

ECUMENICAL TRENDS

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A Ministry of the Franciscan Friars of the Atonement

Editorial Note

This issue of Ecumenical Trends, featuring two articles that examine the dynamics of interreligious dialogue along with an interview with Imam Feisal Abdul Rauf on matters pertaining the theological as well as the practical significance of that dialogue, is the first half of a two-month commemoration of the 800th anniversary of St. Francis' visit to Sultan Malik al-Kamil in Egypt, during the Fifth Crusade. This encounter between sultan and saint, in 1219, has been interpreted in numerous ways but is often celebrated as an instance of interreligious hospitality that stands out against a context of intense animosity and brutal warfare.

What Makes Dialogue Effective? Three Kinds of Interreligious Dialogue

By Devorah Schoenfeld

What are we doing when we come together in dialogue? As someone who teaches Judaism at a Catholic university, I am involved in a wide variety of Jewish-Christian encounters and kinds of dialogue. People who organize interreligious dialogues are constantly working to make them better. To improve our dialogues, however, we need to know what we are trying to accomplish. Participants come to interreligious dialogue with at least three different kinds of goals, which are often implicit rather than stated. Some participants might want to understand the other better, or themselves better, others might want to work together for social change. The ambiguity about what dialogue is or can accomplish can lead to frustration and the feeling of people talking past each other. When we think more clearly about our goals we can think about how to design a dialogue that meets those goals.

One kind of goal for dialogue is when participants in the dialogue learn about the other in order to understand the other better. This could be for practical reasons, for example medical professionals learning how to accommodate different

religious needs in a hospital. Or students and scholars might study other religions and religious communities in order to better understand the diversity of human experience. The academic discipline of Religious Studies, as a humanities discipline, often operates with this goal as a humanities discipline, that is a discipline which is about understanding human experience.

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This kind of goal is fundamentally other-directed and can be altruistic when people engaged in it are learning about the other for the sake of the other.

The goal here seems simple, to understand the other better. But what does it mean to understand another religious group better? What about them do you need to know? On one level this is a practical question. Who needs to be in the room in order to help advance what kind of understanding? If you want Christians to understand the diversity of contemporary Jewish experience, you need to get Jews in the room who can represent a diverse range of experiences. If you want Jews to understand how Christian thinking about Judaism has changed in recent decades, you need someone in the room who has familiarity with the relevant texts. This might seem obvious, but many dialogues proceed on the assumption that simply getting Jews and Christians in a room will increase mutual understanding without identifying what needs to be understood, or why the people present are qualified to help advance this understanding.

On another level, however, the question of what it means to understand another religious community better is a political question. What defines a religion? Is it the authoritative pronouncements of theologians? If so, which theologians? Is it the way laypeople practice it? If so, which laypeople? There are many possible ways of approaching these questions, but inviting people to a dialogue, and framing them as teachers of the other, implies an answer. A dialogue, for example, of Catholic priests and Jewish lay leaders makes an implied statement about the differing nature of authority in the two religions. Inviting college students who have no formal qualifications beyond stated membership in their different religions to dialogue implies that what other students need to learn is how their tradition is experienced on the ground by sometimes minimally-affiliated people.

Because this first approach to dialogue is other-directed, it can lead to competition among religious minorities about which minority it is important for members of the more powerful majority to learn about. Is it more important for a Catholic student to minor in Jewish studies or in Islamic Studies? On what grounds are they expected to decide? I see this in the background of some of the conversations around

Israel and Palestine on campus. I think it is clear that the future of Israel-Palestine will not be decided at a Catholic university in Chicago, but what might be decided (and which is actually important) is which community a justice-minded young Catholic should be in dialogue with.

In a second kind of goal, participants work together to form an alliance. These alliances can be broadly political, for example interreligious alliances in support of or opposing same-sex marriage. They can be more narrowly political, for example a synagogue and a church operating a soup kitchen together or advocating together for affordable housing in their neighborhood. They can also be purely intellectual, for example Jewish and Christian archeologists working together on a dig that for the Christian will have results relating to the life and times of Jesus and for the Jew will help inform our understanding of Second Temple history, or a group of sociologists working on a study of American religious values that will then inform how the clergy of each denomination does outreach.

Many people might be interested in Jewish-Christian dialogue in general without being interested in any particular alliance. Sometimes people form dialogue groups in order to create an alliance without making that clear at the outset, and instead present their goal as learning about

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Ecumenical Trends

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each other. They might present a dialogue group as a way to explore, for example, the question of marriage in different religions, when actually they hope to create a shared definition of the value of marriage, which the participants would work together to defend. Or they could have an unstated goal of showing how things that are called marriage in different cultures are in reality very different from each other, with the hope of building an alliance towards expanding the definition of marriage.

Sometimes participants in Jewish-Christian dialogue in particular will have an unstated goal of learning about or defending “Judeo-Christian” values. This means creating an alliance between Jews and Christians to support certain values against unidentified others (secular people? Muslims?) who do not support those values. While some Jews and some Christians are interested in this sort of alliance, many are not.

Dialogues that are intended to create an alliance do not always make that clear at the outset, and participants might be interested in interreligious dialogue without being willing to participate in any particular alliance. A dialogue about marriage in different religions, for example, could be geared towards creating a shared definition of the value of marriage, with the hope that the participants would work together to defend that definition. Or it could go in the opposite direction, of showing how things that are called marriage in different cultures are in reality very different from each other, with the goal of building an alliance towards expanding the definition of marriage.

This kind of alliance can pose particular problems for Jews who define themselves as secular, in a way which rarely has parallels among American Christians. Jews who define themselves as secular may have particular problems with alliances to further shared religious values. So may Jews who are themselves religious but who see secular Jews as part of their community and are not willing to enter into an alliance which excludes them.

Finally, in the third kind of dialogue, the participants come together to learn about their own theology and figure out how to do it better. One example of this type of dialogue comes from my own field of study: medieval Bible commentaries. Sometimes, when Jewish and Christian interpreters learn about each other’s interpretations, they see something in the biblical text that they hadn’t seen before, which helps them understand their own Bible better. The most impressive example of this that I encounter regularly is the ongoing work among Christian theologians to develop Christian approaches to theology, ethics and Bible that are free from anti-Judaism and supersessionism. Dialogue with Jews can be very helpful in developing these new Christian theologies.

This is the kind of Jewish-Christian dialogue that most interests me, since I see it as essential to both communities. It is obviously essential for Christians, since as soon as one identifies as Christian one is referencing a Jewish person – Jesus – and a Jewish theological category – the Christ or Messiah. This means that Christians always and inevitably need to think about Jews in their own theological work. On the face of it this seems non-reciprocal, since Jews and Judaism are central in the Christian Bible, while Christians and Christianity are not a major part of any canonical Jewish text. But Rabbis and Jewish scholars in the contemporary world do frequently reference Christianity, usually by contrasting it with Judaism to make a point about Jewish/Christian difference. Every time a Rabbi or Jewish theologian makes a statement like that, they are engaged in constructing Judaism in relation to Christianity. Although Judaism is not by its nature defined by Christianity in the way that Christianity is by Judaism, the work of constructing Judaism in relation to Christianity is happening now in America and has happened at other historically significant times in ways that have impacted the development of Judaism. So both Jews and Christians have internal narratives of the other that impact how we practice our own religions. Dialogue with the other can help bring those internal narratives more in line with reality.

Interreligious dialogue with this goal is effective when you come out of it with better and more nuanced theology, when after the dialogue you find that you understand your own beliefs, sacred texts, or religious practices better. It is ineffective when you come out of it not understanding your own theology better, or actually find that you understand it worse. Often when people engage in it who are not thoroughly trained in their own tradition it can lead to an easy syncretism, choosing to adopt pieces of another religion’s practice or theology without having the tools to consider whether it truly fits with the rest of one’s own religious life.

When Jews and Christians engage in theological work together it raises the question of how to maintain the boundaries between the two communities. This is more true for Jews and Christians than for most other interreligious conversations, since the two communities share so many basic texts and foundational concepts. It can be easy to make the case that any particular practice or theological concept from one can be moved to the other, as in the case of Sabbath-observant Christians or Jews who believe that their messiah will return from the dead. This means that the work of constructing boundaries has to be an intentional act, in which Jews and Christians intentionally decide which concepts not to adopt from each other in order to maintain the two religions as separate.

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Conversely, it can also lead to reification of difference: Jews do this, Christians do that. This kind of conclusion can feel deceptively satisfying, giving a sense that the participants have discussed their differences, learned how they are different, and learned how to respect each other. But it leaves some of the core problems of Jewish-Christian relations untouched, and perhaps makes them worse. One of the great tragedies of the Jewish-Christian relationship is the way in which we can surrender religious concepts to the other that in fact properly belong to us. To speak of Jewish examples, the most heartbreaking one for me is the struggle that Jews sometimes have with the idea that God loves them, because it sounds “too Christian.” Sometimes Jews will resist discussions about theology because of the idea that Christians prioritize belief while what is important for

Jews is practice. Similarly, in teaching Christian students, I’ve seen them struggle with ritual, or religious law, because they see these as Jewish rather than Christian.

These three goals of interreligious dialogue are not mutually exclusive. Sometimes they can lead into each other: learning about the other in order to learn about other human beings can lead to discovering that we have shared goals and can make an alliance, or to reformulating our own theology based on what we have learned.

So, how can it help to be aware of these three different goals? If you are a participant in a dialogue, they can help you recognize if this particular dialogue is one that you want to be part of, and if so on what terms. It is possible to choose, as a participant in a dialogue to get things out of it that are different from what the organizers intended. If one party comes to dialogue with a goal of making an alliance, it is possible to refuse to enter into the alliance while at the same time taking the opportunity to learn about them, or to use the dialogue with them to think about one’s own religious life. But that might be frustrating for the organizer, who (sometimes unconsciously) developed the event with different goals. For those creating a dialogue, thinking more clearly about the goals of the dialogue can help us organize a dialogue that is effective by understanding more precisely what it is that we are trying to accomplish. 

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Waiting with Simone Weil: Atheist-Christian Dialogue as Spiritual Practice

By Russell P. Johnson

“Atheism is a purification.”¹ This statement, found in the notebooks of French philosopher Simone Weil, is as enigmatic as it is concise. It would mean one thing from the pen of some great critic of religion, a Nietzsche for example, welcoming an anti-religious age purified of its servile morality and childish metaphysics. But when Weil wrote this, she was a deeply committed Christian – perhaps heterodox in some of her beliefs but fiercely devoted to God. What, then, does Weil mean by “atheism is a purification,” and what are the implications of her suggestion for Christians and atheists in dialogue after “the death of God”?

Weil writes, “A case of contradictories which are true. God exists. God does not. Where is the problem?”² Well, the problem is obvious. God cannot both exist and not exist. It goes against the law of non-contradiction, one of the basic laws of logic. As Aristotle wrote, “The most certain of all basic principles is that contradictory propositions are not true simultaneously.”³ As logicians would say it today, contradictories cannot both be true in the same sense at the same time; something cannot be both A and not-A. This is true even of someone as eminently capable as God; as C.S. Lewis writes, “Nonsense remains nonsense even when we talk it about God.”⁴ For the existing God to manage to be non-existing would not be a feat of ontological prowess, it would be a collapse into logical incoherence.

As we will see, perhaps Weil’s comments are not meant to be *logical* so much as *dialogical*. But first, let’s consider the passage in its context: “A case of contradictories which are true. God exists. God does not. Where is the problem? I am quite sure that there is a God in the sense that I am quite sure that my love is not illusory. I am quite sure that there is not a God in the sense that I am quite sure nothing real can be anything like what I am able to conceive when I pronounce this word. But that which I cannot conceive is not an illusion.”⁵ Here we see how Weil escapes incoherence; it is in different senses of the word “God,” and perhaps also the word “exist,” that she can affirm both that God does and does not exist. Christians believe there is a God, to whom we pray, in whom we trust, through whom we come to know ourselves. But our understanding of this God always fails to fully capture divine reality. Our imagination never properly envisions the God of the universe. A.W. Tozer said, “What comes to our minds when we think of God is the most important thing about us.”⁶ Weil would add, what comes to our minds when we think of God – is false.⁷

Thus the logical problem is not easily solved by saying that Weil is using the word “God” in two different senses.

The problem becomes, what is the sense of the word “God” in the first place? Is it what we believe or what we can conceive, and how would we even know the difference? If you think it’s easy to distinguish between the conceivable and the inconceivable, then I do not think that word means what you think it means. Analytic philosophers could rightfully object that we still haven’t specified what exactly we mean by “God.”

This, I take it, is not an objection against Weil, but precisely her point. Those who believe in a God and those who disbelieve are never quite on the same page by what they mean by “God.” Indeed, even one person by herself has a hard time making sense of God. When someone says “God exists,” who or what are they saying exists? If another responds, “God doesn’t exist,” are they disagreeing or merely talking past the first person? How can these people be sure they mean the same thing when they say “God,” and aren’t just using the same word to refer to different entities? There seems to be no conclusive way to resolve this dilemma if God is always beyond description and surpassing conception. If I said to you, “Do you believe in sneerp?” and you asked “What is sneerp?” and I would say, “Well, I’ll tell you what sneerp isn’t; sneerp isn’t what I think of when I think of sneerp,” you wouldn’t think, “this is deep mystical theology,” but rather, “this fellow has been drinking too much cough syrup.” It’s for this reason that philosophers like A. J. Ayer in the early twentieth century concluded atheist-theist discussions are senseless.⁸

For Weil, however, our talk about God is not senseless so much as it is searching for sense, or better yet, waiting to become sensical.⁹ Our understanding of God is not so much an illusion as an incomplete glimpse. When we speak of God, it’s like the right word is on the tip of our tongue but we can’t quite find it, so we use another word instead, a word that might be good enough for present purposes but doesn’t quite get at what we mean. When we talk about God, we are not speaking nonsense, but neither can we fully comprehend the sense of our own affirmations or negations. Stanley Hauerwas expresses this tension with an analogy. Just as the couple at their wedding saying “I do” don’t fully

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know what it is they're committing to, so the one who commits to the belief "God exists" doesn't fully know what she's committed to. A marriage is an ongoing process of learning the meaning of one's own vows. A religious life is an ongoing process of learning the meaning of one's own confession of faith.

Speaking of weddings, no passage captures this better than I Corinthians 13. Paul writes,

Love never ends. As for prophecies, they will pass away; as for tongues, they will cease; as for knowledge, it will pass away. For we know in part and we prophecy in part, but when the perfect comes, the partial will pass away... For now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face. Now I know in part, then I shall know fully, even as I have been fully known.¹⁰

This insistence on partial knowledge, language passing away, incomplete understanding, and unending love is in the background of Weil's remark that there is and is not a God.

It is also, I argue, in the background of Weil's claim that atheism is a purification. Every person's understanding of God is partial and incomplete. One way we can gain clearer, more complete understanding is by comparing notes, both within and beyond the confines of our religious communities. The voice of atheism, the voice that calls into question accepted – sometimes ossified – conceptions of the divine, is an essential voice in the dialogue of Christian theology. Atheism is not just accidental, but integral to Christian theological development.

This is true of course historically, as the story of Christian theology in the past three centuries (at least) is the story of an interaction between different voices of affirmation and negation. Locke and Butler and Hume, Wolff and Kant and Hegel and Kierkegaard, Schleiermacher and Feuerbach and Barth, Strauss and Troeltsch and Marx and Frei, Nietzsche and Weil. The story of modern Christian theology is a conversation back and forth between Christian voices and atheist voices, pointing out one another's blind spots, challenging each other's assumptions, testing each other's logic, in the process sharpening our conceptions of the divine.

We don't often associate Karl Marx with puns, but he once wrote punning on Ludwig Feuerbach's name,

"There is no other road for you to truth and freedom except that leading through the brook of fire (*feuer-bach*). Feuerbach is the purgatory of the present times." Karl Barth later echoed this, saying explicitly that the only way to do theology in the twentieth century is to pass through the brook of fire, to engage with Feuerbach's criticism. That is, only by testing our conceptions of the divine against the human tendency to project human traits onto the heavens can Christians do theology honestly. Feuerbach's voice needs to be heard again and again, reminding Christians that when we look at God through a "mirror, dimly," we may be looking at ourselves. Barth insists that Feuerbach's word on theology is not the last word, but Christians nonetheless need to hear this word, dwell on it, and respond vulnerably. Whenever Christians reckon with the challenge of Feuerbach, "the purgatory of the present times," their faith is purified by atheism.

This dialogical purification is not only historical but happens in present-day interfaith dialogues. Weil insisted that there is no God in the sense that nothing corresponds to "what I am able to conceive when I pronounce this word." The emphasis on conceptions and words helps us to understand the process that transpires in atheist-Christian dialogue. Dialogue is not simply a process in which words are exchanged and conceptions are compared, but a process through which words are refined and conceptions sharpened. If one person says God is just, and another says there cannot be a just God, the conversation should turn to what we mean by "justice," and in what ways this concept does and does not apply to God. As Socrates taught us, the very action of clarifying what we mean by our concepts helps us understand them better. Dialogue, even argumentative dialogue, is a learning process; we are coming to a deeper comprehension of the sense of our own words. By making sense of our discourse about God, we see less dimly than before.

Thinking in terms of an ongoing process of *making* sense, rather than a clear and definite sense *given* to our words, helps us move from the static restrictions of the logical to the dynamic refinement of the dialogical. That is, we can affirm that "something cannot be both A and not-A at the same time in the same sense" but admit that we can't always discern precisely in what sense a thing is A or not-A. When one person says "There is a loving God" and another person says "There is not a loving God," they don't need to assume that one of them is utterly right and one of them is utterly wrong, nor do they need to conclude with Ayer that their disagreement is senseless. Rather, they can take this contradiction as an opportunity to make sense together, to come to terms with one another, to come to a deeper understanding of what it means to be loving. A Christian could

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see this not as a pretense to win an apologetic battle but as a spiritual practice. Purifying away the countless misleading analogies, misguided conceptions, false projections, and harmful assumptions we bring to God is a way for humans – Calvin’s “factories of idols” – to grow in grace and knowledge of God. This spiritual practice requires humility before God and before the atheist neighbor. If Christians accept that our knowledge of God is always partial and incomplete, that our conceptions always fall short, then heeding the voices that point out where our theological statements fail to capture reality is not a matter of succumbing to external pressure but a matter of welcoming suggestions for more truthful existence. We may hear Weil’s “Where is the problem?” not as a rhetorical question but an authentic invitation to consider together what is problematic in our conceptions of God.

This is not to say that Christians should use atheists for their own spiritual purposes. As Martin Buber insisted, dialogue dies when it becomes reduced to exploitation. Rather, I am arguing that it is essential for Christians to *listen* to atheists, and the voice of doubt within themselves.¹¹ Nietzsche, the great prophet of *The Antichrist*, wrote, “Never ignore, never refuse to see what may be thought against your own thought.”¹² Simone Weil, the curious saint collapsing willingly at the feet of Christ, said the same, “Method of investigation: As soon as we have thought something, try to see in what way the contrary is true.”¹³ This process of questioning is something that – like editing an essay – can be done individually but is better done in conversation.

This conversation might not be explicitly about God at all, but about the deep commitments, the abiding values, and the burning desires that constitute the participants’ lives. It may also involve attending to histories of hypocrisy and hurt that have shaped how people understand faith. It will likely involve questions that go unanswered, possibly because they are unanswerable. But as long as it involves genuine listening, it will be a moment of compassion, and as long as it involves humility, it will be an opportunity for purification.

In this dialogue, Christians need to hear the voice of doubt, a voice of dissent, calling into question any candidate for divinity, a recurring interrogation, challenging and holding them accountable to their own commitments to truth

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and life. If Christianity is to survive the “death of God,” then Christians must ask not only themselves but atheists as well, “Which god has died, and is it mine? What do we mean by death? How now shall we make sense?” 

Notes:

1. Simone Weil, *The Simone Weil Reader*, ed. George A. Panichas (Mt. Kisco, NY: Moyer Bell, 1977), 417.
2. Weil, *Gravity and Grace* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1997), 167.
3. Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, 1011b13-14, in *The Complete Works of Aristotle*, ed. Jonathan Barnes (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984).
4. C.S. Lewis, *The Problem of Pain* (New York: Harper One, 1940), 18.
5. Weil, *Gravity and Grace*, 167.
6. A.W. Tozer, *Knowledge of the Holy* (San Francisco: Harper One, 2009), 1.
7. In this, Weil is agreeing with a long history of Christian mysticism, notably including Pseudo-Dionysius and Meister Eckhart.
8. A.J. Ayer, *Language, Truth, and Logic* (New York: Dover, 1952).
9. Weil, *Gravity and Grace*, 62–64; *Waiting for God* (New York: Harper & Row, 1973), 112.
10. I Corinthians 13:8–10, 12 (ESV).
11. Weil writes that listening is a form of compassion. *Waiting for God*, 150
12. Quoted in A.G. Sertillanges, *The Intellectual Life: Its Spirit, Conditions, Methods* (Washington, DC: Catholic University Press, 1987), xxv.
13. Weil, *Gravity and Grace*, 156.

The Taste of the Absolute: Encountering Others, Envisioning Peace

By Imam Feisal Abdul Rauf and Aaron Hollander

Aaron Hollander, for *Ecumenical Trends*: Thank you, Imam, for joining me for this conversation – the first fruits of *Ecumenical Trends*’ special attention, this Autumn, to Muslim-Christian encounter and dialogue. It’s lovely to meet you and to begin what we hope will be more of a relationship between our two neighboring organizations, a mere seventeen floors apart!

To get started, I think it’s important that our readers understand who you are – about the interfaith vision that has animated you for these past decades, and about the convictions that led you to create Cordoba House in the first place. I wonder if you’d share with us a little of your own background, how you got to be where you are.

Imam Feisal Abdul Rauf: Well, to begin biographically: I was born in Kuwait of Egyptian parents. My earliest memories are from when my father went to study in England. I lived in England for five years, until I was six years old. Then my father was transferred to Malaysia, where we lived among not only Muslim Malays but also the other major demographic segments of the population – the Indians, who are predominantly Tamil in ethnicity and Hindu in religion, except for a small minority from North India, who are Muslims, and the Chinese, who are predominantly Buddhist, though some are Christians. By the time I came to the United States at the age of seventeen, I had been exposed from my earliest days to several substantively different cultures – this face-to-face exposure, in fact, was part of my own culture, part of who I was.

And as I came of age and began to practice my faith, I could also see that the varieties of practice among the Muslims of Egypt, Malaysia, Pakistan, Turkey, and so forth, flowed not from creedal disagreements but from the cultural traditions of those societies, a reality shared by other religious traditions – Islamic music from India has much in common with Hindu music, while Muslim songs from Turkey sound virtually identical to songs sung by the Christian monks in Greece. What does this mean, I wondered? Isn’t it significant that these traditions – Muslim and otherwise – are so internally flexible and yet have so much in common with one another in how they are expressed? So I began to search for what was at the core of the religions and what was at the core of myself, who I was as a person, as a being. After all, my body changed, my ideas changed, my emotions changed, the people whom I loved changed, my ambitions changed – so I said to myself, if everything about me changes, why do I still regard myself as the same person?

The only way I could answer that was to narrow my identity to what I call the “timeless I.” If you don’t believe in God then you believe that everything you are ends at death, but as believers in human immortality we believe that this immortal, timeless self, this essential self, will continue living even after our bodies have died. And this timeless self is deeper than everything, even deeper than the religious forms and traditions in which our spirituality has been shaped. *That* is who I was – everything else has an expiration date.

So I came to the conclusion, after many years of readings in the world’s religions and many years of experience living among people of different faiths, that all religions are connecting us in one way or another to the Absolute, which we call by different names. The Qur’an teaches us that God sent messengers to every community in the world and gave them their own rituals by which to honor him. Yet the message was essentially the same: that there is one God, that created the universe and created us as his highest form of creation, that we have a particular mandate to be his stewards and to discharge our obligations as such, and that, indeed, all the revelations sent down by God are at their core the same. So therefore, if we look at all the so-called “different” religions from God’s eyes – which is the perspective from which we always have to consider things! – These are all different revelations of God’s one truth. The challenge is how to internalize that understanding, and then how to practice it when we encounter so many differences among people and communities and political institutions.

AH: How to internalize and practice the sense that what we experience in our lives and societies as very different, pointing in different directions, is actually grounded in a commonality that is deeper than that which divides us? Insofar as they receive from God their impetus –

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*Feisal Abdul Rauf is an American Sufi imam, author, and activist who founded and serves as the President of Cordoba House, a nonprofit institute that, by connecting people to God, seeks to build trust and improve understanding among people of all religions. Part of the Cordoba House mission is shaping the agenda for the next generation of American Muslim leaders to address the unique needs of their communities. He is the author of six books, including the highly acclaimed *Moving the Mountain: A New Vision of Islam in America*, as well as numerous articles and op-eds.*

We see things from a perspective that may be partially correct, but it is not completely or ultimately correct, because it is not God's perspective.

FR: Not *just* their impetus, but their rituals, their philosophy, their worldview, everything sincere in them – we need to see all this from a God-centric perspective. We *see* different religions because we are looking at reality from an anthropocentric point of view. If we look at it from a theocentric point of view – well, it's like when we move from a geocentric theory of the solar system to a heliocentric theory. Once you put the Sun in the center, and everything else is orbiting it, you can understand why it *looks* like Jupiter is going in reverse from an Earth-centric perspective. It's not really going in reverse – it's orbiting the Sun more slowly than the Earth does, so as we go faster around the Sun it looks as though Jupiter is moving in reverse. Or when you are on the turnpike, and you are going at 60 mph, and another person in front of you is going at 50 mph, relative to you he is reversing at 10 mph – but he's not *really* reversing, he's going forward at 50 mph! It's your own motion, your limited perspective, that makes things appear that way.

AH: So when get caught in our human perspective and mistake that human perspective for a universal or divine perspective, we encounter others and perceive their differences, their practices, their beliefs, according to our own logic rather than God's?

FR: We see things from a perspective that may be partially correct, but it is not completely or ultimately correct, because it is not God's perspective. And, problematically, in many ways we introduce errors and blunders.

AH: What I think is especially interesting about what you're saying is that it points us toward a specific kind of rationale for interreligious dialogue. There are many of these rationales – some are pragmatic, of course. There's such widespread misinformation about religion and about minority religions in particular in this country, and public interfaith exchange is one way to correct misunderstanding and ideally inoculate against fear or mistrust. Or we might want to collaborate with one another on some project, making our city safer, or greener, or more humane, or what have you. This is all pragmatic – working for the common good in a civil society. But it sounds like what you're talking about here is a *religious* rationale for interreligious encounter. If such encounter aids us in transforming our narrow, self-centered perspective and aligning or assimilating that perspective more toward what you call a God-centric per-

spective or God's-eye view, then this uplifts us theologically and not just socially.

Would you talk a little bit more about the religious rationales found in Islam for interreligious dialogue? Are there other Islamic ways of thinking about why we might want to get to know one another's perspectives? You mentioned, for example, the Qur'anic logic of human beings having been created in many places with many revelations from the one God – so that would suggest a certain rationale for encountering these others and listening to their understanding, would it not?

FR: Well, the Prophet Muhammad said that it's an obligation for a Muslim to seek knowledge from the cradle to the grave. And he said, "Go and seek knowledge as far as China" – China being then seen as the furthest point in the known world. So Muslim scholars went all over the world that they knew, and within a century and a half of the Prophet's lifetime, Muslims had translated all the books they could get and adapted these ideas into Islamic thought. For example, Muslim thinkers adopted Greek philosophy, and they used Greek logic and Roman law to shape Islamic jurisprudence. So, I have found this instruction to seek knowledge wherever we can to be very helpful in my own understanding of interreligious dialogue and my ability to see my own religion better. It's just like when you grow up in a place and you speak only one language. Then you study another – French, or Italian, or Latin, say – this doesn't mean that you've given up your own language, but you gain deeper insights into your language when you study a foreign language, and every new language you study will give you new insights into your own. You see these different verb structures or vocabularies, some of which are closely related, and you gain different perspectives and different insights in how the world may be viewed more broadly than you ordinarily do. So too, different religions give you different perspectives on the same phenomenon.

AH: It would be fair to ask: if the core of all these revelations is essentially the same, then what good is it to go out and seek to encounter, listen to, have a conversation with people who have heard the message differently? If it's all the same in the end, why bother? I think your linguistic metaphor may continue to help us here: does being religiously "bilingual," so to speak, actually strengthen our apprehension of our own traditions? Does it aid us in interacting with the world using the repertoires of our traditions without mistaking them for the only way of describing God or God's presence in the world?

FR: Exactly.

AH: So are you suggesting that a Muslim or a Christian who gets to know another's religious heritage deeply would be, or might be, a more faithful Muslim or Christian?

FR: Well, I think that commitment in faith is a matter of individual decision-making and exercise of will. You can be knowledgeable about something and not committed to it – as a Christian or a Muslim, you can be a scholar of your tradition's theology but at the same time be faithless. Or you can be a very devout person with very little knowledge of your tradition, its history or theology, etc. So spiritual growth and intellectual knowledge are different axes in space, so to speak – they are orthogonal to one another. It helps if you can put these in alignment in your life, because then you can understand more deeply the meaning of the words in which you place your faith, but we say in my spiritual tradition that the rational mind does not help you arrive to God. It's your faith which leads to God, the soul which experiences God.

AH: Along the lines of your linguistic metaphor, then: we might learn, in encountering the religious riches of a community other than our own, all about the "lexical" or "grammatical" parallels, about the history that has brought our two traditions together or yielded two traditions where there had been one, and so forth. This might help us to appreciate the other tradition or our own more fully. But what about the spiritual growth?

Here I hope we might go a little further into your tradition of Sufi Islam in particular. My understanding is, and please correct me as need be, that there's a deep commitment in Sufism to spiritual exercise, asceticism, growth toward God in a kind of inward journey. In such an inward journey, what is the role of encountering religious difference among people whose perspective may appear very alien to our own – can this aid us in spiritual growth as well as intellectual growth? In the terms of your metaphor, does getting to know other religions help us master the subtleties of our own more deeply, help us cultivate a more "poetic" appreciation of reality?

FR: I look at religion from what I call a phenomenon-perspective. To understand anyone's religion, you have to go beyond the words they say to the experience they have, and this is where Sufis place their own spiritual emphasis. As I tell my congregation, we all know that the fundamental thing about Islam is the *shahada*: "I witness that there is no god but God." But what does it mean actually to *witness* God? I remember when I was taught to pray as a child, when I was around twelve or thirteen, every time I said my prayer, "*ash-hadu an la ilaha illallah*," I heard a voice in my heart say, "Feisal, you're a hypocrite. You say 'I witness God,' but you haven't witnessed God yet." It bothered me in my prayer! So it impelled me – I wanted to *experience*

God. And I prayed and prayed, prayed constantly, and – ah. I ultimately experienced God one day while on the bus returning from school. I now began to feel traction in my religious journey. When you take this experience-based way of looking at religion, then you strive to understand the other person's faith from the inside. Here again, like with language – you can understand a language from the outside and see how it works, what its structures are, and so forth. But to really *know* a language you have to experience it from the inside, you have to speak it and feel it come through you and feel what it's like to interact with the world in that way.

AH: Earlier you suggested that the message of every genuine religion is the same at the core because each is originally from God and God is one. But what of their experience – every person's perspective on the world is different, their lives are different, and so their experience of God in that context is different as well? Are there not, at least potentially, as many experiences of God as there are human beings?

FR: No – the experience of God, in the deepest self, is always the same. You see, it's the experiences that teach you the reality. It's what you experience, what you hear, what you taste, that teaches you what a sound really is, what food really is. I can describe to you a strawberry – but until you taste it, you have only a vague idea, and when you taste it, you are tasting the same thing that I am tasting, even if you describe it differently. So when Jesus says to his disciples that they must let the power of the Holy Spirit work within them – if you haven't experienced this, you might have all kinds of ideas about what he's saying but you don't really *know* what he means. You have to experience yourself as a channel for a force from God.

AH: But how can these experiences of God be the same when they are shaped in so many ways by one's world and one's encounters? When the Apostle Thomas goes onto his knees, in the Gospel of John, and has his finger in the wound of Jesus' side, and he says "My Lord and my God" – can

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I can describe to you a strawberry – but until you taste it, you have only a vague idea, and when you taste it, you are tasting the same thing that I am tasting, even if you describe it differently.

that experience really be the same as, say, the friends of the Prophet Muhammad hearing the Word of God flow through him? They are each experiencing God in these moments, one through touch and one through hearing, as you say, but I think it would be difficult to say that they are having the same experience. The experience is their own, even if what they are experiencing is God.

FR: No, that's true, but when one experiences God truly, the ego, the "I" that experiences, is revealed to be part of what passes away. We do not experience God as ourselves, in our human perspective; we experience God as the "I" knows the "I," with no intermediary. For Sufis, this is the goal and summit of Islam – this is what *islam* means, complete surrender or submission to God, where the Spirit of God acts through you, where all your action is God's action. The Qur'an tells that the Prophet faced his foes in the Battle of Badr and took a clump of dirt and threw it at them, and the Qur'an says after that, "It was not you who threw when you threw, but God who threw" – this is a strange statement, which cannot be understood logically but only experientially – and this is what I understand Jesus to mean when he says to let the Holy Spirit work through you.

Now, maybe we've experienced this in our lives, maybe we've experienced what we call "flow," when we and our actions and the world are one, but the question is how can we make that more and more a norm in our life, rather than an abnormal rarity. How do we make it more of a commonplace? This is the ambition, or, let's say, the spiritual ideal, in the language which is common to Islam and Christianity and other religions as well: to *submit* to the Absolute in such a way that all our actions are in this state of flow, a flow from God through us into the world.

And notice – by reflecting on this experience as we are doing, we are dwelling in a commonality between Muslims and Christians. That is interreligious dialogue from a phenomenon-perspective.

AH: I hear you saying that this experience of submission is something that we can know together, not necessarily in the language that we're using to talk about it, which is often quite different, but in the *experience* of that submission as holy. Having "tasted" it separately, we recognize the other as having tasted what we have tasted, and found it good?

FR: Exactly. We recognize it as such, as coming from God and not coming from Satan, and if we are truly attentive we recognize it as such in the other person as well. I see the Christian's submission to God and I recognize it as holy. I can affirm that what you experience as letting the Holy Spirit flow through you is what I experience as a state of submission to the divine will, as *islam*.

I see the Christian's submission to God and I recognize it as holy. I can affirm that what you experience as letting the Holy Spirit flow through you is what I experience as a state of submission to the divine will, as islam.

AH: Okay, so we can do this work to identify or celebrate a commonality, despite the diversity of vocabulary, but the question remains: why is our spiritual life strengthened by encountering that commonality *in difference*? Why does it matter that you can see Christians, from whom you differ in so many ways, having this same experience, as you say, of submission to God?

FR: Let me tell you a story. My wife used to work in a company, and she would fast Ramadan. At the time when the sun would set before the end of the work-day, around 4:30 pm, her work colleagues would call her and tell her, "Hey, it's time to break your fast!" and offer some drink, or a piece of fruit or chocolate to break her fast. Her secretary admitted to her one day, "You know, watching you fast Ramadan and not drinking or eating anything all day makes me feel that my definition of fasting for Lent – giving up chocolate – is no fast at all!" So there's a certain sense of setting standards for each other. God tells us in the Qur'an: "Compete with each other in righteousness, race toward God's favor and forgiveness." That doesn't mean "compete" by kicking each other in the shins and committing fouls! It means – when you see another person practicing their faith in a way that you find inspiring, let that be a model for you, let it set a bar, a challenge to meet in your own practice.

AH: It's a lovely metaphor because in a "competition" of this sort, we're still playing the same game, we're playing together, we have shared commitments and a shared love of the game. Of course, the metaphor also works in terms of how easy it is to forget that this competition is still a collaboration – something we are doing together for the well-being of everyone involved. It's so easy, so tempting, so dangerous, to get carried away and treat a team as a tribe: something to fight over, to riot over...

This is a fruitful conversation, but I'd like to shift gears a little bit here, now that we've explored some of the rationales and benefits of interreligious dialogue in our time.

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Another important parallel between Sufi Islam and Catholic Christianity is the example of the saints – looking to the saints not only as a model for emulation but also as a kind of interpretive key to the truths articulated by the tradition. This month we're coming up on an anniversary event, important to the Franciscans in particular but also to many who are committed to intercultural exchange and interreligious peace: the 800th anniversary of St. Francis' visit to Egypt and of his meeting with Sultan Malik al-Kamil. In 1219, Francis of Assisi travelled to the front lines of the Fifth Crusade and sought an audience with the Sultan, even though he did not speak Arabic and had every expectation that he would die in the attempt; once granted that audience, Francis spoke of the gospel that motivated his coming and engaged (through a translator) in a long conversation about faith and truth with Malik. So this is remarkable: in the middle of a brutal war motivated and ideologically justified by interreligious animosity, the Christian monk was able to come in peace and friendship to a man who was supposed to be the enemy of all Christendom – and the Muslim sultan was able to receive him hospitably, to listen to and empathize with the monk's convictions, and to send him home safely and well-fed. Now, that's just scratching the surface, but can we talk a little about this encounter, about what you take to be its significance for our time?

FR: Well, as a background to this event I'd like to point out a few things. First, when Islam spread, it was welcomed in many countries because it protected the rights of religious minorities, not least Christian minorities, who had been persecuted by the authorities in those places. At the time, there was a lot of sectarian fighting among different Christian groups, as you know well from your studies. And the Muslim leaders, whether Salah ad-Din or Malik al-Kamil, saw it as their responsibility to protect religious diversity and the rights of each community in a time of sectarian division. They were never fighting against Christianity *per se*, because they had numerous Christian communities, such as the Syrian and Coptic churches, protected within their state. So the perspective that the crusaders had toward the Muslims of the Middle East was not reciprocated by the Muslim leaders of the time. Sultan Malik would not have seen *Christians* as the enemy (as the crusaders might have seen the war as a struggle of Christianity against Islam); rather, he was fighting against a specific European army, against Latin crusaders on behalf of the Muslims and the local Christians as well.

AH: That being said, Francis of Assisi was there as a representative of the Roman Catholic church. Although he didn't come with specific ecclesiastical authority, he didn't disguise that he was aligned with the crusaders' religion; he resists their methods but still sees himself as part of their community and their faith. If Malik viewed

the Roman church as the ideological wing of the crusaders' war machine, he would still have recognized Francis as part of it, in spite of the monk's simplicity and humility.

FR: I'm just saying that this is the context for understanding Sultan Malik's perspective. The Sultan would not have viewed Francis as an enemy *because* he was Christian, and if it was clear that he was not there as a military agent then he would have had no reason to treat him in a hostile manner. In any case, it's a lovely story, and it shows how an attempt to create human understanding on a one-to-one level will always have a positive significance, even in the midst of terrible conflict. I know from what I have read of the story that the encounter had a very profound impact upon St. Francis. And although Francis may have gone with the intention to convert the Sultan to Christianity, his perspective would surely have been enlarged in course of the meeting, that is, he would have seen the Sultan not just as a Muslim to be converted but as a human being in his wholeness.

And what about Malik? First of all, the Qur'an instructs Muslims not to curse the beliefs of others, lest they curse God through their own ignorance – ignorance not in the sense of being foolish but in the sense of not knowing, not understanding, that which they disparage. Of course, that's a command which Muslims violate all the time, but be that as it may, this is an instruction that we are supposed to follow. Second, Muslims believe that Islam serves to complete the same religion that God revealed through all the biblical prophets, including Moses and Jesus. The Quran informs us that Jesus predicted the coming of Muhammad. And Muslims point to certain verses in the Gospels as indicating the coming of Muhammad. So we see our religion as inclusive of Christianity and inclusive of Judaism, just as Christians see the Old Testament as part of their Bible – they accept the Hebrew Scriptures even though Jews do not accept the New Testament as part of *their* Bible. So too, we look at Christians more or less as Christians look at Jews – that we are basically a continuation and incorporation of the same heritage. We believe in the same God, we seek the same ultimate end in God.

So I like to think that St. Francis and Sultan Malik came to this point in their conversation, and recognized one another as sincere seekers after God, as speakers of the truth in different languages. They appreciated each other's convictions, whether or not they recognized them as aligned with their own – without trying to water down their own tradition in any way whatsoever.

AH: Francis and Malik are able to be convinced of the rightness of their own tradition without presupposing the wrongness of the other one's tradition – that's significant, yes. It's noteworthy that the early accounts suggest that

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the Sultan's advisors counseled him to execute Francis and his companion, on the grounds that they were encouraging apostasy from Islam – but Sultan Malik refused to do it. Of course, he was not persuaded to convert to Christianity, but he didn't need to be persuaded to see that this other person was worth listening to, worth honoring and treating hospitably. Malik is convinced that Francis is incorrect in *what* he believes, yet he is impressed with *how* he believes, and he is able to have great appreciation for Francis' authenticity, his humility, his humanity.

FR: How could he not be impressed, seeing that this man is a saintly human being, who submitted completely to God and sought to let the Holy Spirit flow through him, as we were discussing before? Something else that I want to say about sainthood. We have a word which is translated as "saints," although it doesn't have the same semantic field as the word "saint" in English, but it conveys the idea that there are people who are especially close to God: we call such a person a *wali*, or a "friend" (of God). And these are people who, not because of any kind of formal canonization, but because of their strong exercise of spirituality and their effect upon people, have been recognized as saints by the popular masses. And we have a number of those throughout our history, and they have played a profound role in the development of Islamic spirituality, and in converting many people to Islam, through the power of that spirituality.

Malik is convinced that Francis is incorrect in what he believes, yet he is impressed with how he believes, and he is able to have great appreciation for Francis' authenticity, his humility, his humanity.

AH: Their presence is magnetic; it draws others in towards the source of their spirituality, which can be perceived through all the senses, physical and otherwise.

FR: Exactly; there is a spiritual attraction that draws people to them. So too in Christianity – for instance, when Peter went to Rome and drew people to him. Or Jesus' apostles, for that matter, were taught by Jesus himself to have and exercise this power, to understand people and be understood by them, to know through the Holy Spirit what is in their hearts, to talk to them in their own language, even to heal them by faith – if you let the Holy Spirit flow through you, it will draw others to you and to God. And I sense that

Sultan Malik and St. Francis felt this from each other, this presence of the Holy Spirit in one another.

AH: We're just about out of time, and I'd like to conclude by asking about the future, and specifically about your organization and your vision. Of course, we can't predict what's going to happen in these coming days, but I think it's safe to say that we're sailing in rough seas...

FR: Well, part of our work takes place within the Muslim community, which, as you say, is trying to navigate rough seas in America today. I realized long ago, by studying the history of religions in America, that as Christianity and Judaism migrated to America they adapted themselves to the local conditions. This is, of course, consistent with the whole history of religions as they have moved and migrated. In the case of Christianity, national and cultural differences have shaped the local churches. You have the Coptic, or Egyptian, Church; you have the Abyssinian, or Ethiopian, Church; you have the Greek Orthodox, the Russian Orthodox, the Syrian Orthodox... you even have variations within these. When Rome became Christian you had the Roman Catholic Church; then the Reformation happened and you have now not only the Lutherans but the Dutch Reform, Swedish Reform, and so forth. Now, in Islam we didn't have quite the same nomenclature – the scriptures and the creed and the liturgy, so to speak, remained in Arabic across the world, but in terms of jurisprudence, you can see real differentiation as Islam spread from Arabia to Egypt, Anatolia, Persia, India – and Spain, as in Cordoba, the medieval haven of intercultural exchange, from which we take the name of our institute.

When religion is transplanted in new cultures, this acculturation process is a natural part of its life, its becoming at home in each new environment. So what is needed in the Muslim community today is what I call an *Americanization* of Islam; until that happens, unfortunately, the religion will be seen by other Americans as alien. Catholic immigrants went through this process – their presence was resisted by the Protestant majority, you had the Klan promoting violence toward Catholics, among other tensions throughout American history. Jews as well – when they began to come here they were seen as alien, but by the middle of the twentieth century, Catholicism and Judaism were both accepted as American religions. Islam is not yet generally accepted as an American religion, but it's on its way. That's part of what we're working on: we want to help Muslims understand and communicate that you can be American and Muslim and not lose any part of your culture. But, while doing that, because American Muslims are so diverse and because our community is increasingly multiethnic, multicultural, we need a multicultural interpretation of Islam that is at home in this reality, this society that we share.

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AH: This vision of an American Islam, as I understand it, would also have to be an interfaith vision. A fully American Islam is a multicultural Islam that is dexterous and has the wherewithal to thrive in an interreligious society – one which, admittedly, is struggling at the moment with its history of violence and the faultlines buried in its diversity. But what does this look like? Would you leave us with a description or an image of some sort, a picture of the interreligious thriving you imagine and towards which Cordoba House is working?

FR: We envision a “Cordoba Community,” comprised not only of Muslims but of people of all faiths. To this end, we have crafted a set of “Cordoba Community Values,” which are meant to speak to people of faith from within their own traditions and uplift this ideal of a multireligious community aligned with our mission. These values are the result of extensive reading in different religions, in search of commonalities and resonances that we can name and bring into the foreground of our relations with one another. And in this document there is a discussion of the relationship between prayer and virtue, between faith and life – we affirm, and invite all in our community to affirm, that this conjunction of the “vertical” and “horizontal” axes of religious life is found in all religions, and can be the basis for a robust moral partnership for the common good, each of us participating in the name of our own understanding and tasting of the Absolute.

So here’s a short excerpt from the Interfaith Values statement, which summarizes the peace we seek:

“If prayer is the vertical axis of the spiritual life, then virtue is the horizontal axis. In prayer, we fulfill the command to ‘Love God with all your heart, mind, and strength’ (Deuteronomy 6:5). By our virtue, we fulfill the command to ‘Love your neighbor as yourself’ (Leviticus 19:18). We appreciate that Jesus joined the two into the Great Commandment of Luke 10:27, which all the religions of the world effectively affirm.

We affirm, and invite all in our community to affirm, that this conjunction of the “vertical” and “horizontal” axes of religious life is found in all religions, and can be the basis for a robust moral partnership for the common good.

We perceive that faith (*iman*) and prayer culminate in union with God, and that ethical acts (*‘amal salih*) flow from the virtues of sincerity, humility, and charity. Virtuous acts culminate in repair of the world (*tikkun olam*). The Quran routinely twins *iman* and *‘amal salih*.

We celebrate the beauty inherent in the crossroads of prayer and virtue. With the Bible, we ‘worship the Lord in the beauty of holiness’ (Psalm 96:9). With the Hadith, we reverence ‘Allah [who] is beautiful and loves beauty’ (al-Mu’jam al-Awsaṭ 6902). With the Buddha, we reflect that ‘like a beautiful flower, full of color and scent, are the pure and fruitful words of those who act accordingly’ (Dhammapada 4:52).

We affirm the traditions of prayer within all of the world religions. And we focus with gratitude on the prayers of invocation all the religions teach, each in its own way, since God is present in all God’s Names.

We commend to our neighbors the Divine Name closest to them for the door that opens them onto their own truest Self.”

The more we come to know and uproot our own imperfections, the good we see within our neighbor is set into greater relief.

So this is the interfaith community that we seek to establish in America. We envision a shared commitment to the “Greater Jihad” – the struggle *not* against other human beings but against the ego, against self-righteousness, against all that undermines the ideals of humility, sincerity, and charity that all religions share. The more we come to know and uproot our own imperfections, the good we see within our neighbor is set into greater relief.

AH: And we will look forward to seeing, and participating in, that struggle in our own community of Morningside Heights, and New York City, and beyond. 

FR: Amen.

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