“We who are here together and in peace believe and hope in a fraternal world. We desire that men and women of different religions may everywhere gather and promote harmony, especially where there is conflict. Our future consists in living together.”

— Pope Francis
World Day of Prayer for Peace
Assisi, Italy

Inter-Religious Dialogue: A Must in Our Multi-Religious World

by Hariwan Adji, O. Carm.

Religious encounter happens not only in this modern globalization. The encounter of different religions has happened long time ago when people migrated from one place to another place due to survival, natural disaster, expansion, economic reason, etc. The rate of religious encounter increase rapidly in the modern globalization in which advanced sophisticated technology supports human beings to mobile easily from one place to other places and to communicate with those from very distant areas.

Nowadays many communities are religiously heterogeneous. They consist of people with different religious traditions and backgrounds. In some communities the people prefer to live with love and affection and they all have an understanding among each other for centuries from the days of their forefathers. They develop a culture of non-violence and peace. On the other hand there are many more communities with violence and discrimination against certain religious groups either by the government or by rival religion. Almost every day we listen to news about attacks on minority religions or pressure to convert to certain religion. The evidence of religious-related terrorism and sectarian violence is also increasing. Sadly, nowadays not a day passes that we do not hear of acts of religious violence, conflict, kidnapping, terrorist attacks, killings and destruction. Moreover, they justify such barbarism by using the name of a religion or the name of God himself.

How can religious violence happen when we believe that everybody searches for happiness? Are religions wrong and leading people to destruction? Should we have only one religion or not any religion to live in peace? I think the problem is not on the religion or the varieties of religions. Even,
I think that religions may become the basic work of trying to make this world a better place. What causes religious disharmony is our ignorance of each other’s beliefs. This is made worse by our lack of deep knowledge about our own tradition. Pope Francis in the World Day of Prayer for Peace in Assisi, on September 20, 2016, mentioned “Our religious traditions are diverse. But our differences are not the cause of conflict and dispute, or a cold distance between us. We have not prayed against one another today, as has unfortunately sometimes occurred in history. We have rather prayed side by side and for each other.” He added, “we who are here together and in peace believe and hope in a fraternal world. We desire that men and women of different religions may everywhere gather and promote harmony, especially where there is conflict. Our future consists in living together. For this reason we are called to free ourselves from the heavy burdens of distrust, fundamentalism and hate. Believers should be artisans of peace in their prayers to God and in their actions for humanity!” Finally he called religious leaders to be strong bridges of dialogue, and creative mediators of peace.

There are four types of inter-religious dialogue that can be done. They are:

The Dialogue of Everyday Life

An inter-religious dialogue of everyday life happens when people strive to live in an open and neighborly spirit, sharing their joys and preoccupations. A sincere brotherhood between people with the different religions will definitely contribute to developing a culture of mutual respect and tolerance.

The Dialogue of Action

An inter-religious dialogue can start from non-religious issues, reflecting the existing problem of the community. When people with different religious backgrounds share feeling with those who are suffering and are called to act together to end the reality of suffering, actually they are entering the first stage of inter-religious dialogue which will end with a sharing about their religious teaching that supports them in doing the action.

The Dialogue of Religious Experience

An inter-religious dialogue can also start from sharing the richness of each other’s prayers, readings of holy book, contemplation, faith and ways of searching for God. This kind of dialogue can be done by anybody regardless their theological competence.

The Dialogue of Theological Exchange

A dialogue of theological exchange is done at academic level in which theologians and religious leaders share and study together the teachings of their religions. The aim of this dialogue is not to find which religion is the "correct" religion but to understand other religion’s teachings. This kind of dialogue encourages not only the theologians but also the audience of the dialogue to be open-minded and devoted to continuous learning, so that they can comprehend the spirituality and essence of other religion’s teachings.

Inter-religious dialogue is not something easy but it is worth doing. For us who are afraid to engage in inter-religious dialogue, we can learn from Leonard Swindler’s dialogue Deca-logue, published in the Journal of Ecumenical Studies in 1983, which list ten tips how we prepare ourselves to engage in an inter-religious dialogue:

1. Keep in mind the positive objective of inter-religious dialogue: to build understanding not to convince others to convert,
2. Be aware and ready to learn, change and grow in understanding the reality,
3. Participate honestly and sincerely,
4. Be open to disagreements,
5. Be realistic that you will not understand everything of the other religion,
6. Maintain your own integrity,
7. Be equal and fair, come to learn from each other,
8. Trust each other,
9. Be critical, either of you yourself or of your own religion, and
10. Attempt to experience other’s religion.
Mercy Binds Us Together

When discussing three of the world’s major religions, the focus is often on what divides. Here are a few things the three monotheistic religions have in common.

Abraham: Abraham is an important unifying figure of the three religions. This is the reason Christianity, Judaism, and Islam are referred to as the Abrahamic religions. Abraham belongs to the Aramaic people and is believed to be the Patriarch of the Jewish people. According to the Bible, Abraham and his son, Isaac, are said to be the founding fathers of the Arabic people. The Koran also explains that Islam was not a new religion, but rather it was seen as a continuation of Abraham’s original religion.

Jerusalem: The historic center of Jerusalem is home to members of all three religions. The Dome of the Rock is holy for Muslims, who worship there as the place from where Muhammad ascended into heaven to receive revelations from God. Jerusalem is also considered the spiritual and ancestral homeland of the Jews. Christians worship in Jerusalem as the place where Jesus was buried and resurrected. Among the most important places of Christian worship is the Church of the Holy Sepulcher.

Scriptures: The scriptures belonging to the three Abrahamic religions have similarities too. The Jewish holy book consists of the Tanakh and the Talmud. Christians adopted the Tanakh for their Bible, but call it the Old Testament. The Koran also tells the story of Jesus’ crucifixion. Muslims believe it represents a spiritual, rather than actual event and that God intervened to save Jesus in what would otherwise have been his final moments.

Singing: When places of worship were filled, a speaking voice alone could not reach those seated in the rear. The choral tradition of chanting and singing has its roots in the attempt to repair this acoustic deficit. Whether it’s church Gospel music, the chanting tradition in synagogues or the characteristic Muslim call to prayer, all these vocal traditions can be traced back to this primary need to get the message across.

Pilgrimage: All three have a tradition of making a pilgrimage. Mecca is the destination for Muslim pilgrims while Jews journey to Jerusalem and Roman Catholics travel to the Holy Land, for example.

The Unspoken Name: In all three religions, there are both common and specific names for God. Muslims use the Arabic word “Allah” to refer generally to God, as do Arabic-speaking Christians. But Muslims also use the term to speak specifically about their God. There is a list with another 99 proper names, each describing one aspect of God’s nature. A 100th name exists, but is unspeakable. A popular belief is that Jesus, the Messias (Mehdi), will come and reveal it to the people. Similarly, Christians and Jews also have a specific name for their God, Elohim or Yahweh. However, the divine name was increasingly regarded as too sacred to be uttered and was therefore replaced by referring to God, not with a particular name, but using the general terms “Lord” or “God.”

Although these common shared beliefs and practices are significant, perhaps one of the most important shared beliefs is that of mercy. How do the three view mercy? To open the ‘Year of Mercy,’ Pope Francis proclaimed, “The mercy of God is limitless.” Imam Khadi Iyad Zahalka stated, “Mercy is the founding ideal of Islam. Muslims should not attack others. The ones who lost the main idea of Islam are pulling themselves out of the Muslim community, the Muslim faith and the Islamic values.” Rabbi David Rosen said, “We sin almost from the beginning, because we have the ability to make choices, so we are allowed to make mistakes, but since our essence is good and divine, it allows us to return to God. We must therefore be able to identify what we did wrong, being sincerely repentant, then, according to Judaism, we can immediately ‘lashur,’ i.e. return to God, without the need for any external act of atonement.” And Rev. Dr. Francesco G. Voltaggio stated, “This is just the novelty for us in Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ descends into hell. Not only in a theological sense, but in our underworld. Down to the lowest point of ourselves, down to our misery. If you feel loved, then you can love. One cannot give what he/she has not received. This is why you need to receive. This is why we Christians receive the grace, the Holy Spirit, the church, the sacraments, the divine nature, this regeneration in this love and this mercy so we are able to donate mercy.”

The Quran open with the phrase, “In the name of God, the most gracious, most merciful.” Muslims begin their formal prayers with this phrase, they say it before meals, begin formal speeches with it and recite it at the beginning of wedding and funeral rites. As in continued on page 4

Is·lām

1) There are five pillars of practice in Islam. These practices must be undertaken with the best of effort in order to be considered a true Muslim: A) Shahadah - declaration of faith in the oneness of God and that Muhammad is the last prophet of God. B) Formal prayer five times a day. C) Fasting during the daylight hours in the month of Ramadan. D) Poor-due “tax” - 2.5% of one’s savings given to the needy at the needly at the end of each year. E) Pilgrimage to Mecca at least once, if physically and financially able.

2) There are six articles of faith in Islam. These are the basic beliefs that one must have in order to be considered a true Muslim. They are belief in: A) The One God. B) all the prophets of God. C) the original scriptures revealed to Prophets Moses, David, Jesus, and Muhammad. D) the angels. E) the Day of Judgment and the Hereafter. F) the divine decree (or destiny).

3) Islam is one of the fastest growing religions in the world. To become Muslim, a person of any race or culture must say a simple statement, the shahadah, that bears witness to the belief in the One God and that Prophet Muhammad was the last prophet of God.

4) “Allah” is an Arabic word that means “God.” Muslims also believe that “Allah” is the personal name of God.

5) The Islamic concept of God is that He is loving, merciful, and compassionate. But Islam also teaches that He is just and swift in punishment. Nevertheless, Allah once said to Prophet Muhammad, “My mercy prevails over My wrath.” Islam teaches a balance between fear and hope, protecting one from both complacency and despair.

6) Muslims believe that God has revealed 99 of His names (or attributes) in the Qur’an. It is through these names that one can come to know the Creator. A few of these names are: the All-Merciful, the All-Knower, the Protector, the Provider, the Near, the First, the Last, the Hidden, and the Source of Peace.

7) Muslims believe in and acknowledge all the prophets of old, from Adam to Jesus. Muslims believe that they brought the message of peace and submission (Islam) to different peoples at different times. Muslims also believe that these prophets were “Muslims” because they submitted their wills to God.

8) Muslims neither worship Muhammad nor pray through him. Muslims solely worship the unseen and Omniscient Creator, Allah.

9) Muslims accept the original unaltered Torah (the Gospel of Moses) and the original Bible (the Gospel of Jesus) since they were revealed by God. However, none of those original scriptures are in existence today, in their entirety. Therefore, Muslims follow the subsequent, final, and preserved revelation of God, the Qur’an.

10) The Qur’an was not authored by Muhammad. It was authored by God, revealed to Muhammad, and written into physical form by his companions.
The story of the Golden Calf tells of how Moses sought to open a path for the Jewish people to attain God’s forgiveness. To this end, God revealed to Moses the Thirteen Divine Attributes of Mercy, opening a pathway for all future generations to achieve atonement and healing: “And the Lord passed before him and proclaimed: Lord, Lord, benevolent God, Who is compassionate and gracious, slow to anger and abundant in loving kindness and truth, preserving loving kindness for thousands, forgiving iniquity, rebellion and sin, and He cleanses . . .” (Exodus 34:6–7). This raises the question: why is “an abundance of truth” considered one of the attributes of mercy? What about compassion, graciousness and kindness, why truth? Truth is a severe and honest judge, unwilling to overlook misdeeds and transgressions. Jews believe our shortcomings and failures are true only superficially. The reality is that our shortcomings and failures are true only for a moment in time, and only affecting an outer layer of self. The Hebrew word for sin, chet, means “to miss the mark, to be deficient.” Essentially we are not wrongdoers; we are simply falling short of our potential. The Thirteen Attributes of Mercy and the intertwined concept of tešuva, translated as a “return” to one’s real self, are the road that reconnect us to our potential, our true self. This potential remains whole and unaffected by whatever temporary detour we have taken.

When one invokes these attributes, he or she connect to our relationship to the Source of all being, a relationship that is rooted deeper within us than any failure can reach. We have a place within our soul that is deeply connected to the Infinite, a place that the effects of our negative choices cannot reach. When we awaken this level of being, we find new reservoirs of strength to transform our lives. We are fundamentally, essentially and truly Godly and positive. We can access that reality at any time we choose. And God’s attribute of truth cuts away all the external layers and sees us for whom we truly are.

The Catholic definition of mercy is the disposition to be kind and forgiving. Founded on compassion, mercy differs from compassion or the feeling of sympathy in putting this feeling into practice with a readiness to assist. It is therefore the ready willingness to help anyone in need, especially in need of pardon or reconciliation.

In the New Testament, the Greek word that is usually translated as “mercy” is the word eleos. It can also be translated as loving kindness or tender compassion. The Greek word comes from a root word meaning oil that is poured out. Thus, when the Church sings in her liturgy the Greek words Kyrie Eleison and Christie Eleison, she is praying that the merciful love of God will be poured out upon her children, like holy oil from above. According to the ancient Fathers of the Church, the Church herself was born from the wounded side of Christ, when out of His heart there poured out blood and water, symbolic of all the graces of the two chief Sacraments, Baptism and the Eucharist (Jn 19:34). In short, eleos is God’s love poured out upon us.

In the Latin tradition, the principal word for mercy is misericordia, which means, literally “miserable heart.” Father George Kosicki, CSB, the great Divine Mercy evangelist, once summed up the meaning of this Latin word as follows: misericordia means “having a pain in your heart for the pains of others, and taking pains to do something about their pain.”

The most comprehensive statement by the Magisterium on the meaning of Divine Mercy can be found in Pope John Paul II’s encyclical letter Dives in Misericordia (Rich in Mercy, 1981). In that encyclical, the Holy Father made two very important statements about mercy. First, he wrote, “Mercy is love’s second name.” Secondly, he taught that mercy is “the greatest attribute of God.”

Christianity, Islam and Judaism can all be embraced in the words of Pope Francis, “The mercy of God is limitless.”