

Patriarch Alexy II Of Moscow responding To Muslim Theologians

I would like to thank all the Muslim religious leaders and scholars who sent an open letter to representatives of Christian Churches and organizations including the primate of the Russian Orthodox Church.

Christians and Muslims have many similar aims, and we can unite our efforts to achieve them. However, this unity will not occur if we fail to clarify our understanding of each other's religious values. In this connection, I welcome the desire of the Muslim community to begin a sincere and open dialogue with representatives of Christian Churches on a serious scholarly and intellectual level.

Christianity and Islam are engaged today in a very important task in the world. They seek to remind humanity of the existence of God and of the spiritual dimension present both in man and the world. We bear witness to the interdependence of peace and justice, morality and law, truth and love.

As you rightly put in your letter, Christians and Muslims are drawn together first of all by the commandment of the love of God and the love of one's neighbor. At the same time, I do not think it is worthwhile for us to identify a certain minimum that seems to fix our convergences in faith and to be theologically sufficient for the individual's religious life. Any doctrinal affirmation in Christianity or Islam cannot be viewed in isolation from its unique place in the integral theological system. Otherwise, one's religious identity will be obliterated to give rise to a danger of moving along the path of blending the faiths. It seems to be more fruitful, therefore, to study the integral faith of each side and to compare them.

In Christianity, a discourse about love of God and love of one's neighbor is impossible without a discourse about God. According to the New Testament revelation, God is revealed to human beings as Love. "Whoever does not love does not know God, because God is love" (1 John. 4, 8). "And so we know and rely on the love God has for us. God is love. Whoever lives in love lives in God, and God in him" (1 John. 4, 16). One cannot help seeing in this an indication that the Divine nature itself also has love as its most essential, characteristic and important property.

A lonely isolated essence can love only itself: self-love is not love. Love always presupposes the existence of the other. Just as an individual cannot be aware of himself as personality but only through his communication with other personalities, there cannot be personal being in God but through love of another personal being. That is why the New Testament speaks of God as one Being in three Persons - the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. God is the unity of three Persons who have the same divine nature, which belongs to each of them in its fullness so that they are not three but one God. God the Trinity is the fullness of love with each hypostatic Person bespeaking love

towards the other two hypostatic Persons. The Persons of the Trinity are aware of themselves as "I and you": "just as you are in me and I am in you" (John. 17, 21), Christ says to the Father. "He will bring glory to me by taking from what is mine and making it known to you", Christ says about the Holy Spirit (John. 16, 14). Therefore, every Hypostasis in the Trinity refers to the other Hypostasis, and, according to St. Maxim the Confessor, it is "eternal movement [of the Trinity] in love".

It is only through the knowledge of God as love that the individual can come to the true knowledge of His being and His other properties. The love of God, not any other property of the Divine nature, is the main principle and the main driving force of Divine Providence for humanity in the cause of its salvation: "For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only begotten Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life" (John. 3, 16).

The Christian teaching on the incarnation of God the Word in Jesus Christ is also a natural manifestation of God's love of human beings. "This is how God showed his love among us: He sent his one and only Son into the world that we might live through him. This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins" (1 John. 4, 9-10).

Man, created in the image and after the likeness of God (Gen. 1, 26), is able to experience Him in himself and, thus, come to know the love that God has for him. God's love is communicated to human beings to become their inner property, their living force that determines, penetrates and forms their whole lives. Love in man arises in response to God's love. "How great is the love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God!" (1 John. 3, 1). God expects from man not so much a slave's devotion as filial feeling of love. Therefore, in the main prayer that the Lord Jesus Christ has taught Christians to say (Luke. 11, 2), man appeals to God as his Heavenly Father.

The manifestation of man's true love of God is possible only if man is free. This freedom makes it possible to do good by fulfilling the will of God by choice, not only out of fear or for the sake of reward. The love of God inspires in man the selfless desire to fulfill His commandments. For, according to St. Isaac the Syrian, "Because of His great love, God was not pleased to restrict our freedom but was pleased to draw us near Him through the love of our own heart". Therefore, human freedom increases, extends and grows stronger as human beings grow in love of God, which is the core of human religious and moral perfection. Those who love God seek to emulate their Creator in their actions: "Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect" (Matt. 5, 48).

My letter does not have the aim of setting forth the entire Christian theology. I only offer an example of reflection on God's love of man and man's love of God, which underlie the whole theological system of Christianity and which cannot be reduced to a few laconic formulations. It is my conviction that Christian and

Muslim thinkers would benefit from regular studies of each other's doctrines in their fullness. In this connection, it seems desirable to develop a doctrinal Christian-Islamic dialogue to broaden academic and research cooperation, to study doctrinal affirmations, to create an in-depth basis for developing multifaceted cooperation between our two religious communities.

The doctrinal dialogue between the Orthodox Church and Islam has considerably intensified recently. This happened not only because we have to communicate more intensively and to build societal life together, but also because Christians and Muslims have come to face the same challenges which are impossible to meet on one's own. We have together encountered a pressure from the anti-religious worldview that claims universality and seeks to subject all the spheres of life in society. We are also witnesses to attempts to assert a 'new morality' that contradicts the moral norms supported by traditional religions. We should be together to face these challenges.

Some people among both Christians and Muslims have expressed fears that the development of interreligious dialogue may lead to religious syncretism, a review of the doctrines and obliterated borders between religious traditions. Time has shown however that a reasonable system of cooperation between religions helps to preserve and emphasize the unique nature and identity of each of them. Moreover, the development of appropriate forms of interreligious dialogue in itself has proved to be a serious obstacle for manipulations aimed to establish a kind of universal super-religion.

Unfortunately, I have to state that our religions do have enemies who would like to see Christians and Muslims clash, on the one hand, or to bring them to a false 'unity' based on religious and moral indifference, thus giving priority to purely secular concerns, on the other. Therefore we as religious leaders need each other, so that our faithful may preserve their identity in the changing world.

Noteworthy in this connection is the experience of co-existence between Christianity and Islam in Russia. The traditional religions in our country have never come into conflict while preserving their identity for a thousand years. Russia is one of those rare multi-religious and multinational states whose history has not known the religious wars that have plagued various regions of the world.

The basic religious and ethical principles held by the traditional faiths in Russia invariably guided their followers toward cooperation with people of other religions and beliefs in the spirit of peace and harmony. Various religious communities lived side-by-side, working together and defending together their common Motherland. Nevertheless, they stood firm in the faith of their own forefathers, safeguarding it against encroachments from outside and often doing so together in face of invaders from other countries. To this day, our compatriots have not come into any real conflict between them based

on religious grounds. In this way, an affective system of interreligious relations based on mutual respect and good-neighborliness was established in Russia.

In today's Russia, there is an important mechanism for interreligious dialogue, namely, the Interreligious Council in Russia, which has been working fruitfully and successfully for over ten years now. Its example and experience have proved to be attractive for the independent states, which have been formed in the post-Soviet space. Religious leaders in these countries have formed a CIS Inter-religious Council. Through these two bodies, together we seek to meet the various challenges of today and to show to the whole world a positive experience of peaceful coexistence and cooperation between Orthodox Christians and Muslims who have lived in the same society for centuries. As is known, in other Christian countries, too, Muslims have had opportunities for developing their religious life freely.

In many Muslim countries, Christians have enjoyed invariable support and have the freedom to live according to their own religious rules. But in some Islamic countries, the legislation prohibits the construction of churches, worship services and free Christian preaching. I hope that the letter of Islamic religious leaders and scholars proposing to intensify dialogue between our two religions will contribute to establishing better conditions for Christian minorities in such countries.

Doctrinally our dialogue could deal with such important themes as the teaching on God, man and the world. At the same time, on the practical plane the Christian-Muslim cooperation could be aimed at safeguarding the role of religion in public life, struggling with the defamation of religion, overcoming intolerance and xenophobia, protecting holy places, preserving places of worship and promoting joint peace initiatives.

It is my conviction that it is precisely the Christians and the Muslims that should initiate inter-religious dialogue on regional and global levels. Therefore, in the framework of international organizations, it seems useful to create mechanisms that make it possible to be more sensitive to the spiritual and cultural traditions of various peoples.

Once again I would like to thank all the Muslim scholars and religious leaders for their open letter. I hope for further fruitful cooperation both in theological dialogue and social sphere.

[English translation: DECR Moscow Patriarchate]