PRINCIPLES FOR INTERRELIGIOUS DIALOGUE

VIEWPOINT OF THE CHURCH
Dialogue is a conversation of two (or more) persons. It could be defined as the intention to seek mutual understanding on an issue or situation through inquiry and learning that can lead to consensus. Thus Interreligious dialogue is a conversation of two (or more) believers of different religions or living faiths. Plato said in his treatise on law that “every art and every inquiry, and similarly every action and pursuit, is thought to aim at some good; and for this reason the good has rightly been declared to be that at which all things aim. But a certain difference is found among ends; some are activities, others are products apart from the activities that produce them. Now, as there are many actions, arts, and sciences, their ends also are many; the end of the medical art is health, that of strategy victory, that of economics wealth.¹ The end of Interreligious dialogue is peace and harmony”

The Church in which we are is called Catholic because it is universal in the sense that it is given to all not only as a place but more importantly as a life to choose; a life which provide all that a person need in order to be saved, that is to see God face to face as he really is. The Catholic Church, therefore, goes into internal reforms to be meaningful to all people of different generations, traditions, cultures, races, educations, etc. In the cause of reform, the Church evaluates its methods of evangelizing and its content. Essentially, it remains the same but as a social institution as well, it evolves towards a better understanding of its doctrines, beliefs and rites. Thus many things have gone into vital changes, especially from second Council held in Vatican from 1962 to 1965. The church is no longer presented as a pyramid but as communion of communion, the role of the laity was redefined, its relations with other denominations and with non-Christian religions has improved, its methods have changed, it views of the whole universe have also improved. Moreover, the Catholic Church grants freedom to all its members; the Sacraments, which are seven, received more emphasis. Its organization is in such a way that it gives identity to all, even to non-Christians. So Ecumenism and Dialogue are new forms of evangelization.

¹ Cf. Plato, treatise on law.
Thus, more than what Plato says, Interreligious dialogue is a way that God the Father through Jesus Christ in the Holy Spirit has shown his people for a bright future. The Church believes that there is only one divine plan of for all people. So Interreligious dialogue is a strong element of the Church of the future and the future of the Church.²

The Church of the future has no basis of discrimination whosoever as it is stated:

We cannot truly call on God, the Father of all, if we refuse to treat in a brotherly way any man, created as he is in the image of God. Man's relation to God the Father and his relation to people his brothers are so linked together that Scripture says: "He who does not love does not know God" (1 John 4, 8). No foundation therefore remains for any theory or practice that leads to discrimination between man and the man or people and people, so far as their human dignity and the rights flowing from it are concerned. The Church reproves, as foreign to the mind of Christ, any discrimination against people or harassment of them because of their race, color, condition of life, or religion. On the contrary, following in the footsteps of the holy Apostles Peter and Paul, this Sacred Synod ardently implores the Christian faithful to "maintain good fellowship among the nations" (1 Peter 2, 12,14,15), and, if possible to live for their part in peace with all people, so that they many truly be sons of the Father who is in heaven.³

The Church, particularly the Church of and after Vatican II, sees the need of Interreligious dialogue and has incorporated it in its evangelizing mission. Jacques Dupuis says:

What is to be shown now in that interfaith dialogue belongs to the Church's evangelism mission? This has not been perceived in mission theology, even in recent decades. In fact, it is a recent gain of post-Vatican II years, the background of which must be briefly recalled...this goes to show that viewing dialogue as an integral element of evangelization marks a significant qualitative change in postconsular mission theology. It forms part of the development in

² Cf. Peter Lobo, Brief historical background to interfaith dialogue in Sound the Conc. Conference on interfaith dialogue (Bangkok-Thailand, 2002), p. 29

³ Nostra Aetate, no.5
post-Vatican II years of a broad and comprehensive notion of evangelization, of which dialogue—together with other elements—is an integral dimension.\(^4\)

Thus Jacques Dupuis defines dialogue in this way:

As a specific, integral element of evangelization, dialogue means all positive and constructive Interreligious relations with individuals and communities of other faiths, which are directed at mutual understanding and enrichment, in obedience to truth and respect for freedom. It includes both witness and the exploration of respective religious convictions.\(^5\)

However, he clearly states that dialogue must be distinguished from proclamation and evangelization since it does not aim at conversion of others to Christianity.

We ought to state beforehand that Interreligious dialogue is possible but a difficult way. Its possibility and difficulties will be highlighted as we discuss it. However, let us know that the Catholic Church has not held an exclusively negative attitude towards other religions. Although there have been some exclusivist approaches and thoughts in many of her members. Perhaps the general attitude in the encounter between Christianity and other religions has been that of a dialectical union of acceptance and rejection.\(^6\) This means that there have been some positive as well as negative responses, episodes of cooperation and chapters of repugnance.

However, the Catholic Church’s attitude has substantially changed and continues to evolve into a new understanding of her relations with non-Christian religions, particularly with the newness brought in

the Church through Vatican II Council. As a matter of fact, the declaration on the relations of the Church to non-Christian religions states:

In our time, when day by day mankind is being drawn closer together, and the ties between different peoples are becoming stronger, the Church examines more closely her relationship to non-Christian religions. In her tasks of promoting unity and love among people, indeed among nations, she considers above all in this declaration what people have in common and what draws them to fellowship. One is the community of all peoples, one their origin, for God made the whole human race to live over the face of the earth (1). One also is their final goal, God. His providence, His manifestations of goodness, His saving design extend to all people (2), until that time when the elect will be united in the Holy City, the city ablaze with the glory of God, where the nations will walk in His light (3). People expect from the various religions answers to the unsolved riddles of the human condition, which today, even as in former times, deeply stir the hearts of people: What is man? What is the meaning, the aim of our life? What is moral good, what sin? Whence suffering and what purpose does it serve? Which is the road to true happiness? What are death, judgment and retribution after death? What, finally is the ultimate inexpressible mystery, which encompasses our existence: whence do we come, and where are we going? 7

The document continues:

Other religions found everywhere try to counter the restlessness of the human heart, each in its own manner, by proposing "ways," comprising teachings, rules of life, and sacred rites. The Catholic Church rejects nothing that is true and holy in these religions. She regards with sincere reverence those ways of conduct and of life, those precepts and teachings which, though differing in many aspects from the ones she holds and sets forth, nonetheless often reflect a ray of that Truth which enlightens all people. Indeed, she proclaims, and ever must proclaim Christ, "the way the truth, and the life" (John 14, 6), in whom people may find the fullness of religious life, in whom God has reconciled all things to Himself (4). The Church therefore, exhorts her sons, that through dialogue and collaboration with the followers of other religions, carried out with prudence and love and in witness to the Christian faith and life, they recognize, preserve and promote the good things, spiritual and moral, as well as the socio-cultural values found among these people. 8

The Church is very much concerned of working towards the unity of all people and abolishing discriminations. Consequently, she exhorts

7 *Nostra Aetate*, no.1
8 *Ibid.*, no.2
her sons and daughters to be aware of this noble and compulsory task, to be well equipped for its achievement and then to carry it out with prudence, love and charity. In recent times, Pope John Paul II invited Christians to commit themselves to dialogue:

All Christians must, therefore, be committed to dialogue with the believers of all religions, so that the mutual understanding and collaboration may grow; so that moral values are strengthened; so that God may be praised in all creation. Ways must be developed to make this dialogue become a reality everywhere, but especially in Asia, the continent that is the cradle of ancient cultures and religions.9

But how can we be actively involved in dialogue with members of other religions if we do not know the major principles and guidelines for such enterprise? How can we know the procedures involved if we do not study them and if we are not trained? How can we be prudent - the document recommends - if we do not know where we are coming from, where we are and where we are going? For instance, we know that it is Christian to love a Muslim and it is Islamic to love a Christian. But in which way Christians will express their love towards the Muslims without hurting them?

We should not rely so much on the hope that the age of holy wars is long past; that the wars of religious expansion and the crusades of only of historical interest, for we have witnessed another set of religious wars in the twentieth century, in Africa and elsewhere.10

This course, as the title indicates, has a very limited scope, for it only sets some guiding principles and procedures to be followed as we enlighten our fellow human beings and take part in dialoguing with non-Christian religions. This enterprise is really important if not necessary to us as Africans since our continent has become more than any period a highly pluralistic. A misguided Pluralism of religious has caused and could still cause conflicts, divisions and wars. Perhaps, the major features of their cultures -solidarity and sharing- should motivate Africans more and more to consider Interreligious dialogue not as an optional but as an imperative activity.

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9 Pope John Paul II quoted by Jacques Dupuis, op., cit., p. 361.
10 Cf. Owen C. Thomas, op. cit., p. 4
WHAT IS INTERRELIGIOUS DIALOGUE?
The testimony of Cardinal Francis Arinze highlights the importance
the definition of these two concepts “Interreligious dialogue” when he
says that he has noticed growing interest in Interreligious dialogue
among many people, statesmen and ambassadors, Bishops, priests
and consecrated people, religious leaders in non-Christian religions
but find some difficulties and challenges. Partly these difficulties are
due to the meaning of this reality. Thus being acquainted with a
consensual definition of “Interreligious dialogue” becomes imperative.
Knowing what Interreligious dialogue is and what it is not should not
be taken too lightly.

What is not11
- Interreligious dialogue is neither a study of world religions (a
theological reflection on religions) nor a comparative study of creeds
and doctrines, although such studies are important and useful.
- Interreligious dialogue is not
  * A scientific debate between experts in religions because no
    one tries establishing what is right or wrong.
  * A box of pre-established and pre-determined laws from which
    solutions can be drawn at any moment. In other words, it is a
    forum of conflicts resolution, though someone might find the
    truth of the matter.

  * An effort to persuade the other to embrace one’s own religion
    since conversion from one religion to another must be free. It
    can be viewed as conversion –Christians and non-Christians to
    God.

  * A forum where differences in doctrines and practices are
    considered as obstacles, therefore they should be ignored and
    thrown away.

  * A simple exchange of information about each other’s religious
    beliefs

Search for peace not conversion is the major goal of Interreligious dialogue. However conversion, both to his own or to the other is not ruled out. This must be free.

What it is
Interreligious dialogue is
*First and foremost an attitude that someone acquires or the kinds of options open to him in developing his own point of view of other religions. An attitude could be defined the manner of his acting or his thinking; one’s disposition, opinion or mental set. Some believe that all other religions are false except theirs. Some others assert that each religion is the appropriate expression of its own culture. Still others think that all religions are the same. So people may have different attitudes towards other religions. Here are the most well known: rationalism, Romanticism, relativism, exclusivism, dialectic, reconception, tolerance, dialogue, Catholicism and presence. The attitude of African Christians towards other religions these last decades is of special concern because the future of Africa that should be shaped in a way that promotes harmony for the avoidance of religious conflicts partly depends on this.

*An encounter of people of different religions and faiths in an atmosphere of freedom and openness for each partner to listen and understand himself and the other. One person speaks and another listens and responds and vice versa. Dialogue is no more than this respectful communication of two different subjects. Now we need a forum whereby African Christians will speak and African non-Christians will listen and respond; African non-Christians will speak and African Christians will listen and respond.

*A sharing -conversation- of the truth found in different religions and faiths. Thought the truth must be said, we need to know how, when and to whom to articulate it.

*A working and walking together in search of what is good and right with the desire of living together and in communion.
*Living together in spite of our differences. Differences make sense when they are well understood.

**ITS NECESSITY**

Interreligious dialogue is necessary for peace. Plato says: “He seems to me to have thought the world foolish in not understanding that all are always at war with one another; and if in war there ought to be common meals and certain persons regularly appointed under others to protect an army, they should be continued in peace.” This means that it peace we need not war. Commonly people say that if you want peace, you must prepare for war. I say, if you want peace, you must prepare for peace. When we say that Interreligious dialogue is necessary we mean that without it we cannot reach to the end or with it, we can reach to the end with fewer difficulties. The end can be understood as peace or justice or harmony or coexistence or cooperation. Interreligious dialogue is not man’s made activity but God’s. The human person is dialogical individual whose whole life is marked by dialogue with God, with his fellow humans and with the world/creation. The very life of God is dialogical. So it becomes necessary that we live the life of God because that is the vocation of men and women. Both the inner nature of God and the outer relationships of God with humans are profoundly dialogical.

Again, dialogue is necessary because the Church is born of the dialogue between God and humans through Christ and in the Holy Spirit. Since God does not leave any person or any culture without some experience of his will, we collaborate with what God has already sown in each individual.

It is therefore necessary that men and women of this world dialogue for their well-being and redemption. No human hates harmony, peace, justice (commutative, associative and social). These come through God’s grace and human’s work.

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12 Cf. Plato, *treatise on law.*
OBSTACLES
As said above, Interreligious dialogue is possible but difficult perhaps because of some hindrances. May be that is why Jean-Mary Gaudel said that the highest form of dialogue will always be the cross, not as a dogma, but as a mystery which we cannot avoid. Dialogue with other Religions goes with some obstacles. Many scholars have listed such as: paucity of deep knowledge of one’s religion, deficiency in of the knowledge of other religions, fear of the unknown, suspicion, lack of self-critical assessment, superiority and inferiority complexes, disparity between those taking part in dialogue, inequality in theological development. To these I add neglect of natural law, confusion between faith and reason, lack of theological and metaphysical language that can be used to explain certain truths. Nowadays, the presence of independent preachers constitutes an obstacle.

We ought to point out the issue about memory or history or achieve because many of us go back to what has happened in the past without a vision of the future. The past will not be useful if it does not help us to improve the present and the future times. Again, when someone does not elevate the status of other religions to the level of world religions could be an obstacle. We are not saying that all religions are the same.

If we cannot avoid these obstacles in order to meet, we can at least understand them and create avenues whereby we can focus on what unites and suspend what divides. Perhaps we need also a background, which can help us to meet though we are different. Just knowing who we are, that we are all human beings, that we are all citizens of this world, that we are Capax Dei could be a solid background. Knowing that we are all Africans as dialogue in Africa is concerned is a good beginning.

14 Cf. Jean-Marie Gaudel, Encounters and clashes: Islam and Christianity in history vol.1 (Rome)
FORMS OF INTERRELIGIOUS DIALOGUE
Experts have mentioned four major forms: dialogue of life, social dialogue, dialogue of experts, dialogue of experience.

*Dialogue of life*: Sometimes, I called it “unarticulated dialogue” because it could take place in all the ordinary interactions and interrelations between people of different religions, without a premeditated plan or structure. It takes place in our homes, families, villages, schools, towns and cities. Many ordinary but important things happen when we live, work, visit and study with people of different faiths.

*Social dialogue*: Cardinal Arinze calls it “dialogue of action”. This happen when people of different religions cooperate and involve themselves in joint projects for a common good or common concern, such as building a road, bridge, a hospital or a center for learning. For instance, there are some joint organizations of Christians and Muslims working for the promotion of human right and eradication of deceases.

*Dialogue of experts*: here, specialists or theologians in various religions listen to one another, present the doctrines, beliefs and practices of their respective religions –not in a self-protective way but in a well-articulated manner-, discover and rediscover their common points and differences. With the use of sciences and technology, they find a consensus where they can meet in order to face the challenges of the modern world.

*Dialogue of experience*: For instance prayer and meditation, as fundamental expressions of religious faith, could be Interreligious meeting point because there are a lot of experiences to share in different traditions. These two experiences allow someone to start a journey towards the other; it takes place, particularly among believers who adore the same God (Judaism, Christianity and Islam).

RISKS OF INTERRELIGIOUS DIALOGUE
To be sure, the involvement of the Church into Interreligious dialogue goes with some risks, (1) because of the confusion that may arise as someone articulates his faith very well. This comes up in theological dialogue where the partner seems to be stronger and more convincing. There is, therefore, a risk of loosing faith. Thus,
someone must be well-prepared and well-educated before he or she engages into this form of dialogue (2) Sometimes, because of the similarities and convergences found in different religions, someone may fall into a relativism and consider all religions as the same. Different religions have different tenets. (3) There is also the risk of falling into syncretism when different tenets of different religions are put together or mixed to form a new religion. This occurs in dialogue of experience where, for instance, someone prays or dresses in a way that is not his. Rites and building styles are very much vulnerable. (4) It is the nature of man to look for more satisfying things. People involved in dialogue with other religions, particularly those who are deeply grounded in their faith, may find new pasture, cling to it and remain there. So there is a risk of loosing some of members of a given religion. (5) The last risk could be likened to indifferentism whereby too much contact with different beliefs may lead someone to loose belief in any one religion. He may doubt on all religions and consider all as nonsense.

NOTA BENE FOR AFRICA
1. The five major African regions (North, East, West, central and South) need Interreligious dialogue.
2. African Leaders and all responsible persons in our various religions ought to educate their members in this new field.
3. Political leaders should create, protect and maintain the road towards Interreligious dialogue.
4. Let religious authorities of different religions organize joint meetings.
5. Let all Africans maintain and promote African values; particular those that do not go against religious values, because they are like the common ground of Interreligious dialogue.

STUDY OF SOME TEXTS

1. HISTORY OF CHRISTIAN-MUSLIM RELATIONS
   (Part one)
   Introduction

Muslim-Christian relations have been subject to the unforeseen sway of events and happenings in history. Looking back at the past and
seeing what Christians and Muslims have done together, the way they have lived and how they have looked at each other, one gets ample food for reflection and thought. There is a need to see how Christians and Muslims have lived particularly in Arabia, in the land conquered by Muslims and in the West between seventh and thirteenth centuries. In fact many historians have written books and papers and presented to the contemporary world the fruit of their research. However, their credibility lies on the sources from which the information is taken. Professor Kenny usually refers to at-Tabarî, al-Azraqî, Ibn-Ishâq, Ibn Sa’d as main sources of the history of Muslims within and outside the Umma. There is hope to believe that such sources are true or closer to the truth.

A discussion about Christian-Muslim relations goes beyond the question who was right and who was wrong. My concern is to look clearly at how Christians and Muslims have interacted, so that, based on history, we may correct and improve the relations between Christians and Muslims. The history of those interactions may bring more light to the Christian-Muslim debates. Robert Caspar says:

This history of Muslim-Christian relationship is the history of the Church that faces the challenges of Islam. Because of that the Church has got a chance to throw new light on its mystery. New theological formulations of Christian doctrine, new aspects of its mission and methods of evangelization, as well as the birth of new spiritualities are the best fruits of this Muslim-Christian relationship that has not always been clear and smooth, but has been full of ambiguities, moments of tension and difficulties.\textsuperscript{16}

So we may ask ourselves two questions: first, what was the attitude of Muhammad and Muslims towards Christians living within Arabia and the conquered lands and vice-versa; second what was the attitude of Christians towards Muslims in the Byzantine Empire and the West?

1. CHRISTIAN-MUSLIM RELATIONS DURING THE LIFETIME OF MUHAMMAD

1.1 Muhammad at Makka

To start with, Christian and Muslim scholars agree that Christians were present in Mecca and Medina during the time of Muhammad. It is equally true that Christians were very few in these important towns; their main place of settlement were in the South of Arabia peninsula, in the upper part of Yemen, and in the North around the Kingdom of Hira and of the Ghassanides. In spite of their presence, Christians distinguish the type of Christians that Muhammad came across at Mecca. They were not orthodox instead Nestorians and Monophysites. Professor Kenny states: Christianity had also come in. The Ghassanids in the northwest and the Lakhmids in the northeast professed a kind of Monophysite Christianity.\textsuperscript{17}

It is in the same way that Jean-Marie Gaudeul observes that Muhammad may have met with Christians but not with Christianity. The fact is that there were some Christian tribes established in the area of Mecca and Medina. And indeed, Muhammad had some relationship with them in Mecca and Medina but also through his trading. That relationship was in the level of friendship. Richard Bell says: During the whole of the Makkān period of his activity Muhammad’s attitude towards the people of the book, which must be taken as including both Jews and Christians so far as known to him, was consistently friendly. Even in Medina when he had adopted a more independent attitude, he seems at first merely to have thought of establishing his own community of an equal footing with them.\textsuperscript{18}

Muhammad did not know Christians so much, but with the little knowledge he had about them, he identified them as \textit{people of the book}, in distinction to pagans who had not any book for their guidance. For that reason, Muhammad considered Christians as equal to Muslims. Beyond that, the humility, morality and love of the Christians as well as the life of their priests and monks made the Christians lovable to Muslims.\textsuperscript{19} The Qur’an is clear about it:

\begin{quote}
Thou will surely find the nearest of them in love to the believers are those who say we are Christians; that is because some of them are priests and monks and they wax not proud” (Q. 5,82).
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{17} Joseph Kenny, Muhammad and the rise of Islam. A critical presentation of the background and major Muslim sources, 1992, p.12.
\textsuperscript{19} Robert Caspar, \textit{op. cit.}, p. 3.
With this trust, Muhammad did not hesitate to send some of his followers to a Christian country to find safety. Christians are those who follow the true prophet, Jesus Christ (Q.2,87). Ibn-Ishâq, quoted by Professor Kenny, reports:

When the Messenger of God saw the sufferings inflicted on his companions and his inability to protect them, although he himself was exempt because of his position with God and with his uncle Abû-Tâlib, he told them, "If you went to Ethiopia you would find a friendly country whose king does not allow any to be mistreated. Stay there until God gives you relief from the present situation." At those words, his Muslim companions left for Ethiopia, fleeing to God with their religion since otherwise they might be exposed to deny it.²⁰

With the same trust, the Abyssinian Negus accepted the Muslims as their brothers after they had confessed their belief. The passage from sûra 19 that they recited was sufficient to gain his trust. The reciprocal trust between them led them to be friends and equal believers.

In this context, one thing must be noted: the ignorance of both sides; neither side understood the other's correct doctrine. In this context, at the beginning of the Muslim era, the Christians saw in Islam a sort of newly structured and revitalized Christianity. At least a relation of friendship reigned during the Mekkan period between Muhammad and Christians within and outside Arabia.

1.2 Muhammad at Madina
The coming of Muhammad to Madina did not modify his attitude towards Christians at the beginning. He continued to be close to the Christians. In Madina, the Jews also called the people of the book, became hostile to Muhammad and his message. According to them, Muhammad who claimed to be a prophet, was not in line with the prophet of Israel. For this reason, they did not see how he could be accepted as a prophet; they rejected him. Considering this fact, Muhammad and his followers became closer to Christians who still accepted him somehow. This does not mean that Christians submitted to him.

Towards his death, Muhammad was no longer friendly to Christians, for two main reasons: Initially Muhammad’s power began to increase

²⁰ Joseph Kenny, op. cit., p. 32.
and to spread in Arabia. Politically he used his power to impose his religion and oppress those who did not submit to his principles. Richard Bell comments:

But when Muhammad's power began to spread in Arabia his attitude towards the Christians soon began to cool. Any real alliance or even peaceful accommodation was indeed impossible from the first.21

Finally, Muhammad’s knowledge of Christianity began to grow as he met orthodox Christians. Of course the real encounter between Muhammad and the Christians took place at Medina where Muhammad met a Christian community from Najrân, with whom he discussed in depth.22 In the discussion, Muhammad discovered some differences between his doctrine and that of the Christians. From that time, he gave new laws and directives to his followers; and the face of the Islamic world changed (Cf. Q.9,34; 9,31; 5,51; 5,5; 9,29). Bell concludes:

When, therefore, Muhammad came to close quarters with Christians it was bound to go with them as it had gone with the Jews. He might recognize Jesus as a prophet as the greatest of previous prophets. He did that. But differences between the belief and practices on the Christians of that day, and the cardinal doctrines and practices which he inculcated were bound to appear, some of which Muhammad could not accept or approve: and Christians, however far they might approve of some of his teachings, could not accept him as the present day mouthpiece of God on earth whom it was their present duty absolutely to obey.23

Furthermore, when Muhammad had learnt that Christians believed in a living Christ exalted at the right hand of God, the encounter turned into a clash.

Despite clashes and misunderstandings, Muhammad still distinguished pagans and idolaters from the people of the book. Somehow he still respected the Christians, so much so that the discussion with them of Najrân did not urge him to expel them because they refused to accept his religion, but gave rise to the pact of Najrân. The pact was very important because it tolerance concerning religion in a Muslim state. That tolerance implies respect to each religion, even though the payment of a tax was the condition

21 Richard Bell, op. cit., p. 151.
23 Richard Bell, op. cit., p. 152

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of peaceful accommodation. With that, Christians enjoyed God's protection and Muhammad's engagement as long as they respected their obligations.

So based on these events and attitudes, I can now say that Muhammad did not drive Christians from Arabia even though his attitude towards them changed from friendship to tolerance. Muhammad tolerated Christians to live in Arabia and to practice their religion, but they had to pay a tax in order not to be persecuted. As we can notice, those who in one reason or the other refused to pay it were persecuted. The Qur'an clearly states: "Fight them until they pay the tax considering it a favor and acknowledge their subjection" (Q. 9,29).

1.3 The attitude of the first four caliphs towards Christians
The reign of the first four successors of Muhammad goes from 632 to 661. It was marked by the first conquests establishing Islamic rule outside Arabia because the Umma accepted Muhammad as the only prophet and therefore the only leader. That common project of the four caliphs attracted the attention of the historians who recount the events of that period. Their attitude towards Christians is passed over by some; nevertheless a little is mentioned about the first two caliphs. Things remained in the status quo from the death of Muhammad throughout the brief reign of Abu-Bakr. Abu-Bakr did not effect an iota of change in his relations with Christians. Following the steps of Muhammad, he confirmed the pact of Najrân.

When `Umar became caliph, he too respected Muhammad's policy with the Christians, but later on he ordered the eviction of Christians from Arabia. That decision, new to the general policy of his predecessors, surprised people and continues to raise questions nowadays so much so that some historians report it with doubt. Antoine fattal, for instance, says that it might be wrong to attribute such actions to the Caliph `Umar b. al-Hattâb because Muslim attitude towards Christians began to change form the second century. Some scholars substitute `Umar b. al-Hattâb to `Umar b. `Abd al-`Aziz.


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Anyway, with this historical analysis, it is clear enough to say that Christian-Muslim relations were not smooth from the beginning. This is because friendship and tolerance were mixed with suspicion. Denial, misunderstandings, polemics as well as war are the seals of that short but important period of the Islamic history.

2. CHRISTIAN-MUSLIM ENCOUNTER FROM 7th TO 12th C,
This period that we are going to study covers two great empires namely the Umayyad and Abbasid. In religious, philosophical and theological point of view, the period between 661 and 1258 is the most important time in the history of Islam. The whole Islamic doctrine found its scientific expression here. Nevertheless our concern is to examine how Christians and Muslims lived at that particular time in Arabia, in the conquered lands, in the Byzantine Empire and in the West.

2.1 Christians under the Umayyad empire
It could have been better to use as title Christian-Muslim encounter in order to present the effort made by each other. But, as we know, Muslims were in power, and the Muslims determined the status of the Christians. Christians were called people of the covenant or ahl adh-dhimma. Dhimma is the population, which did not embrace Islam, who are not enslaved, but their lives are guaranteed.25

In fact the Umayyad Caliphs were Arab emperors rather than heads of a Muslim religious community. They were tolerant especially in religious matters. In Arabia and particularly in the conquered lands, Christians were to be fought and reduced to subjection if they did not agree to pay the tribute. If they did so, their religion was tolerated. Richard bell comments:

If we turn to Mesopotamia we find that much the same things happened. Edessa, that great center of Christianity which the Arabs called Rahâ... capitulated in the following conditions. Their temple and its surroundings was to remain their property: they were not to build any new churches beyond those that they already had, and were to render assistance to the Moslems against their enemies.26

26 Richard Bell, op. cit., p. 171.

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Even if the Umayyad rulers did not allow increasing the number of churches, they did not destroy the churches which were built, in order to show their tolerance to the people of the book. At that time, some parts of the Byzantine Empire, Northern Africa and south-western Europe were conquered and Christians were tolerated as *dhimmîs*, although some were persecuted. In Islamic society, *dhimmîs* constituted the third class after the Muslim ruling class and the clients (neo-Muslims converted by force).\(^{27}\)

Under the Umayyad rulers, Christians enjoyed, against the payment of land and capitation taxes, a wide measure of toleration. In a matter of criminal judicial procedure, they were under their spiritual leaders.

### 2.2 The `Abbâsids' treatment of Christians

Unlike the Umayyad rulers, the `Abbasid leaders were more religious because of their determination to establish a kingdom of justice, piety and happiness among Muslims. Unfortunately, the joy of some is misfortune of others; this determination brought adversity to Christians, Bell wrote:

> It was when Islam as a religion came to be taken seriously, as it was by the `Abbasids, at least in their public policy, and when perhaps the influx of converted Christians had carried into it some of their own heretic-baiting spirit, that the Christian population within Moslem territory began to feel the weight of persecution and humiliation as such.\(^{28}\)

There were persecutions. Anyway, the Christians of the villages suffered more because they refused to pay tax and therefore were persecuted while the population of the towns in Mesopotamia, Syria and Egypt agreed to submit and to be regarded as ordinary subjects. Bell confirms it:

> So long as the Christians paid the tribute and accepted Moslem rule, they were regarded simply as ordinary subjects, and were not much if any worse treated than the Arabs themselves... We find `Abbasid caliphs employing Christian doctors, in whom they displayed utmost confidence, and encouraging Christians to translate Greek philosophy and other literature into Arabic.\(^{29}\)

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\(^{28}\) Richard Bell, op. cit., p. 181.

\(^{29}\) *Ibid*, p. 181.
There are many facts that testify that despite the rough attitude of some Islamic rulers, Christian minorities were not equal to Muslims but surely interacted with Muslims. In commercial activity, for example, there was no prohibition, especially in 9th century. Marston Speight explains:

Commercial activity was another feature of international relations in North Africa, which could not help but have influenced upon Muslim attitudes toward protected Christian minorities. There was no prohibition against trading with unbelievers. No matter what military or political circumstances prevailed, international trade continued with the Christian world.\(^{30}\)

It seems that Speight talks only about North Africa; however the same attitude was seen in the East and in Spain. Muslim rulers protected the life of the Christians unless they intended to fight a Muslim, committed fornication with a Muslim woman, attempted to marry one or to turn one from his religion or killed a Muslim.

### 2.3 Christian-Muslim relationships in 11th and 12th centuries

From 11th to 12th centuries, suspicion and negative views held by each other especially by some writers worsened those relationships. Let us mention some of them along with their attitudes: John of Damascus, trying to present Christianity to Christians, considered Islam as a heresy. Al-Ghazali refuted the Divinity of Jesus without studying Christology deeply. These are just few examples among many, but they can illustrate the type of relationships of that time. Real interaction between Muslims and Christians was difficult. It is thus a surprise when Gaudeul tells us that the encounter between Christians and Muslims, whether in North Africa, Spain or Sicily, remained apparently at the level of practical relations, without finding expression in written works.\(^{31}\) As we noticed in 9th century, Muslims and Christians interacted when they met on practical issues. The Byzantines too did not have real encounter with Muslims because of their lack of information about the Muslim world. Their books had a violent tone and were written in a language known only


by them. Therefore the Muslims and the Byzantines had not understanding of each other.

However in the West Islam was seen as evil, and so it could not be trusted. Daniel Norman described such attitudes:

In that religion there are both many truths inserted into the lies, and good things mixed with the bad, even with malice to deceive: namely so that the false things should be believed because of the true, or else that the bad things should be received because of the good... It is important to realize that truth in the mouth of Muhammad, a corrupt witness who put about a perversion of the sacred page, could never be trusted.\(^{32}\)

Without any doubt, these Eastern, Byzantine and Western attitudes towards Muslims and Christians changed everything in their respective worlds. Implicitly or explicitly, they prepared the climate of the end of the 11th century. At this time crusades began and brought a climate of hatred and intolerance. Christians exalted crusades while Muslims called for jihad. There is a lot of to say about crusades and jihad because the battle was long and horrible. Thanks be to God, some Christians began to rethink that a climate of peace, friendship correct knowledge of Islam and an adequate method of presenting the message, were needed in order to convert Muslims. This awareness bore fruit in the 13th century.

**CONCLUSION**

We have to acknowledge the effort made so far in the history of Muslim-Christian relations. Now, everything done in the past should be looked at in the light of the present reality. So, it is no longer a time of polemical treatment, which led many writers to present only the bad side of other religions. It is rather a time of a new dialogical approach in order to achieve fraternal understanding between the children of Abraham in the search of social justice, moral values and world peace. So we need to know our common history in order to correct our mistakes and improve our situation for a better future.

The history of Christian-Muslim encounter from the lifetime of Muhammad to the end of the `Abbasid dynasty is long, rich and important because of its development. Anyone who understands it can paint it as time of struggles, confrontations, negotiations,

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intimidations, confusions, suspicion, wars and reconciliations. All these qualifications, optimist as well as pessimist, will help us to stand Islam and Christianity for an effective encounter.

The general attitude of Muslims towards Christians at that period was made of tolerance and intolerance. The time before the 11th century was a period of tolerance if we look at the number of practical events done in both sides. The 11th and the 12th centuries were a time of intolerance caused by some writings and attitudes, which gave rise to crusades and jihad. The 13th century was a time of hope and reconciliation.

2. RELIGIOUS LIBERTY: A MUSLIM PERSPECTIVE
   By Muhammad Talbi

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1. From old relations to a new context

At the outset we have to remember that the problem of religious liberty, as a common human concern and international preoccupation, is relatively new. In former days the problem was irrelevant totally. In ancient times everybody felt it natural to worship the deities of his city. It was the job of these deities to protect the house and to look after the family and the welfare of the state. With their worshippers they took the rough and the smooth. The deities of
Carthage were by nature the enemies of the deities of Rome. In such a context the refusal to worship the deities of the city was felt essentially as an act of disloyalty towards the state.

In the beginning the situation was almost the same within the Biblical tradition. In the Bible, Yahweh acts as the God of the Jews. He constantly warns his people not to worship any other deity and to obey his Law. This people, with one God, are also the association of a physical entity — the twelve tribes descended from Abraham via Isaac and Jacob — with a land, Palestine. The Jewish community is an ideal prototype of unity: it obeys at one and the same time the *ius sanguinis, loci and religionis*, the law of blood, place and religion. It is the perfect prototype of an ethnically homogeneous community, rooted in religion and shaped into a land and a state. In a way, to speak of religious liberty in such a case is literally absurd. There is no choice other than remaining in the state-community or leave it. In particular the Jew who is converted to another religion ceases *ipso facto* to belong to his state-community. So his conversion is felt as a betrayal and, as such, it warrants the penalty of death (Cf. Dt 13:2-19; Lev 24:10-23). If we have dwelt on the case of the Jewish community as a prototype, it is because that case is not without some similarities with the classical Islamic *Umma*, as it was shaped by traditional theology.

For historical reasons the situation changed completely with the appearance of the Christian preaching. From the beginning this preaching was not linked with the state, and Jesus' people, the Jewish community, rejected the call. Jesus ordered his disciples “to render unto Caesar the things which are Caesar's, and to God the things which are God’s” (Mt 22:21). This revolutionary attempt to dissociate state and religion and to ensure the freedom of the individual conscience failed. The time was not yet ripe. Consequently, in the Roman Empire, the first Christians were considered as disloyal subjects, because of their refusal to pay honor to the deities of their city and of their social group. Accordingly, they were treated as rebels. The right to self-determination and to religious liberty was denied them as individuals acting freely in accordance with their conscience.
To make a long story short, let us say that power and religion conserved more or less their old relations or resumed them. They needed each other so much. The intolerance of the dominant social group asserted itself everywhere in the world with internal and external wars, and many forms of more or less tough discrimination. Of course the Islamic world, though relatively tolerant, was no exception. As everywhere in the world, human rights were violated in this area, and it still happens that here and there they are more or less ignored. But that does not mean, as we shall soon see, that Islam as such authorizes violation of these fundamental rights.

Now, to avoid looking only on the dark side of things, we have to add that our common past was not entirely so ugly and so somber. We can also quote some brilliant periods of tolerance, respect, understanding and dialogue. Nevertheless it was necessary to wait till the 19th century to see the right to free-thinking clearly claimed. Political liberalism and philosophical studies were then in vogue, and in fact what was claimed was not the right to think freely, but the right not to believe. So the concept of religious liberty unhappily became the synonym of secularism, agnosticism and atheism. Consequently, a stubborn fight was carried on against it as such. To deal with the subject honestly and calmly, we have to free ourselves of this false notion.

It must be admitted too that religious liberty is today, as a matter of fact, definitely and for good rooted in our social life. Since the Declaration of human rights in 1948, this concept is hence forth an essential part of international law.

On the other hand we already live in a pluralistic world, and our world is going to be more and more pluralistic in the near future. I wrote elsewhere that each man has the right to be different, and at the same time our planet is already too narrow for our ambitions and our dreams. In this new world which is in speedy gestation under our eyes there is no longer room for exclusiveness. We have to accept one another as we are. Diversity is the law of our time. Today, because of mass media, which are becoming increasingly sophisticated and pervasive, everyone is truly the neighbor of everyone else.
From the beginning, in our Islamic countries we have been in the habit of living side by side with communities of different faiths. But it is only recently that we have begun to be confronted with secularism. It is now our turn to experience from the inside the growth of agnosticism and atheism. We have to be conscious of this overwhelming change in our societies, and accordingly we have to exercise our theological thinking in this new and unprecedented context.

But before going further, let us first ask what religious liberty is? Is it only the right to be an unbeliever? One may indeed say that religious liberty has very often been exclusively identified with atheism. But this is only one aspect of the question and, from my point of view, the negative one. In fact religious liberty is basically the right to decide for oneself, without any kind of pressure, fear or anxiety, the right to believe, the right to assume with full consciousness one’s destiny, the right of course to get rid of all kinds of faith as superstitions inherited from the dark ages, but the right also to espouse the faith of one’s choice, to worship and to bear witness freely. Is this definition in harmony with the Qur’an’s basic teachings?

2. The Qur’an’s basic principles

In my opinion religious liberty is basically founded, from a Qur’anic point of view, first and foremost on the divinely ordered nature of man. Man is not one being among many others. Among the whole range of creatures only man has duties and obligations. He is an exceptional being. He cannot be reduced to his body, because man, before everything else, is a spirit, a spirit which has been given the power to conceive the Absolute and to ascent to God. If man has this exceptional power and this privileged position inside creation, it is because God “breathed into him something of His spirit” (Qur’an 32:9). Of course man, like all living animals, is matter. He has a body created “from molded clay, from mud molded into shape” (Qur’an 15:28). But he received the spirit. He has two sides: a lower side - his clay - and a higher side — the spirit of God. This higher side, comments A. Yusuf Ali, “if rightly used, would give man superiority over other creatures.” Man’s privileged position inside the order of creation is strongly illustrated in the Qur’an in the scene where we see the angels receiving the order to prostrate themselves before
Adam (15:29; 38:72), the heavenly prototype of man. In a way, and provided we keep man at his place as creature, we may say as Muslims, in accordance with the other members of Abraham’s spiritual descendants, Jews and Christians, that God created him in His image. A Hadith, a saying of the Prophet, although questioned, authorizes this statement. So we can say that on the level of the spirit, all persons, whatever their physical or intellectual abilities and aptitudes, are really equal. They have the same “breath of God” in them, and by virtue of this “breath” they have the ability to ascend to Him, and to respond freely to His call. Consequently they have the same dignity and sacredness, and because of this dignity and sacredness they are equally and fully entitled to enjoy the same right to self-determination on earth and for the hereafter. So from a Qur’anic perspective we may say that human rights are rooted in what every man is by nature, and this is by virtue of God’s plan and creation. Now it goes without saying that the cornerstone of all human rights is religious liberty.

A. Human dignity and religious liberty

It is quite evident that from a Muslim point of view man is not the mere fruit of “chance and necessity”. His creation obeys a plan and a purpose. Through the “breath”, he has received the faculty to be at one with God, and his response, to have a meaning, must be free. The teachings of the Qur’an are clear: man is a privileged being with “spiritual favors” (Q 17:17); he has a mission and he is God’s “vicegerent on earth” (Q 2:30). Proceeding from God with a mission to fulfill, his destiny is ultimately to return to Him. “Who so does right, does it for his own soul; and whoso does wrong, does so to its detriment. Then to your Lord will you all be brought back” (Q 45:15).

For all that, it is absolutely necessary that each person be able to choose his way freely and without any kind of coercion. Every person ought to build in full consciousness his own destiny. The Qur’an states clearly that compulsion is incompatible with religion:

There should be no compulsion in religion. Truth stands out clear from error. Whosoever rejects evil and believes in God hath grasped the most trustworthy handhold that never breaks. God is All-Hearing, All-Knowing (Q: 2:256).
To the best of my knowledge, among all the other revealed texts, only the Qur’an stresses religious liberty in such an accurate and unambiguous way. The reason is that faith, to be true and reliable faith, needs absolutely to be a free and voluntary act. In this connection it is worthwhile to underline that the verse quoted was revealed to reprove and condemn the attitude of some Jews and Christians, newly converted to Islam in Medina, who were willing to convert their children with them to their new faith. So it is clearly stressed that faith is an individual concern and commitment and that even parents must refrain from interfering with it. The very nature of faith, as it is stressed in the basic text of Islam in clear and indisputable words, is to be a voluntary act born out of conviction and freedom.

In fact even God refrains from overpowering man to the point of subduing him against his will. This too is clearly expressed in the Qur’an. Faith then is a free gift, a gift of God. Man can accept or refuse it. He has the very faculty to open his heart and his reason to God’s gift. Guidance (hudan) has been given him. He is warmly invited to listen to God’s call. God warns him in clear and unambiguous terms. As it is underlined in the quoted verse stressing man’s freedom: “Truth stands out clear from error.”— It is up to man to make his choice. Man’s condition — and that is the price of man’s dignity and sacredness — is not without something tragic in it. Man can be misled. He is able to make the wrong choice and to stray from the right path.

In a word, he has the capacity to resist God’s call, and this capacity is the criterion of his true freedom. Even the Messenger, whose mission is properly to convey God’s call and message, is helpless in such a situation. He is clearly and firmly warned to respect man’s freedom and God’s mystery. “If it had been thy Lord’s will, all who are on the earth would have believed, all of them. Wilt thou then compel mankind, against their will, to believe?” (Q 10:99). A. Yusuf Ali, in his translation of the Qur’an, comments on that verse in this way:

Men of faith must not be impatient or angry if they have to contend against unfaith, and most important of all, they must guard against the temptation of forcing faith, i.e. imposing it on others by physical compulsion, or any other forms of compulsion, such as social
pressure, or inducements held out by wealth or position, or other adventitious advantages. Forced faith is no faith.

The Apostle’s mission – and all the more so ours – is strictly confined to advise, warn, convey a message and admonish without compelling. He is ordered: “Admonish, for thou art but an admonisher. Thou hast no authority to compel them” (Q 88:21-22). In other words, God has set man truly and tragically free. What He wants is a willing and obedient response to His call, in full consciousness and freedom, and that is the very meaning of the Arabic word Islam.

B. Religious liberty is neither indifference nor atheism

Now we must emphasize that this does not mean that we have to adopt an attitude of abandon and indifference. In fact, we have to avoid at one and the same time striking two kinds of rocks. We have, of course, to refrain from interfering in the inner life of another person, and we have already sufficiently stressed this aspect of the problem. It is time to add that we must also avoid becoming indifferent to anything and careless about the other person. We have to remember that the other person is our neighbor. We must bear witness and convey God’s message. This too needs stressing.

We are too much tempted today to shut ourselves up and to live comfortably wrapped in our own thoughts. But this is not God’s purpose. Respect is not indifference. God Himself sets the example. He is nearer to man “than the man’s own jugular vein” (Q 50:16), and He knows better than we do our inmost desires, and what these desires “whisper (tuwaswisu)” to us (Q 50:16). So He stands by us and He speaks unceasingly to each one of us, warning and promising with a divine pedagogy that fits person of every social and intellectual class, at all times, using images, symbols and words that He alone may use with total sovereignty.

And God urges us to follow his example and to turn our steps towards all our brothers in humanity, beyond every kind of frontier, the confessional ones included. “O mankind! We created you from a male and a female, and We have made you into nations and tribes that you may know each other. Verily, the most honorable among you
in the sight of God is he who is the most righteous of you. And God is All-Knowing, All-Aware” (Q 49:13). A. Yusuf Ali comments on the verse in this way: “This is addressed to all mankind, and not only to the Muslim brotherhood, though it is understood that in a perfect world the two would be synonymous. As it is, mankind is descended from one pair of parents. Their tribes, races and nations are convenient labels by which we may know certain differing characteristics. Before God they are all one, and he gets most honour who is most righteous.”

C. Reconciliation to God and to people

In other words, man is not created to be alone and to live as an individual impervious to others. He is created for community, relationship and dialogue. His fulfilment is in his reconciliation at once to God and to people. We have to find the way, in each case, to bring about this double reconciliation without betraying God and without damaging the inner life of the other person. To do so we have to listen to God’s advice: “Do not argue with the People of the Book unless it is in the most courteous manner, except for those of them who do wrong. And say: We believe in the revelation which has come down to us and in that which came down to you. Our God is one, and to Him we submit” (Q 29:46). Let us note that the Arabic word used in the verse, and rendered in the translation by the verb “to submit” is ʿムسلمین – “Muslims”. So, to be a true Muslim is to live in a courteous dialogue with all peoples of other faiths and ideologies and ultimately to submit to God. We must show concern for our neighbors. We have duties towards them, and we are not isles of loneliness. The attitude of respectful courtesy, recommended by the Qur’an must be of course enlarged to all mankind, believers and unbelievers, except for those who “do wrong”, that is to say, for those who are unjust and violent and who resort deliberately to the argument of the fist, physically or in words. In such a case it is much better to avoid a so-called dialogue in order to avoid something worse.

In short, from the Muslim point of view that is mine, our duty is just to bear witness in the most courteous way, the one most respectful of the inner liberty of our neighbor and of his sacredness. At the same time, we must also be ready to listen to him in truthfulness. We have
to remember, as Muslims, that a Hadith of our Prophet states: “The believer is unceasingly in search of wisdom; wherever he finds it he grasps it”. And another saying adds: “Look for science everywhere, even as far away as in China”. And finally, it is up to God to judge, for we, as limited human beings, only know in part. Let us quote:

To each among you have We prescribed a law and an open way. And if God had enforced His will, He would have made of you all one people. But His plan is to test you in what He hath given you. So strive as in a race for all virtues. The goal of you all is to God. Then will He inform you of that wherein you differed (Q 5:51).

Say: O God! Creator of the heavens and the earth! Knower of all that is hidden and open! It is thou that wilt judge between Thy servants in those matters about which they have differed (Q 39:46).

3. Beyond the limits imposed by traditional theology

Though all Muslims are bound by the Qur’an’s basic teachings, Muslim traditional theology developed in a way that for historical reasons, in my opinion, does not always fit in with the spirit of the Qur’an. We are going to call to mind briefly two important cases: on the one hand the case of the dhimmîs — that is to say the situation of the confessional minorities inside the Islamic empire during medieval times — and on the other hand the case of the apostate.

A. The case of the dhimmîs

Let us start with the dhimmîs. First we must emphasize that if the doors of many countries, not all of them, were opened by force or jihad – as was the general usage then – to pave the way for Islam, practically Islam itself was never imposed by compulsion. From this point of view the Qur’an’s teaching have been fully operative. They provided the dhimmîs with sound protection against the most unbearable forms of religious intolerance. In particular, with two or three exceptions located in space and time, the dhimmîs have never been prevented from following the religion of their choice, from worshipping or organizing their communities in accordance with their own law. In the beginning we can even say that their situation was greatly improved by the Islamic conquest. They enjoyed long periods
of tolerance and real prosperity, very often holding high positions in the administration, in the court and in economic activities.

But it is a fact that they suffered from time to time, here and there, from discrimination. Roughly speaking, things began to worsen seriously for them from the reign of al-Mutawakkil onwards (846-861). Discrimination, especially in the matter of dress, took a form openly humiliating. The oppression culminated in Egypt during the reign of al-Hakim (996-1021), who maybe was not mentally sane.

In the medieval context of wars, hostilities and treacheries, this policy of discrimination or open oppression was always prompted, or strongly backed, by the theologians. To understand this we have to remember that it was not then a virtue — according to the medieval mentality prevailing everywhere in the world and inside all communities — to consider all human beings as equal. How to consider equal truth and error, true believers and heretics!?

So in our appraisal of the past we must always take the circumstances into account, and above all we must strive to avoid the recurrence of the same situations and errors. In any case the Qur’an’s basic teachings, of which we have tried to bring out the inner meaning, lay down for us a clear line of conduct. They teach us to respect the dignity of the other person and his total freedom. In a world where giant holocausts have been perpetrated, where human rights are still at stake, manipulated or blankly ignored, our modern Muslim theologians must denounce loudly all kinds of discrimination as crimes strictly and explicitly condemned by the Qur’an’s basic teachings.

**B. The case of the apostate**

On the other hand we must consider the case of the apostate. In this field too, traditional theology did not remain faithful to the spirit of the Qur’an. This theology abridged seriously the liberty of choice of one’s religion.

According to this theology, though conversion to Islam must be and is in fact without coercion, it is practically impossible, once inside Islam, to leave it. Conversion to another religion from Islam is considered as treason and the apostate is liable to the penalty of death. The
traditional theologians, in their elaboration, rely on the one hand on the precedent of the first caliph of Islam, Abu-Bakr (632-634), who energetically fought the tribes who rejected his authority after the Prophet’s death and refused to pay him the alms taxes, likening their rebellion to apostasy. On the other hand they mainly put forward the authority of this Hadith: “Anyone who changes his religion must be put to death” (Bukhari, IX, 19 etc.).

I do not know, throughout the history of Islam, of any application of the law condemning the apostate to death. This law is mostly theoretical. But it is not useless to draw attention to the fact that during the seventies in Egypt, the Islamists narrowly failed in enforcing this law against the Copts who, without due consideration, were converted to Islam, generally to marry Muslim girls, and who, after the failure of their marriage, returned to their former religion. Recently too some Tunisian atheists expressed their concern.

So the case of the apostate in Islam, though mostly theoretical, needs to be clarified. Let us first point out the fact that the Hadith, upon which essentially the penalty of death relies, is always more or less mixed, in traditional writings, with rebellion and highway robbery. The cases quoted of “apostates” killed, during the Prophet’s life or shortly after his death, are all without exception those of persons who, as consequence of their “apostasy”, turned their weapons against the Muslims, whose community was at that time still small and vulnerable. The penalty of death appears in these circumstances as an act of self-defense in a war situation. It is undoubtedly for that reason that the Hanafi School of fiqh does not condemn to death the woman apostate, “because women, contrary to men, are not fit for war”.

On the other hand the Hadith authorizing the penalty of death is not, technically mutawâṭîr, and consequently, according to the traditional system of Hadith, is not binding. Above all, from a modern point of view, this Hadith can and must be questioned. In my opinion we have many good reasons to consider it as undoubtedly forged. It may have been forged under the influence of Leviticus 24:16 and Deuteronomy 13:2-10 — where it is ordered to stone the apostate to death — if not directly, then perhaps through the Jews and Christians converted to Islam.
C. The Qur’ânic teaching

In any case, and as a matter of fact, the Hadith in question is at variance with the teachings of the Qur’an, where there is no mention of the penalty of death required against the apostate. During the life of the Prophet himself the case presented itself at various times, and several verses deal with it. In all these verses, without a single exception, the punishment of the apostate who persists in his rejection of Islam after having embraced it, is left to God’s judgment and to the afterlife. In all the cases mentioned in the Quran and by the commentators, it is a questions on the one hand of time-servers, individuals or tribes who, according to the circumstances, turned their coats, and on the other hand of hesitant persons attracted by the “People of the Book” (Q 2:109; 3:99-100), Jews and Christians, to their faith. Always taking into account the special situation, the Qur’an argues, warns or recommends the adequate attitude to adopt, without ever threatening death.

*The Qur’an argues

From a Muslim point of view the Qur’an recognizes all the previous revelations, authenticates and perfects them:

Say: We believe in God, and in what has been revealed to us, and what was revealed to Abraham, Ishmael, Isaac, Jacob and the Tribes, and in what was given to Moses, Jesus and the Prophets, from their Lord. We make no distinction between any one of them, and to God we submit (muslimûn) (Q 3:84).

It does not follow that each one is permitted, at the convenience of the moment, to change his religion as he changes his coat. Such behavior denotes in fact a lack of true faith. It is for this reason that the following verse insists on the universal meaning of Islam, a call directed to the whole of mankind:

If anyone desires a religion other than Islam, never will it be accepted of him; and in the hereafter he will be among the losers (Q 3:85).

Accordingly apostates are warned: those who choose apostasy, after being convinced, in their inmost thoughts, that Islam is the truth, are
unjust, and as such they are deprived of God’s guidance, with all the consequences that follow for their salvation:

How shall God guide those who reject faith after they accepted it, and bore witness that the Apostle was true, and that clear signs had come to them? But God guides not a people unjust (Q 3:86; see also vv. 87-91).

On the other hand, the Qur’an denounces the attitude of “the People of the Book”, who exerted pressure on the newly converted to Islam to induce them to retract. There is no doubt that the polemics between the dawning Islam and the old religions were sharp. In this atmosphere the Qur’an urges the persons who embraced Islam to remain firmly in their new faith till death, to close their ranks, to refuse to listen to those who strive to render them apostates, and to keep out of their trap. They are also reminded of their former state of disunion when they were “on the brink of the Pit of Fire”, and they are exhorted to be a people “inviting to all that is good” in order to ensure their final salvation. Let us quote:

Say: O People of the book: Why obstruct ye those who believe from the path of God, seeking to make it crooked, while ye were yourselves witnesses thereof? But God is not unmindful of all that ye do.

O ye who believe! If you obey a faction of those who have been given the Book, they will turn you back into disbelievers after you have believed.

O ye who believe! If you obey a faction of those who have been given the Book, they will turn you back into disbelievers after you have believed.

And how would you disbelieve, while you have rehearsed the signs of God, and His Messenger is among you? And he who holds fast to God is indeed guided to the right path.

And how would you disbelieve, while you have rehearsed the signs of God, and His Messenger is among you? And he who holds fast to God is indeed guided to the right path.

O ye who believe! Fear God as He should be feared, and die not except in a state of Islam.

And hold fast, all together, by the rope of God, and be not divided, and remember God’s favour on you: for ye were enemies, and He joined your hearts in love, so that by His grace, ye became brethren; and ye were on the brink of the Pit of Fire, and He save you from it. Thus doeth God make His signs clear to you, that ye may be guided.
Let there arise out of you a community inviting to all that is good, enjoining what is right and forbidding what is wrong. They are the ones to attain felicity. (Q 3:99-104)

Thus, unceasingly and by all means, the Qur’an strives to raise the new Muslims’ spirit, in order to prevent them from falling into apostasy. the argumentation is only moral. The Qur’an goes on: It is “from selfish envy” that “quite a number of the People of the Book wish they could turn you back to infidelity” (Q 2:109; see too 3:149); you have not to fear them, “God is your Protector, and He is the best of helpers; soon shall He cast terror into the hearts of the unbelievers” (Q 3:150-151); “your real friends are God, His Messenger, and the believers.. It is the party of God that must certainly triumph... Therefore take not for friends those who take your religion for a mockery or sport.” (Q 5:58-60). And finally, those who, in spite of all that, allow themselves to be tempted by apostasy, they are forewarned: if they desert the cause, the cause anyhow will not fail. Others will bring it to a head.

O ye who believe! If any from among you turn back from his faith, soon will God produce a people whom He will love as they will love Him, — lowly with the believers, mighty against the rejecters, striving in the way of God, and never afraid of the reproaches of a fault finder. That is the grace of God, which He will bestow on whom He pleased. And God is Bountiful, All-Knowing (Q 5:57; see too 47:38)

*The Qur’an warns*

The young Muslim community is thus given plenty of reasons to remain in their new religion. The members of this community are also warned that for their salvation they should not depart from their faith. They are urged to follow the true spirit of Islam, and this spirit is defined in two ways: first they will love God and God will love them; secondly they will be humble amongst their brethren, but they will not fear the wrongdoers and they will not compound with them. If by fear, weakness or time-serving, they depart from this line of conduct and fall in to apostasy, the loss will be their own and the punishment will be hard in the hereafter. “And if any of you turn back from their faith, and die in unbelief, their works will bear no fruit in this life. And in the hereafter they will be companions of the Fire, and will abide therein”
(Q 2:217), “except for those who repent thereafter and amend, for God is Oft-Forgiving, Most Merciful” (Q 3:89). But there is no hope for those who persist in their apostasy (Q 3:90-91). These obstinate apostates will “taste the penalty for rejecting faith” (Q 3:106; see too 3:140). Such men are entirely in the hands of evil (Q 47:25). They secretly plot with the enemies (Q 47:26-7), and “they obstruct the way to God” (Q 47:32,34). As a result “God will not forgive them” (Q 47:34).

*The Qur’an advises

How to deal with such obstinate and ill-disposed apostates? How to treat those who try to draw them into their camp or to manipulate them? Let us emphasize once more that there is no mention in the Qur’an of any kind of penalty, whether death or any other. To use the Arabic technical word, we say that there is no specified hadd in this matter.

On the contrary, Muslims are advised to “forgive and overlook till God accomplishes His purpose, for God hath power over all things” (Q 2:109). In other words, no punishment on earth. The case is not answerable to the Law. The debate is between God and the apostate’s conscience and it is not our role to interfere in it.

Muslims are only authorized to take up arms in one case, the case of self-defence, when they are attacked, and their faith seriously jeopardized. In such a case “fighting” (al-qitâl) is “prescribed” (kutiba) for them, even if they “dislike it” (kurhun la-kum) (Q 2:216), and it is so even during the sacred month of pilgrimage (Q 2:217; 2:194). To summarize, Muslims are urged not to yield when their conscience is at stake and to take up arms against “those who will not cease fighting you until they turn you back from your faith, if they can” (Q 2:217).

4. Conclusion

It is thus evident that the problem of religious liberty, with all its ramifications, is not new within Islam. The Qur’an deals at length with it. At the heart of this problem we meet the ticklish subject of
apostasy. We have seen, with regard to this very subject that the Qur’an argues, warns, advises, but never resorts to the argument of the sword. The reason why is that argument is meaningless in matters of faith. In our pluralistic world our modern theologians must take that into account.

We never emphasize enough that religious liberty is not an act of charity, or a tolerant concession towards misguided persons. It is a fundamental right for everybody. To claim it for myself implies ipso facto that I am disposed to claim it for my neighbor too.

But religious liberty is not necessarily the equivalent of atheism. My right, and my duty also, is to bear witness to my own faith by fair means, and to convey God’s call. And ultimately it is up to each man to respond to this call or not, freely and in full consciousness.

From a Muslim point of view, and on the basis of the Qur’an’s basic teachings, whose letter and spirit we have tried to bring out, religious liberty is fundamentally and ultimately an act of respect for God’s sovereignty and for the mystery of His plan for man, man who has been given the terrible privilege to build, on his own entire responsibility, his destiny on earth and for the hereafter. Finally to respect man’s freedom is to respect God’s plan.

To be a true “Muslim” is to submit to this plan. It is, in the literal sense of the word, to put oneself voluntarily and freely, with confidence and love, in the hands of God.