

Muslims and Christians – Becoming aware of a common task

Prof. Dr. Bernd Feininger

(0) Introduction

It is a great pleasure for me and a grand honour to speak to such a respected audience in an atmosphere of hospitality and religious benevolence in this famous place of Sultan Qabous Mosque. You offered me your “Ahlan wa Sahlan” and this isn’t a mere formula but also an invitation to meet with your intentions about living religion and Islam-Christian discourse. “Allah has attuned their hearts” (arab.): “He has set friendship in their hearts” / “He has united their hearts” (sura 8:63). Let us follow together the example given to us by Abraham who honourably hosted his guests as the prophet (Salla Allah ‘ alaihi wa sallam) delivered. And let us, Christians as well as Muslims, take this Hadith to our hearts which is so important for conversations about religions; namely to pass the greeting of peace before any other word (arab.): As-salam qabl al-kalam.

I begin with a short description of the current situation because the point of departure for Islamic-Christian dialogue got more complicated in the last few years.

(1) Islam in discussion and its extreme perception in the West: The dominance of buzzwords

“How Islam really is” – From the wide-spread need for getting things straight” -

This is the title of an essay by the well-known Christian-Catholic theologian Hans Zirker. He gives us a summary of the current problems in European discussions on Islam. In his opinion there are two major tendencies in the Western perception of Islam. On the one hand, there are those who believe to know how Islam really is: namely a dangerous religion of violence and a threat for the Christian West (Occident) and global peace overall. On the other hand, there are Christians acquainted with Islam, living together with Muslim friends and colleagues and the majority of believing Muslims who want to live their religion in peace with God and their next, in Europe as well as in the Middle East. Western friends of Islam versus Western enemies of Islam! And there are also Muslims who reject all European or Western culture as work of devils and everlasting enemies. Sometimes they are

aggressive and go into opposition; more often, however, they just stay for themselves, isolated in their own group, refusing contact and communication.

This is due to a primitive psychological mechanism: The more we over-simplify a problem, the better we think we can cope with it. And the greater the dangers seem which threaten us, the more we look for simple orientation. When we can clearly say “here” and “there”, “for” and “against”, “good” and “bad”, “black” and “white”, “we” and “the others”, then we know where we stand. It may be that our fears are still there, but at least we can control the issue mentally and verbally. If this is about human beings – about their social status, colour of the skin, ethnicity, political orientation, religion etc. – such attributions are especially effective, because in differentiation, well confrontation we find our identity. It is a simple mental mechanism and the relationship between Christianity and Islam shows typical examples for it. The mutual concepts of the enemy intensified accordingly to militant experiences as there were numerous during the early expansion of Islamic rule since the 7th century AD, during the Crusades and the threatening of Europe by the Osman Empire. Then again, there was the control of Islamic countries in colonial times which produced a continuous feeling of inferiority and misfortune.

Memories of past battles stayed vivid on both sides. And since 9-11 and the spread of terrorism in the name of religion, the situation has even sharpened, flat positioning has grown more and more. And the self-content of those who had always known it better than dialogians and naive good souls has increased as well. And positions seem to become more and more rigid! Just think of buzzwords as ‘Holy War’, ‘fundamentalism’, ‘sharia’, ‘theocracy’. Even the word ‘Allah’ as name for God then signals the religious incompatibility/ the threatening contrast (Zirker, 2003, essay p.187): “I fight for Allah! , ‘Blood for Allah’, Allah ‘in the West’, ‘Allah over Europe’, ‘Allah’s sword’, ‘Allah’s German children’, ‘Terror in the name of Allah’: These are the titles of respective books. Notwithstanding the strange book by Hans-Peter Raddaz “From God to Allah” which seeks to mark a declining picture of God, pushing the word Allah in a pejorative meaning and context, a development towards the bad/evil! This makes Allah an enemy of Western culture. Without doubt, a silly form of discrimination (Zirker, 2003, essay p.187). Yes, things have become more and more complicated in the last few years. Today, we have Thilo Sarrazin in Germany with his dreadful book “Deutschland schafft sich ab” (in English: “Germany is deleting

itself"). He blames Islam for economic and social problems in Germany. His book ranks first on the list for bestselling non-fiction books! In Berlin, the representative and right-wing demagogue Mr. Stadtkewitz founded a new party against Islam with the name "Die Freiheit" – meaning liberty or freedom. He says: "We defy an Islamization of our country by all means." In the Netherlands, Geert Wilders scores with his Islamophobia. There are similar developments in Switzerland, Austria, Denmark and Sweden.

The news magazine "Der Spiegel" writes about an assembly of Islamophobes in Berlin: *"It always continues like this. All the people in the hall, the speakers, the parties, Mr. Stadtkewitz: They cling to their world view like a parallel society of defense, of fear. However, they believe that they fight for the good: freedom, modernity, Western values. They consider themselves as fighters against the dark danger from the Orient. This makes their Islamophobia eligible for many fearful people"* (Der Spiegel, 1/3.01.11, p.51).

"Islamophobia", this is a new word that buzzes through Europe. In Europe, a kind of Islamophobia has developed which obstructs a friendly view towards Islam. This concept of the enemy Islam gets intensified through terrorist activities against Christians for example in Egypt or in Iraq. In December 2010, the results of two large survey studies (one in Germany conducted by TNS EMNID, the other one comparing France and Germany by IFOP, commissioned by the newspaper Le Monde) showed that about 40% of the French and of the Germans view Islam as a threat to their national identity. 60% talk about such a huge cultural and religious divergence that it would not be possible to live together. Islam would radically reject Western values. The headline in Le Monde, 5th January 2011: "Islam and integration: failed in Germany and France!"

That is why the dialogue between Islam and Christianity and between Islamic and Western culture is in greater need than ever before. On both sides, we need competent and passionate people who commit themselves to communication and who know each other, and also about the other religion and cultural characteristics.

How Islam really is! Without doubt, it is the Muslims' priority to inform about how they understand their belief and which importance they attach to it. On the other hand, it is

meaningful to let competent non-Muslims contribute something to the discourse about Islam due to their aptitude or profession (or both). Muslims themselves should be interested in how other non-Muslims regard their religion and understand it or do not understand it. And this not only via the secondary world of media but also in institutions of education, advanced training and the interested public. And also in discussion with Western Islamic studies which are still shown a hostile attitude by some. Because actually too many Western scholars of Islamic studies have too little understanding for religion or simply are not believers in God!

If Muslims do not want to know about this, they isolate themselves from any other speech, concerns and irritatingly different convictions and thus, block any further communication. And the same accounts for Christians or Western politicians who cultivate their own ignorance to make political deals with the fear of fellow citizens. And this is dangerous. They stir up the social peace in their countries. (Zur kritischen Haltung der maghrebinischen Ibadis ggn. westl.Orientalistik vgl. Ourghi 2008, S. 20, A. 28!)

How Islam really is! And how Christian religion really is! It does not work without mutual getting to know of each other, and this at eye level, respectful and with patience. And above all: With the joy of discovering something new, on the other side, but still on my own. Broadening the horizon, change of perspectives, see myself with fresh eyes: this is the core of social interactions of religions, and it is one of our common tasks!

(2) The necessity of social interactions for interreligious dialogue. Living together in a world of diversity

« Social interactions of religions » - This subject plays an important role in the Sultanate of Oman due to the tradition of the early Islamic Ibadis. This Islamic school of law and religious belief demonstrates that Islam and Sharia can be reconciled with values and attitudes of modern societies. "Living faith in a modern society": This means to accept diversity and multiple ways of living and different religious attitudes. Maybe the reason for the success story in Oman derives from its long history of conflicts between sultanate and imamate, between duties and regulations of the political and clerical world and their partly competing claims which get formulated

differently by Shi'ites and Sunnites. In its long history, Oman has experienced and got through struggles of diversity. A conflict-ridden but helpful story which has turned out well in a religious society culture - with the lucky chance of Sultan Sa'id's family and the one of his son Qabus ibn Sa'id coming into power. Today, the Ibadiya plays a central, social, integrative but also power-political role in Oman. The Ibadiya occupies a central position in the theological spectrum of Islam and, therefore, also meets with Sunnite approval.

During his speech at a UNESCO meeting in Paris, former Iranian President Khatami emphasized the basis of the Islamic idea of man: "All human beings are God's creatures and this is why all of them have the right to live in safety and peace, [...] human dignity applies for everybody equally and without reservation. We have to open our hearts and souls, in line with social demands." Then, Khatami explains how this basic principle applies for all of the three major monotheistic religions which lead back to Abraham (cit. M. Lüders, *Allahs langer Schatten. Warum wir keine Angst vor dem Islam haben müssen*. 2007, 179f. – *frei übersetzt: Allah's long shadow: Why we do not have to be afraid of Islam. The Arabic edition "Dhill Allah at-tawil" was published by Al Warrak Publishing, London in 2009.*).

Since early Christian and early Islamic times, several denominations of Christianity, Islam and Judaism have been living together on the Arabian Peninsula. The cradle of these three religions is Arabia and the Middle East. Many western Christians are not really aware of this. Neither do they know about the large number of Arabian Christians or Christians with old oriental denominations as currently living in Oman. Or in Syria, Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon, Iraq. Christians of different denominations partly took on leading roles in the politics of these countries.

Prince Hassan bin Talal from the Jordan Royal House is Muslim and such an expert of Christianity that he was awarded an honorary doctorate by the Faculty of Theology in Tübingen, Germany. In his publications, Prince Hassan consistently highlights the fact that Christian Arabs are by no means strangers in the Islamic-Arabian society. He writes: "Syrian Christians both from the Lebanon Mountains and from other regions were the pioneers for modern Arabian journalism in Egypt. They established newspapers as well as scientific and literary magazines and actually set up the

modern Arabian press by this. At that time, Christian Arabs did a lot of pioneer work in the whole Arabian world with regard to graduate professions and in the field of education, too. In all of their accomplishments they were a role model for others. At the beginning of the 20th century, they had a lead over their Muslim fellow countrymen in social and intellectual questions. This was due to the fact that they – other than the Muslims – were not reserved about new ideas and social models which came from Western civilization – a world with which they symbolically shared Christianity. (Das Christentum in der arabischen Welt, 2003, 91f. – *frei übersetzt: Christianity in the Arabian World*). So Interfaith Dialogue develops at the roots of our society.

The effort to merge faith and reason is a heritage of both cultures, the Christian and the Islamic one and dates back to the ancient world of thinkers. There has never been an exclusively Christian West (Occident)! The European history of ideas has always been Roman, Christian, Jewish, Islamic, pagan and the one of atheists. The ideal conception of a purely Islamic world would be just as deceptive. The excesses of nation-state concepts since the 19th and 20th century with their numerous “Isms” and successively expansive ethnic cleansings belong to the most fatal and distressful dead ends of the ideological and political history; until today they present an epochal crisis phenomenon. In this respect, the “Clash of Civilizations” (Huntington) mainly is a relieving projection and a war of societies against themselves and their anxious questions of identity and life! The Islamic Arabs were liberal-minded towards new and different things, and not afraid of getting closely involved with foreign nations that they took over. As a pool of many heterogeneous influences this Islamic-Arabian mixed culture could develop in the first place; it expanded during Middle Eastern, Southern Italian and Spanish Middle Ages and influenced the Christian West (Occident) strongly.

Indeed, good communication between the Islamic and the Christian world began quite early: In the ancient world, when Europe came into existence and later in Spain and in Southern Italy. Before the Crusades, the relations between Christians and Muslims formed a kind of “intercultural dialogue” – as we would call it today. Two days before Charlemagne’s unexpected coronation, which took place at Christmas 800 AD, messengers of the Patriarch in Jerusalem arrived in the Eternal City and

gave him the keys of Jerusalem. A key to Christ's grave could be found among them as well as a flag of the city. Had the caliph of Baghdad not agreed, these presents would never have reached Rome. They might only have been token gestures but for the Christians in Jerusalem they had a significant meaning. During the Passion Week in 802 the ministers of Harun-ar-Raschid arrived in Aachen, Germany. Among other things, they handed the Emperor gifts like balm, oriental spices, healing herbs and a white elephant which was named after the first Abbasid caliph of Baghdad Abul Abas. The emperor returned the favour to the caliph of Baghdad with Hispanic horses, Frisian cloth and dogs that were especially trained for lion hunting. According to the chronicle of Notker the Stammerer, thereupon the caliph promised to serve his "brother Charles" as administrator in the Holy Land.

The necessity for interreligious dialogue is based on the social interaction of people with multiple ways of living. The wider frame for this is interculturality within the developing vitality of cultures. Life needs diversity and above all room for development. And HE the ONE and only God especially shows in allowing, supporting and appreciating diversity. In contrast to many a narrow-minded, reductive and simplifying fundamentalist religious theories, God is not afraid of diversity. "He who does not know weariness and slumber" Arab.:

(sura 2:256) can carry and hold together for showing unity in diversity and for that He can be praised as THE GOD. Knowing and appreciating each other, sympathy, solidarity, sharing life – this is also possible when people of different denominations and cultures live together – without loss of identity. From a religious perspective, it is ultimately God who allows, maintains and accounts for unity in diversity! HE alone is the real principle and source of UNITY!

Let me give an example for right understanding.

Again and again, there are problems with the "dress code" in the Islamic world. A woman's clothing in public becomes a religious sign. What is meant in the sense of ADAB (good behaviour, dignified clothing) becomes a criterion for righteous belief and a tool for the struggle of cultures or a political programme. That is ideology, not religion: A Turkish Islamic leader of Sufi mysticism tried to view this issue better and set it right. Kenian Rifai Bey (died 1950) wrote: *"If a special orthodox or an imam*

walks to somebody with an accusing look and tells him: 'How do you dress? Take off these tight trousers! Those should be wider. You should dress like people did during the times of the prophet' etc. [...] And if hence, somebody who yearns for spiritual enlightenment is rejected at the door to the spiritual world, wouldn't that be a betrayal on the spirit of Islam? Why does he say: 'Dress like in times of the prophet?' instead of 'Live accordingly to the ethics of the prophet!' Behaviour and conduct should not be measured by means of clothing but by faith. [...] The prophet was sent to perfect and teach good ethics. [...] The prophet said: 'In-Allahe-la yenzuru suverukum' – God does not look at your faces and appearances. Arab.:

Therefore the main thing is to align our hearts. [...] It is not your duty to deter people but to draw them closer. Try to be like the Prophet Solomon who knew the language of each bird.” (Samira Ayverdi: he Friend, Collected Works 23, Kubbealti Nesriyati, Istanbul 1995, p.87f.)

“Therefore the main thing is to align our hearts.” This means that we open our hearts in line with societal demands, needs of today. It would be completely wrong to build walls or seclude oneself due to the fear of losing identity. This has always been a temptation for religions. However, it leads to a fundamentalist enmity against the world, to a fearful line of defense across to all modern spirit, which constrains any positive development. Christian churches know this temptation, too. In 1864, Pope Pius IX. published a major document (syllabus) in which he condemned modern science, philosophy and politics, democracy and secular law altogether from a religious perspective. For him, the supremacy of religion applied in every area. In Germany, a real culture struggle developed out of this - between the Roman Catholic Church and the new German Empire under Prussian leadership. For the Catholic Church this was a huge setback in the field of education and science which was still noticeable in the 20th century. It was not before the middle of the 20th century that the Catholic Church dramatically changed course under the charismatic Pope John XXIII. He talked about the necessity “to open the windows” for the world and used the Italian word “aggiornamento” as motto for reforms. It literally means “update” (of faith). “Aggiornamento”: Which Arab word would fit here? It is worth thinking about this! **Maybe: Arab.:**

One way to realise Aggiornamento definitely is conscious discussion with the world, conscious cooperation, also in regard to global peace.

Professor Hans Küng, University of Tübingen, Germany, the initiator of the “Project Global Ethic”, invites to better understand the ethical message of world religions in today’s society. He and his fellow colleagues could show that it does not have to come to the Clash of Civilizations as Huntington postulated. However, we have to reflect on the significance of religions for human culture. And this not only from a denominational-dogmatic perspective but with regard to joint action: In the fields of education, economy, industry and the world of finance. Becoming aware of a common task and practising cooperation – without weakening or relativising the commitment to the own belief.

“From my own experience I know about all the dark sides of religions – of Christians as of others: Still today religions often have a fatal influence on many conflict situations worldwide. Yet I also know about the bright sides of religions: As doctrines of and ways to salvation they can give meaning, support peace and reconciliation, and convey ethical standards and personal orientation to people today. Human beings of all religions know much too little about each other, particularly about similarities in their religious and ethical traditions. I would like to make a contribution to change this. In doing so, we do not want to inform about religions objectively and distantly. However, we do not want to evangelize either: neither in favour of my religion nor of another nor of a new world religion. No, we would like to give you orientation and dare you to rethink the significance of the major religions for humankind in a new way. I invite you to do so, guided by a vision of hope: No peace among the nations without peace among the religions. No peace among the religions without dialogue between the religions. No dialogue between the religions without global ethical standards. No survival of our globe without a global ethic.” (H. Küng: Weltreligionen, Weltfrieden, Weltethos. Broschüre der Stiftung Weltethos, Tübingen 2000 – World Religions. Universal Peace, Global Ethic. Brochure published by the Global Ethic Foundation)

Küng demonstrates this opportunity of joint action with the help of the holy scriptures of the major world religions, with the help of actual common ethical attitudes and rules, for example those similar to the Ten Commandments (cf. for example Sura 17

in the Holy Qur'an!) or the "Golden Rule". In Christianity: "Whatever you wish that men would do to you, do so to them" (Sermon on the Mount, Matthew 7:12). In Islam: "None of you truly believes until he wishes for his brother what he wishes for himself" (Hadith). Arab.:

Here, I will quote Mahmoud Zakzouk from the Al-Azhar-University Kairo who writes: "As the prophet Muhammad once depicted, all human beings stand on a boat which will sink, if they do not realize their responsibility for their actions, for themselves, for their fellow people and the whole creation and accordingly try to behave reasonably. The prophet Muhammad said: Wish the people whatever you wish for yourself, this is how you become a Muslim. People's deepest desires for happiness, harmony and peace come true through brotherliness, justice and love of peace." In this way, Zakzouk is applying the Golden Rule of ethics.

In this context, it is interesting that Pope Benedict commemorated religious basics for peaceful conflict resolutions during his visit to Cyprus at the beginning of June 2010. Those basics can motivate the just politician in a positive way. Benedict XVI did not engage with political details of the conflict in Cyprus. Instead, he held a kind of basic course on the just politician when meeting the president. He developed the basics for peaceful conflict resolution in overviewing the history of ideas from Plato and Aristotle to Christian and Islamic thinkers. It was remarkable that the Pope called for a good understanding with Islam several times. The encounter and embrace with 89-year-old Sufi teacher sheik Nazim, which was included to the visit programme on short notice, will remain an important picture. This is neither about misled politicization and its agitators, nor the other way round about the dominance of religion over politics and society. (No claim of totality!). The Catholic Church set the basics for the interreligious dialogue with Islam at the Second Vatican Council in the important declaration on the relation to non-Christian religions (1965). This is what it says:

"The Church regards with esteem also the Muslims. They adore the one God, living and subsisting in Himself; merciful and all powerful, the Creator of heaven and earth, who has spoken to men; they take pains to submit wholeheartedly to even His inscrutable decrees, just as Abraham, with whom the faith of Islam takes pleasure in linking itself, submitted to God. Though they do not acknowledge Jesus as God, they

revere Him as a prophet. They also honor Mary, His virgin Mother; at times they even call on her with devotion. In addition, they await the Day of Judgment when God will render their deserts to all those who have been raised up from the dead. Finally, they value the moral life and worship God especially through prayer, almsgiving and fasting. Since in the course of centuries not a few quarrels and hostilities have arisen between Christians and Muslims, this sacred synod urges all to forget the past and to work sincerely for mutual understanding and to preserve as well as to promote together for the benefit of all mankind social justice and moral welfare, as well as peace and freedom.” (Nostra Aetate Article 3, cf. the Constitution on the Church Lumen Gentium Article 16: “But the plan of Salvation also includes those who acknowledge the Creator. In the first place amongst these are the Muslims, who, professing to hold the faith of Abraham, along with us adores the One and merciful God, who on the last day will judge mankind.”)

This significant text of the council implicitly contains the key concepts for interreligious dialogue: “Respect” for others that is appreciation, closeness together with distance and esteem. “Understanding and approving of” religious beliefs and basic convictions. “Accepting” individual, that is diverse ways of living. The “confession of guilt and failure” in historical conflicts. The “will for a new beginning” and for “cooperation” in local communities and as “task to back up the world out of religious spirit”, the ability to communicate and the capacity to act for a socially effective religion. (Stephan Leimgruber, *Feinde oder Freunde? Wie können Christen und Muslime miteinander umgehen*. 2008. E. Furlinger (Hg.), *Der Dialog muss weiter gehen*, 2009 – *frei übersetzt: Enemies or friends? How Christians and Muslims deal with each other. In: The dialogue has to continue*)

“To act for a socially effective religion.” This also is a very important goal for modern education, for a modern instruction in religion. Religious Education shall make a contribution to that purpose. This is valid for Christian AND Islamic Religious Education. Society expects religious instruction to contribute to social action. At my home university in Freiburg, students can become trained R.E. teachers at our public schools in Roman Catholic and in Protestant denomination. And now there is also a course of study for Islamic R.E. teachers. They teach Religious Education at public schools when Muslim parents ask for it. Of course, only Muslims can study the

subject “Islamic Religious Education” and the majority of lecturers are Muslims, too. I developed this degree programme by order of the ministry and I am responsible for the organisation and course of events. Islamic faith and conduct of life constitute the core content. In addition, there is a training with regard to joint action by Muslims and Christians and communication. I would be pleased to inform you about Islamic Religious Education in our country and at our schools at another occasion. Two of my students are currently working on their dissertations with regard to this issue. They are Muslims from Egypt and both have become Masters of Oriental studies at the University. Our main concern is to educate competent teachers of Islamic Religion who are well-trained in contents and practice of their own religion, being authentic personalities, representing faith and truth and reliability. Thus they are a living testament for religious truth “on two legs”: They confirm a personal testimony. At a public school, this has to be an educated testimony which is communicable with other ways of living and religions. Such Religious Education is denominational but not normative-authoritarian. It contains or presents a bridging function to the world. And keeps in touch with all other teachers and responsible officials at a public school. This is why it is important that modern R.E. teachers did not just learn religion by heart or live in a world of religion solely. In most cases, they also teach two further subjects, e.g. mathematics or German. Stronger than in earlier days, their personality constitutes from an experience of difference and integrates it in their own development of identity. They involve “the other” more strongly in their thinking than in former times. They have learned to deal critically but constructively with the world of others. This is what we call “educated R.E. teachers”. A multi faith society is dependent on people who can accept and respect different religions and beliefs. Therefore interfaith competence, as a key to a profound and peaceful understanding of others, should be a balance point in education. In educational framework we speak of a competence for “social engineering”.

The data affirming the proximity of our two religions in origins and aims led many scholars and theologians in the Orient, Muslims as well as Christians, to preach cooperation, careful study and dialogue between Islam and Christianity for the sake of faith and the welfare of humanity and peace. This standpoint led the great Christian poet Halim Damos to say: “By God, all religions are merely windows through which worshipers see God. Mankind would not discriminate between

Muhammad and Jesus if they understood the essence of their religion. I feel the presence of Jesus in the Qur'an, and in the Bible I sense the spirit of Muhammad." The Arab poet-laureate Ahmad Shawqi said: "The diversity of religions must not lead to separation or hostility among human creatures nor books and prophets. All faiths are stores of utmost wisdom: their essence is the love and fear of God as well as tolerance."

(3) *A common ethical task*

All over the world, new attention is paid to the positive motivation of religion in ethical behaviour. As the Swiss psychologist and educator Jean Piaget used to say: Morality without religion runs idle, is redundant! Even a critical philosopher like the German Sloterdijk, who analysed the potential for zeal and fighting spirits of the monotheistic religions in a recent publication, comes to the following conclusion: Today the difficult situation requires "that the reasonable religions, which have passed on to their post-zeal stadium, have to seek for alliance with the secular civilization and their theoretical collections in cultural sciences. Only they will be ready to assume the responsibility for duties that can be exclusively overcome through grand coalitions. It is only from this alliance [between religions and civil society] that the powers of those can be gained whose positioning is needed to neutralize the apocalyptic directors." (Gottes Eifer. Vom Kampf der drei Monotheismen. 2007, 217 – *frei übersetzt: God's zeal. About the fight of the three monotheism*).

Let me assign the Iranian Mehdi Bazargan to the cultural philosopher Peter Sloterdijk. Bazargan is a politician and believing Muslim; in terms of the Christian-Islamic dialogue he wrote a small commentary in which he points to the respect which Muhammad showed to Christians, and in which he urges tolerance and comprehension. He does so by interpreting verse 48 of the fifth sura in the Holy Qur'an: "For each of you, we have decreed laws and different rites. Arab.:

Had God willed, He could have made you one congregation. But He thus puts you to the test through the revelations He has given each of you. You shall compete in righteousness. Arab.:

To God is your final destiny - all of you - then He will inform you of everything you had disputed.” This verse is the basis for the Islamic notion of plurality. Above all, this verse shows that the ultimate judgment in religious issues exclusively rests with God. On the last day of all HE will inform us definitely. And we also hear how important it will be to have done good deeds, to have acted socially effective: You shall compete in righteousness! We can also quote sura 22, verse 40: “Did not Allah check one set of people by means of another, there would surely have been pulled down monasteries, churches, synagogues, and mosques, in which the name of God is commemorated in abundant measure.” Islam considers sacred all religious places of worship, whether Jewish, Christian or Islamic. Islam asks Muslims to defend the right of liberty of worship for all and in all countries. Islam seeks the establishment of a society in which all can live enjoying religious freedom in safety. The Iranian poet and mystic Hafiz once exclaimed: “If there are 13 different ways to read a Qur’an verse and I know all of them by heart, then I cry for love” (to God, because of this enriching, unfailing diversity which God set out in holy writing).

I would like to finish my small contribution with Bazargan’s comment on this: “The Qur’an announces that the diversity of religions and laws is God’s will, and asks the members of the monotheistic religions to not only pay attention to their differences or to take precedence but, instead, to compete in serving people and doing good deeds. They shall not lament the existing differences but resign the resolution to God beyond. (cf. *Der Koran und die Christen*, 2006, p.87f. – *frei übersetzt: The Qur’an and Christians*)

(4) <i>A common spiritual task</i>

It is a question of faith and surrender (= the meaning of “Islam”) that Christians as well as Muslims can trust in the ONE God. He is so incredibly great in his uniqueness that he carries and maintains the diversity of the world. Christians know this simple song: “He’s got the whole world in his hands.” Again, we may quote the Holy Qur’an in Ayat al-Kursiye Sura 2:255: “HE is never weary of preserving them (the heavens and the earth)”: “wa la ya’udu-hu heftouhuma” **Arab.:**

Power and truth only rest with God. If, however, people think that they must take over God's place then this is idolatry. They mistrust God's almightiness and providence. Human beings can never reach the power of unity and uniqueness, or realize it in their society. God alone guarantees their unity. It is only him who accounts for unity - as I have said it before, "HE who does not know weariness and slumber." Arab.:

In my eyes, it is very important that we learn "self-restraint", that we remain reticent and that we allow space for God's action. We have to learn to let go. I believe that this especially applies for the Western attitude "that anything is possible". The American way: "Yes we can do!" In a new and better way, we have to learn to wait for God. Wait for his resolution, his decision. Sectarian Fanaticism, in contrast, is overhasty. Basically, fanaticism is an insult to God, a "misled zeal" which takes itself too seriously! We have to learn to let God go ahead and to give him priority. First and foremost, realising unity in the Islamic or in the Christian world rests exclusively with God at the end of all days and times. It is a creation of God's mercy and not one of human power. "The Qur'an is as realistic and freedom-loving that it does not dictate an obligation to convert. Each community is verified by its own divine law and the religion maintained, and can approach God and God's values respectively. The Qur'an leaves the decision and judgment of different opinions of people, as well as their statements and truth claim ultimately to God beyond." (cf. Der Koran und die Christen, 2006, p.32 – frei übersetzt: *The Qur'an and Christians*).

What is our task in this spiritual context?

God gave us faith and surrender and in addition, reason, thinking and the common counsel on what has to be done. I answer the question by relating to a scholar from the reform movement of the Ibadiya. Mohammad ben Yusuf Atfaiyash (1821-1914) who was a "Qutb a'emma" (Arab.:) in Algeria, a leading personality of the imams in those days. He talks about islah (=reform) on the basis of "virtue" (salah), about advice and counsel, but also about reconciliation. It was his aim to reactivate the Islamic faith for his time and to disseminate it in a reformatory discourse on the basis of advice. For him, advice, counsel is an ethical-religious authority to maintain the teachings of Islam and an important component of religion. For Atfaiyash, nasiha in the sense of islah means self-abandonment of the individual in favour of the interests

of fellow human beings (cf. Ourghi 2008, S. 351). According to Atfaiyash knowledge can make an important contribution to faith. This is why he strives for an Islam to which basics reflection and reason also belong. Virtue is the highest level to which the reform shall lead. This means that the reform has to begin with the individual, the need to be genuine, come to terms with oneself and live pursuant to divine command. In right understanding, islah (=reform) is a great enrichment as this reform reactivates Islamic sources and allows new interpretations for the changing times. Here I will quote Abdel-Hakim OURGHI from his dissertation on Atfaiyash (2008): According to Atfaiyash, reform is the effort to realize God's religion in the life of the individual and give him (or her) a better understanding of it by simplifying its regulations. In this regard, the QUTB writes the following:

“The meaning of the realization of religion is unity (tawhid), worship (‘ibada) and faith in the holy books, the prophets and the resurrection. [...] The ‘furu’ are also part of this such as noble deeds (commandments). This is what nations agree on. [...] It is also said that the realization of religion demands the good and prohibits the evil.”

This means that man is obliged by his Creator to labour honestly in this world to create an environment fit for all to live; an environment of cooperation and understanding.

Elsewhere he adds that the aim of the reform is to actualize the right thing, the obedience to God, refraining from sins as well as protecting people from harm (Ourghi, p.174). Thereby, Dr. OURGHI draws on the last Qur'an commentary of Atfaiyash, Taysir at-tafsir. Atfaiyash linked the principles of the doctrine, with which he dealt, with the real world in which people live. He tried to fill the basics of faith with practical contents. “Taysir” (Arab.), “facilitation”, the easier access to interpreting the Qur'an; this title of the Qur'an commentary fits very well into the task which he had assigned to himself: Atfaiyash did not just care about interpretation but a interpretation with the practical goal of “facilitation”, that is application to the everyday life of believers. This is what I regard to be the most important common task of believers in God: That we show them how religion can enrich their life, make it more beautiful and easier; that it is better to live with religion than without. That the connection and cohesion of an individual with his or her community turns out best on the ground of religion because in truth, we are a family of God. A burden too heavily

is not good for people in their religious life. Religion does not exist to make life more difficult and more complicated but to succeed in it, and for that we praise the Creator for his good deeds.

This is why it is so important that religion lives in the world, is lively. Jesus Christ said in the Gospel of Matthew 11:29 and 30: "Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light."

Man must come to understand that morality and religious obligations are in the interest of both his worldly temporal existence as well as in the Hereafter. Islam and Christian religion promise us God's mercy and bounty as a source for man to live in an earthly paradise before heaven. May GOD help us all to be beneficent and to proceed on the right path. Praise be to HIM, Lord of creation!

Bernd Feininger