he knoweth what (appeareth to his creatures as) before or after or behind them. Nor shall they compass aught of his knowledge except as he willeth. His throne doth extend over the heavens and the earth, and he feeleth no fatigue in guarding and preserving them for he is the most high, the supreme (in glory). *Surah 2:255*

1.2.2 Belief in God's Angels

This is the second important article of faith according to the Islamic belief. Prophet Muhammad has instructed all Muslims to have faith in the existence of god's angels. There are numerous angels and their main purpose is to execute the will of Allah. The word for angel, '*malak*', appears more than eighty times in the Quran and it is derived from the word '*malaikah*' which means messenger. Angels are spiritual creatures created of light, they are neither females nor males, they do not have any material body like that of human beings and they do not eat or drink. They belong to the world of 'unseen' yet they can appear in the world in any form which is suitable in the world. They always act in complete obedience to God, and they cannot do anything without the command of God.⁹

Muhammad forbade Muslims to worship angels, and to associate them with God in His divinity. He also informed them that God made them prostrate before

⁸ Cf: GUNAR NORLEN, *Islam and its World*, p.143.

⁹ Cf: GUNAR NORLEN, *Islam and its World*, p.151-152.

Adam after his creation to show that man is superior to them. He also informed them that the angels of God surround human beings from all sides, are attached to them and are always in their company. They observe and note all the human actions, good or bad. This complete report of human life will be presented before God after death.¹⁰ Some of the prominent angels are: *Jibreel* (Gabriel), the chief messenger of God; *Mika'eel* (Michael), the angel of providence and protection; *Israfeel*, the angel who blow the trumpet on the last day.

1.2.3 Faith in the Books of God

Belief in the sacred books is very essential for Islam. According to them God has revealed himself through his prophets and messengers long before the final revelation given to Muhammad in the Quran. According to Muslim tradition God had revealed more than one hundred such books through messengers and prophets, although most of them have been lost. Some of these books are Books of Abraham, Torah of Moses, Psalms (*Zabur*) of David and the Gospel (*Injil*) of Jesus Christ. In the above mentioned books the books of Abraham are extinct and not traceable in the world literature. But the other three books exist with Jews and Christians. Quran also states that people have changed and added to these books and thus they are in a way corrupted.¹¹

According to Muslim scholars Christians have made most serious alterations by omitting the prophesies of the coming of Prophet Muhammad. According to them both Old Testament and New Testament do not fully correspond to the original revelations, Muslims do not regard them as purely divine books. Since these books contains original words of truth spoken through prophets, both Jews and Christians are respected as being the 'People of the Book' (*Ahl al-Kitab*). But the most sacred

¹⁰ Cf: ABULALA MAWDUDI, *Towards understanding Islam*, p.72.

¹¹ Cf: ABULALA MAWDUDI, *Towards understanding Islam*, p.74.

book and the only book that contains the final truth and pure words spoken by God, is the Quran.¹²

1.2.4 Faith in God's Prophets

As it is mentioned in *shahadah*, the revelation through God's messenger and prophet is mentioned directly after the statement of the unity of God, therefore it is the second most important part of the Muslim doctrine as a whole.¹³ They believe in all Messengers of God without any discrimination among them. Every known nation had a warner or Messenger from God. They were chosen by God to teach mankind and deliver His divine message. The Quran mentions the names of twenty five of them. Among them Mohammad stands as the last Messenger and the crowning glory of the foundation of Prophethood.¹⁴ The others are: Abraham, Noah, Moses, Lot, David, Solomon, Jesus, John the Baptist, etc.

All the prophets of God have been deputed by God to teach the same straight path of Islam. In this sense there is no difference between Muhammad and other prophets. But in spite of this equality Muhammad is considered as the last and most important of all prophets. He who follows Muhammad follows all the prophets, for whatever was good and eternally workable in their teachings has been embodied in his teachings. Muslims also believe that Muhammad is the last prophet and there will not be any more prophets appearing among the people till the day of judgement.¹⁵

1.2.5 Belief in Life after Death

Muslims believe in the last Day of Judgement. This world will come to an end someday, and the dead will rise to stand for their final and fair trial. People

¹² Cf: GUNAR NORLEN, *Islam and its World*, p.161.

¹³ Cf: GUNAR NORLEN, *Islam and its World*, p.162.

¹⁴ Cf: <http://www.saa'id.net/islam/4.htm>

¹⁵ Cf: ABULALA MAWDUDI, *Towards understanding Islam*, p.78-79.

with good records will be generously rewarded and warmly welcomed to the Heaven of Allah, and those with bad records will be punished and cast into Hell. Belief in life after death has been an integral part of the teachings of all the prophets. This has always been an essential condition of being a Muslim. All prophets have declared categorically in one way or another about the importance of this belief. And they taught that those who cast doubts on this belief would be considered as a non-believer (*Kafir*).

1.3 Five Pillars of Islam

Every building needs a strong foundation. In the same way Islamic faith also is built upon a strong foundation which is supported by pillars. The five pillars of Islam are: The declaration of the faith, the prayers, alms giving, fasting and pilgrimage. Let us take a closer look at all these pillars.

1.3.1 The Declaration of Faith (Shahadah)

This is the first pillar of Islam, it entails, to bear witness that there is none worthy of worship except Allah, and that Mohammad is His Messenger to all human beings till the Day of Judgment. The Prophethood of Mohammad obliges the Muslims to follow, his exemplary life as a model. In short all the activities of a true Muslim could be in accordance with the law of God and their ultimate aim is to seek the pleasure of God. Therefore whenever someone does good or avoids evil for fear of God, in whatever sphere of life and field of activity he is discharging his Islamic obligations.¹⁶

1.3.2 The Prayers (Salah or Salat)

This is the second pillar of Islam and it constitutes the daily prayers offered to Allah at different times of the day. According to the tradition (*hadith*) there are

¹⁶ Cf: ABU:LALA MAWDUDI, *Towards understanding Islam*, p.88.

five compulsory prayers are to be observed by the Muslims who have reached the age of maturity. The five compulsory *salats* are named as follows according to the time of the day at which they are observed; *salat al-subh*, *salat al-zuhr*, *salat al-asr*, *salat al-maghrib* and *salat al-isha*.¹⁷ These ritual prayers are most fundamental and most important of all other obligations in the life of a Muslim. This repetitive prayer refreshes five times a day the belief in which one reposes his faith.

It is easy to understand how daily prayers strengthen the foundations of one's faith, prepare one for the observance of a life of virtue and obedience to God, and refreshes that belief from which springs courage, sincerity, purposefulness, purity of heart, advancement of the soul and enrichment of morals. Before each moment of prayer one performs ablutions as prescribed by the Holy prophet. Then say the prayers as instructed by the prophet to show that you believe and respect his prophethood and consider it as your bounden duty to follow his instructions ungrudgingly.

Besides these five daily prayers Muslims are also encouraged to say their prayers as a community. Therefore the Friday prayers are of great importance to all Muslims. This congregational prayer on Friday creates among Muslims a bond of love and mutual understanding. It arouses a collective unity and fosters among them a national fraternity. This prayer is also a symbol of equality where rich and poor, black and white all stand together and prostrate together to worship the true God. It also inculcates a strong sense of discipline and obedience to an elected leader.¹⁸

¹⁷ Cf: Ed. H.A.R GIBB, J.H. KRAMERS, *Shorter Encyclopaedia of Islam*, p. 493.

¹⁸ Cf: ABULALA MAWDLU DI, *Towards Understanding Islam*, p.90.

1.3.3 Alms Giving (Zakah)

The third pillar of Islam is religious alms giving (*Zakah*). This is a legally fixed tax¹⁹ which every Muslim is obliged to pay annually for the support of the poor and of other people who are in special need of help. The root of the term *zakah* is from *zaka*, which means to 'increase purity' or to 'become pure'. In a way it means giving back to God a part of what he has given through his grace is to attain merit on the day of judgement. According to Islamic belief everything comes from God and He is the rightful owner of everything in this world. Therefore giving *zakat* is an act that pleases God.²⁰

The money that one pays as *zakah* is not for Allah. He is beyond any want or desire. But He promised manifold rewards to those who help their brethren in need without expecting any worldly gains or recognition. This great pillar of Islam fosters the quality of sacrifice and free people from selfishness and greed.²¹

1.3.4 Fasting (Sawm)

Fourth pillar of Islam is called fasting (*sawm*) and it is prescribed for all adult Muslims during the month of Ramadan, the ninth month in the lunar calendar, believed to be the month in which Quran was revealed to Muhammad the first time. The term *sawm* means abstinence and it means all Muslims with the exception of children below seven years, the sick or elderly and pregnant or menstruating women, should abstain from food, drink, smoking, sexual intercourse, or any other sensual desires from dawn till sun down, during the 30 days of Ramadan.²² This consciousness of duty and spirit of patience observed for the whole month enables the Muslims to strengthen their faith.

¹⁹ It is paid once a year considering the net wealth and the percentage set by the prophet. (1/40 or 2.5%)

²⁰ Cf: GUNAR NORLEN, *Islam and its World*, p. 189.

²¹ Cf: ABUL ALA MAWDUDI, *Towards understanding Islam*, p.92.

²² Cf: GUNAR NORLEN, *Islam and its World*, p. 191.

In another point of view fasting has an immense impact on society, all Muslims irrespective of their status fast during the same month. This brings about equality of men and thus goes a long way towards creating in them sentiments of love and brotherhood. During this month of fasting evil conceals itself while the good comes to the fore and the whole atmosphere is surrounded by piety and purity.²³

1.3.5 Pilgrimage (Hajj)

It is the last of the five pillars of Islam. But it has a great religious importance for a pious Muslim. The pilgrimage is recommended at least once during the life time, and everybody who is physically or economically able to perform is obliged to it. According to prophet himself and *hadith*, Pilgrimage (*Hajj*) is the most important form of the struggle for the sake of God (*Jihad*) provided it is performed in a pious and serious way in obedience to God's command.²⁴

The *hajj* is in a way the biggest of all *ibadah* (Submission, Surrender or Worship). To undertake such a long journey leaving all the dear ones shows the depth of one's love for God. And it is not like any other journey, here his thoughts are only concentrated on Allah, his entire being is directed towards Him in a spirit of intense devotion. Therefore the visit to the places which bear witness to the glory of Islam leaves in him an indelible impression that he carries till his last breath.²⁵

Our discussion so far has given us a fair understanding of what Islam is all about. We also looked into the fundamental articles of faith and five pillars of Islam. So now we are going to focus our attention to Christianity. In this section we will be discussing about Christianity in general and its fundamental beliefs.

²³ Cf: ABULALA MAWDUDI, *Towards understanding Islamp.*91.

²⁴ Cf: GUNAR NORLEN, *Islam and its World*, p. 195.

²⁵ Cf: ABULALA MAWDUDI, *Towards understanding Islam*, 93.

1.4 What is Christianity?

Christianity is the name given to that definite system of religious belief and practice which was taught by Jesus Christ in the country of Palestine, during the reign of the Roman Emperor, Tiberius, and was promulgated, after its founder's death, for the acceptance of the whole world, by certain chosen men among His followers. At present there are numerous sects and denominations (Baptists, Presbyterians, Lutherans, Anglicans, Calvinists, etc.) of people who claim to be true followers of Jesus. All these groups accept the life and teaching of Jesus and acknowledge that Jesus is the Son of God and truly God himself.²⁶

In my enquiry I am going to limit myself to the Catholic Church and her teaching regarding the issues of basic beliefs and practices. The Roman Catholic Church, officially known as the Catholic Church, is the world's largest Christian church, representing over half of all Christians and one-sixth of the world's population.²⁷ The Catholic Church is a communion of 23 particular churches. Among these are the Western Rite (Latin Rite) and Eastern Catholic Churches comprising 2,782 dioceses.²⁸ The Church's highest earthly authority in matters of faith, morality and Church governance is the Pope, currently Benedict XVI who holds supreme authority over the Church in concert with the College of Bishops, of which he is the head.²⁹ The community is made up of an ordained ministry and the laity; members of either group may belong to organized religious communities.

²⁶ Cf. KEATING, J. *Christianity. In The Catholic Encyclopedia.*

²⁷ "Number of Catholics and Priests Rises". Zenit News Agency. 12 February 2007. <http://www.zenit.org/article-18894?l=english>. Retrieved on 21 February 2008.

²⁸ *Roman Catholic Church*, From Wikipedia the free encyclopedia.

²⁹ Cf: *Code of Canon Law*, Art. 331 and 333.

1.5 Fundamental Beliefs in Christianity

Even though there are different interpretations and opinions regarding the Bible from one Christian denomination to another, Christians in general share a set of beliefs they hold as essential to their faith. These statements of faith could be extracted from the earliest of Christian documents such as Apostles Creed and other apostolic writings. The Apostles creed was developed between second and ninth centuries. It was the most popular creed that was used by the western Christians. Its central doctrine was that of Trinity and God the Creator. All the doctrines present in this creed could be traced back to the apostolic period. This creed was used as the summary of Christian belief especially for the candidates for baptism in Rome.³⁰

Apostles Creed is still unaffected by the later Christological divisions, its statement of the articles of Christian faith remain largely acceptable to most of the Christian denominations. These articles of faith are, belief in God the Father, Jesus Christ as the Son of God and the Holy Spirit (Trinity), the death, descent into hell, resurrection, and ascension of Christ, Christ's second coming, the Day of Judgement and salvation of the faithful.³¹

1.5.1 Belief in the Trinity

Trinity refers to the teaching that the one God comprises three distinct, eternally co-existing persons; the Father, the Son (incarnate in Jesus Christ), and the Holy Spirit. Together, these three persons are sometimes called the Godhead, although there is no single term in use in Scripture to denote the unified Godhead. The Catechism of the Catholic Church (CCC) states that, "The mystery of the most Holy Trinity is the central mystery of Christian faith and life. It is the mystery of God himself. It is therefore the source of all the other mysteries of faith, the light

³⁰ Cf: Ed., PELIKAN, HOTCHKISS, *Creeeds and Confessions of Faith in the Christian Tradition*.

³¹ Cf: <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Christianity>

that enlightens them.”³² In the words of the Athanasian Creed, an early statement of Christian belief, "the Father is God, the Son is God, and the Holy Spirit is God, and yet there are not three Gods but one God".³³ They are distinct from another: the Father has no source, the Son is begotten of the Father, and the Spirit proceeds from the Father. Though distinct, the three persons cannot be divided from one another in being or in operation.³⁴

The Trinity is an essential doctrine of mainstream Christianity. "Father, Son and Holy Spirit" represents both the immanence and transcendence of God. God is believed to be infinite and God's presence may be perceived through the actions of Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit. According to this doctrine, God is not divided in the sense that each person has a third of the whole; rather, each person is considered to be fully God. The distinction lies in their relations, the Father being unbegotten; the Son being begotten of the Father; and the Holy Spirit proceeding from the Father and from the Son. Regardless of this apparent difference, the three 'persons' are each eternal and omnipotent.³⁵

1.5.2 Belief in Jesus Christ

The central tenet of Christianity is the belief in Jesus as the Son of God and the Messiah (Christ). The title "Messiah" comes from the Hebrew word מָשִׁיחַ (māšīáh) meaning anointed one. The Greek translation Χριστός (Christos) is the source of the English word "Christ".³⁶ Christians believe that Jesus, as the Messiah, was anointed by God as savior of humanity, and hold that Jesus' coming was the fulfillment of messianic prophecies of the Old Testament. The Christian concept of the Messiah differs significantly from the contemporary Jewish concept. The core

³² Cf: *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, Art. 234

³³ Cf: KELLY. *The Athanasian Creed*

³⁴ Cf: <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Christianity>

³⁵ Cf: <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Christianity>

³⁶ Cf: MCGRATH, *Christianity: An Introduction*, p. 4-6

Christian belief is that through belief in and acceptance of the death and resurrection of Jesus, sinful humans can be reconciled to God and thereby are offered salvation and the promise of eternal life.³⁷

While there have been many theological disputes over the nature of Jesus over the first centuries of Christian history, Christians generally believe that Jesus is God incarnate and "true God and true man" (or both fully divine and fully human). Jesus, having become fully human, suffered the pains and temptations of a mortal man, but did not sin. As fully God, he rose to life again. According to the Bible, "God raised him from the dead" (Acts 2:24, 2:31-32, 3:15, 3:26, 4:10, 5:30, 10:40-41, 13:30, 13:34, 13:37, 17:30-31, Rom. 10:9, 1 Cor. 15:15, 6:14, 2 Cor. 4:14, Gal 1:1, Eph 1:20, Col 2:12, 1 Thess. 1:10, Heb. 13:20, 1 Pet. 1:3, 1:21) then ascended to heaven, and is "seated at the right hand of the Father"³⁸ and will ultimately return (Acts 1:9-11) to fulfill the rest of Messianic prophecy such as the Resurrection of the dead, the Last Judgment and final establishment of the Kingdom of God.

1.5.3 Death and Resurrection of Jesus

Christians consider the resurrection of Jesus to be the cornerstone of their faith (1 Cor. 15: 3-5) and the most important event in human history.³⁹ Among Christian beliefs, the death and resurrection of Jesus are two core events on which much of Christian doctrine and theology is based.⁴⁰ According to the New Testament Jesus was crucified, died a physical death, was buried within a tomb, and rose from the dead three days later. (Jn. 19:30–31, Mk. 16:1-6) The New Testament mentions several resurrection appearances of Jesus on different occasions to his

³⁷ Cf. METZGER, COOGAN, *Oxford Companion to the Bible*, p. 513, 649

³⁸ Cf. http://en.wikisource.org/wiki/Nicene_Creed. Retrieved 2009-05-05.

³⁹ Cf. HANEGRAAFF. *Resurrection: The Capstone in the Arch of Christianity*

⁴⁰ Cf. <http://www.gotquestions.org/resurrection-Christ-important.html>.

twelve apostles and disciples, including "more than five hundred brethren at once,"(1 Cor. 15:6) before Jesus' Ascension to heaven. Jesus' death and resurrection are commemorated by Christians in all worship services, with special emphasis during Holy Week which includes Good Friday and Easter Sunday.

The death and resurrection of Jesus are usually considered the most important events in Christian Theology, partly because they demonstrate that Jesus has power over life and death and therefore has the authority and power to give people eternal life (John, 5:24, 6:39–40, 6:47, 10:10, 11:25–26, 17:3). Christian churches accept and teach the New Testament account of the resurrection of Jesus with very few exceptions. Some modern scholars use the belief of Jesus' followers in the resurrection as a point of departure for establishing the continuity of the historical Jesus and the proclamation of the early church.⁴¹ Some liberal Christians do not accept a literal bodily resurrection, seeing the story as richly symbolic and spiritually nourishing myth.⁴² Arguments over death and resurrection claims occur at many religious debates and interfaith dialogues.⁴³ Paul the Apostle, an early Christian convert and missionary, wrote, "If Christ was not raised, then all our preaching is useless, and your trust in God is useless."(1 Cor. 15:14).

1.5.4 Belief in the Sacred Scriptures

Christianity regards the Bible, a collection of canonical books in two parts (the Old Testament and the New Testament), as the authoritative word of God. It is believed by Christians to have been written by human authors under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, and therefore for many it is held to be the inerrant word of God.⁴⁴

⁴¹ Cf: FULLER, *The Foundations of New Testament Christology*, p. 11.

⁴² Cf: FUNK, *The Acts of Jesus: What Did Jesus Really Do?*

⁴³ Cf: LORENZEN, *Resurrection, Discipleship, Justice: Affirming the Resurrection Jesus Christ Today*, p. 13

⁴⁴ Cf: *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, Inspiration and Truth of Sacred Scripture (§105-108)

Jews, Catholics, Orthodox and Protestants each define separate lists of Books of the Bible that each considers canonical. These variations are a reflection of the range of traditions and councils that have convened on the subject. Every version of the complete Bible always includes books of the Jewish scriptures, the *Tanakh*, and includes additional books and reorganizes them into two parts: the books of the Old Testament primarily sourced from the *Tanakh* and the 27 books of the New Testament containing books originally written primarily in Greek.⁴⁵ The Roman Catholic and Orthodox canons include other books from the Septuagint which Roman Catholics call Deuterocanonical.⁴⁶ Some of the deuterocanonical books are Job, Sirach, Wisdom, 1 and 2 Maccabees, etc. Protestants consider these books to be apocryphal. Some versions of the Christian Bible have a separate Apocrypha section for the books not considered canonical by some Churches or by the groups publishing them.⁴⁷

1.5.5 Belief in Afterlife, Salvation and Eschatology

Most Christians believe that human beings experience divine judgment and are rewarded either with eternal life or eternal damnation. This includes the general judgement at the Resurrection of the dead. In Roman Catholicism, those who die in a state of grace, i.e., without any mortal sin separating them from God, but are still imperfectly purified from the effects of sin, undergo purification through the intermediate state of purgatory to achieve the holiness necessary for entrance into God's presence.⁴⁸ Those who have attained this goal are called saints.

⁴⁵ Cf: <http://www.pcusa.org/101/101-bible.htm>.

⁴⁶ Cf: *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, The Canon of Scripture, (§120)

⁴⁷ Cf: METZGER, COOGAN, *Oxford Companion to the Bible*. p. 39.

⁴⁸ Cf: *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, The Final Purification, or Purgatory (§1030-1032)

Paul of Tarsus, like Jews and Roman pagans of his time, believed that sacrifice can bring about new kinship ties, purity, and eternal life.⁴⁹ For Paul the necessary sacrifice was the death of Jesus: Gentiles who are "Christ's" are like Israel, descendants of Abraham and "heirs according to the promise" (Gal. 3:29). The God who raised Jesus from the dead would also give new life to the "mortal bodies" of Gentile Christians, who had become with Israel the "children of God" and were therefore no longer "in the flesh"(Rom. 8:9,11,16).

Modern Christian churches tend to be much more concerned with how humanity can be saved from a universal condition of sin and death than the question of how both Jews and Gentiles can be in God's family. According to both Catholic and Protestant doctrine, salvation comes by Jesus' own death and resurrection as a substitute. The Catholic Church teaches that salvation does not occur without faithfulness on the part of Christians; converts must live in accordance with principles of love and ordinarily must be baptized.⁵⁰

Christians believe that the second coming of Christ will occur at the end of time. All who have died will be resurrected bodily from the dead for the Last Judgment. Jesus will fully establish the Kingdom of God in fulfillment of scriptural prophecies.⁵¹

So far we have spelt out clearly about Islam and Christianity giving special emphasis to their fundamental articles of faith and beliefs. In the next section we are going to focus more of the similarities and differences of these two great faiths.

⁴⁹Cf. <http://www.sbl-site.org/assets/pdfs/JBL1234.pdf>.

⁵⁰ Cf. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 846; Vatican II, *Lumen Gentium* 14

⁵¹ Cf. <http://www.reformed.org/books/institutes/books/book3/bk3ch25.html>.

1.6 Similarities and Differences in Basic Concepts of Islam and Christianity

Having discussed at length about the beliefs and basic concepts of Islam and Christianity, it would be interesting to note the similarities and differences in their basic concepts. There are many things that unite these two great religions, also there are number of things that differentiate them. There is great convergence between the basic prayers of Islam and Christianity, the creation story of Bible and that of Quran, commandments of God in the Bible and in the Quran, basic concepts of faith and practices, moral code and secularism. There are also obvious differences in the above mentioned areas but those will not outweigh the unity of purpose. In this section I will limit myself to elaborate only the similarities and differences of basic concepts of Islam and Christianity.

1.6.1 Similarities in Basic Concepts

Both Islam and Christianity recognize a monotheistic God as the creator, who is omnipotent, omniscient, and immanent yet with his creation transcendent. God is perceived as one who makes agreements or covenants with humans. Islam and Christianity have similar eschatology, both believe that this world will come to an end some day and no one knows when. And they also believe that a figure referred to as Satan or Antichrist will be defeated at the end of the world. After the world has ended God will judge humans, based on their actions in compliance with a moral code, which is specified in the covenant God has already made with us.⁵²

The final judgement will determine ones eternal abode, heaven or hell. Both Islam and Christianity believe that human beings have a soul which is eternal continuing its existence after death. They both believe in the free will of human

⁵² Cf. <http://www.jerusalemities.org/jerusalem/christianity/24.htm>

beings to choose between good or evil by obeying or disobeying God. Islam and Christianity believe that angels exist as servants and messengers of God. They believe that Satan exists, as well as evils spirits who follow him who are the enemies of humanity. They also believe in miracles and sincere repentance and forgiveness of God. Both Islam and Christianity also believe that Jesus was born of the Virgin Mary. These are the prominent similarities one could find in these two great faiths. There are also many other similarities which are not mentioned here.⁵³

1.6.2 Differences in Basic Concepts

Together with number of similarities there are also obvious differences between Islam and Christianity. I will enumerate few of the prominent ones here to help our enquiry. The most prominent difference between Islam and Christianity is that Islam does not believe in the Trinity whereas Christians believe in the Trinity (Father, Son and Holy Spirit). Christians believe Jesus as God himself (a person of the Trinity), whereas Muslims consider him only as a prophet and a servant of God. Christians believe that Jesus was crucified on the cross whereas Muslims hold that Christ was neither crucified nor killed by Jews but he was taken up to God. Crucifixion was only an illusion in the minds of his enemies(Quran 4:157,158).

Christians believe that Jesus resurrected after three days of his death. And they also believe the death and resurrection of Jesus redeems them from their sins. Muslims do not believe in this because they do not believe in the crucifixion account at all. According to Christian belief hell is eternal. According to catholic belief purgatory is a place or state of punishment where in the souls of those who die in the state of grace may do penance and become cleansed and fit for heaven. And also they believe that only Christians can go to heaven. According to Islam hell is a place

⁵³ Cf: <http://www.jerusalemmites.org/jerusalem/christianity/24.htm>

of purification, and permanent. Paradise will be eternal once meriting it. As to whether hell is also eternal for unbelievers there are two schools of thought; a great majority of Muslims affirm that God may pardon every sin and every crime except disbelief in God(Quran 4:48, 116). Others believe that even the punishment of disbelief may one day terminate by the grace of God (Quran 11:107). Christians believe in original sin that can only be expiated by Christ through baptism, whereas Muslims believe that all mankind is born pure and each one is responsible for his/her sins and not someone else.⁵⁴

Christians believe in the vicarious atonement, which means one person can extinguish the guilt incurred by another person's sins. Jesus is believed to have died so as to atone vicariously for the sins of man. But Muslims do not believe in vicarious atonement. They believe that each person is responsible for his or her own actions and no one can atone for someone else. However, one can pray to God for His Mercy and Forgiveness on behalf of another person. There are many differences between the Quranic and Biblical versions of certain biblical stories. The source of Christian law is the Sacred Scripture, which is interpreted by the competent authority (for Catholics it is the Pope and college of Bishops), whereas Muslims the first source of Muslim law is the Quran and second source is the *Hadith* (traditions of the Prophet Muhammad).⁵⁵ Other sources of Muslim laws are *Ijma*- consensus of jurists and *Qiyas*- analogical deductions.

1.7 Conclusion

Even though we have not gone through the similarities and differences of Islam and Christianity in detail, I have tried to give a glimpse of what it rally entails.

⁵⁴ Cf: <http://www.jerusalemities.org/jerusalem/christianity/24.htm>

⁵⁵ Cf: <http://www.jerusalemities.org/jerusalem/christianity.24.htm>

Both these religions are strong in their own beliefs and practices. So it is not easy or possible to merge together these giants of faiths. That is not my intention either. What I want draw my attention to, is to find a possibility of peaceful co-existence of these two great religions. As we find number of similarities, without closing our eyes to obvious differences, can lead the members of both faiths to understand and appreciate one another better and find ways and means to identify peaceful living together. Therefore my next chapter will deal with a common denominator that can unite us rather than divide in our effort to attain peaceful co-existence.



CHAPTER II

JESUS CHRIST IN ISLAM: A UNIFYING FACTOR BETWEEN CHRISTIANS AND MUSLIMS

2.0 Introduction

There are several mentions of Jesus in the Muslim scriptures. But the way Christians understand Jesus as Christ and being the second person of the Trinity is completely missing its relevance in Islamic faith. Muslims do believe in the person of Jesus and his miraculous birth and extraordinary works. In this small research paper I will try to venture into the Islamic scriptures and thought to identify what they really believe about Jesus and also some probable misconceptions with regards to Christian doctrine about Jesus Christ.

Of all the major religions in the world, Islam is the only non-Christian faith that recognises Jesus. Within the pages of the Qur'an there is a distinctly Islamic portrayal of Jesus. Three of its Suras (chapters), *Ali-Imran*, *Al-Maida* and *Maryam*

are so named because of their references to Jesus and his work. There are about ninety verses spread across fifteen Suras of the Qur'an that refer to Jesus. A second source for the Islamic understanding of Jesus are the numerous *Ahadith* (traditions) which portray his teaching and the ultimate purpose of his first and second coming. There are also many references to Jesus in other Islamic literature.⁵⁶

My purpose in this paper is to examine ontological (rather than functional) assertions about Christ in Islam, both in terms of what Islam itself affirms about Jesus and also what it claims Christians believe. A proper study of this subject is essential for moving the debate forward. Therefore I would like to restrict my research to few areas such as; Jesus' names and their significance, His Virginal conception and birth, infancy narrative, Jesus as a prophet and Messenger, His divine status, Jesus as the Messiah (Christ) and his second coming.

2.1 Jesus' Names and their Significance in Islam.

In Islam, Jesus is known as *Isa*. In the Qur'an the name *Isa* often occurs with the addition "son of Mary". Of the 25 places in the Qur'an where *Isa* is used, in sixteen of them he is called *Ibn Mariam* (the son of Mary), and in five passages his name is coupled with that of *Musa* (Moses).⁵⁷

The Qur'an does not mention who chose the name and why he was named *Isa*. Christian Scriptures, however, relate that the name Jesus was chosen by God himself. It is stated that the angel of God came and said to Mary, "Do not be afraid, Mary, you have found favour with God. You will be with child and give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus" (Luke 1:30-31). He was to be called Jesus, "because he will save his people from their sins" (Matthew 1:21).

⁵⁶ <http://www.itl.org.uk/print/jesus.pdf>

⁵⁷ <http://www.itl.org.uk/print/jesus.pdf>

2.1.1 Jesus called as Christ (Masīh)

Jesus is called Christ in eleven verses of Qur'an, but with no specific connotations as in the case of Christianity. Interestingly all the sur'as that use the name Christ are Medinan,⁵⁸ probably Muhammad was influenced by the Christian Arabs in Medina and must have got the name 'Christ' from them. The meaning of the name Christ is not found anywhere in Qur'an, so Muhammad may not have known the real Christian meaning of that word. It is merely taken as a proper name of Jesus.⁵⁹ For instance we see in Qur'an, 3:45 "Behold! the angel said: O Mary! Allah giveth thee glad tidings of a Word from Him: His name will be Christ Jesus."

Etymologically speaking Jesus was called Christ because he was anointed. The reason why Qur'an calls Jesus Christ is not mentioned anywhere in the Qur'an. But some commentators have given us some interpretations, such as Ar-Razi⁶⁰ who suggested that the derivation of Masīh is from a verb meaning to 'travel', for Jesus travelled much or went on pilgrimage. Al-Ghazali suggests the name Christ attributes to mysticism of Jesus. Hence for Muslims Jesus became the model of pilgrims and example of mystics.⁶¹

2.1.2 Jesus, Spirit of God

In Qur'an the word "spirit" is used in many verses. Each of them could be understood differently according to the context. The Shorter Encyclopaedia of Islam identifies five meanings of the word spirit, they are used: as breath of life, as

⁵⁸ The sur'as in Quran can be divided into three time periods according to its composition as Early Meccan, Medinan and Late Meccan. Medinan sur'as were composed when Muslims controlled Medina.

⁵⁹ FREDERIC N. MVUMBI, *Journey into Islam*, 81.

⁶⁰ Al-Razi and Al-Ghazali are prominent Muslim Scholars.

⁶¹ FREDERIC N. MVUMBI, *Journey into Islam*, 82.

inspiration, as a command, as the name of Jesus, as associated with Gabriel who brought the message to Mary.⁶²

All these shows the Qur'anic use of the word is wide and at time confusing. Yet it is interesting to note that the spirit is used in two contexts in connection with Jesus. In the first instance Jesus was aided and supported by the Holy Spirit. Qur'an regards Jesus as mere creature who needs God's help and strength to carry out his mission. Therefore Qur'an says, "We gave Moses the book and followed him up with succession of messengers; we gave Jesus the son of Mary clear signs that strengthened him with the Holy Spirit."(Q.2:87; cf.2:253). When the Qur'an mentions Jesus was supported by Allah, it wants to show the humanity of Jesus and to deny his divinity.⁶³ Secondly, Jesus himself is named as Spirit. Unlike the previous mention of Spirit as supporter of Jesus here in Q.4:171 it says, "O people of the book! Commit no excess in your religion: nor say of Allah aught but the truth. Christ Jesus the son of Mary was no more than a messenger of Allah, and his Word, which he bestowed on Mary, and a Spirit proceeding from him: So believe in Allah and his messengers." The idea that comes out is that Jesus is a Spirit of God because he is created by Allah. Therefore even though he was called the Spirit of God, he is still a creature and nothing more.⁶⁴

2.1.3 Jesus, the Word of God.

The Arabic word '*kalima*' means Word of God, and it appears in many verses with different meanings. First of all it means Qur'an, the revealed Word, secondly it means the act of the Creator, thirdly a revealed message imparted to the prophets and fourthly a divine precept given to Mary. Our focus of attention is to the

⁶² FREDERIC N. MVUMBI, *Journey into Islam*, 82.

⁶³ FREDERIC N. MVUMBI, *Journey into Islam*, 83.

⁶⁴ FREDERIC N. MVUMBI, *Journey into Islam*, 84-85.

last meaning. There are two instances in the Qur'an that mentions this divine precept given to Mary and two of them seem to contradict each other. First is emphasising on his origin, the Qur'an says, "Behold! The angels said: O Mary! Allah giveth thee glad tidings of a Word from him: His name will be Christ Jesus." (Q.3:45). Here the Qur'an does not say clearly whether Jesus was created through the Word of God or he is Word himself. But in the second text (Q.4:171) clearly mentions that Jesus as the Word of God. It says, "Christ Jesus the son of Mary was no more than a messenger of Allah, and his Word, which he bestowed on Mary."⁶⁵

Since the Qur'an does not mention what it means for Jesus to be the Word of God, we have to rely on some commentaries. It is interesting to note that most of the commentaries are unanimous that Jesus is called the Word of God because he was created by the Word of God. According to Badawi⁶⁶, Jesus is the Word of God because he belongs to the first class of beings, those produced by first creation, from nothing, as contrasted with the creation out of existing matter like man and woman.⁶⁷

Muslims accepts Jesus as the Word of God but not the same way Christians understand and believe him as God himself. Christian understanding of Jesus as the Word of God implies that he is God himself, but Muslims recognise Jesus as the Word of God without this connotation. It is important to note how the same term revealed in two religions can give two different meanings.⁶⁸

2.2 Jesus' Virginal Conception and Birth

The virgin conception of Jesus is an unquestionable and unanimous belief of Islam. There are two Suras that mention at length about it. Sura al- Imran

⁶⁵ FREDERIC N. MVUMBI, *Journey into Islam*, 87.

⁶⁶ Badawi is also a prominent Muslim Scholar.

⁶⁷ FREDERIC N. MVUMBI, *Journey into Islam*, 88.

⁶⁸ FREDERIC N. MVUMBI, *Journey into Islam*, 89.

says, "She (Mary) said: O my Lord! How shall I have a son when no man hath touched me?" (3:47). Mary was really disturbed and she wanted to defend her virginity by saying that it is not possible to have a son without a man. The same story is repeated in Sura Maryam, besides saying that no man has touched me, she goes on to declare in verse 20 saying, "And I am not unchaste." It is an interesting thing to note that Mary's statements about her virginity connected with two negations. The sum total of these negations are the affirmation that, "I am a virgin."⁶⁹

The Qur'an acknowledges that Jesus was born without a father. Mary, his mother was chosen by God for this purpose. The Qur'an highly reveres her. Sura 19 of the Qur'an is given her name. She is the only woman who is specifically called by name in the Qur'an (Sura 3:42; cf. 21:91; 66:12; 23:50). Other women are given names that show their relationship with their husbands, for instance, wife of Adam, wife of Noah and wife of Pharaoh, etc. This is an indication of how Islam (Quran) reveres and esteems Mary.

In line with other Qur'anic references the designation "son of Mary" serves to remind readers that Jesus was born of the Virgin Mary. She conceived Jesus through God's creative word. (Sura 3:47).⁷⁰ Even though the virgin birth of Jesus is undisputed in Islam, the divinity of Jesus is not accepted in Islamic faith due to the reference of Muhammad and also the belief that, "God creates what he wills." (3:47).

2.3 Infancy Narratives of Jesus

It is at this point (regarding stories of Infancy narratives) that the Jesus of Islam and the Christ of the Bible begin to diverge, since Q.19:19ff presents

⁶⁹ FREDERIC N. MVUMBI, *Journey into Islam*, 76.

⁷⁰ <http://www.itl.org.uk/print/jesus.pdf>

Jesus speaking in the cradle, announcing His prophet hood, a thought repeated in Q.5:110 - 'Behold! I strengthened thee with the holy spirit so that thou didst speak to the people in childhood and in maturity'. In fact, the Qur'an presents Him as a wonder kid, for in Q. 3:49 we find the child Jesus animating clay birds (again, repeated in Q. 5:110 '...thou makest out of clay as it were the figure of a bird ...and thou breathest into it and it becometh a bird...') Clearly, there is nothing in the canonical gospels resembling this picture. However, we must observe this fact at this juncture; what the Qur'an is asserting here is its *own* Christology, *not* what it claims Christians believe. It is very well known that this idea of the wonder-working infant has been borrowed from the apocryphal pseudo-gospels of the *Gospel of Thomas* ('clay birds') and the 'cradle' story is taken from the so-called *Gospel of the Infancy* which itself derives from the *Gospel of Thomas*.

Although there is this common ground, notice that Islam attaches no theological significance to the Virgin birth; Sura 3:59 states: "Lo! the likeness of Jesus with Allah is as the likeness of Adam. He created him of dust, then He said unto him: Be! and he is." Muslims often state that Adam's creation was a *greater* miracle, since he had no parents at all! Moreover, there does not seem to be any compelling reason for the virgin birth in the Qur'an, since Islam denies original sin; the miracle is merely an arbitrary act of God's will, an expression of His power. However, one interesting point in the *Hadith*, the narrations of Muhammad (the second source of authority for Muslims), indicates the uniqueness of Christ's birth narrated by Abu *Huraira*: The Prophet said, "When any human being is born, Satan touches him at both sides of the body with his two fingers, except Jesus, the son of

Mary, whom Satan tried to touch but failed, for he touched the placenta-cover instead." (*Sahih Al-Bukhari Hadith 4.506*)⁷¹

There are several concerns regarding the accounts of Christ in the Qur'an. First, the infancy accounts of Christ contradict the Gospels. The Qur'an teaches that Jesus was born in the desert under a palm tree while the New Testament Gospels teach that Jesus was born in the city of Bethlehem in a stable (Lk. 2:7). The infancy narratives in the Qur'an teach that Jesus performed miracles in his infancy and childhood. However, John 2:11 states that Jesus' first miracle was performed in Cana of Galilee at the beginning of His ministry. Since the Qur'an and the Bible present contrary accounts of the life of Christ, both cannot be true at the same time.⁷²

2.4 Jesus as Prophet and Messenger.

In Qur'an prophets are men among men, but special instruments of God for the revelation of his message. They are so important in Qur'an and it recommended for all men to believe in all the prophets (cf. Q.5:43-45). Jesus is one among the many prophets who are mentioned in the Qur'an. In Q. 19:30 he is once mentioned alone as a prophet rather than elsewhere with the company of other prophets. The name (*nabi*) prophet should not be confused with another term (*rasul*) messenger. We find in the encyclopaedia that a *nabi* is at the same time a *rasul* but a *rasul* is not ipso facto a *nabi* because a prophet is the one who not only preached the Word of God but also brought a book for guidance. With this respect Jesus is called a *nabi*.⁷³

Jesus is known by the common titles of *nabi* (prophet) and *rasul* (messenger or apostle) and he was the recipient of the *Injil* (the gospel) to give to people (Sura 19:31; 4:169; 3:48; 4:46). As in the Qur'an, we find in the Christian scriptures that

⁷¹ http://www.pneumafoundation.org/article.jsp?article=/article_0053.xml

⁷² http://www.probe.org/site/c.fdKEIMNsEoG/b.4426941/k.BCE4/Jesus_in_the_Quran.htm

⁷³ FREDERIC N. MVUMBI, *Journey into Islam*, 89.

Jesus was ‘sent’ by God who had ‘given him the Gospel’ (Luke 10:21; 4:18). In John’s narrative Jesus is spoken of as the prophet that was to come in the world and as the Messiah, the Son of God (John 6:14; 11:27). We also find that he was called a prophet by those who first heard his teaching (Mark 6:15; 8:28) and although Jesus accepted this title (Mark 6:4; Luke 13:33), he did not think of himself as just a prophet. At times he claimed that he was greater than the Prophet Jonah, David, Solomon and even Abraham (Luke 11:31-32; Matthew 22:45; John 8:54-55).⁷⁴

In short, according to Islam Jesus is one of the prophets sent by Allah to guide and guard human beings. The Qur’an acknowledges that he has special favours that he does not share with any other prophets. Yet he is not above others who brought the books. He is not above Muhammad who is the seal of the prophets. Jesus is no more than a prophet who received special favours from God.⁷⁵

2.5 Jesus’ Divine Status.

The Qur’an denies that God begets or takes to himself offspring (Sura 112). In other places it asks, “How can Allah have a son, when he hath no consort?” (Sura 6:101). Allah “has taken neither a wife nor a son.” (Sura 72:3). Such denunciation was directed primarily against the polytheism of the Makkans. However, Muslims use these passages along with passages which deal specifically with heretical Trinitarian ideas to condemn the doctrine of the Sonship of Christ as they believe it is taught in Christianity (Sura 19:88-93).⁷⁶

Every messenger of God is a *shahid* (witness) to the true faith before his people. Jesus’ mission as a witness is highlighted in the discourse between him and Almighty God that will take place on the day of judgement but is already written

⁷⁴ <http://www.itl.org.uk/print/jesus.pdf>

⁷⁵ FREDERIC N. MVUMBI, *Journey into Islam*, 91.

⁷⁶ <http://www.itl.org.uk/print/jesus.pdf>

down in the Qur'an, that God will ask him whether he taught people to worship him and his mother beside God. Jesus will certainly deny this and will affirm that he had said, "Worship God, my Lord and your Lord". (*Sura 5:116 - 117*).⁷⁷

Ahmad von Denffer refers to the account of the theological dispute between Muhammad and the Najran Christians: They said: 'If Jesus is not Allah's son, who is then his father?', and they argued about Jesus, so Allah's messenger said to them: 'Do you know that there is no child not resembling his father?' They said: 'Yes'. He said: 'Do you not know that our Lord is living and does not die, and that Jesus passed away?' They said: 'Yes'. He said: 'Do you not know that our Lord takes care of everything, guards it and sustains it?' They said: 'Yes'. He said: 'Does Jesus do any of these things?' They said: 'No'. He said: 'Our Lord formed Jesus in the womb, as he wished, and our Lord, he does not eat, nor drink nor talk?' They said: 'Yes'. He said: 'Do you not know that Jesus' mother carried him, as any woman carries (a child), then she gave birth to him, as any woman gives birth to her child, then she fed him, as a child is fed, then he ate, drank, talked?' They said: 'Yes'. He said: 'How is it then as you claim? Then they were silent.'⁷⁸

It is important to appreciate that Jesus, alone among the founders of the great religions of the world, spoke with authority. Others have claimed to speak the words they have received from God, for example, Moses begins all his teachings with the phrase, "Thus says the LORD". However, Jesus says, "But I say to you...". The people who heard him "were amazed at his teaching, because his message had authority" (Luke 4:32). No other prophet spoke with such authority. Prophets claimed to have a deeper insight into the truth; however Jesus went further by claiming to be the Truth, the source of all Truth. In the light of his claims and deeds

⁷⁷ <http://www.itl.org.uk/print/jesus.pdf>

⁷⁸ AHMED VON DENFFER, *Christians in the Qur'an and the Sunna.*, 25-26.

the Bible portrays him as the “image of the invisible God” (Col 1:15) and as the living Word of God through whom He has spoken in a way He never did before (Hebrew 1:1-3). Jesus certainly did not go around saying, “I am God”. Indeed, he joyfully acknowledged his dependence upon God. However, the things he said and did convinced his contemporaries that he was stepping into the space reserved for God, acting and speaking for him in a way never seen or heard before.⁷⁹

2.6 Jesus as Christ.

Jesus is called by his proper name along with the title *Al-Masih* (the Messiah). This title is sometimes accompanied by the name Jesus and sometimes used by itself and occurs in the Qur’an some eleven times. This title is used in a personal way, as in *Sura 5:76/72*: ‘The Messiah said, “O children of Israel serve God”. There is no etymological explanation of the word *Masih* in the Qur’an. However, Muslim commentators and lexicographers give various explanations. The popular one is that it is a Hebrew word, *mashiah*, which was used of kings, patriarchs, and deliverers.⁸⁰ However, it means ‘anointed’ and it was in this sense that Jesus was called the Messiah, the one anointed for specific purpose, the last prophet of Israel.

The Qur’an says that Jesus was blessed by God (*Sura 19:32/31*) and so anointed with honour. He had been protected from Satan from birth (*Sura 3:36*). Some attach this special anointing to his birth. Yet others say that Jesus was the Messiah because he anointed the eyes of the blind to cure them (*Sura 3:43*; Mark 6:13; James 5:14), or because he used to rub sick people with his hands. Some Muslims from Sufi circles think that Jesus was called the Messiah because he travelled far and wide and never settled. They connect *Masih* with the word *Sah*, to

⁷⁹ <http://www.itl.org.uk/print/jesus.pdf>

⁸⁰ AHMED DEEDAT, *Christ in Islam*, 123.

wander, to survey, to go on pilgrimage. Thus they believe that Jesus is the leader of *Imam al sa'yihin* (peripatetic ministers).⁸¹

The title Messiah is very important to Christians. In Hebrew the word Messiah means "the Anointed One". It can in a lesser form, refer to any priest or anointed leader and occasionally the expression is used in this context in the Old Testament. However, later it became a title for the Promised One from God - the Redeemer (Daniel 9:25). When Jesus came he claimed to be that expected Messiah (John 4:25-26). The Jews of his day did not understand that he was the Messiah because they had expected a military leader, while Jesus claimed to be the Messiah who came "not to be served, but to serve and to give his life as a *fidya* (ransom) for many" (Matthew 20:28). In the Scriptures we find that the title Messiah is synonymous with the title Son of God. (Matthew 16:16; 26:63; Mark 1:1; Luke 4:41; John 11:27; 20:31).⁸²

For Muslims, Christians are *masihiyyuna*, the followers of *Massih*, in short followers of Christ. The Qur'an calls Jews and Christians, the people of the book (*Ahla al-Kitab*). It is more appropriate for us to be called *Ahla al-Masih*, the people of Christ. In fact we do not follow a book but a person, Jesus Christ himself.⁸³

2.7 Second Coming of Jesus.

There are two verses in the Qur'an that Muslims believe indicate the second coming of Jesus: "And there is none of the People of the Book but must believe in him before his death; and on the Day of Judgement he will be a witness against them" (Sura 4:159). "And (Jesus) shall be a Sign (for the coming of) the

⁸¹ The Encyclopaedia of Islam, Vol. IV, 82.

⁸² <http://www.itl.org.uk/print/jesus.pdf>

⁸³ FRANS BALDACCHINO, *Jesus Christ and Virgin Mary of the Qur'an*, 9.

Hour (of Judgement): Therefore have no doubt about the (Hour), but follow ye me: This is a Straight Way" (Sura 43:61). According to the first verse, all the *Ahl-al-Kitab* (Jews and Christians), will believe in Jesus before his death. Muslim commentators state that the Arabic *leuaminanna* (must believe) refers to an event in the future. This they believe could only be possible should Jesus come again and live in this world till he dies. The second verse shows that Jesus is the sign of the Last Hour. So it is argued, 'How can he be a sign for Doomsday if he doesn't appear sometimes before it?'⁸⁴

Most Muslims believe that Jesus descent from heaven will be accomplished by resting his hands on the wings of two angels. He will descend onto the white minaret, situated in the eastern part of Damascus. He will invite the whole world to be Muslim including Christians and Jews. The one eyed antichrist, accompanied by seventy thousand Jews, will be killed by Jesus, at the place called Lod. The Jews will be badly defeated. Jesus will break the cross, annihilate swine and will end all wars and *jizya* (poll tax). His position will be like that of a judge. During this period there will be an abundance of all sorts of goods. Muslims will dominate the world and there will be an end of all religions except Islam.⁸⁵ Some groups like the *Ahmadiyya* and the *Bahai* believe that their founders were the second coming of Christ. Other groups like the Jehovah's Witnesses believe that Jesus came back at the turn of this century and took the elect with him. However, the Bible reveals that his second coming will not be in secret. When the apostles saw Jesus ascending into heaven, the angels told them: "This same Jesus, who has been taken

⁸⁴ <http://www.itl.org.uk/print/jesus.pdf>

⁸⁵ MAWDUDI SAYYID .A, *Finality of Prophethood*,. 58-61.

from you into heaven, will come back in the same way you have seen him go into heaven" (Acts 1:11).⁸⁶

Christians are fortunate to find a major part of the New Testament directly concerned with Christ's second coming. Jesus and his return as Judge is one of the major themes. Nevertheless, there is no mention of him coming as an ordinary being, nor is there the least suggestion that he will marry, die, and be buried. The Scriptures indicate that when he comes, his people both living and the dead will be raised or changed and meet him in the air and the earth will be destroyed (1 Thessalonians 4:15 - 17; 1 Corinthians 15:50-54; 2 Peter 3:10). On many occasions Jesus said that he came down from heaven and that he would come again (John 3:13; 8:23; 14:2-3,18-19; 16:28; Matthew 25:31-32; 26:64). This second coming is to be different from the first, his coming will be as the Mighty Judge and conquering King (2 Thessalonians 1:6-10).⁸⁷ The reassuring news and the final reminder is found in the last chapter of Revelation, the last book of the Bible: "Behold, I am coming soon! My reward is with me, and I will give to everyone according to what he has done" (Revelation 22:12).

At his first coming Jesus became like us in every respect, to deliver us from the power of Satan (John 1:18; Hebrews 2:14-17). He came to conquer sin and rise from the dead to gain victory and triumph. At his second coming, we are going to see him as he really is (1John 3:2). The mission that Jesus had left to his Church to perform and proclaim his Gospel to the world will terminate at his second coming. He will uproot evil and enthrone righteousness forever. He will establish eternal peace. Although it is right to campaign for social justice and peace to improve society, the Bible makes it clear that we will never be able to perfect it. Only Christ

⁸⁶ <http://www.itl.org.uk/Jesus/second.html>

⁸⁷ <http://www.itl.org.uk/print/jesus.pdf>

at his second coming will fulfill it. The Bible speaks clearly about the unexpectedness of his return. About the day of his return, Jesus advised us all not to speculate because no one knows the date but God (Mark 13:32). All that we have to do is to be ready and prepared for his return - at any time. Jesus said that he would come when people did not expect him. Critics consider the idea of Jesus' second coming as naive: "Where is this coming he promised? Ever since our fathers died everything goes on as it has since the beginning of creation" (2 Peter 3:4).⁸⁸

Jesus has already answered such ridicule. He said his coming would be as unexpected as the flood in the time of Noah (Matthew 24:37-41). People were told about it but they did not believe it. Then it arrived and it was too late. Today everyone has the opportunity to believe in Christ now and act as he has commanded (2 Peter 3:9; Acts 2:37-38). At his arrival this chance will have been withdrawn; it will be too late.⁸⁹

2.8 Conclusion

The Qur'an and the Bible agree that Jesus was special. He is recognised as one 'par excellence' but to understand the whole purpose of his coming one has to study and see him in the light of the Torah, the Psalms and the books of the prophets, which Jesus himself referred to. It is through these scriptures that one can see the full picture of Jesus and how his companions and disciples understood him (2 Peter 1:16-17; 1 John 1:1-4). The Qur'an says that Jesus was sent in order to 'make him a Sign unto men' (Sura 19:21). However, the whole story can only be

⁸⁸ <http://www.itl.org.uk/Jesus/second.html>

⁸⁹ <http://www.itl.org.uk/print/jesus.pdf>

found in the scriptures of those, known to Muslims as *ahl al-kitab* (the people of the Book) or in today's language, the people of the Bible.⁹⁰

Through this research I have attempted to reach out into the vast ocean of Islamic and Christian understanding of Christ. I am well aware that a study of this kind cannot be completed with these few observations and comparisons. What I have in mind is just to tickle the curiosity of both Christians and Muslims to venture into this sort of a study to be more understanding towards one another. It calls for openness and dialogue coupled with a great willingness to listen to the voice of God. My wish and prayer is the same as it was heard at the nativity, 'Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favours!' (Lk.2:14).

⁹⁰ <http://www.itl.org.uk/Jesus/story.html>

CHAPTER III

WAY FORWARD: A PEACEFUL COEXISTENCE OF CHRISTIANS AND MUSLIMS

3.0 Introduction

Our world today is a mixture of multiplicity of ideologies, religions and cultures. Whether one wants or not he or she is forced to live in an environment which is complex and different ^{from} ~~form~~ one another. Here comes the important question. How does one live in such a situation? Is it enough to coexist in the same geographical area? Or, is there a need to coexist peacefully, understanding each other's uniqueness and differences? This mutual appreciation and acceptance would not be possible unless people are willing to learn about the 'other' and willing to walk a mile in their 'shoes'. But often these differences between people have caused painful conflicts and have become a source of discord rather than unity and understanding.

3.1 Christian Muslim Dialogue: An Overview

Christian - Muslim encounter over the centuries was far from encouraging. This dialogue is as old as Islam. The common denominator that unites Christianity and Islam is monotheistic tradition of the patriarch Abraham. Even though in the early days of Islam there was great understanding and toleration between them.⁹¹ But soon there existed a sort of hostility and desire to take control of the other. This ultimately led to the centuries old crusades and bloodshed on both sides. For the last fourteen centuries Muslims and Christians travelled long and often difficult road together. There were some bright spots⁹² (time of peaceful coexistence) along the way as well as periods of great hostility, tension and severe conflict.⁹³ In short, the history of interaction has been characterized by mistrust, misunderstanding and mutual antipathy.⁹⁴

Among the Catholics, in the Second Vatican Council the need was felt to relate peacefully with major religious traditions of the world. Therefore the pontifical council for interreligious dialogue brought about a document entitled, *Guidelines for Dialogue Between Christians and Muslims*. This document has gone through several editions and updates since then taking into account the experiences of Christians and Muslims in the intervening period. In the west, the image of Islam was portrayed in a distorted manner due to the past experiences of crusades and mistrust. Even the most objective research of past hundred and fifty years has not

⁹¹ In the early days Islam was considered as a Christian heresy and many were tolerant and understanding towards them. Muhammad himself asked the Ethiopian king for protection of his followers from the Meccan persecution.

⁹² Soon after the establishment of Islam due to the conflict between Chalcedonian Orthodoxy versus Syriac and Coptic speaking Orthodox Churches, the latter encouraged and welcomed Islam in their midst.

⁹³ This was the time of crusades.

⁹⁴ Cf. CHARLES KIMBALL, *Striving Together*, p.37

entirely succeeded in correcting this distorted image.⁹⁵ At this juncture the Second Vatican Council declared “Although in the course of the centuries many quarrels and hostilities have arisen between Christians and Muslims, this most sacred synod urges all to forget the past and strive sincerely for mutual understanding. On behalf of all mankind, let them make common cause of safeguarding and fostering social justice, moral values, peace and freedom.”⁹⁶

As far as Christians and Muslims are concerned, they are invited to consider various forms of their life together over the centuries. God is inviting them at this present time to draw lessons from their painful history and to realize the need to have a peaceful dialogue to enable them to give a better witness and peaceful cooperation in service to God and humanity. The document of the pontifical council for interreligious dialogue is an answer to this long felt need of an open dialogue in which participants fully accept each other and share together both the content of faith and values of their tradition.⁹⁷ In recent times relations between Muslims and Christians are tensed in many countries. At times they live side by side, but the two communities live completely separate social lives. Some of the countries like Sudan, Egypt, Nigeria and Pakistan encounters between Muslims and Christians have been problematic, especially after some of these countries tried to introduce the *Shari'ah* as the official law. On the other hand Tanzania and some other East African countries are examples of peaceful coexistence of Muslims and Christians. In Tanzania especially on the west of Lake Victoria and in the west Kilimanjaro, many

⁹⁵ Cf. MAURICE BORRMANS, tr. Marston Speight, *Guidelines for Dialogue between Christians and Muslims*. P.1

⁹⁶ *Nosira Aetate*, Art.3

⁹⁷ Cf. MAURICE BORRMANS, tr. Marston Speight, *Guidelines for Dialogue between Christians and Muslims*. P. 9-10.

tribes are either Christians or Muslims. Among them mixed marriages are also quite frequent.⁹⁸

Dialogue without a good understanding of its requirements and methods do not bear any desired fruits. Dialogue has nothing to do with the extremes; either of syncretism which makes all religions alike, or an uncompromising polemic that deny the meeting of different religions. Dialogue is actually a daring adventure of people who desire mutual enrichment from their different ways, for instance, sharing of common values. This exercise should not be a platform for trying to convince the other of their duty to adhere to what the other believes. Rather this should be for greater understanding of each other and of respect of each other's convictions. Christians and Muslims walked often painful and bumpy roads together in the past centuries. This journey together was often difficult due to misunderstandings and mistrust between them. There were also peaceful dialogues in the middle ages that were characterized by philosophical reasoning and systematic recourse to scriptural texts. In the present times Christians and Muslim find themselves living side by side and collaborating to each other for human progress and for the well being of all whether deliberately or not.

3.2 Muslim Views on Christianity

In this section I would like to present a short overview of Muslim views on Christianity and also of my research findings from the Sudan. The famous passage from *Sura 5* expresses that the relations between the Prophet himself and the local Christians were characterized by tolerance. That passage reads thus,

Strongest men in enmity to the believers, will you find Jews and Pagans; and nearest among them in love to the believers will you find those who say "We are Christians": Because among these are men devoted to learning, and men who have renounced the world, and they are not arrogant. (*Sura 5:82*)

⁹⁸ Cf. GUNAR NORLEN, *Islam and its World*, p. 263.

Scholars refer this text to the Christians in Ethiopia and their attitude towards the first Muslims.⁹⁹ Muslims regard the Jews and Christians as 'People of the Book' (*Ahl al-kitab*). But as mentioned earlier in this research Muslims are convinced that Jews and Christians have corrupted their scriptures and the only true texts are found in the Quran. Even though Muslims believe in Jesus¹⁰⁰ they do have serious difficulty in accepting the way Christians worship Jesus as the son of God and the second person in the Trinity. Therefore Quran uses rather strong words to condemn it in *Sura 4:171*,

O People of the Book, do not exceed beyond the bounds in your religion or say things about God, save the truth. The Messiah, Jesus, son of Mary, is only a messenger of God, and His word he conveyed to Mary, and a spirit from Him. So believe in God and His messengers, and say not, "Three." Stop. It is better for you. God is only one God. It is far removed from His majesty that He should have a son.

During my stay in the Sudan¹⁰¹ I managed to meet a number of Muslims from different walks of life and was able to discuss at length about their faith and also their views on Christianity. As many of them have requested me not to reveal their identity I am unable to mention their names and designation. But they have given me the permission to share their views in this paper. Out of ten people who shared with me their views on Christianity, eight of them were very appreciative and positive about their interactions with Christians on a daily basis. I asked mainly six questions¹⁰² to each of them and their answers throw light to their understanding of Christians and Christianity in general, issues of relating to each other, common elements in both faiths, possibility of peaceful coexistence and issues relating to relationship of Christians and Muslims in the Sudan. Most of them were frank in their sharing and they expressed their readiness to walk with me an extra mile to

⁹⁹ Cf. GUNAR NORLEN, *Islam and its World*, p. 264.

¹⁰⁰ It is discussed elaborately in the second chapter of this thesis.

¹⁰¹ I was in the Sudan from the last week of May till first week of August, 2009.

¹⁰² Those questions are in the appendix.

show their positive appreciation to have a peaceful and healthy interaction with Christians. They were also open to point out certain key elements in both faiths that are not easily agreeable. Three out of ten pointed out to me that they find it hard to accept the Christian understanding (belief) of God as Trinity and Jesus as the son of God.

Three out of ten whom I interviewed were highly educated and well versed in Islamic literature. They gave me a comprehensive view of their understanding of Christianity and to my surprise all three of them were highly appreciative of the people of the book (*Ahl al-Kitab*) and mentioned the need for greater understanding of each other through peaceful interactions. One thing they pointed out in common was that there should be ample opportunities for people of both faiths to have access to each other's literature. They were also appreciative of the efforts of the Catholic Church in promoting inter-religious dialogue and collaborating with the people of other faiths in social and moral issues. Most of them have accepted that there are certain issues in the Sudan that are still unresolved between Christians and Muslims which are blocking in a way peaceful coexistence with each other. They also expressed their desire to see a peaceful Sudan in the near future where people of both faiths could work hand in hand for the welfare of the whole country regardless of their religious orientation.

Practically all of them argued that they found it difficult at times to relate with Christians even though there are many things we have in common that unites rather than divide us. Two young students whom I interviewed expressed their views that they found it easy to relate with their fellow students who are Christians. They did not even consider what they believe or why they believe certain things which are different from them. What mattered for them was their availability to one another

when they needed it. It may sound strange for the people who hold their faith very dear to them. But according to those young students they were convinced of what they were talking about. One of them mentioned to me that, “our relationship to one another should not be on the basis of which religion or faith I follow, but on the basis of human values. My religious outlook should not blind or stop me from having a true friendship with a person from another faith”, he added. We, the Salesians of Don Bosco, have two technical schools in the North Sudan, one in Khartoum and the other in El-Obeid. We educate and train hundreds of Muslim boys in our schools. They feel completely at home in our institutes and never complained that they are treated differently because of their religious beliefs. Those who passed out of our schools are still in contact with us and many of them come to visit us when they are on holidays.

In short, besides all the differences and complexity in our religious outlook still there is a room for better relations and understanding. Muslims in general are peace loving people and as the name Islam implies, they believe in complete submission to the will of Allah. Islam (faith) permeates their whole life.

3.3 Christian Views on Islam

In this section I would like to present a short historical overview of Christian views on Islam and also of my research findings from the Sudan. The very first encounters between Christians and Muslims were portrayed by mutual tolerance and acceptance.¹⁰³ During the emergence of Islam there was a struggle going on among the Eastern Byzantine Church regarding the natures of Christ. The Eastern Christians in Arabia were Monophysites and they were persecuted for a long time by the Byzantine Church of Constantinople, and they considered Muhammad as a

¹⁰³ The reference to this effect is given at the beginning of this chapter.

liberator.¹⁰⁴ Therefore there was tolerance and acceptance of each other at the early stages of the establishment of Islam. But when Islam had become a political power and began to develop as a dangerous competitor to the Christian Church, the good relations deteriorated rapidly.¹⁰⁵ At first Christians did not consider Islam as an independent religion, but rather considered it as a Christian heresy same like that of Arianism. Even some Christian scholars went as far as to attribute Islam as the emergence of the misleading sect of Antichrist within the Church. This idea also pointed towards the prediction of the end of the world.¹⁰⁶

One of the most important contributions to the encounter between Christians and Muslims in the twentieth century is brought about by the new approach of inter-religious dialogue brought about by the Catholic Church in the Second Vatican Council. *Nostra Aetate*, the document that deals with Church's relations with non-Christian religions states, "The Catholic Church rejects nothing of what is true and holy in these religions". (*Article 2*) This statement is followed by her (Church's) encounter with Islam in article number 3:

The Church has also high regard for Muslims. They worship God, who is one, living and subsistent, merciful and almighty, the Creator of heaven and earth, who has also spoken to men. They strive to submit themselves without reserve to the hidden decrees of God, just as Abraham submitted himself to God's plan, to whose faith Muslims eagerly link their own. Although not acknowledging him as God, they worship Jesus as a prophet, his virgin Mother they also honour, and even at times devoutly invoke. Further, they await the day of judgement and the reward of God following the resurrection of the dead. For this reason they highly esteem an upright life and worship God, especially by way of prayer alms-deeds and fasting. (*Nostra Aetate Article.3*)

¹⁰⁴ GUNAR NORLEN, *Islam and its World*, p.265.

¹⁰⁵ GUNAR NORLEN, *Islam and its World*, p.265.

¹⁰⁶ GUNAR NORLEN, *Islam and its World*, p.265.

The sacred council also urges everyone to forget the past and to make efforts to achieve mutual understanding for the benefit of all people to promote and preserve peace, liberty, social justice and moral values.¹⁰⁷

My research findings from the Sudan regarding the Christian view on Islam was two sided. I spoke to several people and ten of them were quite substantial in their contribution towards my research. Their opinion about Islam in general was something positive. They did not have any serious problem with their beliefs except for their condemnation of Jesus as the son of God. They also pointed out several common elements in both the faiths, such as, belief in One God, Jesus (even though not the same way), Day of Judgement, Angels, Mary, commitment to the poor, etc. Among the ten people whom I spoke to six of them were very positive about their relations with Islam. But the other four of them were skeptical and suspicious about the way they were treated under the Islamic rule (*Shari'ah*) in the Sudan. Those who spoke in favour were happy to point out the positive aspects of law and order and sense of security they feel in the Sudan rather than in any other country. They attribute the peaceful and secure life of people in Khartoum and around to the Islamic rule and the values of Islamic faith. Anybody can move around the city peacefully during the day or late in the evening without fearing thieves and armed robbers.

On the other hand, people who dissented were unhappy with the whole affair of the introduction of Islamic law into the Sudan. One even named it as 'propaganda for Islamisation'. In their opinion they do not feel they are respected by the Muslims, and they also pointed out few examples of the restrictions placed on Christian churches by the Islamic law of the state. In their opinion the Christians are

¹⁰⁷ Cf. *Nostra Aetate Article.3*

not allowed to construct churches or places of worship, they are also closely monitored the way they pray and interact with others. There are also other political concerns in their opinion which are not favourable to Christians. Two of them also brought about the issue of conflict between South and North Sudan as a religious intolerance rather than just geographical boundary. They also pointed out to me about the infrastructural development in the North of the country in comparison to the South Sudan. North is affluent in all the modern amenities such as hospitals, schools, roads and recreational facilities whereas the South of the country is deprived of even the basic facilities of health, transport and education. In their observation it is a systematic project of neglecting the South Sudan, which is predominantly Christian, against the Muslim north. They were also not blinded by the reality that most of the resources (oil, minerals and agricultural products) are exploited from the Southern part of the country for the betterment of the North.

Those who spoke positively about the interactions with Muslims were able to look beyond the above mentioned drawback and see the possible way forward in peaceful coexistence. According to two respondents we need to appreciate and focus on the positive elements of security and mutual respect rather than negative elements of polarization. In their view we have (both Christians and Muslims) many things in common. Both Islam and Christianity believe in God who is the creator of the whole universe, family values, social justice and peace, etc. One of them frankly remarked that most of the time the dissention take place due to hidden agendas from both sides. If a Christian interact with a Muslim in view of converting him or her to Christianity or vice versa, it can create unnecessary tension and even animosity between them. On the other hand the interaction is only just to share our convictions then there may not be any threat whatsoever. Such kind of interactions can bring

about better understanding of each other and harmonious living. He also mentioned that he regularly participated in their common celebrations (like Ramadan, Idd, etc) and also invited his Muslim friends to join him in Christian celebrations (Christmas, Easter, etc).

It is evident that the interactions between Christians and Muslims are not an easy task, but at the same time it is not an impossible task either. My personal experience as a Christian missionary in the Sudan gave me number of wonderful experiences of friendly and peaceful interactions with the Muslims. On one occasion when I experienced a serious accident in Khartoum, to my surprise the one who came to offer assistance was a Muslim. He knew that I was a Christian missionary and therefore he even refused to accept even anything in return for his generous support. What he told me that day touched me deeply. He said, "We are children of the same God, and therefore you are my own brother." The magnanimity of that faithful follower of Islam still gives me hope for peaceful relations between Christians and Muslims, not only in the Sudan but everywhere we meet. Often some Christians and many other religious groups brand Islam as a religion of terrorism and violence. In reality it is far from the truth. There are fundamental Muslims, who misunderstand the word *jihad*¹⁰⁸ and rise up in arms against all the rest considering them as infidels. But they are only a minority and they do not represent the true Islam, which is a religion of peace.

3.4 Way Forward: Towards Tolerance and Acceptance

Having discussed at length about the similarities and differences and also of some unifying elements, we have gone a step further to see how Christians and Muslims perceive each other. At this juncture it is right to propose certain

¹⁰⁸ Jihad simply means striving to live a moral and virtuous life, spreading and defending Islam as well as fighting injustice and oppression, among other things.

recommendations for a way forward for a peaceful coexistence of Christians and Muslims. What I am going to attempt here will not be in any way exhaustive or comprehensive. I am aware of my own limitation in such an attempt to propose a way forward. But having gone through a journey this far with the literature reviews and personal interviews with people of both faith I feel it is my bounden duty to pin point few observations which have emerged out of my research. I am also aware like many others who have undertaken such study in the past that considering the long history of enmity between Christians and Muslims, there are no quick fixes or easy answers or simple solutions. At the same time it is evident that the road is not blocked either.¹⁰⁹

The following few recommendations and propositions are points to ponder. I would not expect everybody to agree with me in whatever is expressed here. But if these propositions throw light to at least some dark areas of our understanding about Christian - Muslim relations my inquiry will have achieved its purpose.

3.4.1 Tolerance

The best way to open oneself to the other is through tolerance. As the meaning of the word 'tolerance' suggests, "it is the willingness to accept somebody or something especially opinions or behavior that you may not agree, or people who are not like you." ^{tolerant se - feo forule} (*Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary*). As we have seen that Christians and Muslims have lived through centuries of mistrust and antipathy coupled with political upheavals it is not an easy way forward to be tolerant to each other. At the same time if you look squarely at the issues at hand you will realize that there is no other way to begin a process of peaceful coexistence without being tolerant to one another. Being tolerant does not mean that one should sacrifice one's

¹⁰⁹ Cf. CHARLES KIMBALL, *Striving Together*, p. 106.

own religious convictions for the sake of the other. It is just acknowledging that a coin has two sides. Both sides of the coins are equally important and valuable. The values and beliefs I hold as a Christian are as important as the values and beliefs of my Muslim brother. Tolerance is not an attempt to make someone like me, but it is a greater openness to the other as he or she is. In my opinion to have a peaceful coexistence between Christians and Muslims tolerance is an inseparable component.

3.4.2 Acceptance

Together with tolerance, acceptance of each other is necessary. I can be tolerant to someone but I can be also passive at the same time. A passive tolerance would not bring about peaceful coexistence. My tolerance should be cemented with my active acceptance of the other person as he or she is. Acceptance also can mean openness to the other. Openness to the belief and value systems of the people of other faiths. In this regard inviting and accepting invitations for important celebrations of each other would be a sign of openness and acceptance. As I have mentioned earlier, one of the respondents pointed out that, he accepts invitation from his Muslim brothers to join them for their special celebrations and he himself invites them in return for Christian feast day celebrations. I found it something very positive and commendable which can bring about a peaceful coexistence.

3.4.3 Education

Another important area we need to focus in achieving a peaceful coexistence is education. It provides the basis for mutual understanding. Uninformed or erroneous views of the other are often the root cause of many problems that rock the Christian - Muslim relations. Christians need to unlearn some of what we presume we know about Islam and study empathetically about the religious faith and traditions of Muslims. The same is to be done by Muslims with regard to their

understanding of Christians and their traditions. This educational process is ongoing. We must never presuppose that we fully understand another religious tradition. It is not possible even to understand our own religious traditions¹⁰ in its entirety, so much less for another faith. The prospect of coming to know another tradition is overwhelming but it should not shy us away from our willingness to know about the other. This process of learning and reflection does not imply agreement. Often people reach different conclusions after appropriating the same information. But it can bring about greater understanding and appreciation of each other even beyond mere toleration.¹¹⁰

3.4.4 Encounter through Dialogue

Dialogue is more than a two way conversation. It is a stance, an orientation and openness. It includes thoughtful process of listening, learning and interacting. This is not as easy as the above mentioned propositions. Simply getting a group of people who are well intentioned and even motivated for a 'dialogue' may not bring about satisfactory results. There are some ground rules to be observed in order to get desired results. The following ground rules are developed through years of experience. Most important among them are; dialogue should be planned together whenever possible; parameters for the dialogue should be considered and identified as clearly as possible; people who participate in this process should be able to speak from a perspective of faith and religious experience; dialogue meetings should provide equal number of persons from each religious tradition; participants of this dialogue process should strive to understand the religious, cultural and ideological diversity present in the local situation.¹¹¹

¹¹⁰ Cf. CHARLES KIMBALL, *Striving Together*, p.107-109.

¹¹¹ Cf. CHARLES KIMBALL, *Striving Together*, p. 114.

There is no reason to assume that an agreement will result from a dialogical encounter following the above mentioned ground rules. At times Muslims and Christians who meet and share honestly about their deepest concerns may discover points where they must simply agree to disagree. Since both Christianity and Islam are mission oriented religions there would also be another concern that may emerge at this juncture. Is proclamation and witness appropriate in the context of dialogue? The answer could be no and yes. It is 'no' in the sense that dialogue should not be understood as a kind of pre-evangelization or forum for evangelization. Few people, either Muslims or Christians will enter into a dialogue to listen if they perceive the intentions of their partners are deceptive and insincere. True dialogue aims at mutual understanding through respectful exchange. Therefore it does not encourage people to dilute the strength of their religious commitment or to play down one's own religious convictions.¹¹²

Most important issue here is to know where to draw the line. In this respect bearing witness to one's faith is perfectly in tune with the context of dialogue. Such testimony reveals a sincere commitment and focus of a person as a Christian or a Muslim. Partly, the goal of dialogue is to hear directly and learn from people about their faith and traditions that permeate their lives. At the same time dialogue is not a forum for evangelization. The primary motivation of the participants should not be to persuade others to convert. The sole motivation should rather be, to speak, to listen and to learn.

3.5 Conclusion

The inquiry which I began some years ago regarding the possibility of peaceful coexistence between Muslims and Christians is motivated by one of my

¹¹² Cf. CHARLES KIMBALL, *Striving Together*, p. 115.

close friend, a committed Muslim, during my undergraduate studies at the university. We were closest of friends and we shared a great deal of ourselves. We often had serious discussions about faith related issues. We also prayed together. I went with him to the mosque couple of times to join him in his daily prayers. He also participated with me for some of the Christian services at my Church. We never tried to convert each other but rather encouraged each other in our own religious convictions and way of life. He is now an Imam, who is well versed in the Islamic scriptures. I am a Catholic missionary who is at the last phase of my priestly formation. We are still close friends even though miles apart. In short it is possible to live peacefully with Muslims. Not enough to just live side by side peacefully without interfering with each other's business but it is important to share passionately your convictions and allow others to share their own.

GENERAL CONCLUSION

As the famous saying goes, “A journey of thousand miles begins with a single step.” To begin a peaceful coexistence between Christians and Muslims is like venturing into such a long and tedious journey. Yet for the journey to commence we need to take the first step. Unless and until that very first step is taken, the whole process remains only as an idea in the intellectual sphere. The need for a peaceful coexistence of Muslims and Christians was felt over the centuries and there were some definitive steps taken towards achieving this goal. The desire for greater understanding and openness to each other has paved the way forward for peace. But this alone is not enough there should be mutual acceptance and appreciation of each other as they are.

I am also painfully aware that there are some issues which are still not yet under check and thus create an unhealthy tension between Christians and Muslims. For instance, in the recent shootout at Texas military base by an army Major Nidal Malik Hasan, who killed few of his colleagues and injured several others.¹¹³ It might seem to be a solitary incident that has no connection whatsoever with the topic under study. But when we look squarely at it we can find some connection. The BBC report substantiated by pointing out that the Major was unhappy with the racial abuses he received due to his religious outlook. There is a tendency within us which forces us to look at people with certain prejudice and preconceived ideas. We need to look beyond our religious settings to see the larger picture and greater human values.

A way forward in peaceful coexistence is only possible if there is mutual willingness to learn from each other. As I mentioned in the last chapter of this thesis

¹¹³ BBC world news on 6th November, 2009 gave the detailed news about this.

tolerance and acceptance coupled with education and dialogical encounter can bring about better understanding of each other. This can lead to greater appreciation and openness. There is a famous quotation on peace that reads thus, “peace is not the absence of war, but it is the absence of fear.” To have peace between Christians and Muslims also means the same. To live side by side without fear, to have that confidence that the other is not a threat to me, as well as me to the other, to have the freedom to love our neighbour without considering his/her religious outlook. It is not an easy task, but at the same time not an impossible task either.

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APPENDIX

Questionnaire for Research

Questions for Muslims

What is your opinion about Christianity?

What is your opinion about Christians in general?

Do you find it easy to relate with Christians?

Is there anything common among Muslims and Christians?

How can Muslims and Christians live peacefully without offending each other?

What is your opinion regarding Christian - Muslim relations in the Sudan?

Questionnaire for Research

Questions for Christians

What is your opinion about Islam?

What is your opinion about Muslims in general?

Do you find it easy to relate with Muslims?

Is there anything common among Muslims and Christians?

How can Muslims and Christians live peacefully without offending each other?

What is your opinion regarding Christian - Muslim relations in the Sudan?