Seeking the One: Cultural Diversity and Islam

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Hello, from Ontario, Canada!! I hope this video message finds everyone well and enjoying well-being despite the challenging circumstances.

I want to thank the Society for Intercultural Pastoral Care and Counselling for this invitation to virtually join with and learn from all of you. In particular, from my heart, I want to thank Dominiek Lootens for everything. I am grateful for his way of being which reflects in my mind the great spirit of the late Thomas Merton.

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(To begin, I would like to dedicate this presentation to Dr. Abdul Aziz Said, who "passed the Way" on January 22nd, 2021, at the age of 90, after decades of blending his teaching about peace and international relations with the spirit of the Sufi tradition of Islam. He was the founder of one the largest Peace and Conflict Resolution programs in the United States and was the former occupant of the Mohammed Said Farsi Chair of Islamic Peace at American University in Washington, DC. As you will soon see, I am deeply indebted to him for the perspective I will be sharing with you today, and many of the themes I will explore are found in his writings.).

For instance, at the beginning of the 21st Century Dr. Abdul Aziz Said, started to develop a concept of "total peace," in light of his experience of the 20th Century as an era of "total war". In exploring this holistic concept of "total peace" Said further developed his ideas on cultural diversity and the dialogical in human relations.

This presentation explores cultural diversity and the dialogical in Islam, from a perspective that is informed by both Sufism and peace studies, both of which provide bases for seeing, experiencing, and affirming unity in diversity.

The particular themes I wish to engage include living cultural diversity, dialogue, cultural empathy, and human transformation. Unfortunately, for my presentation I will only briefly talk about each theme. There is always so much more that can be said.

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For starters, living cultural diversity means many things. It is the ability to see the big picture. It is having a big enough view of the world. It is the capability to seek what is deep or exceptional in each culture, making it a unique and valuable resource not just to those who partake of it, but also to the larger world. As Abdul Aziz Said once stated, “The whole world needs the whole world.” He also added, “the whole is reflected in its diverse parts and from its parts the information of the whole community can be constructed. The total is greater than the parts but only when the parts are taken into account.”

For Muslims, Islam is not only a metaphysical guide and theological doctrine but it is also a historical dynamic expressed through a diversity of cultures. The history of Islam is a history of relations between the ideals of the Qur’an (the holy book for Muslims) and the ability of Muslims to realize them and manifest them in their lived cultural contexts. Ideals of Islam are not static but emergent. Every historical period and cultural milieu has given a different synthesis of Islamic ideals.

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Living cultural diversity in Islam is to embrace and learn from the shared histories of past civilizations that manifest anew into today's realities. For instance, classical Islamic civilizations (influenced by diverse Muslim dynasties such as the Umayyads, the Abbasids, and the Mughals) were constructed not only out of Arab, Biblicist, and Hellenic cultures, but cast an even wider net by integrating Persian, Central Asian, Chinese and Indian components within their cultural synthesis. Historically, Islam has been and can still be a true bridge between West and East, North and South.

The extent to which the Islamic experience has bridged cultures has often been underappreciated. Yet there are so many historical examples underscoring how closely intertwined the Islamic experience has been with that of Europe and of other lands – examples that can inspire us as we reflect on what it means to live and embrace diversity. On this slide are just three examples:

--Abd ar-Rahman Ibn Khaldun (the great sociologist of Islam) made efforts in the 14th Century to tutor an Andalusian prince after the model of the ancient Greek Plato's *Republic*. This is a great example of how Muslims translated, transmitted and, ultimately, transformed knowledge from ancient cultures and civilizations.

--Another, example, Copernicus (the great Polish astronomer and mathematician), while constructing his Heliocentric planetary theory, found it obligatory to cite Muslim astronomers who had recorded their observations and ideas in Arabic. This is a great example of how Europeans translated, transmitted and, ultimately, transformed knowledge from Muslim cultures and civilizations.

Another intriguing and thought-provoking example is …

--Dara Shikoh (the son of the Great Shah Jahan of the Mughals in India, who himself ordered the construction of the majestic Taj Mahal, as you see on this slide) personally translated forty Hindu Upanishads. Today this may sound surprising to many of us, but as Carl Ernst states, at that time "it was easy for Muslims in India to view yogic or Vedantic teachings of the subtle power in mantras to the Muslim meditations and formulas consisting of Arabic names of God".

I could go on citing many more examples of surprising ways in which "the Islamic" blends with that which we consider inherently "Western" or "Eastern," but I would like to shift now from the historical to the theological, and ask how is living cultural diversity reflected in the religion of Islam? What perspectives within Islam make it desirable not just to cite past connections across cultures, but to envision new forms of dialogue and appreciation?

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At the heart of the message of Islam is the Quranic concept of *tawhid*, the Unity of God, of Being, of Humanity and of Truth itself. This universalistic concept commands that the material and spiritual are in reality one.

Furthermore, at the human and social levels, oneness is the overriding principle, even amid differentiation. This is reflected in the Quranic verse, 49:13,

O Humanity! We created

You from a single pair

Of a male and a female

And made you into

Peoples and tribes that

You may come to know one another

Verily, the most honoured of you

In the sight of Allah

Is (he who is) the most aware of God amongst you.

As this verse reflects, through unity, humanity can come to know and respect cultural and religious differences that are inextricably linked to a recognition of the connectedness of all human beings. According to Islam, the reality of ethnicity and cultural diversity is an expression of the Divine Will, while at the same time, humankind is directed to embrace the notion of the unity of humanity through the expression of human solidarity.

The vision of Unity in Islam then also provides for cultural pluralism and cultural co-existence. Muslims, whether Arab, Asian, African, Indian, Persian, North American, European, etc. have retained and can continue to retain their culture within Islam. Such intersections of different ethnic and national cultures result in diverse expressions and manifestations of Islam.

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It is also very important to point out that the Qur'an states in verses 10:47 and 16:36, "to every people has been sent a Messenger". Islam then also upholds the legitimacy of other religions, accepting that Truth has many centers. This leads to the thought that all people have been chosen, and that no persons or peoples have been forgotten.

For Muhyi ad-Din Ibn al-'Arabi (who lived from 1165-1240) and was one of the great Muslim metaphysicians and philosophers who influenced a variety of Muslim mystics, the diversity of the world's religions was itself a sign of God and a source of theophanic insight necessitating an attitude akin to what Krister Stendahl, the great Swedish Christian theologian at Harvard University, described as 'holy envy'. Here is a quote from Ibn al-'Arabi to share a bit of his thought. It is from the *Fusus al-Hikam*, *The Bezels of Wisdom*, which is seen as a culmination of his thought,

> Beware of being bound up by a particular religion and rejecting all others as unbelief! If you do that you will fail to obtain a great benefit. Nay, you will fail to obtain the true knowledge of the reality. Try to make yourself a (kind of) Prime Matter for all forms of religious belief. God is wider and greater than to be confined to a particular religion to the exclusion of others. For He says: 'To whichever direction you turn, there surely is the Face of God'. God does not specify (in this Quranic verse) a particular place in which the Face of God is to be found. He only said: 'There is the Face of God.' The 'face' of a thing means its real essence. So God has admonished by this verse the hearts of the 'knowers' so that they might not be distracted by non-essential matters in the present world from being constantly conscious of this kind of thing.

In Ibn al-'Arabi's teachings as reflected in this quote, respect for the integrity manifest within non-Muslim systems of belief and worship was essential for being a fully realized Muslim – a spiritually developed person who surrenders to the grace of Truth no matter what symbolic form it might take.

There is a need to understand this more self-reflexive pluralistic thinking and way of being within Muslim history in which Muslims have expanded their perceptions of themselves and others, moving beyond negative and defensive consensual thinking and being. In doing so, there is no one definitive discourse of Islam that can definitely label or shape contemporary or pre-modern Muslim identities. Rather, Muslims through transnational as well as transcultural conversations/negotiations are and have been interpretive agents of multi-faceted textual and contextual realities.

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The Dialogical and Islam

Another theme that I would like to explore in this presentation, that is embedded within living cultural diversity and Islam, is the concept and method of the dialogical.

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To discuss this theme, I would like to share a quote by Dr. Abdul Aziz Said which was stated in a speech on March 19, 2002 in Damascus, Syria, at the National Library. Over a decade later, his words speak even louder…

> The information revolution of the 21st century has set in motion two contradictory trends in the world: 1) localization, leading to self-assurance and the strengthening of each culture's own traditions, and 2) globalization, which spans the sheer diversity of the human expression. This context defines the nature of our contact in a broader sense: through this growing awareness of our diversity lies our unmistakable unity: our humanity and our common values and needs. It is up to us, at this crucial time in our shared history, to determine how we will know and relate with each other, how we define and benefit from our relationship, and how we will cope together with the teeming diversity of our global community. *Dialogue, as a new paradigm in global relations, is based on knowledge to achieve new knowledge, to see each other with different eyes, in a different light, looking together toward a shared future in a global community to make the world safe for diversity.* The need for a dialogue of civilizations is based on the recognition that our changing reality requires a new global ethic and a new perception of one another. (Said 2002, 1)

In this quote you find many of the cross-cutting themes that Abdul Aziz Said uses to articulate what is dialogue. It is the basis for embracing global citizenship and for experiencing what Said calls *"the first planetary culture"*. This idea is SO timely esp. in relation to the global pandemic which we all are currently navigating. As Said adds, "We have moved from a humanity which lived its

collective life as fragments of the whole, into a new context of humanity as a whole." (Said, Changing Context, 1).

In emphasizing "our humanity" and "our common values and needs" in the same paper Abdul Aziz Said calls on the humanist insight within the great ancient Greek philosopher Plato by stating:

> Plato said that while we might not be able to agree with each other, if we have open and honest conversation, we will be able to empathize with the human predicament each of us finds our self in, because human life is so similar in its deeper significance and issues whatever our society and culture. (Said 10 Changing Context)

So, dialogue begins with recognition of human complexity and differences; especially in light of what is "good" for the human in self and other. What follows is a sincere effort to counteract misperceptions and double standards. This means replacing moral self-images and immoral other-images with perceptions that are closer to reality… closer to the underlying unity of the human experience.

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The beauty and spiritual significance of a vision of unity in diversity can be appreciated symbolically, through contemplation of themes in sacred Islamic architecture, where we can witness the cultural inflections of theological and mystical ideas.

Through such architectural symbolism, we can contemplate complex, abstract thoughts like unity within plurality or the one and the many. And it is important to recognize that within traditional Islamic metaphysics, this world is a world of symbols in dialogical relations to one another. And some of the great symbols of unity within plurality are found in the majestic mosques and shrines of Isfahan, Shiraz, Lahore, Cairo, etc.

Unfortunately, I do not have time to discuss this subject in detail but it is fascinating to note how each aspect of traditional Islamic architecture (whether its structure, design, patterns, and even colours) not only reflected distinct cultural contributions to the arts and sciences, but was intended to evoke and ultimately aid in the discovery of higher spiritual realities.

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For example, the geometric dome in most traditional mosques represents the ultimate vault of heaven. It is the universal spirit which encompasses everything and unifies all differences. It also in its sacred geometry is constituted by a system of balanced relations; every part has to comply to the next part to remain functional.

Additionally, each part contains its own center or "absolute" within itself; each of these centers is capable of either supporting all other centers, and thereby serving as a keystone among keystones, or denying all other centers, and thereby being false to the truth it contains.

Here lies the crucial observation in the symbolism of a sacred geometric dome: there is a sense in which the center of the dome holds all of the surrounding centers of the design, and relates to them as a uniting principle even as each individual component of this larger dome design also constitutes and manifests the larger configuration. Therefore, the strength of the sacred geometric dome depends on what you could metaphorically say is "open dialogue" where "the whole is reflected in the parts and from the parts comes the ever-greater whole."

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In my own research I have found it compelling to think of social networks and relations as similar patterns to that of the great geometric domes which manifest unity as well as diversity – patterns of connection through which parts create a greater whole.

As a doctoral student almost two decades ago, I sought to encounter transnational dialogue amongst Muslim women activists from different cultural and national contexts, and I witnessed what for me are expressions of Islamic cultural diversity, and of the broader idea of unity in diversity maintained by dialogue. On this slide and the next are some images of Muslim women whom I had the honour in experiencing the wonder of dialogue.

From these encounters and others, I thoroughly believe that open dialogue is a mirror of consciousness that guides the participant toward an awareness of assumptions. Like a river of meaning ever "flowing through us and between us," dialogue transforms the part and the whole into greater harmony of coherence. Dialogue then creates healthy relationships "between the individual and the collective." Society, being "a link of relationships," establishes order through "shared meaning". Therefore, incoherent assumptions destroy relationships, negating all possibility for dialogue.

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In a paper entitled, *The Dialogue of Healing*, Abdul Aziz Said states

> Dialogue literally means "through logos", the stream of meaning that opens up when we share our innate dignity and diversity with the rest of humanity. This shared meaning is the foundation of the social whole we seek to heal. To heal the social is to reinvigorate the ability of individuals to be capable of the act of unity through logos. In other words, *we find meaning through each other*. (Said 2003, 2)

By focusing on the need to reveal assumptions and ultimately suspend assumptions, the dialogical experience shifts our thinking that allows us to recognize that the achievements of one culture does not imply or reflect that another is inferior.

Rather the necessity for dialogue comes with the need to reveal these assumptions and understand what they mean and how they can transform. Attunement then to living cultural diversity is an awareness that makes us attentive to basic problems and differences in worldviews among peoples. It protects us, you could say, from the fallacy of believing that "they" think precisely as we do.

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According to Abdul Aziz Said dialogue also is the tool "to unlock the secrets of effective communication and pierce through the walls of misperception in order to conceptualize a shared concept of peace that has depth and integrated meaning."

Roxanne Euben, a professor of Political Science at Wellesley College in the United States, in her book, *Journeys to the Other Shore: Muslim and Western Travelers in Search of Knowledge*, reflects on the act of dialoguing as a means to help in constructing what she calls a "new cosmopolitanism" which she defines as "a protean category that at the very least signals an attempt to rethink the scope and scale of moral and political obligations among human beings whose identities and loyalties are no longer coextensive with the modern nation-state" (175).

In painting a picture of Islamic and Western travelers (for example, Ibn Battuta and de Tocqueville) who sought to understand "foreign" cultures of unfamiliarity while experiencing critical distancing from all that was familiar, Euben discovers the imaginary world of these travelers and their sense of belonging to the world as global citizens. She concludes her book by reclaiming the cosmopolitan from the clutches of imperial powers, and reconnecting to the original Greek meaning of the word, "citizen of the world".

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In *Dialogue Among Civilizations*, Fred Dallmayr, a colleague of Euben's, argues that one need not abandon particularism or preference for the value system of one's own community. All that is necessary is recognition that developing a realistic and constructive relationship with the other is impossible without *cultural empathy*: the ability to suspend one's own frame of reference long enough to enter and experience the other's world of values, experiences, and meanings. In doing so, one is aware of the inevitability of experiencing the other's world and how that experience in turn influences one's own understandings (Dallmayr 26-29).

Such empathy produces what Dallmayr calls "integral pluralism" or "being-with" which recognizes that we are all products of "symbiotic" relationships between tradition and modernity, between global and local, between West and East, North and South.

This relational symbiosis is the act of living together in a more intimate association or close union of dissimilar otherness, whether temporal or spatial. Transcending the bifurcation of the world based in static, separated pre-conceived concepts of self and other, symbiotic thinking encourages --what other scholars have pointed to-- more organic awareness of a pluralized identity as an ever-changing whole with endless frontiers (Dallmayr 2010, 2-8).

To define dialogue as a process enabled by empathy, is to follow in the footsteps of the humanist psychologist Carl Rogers, for whom empathy was among the most vital means of understanding the human condition. Rogers states that, "empathy is to perceive the internal frame of reference of another with accuracy and with the emotional components and meanings which pertain thereto as if one were the person, but without losing the 'as if' condition" (1959, 20).

Rogers differentiates empathy from identification with the pain, pleasure, or confusion of other persons.

> To be with another in this way means that for the time being, you lay aside your own views and values in order to enter another's world without prejudice. In some sense it means that you lay aside yourself. (1980, 143)

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Living cultural diversity also then involves being sensitive, moment to moment, to the felt meanings which flow in others. Our capacity for moral behavior is directly related to our capacity for empathy, for experiencing connectedness. When other seems "different," hard to empathize, easier to dehumanize.

Abdul Aziz Said is also known for saying, "we need to meet people where they are at." This practice interestingly enables each person to become as Said states "more individually authentic yet simultaneously recognizes the genuine uniqueness of others". It also means the ability to enter the private perceptual world of others and feel at home, using empathy as a mode of inquiry, analysis and engagement.

When we empathize we learn and experience patterns of human connection within our diversity. We also experience another quality of living cultural diversity which is *seeing with a beginner's eyes*. We need to *learn to be beginners*. They are the ones who believe that learning never ends and that one must wake up every morning as a beginner. And, why? Well, what happens when we forget to be a beginner?

When we forget to be a beginner, we start to think that we have all the answers. That the way things were done before is the way they should be done today. That we don't need to consult others or brainstorm creative possibilities.

However, when we remember to be a beginner we are protected from becoming blocked or stuck, and make space for dynamism and creative imagination. We see the familiar with fresh eyes, and envision new ways of acting. As stated by Abdul Aziz Said stated:

> …a framework for a dynamic and mutually rewarding dialogue is one where we bring to table the best that our cultures have to offer the world and how these contributions can help one another to achieve a greater flourishing of our respective communities, who look upon one another as moral equals and partners in creating a global community. (Said 2002, 3)

To reiterate, all that is necessary is recognition that developing a realistic and constructive relationship with the other is impossible without cultural empathy: the ability to suspend one's own frame of reference long enough to enter and experience the other's world of values, experiences, and meanings.

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In Islam, there have been many poets who have tried to capture the empathic feeling towards other cultures and religions. And it is important to recognize that the art and science of poetry is often seen as the height of one's language and even one's culture. So, for many Muslims, poetry reflects the Quranic principle of *adab*, the height of moral behavior towards self and towards others.

In the early part of the 21st century, I had the honour of studying poetry in Arabic literature at Kulliyat al-Adab, the College of Literature, at the University of Damascus in Syria before the civil war.

Now there are many Muslim poets and verses which I could mention but the two examples on this slide are very well-known.

The first is one of the most famous poems by Ibn al-'Arabi, whose verses in his *Tarjuman al-Ashwaq* reflect a pluralistic and empathic practice:

My heart has become capable of every form.
It is a pasture for gazelles and a convent for monks.
A temple for idols and the Ka'aba for the pilgrim.
It is the tables of the Torah and it is the book of the Qur'an.
I profess the religion of Love, whatever the destination
Of its caravan may be, Love is my religion and my faith.

Also, another famous example of empathy is found in Sadi of Shiraz's *Gulistan* in which he states…

The children of Adam are limbs of one another
And in their creation come from one substance
When the world gives pain to one or another
The other members find no rest.
If you have no empathy for human suffering,
The name of human you cannot retain.

This last poem has been placed at the entrance into the United Nations building in New York City.

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Now lastly, for this presentation, cultural diversity and empathy as well as dialogue just like peace is never made, it is always in the making. So, for my conclusion I would like to end on the theme of transformation.

Living cultural diversity is a dynamic transformational process. It is a journey and not a destination.

As stated by Abdul Aziz Said, "culture is a resource whose function is to express our humanity in ways that make us more human….Each individual is a powerful source of transformation."

And

"The process of peaceful relations involves endless transformation. There is no instant transformation. There are no instant transformers. In the same way that our limitations are inexhaustible, our growth in peace is limitless. Each moment when we see and detach from a selfish thought impulse, we deepen our peace by one step."

Ultimately, living cultural diversity is a transformational process involving a change in our conscious beliefs and in the structure of underlying unconscious symbols (ideas and abstractions) which hold our world in place.

In Islamic philosophical as well as theological thought, the unicity of being is intertwined with the perpetual fluctuation and transmutation of time. This property of time as perpetual transformation is known as *taqallub*.

The word, "*taqallub*" is derived from the root *qalaba*, which is also connected to *qalb* (the Arabic word for "heart"). The heart then to many Muslim philosophers is seen as a vehicle as well as the focal point of constant fluctuation, motion, endless transformations.

It also, as reflected in the Qur'an, is seen as the locus of knowledge in which understanding and intelligence define a healthy heart. Some Muslim philosophers like Ibn al-'Arabi connect the heart to the idea of the "Throne of God" in the microcosm as reflected in the prophetic saying "My earth and my heaven embrace me not, but the heart of My believing servant does embrace Me."

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Perhaps the most important thing to take away from the concepts of *taqallub* and *qalb* in connection to living cultural diversity is the radical dynamism inherent within them.

As discussed by Ibn al-'Arabi, God never manifests Himself in the same way twice, or to two people in the same way. Each person, at each moment, has a unique experience of Reality. Or, put alternately, God manifests himself to each person, at each moment in a new and different way. Creation is forever new; God's self-manifestation is forever changing. This idea later became a Muslim axiom *La takrar fi'l-tajalli* – "There is no repetition in self-disclosure" (Chittick 1989:103).

This understanding of God and the world has profound implications in understanding different cultural beliefs, religions, and philosophies, laying the groundwork for a radical pluralism.

If God manifests Himself in all things, in all beliefs, to all people, in different ways, then the worshipper of God witnesses and remembers God in and through all of these forms. Accordingly, Ibn al-'Arabi writes:

> God discloses Himself perpetually, since changes are witnessed perpetually in the manifest things and the nonmanifest things, the unseen and the visible, the sensory and the intelligible. His task is self-disclosure, and the task of the existent things is change and passage from one state to another state. Among us there are those who recognize this and those who do not recognize it. Those who recognize it worship Him in every state. Those who do not recognize it deny Him in every state (Chittick 1989: 103).

This central spiritual idea, that we can encounter the face of God wherever we turn, amid all the changes of existence, invites us to be truly present with others, whatever their culture or background, whatever our apparent similarities or differences. To be truly present in our relations with others is a prerequisite for the sort of inspiration that Ibn al-'Arabi spoke of when he described love as his religion or faith.

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Let me conclude, then, with a quote on love from my mentor Abdul Aziz Said, from a paper written for a conference in Cyprus in 2000:

> "Love is a dynamic force not a state we possess. It is a force passing through us. To receive it we have to give it to others. When peace emanates from us peace returns to us." (Said 2000, 1-2)

It is thoughts such as these, made conscious in our daily lives and relations, that truly enable us to embrace the other, and to receive the greatest possible meaning from living cultural diversity.

Thank you for watching this video. I look forward to any questions or thoughts that you may have. Wishing all of you a beautiful today and tomorrow!