

Forum

The Abrar Islamic Foundation, in conjunction with
The City Circle, hosted a book launch on
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Islam and Global Dialogue: Religious Pluralism and the Pursuit of Peace

Edited by Dr Roger Boase with Foreword by HRH Prince Hassan bin Talal. Essays by John Bowden, Diana Eck, Muhammad Legenhausen, Francis Robinson, William Dalrymple, Akbar Ahmed, Fred Halliday, Jonathan Sacks, Antony Sullivan, Robert Crane, Khaled Abou El Fadl, Tony Bayfield, Norman Solomon, Marcus Braybrooke, Frank Gelli, Murad Hofmann, Roger Boase, Jeremy Henzell-Thomas, Mahmud Ayoub, Wendell Berry.

SPEAKERS

Roger Boase: The question that we are discussing this evening is “What role can religion play in promoting peace instead of war and other forms of violence?” This is the one of the main questions that my book *Islam and Global Dialogue* seeks to answer.

I began the book in October 2001 after participating in a conference organised by the Association of Muslim Social Scientists, entitled “Unity and Diversity: Islam, Muslims, and the Challenge of Pluralism.” Already before 11 September 2001 Islam was widely portrayed in the media as a belligerent and intolerant religion, incompatible with democracy and civilised values. Half of those who responded to an opinion poll in the United States in the year 2000 thought that Islam supported terrorism.

There was, and still is, much discussion about holy war, as if war can ever be holy! I do not now intend to define jihad. That would take too long.

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Suffice it to say that military jihad is necessary in self-defence, whereas the greater jihad is the struggle to control one's own ego. In the aftermath of 9/11, when Islam was in the dock and the very concept of religious pluralism seemed to be under assault, I felt that I had to try to set the record straight by compiling a collection of essays by a select group of like-minded Jews, Christians and Muslims.

I would first like to thank the distinguished scholars who generously contributed to this book. The whole project has taken much longer than I had intended, but having been forced by the publishers to cut out 50,000 words, I am delighted with the result, and I wish to express my gratitude to Sarah Lloyd, Barbara Pretty, Sarah Noble, Ann Keirby, Jeanne Brady, Jackie Bressanelli, and all the other members of staff at Ashgate Publishing who have taken so much trouble to ensure that this book is a success. I also want to thank Dr Shehabi of the Abrar Foundation for allowing us to use these premises for this occasion, and I want to thank Asim Siddiqui for publicising this event as part of the City Circle programme. Finally, I wish to thank Dan Plesch, Rabbi Tony Bayfield, the Reverend Marcus Braybrooke and Daoud Rosser-Owen for agreeing to speak at this book launch.

One of the aims of this book is to demonstrate that Islam has an ecumenical aspect that has not been well understood or explained by Muslims themselves. There is much advice in the Qur'an on how one should engage in dialogue with those whose religious views are different from one's own. Furthermore, it is evident from certain key passages in the Qur'an that there is in Islam a theological basis for religious pluralism:

And of His signs is... the diversity of your tongues and colours. (Qur'an, 30:22)

To each community among you have We appointed a law and a way of life. (Qur'an, 5:48)

We have appointed for every community a way of worship that they shall perform. Therefore do not allow yourself to be drawn into disputes about this. (Qur'an, 22:67-9)

Truly those who believe, and the Jews, and the Christians, and the Sabaeans – whoever believes in God and the Last Day and performs virtuous deeds – surely their reward is with their Lord, and no fear shall come upon them. (Quran, 2:62)

In the increasingly interdependent and globalised world in which we now live, it has become imperative for all of us to engage in an ecumenical jihad and to look for such passages in our religious scriptures. We should remember God's words in the Book of Leviticus (19: 34): "The stranger who

lives with you shall be treated like the native-born. Love him as yourself, for you were once strangers in the land of Egypt.” We should remember the words of Peter, the disciple of Jesus: “I now see how true it is that God has no favourites, but that in every nation anyone who is Godfearing and does what is right is acceptable to Him” (Acts 34-5). As Martin Luther King said: “Our loyalties must become ecumenical . . . Every nation must now develop an overriding loyalty to mankind as a whole in order to preserve the best in their individual societies.” And, as the Malaysian scholar Chandra Muzaffar says, to be true to mankind “the centres of power in the West” have to show that they are committed to a multi-civilisational world based upon justice, equality and respect for diversity.

As most of you know, the word *Islam* comes from the same root as the Arabic word *salam*, “peace.” A Muslim in this general sense may be defined as a person who attempts to find inner peace by doing God’s will and remembering Him “for, in the remembrance of God hearts do find their rest” (13:27-8). This is why in the Qur’an the disciples of Jesus bear witness that they are Muslims (3:53). It is also said that “the true servants of the Most Merciful” are “those who walk gently on earth and who, when the ignorant address them, say ‘Peace’” (25:63).

Secular humanists tend to assume that religion is inherently divisive and irrational, the cause of most wars and acts of violence. In the words of Salman Rushdie, writing in *The Guardian* about the massacre of thousands of Muslims in the Indian state of Gujerat in March 2002, “religion is the poison in the blood . . . The problem’s name is God.” Mark Twain stated the paradox rather better:

Man is . . . the only animal that has the True Religion – several of them. He is the only animal that loves his neighbour as himself and cuts his throat, if his theology isn’t straight. He has made a graveyard of the globe in trying his honest best to smooth his brother’s path to happiness and heaven.

Certainly throughout history much blood has been shed in the name of religion. But I do not think that religion as such is to blame. It is the fanatical belief in the exclusive truth of one’s own narrow interpretation of religion that is so dangerous. For example, in Islam one thinks of the practice of *takfir*, which means denouncing other fellow Muslims as heretics who deserve to be killed. Here I would like to quote from a message I received two days ago from Bob Crane, on the anniversary of the second murderous assault on Falluja:

Clearly, anyone with a final solution to anything in this world ... is a threat to humanity. Two such threats escalate logarithmically when two utopian ideologies emerge from the depths of hell and confront each other.

The mystic Said Nursi wisely said:

When you know your way and opinions to be true, you have the right to say, "My way is right and the best." But you do not have the right to say, "Only my way is right."

The Prophet Muhammad is reported to have said: "The differences of opinion among the learned within my community are a blessing." It is this Islamic tradition of tolerance that has to be revived, for those who cannot appreciate diversity within their own religious community will certainly not be able to value religious pluralism.

The four distinguished speakers will no doubt each offer a different perspective on the subject. But all of them will, I think, agree that wars, civil unrest and other forms of violence are more likely to occur in a climate of opinion ruled by fear, hatred and distrust, when we fail to respect what the Chief Rabbi Jonathan Sacks calls "the dignity of difference."

*Marcus Braybrooke**: First, I want to congratulate Roger Boase and the publishers on a carefully edited and beautifully produced book. *Islam and Global Dialogue* is important and timely because it provides a theological and philosophical basis for people of faith to co-operate in seeking a more just and peaceful world. We are all well aware that religion often seems to be a cause of conflict. Indeed one commentator has said the daily news is a record of "holy hatred." In my view, religious differences are seldom the primary cause of conflict, but quickly embitter conflict if it occurs.

In response to the violence for which some people falsely claim a religious sanction, there has recently been an enormous increase in interfaith contact. The number of local interfaith groups in Britain has doubled in the last three or four years and international meetings are on the increase. Yesterday some of us at the Three Faiths Forum had the pleasure of meeting with the Grand Mufti of Syria.

Interfaith encounter takes place at many levels and each is important. There is a need to dispel ignorance and prejudice. Many Christians are woefully ill informed about Islam. One of the best ways of changing attitudes is to encourage people to meet and get to know each other and both the Three Faiths Forum and the World Congress of Faiths encourages such meetings.

This leads often to real friendship, but also to the desire to work together – perhaps to protect the environment or to campaign against war. Beyond this we need to affirm the values that we share and seek to recover a moral basis for our society and world, as for example, in efforts to gain support for a Global Ethic.

Vital as all this is, if it is to be fruitful, it must be undergirded by a new outlook which rejects exclusivism and recognizes God’s presence in religious traditions other than our own. It is not enough to rid ourselves of ignorance and prejudice, nor to co-operate on the values that we share. As we recognize that Jews, Christians and Muslims, children of Abraham, serve the One God – even if our understandings of the Holy One are different – we know that we are bound together with cords that cannot be broken. Our co-operation and fellowship become part of our religious self-understanding. Interfaith meeting cannot just be a matter of convenience, it must be based on conviction.

This is no watering down of faith but an attitude demanded by the nature of God Himself. Mystics of every tradition affirm that God is more glorious than our imagining. Our language always falls short. The fourth-century Church father Gregory of Nazianzus (329-89) wrote:

By what name shall I call upon you, Who are beyond all name!
 You, the Beyond-all, what name shall I give you?..
 All names are given to you and yet none can comprehend you.
 How shall I name you then, O you, the Beyond-all name?

In Judaism, the concept of *Ein Sof* was applied to the Being of God as “that which is not conceivable by thought.” The Sufi tradition in Islam has a similar emphasis on the experience of the Divine Mystery which is never fully captured in words. Despite the longing to see God with the eye of the heart, people will only see what God chooses to show them and not see God as He sees Himself.

This emphasis on experience of God who can never be fully known implies that doctrines about God are like fingers pointing to the moon.

I am not suggesting that all religions say the same, but that as we share our different perspectives we may apprehend a little more fully the Divine mystery. A couple of years ago I was asked to write a book called *What Can We Learn from Islam*. The “we” is Christians and Westerners. I know myself that when I enter one of the great mosques of India or of the Middle East I have an over-powering sense of the glory of God, which sometimes is lost in Christian worship. Perhaps the simplest definition of dialogue is “Tell me your beautiful names for God and I will tell you mine.”

Further, many of us would probably also agree that our interpretation of sacred texts is conditioned by a person's historical setting, intention, culture, class and sex. We cannot claim absolute authority for our understanding of God's message.

The inadequacy of our language does not make me doubt the reality of God, nor do I think that we live in our own religious islands and that communication between people of different faiths is impossible. Even more important, the fact that in this life we only see through a glass darkly should not stop us committing ourselves to the truth as we see it. Doctors, for example, know that new treatments may become available, but they prescribe according, one hopes, to "best practice." There was a recent headline, "Scientists place their bets on relative certainty." We worship God as God has revealed Himself to us in the hope that we shall be granted a fuller vision of His glory.

Interfaith fellowship should, therefore, enrich our faith not weaken it. As we learn more from others, we marvel at the greatness and mercy of God and are encouraged to be more fervent and faithful in following our chosen path.

Many of the essays in this book provide a theological and philosophical basis for greater sharing and co-operation between members of different religions. Here is the answer to those who misuse religion to foment division and hatred.

In the New Testament, St Paul says that God, through Jesus, changed us from enemies into His friends and gave us the task of making the whole human race God's friends. If God longs for all people to be His friends, then we should be friends with all who serve Him. True faith can still be the most effective way of healing the divisions of the world and uniting us all in a more just and peaceful society and I trust that this book will contribute to the future we long for and for which we pray.

* The Reverend Marcus Braybrooke, a contributor to the book, is President of the World Congress of Faiths, co-founder of the Three Faiths Forum, and an active member of nearly every interfaith organisation in this country. He is the author of numerous books including *Faith and Interfaith in a Global Age* (1998), *Christian-Jewish Dialogue* (2000), *What We Can Learn from Islam* (2002), *1000 World Prayers* (2003), and with Kamran Mofid, *Sustaining the Common Good: Bringing Economics and Theology Together* (2005).

*Tony Bayfield**: These are extraordinarily disturbing and difficult times. I'm really alarmed for the future of humanity and for the future of religion.

For the last ten years, I've been part of a small but tenacious Jewish-Christian-Muslim dialogue group which has always given priority to the

personal (individuals who are prepared to be open and connect with each other) over the representative, to the theological (I really want to understand that teaching) over the political, and to honesty (this is how I really feel) over negotiation. If nothing else, we are friends who trust each other. I'm not sure that any other form of dialogue is worthwhile or even really dialogue.

Yet, sitting in the group on Monday, I was more conscious than ever of the tsunami of hatred and violence which threatens – which is engulfing us all over the world – from Indonesia to Belfast and from Chechnya to the State of Israel and its neighbouring future state of Palestine. The ferocity of the tidal wave threatens even dear old Britain with its traditional stability and insulating insularity.

I hope it isn't bad taste to use the word tsunami. After all, I'm deeply resentful of the trivialisation of words like holocaust. But tsunami expresses for me the enormity of what is going on, the present suffering and the danger to us all.

In my small contribution to Roger's tremendous book – a unique and much, much needed and appreciated venture – I try to express a bitter irony. We three children of Abraham – Islam, Christianity and Judaism – are integral to the formation and course of the tsunami. It is significantly of our making – Indonesia, Belfast, Iraq, Afghanistan, Sudan, New York, London, Chechnya, Israel/Palestine and so on all over the globe. Yet our three faiths, the three Abrahamic faiths, Christianity, Islam and Judaism are also its most likely victims. For if we are part cause of the current and impending human catastrophe, what integrity, what respect can humanity give us? What conviction can we possibly carry? What role model do we offer? And without integrity and respect, conviction and compelling example, our faiths are rendered worthless and will die.

But I've sounded that note of terror before. I've written and spoken frequently about Judaism, Christianity and Islam as dysfunctional siblings, the family that the world most needs to work in harmony and which seems least able to do so. Like Marcus and Roger, I have contributed to a statement, a platform, which attempts to set out the conditions under which we can function together for the good of humanity and the globe. Sometimes, it feels like spitting in the wind, like waving defiantly at the onrushing wave.

But Roger is right. We must not lose hope – that's the worst thing that people of faith can do. All hope rests with global dialogue, with the subtitle of Roger's book *Islam and Global Dialogue*, upon real acknowledgement of religious pluralism and the pursuit of peace – which is unattainable without justice – through dialogue.

So I want to take you back into our little dialogue group last Monday afternoon and tell you what I heard above the roar of wave and the thunder of anger. “Is it best symbolised by 9/11 – have we already moved beyond the usefulness of referring constantly to 9/11?”, someone asked. Somebody else referred to 7/7. A third person commented that what 9/11 and 7/7 did was to allow us to point to events without the use of words which might give a clue as to how we see those events or what we actually want to talk about. “What’s the ‘it’ that 9/11 and 7/7 actually point to. What’s the ‘it’ about which we are speaking?”

The Muslims in the group spoke with one voice. “The ‘it’ is the invasion of the Muslim world by the West – a physical, economic, cultural and political invasion. It has torn countries physically apart, exploited and impoverished, corrupted and coarsened Islamic culture and foisted upon us evil and debased political regimes antithetical to democracy, regimes which have betrayed our people all over the Muslim world. Those of us who have been drawn into the western world and made our lives here feel uprooted, displaced and victimised. That’s the ‘it’ and though it doesn’t in any way justify extremist violence, it’s the context in which the violence must be understood and screams out what needs to be done if the situation is not to deteriorate further.” I already knew it and yet I’d never heard it with such clarity.

A jumble of emotions ran through me and a turmoil of thoughts. “I wonder how the Christians in the room are feeling. Why do I as a Jew feel so attacked when I’m part of a tiny, tiny minority who have lived equally in the Christian and post-Christian west and in the Islamic world as well. I feel like a tiny morsel of schnitzel caught up in a vast bread and pitta sandwich. Poor me. But then, maybe my Muslim friends are right and we Jews have indeed thrown in our lot with the forces of western imperialism. But did we have any option? And then, is that anguished analysis objectively correct and is the apparent decline of the Muslim world over the last 300 years all our fault? And ...” In the end I said nothing other than to indicate that I had heard, really heard, felt something of the reality of the pain and understood it a little better.

And maybe I have said too much tonight by telling you of my inner thoughts and what I stopped myself from saying. Because isn’t that the only hope for the three Abrahamic faiths at one minute past midnight? Isn’t that the glimmer, the starting point for surviving the devastating tsunami that we have already initiated?

To listen, to hear, to feel the other’s pain and somehow to find out of our respective faiths the strength and courage to move beyond our own pain and try to ease that of our brothers and sisters within the Abrahamic family.

There is a dialogue which goes as follows: “Do you love me?” “Yes.” “Do you know what causes me pain?” “No.” “Then you don’t love me.” For the sake of the One God whom we all worship and share and for the sake of humanity and the globe, we must hear and acknowledge the pain and respond in global dialogue with love, concern, understanding and action, and not with truculence and pain – increasing self-justification.

* Rabbi Tony Bayfield, a contributor to the book, is Chief Executive of the Reform Synagogues of Great Britain, Director of The Sternberg Centre for Judaism, Co-President of the Council of Christians and Jews, editor of the journal *MANNA: The Voice of Living Judaism*, author of *He Kissed Him and They Wept* (2001), and joint author of *Dialogue with a Difference* (1992). He has been the convenor of a Jewish-Christian-Muslim dialogue group, founded in 1992.

*Dan Plesch**: First of all I would like to thank the people for organising this evening, Roger for inviting me, and to congratulate everybody involved in producing this extremely important book. I am sure there have been others in the past on a similar theme and there will be others in the future, but this is what we need now. It is tremendous that Roger and his colleagues have brought this together.

I was having lunch with one of the editors of the Al Jazeera International Channel which will air in the middle of next year. He said he was sorry he could not come along personally this evening, but he said he couldn’t think of any more important subject at the present time. I think that is absolutely true.

I must reinforce this message by saying I say this as a devout atheist and if one thing has caused a chill to run down my spine this evening it is the prospect of ecumenical jihad. I am not sure if I would be stoned before I am burned at the stake, or vice versa. Perhaps the time for the argument would allow me to escape.

There is a point I do not want to labour, but having become an American citizen and having lived many years in the United States, it is a question about how much space is left for rationality, for the position I hold overall; one can say that we live in a decadent and godless culture and in many respects it is not one I care for.

But certainly working and living in Washington DC, it is very difficult to be a person of reason as against a person of faith. One year when Bill Clinton was coming to town there was a great argument among my staff as to which church he was going to go. As director I intervened in the coffee discussions and said “Won’t he be listening if he goes to the wrong way?” Of course it was a social question.

I think we are all too aware how those social issues and divisions have escalated over time. So with that as a side note to the question of faith and un-faith, or faith and reason, which is an important part of this dialogue, I want to touch on a few points which occurred to me listening to this discussion and looking at this remarkable book.

First of all, we come to this question of what active role can ecumenical religion take at this difficult time. Normally I am the one in discussion prophesying doom and I have been upstaged and I don't entirely agree things are quite as bad as we are led to believe – but they are bad enough. So I want to cut through to some things which might be helpful to share.

It may be helpful to recognise the commonality of those things that bring us here tonight, but that there are common traits of violence and intolerance across the region as well. Sometimes I find there is more in common between some of the more extremist groups.

I raised the question “What about a just war in other religions?” with a very eminent Quaker figure. He did not have anything to say. It seems to me at the present time we are in a very great danger, certainly from the Christian cultural perspective, of thinking that the concept of a just war only exists in one of the Abrahamic faiths. There is a pressing need for very specific dialogue on the just war within the three Abrahamic traditions.

Secondly, in terms of the conflict that concerns us, we talked about cultural domination, imperialism, call it what you will. I remember little from my O-Level history some 35 years ago, but I do remember a quotation from an early Victorian called William Covent who remarked on radical politics: “I defy you to agitate a man with a full stomach.” This sums up a lot about the complacency and political apathy in this country and certainly the causes of conflict. We do live increasingly in a culture of totalitarian capitalism. I use this phrase advisedly because it is increasingly a structure which says that only the corporation and only business can exist.

You can see this with our Prime Minister's political agenda, which is to corporatise, it is to commercialise every sector, you might say apart from the religious, of our cultural life: schools, the health service, everything has to be corporate. That is extremely unhealthy and many people would say that. I will touch on two issues which I think an inter-faith discussion can very powerfully assist. From what little I understand, I think there is a strong Judaic critique of corporate structures, that is limited liability, because of lack of personal responsibility involved. Similarly, I think that there is a strong critique in Islam of the idea of a company as being something against faith and again there is the question of responsibility and personal conduct which is a major theme of all the religions.

In those two traditions they bring together something which is very close to the deeply resonant critique of corporations and businesses which one hears in the anti-Western and the anti-globalisation movement. They are providing a cross-fertilisation of dialogue and expression of these perspectives across cultures which could be very, very important in providing a unifying discussion.

The question of the domination of the business model is something which I have been considerably concerned with in my research recently. When we return to the issue of defying to agitate a person with a full stomach and looking at the roots of poverty and the countless decisions of the United Nations, there is this great sucking sound of the wealth going upwards in whichever part of the world one happens to live – in sophisticated legal structures one can find bouncing legal mechanisms and rights of the citizen against corporations.

But in all too much of the world, the corporate model simply provides an opportunity for old elites to re-legitimate themselves, privatise the economies to themselves in a way which deeply alienates large parts of society and seems beyond the reach of people. This creates a legalised, structural inequality, which is at the heart of much of the economic and social injustice which we face.

I sketched out what I think may be an ecumenical means of providing a response to that very large problem which is at the root of much of what we have to face today. I don't say it is an immediate cause, but it is at the root of the processes of what has gone on, particularly in the last 20 years in international political economy.

Finally, I would like to talk a little bit about outreach – making one's voice heard. All too often people of sense find themselves in small rooms playing extremely elegant string quartets in musical terms, delightful unplugged performances (in the jargon of the music industry). The problem that we face in mass society is that we need to find the 20,000 watt speakers for what we have to say because we find ourselves so drowned out.

That is very difficult because generally speaking people like us come to a session like this to get away from the noise, to find a space for reflection and dialogue. But because of the urgency of the situation we desperately need organisation and we desperately need to organise ourselves. I have friends in the former Yugoslavia who experienced living side by side, not caring who was who for decades, and then seeing the arrival of criminal gangs, who with some expertise and with the control of one channel television managed to whip up a hatred which had lain dormant for decades, if not centuries,

within months. If we are to resist that happening to us, we need to be very well organised.

I think the good thing is that if you amongst yourselves look at yourselves and at the skills you have in your jobs, you have a remarkable set of skills. Not everybody is in marketing and public relations which are the two things we need as a priority, but if one looks at one's skills and how one can organise, not in large groups but in groups of three to six, and when it gets more than six you can become two groups of four, to think on a cross religious basis as far as one can about what one can do in crisis. What one can do when things blow up as they did a few months ago here in London?

There was something terrible on the news this morning. What are we going to do? Are we going to wait and see what we are told on the news at ten, or do we go out and do something? Certainly we can't rely on the media or our current system of government. We have to be organised across faith to act. So coming together not simply to reflect and discuss, but to think about what can actually be done in a preventive way before these sorts of events wash into our communities, I think this is of vital importance. And with that thought on a rather down-beat note I will leave you.

* Dan Plesch is a well-known commentator on US foreign policy and the so-called "war on terror," author of *The Beauty Queen's Guide to World Peace* (2004). He is a firm believer in the need to work within the framework of international regulations, in particular the United Nations Charter.

*Daoud Rosser-Owen**: This book which Dr Boase has edited is, I think, a major contribution to the literature; and thus to the continuing dialogue of the subject of Religious Pluralism. In it, he has brought together many of the major names and thinkers of the world of religious exchange and the continuing search in the modern world for a meaningful *modus vivendi*.

Two things in particular mark out the difference of our contemporary situation from many of those that have preceded us. These are a remarkable willingness on the part of religious people to work out a means of living together, but against a backdrop of diminishing popular religious belief and practice of a sort that the Great Names of the three Abrahamic Faiths would not recognise as deriving from their Teaching. In a time of an apparent impulsion towards an apocalyptic catastrophe, it seems to be even more urgent than at any other time that peace be not merely pursued but actually caught.

The term "Abrahamic Faiths" was, I'm led to believe, coined by the late Ismail Faruqi, whom I knew somewhat, and also his late wife Lamyia. It was an inspired coining, whoever came up with it, as it neatly encapsulates both what unites the three religions of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, and what

apparently divides them. But I am convinced that in their true forms, what brings them together is greater than what separates.

I've known Dr Boase for some years, and we have shared a dialogue on this and related topics. Indeed, I think I can claim that a number of those acknowledged by him in the Preface to this book are at least acquaintances, and perhaps good friends, of mine too. For example, I knew Shaykh Abdullah Ross quite well, and I went up to Mull to deliver the Islamic burial of Michael Scott.

I was told by a friend some years ago of an incident that seems to have deeply affected her. Then a Roman Catholic, she had gone on a trip that ended up overlooking the Sea of Galilee. The coach stopped for a leg-stretching break, and she noticed a rabbi and an imam had drifted off and were sitting together obviously quite at ease in each other's company. It came to her that left to their own devices, people of religion could work it out. It's the other lot, I would suggest, whom I would term the People of Irreligion, or *Munafiqs*, who get in the way and foment turmoil.

What possibilities can dialogue present for the future? I am getting cynical and not too hopeful, as we need to produce changes in the outlook and conduct of our Lords of Misrule. As a contribution to the launch and the discussion to follow, let me juxtapose two government-led initiatives, one which exacerbates racial and religious tension, and one which tends to mitigate and minimise it. For it seems to me that if religion, or religious people, are to have a role in promoting world peace it has to be through influencing politicians and the leaders and formers of opinion – which would include the “Media” – at least to tell the truth, and not to lie, most of the time.

When we set up the Council for Human Rights and Religious Freedom in 1996, it was to bring together religious leaders in the United Kingdom and Europe to combat what appeared to be a systematic abuse and denial of Human and Religious Rights to minorities in Germany, Belgium, and France. The German government of the time had produced what it called a Brochure of some 600 “*bösen und gefährlichen Sekten*” that it wanted either banned or closely scrutinised and monitored. In fact, later, the French Assemblée Nationale, followed by the Belgians, went ahead and set up an Observatory of Sects and Cults.

Among the 600 were to be found “the usual suspects” – such as the Church of Scientology or the Unification Church – but also the followers of Sri Chinmoy, the Hare Krishnas, a Southern Baptist church in Bonn and Cologne, the Seventh-Day Adventists, the Latter-Day Saints, and the Jehovah's Witnesses. The list was an updated version, we discovered, of one put out in 1937 by the National Socialist administration of Bavaria. To cap it all,

not long after our visit to Germany, a meeting was held at Wannsee (just outside Berlin) to discuss what was to be done about the Sect problem. Wannsee was where Reinhard Heidrich plotted the *Endlösung* – the Final Solution.

This confrontational approach to community relations included intrusive surveillance of mosques and Islamic organisations, and has been continued in France and adopted in America and here in the UK since 11 September 2001. Matters have, predictably, deteriorated.

Against this I would set the other example. Many know, or should know, about the *convivencia* between Muslims, Catholics, and Jews that supposedly typified the reign of Alfonso X of Castile and Leon in thirteenth-century Spain, and which was an acquisition from the actual practice of the kingdoms of Islamic al-Andalus. But in the next century far to the east, there grew up the dynasty of Osman Ghazi that in 1453 captured the last prize of the Byzantine Empire, namely the city of Constantinople itself, and began a style of communal government known as the *millet* system.

This began immediately, when the Sultan (Muhammad the Conqueror) made the Greek Orthodox Patriarch the Head of all Christians in the empire, and gave him the right of direct and untrammelled access to the Sultan for matters that affected Christians. This system expanded and developed so that eventually it incorporated different sects and denominations in Christianity, Judaism, and Islam. All were internally autonomous, and externally contributed to the working of the empire. Inter-communal strife wasn't avoided, but it was sporadic and what was systematised was inter-communal cooperation.

I believe that something like the Ottoman system needs to be adopted, rather than the confrontational system. We need to involve people with real hope of being able to achieve things, not to dismiss and marginalise them; and certainly not to demonise whole communities on specious grounds. That will only make matters worse than they are, for if you've nothing to lose, why not become a nihilist?

Religions don't prescribe war, terror, or violence except in extremis for self-defence. Religions offer hope. And it's in hope to the hopeless that I think lies our way forward.

* Daoud Rosser-Owen has been for many years President of the Association of British Muslims. He is also co-founder of the Council for Human Rights and Religious Freedom and is the author of many articles on Islam and Sufism.