

The Basis for a Hindu-Muslim Dialogue and Steps in that Direction from a Muslim Perspective

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In *Muslims in Dialogue: The Evolution of a Dialogue*, L. Swidler, ed, The Edwin Mellen Press, Lewiston, NY, pp. 262-276, 1992.

Available at <http://global-dialogue.com/swidlerbooks/muslim.htm>

Hindus and Muslims have lived together in the subcontinent of India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh for over 1,000 years. During this time many kinds of conflict-for example, historical/political, socioeconomic, cultural, theological, philosophical, psychological, and personal-have existed between these two religious communities. There have also been periods of violence when members of one community (generally the majority community) have perpetrated acts of aggression upon members of the other (generally the minority community). Sometimes these acts of aggression have been brutal to the extent of being barbarous, and sometimes their magnitude is shocking, as was the case when-in the bitter aftermath of the partition of the subcontinent into India and Pakistan in August, 1947-a bloodbath took place in which tens of thousands of human beings (Hindus, Muslims, Sikhs, Christians, and others) were massacred. The nature and number of communal (particularly Hindu-Muslim) riots¹ which have taken place in post-partition India are undoubtedly causes of serious concern to those who would like to see the peoples of this ancient land live together in peace. The troubled history of Hindu-Muslim relations in this area is, thus, clearly recognized at the outset of this essay. I do not attempt to negate or mitigate the fact that, in a number of ways, Hindus and Muslims are, and have always been, antagonistic to each other's realities as well as aspirations-and that this leads at times to all kinds of negative consequences, including physical violence.

The perspective from which this essay is written, however, while acknowledging the problems of Hindu-Muslim relations in Pakistan, Bangladesh, and (chiefly) India, focuses on the possibilities of Hindu-Muslim dialogue in this region. This perspective is grounded in my belief that, despite all the problems that Hindus and Muslims have had vis-à-vis one another through the centuries, they have been able in their millennium of coexistence in one geographical area to develop and maintain a pluralistic society which is as genuine as may be found anywhere in the world.

Since human beings are imperfect, any human society they create is imperfect. No pluralistic society in the world is free from a sense of dis-ease or tension, but this state of dis-ease or tension is not necessarily an evil. In fact, very often it is a blessing since it militates against a society's becoming stagnant and apathetic. Pluralism is good precisely because it embodies points of view which are not identical or even harmonious and thus cannot lead to a totalitarianism in which human differences are not tolerated and all human beings are subjected to the supreme oppression of having to conform to uniformity imposed from without. It is the effort to evolve a pattern of "the good life" within the framework of differing perspectives and values which makes pluralistic societies creative and dynamic.

As most Americans have heard, "There is no such thing as a free lunch." There is a price to be paid for pluralism, just as there is a price to be paid for democracy. Hindus and Muslims in the subcontinent have paid, and are paying (especially Muslims in India²), the price for pluralism, but -given the state of the world in which we all live-I believe that their experience of coexistence represents a significant achievement. The spirit of this experience is reflected in what may be called "a dialogue of life," which has been going on for centuries between Hindus and Muslims of the subcontinent. Such a dialogue was, and is, unavoidable and inevitable, given the fact that Hindus and Muslims have inhabited the same physical and cultural world since the tenth century.

The dialogue of life which emerges out of the processes of life is not a contrived matter. It arises “naturally” as it were from the interaction, positive and negative, obvious and subtle, verbal and nonverbal, between various peoples or persons. This dialogue is not the sort of dialogue we talk about in academic meetings because this dialogue proceeds not in accordance with rationally debated, mutually agreed-upon criteria or guidelines for dialogue but in accordance with the existential needs of those who generate this dialogue. However, to ignore either the reality or the importance of this dialogue of life in any discussion of Hindu-Muslim dialogue in the subcontinent is to cheat oneself of what is perhaps the most valuable resource available to those of us who are committed to bringing about better understanding and relations between the two major religious communities of this ancient and vast civilization. In today’s world many theologians realize the need for making “theology from above” coalesce with “theology from below.” Likewise, there is a great need today to make “dialogue from above” coalesce with “dialogue from below.” While it is true that the reflections and discussions of scholars produce ideas and schemata which play an important, perhaps even a crucial, role in molding the ideas and attitudes of the common people, it is even more true that grass-roots dialogue is what has the greatest impact on pragmatic reality.

While we must never permit ourselves to forget the violations of human rights which occur in and between India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh and seek constantly to strive for justice on behalf of all those who are discriminated against by the political and cultural systems prevailing in these countries, we must also seek to remember that for a millennium Hindus and Muslims have not only been neighbors in one physical region but have also had to face the same kinds of problems: the curse of massive illiteracy, poverty, and superstition; the burden of an ever-increasing population pressure in an area where tremendous inequities exist in terms of distribution of power and wealth; the difficulties of survival in societies run by incredibly corrupt persons-to mention just a few of the many problems which confront the common Hindu and Muslim living in the subcontinent. Facing common problems creates a strong bond between human beings regardless of caste, creed, or color. Anyone who has lived in the subcontinent understands what is meant by the first whole truth of Buddhism-that life is *dukkha* (suffering)-and this truth which is learned experientially by the teeming masses of Indians, Pakistanis, and Bangladeshis militates against self-centered isolationism or selfish indifferences toward the plight of others. Suffering may not always lead to wisdom or compassion, but wisdom and compassion are seldom found in those who have not suffered. It is my belief that the people of my subcontinent-Hindus, Muslims, and others-possess much wisdom and compassion and that this is born of their suffering.

It is perhaps an irony or a paradox that those who are able to suffer deeply are also able to rejoice deeply. In few places in the world have I experienced the deep sense of joy I have felt in the homes of the people of my subcontinent. It is hard to describe to those who do not belong to this world what human relations mean to people of this world-Hindus, Muslims, and others. In this world, human relations are cherished far above material things, and the joy which a person feels in having or in being a mother, father, brother, sister, spouse, child, relative, or friend to another radiates through all the vicissitudes of fortune. In their attitude to family and friends, Hindus, Muslims, Sikhs, Christians, and other peoples living in the subcontinent are amazingly similar. They are also very similar in believing that people should meet and greet each other with courtesy and respect, especially when they address someone older in age, and in considering hospitality to others a very important value and virtue.

Aside from these similarities which provide the basis for a dialogue of life between Hindus and Muslims (and others) in the subcontinent, there are also other cultural bonds. One of the most important of these is the bond of common language. Hindus, Muslims, and Sikhs who speak Punjabi, for instance, gravitate toward each other. I have met Hindus and Sikhs living in the Western world who become tearful when they hear that I come from Lahore, a city loved by all the Punjabis, even as Delhi is loved by all those who speak Urdu. How important language is to a people is illustrated dramatically in the case of the alienation of the people of what was formerly East Pakistan from the state of Pakistan. This process of alienation began in the early 1950's. Bengali was not given the status of Urdu, which was declared to be the one national language even though the Bengalis constituted the majority of the people of Pakistan. The insensitivity

shown by the federal government of Pakistan to the East Pakistanis' sentiment regarding Bengali did not diminish with time and continued to exacerbate the problems existing between the two wings of the country.

Here it would not be inappropriate to refer to the supreme irony embodied in the secession of East Pakistan from Pakistan, a country which had been created so that Muslims could live together according to the Islamic Shari'a. Critics of the creation of Pakistan had always upheld that religion could not be made the basis of statehood. For instance, Maulana Abu'l Kalam Azad, an outstanding Muslim who became a disciple of Mahatma Gandhi, said in his autobiography:

It is one of the greatest frauds on the people to suggest that religious affinity can unite areas which are geographically, economically, linguistically, and culturally different. It is true that Islam sought to establish a society which transcends racial, linguistic, economic, and political frontiers. History has, however, proved that after the first few decades, or at most after the first century, Islam was not able to unite all Muslim countries into one state on the basis of Islam alone.³

Having watched the course of events preceding the 1971 civil war from which East Pakistan emerged as Bangladesh from very close quarters as a senior officer in the Federal Ministry of Information in Pakistan, I am convinced both that East Pakistan would not have seceded from Pakistan if a political instead of a military solution had been attempted, and that the loss of East Pakistan represents not so much an inability on the part of Islam to hold together two physically noncontiguous and culturally diverse regions as it does the failure of the Pakistan government to uphold Islamic principles of justice in the country as a whole.

The creation of Bangladesh did not represent a rejection of Islam as a way of life, as the majority of the people of Bangladesh continue to be devoutly Muslim, nor did it represent a well-considered rejection of Pakistan as a state as is shown by the tragic fact that today there are tens of thousands of Bengalis from Bangladesh who are working in Pakistan, having acquired forged papers making them citizens of Pakistan. At the same time, it must be pointed out that cultural bonds can and do at times transcend religious convictions. During the pre-war period, for instance, the East Pakistanis revolted violently when the government of Pakistan prevented Radio Pakistan, Dacca, from broadcasting the writings of Rabindranath Tagore since he was a Hindu. It is sad but not surprising that the culturally illiterate government of Pakistan should have failed to appreciate the universalism of Tagore since it is unable, to this day, to appreciate the universalism of Iqbal and insists jingoistically on making him exclusively the poet-philosopher of Pakistan.

Moving beyond the Hindu-Muslim dialogue of life, which is rooted in a common culture, I would like to refer to another extremely important realm of life in which the Hindu-Muslim dialogue has existed since the advent of the first Sufis into India: this is the realm of spirituality. All students of this area know how deep the spiritual quest of the children of this soil has been since the worldliness of the Vedic Aryans was superseded by the otherworldliness of the Upanishadic way of life and vision as well as the teachings of Buddhism, Jainism, and other ascetic sects. The Muslim mystics who came to India found the ground prepared for their work. Their passionate proclaiming of the existence of a loving, forgiving, saving God with whom a personal relationship could be established through single-minded devotion touched many hearts. It was Muslim Sufis, not Muslim soldiers, who converted masses of Hindus to Islam. Such conversions ought to have pleased the custodians of the Islamic Shari'a and Muslim rulers in India, but they did not. To holders of both secular and religious power in Islam, the Sufis have, since the early centuries of Islam, appeared as a great threat since they acknowledge the authority and sovereignty of no one but God and also because their devotion to God does not always exhibit itself in prescribed ways. For instance, knowing how important music was to the worshipful people of India, many Sufis adopted music in their worship—a practice frowned upon by the so-called "Shari'a-minded" Muslims. Regardless, however, of the attitudes of the Islamic establishment toward them, the mystics of Islam developed a spiritual bond with masses of Hindus, both those who converted to Islam and those who did not. The influence of Islamic mysticism on the Hindu bhakti movement

and of Hindu mysticism on Muslim spirituality is well known, and it is noteworthy to mention here that Iqbal was very proud of being “a Brahmin’s son” who represented a synthesis of Hindu and Muslim spiritual insight.⁴

Many messianic ideas are also common to Hindus, Muslims, and the other peoples of the subcontinent, and veneration is shown generally to all “saints” irrespective of their religious origin. Muslim scholars such as Fazlur Rahman deplore the appearance of messianism in Islam and attribute it to foreign influences, but I believe that there were also substantial reasons and forces within the Islamic tradition which contributed to it and that, although the Qur’an does not provide explicit support for it, it nevertheless has important spiritual, psychological, and emotional value for the masses of Muslims and constitutes a bond with other people who share their messianic hopes and ideas across the barriers of differing religious ideologies.⁵ I have heard of Hindus visiting Muslim shrines, and I used to know Bengali Muslims who kept icons of the goddess Kali in their homes as protection against the evil eye. These Muslims were not idolatrous, since they did not deify Kali but regarded her as a savior-or intercessor-figure to whom they could address their fears and aspirations in much the same way that they would to Sufi saints.

Besides the dialogue of life and dialogue at the level of spirituality and the interchange of ideas and practices related to messianic beliefs, Hindus and Muslims in the subcontinent have also had a continuing dialogue on the basis of their common intellectual-aesthetic heritage. Literature, music, and philosophy are but a few areas in which Hindus and Muslims have much in common. There are many Hindus who love Iqbal, just as there are many Muslims who love Tagore. I remember how deeply touched I was several years ago when as a doctoral student working on Iqbal’s philosophy I asked Mulk Raj Anand, a noted Indian novelist and scholar, about his feelings toward Iqbal, and he told me that one of his life’s deepest desires was to visit Lahore and pay homage at the tomb of Iqbal, who had been his mentor at one time and whom he loved deeply despite the alienation brought about between Hindus and Muslims by the Muslim separatist movement in India. A year later, Mulk Raj Anand wrote to me telling me that he was happy in that he had indeed been able to fulfill his desire and pay his respects at Iqbal’s mausoleum.

Having mentioned the areas in which I believe a dialogue already exists between Hindus and Muslims in the subcontinent, let me refer now to two areas in which there is either no, or minimal, dialogue between Hindus and Muslims living in India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh. The first is that of dialogue relating to historical/political issues; the second, dialogue relating to theological issues.

The first area is exceedingly difficult for a number of reasons, including the basic one that dialogue presupposes that a peer relationship or a relationship of equality exists between the dialogue partners. Dialogue of certain kinds cannot take place between obviously unequal people. That is why dialogue seldom takes place between masters and slaves and between men and women. In India, Muslims are not equal to Hindus; in Pakistan and Bangladesh, Hindus are not equal to Muslims in many ways. In the matter of writing history, particularly of the last 1,000 years, the historians of the subcontinent encounter serious difficulties. There is great pressure on Hindu historians to write history from the Hindu and the Indian nationalist point of view and on Muslim historians to write history from the Muslim and the Pakistani and Bangladeshi nationalist points of view.⁶ Both viewpoints are obviously limited and biased. There is imperative need for writing a history which is comprehensive and just, which shows the mirror to Hindus and Muslims alike. Confronting our mutual history can sometimes be as painful as confronting our personal history if this history is a checkered one, but it is necessary to do so in order to be free of the shadows of the past. Knowing what we did or did not do does not alter the history of the past, but this knowledge-if accepted with courage and honesty-can lead to a different kind of future. It is one of the prime tasks of those interested in promoting Hindu-Muslim dialogue in the area of historical-political discussion to emphasize the need for an accurate chronicling of all the facts which led to the alienation of Hindus and Muslims in the pre- and post-partition periods and leads, every now and then, to violence and the violation of the rights of weaker people.

Included in this "objective" history must be the role played in Hindu-Muslim relations by the British imperialists who left India in great haste once they accepted the fact that the golden days of the British Raj were over. So many problems-political, geographical, economic, cultural, and psychological-were the legacy of this Raj to the people of India: Hindus, Muslims, Sikhs, and others. Although almost four decades have gone by since the departure of the British from their most prized imperial possession, people of the subcontinent are still discovering how variegated, widespread, and vicious the results of the British colonial policy of "Divide and Rule" have been. One very important part of any endeavor to establish better relations among the peoples of the subcontinent must be a thorough review of the British role in India, so that the responsibility for the atrocities which were committed against the various victims under the different phases of this rule-particularly the momentous upheaval of the pre- and post-partition period-can be correctly allocated.

As a Muslim and a person committed to dialogue, I do not believe in carrying the baggage of recrimination and bitterness from one life-period to another, but I do believe very strongly that peace is predicated upon justice, and a just evaluation of the past is necessary for establishing peace in the present and the future. Criticism of the British conduct in India does not, of course, mean that the British should be made scapegoats for all the problems which arose among the major religious communities in India. There are undoubtedly a number of problems which preexisted the coming of the British and are related to fundamental differences among these communities.

Without honest and deep self-probing and self-criticism, authentic dialogue with oneself or another is impossible. Hence it is necessary for all the peoples of the subcontinent to look into their own traditions and into their own hearts and minds and souls to discover the sources of these negative feelings and thoughts toward the "other" that periodically erupt in destructive modes of conduct. As stated by a philosopher, those who do not know their history are condemned to repeat it. We who come from a civilization which is not only one of the oldest in the world but also one of the most complex and reflective must understand our history if our future is to be better than our past, but this understanding of history must be comprehensive, not selective. We have to look not only at those periods or events in history which prove our particular bias but also at all the good and the bad together, and to take responsibility, both as individuals and as communities, for our own contribution to the difficulties which exist in our part of the world. However, we must not acknowledge guilt for that for which we are not responsible. The world, it is said, consists of givers and takers. It also appears to consist of persons who acknowledge guilt for everything and those who acknowledge guilt for nothing. Neither attitude is correct from the perspective of Islam, for neither conforms to the idea of justice. A just evaluation of our past requires that the specifics of history be examined closely and that responsibility be allocated for significant events, negative or positive, after proper consideration of all available evidence. And even that is not enough. It is not enough to hold any group-Hindus, Muslims, British, or any other-responsible for any particular event without specifying also which person or persons within the group were involved and what other circumstances (such as the time period) surrounded the event. We distort history by simplifying it. An extremely good example of this is provided by the way in which American television gives world news, particularly in situations (for example, the U.S. hostage crisis in post-revolutionary Iran) in which Americans are involved, directly or indirectly.

Authentic dialogue is not based on abbreviations, even as it is not based on hairsplitting elaborations of known facts. It is based on a clear and careful understanding of what we call "facts" seen in their historical context. Once we are able to identify the sources of a conflict correctly, it becomes possible to transcend the conflict-to forget and forgive, as it were-but as long as we continue to evade a just evaluation, we are trapped in a process of scapegoating either ourselves or others. This, in Qur'anic terminology, is "Zulm," and God tells us not to be "zalimin."

While speaking of history, perhaps a few words are in order about the way in which Muslims and Hindus view it philosophically. According to Kana Mitra, for Muslims, “the universal ideal needs to be concretized in society and in history,” whereas, for Hindus, “the concrete is a stepping stone to the universal ideal but the universal can never be fully concretized in history.”² While her first statement is correct, Muslims would have no difficulty in also affirming her second statement. Like Hindus, Muslims also do not believe that the universal or the transcendent can ever be fully embodied in a material entity. If they believed otherwise, they would be guilty of deifying history as the Marxists are. Here, the following quotation from W. C. Smith’s *Islam in Modern History* is relevant:

Not that Islam ... even in its most legalist form, ever became fully idolatrous. Attention was never *confined* to the this-worldly manifestation of value. For the Muslims, involvement in history, though absorbing, is at the most only the obverse of their coin, the reverse of which, polished, brilliant, and pure gold, is in the other world. Islam begins with God, and to Him it well knows we shall return. Its endeavor to redeem history, though total, is derived; it is an endeavor to integrate temporal righteousness in this world with a timeless salvation in the next.⁸

Finally, we come to the area of theological dialogue between Hindus and Muslims in the subcontinent. This is, in a way, the most difficult or problematic of all the areas discussed so far. In view of the fact that I have virtually no personal experience of participating in a Hindu-Muslim theological dialogue, I am hesitant to theorize regarding the methodology to be employed in such dialogue. What I can offer are some reflections and suggestions which might be useful to those who believe, as I do, that theological dialogue between Hindus and Muslims is urgently required in order to eliminate the gross ignorance regarding the “other” which leads to unjust behavior in times of peace and to gross brutality in times of stress.

Any Hindu-Muslim dialogue on theological issues must be carried out against the backdrop of the fact that Muslims entered the subcontinent as conquerors and that it was natural for Hindus to identify the religion of the conquering people as an embodiment of imperialism and militaristic power. The scope of this essay excludes the possibility of exploring the conduct of various Muslim rulers in India in general to determine if and to what degree Hindu allegations regarding Muslim aggression toward non-Muslims in this area are warranted by history. Such questions, of course, need to be asked and must be answered in the context of the political/historical dialogue mentioned earlier. However, in the context of theological dialogue it is more pertinent to look at questions or issues which effect the way in which Hindus and Muslims perceive each other’s religious traditions and the impact which such perceptions have on their daily lives.

There is no question at all that the overwhelming majority of the Muslims in the world, if they have heard of Hinduism at all, think of Hindus as idol-worshippers. In a religious tradition as strictly monotheistic as Islam, where even in the realm of art no human representation is permitted, the making and revering of icons is bound to be regarded as “*shirk*” or association of anything with the One and Only God of humanity and all creation. Not only do most Muslims see Hindus as “*mushrikin*,” but they also see them as “*kuffar*” or disbelievers in the one creator God of Jews, Christians, and Muslims. In view of this belief, most Muslims consider interreligious dialogue with Hindus to be an exercise not only in futility but also in sinfulness, since believers ought not to take unbelievers for friends, and dialogue is a friendly encounter which should take place only between or among believers.

At this point it is pertinent to mention that, historically, Muslims have had little or no interest in interreligious dialogue even with other believers in God, including the “*Ahl-al kitab*” (“People of the Book”-Jews and Christians) with whom they have strong theological and historical links. A partial explanation of this attitude may also be found in A. Toynbee’s statement⁹ that all three religions of revelation which sprang from a common historical root-Judaism, Christianity, and Islam-have a tendency not only toward exclusivism and intolerance but also tend to ascribe to themselves an ultimate validity. Muslims, who consider themselves the recipients of the final revelation, have, in general, taken the truth of Islam to be self-evident and have not expressed any great interest in

having an open-ended philosophical and theological dialogue with people of other faiths, except” perhaps in places where they have formed a minority component in a pluralistic environment. Also, the fact that until colonial times it was relatively easy for Muslims to assume the superiority of Islam to all other religions is, at least in part, responsible for their unwillingness to probe deeply into the question of the nature and implications of their Islamic identity.

One means of persuading at least some Muslims to participate in a theological dialogue with Hindus is to point out to them that such dialogue is called for by the spirit of many statements in the Qur’an.¹⁰ For instance, the Qur’an refers to the fact that God not only created and honored the humanity of all human beings (Surah 17: *Bani Isra’il*: 70) but also intended Muslims to communicate the message of Islam to all. That the Qur’an is addressed to all is stated many times in the Qur’an; for example:

Blessed is He Who
Sent down the Criterion (Qur’an)
To His Servant, that it
May be an admonition
To all creatures
(Surah 25: *Al-Furqan*: 1)

This is no less than
A Message and a Qur’an
Making things clear:
That it may give admonition
To any (who are) alive,
And that the charge
May be proved against those
Who reject (Truth).
(Surah 36: *Ya-Sin*: 69-70)

This is no less than
A Message to *(all)*
The Worlds.
(Surah 38: *Sad*: 87)

Verily this is no less
Than a Message
To (all) the Worlds:

(With profit) *to whoever*
Among you wills
To go straight.
(Surah 81: *At-Takwir*: 27-28)

The universal mission of the Prophet of Islam is also affirmed by the Qur’an; for example:

We have not sent thee
But as a universal (Messenger)
To men, giving them
Glad tidings, and warning them
(Against sin), but most men
Understand not.
(Surah 34: *Saba’*: 28)

There are a number of verses in the Qur’an which refer to God’s mercy and justice toward all creatures; for example:

And God careth for *all*
And He knoweth all things.
(Surah 2: *Al-Baqarah*: 268)

Unto *all* (in Faith)
Hath God promised good.
(Surah 4: *An-Nisa'*: 95)

That plurality of religions is sanctioned by God and is, in fact, a part of God's design for humanity is attested by the Qur'an; for example:

To each is a goal
To which God turns him;
Then strive together (as in a race)
Towards all that is good
Wheresoever ye are,
God will bring you
Together. For God
Hath power over all things.
(Surah 2: *Al-Baqarah*: 148)

If it had been God's Plan
They would not have taken
False gods: but We
Made thee not one
To watch over their doings,
Nor art thou set
Over them to dispose
Of their affairs.
(Surah 6: *Al-An'am*: 107)

If it had been thy Lord's will
They would have all believed,
All who are on earth!
Will thou then compel mankind,
Against their will, to believe!
(Surah 10: *Yunus*: 99)

That there is to be no coercion in religion and that the Prophet's mission is simply to communicate the message of Islam is stressed by the Qur'an in many ways; for example:

Let there be no compulsion
In religion.
(Surah 2: *Al-Baqarah*: 256)

But if they turn away,
Thy duty is only to preach
The clear message.
(Surah 16: *An-Nahl*: 82)

The Truth is
From your Lord:
Let him who will
Believe, and let him
Who will, reject (it).

(Surah 18: *Al-Kahf*: 29)

If then they turn away,
We have not sent thee
As a guard over them.
Their duty is but to convey
(The Message).

(Surah 42: *Ash-Shura*: 48)

That the Qur'an advocates gracious conduct and religious tolerance as a lifeattitude is clearly seen from the following verses:

When a (courteous) greeting
Is offered you, meet it
With greeting still more
Courteous, or (at least)
Of equal courtesy,
God takes careful account
Of all things.

(Surah 5: *Al-Ma'idah*: 86)

Reville not ye
Those whom they call upon
Besides God, lest
They out of spite
Reville God
In their ignorance.
Thus have We made
Alluring to each people
Its own doings.
In the end will they
Return to their Lord,
And We shall then
Tell them the truth
Of all that they did.

(Surah 6: *Al-An'am*: 108)

...If the enemy
Incline towards peace,
Do thou (also) incline

Towards peace, and trust
In God: for He is the One
That heareth and knoweth
(All things).

(Surah 8: *Al-Anfal*: 61)

If one amongst the Pagans
Ask thee for asylum,
Grant it to him,
So that he may hear the word
Of God; and then exort him
To where he can be secure.

(Surah 9: *At-Taubah*: 6)

That God's message has been intended, from the beginning, for the guidance of all humanity is shown by the verse:

The first House (of worship)
Appointed for men
Was that at Bakka:
Full of blessing
And of guidance
For all kinds of being. (*alamin*)

(Surah 3: *Al-'Imran*: 96)

And, further, the Qur'an holds the promise:

One day we shall raise
From all peoples a witness...
(Surah 16: *An-Nahl*: 89)

The first problem to be confronted by anyone interested in bringing about a Hindu-Muslim theological dialogue would be to motivate both sides to enter into such dialogue with openness and seriousness. To have such a dialogue in a Western setting where dialogues are in fashion nowadays is one thing; to have it in India, Pakistan, or Bangladesh is quite another, and to bring it -about would require much talent and commitment. If Hindus and Muslims could be persuaded in the interest of truth-seeking or peace-making to engage in a theological dialogue, the major task would be to determine what should be the beginning point of this dialogue.

My experience of Muslim-Christian-Jewish dialogue has convinced me that it is disastrous to begin any dialogue with a discussion on the concept of God, which many theologians assume to be the natural starting point of any theological dialogue in the framework of monotheistic religious tradition. I have never seen any dialogue which begins with a discussion of the Jewish, Christian, or Muslim concepts of God get past the point of hair-splitting definitions and disagreements, leaving the dialogue partners flabbergasted and wondering whether they are indeed talking about the believers in the same God. Any theological dialogue between Hindus and Muslims which begins with a discussion of the concept of God is even more likely to be doomed to disaster. I do not see any way in which the great majority of Muslims can be persuaded to appreciate the 330,000,000 gods of Hinduism, even if they are told that these gods are not ends-in-themselves but merely symbols of ultimate reality. Iqbal is certainly an exceptional Muslim in that he has the courage to say:

The "kafir" with a wakeful heart praying to an idol is better
than a "believer" asleep in a sanctuary.¹¹

Such is the absoluteness and starkness of Islamic monotheism that any reference to images of God or incarnations of God turns Muslims off so deeply that most of them feel compelled, theologically as well as personally, to abandon the dialogue. Most of the theological problems which Muslims have had with Christians have also revolved around the issue of Jesus' being the incarnation of God. However, the case of Christianity is different from that of Hinduism in that it preserves the Creator-God of Genesis and thus, from the Islamic point of view, does not lapse into total idolatry.

In my view, in order to eliminate the Muslims' stereotype of Hindus as idol-worshippers, it is better to begin by looking not at Hindu concepts of God but at Hindu experiences of God, particularly at those experiences which Muslims can empathize with. It would, for instance, be very difficult for a God-loving Muslim not to be deeply touched by Tagore's *Gitanjali: Gift Offering of Songs of God*. Some Muslims may feel a little uneasy at the human imagery used by the Hindu poet to depict the divine, but, then, Islamic mystic literature also abounds with such imagery, and the Qur'an

itself uses anthropomorphic images for God (“I made a human being with both my hands” [Surah 36: *Sad*: 72]).

Some people-theologians and others-think that theological dialogue does, or should, lead to theological agreement. This, in my judgment, is an erroneous point of view. For instance, no amount of theological dialogue between Hindus and Muslims can lead to the reduction of the monistic principle upheld by many Hindus to the monotheistic belief held by all Muslims, and vice versa. But why should the achieving of theological agreement be so necessary? Why should it not be sufficient for Hindus and Muslims to understand correctly what the religious experience of each is without trying to merge them together? Like many other Muslims, I also believe that there are some Hindus who, in fact, do identify idols with Brahman and, thus, are idolators. But I also believe that there are some Muslims who identify the Word or Law of God with God and, thus, are idolatrous. Whatever be the religious experience of some Hindus or some Muslims, and whether we approve of it or not, I think that it is important to remember in the context of Hindu-Muslim theological dialogue that the two religious worldviews have some extremely important things in common.

To begin with: both Hinduism and Islam conceive of ultimate reality as spiritual, thus making the believer aware of that which is beyond the here-and-now, the eternal and transcendent, which gives human life a purposefulness it would not have if reality were confined to the material. Both Hinduism and Islam insist that all aspects of life are related and must be integrated in order to achieve wholeness, which is the goal of Hindu *yoga* and Muslim *salat*. Neither Hinduism nor Islam permits the bifurcation of life into mutually exclusive domains: the secular and the sacred, the public and the private, the inner and the outer. Again, both Hinduism and Islam hold that knowledge of external and internal reality is to be obtained not only through reason but through all other human faculties as well, with particular emphasis on “the heart,” which the mystics regard as the seat of “intuition.” People of the Western world-founded as it is upon the Graeco-Roman civilization which upheld reason as the highest human faculty through which alone one could obtain knowledge of ultimate reality-rarely understand what “the heart” or “intuitive faculty” is, but it is due primarily to this faculty that Hindus and Muslims have evolved what are perhaps the two greatest mystic traditions in the history of civilization.

Finally, both Hinduism and Islam have put unequivocal emphasis on the idea that human beings are accountable for their actions and that ethical action is the goal of religious striving. In both there is great emphasis on duty-fulfillment and on the idea that duty to God is inseparable from duty to fellow human beings.

Having pointed out some of the common perspectives on which a Hindu-Muslim theological dialogue can be based, I consider it necessary to point out also that, as a matter of fact, much assimilation of religious/cultural ideas and attitudes has occurred in the Hindu-Muslim world. Both Hindus and Muslims might wish to stress their distinct identities and insist that Hinduism and Islam are utterly different ways of life, but the plain historical reality is that Indian Islam bears the clear imprint of Hinduism, and Hinduism has absorbed much that is clearly Islamic in origin. For instance, while many Hindus have been deeply affected by Islamic monotheism,¹² many Muslims follow a caste system as strictly as the Hindus and take great pride in being “high-caste” (which generally means being descended from the Prophet Muhammad or his blood relatives), even if they are so only by virtue of their descent from high-caste Hindus!

Before I conclude my comments on the various kinds of Hindu-, Muslim dialogue which exist, or ought to exist, in the subcontinent, would like to mention something very close to my heart: the need for a dialogue between Hindu and Muslim women. As a Muslim feminist, I have been deeply concerned for a long time about some negative ideas/attitudes/customs relating to women which are found widely among Muslims of the subcontinent. Some of these practices (for example, demanding the dowry or bride-price for girls at marriage) and concepts (for example, the husband is the wife’s “*majazi khuda*” or god in earthly form) are clearly un-Islamic. In fact, the “deification” of the husband is tantamount to *shirk* (association with God) and, thus, an unforgivable sin.

However, they have become so deeply rooted in Muslim culture that their association with, or derivation from, Hindu culture has long been forgotten, and they are regarded by many Muslims to be part of the Islamic "Shari'a." While there are woman-affirming resources within both Islam and Hinduism, these have not been used for the liberation of women from the misogynistic/androcentric and rigid patriarchalism of these two religious traditions. In this era of women's freedom from age-old shackles, Hindu and Muslim women continue to be among the most oppressed "minorities" in the world. They need to dialogue with each other not only to understand their common bondage and servitude and to give each other emotional and psychological support, but also to strive together to evolve academic and sociopolitical ways and means or methods and strategies to change the religiocultural world in which they live and die unsung. In this context, my plea to Hindu and Muslim (as well as all other "disinherited" women of the world) is (with due apologies to Marx): "Women of the world unite; you have nothing to lose but your chains!"

In conclusion, I want simply to say that, as a person belonging to what the Qur'an describes as "a nation in the middle,"¹³ I feel that I stand midway between my religious world which is Judaeo-Christian-Islamic (West) and my cultural world which is Hindu-Islamic (East). I have spent more than half my life in the West, which has molded my mind, but where my body and soul are still ill-at-ease. All too often I feel a deep longing to return to the soil of the ancient mystic land where I was born and to the people who speak my language and share my grass-roots values. To be divided-as I am-is to be in a state of perpetual exile. To be in exile is not a happy state, but it enables one to experience more than one kind of reality.¹⁴ It is tragic that the world in which we live today is full of exiles. However, these exiles have a glorious opportunity for dialogue and can do much to create, out of the deep sense of their own fragmented and lonely lives, the vision of a world which is integrated and whole, in which all human beings can find peace.