The Modern House of Wisdom

As a proposal for Inter-religious Faith Hub

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"There will be no peace between the civilizations without a peace between the religions, and there will be no peace between the religions without a dialogue between the religions" (Küng 1998, p. 92)

Introduction:

Faith holds a special place in people's hearts, irrespective of the specific belief system. It is precious, much like how a mother cherishes her children and strives to protect them, or a hopeful farmer watching his crops grow in front of his eyes. It mirrors the commitment of a teacher tirelessly endeavoring to enlighten his students every day, or a doctor doing his utmost to save lives and combat diseases. Even to a child eagerly counting the days and nights until Christmas comes to receive his desired gift, faith holds meaning. It embodies the cherished flame of hope living in every individual's heart, representing the most valued truth in our lives.

In this essay, I seek to offer an overview of Christian-Muslim relations history for a thorough understanding of these interactions. It's essential to trace back to the roots and explore the historical contexts of Christian-Muslim relationships in Europe. I will then propose the establishment of learning hubs reminiscent of Bayt Al-Hikma in Baghdad, and introduce what I believe to be the seven pillars of successful inter-religious dialogue. I will go through the considerable challenges hindering the success of these dialogues, focusing particularly on Islamophobia as a "[1]cultural disease" (Modood, 1992). Ultimately, my goal is to

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[1] Modood, Tariq: *founding Director of the Bristol University* Research Centre for the Study of Ethnicity and Citizenship

establish a novel concept of dialogue that can be applied particularly in Europe and more broadly in the Western world.

1.Historical Background of Christian-Muslim Relations

The importance of history is undeniable, particularly when endeavoring for an accurate comprehension of the initial engagements between the current world's two largest religions; Christianity and Islam. The mainstream narrative of Christian-Muslim interactions predominantly reflects an era of ceaseless military conflict, commencing with the Islamic proliferation following the inception of the religion in the 7th-century Arabian Peninsula and concluding with the siege of [2]Constantinople, with multiple crusades interspersed throughout this period. While factually accurate, this narrative provides only a small slice of a significantly larger story.

Early Christianity is generally regarded as a [3]Mediterranean Basin religion, disseminated along with the Roman Empire and encapsulated in Greek and Latin literature. However, a considerable population of early Christians resided in the modern-day territories of Iran, Iraq, eastern Turkey, and Syria, primarily writing in a Syriac, a dialect of Aramaic. Notably, many Western Christians considered these Syriac Christians as heretics due to theological disputes in the 5th-century, effectively erasing them from history.

Research by scholars such as Michael Penn (2015) probes the potential changes in our understanding of Christianity's history when we cease to neglect the centuries during which the religion's geographic core was Baghdad, not Rome or Constantinople. The rediscovery of Christianity's forgotten history has profound implications for our understanding of early Christian-Muslim relations.

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[2] Today Istanbul

[3] Mediterranean Region

Islamic tradition indicates that the Prophet Muhammad (Peace Be Upon Him) was born around 570 and began his prophecy in 610 when he received his first divine revelation نزول الوحي . In 622, he fled to [4]Medina to avoid persecution, where he, along with his growing following, thrived. Eight years later, he led an army into Mecca victoriously (Ibn Hisham). His immediate successor initiated an extraordinary spurt, known as the Islamic Conquest, spreading Islam across the Persian Empire and two-thirds of the Eastern Roman or Byzantine Empire in a few years (Krämer 2005). However, the prevailing narrative frequently overlooks the experiences of the majority of early Christians living under Muslim rule, largely due to the scarcity of modern scholars proficient in [5]Syriac. If we confine ourselves to Greek and Latin resources, we inadvertently limit our historical interpretation of Christian responses to those primarily embroiled in military conflict with Muslims.

The portrayal of Christian-Muslim relations might alter if we shift our focus to Syriac Christians, who had daily interactions with Muslims and a direct understanding of Islam through their participation in governmental roles, knowledge translation activities, and service in Muslim armies. Their accounts hint at a more fluid line separating Christianity and Islam during the first centuries after the Prophet Muhammad's death (PBUH), revealing a greater overlap than is generally recognized. This acknowledgment doesn't imply that the initial interactions between Christians and Muslims were uniformly harmonious. The rich diversity of Syriac discourses on Muslims defies any simplistic narrative (Penn, 2015) Nonetheless, the current dominance of a conflict-based model in comprehending Christian-Muslim relations has effectively silenced alternative perspectives. The true worth of previously ignored sources lies in broadening our outlooks and demonstrating that rather than inevitably

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[4] A city in Saudi Arabia today

[5] **Syriac language,** a Semitic Language belonging to the Northern Central, or Northwestern, group that was an important Christian literary and liturgical languagefrom the 3rd through the 7th century

clashing civilizations, Christians and Muslims displayed points of permeability, interdependence, and convergence over centuries.

2. Bayt AL-Hikma / The House Of Wisdom

The term "inter-faith" refers to the positive interaction and mutual tolerance between different religious beliefs, is not a new term. Numerous examples of interfaith dialogue exist, aimed at promoting a better future for religious traditions through mutual understanding and acceptance.

The power of inter-faith dialogue lies in its ability to bridge gaps between varying religious beliefs, creating a safe space where the concept of "my religion versus your religion" is replaced with "my religion and your religion". Interfaith dialogues do not dilute the distinct features of any religion; instead, they emphasize that differences are not hindrances, but rather stepping stones toward mutual understanding, cooperation, and consequently, global peace. The famous Bayt Al-Hikma, also known as the House of Wisdom, was a historical example of the interfaith hubs that have ever existed and established in Baghdad in the mid-8th Century, marking the advent of the first Islamic academy of global significance. This institution, founded amid the rise of the Abbasid Dynasty, assembled the brightest minds from all disciplines, making it the pinnacle of scientific and academic pursuits under the Caliphate. Its vast resources included an observatory, a library with manuscripts sourced from as far as India and the Byzantine Empire, and a diverse range of specialists such as translators, scientists, scribes, authors, researchers, and writers. Students of all ethnicities, faiths, genders, and even scholars persecuted by the Byzantine Empire found refuge there. They argued, discussed, agreed and disagreed each other. The House of Wisdom was thus a vibrant, intellectual melting pot of cultures and ideas (Lyons 2009)"*The power of Arab learning, championed by Adelard of Bath, refashioned Europe's intellectual landscape. It's reach extended into the sixteenth*

century and beyond, shaping the ground breaking work of Copernicus and Galileo. This brought Christian Europe face-to-face with the fact that the sun, not the earthly home of God's creature, man-stood at the centre of the universe. [6]*Averros the philosopher-judge from Muslim-Spain, explained classical philosophy to the West and first introduced it to rationalist thought. Ibn Sina's Canon of Medicine remained a standard European text into the 1600s . Arab books on optics, chemistry, and geography were equally long lived."(Lyons*, p.5)[7]. Drawing upon Bayt AL-Hikma as a model of an educational hub, where individuals of various faiths congregated and collectively published works, has inspired me to propose the creation of similar cultural and religious hubs in our modern era that resemble the House of Wisdom. My experience at the Academy in Ravensburg confirmed the need for such spaces. I observed that some colleagues were so eager to understand other religions that they were willing to sacrifice sleep, highlighting a clear enthusiasm for interfaith dialogue. This proposal was inspired by a book I read about the extraordinary House of Wisdom in Baghdad.

3. The seven pillars of successful inter-religious dialogue.

A productive and successful inter-religious relationship should progress through applying the seven Pillars of Dialogue:

3.1. First Pillar: Our identity should not be defined solely by our beliefs, but by what we stand for. Understanding our own faith is essential before attempting to comprehend others, keeping in mind that the goal of this knowledge is not to prove the superiority of one faith over another.

3.2. Second Pillar: establishing a safe space where individuals can openly articulate their religious beliefs and apply these beliefs to their daily lives. It's necessary to create common ground found in all faiths, fostering an environment that supports

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[6] Ibn Sina a muslim Scientists, philosopher, judge and theologian.

[7] The House of Wisdom, AL-Maghreb/ Sunset

everyone's right to their own truth. This place could be within a university, a church, or a [8]Masjid. The most important aspect is providing a safe environment for all participants. It ought to serve as an educational and cultural hub, much like the House of Wisdom.

3.3.Third Pillar: recognition, recognizing one another as equals in inter-religious dialogue can be the basic rule and addressing [9]human dignity as the starting point of every dialogue and emphasizing the importance of applying this concept.

3.4. Fourth Pillar: Religions should contribute to political justice and stand in front of the rise of Islamophobia: Following the 9/11 attacks in the US, a paradigm shift marked the global landscape. The so-called "War on Terror" spread to several parts of the world, leading to a widespread perception of Muslims as terrorists, promoting anti-Islamic sentiment, and propagating the concept of Islamophobia. This led the USA to invade Iraq and Afghanistan and fostered an environment where every Muslim was seen as a potential threat unless proven otherwise:

"This is Islamophobia, a creation so diabolical that it blinds people to what stands before them, embedding vile myths and misrepresentations deep in their imaginations. It is the progeny of a blind mother, Oriantalism, which divided the world into two clashing civilisations, "Islam and the West", eternally locked in a crusade that constructs the most vulnerable Muslims into villains and scorches the earth in the name of empire." (Baydoun p.39)

The infamous abuse of detainees at Abu Ghraib prison by US soldiers outraged many Muslims worldwide, it widened the gap between Muslims and the Western World. Duffner Denari, in her [10]book outlines two key reasons why Christians should understand and actively combat Islamophobia. The first reason is that religious discrimination contradicts the fundamental Christian principles of showing love to your neighbour, respect for human dignity, and it signifies a betrayal of essential God-

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[8] Masjid, the Arabic word for Mosque.

[9] Menschenwürde, Lexikon des Dialogues, 2016

[10] Islamophobia: What Christians Should Know (and Do) about Anti-Muslim Discrimination

given rights. Incidents like the Muslim ban imposed by the Trump administration, along with violent attacks on mosques, represent blatant examples of Islamophobia. Institutional or government attitudes viewing Muslims as sources of trouble typify "hidden Islamophobia."

According to Duffner, Christians can harness multiple resources within their faith tradition to formulate a constructive response to Islamophobia. Applying the so called "The Catholic Social Teaching Method", which is a set of principles derived from Catholic church teachings for addressing social issues. This method champions principles such as protecting human life and dignity, religious liberty, care for the common good and prioritizing the needs of the poor and vulnerable. Furthermore, institutional forms of Islamophobia violate the principle of subsidiarity, as it unjustly results in the detainment, incarceration, and marginalization of Muslims. In the post-9/11 period, the so called "War on Terror" provided authoritarian regimes with the justification to suppress people using fighting "Terror" as a legitimate tool to eliminate every opposition like what happened in Syria or Egypt. Western stereotypes have been exported globally, manifesting in instances such as China's ethnic cleansing of Uighur Muslims under the guise of a war on terror, leading to the portrayal of Muslims as a permanent threat.

So, encouraging the fight against Islamophobia is not only integral to Jesus's message, but also a very important pillar of a successful inter-religious dialogue.

3.5. Fifth Pillar: Recognizing and acknowledging each other can significantly change our interactions and attitudes. This recognition can come in various forms, ranging from a simple gesture such as a banner in a shopping center indicating a prayer area for Muslims, or a supermarket directing customers to the Kosher section. Actions can also be as meaningful as a Muslim neighborhood surprising their Christian neighbours with gifts at Christmas. While these actions may seem trivial to

some, to others, they can mean the world. Moreover, recognizing one another's pain during difficult times can have innumerable positive consequences.

3.6. Sixth Pillar: The ultimate truth is not bound by what we believe in, but rather by what we strive to discover. The concept "truth" differs from person to other.

3.7. Seventh Pillar: Respecting each other should be the foundation of all our actions. Speaking up against intolerance, Antisemitism, racism or Islamophobia, and taking action when necessary are crucial components of this step. Whether it was Ismael or Isaac who was about to be sacrificed, let's focus on the spirit of the religious story, which highlights complete submission to God's will and the tight bond created between the Prophet and his God.

Conclusion:

To summarize, a historical overview of Christian-Muslim relations reveals a long narrative of interaction that includes sometimes political tension, but also features many forms of peaceful engagement. Christianity and Islam are closely intertwined, sharing a common religious language, cultural roots, and a deep, albeit complex, relationship. While this connection hasn't always been comfortable or straightforward, it has enormous potential for fostering peace and understanding. A key strategy for nurturing this potential is to establish safe spaces similar to Bayt Al-Hikma, where interfaith dialogue can thrive. Implementing the seven pillars I previously mentioned, with human dignity as the cornerstone, can yield positive results and contribute to a peaceful community in Europe. In a time when people are often judged by their names, skin colour, and faith, employing these principles becomes even more crucial. As we usher in a new era – an era where standing for justice is not merely normative and calling things by their names can cost us dearly – the pursuit of truth becomes paramount. This pursuit entails striving to understand the

complexities of our religious identities and advocating for social justice, not just across Europe, but in all communities we inhabit.

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