

Salaam

ISSN 0970-5384

Quarterly to Promote Understanding



WOMEN IN ISLAM

TO BE RELIGIOUS IS TO BE INTERRELIGIOUS:

AN APPROACH FROM THE EXPERIENCE AS A COMBONI MISSIONARY IN SRI LANKA

THE UNDERSTANDING OF 'MISSION' IN ISLAM AND CHRISTIANITY

RECITING THE DIVINE:

A COMPARATIVE EXPLORATION OF *TASBIH*, *DIKR*, AND *SAHASRA NAM JAP*

WOMEN IN SUFISM

ZAKAT – A PILLAR OF ISLAM

ISLAMIC STUDIES ASSOCIATION

Vol. 45

April 2024

No. 2

**“..... that they.....
may be one.....”**

INFORMATION

SALAAM is a Quarterly published by the Islamic Studies Association. Articles and Book Reviews meant for Publication should be emailed to victoredwinsj@gmail.com

All business communications must be addressed to : Victor Edwin SJ, Editor, SALAAM, Vidyajyoti, 23 Raj Niwas Marg, Delhi-110 054, INDIA, or email to : victoredwinsj@gmail.com

PATRON OF ISA

Most Rev. Dr. Anil J.T. Couto Archbishop of Delhi

Editor	: Fr. Victor Edwin, SJ
Editorial Committee	: Fr. Thomas V. Kunnunkal SJ
	: Prof. Akhtarul Wasey
	: Dr. Vincent Manoharan
	: Ms. Naaz Khair
	: Fr. Pushpa Anbu SVD
	: Fr. Myron J. Pereira SJ

SUBSCRIPTION RATES

ONLY FOR INDIA

Annual Subscription (4 Issues) : Rs. 100.00

Life Subscription : Rs. 1500.00

Please do not send subscription by DD and Cheque.

Method of Payment

By transfer of money through Bank

Name: Islamic Studies Association

Bank: Canara Bank

Account Number: 0346101008770

IFSC CODE: CNRB0000346

SAVING ACCOUNT

By Money Order to

Victor Edwin SJ

Editor, Salaam

Vidyajyoti

23, Raj Niwas Marg,

Delhi-110 054

Views expressed in the articles are those of the respective authors and do not necessarily represent those of the Editor or the Editorial Committee.

Design and Print: Bosco Society for Printing & Graphic Training, Okhla New Delhi- 25,
Email: boscopress@gmail.com

(For Private circulation only)

Salaam

ISSN 0970-5384

Quarterly to Promote Understanding

Vol. 45

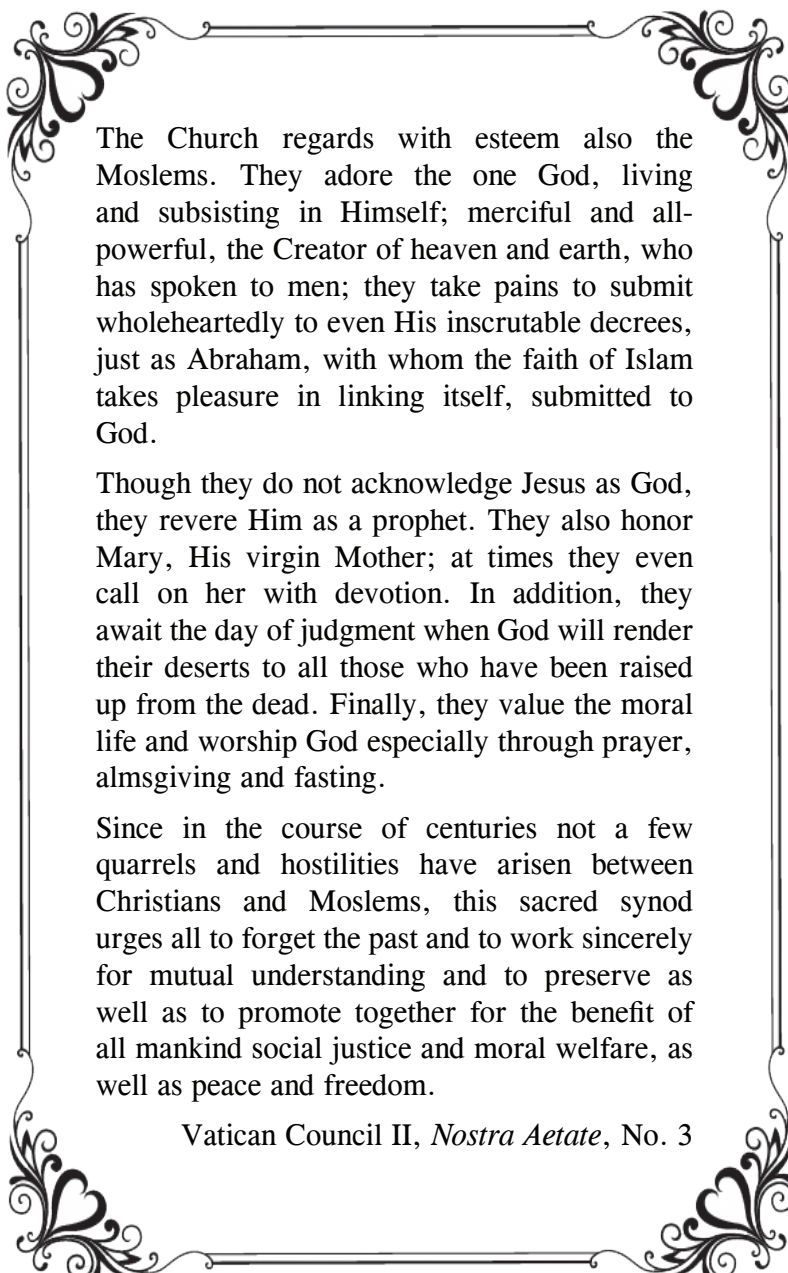
April 2024

No. 2



CONTENTS

EDITORIAL	47
WOMEN IN ISLAM	51
<i>By Renata Bedendo</i>	
TO BE RELIGIOUS IS TO BE INTERRELIGIOUS: AN APPROACH FROM THE EXPERIENCE AS A COMBONI MISSIONARY IN SRI LANKA	64
<i>By Sr. Beatriz Galán Domingo, cms</i>	
THE UNDERSTANDING OF 'MISSION' IN ISLAM AND CHRISTIANITY	68
<i>By Noel Dias SJ and Roydon Misquith SJ</i>	
RECITING THE DIVINE: A COMPARATIVE EXPLORATION OF <i>TASBIH, DIKR, AND SAHASRA NAM JAP</i>	74
<i>By Pruthvi Ryanal Rodrigues SJ</i>	
WOMEN IN SUFISM	78
<i>By Larren Menezes SJ</i>	
ZAKAT – A PILLAR OF ISLAM	83
<i>By Preethesh Misquith SJ</i>	



The Church regards with esteem also the Moslems. 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 Moslems, 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.

Vatican Council II, *Nostra Aetate*, No. 3

Editorial

The journal *Salaam* continues its role of leading to peace through promoting understanding, giving witness to good relations between Christian and Muslims, and thus promoting interreligious dialogue on a wide scale. It is not confined to India but, as this issue testifies, draws on contributions from different parts of the world. The author of the article on Women in Islam is an Italian woman who has lived in Syria; there is an article from Sri Lanka; and the writer of these lines lives in Liverpool, England, though for many years he worked in the Vatican and has much international experience.

Promoting understanding is the main goal of the article on *Zakat*, explaining this pillar of Islam for non-Muslims. It is also prominent in other articles, removing misunderstandings about the place of women in Islamic Society, and showing how they have a role to play in the spiritual dimension of life, also facilitating a correct comprehension of mission in both Islam and Christianity.

Sister Beatriz Galàn Domingo, of the Comboni Missionary Sisters, speaks about building bridges, and about her discovery of God's presence in diverse religious traditions. I would like to confirm what she says from my own experience. I have met people belonging to other religious traditions and I have been convinced that the Holy Spirit was working in them and through them. I would like to give two examples.

The first example is of a Buddhist monk, Etai Yamada, the abbot of the oldest Buddhist monastery in Japan. Though then in his late eighties, he accepted the invitation to participate in the Day of Prayer for Peace in the World that Pope John Paul II convoked in Assisi on

27 October 1986. He was so impressed by this Day of Prayer that, on his return to Japan, he determined to include a similar ceremony in the annual centennial celebrations of his monastery. So, in 1987, and every year since, there has been an interreligious gathering for peace in Kyoto. It is held in the first week of August, to coincide with the anniversary of Hiroshima. Etai Yamada was marked not only by this openness to cooperation with other religious traditions, but, like John Paul II, he had a great gift for relations with young people. They hung on his words, as the youth did with Pope John Paul.

The second example is an Indian lady, Usha Mehta, a disciple of Gandhi. I met her in 1991 at a peace gathering at the centre she directed in Bombay (as it was at that time). She stayed in the background, but her very presence was peace-giving. A small woman, even minute in size, she reminded me of Mother Teresa. In October of 1999, the Pontifical Council (now the Dicastery) for Interreligious Dialogue organized an interreligious assembly to welcome in the new Millennium. The assembly, which brought to the Vatican 200 people representing 20 different religious traditions, concluded with a ceremony in St Peter's Square presided by Pope John Paul II. Usha Mehta was asked to speak during this ceremony. She was so small that she almost disappeared behind the podium, but she spoke very strongly. She referred to a tragedy that had taken place in India a short time before, the burning alive in their caravan of a family of Evangelical missionaries. This Hindu woman asked pardon, in the name of all Hindus, for this crime committed against Christians. No one had asked her to do this; she took the initiative herself. Her words were listened to in deep silence and then were greeted with thunderous applause.

As two examples are never enough, I shall add a third, this time of a Muslim. When I was serving in Halfa Jadida in Sudan, I used to attend the *halqa* (study circle) of a local shaykh. This was held, not

far from the Catholic church, in a quarter of the town which was inhabited by members of the police force. The men would come in civvies, sit on the ground, and listen respectfully to the shaykh as he explained the Qur'an or some other text. During Ramadan the circle would read the Qur'an together. The emphasis was not on understanding the text, but on correct recitation; if anyone made a mistake the others would rush to make the necessary correction. The correct recitation of the Qur'an brings a blessing, *ex opere operato*, we as Catholics would be tempted to say. Before I left Sudan to return to Rome, I attended the *halqa* and informed the shaykh that I was departing definitively. At the end of the session, he prayed for me that I might see the light and become a good Muslim. He knew very well that I was a priest from the Catholic church nearby. He had never put any pressure on me or refused me in his circle because I was not a Muslim. In his prayer he was only asking for me to receive what was most precious to him, namely his Islamic faith. He was an honest man, who lived simply and never appeared to seek to profit by his position. I could not be upset or annoyed by his prayer.

Sister Beatriz ends her article with a conclusion: "To be religious means to be interreligious".

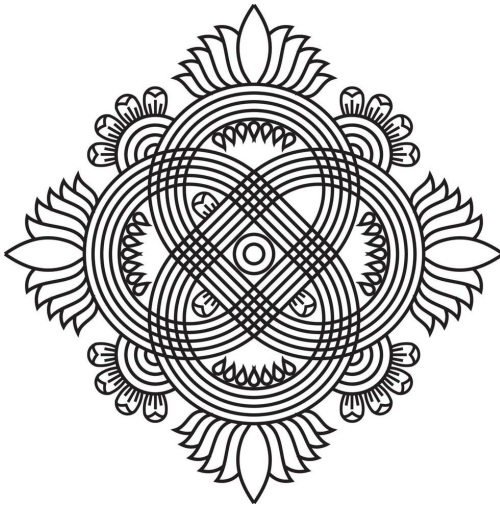
We need to take into account the experiences of the Divine that people have in other religious traditions, including Islam. For this we need to learn about other religious traditions, and we have to be ready to overcome our prejudices. We also must have the courage to meet with people belonging to these different traditions, and to be ready to cooperate with them in common projects on behalf of the whole of humanity.

This is, in fact, what Pope Francis and Dr Ahmad al-Tayyeb, the Grand Imam of al-Azhar have proposed in the Document on Human Fraternity (DHF) that they signed together in Abu Dhabi

on February 4, 2019. If anyone is looking for a programme for Christian-Muslim dialogue, they could not do much better than try to implement the suggestions contained in this declaration. It seems to me that the Islamic Studies Association (ISA) and *Salaam* are following faithfully in this path. An aspiration expressed at the end of the DHF can provide a fitting conclusion:

Our aspiration is that this Declaration may be a sign of the closeness between all who believe that God has created us to understand one another, cooperate with one another and live as brothers and sisters who love one another.

+Michael Cardinal Fitzgerald, M. Afr.



WOMEN IN ISLAM

By Renata Bedendo

In this paper, I wish to answer some questions mainly regarding the Muslim world and particularly the “other half of the sky” in other words the varied world of feminine presence: how women act and recognize themselves, starting from their belonging to the *Umma* and their relationship to the holy text, the Qur’an.

I came across Islam during my very first theological studies on other religious experiences. I was young and my knowledge was not of an academic kind, rather it was scholastic and I must admit that in those days I was more interested in passing my exams than in understanding the matter being studied. With regard to Islam, at that time what was really meaningful to me, was Muhammad’s life and his subsequent certainty of being a Messenger of God.

It was only a few years later, when the first immigrants began arriving from the opposite side of the Mediterranean sea, that I, together with a few other people, established, in Milan the Ambrosian Center of Documentation on Religions (CADR), a center whose goals were, among others, fostering dialogue with Muslims and paying special attention to the minority Churches in the Middle East. During our meetings I realized that what I had studied was in fact a world, a reality deserving of both study and attention to people practicing a religion that was different from our own.

In Cardinal Carlo Maria Martini’s text “Noi e l’Islam”¹ which the Archbishop addressed to the city in the church of Saint Ambrose on December 6th 1990, he raised the problem of relations with Islam, in particular regarding the migratory flow of people belonging to that religion, even though this was only at its very beginning. His text is still remarkably modern, especially in the way he poses the questions: “Who are We and What is Islam”². To this question, Martini, after having underlined that the Western world is losing

¹ Martini Carlo Maria, *Noi e l’Islam Dall’accoglienza al dialogo*, Centro Ambrosiano, Milano 1990.

² Ibid.,13.

the consciousness of absolute values, answers that he sees in Islam a challenge that can help us to rediscover the value of our being Christians³.

Moreover CADR was considered one of the most influential organizations among all those social, political and religious ones working with migrants of whom the majority were Muslims⁴.

My projects for the future were growing, studying began to become a more complex but interesting reality. Then I had the chance to take my first trip to Syria. It was an unforgettable trip and thinking of it brings back a lot of good memories. The most meaningful experience occurred while I was walking in the desert mountains. It was the feeling of God's presence in the light breeze softening the scorching heat. It reminded me of Elijah's experience and the long walk made me discover the radicalism of early life. It did deeply attract me.

During the feast of Saint Moses, patron of the monastery I was visiting, I was very impressed by the presence of Christian and Muslims peacefully sharing the beautiful atmosphere created after the celebration of Mass and the following lunch together. In that particular situation I called to mind my studies, the work I was carrying on with CADR: dialogue with Muslims and attention to minority churches in Middle East and in that precise moment, I saw them both, as it were, brought together and realized.

In the meantime my country, Italy, was changing and a new challenge was appearing, through the presence of young Muslim women and men: marriages between people of different religions. Therefore problems and requests for help arose, so CADR founded a center providing family counseling for mixed couples. I was thrilled at this, since it meant looking for solutions that might help dialogue not only within the couple itself but also between the two religions.

³ Ibid., 25.

⁴ Ibid., 29.

It was a hard but fruitful job. One of the main questions posed by women and men of both faiths regarded polygamy, so I decided to study this matter in depth.

Polygamy in Islam

Nowadays a consideration of the meaning of polygamy is more necessary than ever, both for the difficulties raised by the fact that legislation in European countries does not grant it legitimacy, as also on account of the changed perception contemporary women have of themselves and of couples' relationships.

In the Islamic setting its legitimacy is based on the Qur'an and the Sunna.

With regard to the Qur'an, Muslims mainly refer to sura IV, An-Nisa (Women), in which, in the traditional understanding, are to be found the verses upon which the right to polygamy has been based.

So we read:

If you fear that you will not deal fairly with orphan girls, you may marry whichever [other] women seem good to you, two, three, or four, If you fear that you cannot be equitable [to them], then marry only one, or your slave(s): that is more likely to make you avoid bias.

(Cor IV, 3)⁵

It is interesting to note that the connection between the first part of the verse, related to justice towards orphans, and the second, related to the possibility of polygamy, has had different interpretations throughout the centuries.

Among many different interpretations I have found very intriguing the one suggested by Amina Wadud in her book *Qur'an and Woman*⁶. For the term "polygamy", starting from the same verse, she gives a feminist interpretation and underlines how, in her opinion, this same verse 3 of Qur'an IV mainly regards the way in which orphans are treated, more specifically regarding the management of

⁵ Qur'an, English translation by M.A.S. Abdel Halim.

⁶ Amina Wadud, *Qur'an and Woman. Rereading the Sacred Text from a Woman's Perspective*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 1999.

the assets of little orphan girls by their legal guardians. Since legal guardians were unable to manage the assets that had been entrusted to them, the suggested solution, to prevent this unjust behaviour, was to marry them. On the one hand the limit of four, dictated by the Qur'an, and on the other consideration being given to commitment to support their wife, was supposed to counterbalance the access to the wealth of the orphan girl with the responsibility of managing the assets. Whereas Wadud, spends much time on the interpretation of this verse, it has to be underlined that the majority of those who are in favor of polygamy rarely talk about it in the context of a just treatment of orphans.

From the outset, quranic legislation probably wanted to improve the situation of women, orphans and in general the position of the weaker sex and strengthen the nuptial bond by putting a stop to moral laxity in sexual relations.

It was of common use, in pre-Islamic time, that winners would take as concubines the women of conquered countries. Therefore women were enslaved without any consideration being given to their previous relations. This practice was certainly still in use at the rise of Islam.⁷

In those days a man might have not only the four legal wives, as we have seen in the above quranic text, but also a countless number of concubines if his personal assets would allow him to do so. In such a situation, a man risked not to be just towards his legal wives so that the marriages could be nullified according to the Islamic religious law, the Šharī'a.⁸

Nowadays, thanks to encounter and comparison with the Western world, situations are very different. Ever more frequently Islam is questioned by new situations. And what needs to be discussed is not

⁷ Malek Chebel, *Encyclopédie de l'Amour en Islām*, Editions Payot et Rivages, Paris VI 1995.

⁸ Šharī'a is drawn from the Qur'an and the Sunna. It specifies what should be done in every single little detail of life and organises every aspect of the individual life and the collective life of Muslims.

the concept that religion must govern every aspect of life, even law, but the claim that its traditional style is still valid in the present day.⁹

Nowadays, in some countries, where a common mentality still permits a man to have a second wife, the first one is often consulted before the second marriage of her own husband. And sometimes she even chooses the second wife.

At the present time the situation is very different thanks to the evolution in the attitudes of governments. For instance, the Tunisian Government in its 1956 Code of Personal Status explicitly forbids polygamy. In other countries polygamy, even if it is supported by jurists, who are men perhaps in close contact with mosques, is in fact opposed strongly by women who have founded associations for their own liberation. Through these associations they shape and educate the new generations.¹⁰

If we consider evolutions inside Islamic society in the last century, we can see how the concept of polygamy has slowly changed to monogamy. It is always more rare for a young woman to accept to marry an already-married man, not easily living together with another woman. As we have seen Personal Codes are also adapting to these new situations allowing, in the marriage agreement, the stipulation that the marriage must remain monogamous.

I wish to underline that this “women’s victory” is not always supported by the religious and political authorities. Even if Muslims observe in fact a monogamous reality they still cannot accept discussing, even indirectly, the concept of four legal wives as it was applied in ancient Bedouin societies at the origins of Islam.

Personally I think that “subjecting to discussion” this archaic memory is the principal goal of all those women, in the Arab world and elsewhere, who are working and engaging in different areas:

⁹ Joseph Schacht, *Introduction to Islamic Law*, Clarendon Press, Oxford 1964; Joseph Schacht, *Introduzione al diritto musulmano*, Edizioni della Fondazione Giovanni Agnelli, Torino 1995.

¹⁰ Maria Grazia Ruggerini, *Una cittadinanza in disordine. I diritti delle donne nel paese del Magreb*, Ediesse Editore, Roma 2003.

juridical, social, political, economic and hermeneutic.¹¹

The question about rights is the most important subject for women's emancipation in general and particularly for Muslim women.

As a matter of fact, Muslim women must face two important challenges. The first one is with regard to their community, asserting their own rights not only in theory and regarding Islamic fundamental principles that are generally accepted. The second and most meaningful challenge is the practical application of these ideas in every European country as well as in each individual Muslim country.

Many Muslim women, who are active in the protection of women's rights, recognize that patriarchy exists also in Muslim societies. Therefore, it is necessary to build a movement pushing for the identification of these rights within each and every Muslim State. So, after talking of and for Muslim women, the time has come for them to speak out for themselves. In dialogue and through relations all of this has been possible.¹²

Women and the Qur'an

Muslim women are asked to give an answer to this question: what role can they play in building a global society based on universal values like democracy, social justice, freedom of conscience, gender equality and human rights? Islamic feminism tries to answer this question.¹³

Asma Barlas,¹⁴ of Pakistani origin, though having engaged deeply in quranic studies does not define herself strictly speaking as

¹¹ *Hermeneutics* – The branch of knowledge that deals with interpretation, especially of the Bible or literary texts.

¹² Jolanda Guardi – Renata Bedendo, *Teologhe, Musulmane, Femministe*, Effatà Editrice, Cantalupa (To) 2009; Jolanda Guardi- Renata Bedendo, *Teólogas, musulmanas, feministas*, Narcea Ediciones, Madrid (España) 2012.

¹³ I point out ADAMI (Muslim Women organisation in Italy) foundation and EFOMW (European Forum of Muslim Women) project AISHA (for Muslim women victims of domestic violence).

¹⁴ www.asmabarlas.com

a theologian. She classifies herself rather as a scholar, trying to explain through her work, that every believer with a certain amount of education has the possibility of reading the Qur'an from a new perspective. The Qur'an is not the problem, but rather it is the patriarchal interpretations given through the centuries which constitute the problem

As a Muslim believer she never questions the Qur'an's *ontological status* as of divine origin. In her introduction she asserts that the Qur'an is God's word. However, the problem is not in the divine words of the holy book but rather in the inappropriate ways it is interpreted. So the core of the question is not the "text itself" but its human appropriation.

In her numerous studies of the Qur'an, she observes that two important aspects can be considered: a particular and a universal one. The particular is the meaning that the text had for its first audience, namely seventh century Arabs. Since the Qur'an was addressed directly to seventh century Arabs, it speaks in a way that was significant for the lives of the people at that time. But the Qur'an is also universal. For instance, the concept of equality before God is a universal concept in the Qur'an, valuable for seventh century women and men but especially for twenty-first century women and men.

Therefore Barlas thinks it is absolutely possible to distinguish between what in the Qur'an is universal and what is particular. That is to say attention cannot be put only on what the text says, but also on what it does not say, since what is not said contributes to the meaning of the text and so also to its interpretation.

When a Muslim woman, a faithful Muslim woman, reads and rereads her holy book till she identifies with it, she becomes an essential part of the interpretation of the text. Her access to and participation in this interpretation process become, for her, almost an "obligation". This obligation not only shapes her own identity but becomes useful to shape the identity of all Muslim women.

Amina Wadud, an Afro-American who converted to Islam in the seventies, is now one of the most preeminent figures in Islamic

feminism. She is very well known, not only for her studies of the Qur'an, but also for guiding several times Friday Prayer in the mosque for "mixed" groups of faithful. This fact created a great sensation, and was shown on television and made the newspapers, because until today a woman usually can guide only the prayer of women, not that of men or of a mixed group.

Amina Wadud believes that women are allowed to guide the prayer since Umm Waraqah, a personal friend of the Prophet, was permitted to do this by Him, in early Islam¹⁵.

In her studies of the Qur'an she confronts, time and time again, gender equality and justice in religion, and the patriarchal impact of the interpretation of the Qur'an that always places men in a hierarchical relation to women. The following are some of the topics in her Quranic studies:

- gender equality in creation
- equality after death
- plurality as part of the divine design (all human beings are created to be representatives of God and responsible of their own moral choices regardless of gender)
- the final criterion used for being able to judge human beings must be based only on their reverence for God and not on gender.

Though Islam was revealed in a social context controlled by patriarchy it is possible to find within it the motivations and the drive to overcome this through reciprocity.

Wadud considers patriarchy similar to a "sin" because it denies equality in divine creation and contradicts the quranic vision of mutual relations and responsibilities that are considered equal. Therefore the relationship between wife and husband must not be one of domination and competition but of mutual respect, reciprocal help and love.

¹⁵ Amina Wadud, *Qur'an and woman. Rereading the sacred text from a woman's perspective*, University Press, Oxford 1999. It is exactly in this book that she affirms prophet Muhammad gave permission to a woman to guide the prayer.

I would like to finish this short presentation of the ongoing debate about the situation of women in the Islamic world by expressing the wish for an ever wider participation of women in studies in order to reach a shared interpretation of the Qur'an which would not lead to persecution but rather would remain open to the challenges of the globalized world.

I personally met Amina Wadud during the III¹⁶ and IV¹⁷ Islamic Feminism International Congresses organized by Junta Islamica Catalana.

To realize my wish of adding value to this fundamental text of Islamic feminism text and above all to give the opportunity that its translation into Italian might make accessible, also in Italy, Wadud's research and theological and exegetical competence, I suggested its publication to the Italian Women Theologians Coordination. The questions Wadud puts look very much like the ones put by contemporary Catholic women theologians who are always searching for new openings and challenges. Differences are less important when compared to unity that is 'radical, fundamental and determining'.¹⁸ Pope Francis moves further on saying we all are "brothers" and we are all "citizens" and "faith brings us to see the other as a brother to support and love".

Then he continues: "It is an essential requirement to recognize the right of women to education and employment, and to recognize their freedom to exercise their own political rights. Moreover, efforts must be made to free women from historical and social conditioning that runs contrary to the principles of their faith and dignity. It is also necessary to protect women from sexual exploitation and from being treated as merchandise or objects of pleasure or financial

¹⁶ Renata Bedendo, *III Congres Internacional de Feminism Islamic. Muslim Women in the Globalisation Era*, Barcellona, 24-27 ottobre 2008, in *Islamochristiana* 34/2008, pag. 206-207.

¹⁷ Renata Bedendo, *IV International Congress in Islamic Feminism Analysis of the current status of this movement and its future prospects*, Madrid 21-24 October 2010, in *Islamochristiana*, 36/2010 pag. 276-277.

¹⁸ Giovanni Paolo II, *Discorso alla Curia Romana*, 22 dicembre 1986.

gain. Accordingly, an end must be brought to all those inhuman and vulgar practices that denigrate the dignity of women. Efforts must be made to modify those laws that prevent women from fully enjoying their rights....”¹⁹

A wider Perspective

The above reflections come after years of studying and fieldwork. During my numerous travels I have always tried to meet local women not only to create friendly relations but also to know their reality and experiences and share what I was doing there in solidarity with them. I met women in their homes, in the *suq* and the *hammam* and while studying Arabic culture and language as teachers and classmates in quranic schools.

I met women activists for human rights and theologians facing the reality of their own country who also started a kind of pacific ‘revolution’ often even involving men.

I here refer to women performing a task during the ‘Arab Spring’ that burst in Tunisia then extended to Egypt and Libya. I was in Cairo when manifestations began and had the chance to meet women and men, Christians and Muslims, working together in solidarity. They showed their care by cleaning the streets, cooking for each other while men made long walks to buy food for everybody. I was very moved when, after a few days, I could reach Tahrir Square, the center of the gatherings and the heart of the revolution.

A few years later I went back to the square to see the ‘murals’ painted in memory of that Spring. As is normal, there is a different perspective when women look at them and speak of feminism. Some women scholars refuse as offensive the term “feminist” while others consider adjectives like “Islamic” or “Muslim” tied to feminist as necessary. They explain that caring for women’s

¹⁹ His Holiness Pope Frances – The Grand Imam of Al-Azhar Ahmad Al-Tayyeb, *A Document on Human Fraternity for World Peace and Living Together*, https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/travels/2019/outside/documents/papa-francesco_20190204_documento-fratellanza-umana.html

rights and condition is an integral part of their cultural, social, historical and religious belonging. These scholars use Islamic sources such as the Qur'an to show that equality among women and men is present in Islam. A type of feminism which does not fit within Islam is going to be refused by society. According to these women theologians, defending women's rights is defending Islam itself from the corruption of its ideals. The goal is understanding its essential message and its spirit as lived at the time of the Prophet. He recognized the right of women to participate and gave them a voice.²⁰

Nowadays the fight about the veil has returned as a present concern. How precisely does one explain the wearing of the veil?²¹ I think this is a challenge our women-sisters not only from Iran but the 'many others' living in the complex Arabo-Muslim world are facing.

Once more Arabic women show how "women" always play a crucial role in revolutionary events.

We can see this better, following the death of Mahsa Amin in September 2021. She was only 22 and was arrested and beaten by the morality police because she did not wear her *hijab* correctly. The Qur'an enjoins Muslims to "command right and forbid wrong". There were no morality police in early Islam. From the time of the Prophet Muhammad public morals were instead overseen by a *muhtasib*, or market inspector, appointed by the government to prevent fraud and protect travelling traders. (One of the earliest appointees selected by Muhammad in Medina was a woman.) Over the centuries, they took on greater responsibility for moral standards, including women's dress. By the early 20th century the office of *muhtasib* had disappeared in most places. But in Saudi Arabia, morality policing gained new prominence under

²⁰ Renata Bedendo, *Le teologhe musulmane e le rivolte in Nord Africa*, in *Popoli* 6/7 2011, pag.47.

²¹ Debate also on zoom 27 November 2022. <https://www.chiesadimilano.it/news/milano-lombardia/velo-o-non-velo-donne-musulmane-oltre-lo-stereotipo-1154166.html>

the influence of Wahhabism. The first modern morality police force was formed in 1926.²²

Since the news of Mahsa's death reached the *Umma* thousands of women filed in the streets asking for justice. It is a walk common to women and men asking for change "for my sister, for your sister, for our sisters". Regime repression and censorship has not so far been able to stop this walk. It is growing day by day, assuming new and different ways.

Ayatollah Khamenei stated "... because women uncovering (their head) distract and disturb men..." He did not even realize that by this declaration he unwittingly affirmed the superiority and power of women-sisters. They are so strong and dangerous to the point that they distract men's minds with just a lock of hair. A lock of hair that has driven women-sisters all around the world to cut it off as a sign of solidarity.

We all feel ourselves sisters and brothers with these women in Iran and more recently in Afghanistan. Since these girls, wearing the *hijab* but with unveiled faces and without the obligatory *burqa*, want to go back to school and university, they have to argue with an upset man holding a whip. They keep trying to enter, not caring about the lashes, repeating slogans like 'education is a right' and 'woman, life, freedom' which place them near to their Iranian sisters. There are still many ongoing fights for women's freedom and protection but, despite inequalities, women are really enzymes for change because besides carrying the weight of inequalities and loss of freedom they have a huge capacity for collective cohesion. Pope Francis has also repeated many times: "How many choices of death would be avoided if women were decision makers".

Islamic feminism²³ is an oxymoron. In many people's minds Arabic Muslim feminism does not exist and this prejudice is founded on

²² <https://www.economist.com/the-economist-explains/2022/09/26/who-are-irans-hated-morality-police>

²³ Jolanda Guardi – Renata Bedendo, *Teologhe, musulmane, femministe*. Effatà Editrice, Cantalupa (To) 2009;
Jolanda Guardi- Renata Bedendo, *Teólogas, musulmanas, feministas*, Narcea Ediciones, Madrid (España) 2012.

the number of women wearing the veil. In point of fact, reading the news of what is going on in Arabic countries where women make an effort and give a specific contribution to these manifestations, we see that this proves exactly the opposite.

They not only take off their veil, but girls and boys, Iranian sisters and brothers, make ‘throwing the turban’ another act of protest against Ayatollah Khamenei’s theocratic regime. When they see a religious man walking in the street, they run from behind, hit his turban, making it fall on the ground, and then run away. Whenever possible they film the scene and, as one can imagine, once posted on social media it immediately becomes viral.²⁴

Even if we do not know what is going to happen, how long this march towards freedom is going to last and resist oppression, Iranian and Afghan sisters’ fears and wishes have to become our fears and wishes too. They must impel us to a communitarian vision of supranational sisterhood/brotherhood.

I can finish this piece by saying that though I have studied the Arab Muslim world in depth, in my numerous journeys I have had much help from women I met either privately or publicly who shared and enriched my work. An unfinished work is one that keeps me still busy with CEI²⁵ and took me to the island of Lampedusa in June 2022. The theme of the journey was “We are all on the same boat” and I, with a young Muslim lady, Ghoufran Hajraoui, was in charge of a workshop called “Women and men: a difficult management of ‘gender’, a challenge for Christians and Muslims”.²⁶

Inter-religious dialogue is an ongoing challenge and I am ready for whatever comes next.

²⁴ Renata Bedendo, *Donne sorelle nei paesi arabo-musulmani*, in Vita Nuova, ottobre-dicembre 2002, pag.19-20.

²⁵ CEI *Italian Bishops Conference, Islamic Panel*.

²⁶ <https://unedited.chiesacattolica.it/2022/10/05/sulla-stessa-barca/>

**TO BE RELIGIOUS IS TO BE
INTERRELIGIOUS:
AN APPROACH FROM THE EXPERIENCE
AS A COMBONI MISSIONARY
IN SRI LANKA**

By Sr. Beatriz Galán Domingo, cms

I am resolutely convinced that despite occasional appearances suggesting humans, particularly those in the Western world, have ‘killed God,’ our understanding of ourselves remains incomplete without embracing the innate call to transcendence. Regardless of the myriad answers we uncover to life’s profound mysteries of existence and mortality, a perpetual thirst resides within us, unquenchable and transformative, rendering us eternal seekers.

The initial fascination with the unfamiliar

Growing up in Spain forty years ago didn’t offer many opportunities to stray from the margins of Catholicism. However, I fondly recall and appreciate the chance to study an introduction to Islam during my early university years. Being able to delve into the history of Islam, learn a bit about the biography of Muhammad, and read some passages from the Quran sparked both enthusiasm and doubt within me. How was it possible to find so many convergences between my Christian faith and the Muslim faith? Why had relations with our Muslim brothers and sisters been so problematic throughout history? And why did they continue to be so? Was it conceivable that the truth of God was confined to Christianity? I admit it wasn’t an easy time, but learning about another religion, even at a superficial level, helped deepen my own faith.

The second moment of fascination came during my initial religious formation, while in Glasgow, Scotland. There, I experienced a diverse European reality. Catholic and non-Catholic Christians lived alongside people of various religious faiths: Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists, and Sikhs. Dialogue, at least the dialogue of everyday

life, became a necessity. I remember at the Catholic school where I volunteered, there were Muslim and Sikh students. In Glasgow, for the first time in my life, I stepped into a synagogue, a mosque, and a Sikh Gurdwara. I began to grow as a young religious woman increasingly convinced that while God had revealed Himself fully in Jesus Christ, it was impossible for other religions not to bear traces of the presence of God.

Sri Lanka: A small island of many religions

In the summer of 2017, I embarked on my inaugural missionary assignment in Sri Lanka, where I remained until the close of 2022.

Throughout Sri Lanka's multifaceted history, the interplay of religions has been pivotal in shaping the intricate tapestry of coexistence among its diverse populace. The nation has served as a sanctuary for Buddhist, Christian, Hindu, and Muslim communities, forming a rich religious mosaic that defines its cultural essence. Religious tolerance and harmonious coexistence stand as cornerstone principles in the evolution of Sinhalese society, exemplifying an inspiring paradigm of respectful living among varied communities.

Nonetheless, Sri Lanka's recent past has borne witness to formidable challenges within the realm of interreligious dynamics. Political upheavals and ethnic discord, notably during the civil war spanning from 1983 to 2009, have disrupted the traditional harmony among communities, leaving enduring scars that continue to undergo the process of healing. Despite these hurdles, it is imperative to recognize the ongoing endeavors of institutions and religious leaders committed to nurturing dialogue and fostering reconciliation. This unwavering dedication reflects a genuine eagerness to forge pathways of understanding and advocate for peaceful coexistence among individuals of divergent faiths within the country.

A mission: Building bridges

The Comboni Missionary Sisters commenced our mission in Sri Lanka in 2012, answering the call of Bishop Vianney Fernando of Kandy to serve among the Tamil community residing in the tea

plantations. Specifically, in the Talawakelle area of the Central Province, we were tasked with engaging in both educational initiatives and pastoral work. Our mission encompassed two primary objectives: aiding the local church in its post-civil war reconstruction efforts and contributing to the educational endeavors of St. Patrick's College, a diocesan Catholic institution that has been providing education to Christian and Hindu children and youth from the plantations for over 70 years.

As a Comboni missionary, both my personal calling and that of my congregation are centered around the mission of building bridges among religions and cultures. This commitment stems from the belief that our mission is an embodiment of incarnation and liberation. Initially, encountering other religions posed significant challenges, yet this experience not only reaffirmed my Catholic faith but also broadened my understanding of God's presence in diverse religious traditions. This realization became a cornerstone of my vocation, guiding me towards a mission characterized by inclusivity and respect for all faiths.

Working in a Catholic school where the majority of students and a third of the teachers adhere to the Hindu faith has been profoundly enriching. Here, education serves as a powerful tool for nurturing dialogue and fostering unity across different cultural and religious backgrounds. Our collective aim is to educate individuals who embrace the values of the kingdom of God, transcending religious boundaries and contributing to the creation of a society founded on mutual respect and understanding.

Accompanying the local Christian community has been a continuous exercise in faith and solidarity. Embracing the other without hesitation, even in the face of adversity, and cultivating a spirit of missionary outreach have been central to our endeavors. Despite the challenges, including the tragic events of the Easter Sunday attacks in 2019, our dedication to peace, fraternity, and dialogue remains unwavering. These experiences reinforce our resolve to serve as catalysts for reconciliation, tirelessly working towards a

future characterized by harmonious coexistence among all people, regardless of their religious or cultural affiliations.

Conclusion: To be religious is to be interreligious

The years spent in Sri Lanka have not only reinforced but deepened the insights I gained during my university studies of Islam and my initial training period in Glasgow. They have underscored the undeniable presence of truth and holiness in other religions.

Encountering individuals from different faith traditions has transformed my perspective from one of apprehension and perceived threat to one of acknowledgment and gratitude for the blessings they bring.

Initially, my lack of understanding of Hinduism led me to perceive it as alien and potentially threatening, even to the identity of the school where I worked. However, years of coexistence with Hindu colleagues and students have taught me otherwise. Their presence has not only complemented but enriched my own experiences. This process of “alterization” has drawn me out of my insular mindset, deepened my understanding, and fostered a sense of belonging. One memorable instance was when the family of Shalini, a Hindu student, graciously invited me into their home to celebrate Thai Pongal. Their hospitality, generosity, and patience in explaining their traditions made me feel as if I were welcomed into the very abode of God.

I firmly believe that religious vocation entails an unceasing quest for the Absolute, propelling us into a perpetual pilgrimage toward the Other, for the sake of the Other. Delving deeper into our spiritual journey requires a continual exodus from our preconceived notions of the Divine, opening ourselves to encounter God in entirely new contexts. This journey to the Other and the subsequent meeting with the Divine in others knows no bounds or territorial demarcations. Seeking the Absolute requires transcending any fixed configurations of God, as such limitations would only diminish the expansiveness of the Divine. Instead, we are called to venture into the depths, continually expanding our understanding and experience of God, until we converge upon that central point where all things unite.

THE UNDERSTANDING OF ‘MISSION’ IN ISLAM AND CHRISTIANITY

By Noel Dias SJ and Roydon Misquith SJ

Introduction

The concept of “mission” holds profound significance within the realms of Islam and Christianity, two of the world’s most influential religions. It is rooted in the teachings of their respective founders and scriptures, the understanding of mission in Islam and Christianity shapes the beliefs, practices, and actions of millions of adherents worldwide. While both religions share a commitment to spreading their faith and serving humanity, the theological frameworks and approaches to mission in Islam and Christianity exhibit distinct characteristics that reflect the unique perspectives of each tradition. This paper tries to understand the concept of mission in Islam and Christianity, examining the foundational principles, key teachings, and practical implications within each faith tradition. Through this exploration, we seek to gain a deeper appreciation of the significance of mission within these religious traditions and its relevance for contemporary global contexts.

The Concept of Mission in Islam

The concept of mission is quite broader in its perspective. It involves various aspects at the individual and the community level. They are:

Individual Level:

1. **Submission and Worship:** The core of Islamic mission is submission (Islam) to the will of God (Allah). This submission encompasses all aspects of life, from daily actions to moral choices. This submission isn’t simply passive obedience, but an active commitment to living according to God’s guidance.
2. **Five Pillars of Islam:** These five core practices, **Shahadah** (declaration of faith), **Salat** (prayer), **Zakat** (almsgiving), **Sawm** (fasting), and **Hajj** (pilgrimage), serve as a framework for living a life aligned with God’s will. By fulfilling these pillars, Muslims aim to develop their personal connection

with God, contribute to the community, and strive for self-improvement.

3. **Following the Qur'an and Sunnah:** The Qur'an, considered the direct word of God, and the Sunnah, the teachings and practices of Prophet Muhammad, provide guidance and direction for Muslims. They serve as the foundation for understanding Islamic law, ethics, and morality, guiding individuals and communities towards a just and righteous society.
4. **Monotheism and Prophethood:** Islam emphasizes **belief in one God (Allah)** and the prophethood of Muhammad, the last messenger of Allah. This mission involves conveying the message of monotheism and the teachings of Islam to humanity.
5. **Striving for Personal Excellence:** On a personal level, the mission in Islam involves striving for self-improvement, spiritual growth, and the development of one's character. This includes engaging in acts of worship, seeking knowledge, and cultivating virtues such as patience, gratitude, and humility. By nurturing their inner selves, Muslims aim to fulfill their potential and draw closer to Allah.
6. **Exemplifying Moral Conduct:** Muslims believe in the importance of embodying the values and teachings of Islam in their daily lives. Thus, part of the mission involves being a model of ethical behaviour, compassion, justice, and kindness. By demonstrating these qualities, Muslims aim to positively influence their communities and societies, fostering a culture of peace, harmony, and mutual respect.

Community Level:

1. **Spreading Knowledge and Guidance:** Muslims are encouraged to seek knowledge and understanding of Islam and share it with others. This mission involves educating others, engaging in **da'wah (propagation of Islam)**, and promoting understanding and dialogue with people of different faiths. It also helps in correcting misconceptions, and foster understanding and tolerance. Da'wah can

take various forms, including personal conversations, distributing literature, online outreach, and participating in interfaith dialogues.

2. **Striving for Social Justice:** Islam places a strong emphasis on social justice and the welfare of others, particularly the less fortunate. Muslims are encouraged to engage in charitable acts, support the oppressed, and work towards alleviating poverty, inequality, and injustice in society. This aspect of the mission reflects the broader Islamic principle of establishing a just and equitable social order.
3. **Upholding Islamic Values in Governance:** For those in positions of authority or leadership, the mission includes governing in accordance with Islamic principles and promoting policies that uphold justice, equality, and the welfare of all citizens. Islamic governance aims to create an environment where individuals can freely practice their faith and live in dignity, while also fostering the overall well-being of society.
4. **Preserving the Faith and Tradition:** Muslims strive to preserve the authenticity of Islamic teachings and practices for future generations. This involves scholarship, knowledge dissemination, and upholding religious institutions.
5. **Promoting Unity and Reconciliation:** Islam encourages building bridges between different communities and advocating for peaceful resolutions to conflicts. This contributes to a more harmonious global society.

To summarise, the concept of mission in Islam encompasses a holistic approach to life, encompassing individual piety, community engagement, and societal reform. It emphasizes the pursuit of righteousness, the propagation of truth, and the establishment of a just and compassionate society, all guided by the principles and teachings of Islam as revealed in the Quran and exemplified by the Prophet Muhammad.

The Concept of Mission in Christianity

The concept of mission in Christianity is rooted in the teachings of Jesus Christ and the commissioning of his disciples to spread the message of the Gospel to all nations. It encompasses the idea of sharing the good news of salvation, making disciples, and embodying the love and compassion of Christ in serving others. Here are some key aspects of the concept of mission in Christianity:

- 1. The Great Commission:** In the New Testament, Jesus commands his disciples to go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything he commanded (Matthew 28:19-20). This commission, known as the Great Commission, underscores the universal scope of the mission to spread the Gospel to all people, regardless of nationality, ethnicity, or social status.
- 2. Proclamation of the Gospel:** Central to the mission of Christianity is the proclamation of the Gospel—the good news of salvation through Jesus Christ. Christians are called to share the message of God’s love, forgiveness, and reconciliation with humanity, inviting others to accept Jesus as their Lord and Savior. This involves verbal communication, evangelism, and witnessing through both words and actions.
- 3. Making Disciples:** Mission in Christianity goes beyond mere conversion; it involves making disciples who are committed to following Jesus Christ and living according to his teachings. This entails nurturing new believers in their faith, providing spiritual guidance and support, and helping them grow in their relationship with God. Making disciples is a process of ongoing mentorship, discipleship, and community building within the context of the Church.
- 4. Service and Social Justice:** Mission in Christianity also encompasses acts of service, compassion, and social justice. Christians are called to emulate the example of Jesus, who ministered to the marginalized, cared for the poor and

oppressed, and advocated for justice and righteousness. This involves meeting the practical needs of others, advocating for systemic change, and working towards the alleviation of suffering and injustice in society.

5. **Cross-Cultural and Global Mission:** Christianity is a missionary faith that transcends cultural and geographical boundaries. Christians are called to engage in cross-cultural mission, reaching out to people of different cultures, languages, and backgrounds with the message of the Gospel. This includes missions work in foreign countries, as well as ministering to diverse communities within one's own context.
6. **Empowerment by the Holy Spirit:** Christians believe that mission is empowered by the Holy Spirit, who equips and empowers believers for the task of spreading the Gospel. The Holy Spirit guides, inspires, and strengthens individuals and communities for effective witness and ministry, enabling them to overcome obstacles and challenges in fulfilling the mission of the Church.

We see that as in Islam, the concept of mission in Christianity is multifaceted, encompassing evangelism, discipleship, service, and social justice, all rooted in the love and teachings of Jesus Christ. It is a call to actively participate in God's redemptive work in the world, proclaiming the Gospel, making disciples, and demonstrating the transformative power of God's grace and love to all people.

Conclusion

The concept of mission in Islam and Christianity reflects the fundamental beliefs and teachings of these two major world religions. While there are similarities in their emphasis on spreading the message of faith, making disciples, and serving others, there are also distinct differences in their theological frameworks and approaches to mission. Islam underscores submission to Allah's will, propagation of faith, and social justice, while Christianity emphasizes the proclamation of the Gospel, making disciples, and service in the name of Christ.

Despite their theological distinctions, both Islam and Christianity share a common commitment to promoting peace, compassion, and justice in the world. The missions of these religions have historically intersected, sometimes resulting in collaboration and dialogue, but also tension and conflict. Critiques of missionary activities in both traditions highlight the importance of respecting cultural differences, promoting mutual understanding, and engaging in dialogue rather than imposition.

In today's world, where religious tensions and conflicts continue to pose significant challenges to global peace and stability, the relevance of the missions of Islam and Christianity lies in their potential to foster interfaith dialogue, reconciliation, and cooperation. By embracing the shared values of compassion, tolerance, and respect for human dignity, adherents of both faiths can work together to address common challenges such as poverty, injustice, and environmental degradation.

In building peace, it is essential for followers of Islam and Christianity to transcend religious divides and recognize the humanity and inherent worth of all individuals, regardless of their religious affiliation. Through constructive engagement, mutual respect, and collaboration, Muslims and Christians can contribute to the realization of a more just, peaceful, and harmonious world, reflecting the universal values of love, compassion, and solidarity that lie at the heart of their respective faith traditions.



RECITING THE DIVINE: A COMPARATIVE EXPLORATION OF *TASBIH*, *DIKR*, AND *SAHASRA NAM JAP*

By Pruthvi Ryanal Rodrigues SJ

Introduction

In the hushed whispers of prayer beads and the rhythmic murmurs of chanting, two great mystical traditions - Islam and Shaivism - converge in their shared pursuit of the divine through the recitation of God's names. Both *Tasbih*, the Islamic practice of glorifying God through specific formulae, and *Sahasra Nam Jap*, the Shaiva recitation of Shiva's thousand names, offer powerful tools for spiritual transformation, each imbued with the unique essence of their respective faith. As a Catholic Theology student, when I was studying about the "History of Christian Spirituality", the "Jesus Prayer" captured my attention. In Eastern Christianity, the Jesus Prayer is a mental invocation of the name of Jesus Christ that is most effective when done repeatedly. The phrase "Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me" is the most commonly used version of the prayer. The origins of the Jesus Prayer may be traced to the "prayer of the mind," which was encouraged by early desert monks in Egypt, especially Evagrius Ponticus (d. 339). It was perpetuated in Byzantine Hesychasm, a monastic discipline that aims to acquire heavenly silence, as the "prayer of the heart". Additionally, I read a Kannada book titled "Kaivalya Paddhati" by Nijagunashivayogi, which mentioned, Shiva Nama Japa' as a way to achieve Moksha. The fact that Islam likewise had a comparable notion intrigued me. Regarding mysticism, there are several commonalities across all religions. I'm investigating this specific mystic path in order to alter myself by intentionally and meditatively filling the self with the name of God.

***Tasbih*: Invoking Divine Attributes in Islam**

In the Islamic mystical tradition, the act of *Tasbih*, meaning "praise" or "glorification," transcends mere counting beads. It is a deeply devotional practice where repetitive invocations of specific phrases,

often praising God's attributes, serve as a ladder to higher spiritual states. The most common *Tasbih* formula is “*Subhanallah*” (Glory to God), “*Alhamdulillah*” (Praise be to God), and “*Allahu Akbar*” (God is Great), often recited 33 times in a cycle. Each repetition becomes a mantra, drawing the mind inwards and attuning it to the divine presence.

Tasbih finds its basis in the Quran, where God commands, “And glorify the name of your Lord morning and evening” (74:3). Sufi mystics like Rumi and Al-Ghazali emphasized the transformative power of *Tasbih*, seeing it as a means to purify the heart, quell egotistical desires, and deepen one's connection to the divine essence. The rhythmic repetition is believed to induce a meditative state, where the boundaries between self and God dissolve, leading to a state of *fana*, or annihilation in the divine. The concept of *fana* is regarded as one of the cornerstones of Islamic mysticism. By means of a spiritual journey, the mystic attains boundless truth, is freed from all forms of illusory entities, and ultimately explodes in it. In Indian mysticism, the term “*nirvana*” is used instead of “*fana*,” signifying the attainment of annihilation, disappearing, and quietude, as well as a departure from the world.

***Dikr*: Embracing Remembrance in Sufism**

Within the broader context of *Tasbih*, the practice of *Dikr* (“remembrance”) holds special significance in Sufism. *Dikr* goes beyond mere formulaic recitation, encompassing any act that keeps God in remembrance, from mindful breathing to acts of service. Chanting divine names like Allah becomes a form of *dhikr qalbi*, or remembrance of the heart, where the practitioner cultivates constant awareness of the divine presence.

Sufi masters like Ibn Arabi viewed *Dikr* as a key to unlocking the secrets of the cosmos and realizing *wahdat al-wujud*, the unity of being. Through *Dikr*, the individual transcends the limitations of ego and merges with the universal consciousness, experiencing a state of oneness with the divine. For Sufi mystics, *Tasbih* and *Dhikr* are not mere mechanical repetitions but profound acts of devotion. The rhythmic chanting fosters a state of focused awareness, allowing the

practitioner to transcend the limitations of the ego and experience a direct connection with Allah. The repetitive nature of the phrases serves as a mantra, calming the mind and fostering a sense of inner peace.

Sahasra Nam Jap: Shiva's Symphony in Shaivism

Across the theological landscape, in the realm of Shaivism, the recitation of Shiva's *Sahasranama*, or thousand names, holds an equally profound place. Each name within this sacred hymn, from *Mrityunjaya* (conqueror of death) to *Pashupati* (lord of animals), unveils a facet of Shiva's multifaceted nature. Chanting these names becomes a devotional offering, a way to surrender to the divine power and grace personified by Shiva.

There are two versions of Shiva *sahasranama*; one in Linga Purana (Which Lord Krishna taught to Sage Markandeya) and the other which occurs in Anushasanika Parva of Mahabharata. Each name signifies a specific aspect or attribute of the divine, such as “*Mahadeva*” (the great god), “*Nataraja*” (the lord of dance), and “*Yogeshwara*” (the lord of yogis). Reciting these names is believed to bestow blessings, remove karmic obstacles, and ultimately lead to moksha, liberation from the cycle of birth and death. The rhythmic chanting creates a sonic space for meditation, allowing the mind to focus on the divine attributes of Shiva and ultimately merge with his cosmic consciousness. It becomes a form of meditation, dissolving the illusion of separation and fostering a sense of oneness with the divine.

Convergence in the Depths of Devotion

While the theological frameworks of Islam and Shaivism differ, their mystical expressions through the recitation of divine names reveal remarkable parallels. Both *Tasbeeh* and *Dikr*, and the *Sahasra Nam Jap*, share a common goal: *to transcend the limitations of the ego and experience a direct encounter with the divine*. The repetitive chanting acts as a bridge, drawing the practitioner inwards and fostering a state of deep absorption in the divine presence.

Whether it is the glorification of Allah's attributes in *Tasbih*, the heartfelt remembrance of God in *Dikr*, or the surrender to Shiva's myriad forms in the *Sahasra Nam Jap*, these practices echo a universal human yearning for connection with the divine. In the quiet hum of recitation, both Islam and Shaivism offer pathways to spiritual transformation, reminding us that the language of devotion transcends theological boundaries and speaks to the depths of the human soul. They remind us that the human heart, in its yearning for the ultimate, speaks a language understood by all, a language where names become bridges, and chants become pathways to the transcendent.

However, key differences also emerge. *Tasbih* and *Dhikr* are primarily focused on the oneness and attributes of Allah, while the *Sahasranama Jap* delves into the multifaceted nature of Shiva. The Islamic practices often involve the use of prayer beads and specific formulae, while the recitation of the *Sahasranama* can be more flexible in form. Additionally, Sufi *Dhikr* encompasses a wider range of techniques beyond mere recitation, often incorporating music, movement, and breathwork. Depending on tradition and revelation, each religion has a different theological worldview. The Dalai Lama says, "The purpose of life is to be happy. All our religious traditions, despite whatever philosophical differences there may be among them, carry the same message of love and warm-heartedness that is the foundation of such peace of mind".

Conclusion: A Symphony of Transformation

Whether it is the rhythmic invocations of Allah's names, the meditative chanting of Shiva's thousand facets, or the quiet whispers of *Dhikr* in the heart, these practices offer a path for silencing the ego, deepening our connection with the divine, and ultimately realizing the boundless potential for spiritual growth within ourselves. It is difficult to encompass the full depth and nuances of these complex mystical traditions in this article. Further exploration and engagement with the specific teachings and practices of each tradition is encouraged for a deeper understanding and appreciation of their transformative potential.

WOMEN IN SUFISM

By *Larren Menezes SJ*

Introduction

Sufism is a flourishing Islamic mystical tradition. It emphasizes inner spiritual experiences with a blend of Islamic teachings and local cultures. It is also known as '*Tasawwuf*'. The saints of this movement are known for their poetry and spiritual practices. They played an important role in shaping the region's religious landscape, fostering unity and tolerance. Traditionally this movement is associated with male practitioners, however it is important to acknowledge the role that women have played in shaping the Sufi tradition. This is a small effort to explore the significant role of Asian women in evolution and spread of Sufism.

Historical Perspective

The history of Sufism reveals that women have been active participants in the mystical traditions from its early stages, despite societal norms that often restricted their public roles. Sufism, with its emphasis on spiritual experience and direct connection with the divine, provided a space for women to engage in religious practices and express their devotion.

During the medieval period, prominent female Sufis emerged in Asia, such as, Rabia al-Basri, an 8th century mystic, is often regarded as one of the earliest female Sufi figures. Her poetry and teachings focused on the theme of divine love, embodying the essence of Sufi spirituality. Bibi Zainab bint Ali, revered as the spiritual descendant of Prophet Muhammad, established vibrant communities of female devotees in Sindh and Punjab. Women Sufi like Mai Safoora, Bibi Fatima Sam, and Bibi Hajji Sahiba played pivotal roles in spreading Sufi teachings and establishing their own spiritual lineages.

Women Participation in Sufi Orders

Women in Sufism have not only been solitary mystics but have actively participated in Sufi orders. Their involvement in the Sufi movement has often occurred within the framework of *Khanqahs* (Sufi centres), where they actively participated in spiritual gatherings,

discussions, and rituals. Despite facing societal challenges, many women in the Asian Sufi tradition achieved recognition for their piety and scholarship. They contributed to the preservation and transmission of Sufi teachings through their poetry, writings, and oral traditions. Thus, their influence is beyond religious spaces to comprehend social and cultural domains, challenging prevailing gender norms.

Expressing Divine Love through Art and Poetry

Artistic expression has been a powerful medium through which women in Sufism have conveyed their deep connection with the divine. Female Sufi poets and artists have used their creative talents to articulate the deep experiences of the mystical journey. Through poetry and music, women have expressed their yearning for God and their profound spiritual insights, leaving a lasting imprint on Sufi literature and aesthetics.

Jahanara Begum, the Mughal princess, poured her mystical yearning into poetry, while Hafsa bint al-Shaykh, a Chishtiya scholar, through ghazals explored themes of separation and divine union, challenging societal expectations of female piety. Women like Lal Ded of Kashmir and Akhtari Bai of Hyderabad composed devotional songs (*qawwalis*) in local languages, making Sufism accessible to the masses and bridging the gap between elite and vernacular expressions of spirituality. Their words transcended boundaries of gender and class, offering inspiration to generations of seekers.

Through pen and melody, they not only expressed their own journeys but also built bridges across communities, enriching the Sufi landscape and proving that the language of the soul transcends gender and social barriers.

Spiritual Guides and Teachers

Asian Sufism witnessed the rise of remarkable female spiritual guides, defying the limitations imposed by patriarchal structures. In South Asia, Sufis like Bibi Fatima Sam, associated with the Chishti order in Delhi, and Mai Sahiba in Sindh, Pakistan, exemplify the leadership roles assumed by women within Sufi circles. Bibi Fatima Sam, considered a spiritual successor to Khwaja Moinuddin Chishti, attracted followers with her teachings on love and devotion.

Mai Sahiba, after her husband's death, continued his Sufi work, becoming a prominent spiritual guide in her own right. In Kashmir, Bibi Nooran, a Sufi saint, left a lasting legacy with her emphasis on universal love and humanity. Hazrat Bibi Raji, a saint of the Chishtiya order, guided disciples like the famed Amir Khusrau, establishing herself as a beacon of wisdom and knowledge. In Bengal, Shah Sultan Bibi and Bibi Mariam Sahib became spiritual conduits, attracting devotees from all walks of life, including Mughal elites.

These women teachers actively engaged in spiritual practices, including prayer, meditation, and the recitation of poetry, fostering a profound connection between their followers and the divine. Their teachings emphasized love, devotion, and direct experience of the divine, transcending rigid societal structures and making the way for female spiritual authority. These women broke the stereotype of the passive female disciple, demonstrating their intellectual and spiritual prowess, guiding seekers on the path of divine love.

Patrons and Builders

Female patronage played a crucial role in the institutionalization and spread of Sufism. Queens like Razia Sultana and Bibi Halima Sultan of the Mughal era actively supported Sufi institutions, funding khanqahs (hospices) and enabling the flourishing of spiritual communities. Moreover, women like Bibi Hajra Begum, the daughter of Emperor Shah Jahan, commissioned the construction of the Taj Mahal, a monument that embodies the essence of Sufi love and devotion. Their contributions transcended the realm of material support, shaping the architectural and cultural landscape of South Asian Sufism.

Reformers and Critics

In Asian context women have played roles as reformers, challenging existing norms and contributing to the evolution of Sufi practices. While the concept of reform within Sufism is complex, some Sufi women have advocated for changes in various aspects of spiritual, social, or cultural dimensions.

Bibi Zainab was a Sufi reformer of 16th century, associated with the Chishti order in India. She is known for her emphasis on

inner purification and ethical conduct. Her teachings aimed at instilling moral values and a sense of social responsibility among her followers. Bibi Begum Jan, was a Sufi reformer in the Mughal Empire. She advocated for a more egalitarian approach within Sufism, emphasizing the accessibility of spiritual knowledge to everyone regardless of gender or social status. Rabia Dedi, based in the Sylhet region of present-day Bangladesh, was a Sufi woman who worked towards social reform. She focused on issues such as education, charity, and women's rights, challenging societal norms and contributing to the welfare of the community. Bibi Pak Daman, meaning "The Chaste Lady," is a revered figure in Sufi tradition associated with the city of Lahore in Pakistan, is considered a symbol of piety and is believed to have contributed to the spiritual development of the region. Bibi Halima Sultan, a leader of the Mughal harem, used their positions of influence to promote social justice and advocate for women's education

These Sufi women reformers, through their teachings and actions, aimed to rejuvenate and reform aspects of Sufi practice, adapting them to the contemporary socio-cultural context. While not all of them explicitly identified as reformers, their influence on Sufi thought and practice contributed to a dynamic and evolving tradition within the broader context of Islamic spirituality in Asia.

Challenges and Liberation

Despite their significant contributions, women in Sufism have faced challenges and constraints within patriarchal social structures. Patriarchal norms often restricted their access to formal education and public spaces, limiting their participation in certain aspects of Sufi life. Certain Sufi orders, influenced by conservative interpretations of Islamic law, imposed stricter limitations on female involvement. However, women actively negotiated these constraints, finding alternative paths for spiritual expression and leadership, often forming their own female-centered communities and rituals.

Conclusion: How can they Contribute in Contemporary World

In the contemporary world, marked by misconceptions and prejudices against Islam, Sufi women, especially in India hold

an important role in reshaping perceptions and fostering a more harmonious society. Amidst the backdrop of heightened religious tensions and divisive narratives, these women can serve as ambassadors of peace and compassion, embodying the essence of Sufi teachings that transcend boundaries and promote unity.

Sufi women, deeply rooted in the spiritual tradition of Islam, can contribute by exemplifying the core values of love, tolerance, and empathy. Through their active involvement in Sufi gatherings, they can create spaces for dialogue and understanding, dispelling the notion that Islam is against violence. By embracing the teachings of renowned Sufi mystics, they can inspire younger generations to follow a path of spirituality that emphasizes the universal principles of kindness and coexistence.

Furthermore, Sufi women can play a crucial role in addressing the socio-economic challenges faced by the Muslim community. By focusing on issues such as poverty, hunger, and oppression, they can redirect attention towards constructive solutions and empower the community to uplift itself. Through educational initiatives, they can instill a sense of responsibility and resilience among the youth, guiding them towards a future built on knowledge, compassion, and social justice.

In countering the divisive rhetoric perpetuated by some Muslim leaders, Sufi women can act as advocates for interfaith dialogue and harmony. By promoting a message of inclusivity, they can bridge gaps between communities and emphasize the shared values that bind people together. Their voices, grounded in the rich heritage of Sufism, can serve as a powerful antidote to the language of hatred, redirecting the focus towards building a society where diversity is celebrated and understanding prevails.

Finally, the story of Asian women in Sufism is not just about the past; it holds profound significance for the present and future. In today's complex world, where views on Islam are often negative, Sufi women's voices matter more than ever. We need to hear them louder and clearer. Acknowledging their impact broadens the understanding of Sufism and prompts a deeper examination of how religious traditions, including Islam, treat and empower women in expressing divine experiences.

ZAKAT – A PILLAR OF ISLAM

By Preethesh Misquith SJ

In Islam, Zakat means the duty of giving alms. It is the third pillar of Islam and it is a donation that Muslims regard as a mandatory act within their faith. Followers of Islam who have at least a minimum amount of wealth are required to give 2.5% of their liquid assets away to charity each year. Zakat is closely related to Namaz. It helps the Muslim brethren to encounter God in fellow human beings. Zakat also helps them to perform a meaningful worship in their day-to-day life. In today's world this aspect of Zakat has a lot of things to teach us and inspire us. When we look at the realities in the world today, we can understand that today most of the humans have become self-centred in their approach towards their neighbours. Most of us think of receiving something from others, than, giving something from our part to others. In this regard Zakat, which is one of the important pillars of Islam teaches us how we need to care for our fellow neighbour and see God's presence in them. Therefore, in this article I would like to explain Zakat and some of the important aspects under it. Along with that, I also would like to reflect on how Zakat can be an inspiration for humans in the present broken realities of the world.

When we look at Islam, there are two terms which are used for almsgiving and these two terms have two different meanings. Firstly, Sadaqat, which is almsgiving in general. Sadaqat can be done not only during the festival like Sadaqat ul-Fitr, but also at other times and in any amount. Secondly, Zakat, which is a permanent and definite establishment for the purpose of giving charity and showing concern for the poor. Zakat contributions can be made at any time of year but are most typically given during the time of the Hajj pilgrimage and during the month of Ramadan, especially on Laylat Al-Qadr (night of power), which falls on an evening during the last ten days of Ramadan. If we look at the root word of Zakat, that is Zaka, it means 'to grow'. In Islamic understanding Zakat is an annual tax on the property which remained in the possession of a person for a whole year, when its value is within a certain limit,

called Nisab. In other words, the tax which is paid in the name of Zakat needs to be used for the growth of the poor. Zakat is also a channel to all Muslim faithful to receive God's abundant blessings in their life. The term Zaka can also be meant as purity. To pay Zakat is to purify oneself as well as one's own property.

The term Zakat is mentioned umpteen of times in the Quran. It is obligatory to every Muslim irrespective of gender, class, possession, etc. At the one side, in the name of Zakat, Muslim brethren give alms to others which helps them to encounter God in their life. On the other side, there are eight different categories of people who can receive Zakat. The mention about the beneficiaries or eight categories of people is also made in the Holy Quran. They are, the poor Muslims who are in distress, the needy or destitute, the officials appointed in connection with the collection and expenditure of Zakat, the people in captives or Muslim slaves, the Muslims who are under the burden of debt, the Muslim new converts whose hearts are to be reconciled and who are to be settled down, the Muslim travellers who are stranded and in need of help, and those who are in the service of God or in the way of Allah. Therefore, after looking at the givers and receivers or beneficiaries, we can understand how Islam is serious in practicing this pillar.

Islam is very much known for almsgiving. This religion has become an exemplary religion which teaches us that by giving generously the alms, we attain salvation and become closer to God. It is a religion which gives lot of preferences for the weaker sections of the society. The Muslim brethren, even today are very much particular about almsgiving. Theoretically most of the religions speak about almsgiving but practically Islam is far ahead in giving alms. Most of the Muslims take a personal interest and utmost priority to think about their fellow brothers and sisters. Though it is a religious obligation, it is not done with force. Instead, the Muslims do this with love, which helps them to experience the love of God in their beneficiaries. The Muslims never make Zakat as a publicity, instead they do it secretly. When they give, they do not see the cost and quantity but they see the graces and blessings of God. That is the

reason, in throughout the world, Muslims are highly appreciated and well known for their generosity and charity.

As in Islam, the concept of almsgiving is also there in Christianity. Both for the Muslims and the Christians, caring for the poor and the needy is a religious obligation and a duty. Both faiths stress the importance of donating to, praying for and protecting the needy. Furthermore, in both Islam and Christianity, it is made clear that giving alms in private is favourable in the eyes of God, as opposed to donations made in an attempt to receive praise and acknowledgement. If we read Al-Baqarah 2:215 in the Holy Quran, it says “Whatever of your wealth you spend, shall be for your parents, and for the near of kin, and the orphans, and the needy, and the wayfarer; and whatever good you do, verily, God has full knowledge thereof.” In similar way Proverbs 19:17 in the Holy Bible says, “Whoever is generous to the poor lends to the Lord, and he will repay him for his deed.” Both these verses from Holy Quran and Holy Bible speak about charity. In the religious context charity is not giving something to the poor or needy out of compulsion, instead out of love. It is not giving something to the poor and needy out of our overflowing treasury or what we call extra, instead it is giving from what we have kept for our basic necessities. The concept of charity has become seasonal today. Charity needs to be given not only at the time of feast, celebration and religious rituals but also at the time when the poor and other weaker sections of the society are in need of it. In both the religions there are great saints who have lived a charitable life, other-centred life and life of giving everything of their life.

Zakat, the divine nature of almsgiving, is a timely example to all the citizens of the world. In today’s context of consumeristic world people are busy in receiving than giving. Externally if we are looking at, receiving from others gives joy and giving to others gives pain. But this remains at the superficial level. Instead, when we reflect and internalize the aspect of giving, then we can experience that more than receiving, giving brings lot of joy. This experience will be the depth level experience. Today in the world the poor are becoming poorer day by day and the rich are becoming richer

day by day. Thus, we need to extend our alms to many people like poor, migrants, marginalized and downtrodden people, and other deprived people in the Society. When we look at the world, we come across many war-stricken places, we hear about conflicts between nations, we witness violence in the name of religion, caste and creed, and these all things lead these above sections of people into lack of food, clothing, shelter and security. The different situations which are against the weaker sections of the society, snatches away their freedom and rights. Thus, as we live in such a scenario, we need to extend our hands or alms towards those people.

Finally, though the term Zakat is related only to Islam, the spirit of it should be inculcated or inbuilt in entire humankind. Almsgiving needs the quality of generosity. This generosity is from both, from the mind as well as from the heart. If we are aware of what is happening in the world, then we can experience the increase of various persecutions in the name of religion. Particularly in India, in the name of religion people are brutally persecuted and they are forced to give up their faith in their religion. The politics, economics, social and cultural aspects are based on religion. Thus, we see people are carried away by the religious emotions, religious slogans and religious interpretations. We are witnessing around us the increase of hatred, and we hear the false accusations of conversion. The leaders of the nations, who are elected for the service of people, are busy with glorifying the past history of one religion and persecuting the other religions by interpreting the history as they want it. Therefore, as we are in these kinds of situations, we need to live the spirit of Zakat. Living the spirit of Zakat means moving from self-centredness to other-centredness, and the other-centredness is not only within the religion but even outside the religion. Along with this, building up humanly and healthy relationship and caring for each other. Therefore, if these aspects are put into practice and if we live in the spirit of Zakat, then we can be pretty sure of overcoming those above ill situations. At last, Zakat or almsgiving ultimately needs to help us to encounter and experience God in our fellow brothers and sisters and we all become one and equal in God's kingdom on this earth.

The Spirituality of the Taj Mahal: A Short Reflection on the Talk by Fr Michael Calabria, OFM

By Ana Cardenas Manrique
(Marquette University, Milwaukee, Wisconsin, USA)

On Monday January 8th, 2024, Marquette University students listened to Fr. Calabria's presentation on the Taj Mahal. As students on a trip focused on the theologies of nonviolence and their spiritual foundations, we were very excited to hear from Fr. Calabria, who is a Franciscan Friar of Holy Name Province and who has traveled extensively and conducted research across the world. He is also the author of the book on the subject he addressed in this talk. As a group, we were particularly interested on Fr. Calabria's focus of interfaith dialogue and community as he speaks widely on various aspects of Islam and Islamic culture including the Qur'an, Islamic spirituality and principles, art, architecture – thus encouraging and inspiring deeper conversations on themes in Christian-Muslim relations.

Fr. Calabria started his presentation by sharing the history of the Taj Mahal so that we would have some background before visiting it in person the next day. From the beginning of his presentation, one could see Fr. Calabria's love and knowledge of the Taj exude from him! Fr. Calabria shared that every part of the Taj Mahal was planned strategically – especially regarding the rising and setting of the sun as well as the movement of the planets. Emperor Shah Jahan wanted the Taj Mahal to be a place where the outer world of the senses and inner world of the spirit meet, where light and darkness, life and death yield to each other. Everything was designed with conscious intent and decision-making. Fr. Calabria then shared how Emperor Shah Jahan and the architect Ustad Ahmad Lahori wanted the monument to speak to the people that entered within its walls.

As students we were fascinated to learn that the scripture on outer and inner arches and throughout the monument were also carefully selected from the Qur'an so that the visitor could envision that God speaks directly to them, reminding them of their responsibility and devotion to the rest of humanity, and also of their eventual destination to the world beyond the present. The inscriptions on the gates prior to entering the Taj Mahal remind society to take care of the poor, their fellow human beings, and themselves. The section that spoke to me the most was when Fr. Calabria shared that the gates engage in conversation with the visitor, with one of them asking "So where are you going?" Thus, presenting the most direct and profound question for humanity to answer. The Taj Mahal asks us to reflect on who we are, what our relationship with God looks like, whether we are willing to work on deepening the connection with God, and how we will use the time in our lives wisely. The Taj reminds the visitor that their journey in this world will transition into another world and as they enter through the various gates while reading the scriptural passages they may envision the world to come. The transition from one side of the door to the other becomes symbolic of the transition from one life to another; one plane to another.

By the end of Fr. Calabria's presentation, the group of students took the time to reflect on our relationships with ourselves, our communities, and God – for I would argue that our relationship with a higher power is a direct reflection of the relationship we have with our brother and sisters. We were enlightened to hear Fr. Calabria's lecture as it established the background knowledge and depth needed to visit the Taj Mahal in order to fully enjoy its beauty and gravitas through the four interpretations of love – love of faith, love of architecture, love Emperor Jahan had for his wife, and God's love for humanity. Fr. Calabria's presentation and our tangible experience of visiting the Taj Mahal was an integral part of our experience in India that we will never forget.

SALAAM

SUBSCRIPTION RATES *ONLY FOR INDIA*

Annual Subscription 4 Issues	: Rs. 100.00
Life Subscription	: Rs. 1500.00

METHOD OF PAYMENT

By transfer of money through Bank:

Name	: Islamic Studies Association
Bank	: Canara Bank
Account Number	: 0346101008770
IFSC CODE	: CNRB0000346

SAVING ACCOUNT

Please let us know the transfer of money, date and bank details to victoredwinsj@gmail.com

By money order:

Please write your address legibly and clearly in the MO form.

Please do not send subscription by DD and Cheque.

NEW ADDRESS
Victor Edwin SJ
Editor, SALAAM
Vidyajyoti
23, Raj Niwas Marg,
Delhi-110 054



بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَنِ الرَّحِيمِ

