

CARDINAL MICHAEL L. FITZGERALD\*

## REFLECTIONS ON HUMAN FRATERNITY

SUMMARY: This article aims to do three things: first to reflect on the title of the document signed by Pope Francis and Dr Ahmad al-Tayyeb<sup>1</sup>; secondly to present the contents of this document; and then to compare the Arabic text of the document with the Italian and English versions. It will end with some further reflections on the content of the document.

In the joint document on Human Fraternity that they courageously signed on 4 February 2019, Pope Francis and Dr Ahmad al-Tayyeb requested that the document become an “object of research and reflection”. The following article is a contribution to PISAI’s response to this request. It will reflect on the title of the document, examine different versions of the text, and offer some reflections on the content.

*The Title*

The title in the Arabic text reads *al-uḥuwwa al-insāniyya min aḡli l-salāmi l-‘ālamī wa-l-‘ayṣi l-muṣṭarak*; in English: “Human Fraternity for World Peace and Living Together”; in Italian: “Fratellanza umana per la pace mondiale e la convivenza comune”.

This last expression, “living together”, is not very common in writings on interreligious dialogue in English, whereas “convivenza” in Italian, and its equivalent in other romance languages, can frequently be found. Incidentally, the adjective “comune” would appear to be superfluous.

The question has been put whether it was necessary to specify “human” fraternity in the title, since fraternity is really found only among humans. The answer could be that the fraternity being discussed is not based on religious belonging, but on

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\* Michael Fitzgerald, Missionary of Africa, was Director of PISAI 1972-1978, President of the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue 2002-2006, and Nuncio in Egypt 2006-2012. Now retired, he resides in Liverpool, U.K. He was created Cardinal by Pope Francis on 5 October 2019.

<sup>1</sup> The document in English can be found at [w2.vatican.va/content/Francesco/en/event.dir.html/content/vaticanevents/en/2019/2/4/fratellanza-umana.html](http://w2.vatican.va/content/Francesco/en/event.dir.html/content/vaticanevents/en/2019/2/4/fratellanza-umana.html). For the Arabic text, the same address can be used but replacing “en” by “ar”.

“faith in God, who has created... all human beings” (*Introduction*). In other words, it is not the result of religious belonging, but of sharing in humanity. It is worth going further into this question and seeing what both the Bible and the Qur’an have to say about fraternity.

#### *The teaching of the Bible*

According to a concordance<sup>2</sup> the term *fraternitas* occurs once in the Old Testament and seven times in the New Testament, whereas the term *frater* in different forms occurs 53 times in the OT and 50 times in the NT. The index to the *New Jerome Biblical Commentary*<sup>3</sup> indicates “Fraternal love” with two entries, and “Brothers”, with several entries on Christians as brothers, but also on the brothers of the Lord, and one on the former slave Onesimus being called a brother. It is pointed out that the expression “my brothers” occurs 11 times in the Letter of James, and this is seen to be the “normal form of Christian address”<sup>4</sup>.

The term “brother” then would seem to be restricted to fellow Christians, yet a broader use is also found. In the first letter of John it is said: “Since God has loved us so much, we too should love one another” (1Jn 4:11) and “Anyone who says ‘I love God’, and hates his brother, is a liar, since a man who does not love the brother that he can see cannot love God whom he has never see. So this is the commandment that he has given us, that anyone who loves God must also love his brother” (1Jn 4:20-21). The commentator on this book of the Bible states: “The author never forgets the obligation for Christians that follows from the divine attributes to which he refers”<sup>5</sup>.

The *Vocabulaire de théologie biblique*<sup>6</sup> contains no article on *fraternité*, but does have a fairly substantial article on *frère*. This article distinguishes between the fraternity of flesh and blood, that of faith or sympathy (the example of David and Jonathan is given), and the brotherhood that springs from a common function or an alliance. It points out that in the Bible “Revelation [on fraternity] does not spring from a philosophical reflection on ‘sharing a common nature’ which makes of all men brothers. This does not mean that it sets aside the ideal of universal fraternity, but it is aware that this cannot be achieved, and considers pursuit of it a delusion (*décevante*) if it is not sought in Christ”<sup>7</sup>. As the article points out, in creating the human race from one stock (cfr. Acts 17:26), God instilled in human hearts the dream of fraternity in Adam. Yet there is a long way to go before this dream is fulfilled, as the murder of Abel

<sup>2</sup> H. de Raze et al. (ed.), *Concordantiarum SS. Scripturae Manuale*, Editorial Librería Religiosa, Barcinone 1958.

<sup>3</sup> R.E. Brown, S.S. et al. (ed.), *The New Jerome Biblical Commentary*, London Geoffrey Chapman 1991 (henceforth referred to as NJBC).

<sup>4</sup> Cfr. T.W. Leahy, S.J., *The Epistle of James*, in NJBC 58.8.

<sup>5</sup> Cfr. Ph. Perkins, *The Johannine Epistles*, in NJBC 62:29.

<sup>6</sup> X. Léon-Dufour (ed.), *Vocabulaire de théologie biblique*, Cerf, Paris 1964 (henceforth VTB).

<sup>7</sup> Cfr. A. Négrier and X. Léon-Dufour, art. *Frère*, in VTB col. 403-407; quotation from col. 403.

by Cain shows. The book of Leviticus enjoins: “You must not bear hatred for your brother in your heart” (Lv 19:17), yet this injunction clashes with the frequent hardness of hearts which humans display. So the prophets, speaking out against injustice, open up a universal perspective. “Have we not all one Father? Did not one God create us?” (Mal 2:10). “For Abraham does not own us and Israel does not acknowledge us; you, Lord, yourself are our Father” (Is 63:16). The Wisdom Books praise fraternity: “Brother helped by brother is a fortress” (Prov 18:19), and the Psalmist proclaims: “How good, how delightful it is for all to live together like brothers” (Ps 133:1). Although, for Christians, the prophetic dream of universal fraternity is realized in Jesus Christ, the new Adam, yet in the face of collective sin – one is tempted to say “structural sin” – only God can restore true fraternity at the end of time<sup>8</sup>.

#### *The teaching of the Qur’an*

There is no occurrence in the Qur’an of the term *uḥuwwa*. The plural *iḥwa* occurs seven times, three with possessive pronouns, while the plural *iḥwān* is more frequent, being found 22 times of which 18 with possessive pronouns. The singular *aḥ*, in different forms, is found 53 times, often in contexts dealing with inheritance, while the feminine *uḥt* occurs 14 times<sup>9</sup>.

In the index of an English concordance to the Qur’an<sup>10</sup> under ‘Brotherhood’ one finds “see love; friendship”. The section indicated goes from p. 615 to p. 618, but it covers the Arabic words *ḥubb*, *ulfa*, *maḥabba*, *muwadda*, and there is no reference to fraternity.

In the Qur’an perhaps the most significant use of the term *iḥwa* is found in the following statement: *innamā l-mu’minūna iḥwa*, “The believers are brothers” (Q 49:10)<sup>11</sup>, or in the version of Yusuf Ali: “The believers are but a single brotherhood”. Of course this raises the question as to who are the “believers”, whether this classification is restricted to those who adhere to Islam or whether it can have a wider application. A common understanding is that this text would seem to imply that brotherhood, apart from the natural relation by birth, is restricted to those who are Muslims. Another text would seem to give support to this interpretation. An exhortation is proffered:

Hold fast to God’s rope all together; do not split into factions. Remember God’s favour to you: you were enemies and then He brought your hearts together and you became brothers by His grace (*aṣbaḥtum bi-ni’mati-hi iḥwān<sup>am</sup>*) (Q 3:103).

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, col. 405.

<sup>9</sup> The calculations are based on Muhammad Fu’ad ‘Abd al-Bāqī, *al-Mu’ğam al-mufahris li-alfāz al-qur’ān*, maṭābi’ al-ša’b, no place, 1278 (*hiğrī*).

<sup>10</sup> Al-Haj Khan Bahodur Allaf Ahmad Kerie, *Index cum Concordance. A Key to the Holy Qur’an*, Darul Ishaat, Karachi 1995.

<sup>11</sup> Unless otherwise stated, the English version of the Qur’an is quoted according to M.A.S. Abdel Haleem, *The Qur’an*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2010.

Yusuf Ali understands this verse as referring to the situation in Yathrib. His commentary is interesting: “Yathrib was torn with civil and tribal feuds and dissensions before the Apostle of God set his sacred feet on its soil. After that, it became the City of the prophet, Medina, an unmatched Brotherhood, and the pivot of Islam. This poor quarrelsome world is a larger Yathrib: can we establish the sacred feet on its soil, and make it a new and larger Medina?”<sup>12</sup>. It is good to remember that Medina, according to the Constitution drawn up by Muhammad, had a place not only for the Muhāğirūn and the Anşār, that is those who had already embraced Islam, but also for the Arab tribes and their Jewish clients.

Another use of the term *iḥwān* comes in a description of Paradise:

But the righteous will be in Gardens with springs – “Enter them in peace and safety!” – and We shall remove any bitterness from their hearts: [they will be like] brothers (*iḥwān<sup>am</sup>*), sitting on couches face to face (Q 15:45-47).

Here then the question would concern the identity of the “righteous” (*muttaqīn*, literally the pious or those who fear God). Is this category restricted to Muslims or is it wider?

#### *The contents of the document*<sup>13</sup>

The *Introduction* presents faith in God as the Creator of the universe, creatures, and all human beings as the basis for recognizing human fraternity. It refers to meetings which have created “a friendly and fraternal atmosphere”. It takes into account “the joys, sorrows and problems” of the contemporary world.

The *Document* itself starts with a series of eleven invocations in which there is mention of the equality of human beings, the inviolable nature of human life, the poor, orphans, widows and refugees, human fraternity, freedom, justice and mercy, and all people of good will. The final invocation comes with a declaration of “the adoption of a culture of dialogue as the path; mutual cooperation as the code of conduct; reciprocal understanding as the method and standard” (11). Encouragement is given to develop and spread a culture of tolerance (12).

The causes of the crises in today’s world are suggested: a desensitized conscience, distance from religious values, individualism, materialism (14). Advances in science and technology are contrasted with deterioration in the moral sphere. The latter is seen to foster frustration leading to extremism which can be either religious or non-religious (15). This extremism is itself the source of conflict sometimes fuelled by “narrow-minded economic interests” (16). Reference is made to “situations of injustice” and “catastrophic crises” which meet with “an unacceptable silence on the international level” (17).

<sup>12</sup> A. Yusuf Ali, *The Holy Qur’an*, Dar al Arabia, Beirut 1968, p. 149, note 430.

<sup>13</sup> The numbers in parentheses refer to the numeration introduced by the author of this article in the Italian text. For a fuller analysis see F. Körner, “Human Fraternity. A Reflection on the Abu Dhabi Document”, in *La Civiltà Cattolica*, English Edition, 3/7 (2019) 1-15.

The document then underlines the importance of the family, of education, the primacy of belief in God, recognizing God as the source of the gift of life. Deviation from religious teachings and the manipulation of religions lead to violence and war. Accordingly a strong appeal is made “to stop using religions to incite hatred, violence, extremism and blind fanaticism, and to refrain from using the name of God to justify acts of murder, exile, terrorism and oppression” (21).

The authors note that the document accords with previous International Documents (22). They express their “firm conviction” that “authentic teaching of religions invites us to remain rooted in the values of peace” (23). “Freedom of belief, thought, expression and action” is upheld. Recognition is given to pluralism and diversity as “willed by God in His wisdom” (24). “Justice based on mercy” is advocated. Dialogue, both cultural and religious, is encouraged. The protection of places of worship is considered a duty. Terrorism is roundly condemned, including support for terrorist movements (29). Full citizenship is called for, as also good relations between East and West. There follow calls to respect the rights of women, children, the elderly and the weak.

Finally the authors pledge their efforts to make this document known so that it may become an object of study at all levels of education and thus influence new generations (36).

#### *Comments on the text of the document*

The first remark to be made is that there would seem to be no information on the original language or languages of this document. It can be presumed that, for Al-Azhar, Arabic was a basic working language. From the side of the Catholic Church, however, there could be several possibilities: Spanish, which is the mother tongue of Pope Francis, and also of Monsignor (now Cardinal) Miguel Ángel Ayuso Guixot, President of the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue, who has had many meetings with Ahmad al-Tayyeb, the Grand Imam of Al-Azhar and who may have been asked to work on the text; or Italian, if part of the drafting process was entrusted to Monsignor Yoannis Lahzi Gaid, whose native tongue is Arabic but who is one of the private secretaries of Pope Francis. Comments here on different expressions in the document will be based on the Arabic, Italian and English versions made available by the Holy See.

One general observation that can be made is that only the English version pays attention to the use of inclusive language. For example, where the Arabic text has *iḥwa*, and the Italian “fratelli”, the English version says “brothers and sisters”; similarly where in Arabic there is reference to *šū‘ūb* (lit. “peoples”), in Italian one finds “uomini”, but in English “men and women”; the Arabic text refer also on different occasions to *riḡāl al-dīn* which is rendered in Italian by “uomini di religione” but in English by “religious figures”.

The *Introduction* to this joint document speaks first of “faith” in the Creator as the foundation for human fraternity. This is interesting, since the document of the

Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Dominus Jesus* (2000), made a distinction between “theological faith” found among Christians and “belief” of the followers of other religions<sup>14</sup>. No reference to this distinction is made in the document on human fraternity.

In the second paragraph of the *Introduction* the reference to “sharing the joys, sorrows and problems of our contemporary world” are reminiscent of the opening words of the document of the Second Vatican Council, *Gaudium et spes*, the Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World.

The *Document* itself starts with a series of eleven invocations “In the name of...” which have a very Islamic resonance. The first: *bi-smi Llāhi l-ladī ḥalaqa l-bašar...*, “In the name of God who has created all human beings...” puts one in mind of the *basmala*. Yet it is good for Christians to remember the exhortation found in the letter of Paul to the Colossians: “never say or do anything save in the name of the Lord Jesus” (Col 3:17).

This first invocation (1) calls on the God who has created human beings “to fill the earth” (it. “per popolare la terra”) which corresponds to the Arabic *li-yu‘ammirū l-ard*. The Arabic verb used here has a definite qur’anic resonance, being found in different forms in the Qur’an over twenty times, with the meaning of “build”, “tend”, “populate”, “give long life”.

In the invocation of “innocent life” (2) there is an implicit quotation of a well-known verse of the Qur’an: “We decreed to the Children of Israel that if anyone kills a person (*nafs*) – unless in retribution for murder or spreading corruption in the land – it is as if he kills all mankind, while if anyone saves a life it is as if he saves the lives of all mankind” (Q 5:32).

In the next invocation (3), in the name of the poor and needy, the order of the persons in need is different, but this would be a mere stylistic difference. With regard to what God has enjoined, however, whereas the English version says simply “to help”, and the Italian “soccorrere”, the Arabic is slightly more developed: *bi-l-iḥsān ilay-him wa-maddi yadi l-‘awn li-l-taḥḫīf ‘an-hum*, “to do good to them and to extend a helping hand to lighten [their burdens]”. It could be noted that *iḥsān* is a very important term in Islam.

In the invocation in the name of persons who have lost their security (5) for the last cause mentioned “war” (“guerre”), the Arabic term used *tanāḥur* is perhaps stronger and more evocative since it means “to hack each other to pieces” or “intercine fighting”.

In invocation 8 which recalls the divine gift of freedom, for “creating” (“creando”) the Arabic expression *wa-faṭara-hum* has been used; this would refer back to one of the Names of God, *al-fāṭir*, which is in fact the title of sura 35 of the Qur’an.

The next invocation (9) is “in the name of justice and mercy, the foundations of prosperity and the cornerstone of faith”. “Prosperity” is rendered in Arabic by *mulk*

<sup>14</sup> Cfr. Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Dominus Jesus*, no.7.

whereas one might have expected *falāh* which occurs in the Islamic Call to Prayer and which would have rhymed with the next term used, namely *ṣalāh*, which means “goodness” or “right-living”, that is, faith lived out, rather than just simply faith.

The final invocation (11) raises questions of a different nature. Can there really be a parallel between Al-Azhar al-Sharif and the Catholic Church? The leaders of these two bodies are the joint signatories of the document, but their roles within the bodies they represent are not exactly the same. Francis, as Pope, could be said to represent all Catholics – though some Catholics might object to this – but he would surely not claim to represent all Christians. Ahmad al-Tayyeb, as Grand Imam of Al-Azhar, certainly does not represent all Muslims of the East and West. The presentation in the document seems to overlook the existence of the Shi’a and of other non-Sunni Muslims, and even among Sunni Muslims the authority of Al-Azhar is not uncontested.

Other remarks could be made on the choice of vocabulary. The values of peace, justice, goodness etc. are considered to be “anchors of salvation” (ancora di salvezza, in the singular, or as a collective noun), while the Arabic has *ṭawq nağāt*, lit. life buoy (13). There is mention of “a distancing from religious values” (14). The word used for “values” in the Arabic text is *aḥlāq* which is used more often for morals. The results of extremism, whether it be religious or nationalistic, are seen as signs of a “third world war being fought piecemeal” (‘terza guerra mondiale a pezzi’, *ḥarb ‘ālamīyya tālīta ‘alā aḡzā’*), an expression that Pope Francis has used frequently. In this context there is reference to the victims of these wars, widows and orphans; the Arabic text adds a third group, *takālā* (bereaved mothers) (16).

The next paragraph speaks of “major political crises”, *al-azamāt al-siyāsiyya al-ṭāhīna*, where the second adjective is more expressive in Arabic since it means “crushing” (17). In contrast, in the following paragraph which deals with the family, where there is a call for providing children with “solid moral formation”, this is rendered in Arabic simply by the term *bi-l-aḥkām* without any further qualification (18).

There would appear to be an important difference in the versions of paragraph 21 with regard to religions and war. Whereas the English text states “we resolutely declare that religions *must* never incite war”, the Italian and Arabic texts use the indicative: “non incitano mai alla guerra”, *lam takun abad<sup>an</sup> barīd<sup>an</sup> li-l-ḥurūb*. The document then goes on to present the role of religions in the construction of world peace. It states that there is a need “to re-establish (the Arabic is *takrīs* which could perhaps be interpreted as meaning “recognize the importance of” or “honour”) wisdom, justice and love” (the Arabic has for this last term *al-iḥsān*). There is a need also to reawaken religious awareness among “young people” (the Arabic here has two terms: *al-naš’ wa-l-ṣabāb*) (23).

Paragraph 24 upholds the right to freedom of every person, including freedom of belief (*i’tiqād*), thought (*fikr*), expression (*ta’bīr*) and action (*mumārasa*, which in fact means “practice”, “putting into action” one’s belief). This paragraph mentions also the pluralism (*ta’addadiyya*) – plurality would perhaps have been a better word to use – and the diversity (*iḥtilāf*) of religions, colour, sex, race and language as being “willed

by God in His wisdom (the questions that this affirmation raises will be treated further on).

Paragraph 27 says that “unproductive discussions” (*al-ğadal al-‘aqīm*; the adjective means sterile; useless) are to be avoided; without specifying what kinds of discussions are intended. The following paragraph is concerned with the protection of places of worship (*dūr al-‘ibāda*). These are listed in the English text as “synagogues, churches and mosques”. *Ma‘ābid* can be correctly translated “synagogues”, but it could be rendered by “temples”, as in the Italian version (*templi*), and could therefore include Hindu temples, Buddhist pagodas and Sikh gurdwaras.

Paragraph 33 is concerned with the situation of children. The English and Italian versions speak about “the protection (*tutela*) of the fundamental rights of children. In the Arabic text “protection” is not mentioned; it states simply: *inna huqūq al-atfāl al-asāsiyya...wāğib ‘alā l-usra wa-l-muğtama’*.

These few observations may be sufficient to show that although there are sight differences between the texts, sometimes to the advantage of the Arabic version, sometimes to that of the texts in English or Italian, there would not appear to be any really serious discrepancies which would cast doubt on the worth or reliability of any of the texts.

### *Further Reflections*

#### Fraternity

As has been pointed out when discussing the title of the document, there can be questions raised about the concept of universal fraternity. From the standpoint of Islam, there would seem to be qur’anic grounds for restricting brotherhood to fellow believers, in other words, to Muslims. But likewise the earlier practice of Christians was to restrict the term ‘brothers’ to those belonging to the Christian community. This is certainly true up to the time of St Augustine who addresses the Donatists as his brothers because they are fellow Christians, even if they do not wish to be treated as brothers.

The idea of fraternity in this joint document is not based on religious belonging but rather on belief in God who has created all human beings. The belonging is therefore not to one particular religion but to the human family. It is good to remember that this is the starting point of *Nostra aetate*, the Declaration of the Second Vatican Council on the Relation of the Church to non-Christian Religions. It states:

All men form but one community. This is so because all stem from the one stock which God created to people the entire earth (cfr. Acts 17:26), and also because all share in a common destiny, namely God (NA 1)<sup>15</sup>.

<sup>15</sup> Quoted following A. Flannery (ed.), *Vatican Council II. The conciliar and post-conciliar documents*, St Paul’s, Mumbai 2004, 653.

The consequence of this common belonging to the one human family is spelt out in the final section of this Declaration:

We cannot truly pray to God the Father of all if we treat any people other than in brotherly fashion, for all men are created in God's image. Man's relation to God the Father and man's relation to his fellow men are so dependent on each other that Scripture says "he who does not love does not know God" (1Jn 4:8) (NA 5).

The mention of God as Father in this text can cause difficulties for Muslims, since calling God Father is considered to be disrespectful of the divine transcendence; consequently Father is not found among the Ninety-nine Names of God. As the joint document shows, the idea of common belonging can be developed without mention of the fatherhood of God.

A contemporary Muslim theologian has emphasized that in the Qur'an different attitudes to 'the other' are displayed, sometimes friendly, at other times suspicious or even inimical. This leads to the following result: "Either treated separately and compartmentalized, or one group of verses taken to the exclusion of the other, these verses have given birth to two opposing theologies: the first perceives 'the other' – meaning here the one who professes another religion – as a rival, and the second sees the other as a sibling"<sup>16</sup>. Tabbara in fact goes back before creation to the Qur'anic idea of the 'primordial covenant' between God and humanity in which all the members of the human family have said "Yes" to God (cfr. Q 7:172)<sup>17</sup>.

From the Catholic side perhaps the clearest justification for the use of the term 'brothers' is found in a discourse of Pope John Paul II to representatives of Muslims of the Philippines, pronounced in Davao, on 20 February 1981:

Dear Brothers. It is always a pleasure for me to meet the members of the Muslim communities during my journeys, and to give them my personal greetings, and those of all their Christian brothers and sisters throughout the world.

I deliberately *address you as brothers*; that is certainly what we are, because we are members of the same human family, whose efforts, whether people realize it or not, tend towards God and the truth that comes from him. But we are especially brothers in God, who created us and whom we are trying to reach, in our own ways, through faith, prayer and worship, through the keeping of his law and through submission to his designs<sup>18</sup>.

### Plurality

Discussion has been raised by the passage of the document concerning freedom where it is stated that "The pluralism and the diversity of religions, colour, sex, race and language are willed by God in His wisdom, through which He created human beings" (24). As was remarked above, the use of the term 'plurality' (*ta'addud*) rather

<sup>16</sup> Layla Tabbara, in F. Daou and N. Tabbara, *Divine Hospitality. A Christian-Muslim Conversation* (English translation by Alan J. Amos), World Council of Churches, Geneva 2017, 19.

<sup>17</sup> Cfr. *Ibid.*, 20-24.

<sup>18</sup> Cfr. F. Gioia (ed.), *Interreligious Dialogue. The Official Teaching of the Catholic Church from the Second Vatican Council to John Paul II (1963-2005)*, Pauline Books & Media, Boston 2006, no. 363.

than ‘pluralism’ (*ta‘addudiyya*) as in the text, would perhaps not have caused controversy. That there exists plurality *de facto* is evident; what is questioned is whether this plurality is to be considered *de jure*, in other words as directly willed by God.

From the Islamic point of view there would hardly be any objection. The Qur’an teaches that God has observed diversity in creating:

Another of His signs is the creation of the heavens and earth, and the diversity of your languages and colours. There truly are signs in this for those who know (Q 30:22).

There is a purpose in this diversity:

People, We created you all from a single man and a single woman, and made you into races and tribes so that you should get to know one another (Q 49:13).

It could be said that the “living together” promoted by the joint document supposes the effort to acquire mutual knowledge and facilitate mutual cooperation. This is further emphasized by another passage from the Qur’an which speaks explicitly about the will of God:

If God had so willed, He would have made you one community, but he wanted to test you through that which He has given you, so race to do good: you will all return to God and He will make clear to you the matters you differed about (Q 5:48).

What justification for accepting pluralism can be given from the Catholic side? *Lumen gentium*, the Second Vatican Council’s Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, states clear that “the plan of salvation also includes those who acknowledge the Creator, in the first place amongst whom are the Muslims” (LG 16). This plan of salvation is surely willed by God. Therefore, as *Nostra aetate* says, “The Catholic Church rejects nothing of what is true and holy in these religions” (NA 2). These religious elements come from God for, as John Paul II has pointed out: “the Spirit brings [them] about in human hearts and in the history of peoples, cultures and religions” (*Redemptoris missio* 19). Consequently, the document of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Dominus Jesus*, published in 2000, while it states firmly that “the universal salvific will of the One and Triune God is offered and accomplished once for all in the mystery of the incarnation, death and resurrection of the Son of God” (DJ 14), at the same time gives the following encouragement to theologians:

Theology today, in its reflection on the existence of other religious experiences and on their meaning in God’s salvific plan, is invited to explore if and in what way the historical figures and positive elements of these religions may fall within the divine plan of salvation (*ibid.*).

### Dialogue

In considering dialogue, the joint document proposes that “unproductive discussions” should be avoided (27). As remarked already, no precision is given regarding which sort of discussions are intended. Some may conclude that theological dialogue is being referred to. I have heard a Catholic bishop stating in a public gathering that theological dialogue with Muslims is impossible. That statement was

surely based on a misunderstanding of the aim of such theological dialogue. It cannot be to produce joint statements of belief. Nevertheless, if such dialogue is carried out with a willingness to listen and respect the other's opinion, exploring differences can be very useful for eliminating misconceptions. If one's only intention is to score points and to try to prove that the other person is wrong, then of course the discussion becomes truly unproductive. Since the joint document takes God as Creator for its starting point, could it not be said that the "fraternal and open discussions" (*Introduction*) which preceded the drafting of the text were at least to some extent theological? They have certainly not been unproductive.

#### RÉSUMÉ

Cet article propose principalement de faire trois choses : premièrement, réfléchir sur le titre du document signé par le pape François et le Dr Ahmad al-Tayyeb ; deuxièmement, présenter le contenu de ce document ; et puis, comparer le texte arabe avec les versions en anglais et en italien. A la fin quelques réflexions sur le contenu seront offertes.

