

This article is based on a talk given to a group called Christians Aware in November 2022, which was subsequently published in their magazine.

Theological reflections on Christian and Muslim friendship and working together.

Let us begin by unpacking the two terms ‘friendship’ and ‘working together’. The Greek term *philia* refers to the love of two friends: it is sometimes called ‘brotherly love’. It is a love that builds into a close bond between the partners and each becomes the trusted confidante of the other. For Christians who understand God as love, *philia* is one of the four forms of love that express the nature of God and in which human beings, the recipients of God’s love, are invited to join. To express loving friendship for another is to worship God, the source and entirety of love, and to join ourselves in an act overflowing with divine grace.

When we think of working together, we need first to ask ‘to what end’? In Christian terminology, we are co-operating with God in building the Kingdom of God on earth. We are reminded in the Gospel that “the Kingdom of Heaven is right here in your midst.” It is truly present through the work of Christ on earth and, at the same time, drawing toward completion at the end of time, or ‘being and becoming’ as we say philosophically. The Kingdom of God is that state in which the will of God is done in all things; just as we pray for in the Lord’s Prayer. In Muslim terminology, this is the state of total submission of all things to the Great Designer’s plan, which is the meaning of the word *islam*. In this way, Christians and Muslims can be seen working together, not just for the sake of this world, but also as an act of love and devotion to God, fulfilling our responsibility to be stewards of God’s creation, bringing it to fulfilment.

By working together in friendship, we bear witness to the world that, as Christians and Muslims, we worship the one and only God and that we love one another. If we say that we love our friends, then we will want to advocate for them in the face of misunderstanding and oppression. We will want to seek their good in all things. There is no room for cultural or religious tribalism in either faith: “If you only love those who love you, what use are you because the unbelievers do the same, do they not.”

Neither Christianity nor Islam is *laissez faire*. We are never allowed to sit back and content ourselves with being good, ‘not like other people.’ Rather, a Muslim is commanded to “promote the good and oppose the bad” in all things, just as a Christian is commanded by the dual commandment, “To love God and to love our neighbour as ourselves.” To obey these commandments is at the heart of both faiths and so demands that we love one another for the mutual good of all to make the world a better place. We can be guided by a saying of Ali, the son-in-law and cousin of Muhammad, who said that “Every human being is either your brother or sister in faith or your brother or sister in humanity.” In the word-image of the Last Judgement in Matthew 25, the judgement of every human being is based on how one expressed one’s love for God by loving and serving one’s fellow human beings by seeing each one as being the image of God. Our working together in friendship is thus an expression of our love and service of God.

Real friendship is pure and not alloyed with ulterior motives. We are not to love someone else in order that we can exploit them in some way or bend them to our will or share our position on something. Real friendship values the friend in their own right, giving them full autonomy and leaving them free to follow God as they feel called. This means that the idea of ‘friendship evangelism,’ making friends with someone so that I can share the message of Jesus, my best friend, with them, has no place within Christian-Muslim interaction. God loves us without precondition, whatever our response, and we are called to love one another in the same way.

If we think back some decades to the early days of the Christian ecumenical movement, we may recall that children were taught not to go into the church of another denomination “for fear of what might go on in there.” In this state of ignorance, it was easy to believe all kinds of fanciful stories about fellow Christians. The theologians and church leaders may have begun to talk together to remove some of the misunderstandings but what really gave the movement its forward momentum was the quality of the friendships that were built up between ordinary members in the different churches. By working together on all manner of practical projects, by sharing conversations and discovering that we all faced the same issues, barriers were broken down, hearts were changed and old positions had to be revised. In the same way, working together for the common good becomes the driving force for everyday friends from both faiths to bring about a more godly society.

Part of building friendships is learning the things that are important to our friends. If we say that we love someone, then surely we will want to learn about the things that are important to them. This means learning to understand others the way that they understand themselves, their own faith and their own lives - and not projecting our ‘(mis)understandings’ of what we think they believe onto them. Understanding our friends does not mean that we have to agree with them on every question. Good friends can disagree and remain close and devoted friends. If we are content with ignorance and misunderstanding, what kind of a basis is that for friendship? “If it matters to you, then surely, it matters to me too!”

It is stating the obvious to say that Christians and Muslims cannot agree on everything, otherwise we would not exist as two faiths under the one and only God. When we disagree on things, we need to ask if they are central to our belief system or something of lesser importance. We know that both Bible and Qur'an relate the trial of Abraham, who was told to sacrifice his own son. The biblical tradition knows the son as Isaac, whilst Muslims hold it to have been Ishmael, his older half-brother, the first-born of Abraham. Is the identity of the son of critical importance to the message that the story seeks to teach? On the other hand, the Qur'an records that Jesus was not crucified to death on the cross but that God took him up alive to heaven where he awaits God's command to return and complete his one and only earthly life, at the end of which, he will die, be buried and eventually share in the general resurrection with the rest of us. This cannot be interpreted to mean the death and resurrection to eternal life as Christians understand it. Is this not an absolutely central part of the Christian message and

tradition, which Christians are not free to ‘give up’ without completely removing the heart of the message? On such a crucial central statement of fact and doctrine, surely we must simply agree to differ.

We may not be able to agree on everything in our friend’s faith but there is always the question of what we can say positively of those things that the other holds dear. This calls for clear thinking and care over the meaning of the language that we use. Let us take an example. My Muslim friend will say that she is bound by her faith to accept that Jesus was a Prophet sent by God just like the Prophet Muhammad, and then to conclude by asking me, “Why can’t you accept Muhammad as a Prophet?” Our starting point must be to outline clearly what meaning we give to the term ‘prophet’ in this discussion. A Muslim understanding is that prophets are protected by God from sin and therefore are without error in their words and actions. If I accept Muhammad as a prophet on this definition, given that he received the Qur’an and is truthful in word and deed, then, taking the example above, I must accept that Jesus did not die and was not resurrected to eternal life. In this way, I have ceased to be a Christian. This raises further questions, of course, can I accept Muhammad as following in the line of the biblical prophets thus using quite a different definition of ‘prophet’? We cannot escape the question, as a Christian, “What can you say of Muhammad?”

One of the great challenges in understanding friends from a different tradition is that they can have paradigms or systems of understanding and belief that include our faith tradition but in ways that we do not recognise. The Qur’an, for example, speaks of Christians as the ‘People of the Book’, meaning the followers of the Prophet Jesus, who received a scripture from God, called the Injil, in the same way that Prophet Muhammad received the Qur’an. Christians, of course, do not recognise themselves in that description but rather as people who glimpse the reality of God through the revelation of the word, image and spirit of God in Jesus. Jesus is himself the message, the revelation, he is not the bearer of something of which he is not the author, as is Muhammad with the Qur’an. This means that understanding the faith tradition of the other requires a paradigm shift, to understand the other’s faith within the belief system that they hold. To explore this question further, see my article “The importance of a paradigm shift in understanding Christianity and Islam” on my website: chrishever.org, Written Resources, Articles on Christian-Muslim themes.

Another side of understanding is to learn how to speak about things that are important to us in a way that others can understand. Central to both religious traditions is that our great personalities and insights do not belong to us alone but rather to all humankind. Muhammad is spoken of in the Qur’an as “a blessing for all the worlds.” He is regarded as *al-insan al-kamil*, the perfect human being, an exemplary role model from which all can learn. In a similar way, the incarnation is understood by Christians not to refer just to Christian human beings but to all women and men without exception. Jesus is “all that it is to be human” and not “all that it is to be Christian.” How then are we to deepen our understanding of such critical insights so that we can convey them to our friends in a way that they can grasp without misunderstanding?

Friendship, like life, does not mean that sometimes we will not get it wrong and hurt one another. Without forgiveness, friendship has no meaning. God's forgiveness is always restorative and does not leave us crippled. If we think of the parable of the prodigal son who returns to his father, he is not only forgiven but restored to the dignity of being his father's son and is not to be treated as a servant. An instructive Muslim parallel could be drawn from the story of Husayn, the grandson of Muhammad, who was living under tyranny and eventually led to his death in a massacre at Karbala in Iraq. Those who wished to oppose Husayn sent out a troop of soldiers to ensure that Husayn and his company were brought to Karbala. When the soldiers entered the camp of Husayn and his companions and their leader declared his mission, they were greeted with an act of great generosity and kindness; Husayn gave them the water that had been drawn for his own followers to slake their thirsts, allow them to wash off the dirt of the desert, and water their animals. This act of pure goodness had such an impact on the heart of the leader of the troop, that on the day of the battle itself, he broke ranks with the opposing forces, rode to Husayn and begged his forgiveness for being responsible for bringing them all to the place of their impending death. Husayn not only forgave him and raised him to his feet like a human being, but he also gave him the highest dignity of allowing him to fight at his side and die as a martyr alongside those whom he had brought to the place of massacre. With examples of forgiveness of this kind in both faiths, how could we not allow hurts to be forgiven and friendship restored.

We must never think that we have the capacity to understand everything with the knowledge and vision of God. The Qur'an tells us that on the Day of Judgement, God will make clear to us all the things about which we differed. The ultimate arrogance is to think that we can tell God how things should be! Let us conclude with a story recounted by the great sufi Jalal al-Din Rumi, who told of a group of Muslims approaching the gates of heaven where they were met by God. When God declared her identity, they refused to believe that it was God because he did not meet their expectation. God then asked them what they expected and, when told, transformed herself into that image. At this the Muslims bowed down and acknowledged God, then God transformed back into his true self. Let God be God and we God's unworthy servants, the friends of God's fellow-servants in the Muslim faith and our co-workers towards the kind of world that God intended and commands.

To listen to a fuller version of this talk go to the Christians Aware website.