Life at L’Arche Through Muslim Voices

Edited by Nayla Tabbara

2017
This booklet is the result of meetings of a reflection group called "L’Arche and Islam" that took place from 2008 to 2015 in Egypt, India, Bangladesh, Kuwait, Lebanon, and France, led by L’Arche International.

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FOREWORD

L’Arche encountered Islam in India in 1971, only seven years after its foundation.

With the first persons with disabilities in the community of Bangalore, it welcomed Islam and Hinduism as “de facto” components of its founding identity.

Jean Vanier admits that he never foresaw or decided that. It just “happened” as the logical consequence of the L’Arche founding choice: that of being a place not “for” people with disabilities, but “through” persons with disabilities.

L’Arche “for” Muslim or Hindu people with disabilities would have remained Christian, like many “Christian charities.”

By contrast, L’Arche “through” Muslim and Hindu persons with disabilities has proven to be interreligious.

In the early days of L’Arche in Bangalore, Gabrielle Einsle, its founder, had created a prayer room in the first L’Arche home. She used to go there morning and evening and kneel in front of a small cross and an icon of Mary. Guranthan, the first person with a handicap welcomed in the community came from a traditional Hindu family. He came back from his first weekend with his family with an image of his favorite god, Muruga, one of the sons of Shiva, and presented it proudly to Gabrielle. She thus added it to the prayer room, and bit by bit other religious symbols were added.

By this simple gesture, this improvised moment of “praying together,” Guranthan and Gabrielle had established together the interfaith dimension of L’Arche...

Ever since then, the interreligious identity of the federation of L’Arche communities has been enshrined in the International Charter of L’Arche.

Interreligious cohabitation within one community is complex but it has been proven possible, particularly in India, Bangladesh, and Palestine.

However, the fundamental reflection on L’Arche, though enriched by this interreligious dimension and questioned by it, has been based, until recently, mainly on Christian tradition. Many writings have sought to describe L’Arche and its anthropological, educational, philosophical, or spiritual components, yet few have relied on non-Christian sources for that purpose. None, so far, has drawn from Muslim sources.

Hence, there are two types of expectations in relation to Islam in L’Arche:

- Allowing the Muslim assistants of L’Arche to enlighten and enrich their life experience with persons with disabilities in light of Muslim tradition; allowing them to check the coherence of this experience with their faith; giving them a chance to deepen their faith; enabling them to realize that this
relationship with vulnerable people can make them better Muslims and, on this basis, help build the community of believers or, more broadly, the human community.

- Help the L’Arche communities develop the means to provide spiritual nourishment to their Muslim members.

This Muslim reflection on L’Arche started to develop in 2004 within “L’Arche and Islam,” a small group composed of Muslim long-term assistants and theologians.

Three Muslim theologians and friends of L’Arche accepted to lend their competence and sustainable commitment to this project, namely, Nayla Tabbara, professor of science of religions and Islamic studies and director of the Institute of Citizenship and Diversity Management at Adyan Foundation in Beirut; Amr Abdulaty Saleh, professor at Al-Azhar University in Cairo; and Amer Al Hafi, professor at the Al al Bayt University and academic advisor of the Royal Institute for Inter-Faith Studies in Amman.

The group also relied on the faithful and competent support of Jean-Jacques Pérennès, o.p., presently director of the Ecole Biblique of Jerusalem.

The group met with members of L’Arche communities in India, Bangladesh, Palestine, Egypt, and France, and started listening to the experiences of persons with disabilities and assistants within these communities.

As for the theologians, they brought forward the texts, stories, thoughts, and testimonies belonging to the Muslim tradition, thus giving meaning to these experiences of encounter and of vulnerability.

This booklet provides an overview of this work and these moments of sharing, shedding light on the most familiar themes of community life at L’Arche by relying on accurate theological bases.

In response to the need for a written document that could be used by and distributed to all the L’Arche communities worldwide, these shared moments over a period of ten years were transformed into thematic articles.

Special thanks to the Institute of Citizenship and Diversity Management at ADYAN, a Lebanese foundation for interreligious studies and spiritual solidarity, which led the group’s thematic research over the past four years in partnership with L’Arche and coordinated the production of this work.

Patrick Fontaine
L’Arche International Leader
Witnessing Our Own Faith
through Helping and Protecting Those in Need

Amr Abdelaty Saleh

The fundamentals of Muslim belief can be described as follows: Islam is a six-floor construction, built upon five pillars. These five pillars are the declaration of faith (shahâda), prayer, purification of possessions through almsgiving (zakat), fasting, and pilgrimage to Makka. The six floors are belief in Allah, belief in angels, belief in all the revealed books sealed with the Qur’an, belief in all prophets and messengers sealed by Muhammad, peace be upon them all, belief in the day of Resurrection and Judgment, and belief in destiny.¹ These floors consist of over seventy rooms; the Prophet Muhammad, peace be upon him, said: “Iman (faith) has over seventy branches – or over sixty branches – the uppermost of which is the declaration of faith: ‘There is no god but Allah’ meaning ‘None has the right to be worshipped but Allah’; and the least of which is the removal of harmful objects from the road. Modesty is a branch of faith.”² The declaration of faith is thus of fundamental importance in the matrix of Islamic faith: it is the first pillar of Islam, it is the first floor of Islam, and it is the highest ranked value of Islam.

So then what is the shahâda (declaration of faith) and why is it so important to the construction of the Islamic value set? Shahâda is an Arabic word that comes from the root shahida, which has two major meanings; “to testify” and “to witness.” Many Arabic words are derived from this root, such as shâhid (witness) shahîd (martyr) and shahâda, which means certificate, witnessing, and declaration.

The religious sense of the word shahâda refers not only to announcing the words of shahâda (No god but Allah, and Muhammad is His messenger), but also it is the process of witnessing to the meanings of this Shahâda throughout your entire life. So whenever a person says the words of the Shahâda with sincerity and truthfulness, s/he is on the way of Islam, but s/he will not become a real Muslim unless s/he puts the meanings and results of this sentence of shahâda into practice.

“The Bedouins say, ‘We have believed.’ Say to them O Muhammad, ‘You have not [yet] believed; but say [instead], “We have submitted,” for faith has not yet entered your hearts.’”³

Therefore, the life of a Muslim starts with the declaration of faith to the Muslim community, which s/he is joining for the rest of his/her life in a state of mutual responsibilities, rights, and duties. A vital misunderstanding, however, is to think that the shahâda stops at the declaration of faith,

¹ The six floors correspond to the Sunni denomination’s dogma. The Shiite denomination’s dogma shares the same fundamentals (belief in one God, in prophethood, and in the Last Day) but adds to it the belief in the Imamate, and does not count the belief in destiny as one of the fundamentals of belief.
² Bukhari and Muslim.
neglecting the fact that believers have to fulfill the other meanings of Shahâda, namely to testify and to witness: “And thus We have made you a medium (just) nation that you may be the bearers of witness over mankind and (that) the Messenger may be a bearer of witness over you.”

Testifying and witnessing to our faith is therefore the Muslim’s lifelong task, and it is the purpose of creation: “And (remember) when your Lord said to the angels: ‘Verily, I am going to place man as vicegerent on earth (khalifa).’ They said: ‘Will You place therein those who will make mischief therein and shed blood, – while we glorify You with praises and thanks (Exalted be You above all that they associate with You as partners) and sanctify You.’ He (Allah) said: ‘I know that which you do not know.’”

We also read in the Qur’ân: “And I (Allah) have not created the jinns and humans (for anything) other than worshipping Me (Alone).” The message of the Muslim community “that you may be the bearers of witness over Mankind” and the personal mission of every individual Muslim is thus to witness. It was narrated from Asma’ bint Yazid that she heard the Messenger of Allah (peace be upon him) saying: “Shall I not tell you who the best among you are?” They said: “Yes, O Messenger of Allah.” He said: “The best among you are those who, when they are seen, Allah the Mighty, the Majestic, is remembered.”

Thus, how can people think of God when they look at any individual human being?

To answer this we need to read this story about Prophet Joseph who was the prime minister of ancient Egypt. He was known to be the most handsome man on earth. A friend of his wanted to give him a present, and gave a lot of thought to finding out what would be the right gift to present to someone like Joseph, the prime minister of Egypt – the capital of the world at that time. After long and deep thought, he found the right gift and took it to Joseph. The gift was a mirror! Joseph wondered: “Why is that man bringing a mirror to me as a gift!? The man replied that since Joseph was the prime minister of Egypt, and thus needed nothing, he had thought that the best gift would be a mirror that could show Joseph his own beauty!

Now, and in the light of this story: what can we offer to God?! What can a human person present to Allah, the Creator and the Sustainer? The answer is nothing except turning ourselves and our hearts into mirrors reflecting the beauty of God that we find in His 99 beautiful names: “Allah has 99 names, i.e., 100 minus 1, and whoever knows (ahsa-ha) them will go to Paradise.”

When we were children, we used to understand the Arabic verb ahsa in its literal meaning: to know/memorize. And we used to chant these names every morning at school, hoping to enter the Heavens! Later on, when we started to learn Hadith at Al-Azhar, we realized that it’s not that simple, it’s about becoming a mirror that reflects God’s names, an embodiment of the ethics and values derived from those names, following the example of Prophet Muhammad, peace be upon him, who was a live

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4 Qur’ân Al-Baqara 2:143.
5 Qur’ân Al-Baqara 2:30.
6 Qur’ân Al-Dhariyat 51:56.
7 Sunan Ibn Majah, Ketabul Zuh, Book 37, Hadith 4258.
8 Tirmidhi 3429.
version and an embodiment of the Qur’an. Yazid ibn Yabnus said, “We went to ‘A’isha and said, ‘Mother of the Believers, what was the character of the Messenger of Allah, may Allah bless him and grant him peace, like?’ She replied, ‘His character was the Qur’an. Can you recite the surah entitled “The Believers”? Recite: “It is the believers who are successful: those who are humble in their prayer; those who turn away from worthless talk; those who actively pay alms (zakat); those who guard their private parts.”’ 23:1-5’ She said, ‘That was the character of the Messenger of Allah, may Allah bless him and grant him peace.’”

Thus it’s about every Muslim becoming a living example that is witnessing to the One and the Almighty God, i.e., to be His khalifa, vicegerent on earth. And as we stated earlier from verse 3:30, even if the angels, for whatever reasons, had bad expectations from Adam and his children, Allah, our creator, knows that, through the abilities He provided us with, we can accomplish the mission He created us for.

Witnessing His Existence, His Mercy, His Justice and all His beautiful attributes; this lifelong task of witnessing is the broad concept of worship.

Some people misunderstand the meaning of worship, ibada. They narrow it down to the physical acts of worship; prayer, fasting, pilgrimage, and zakat. But in Islam, to worship God means more than to pray or to fast or to do pilgrimage or to give some money to charity. It means to do what is right, to do what He loves. And as we stated earlier, ibada is about being a person who reflects the beautiful attributes of Allah, at the different levels and in the different stages of her/his life. “Man’s feet will not move on the Day of Resurrection before he is asked about his life; how did he consume it. His knowledge; what did he do with it. His wealth; how did he earn it and how did he dispose of it. And about his body; how did he wear it out.”

So on the Day of Judgment, the question will be to each of us: Have you been a real witness to Me, the One who created you, or not? Indeed, many acts can be done as an act of witnessing our faith to the world in the shade of the beautiful names and attributes of Allah. But what I would like to highlight in the next few paragraphs is how our lives can reflect the divine name “Al- Nasîr”: the Helper and the Supporter. When we implement the faith of monotheism in our daily life, as Muslims we believe that God alone is the real Helper and Supporter as we learn from the Qur’an: “Do you not know that Allah’s is the kingdom of the heavens and the earth, and that besides Allah you have no patron or helper?” Moreover, the Qur’an tells us that God promised not to leave believers alone and helpless in this world. Rather, He promises to help them both in this world and in the hereafter, “I will certainly help My Messengers and those who believe both in the life of the world and on the Day the witnesses appear.”

As a Muslim, I have two levels of witnessing this beautiful name, Al-Nasîr, in my life. First at the level of my personal life, I know who my real patron is, the one to whom I shall always return for help and guidance when I feel that life is not treating me well. The perfect example of this is the prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) when he went to Ta’if to preach the word of God to the people of

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9 Al-Adab Al-Mufrad, Imam Bukhari, Kitab Dealings with People and Good Character.
10 Riyad as-Salihin, kitab al muqadimat, narrated by Al Tirmidhi.
12 Qur’an Ghafir 40:51.
Thaqif. But they would not let him depart in peace, and set the street urchins after him to hiss at him and to stone him. He was so pelted with stones that his whole body was covered with blood, and his shoes were clogged to his feet. He left the town in this woeful plight. He sat down outside the town in this state of complete exhaustion and prayed to Allah: “O, my lord! To you I complain of the feebleness of my strength, of my lack of resources and my being unimportant in the eyes of people. O, Most Merciful of all those capable of showing mercy! You are the Lord of the weak, and thus you are my own Lord. To whom are you to entrust me; to an unsympathetic foe who would sullenly frown at me, or to an alien to whom you have given control over my affairs? Not in the least do I care for anything except that I may have your protection for myself. I seek shelter in Your light, the light which illuminates the Heavens and dispels all sorts of darkness, and which controls all affairs in this world as well as in the Hereafter. May it never be that I should incur your wrath, or that you should be displeased with me. Help me to remove the cause of your displeasure till you are pleased. There is no strength or power but through you.”

This was a perfect example of the first level of witnessing to the name Al-Nasîr. The second level is to become a mirror reflecting this divine name: to help those who need help and to support those who need support. This should be done for no reward of repay from any human. It’s an act of pure gratefulness to the One who is always there for you. “And He is with you (by His Knowledge and by His Help) wherever you might be. And Allah is the All-Seer of what you do.”

It’s an attempt to allow people to remember Him when they see us. Moreover, this help we offer and give to others is not just us being nice and kind... it’s an act of worship that a Muslim performs as s/he performs prayer, fasting, or pilgrimage. Abu Musa Al-Ash’ari narrated that the Prophet (peace be upon him) said: “On every Muslim there is enjoined (a compulsory) Sadaqa (alms).” They (the people) said, “If one has nothing?” He said, “He should work with his hands so that he may benefit himself and give in charity.” They said, “If he cannot work or does not work?” He said, “Then he should help the one in great need (by word or action or both).” They said, “If he does not do it?” He said, “Then he should enjoin what is good (or say what is reasonable).” They said, “If he does not do that?” He said, “Then he should refrain from doing evil, for that will be considered for Him as a Sadaqa (charity).”

The prophet also made it very clear that God treats us when we need Him in the same way we treat those who need our help. “No Muslim will desert his brother in a place where the later respect may be violated and his honor aspersed without Allah deserting the former in a place where he wishes His Help; and no Muslim who will help his brother in a place where his honor may be aspersed and his respect violated without Allah helping him in a place where he wishes His help.”

The previous hadith might help us to understand how precious we are in the sight of Allah, and how much we can please Him through helping those in need. Furthermore, we might realize how helping those in need is a way and a path towards our mission of witnessing our faith to ourselves and to others. We might realize how preventing anyone from aspersing the honor of persons with disabilities

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14 Qur’an Al-Hadid 57:4.
15 Sahih al-Bukhari: The Book of Good Manners and Form (Kitabul Al-Adab).
16 Sunan Abi Dawud, Kitabul Adab.
or handicaps or violating their respect is acting the same way Allah acts with us. And in the end, it does
not matter if they remember Allah when they see us or if it’s we who should remember Allah when we
see them as a living example of His Majesty, Mercy, and Wisdom that we spend our life to discover and
understand.

I think God chose me to come to L’Arche. That is my belief.
We have to support those who are living in L’Arche, and God believed that this is what I can do.
Israfil, an assistant from L’Arche Mymensingh, Bangladesh, at a meeting in Trosly in 2012.

My grandfather was an Imam. I therefore grew up in an environment of devotion and spirituality, and
am familiar with the spiritual life. Among other things, I am convinced that God does not want me to
leave these people. I don’t think He would forgive me if I did.
Wadud, an assistant from L’Arche Mymensingh, Bangladesh, at a meeting in Bangladesh in 2011.

I realized what a physical and mental handicap is. I noted the exclusion, where there is a lack of means
of communication and a social handicap of cultural and material poverty. I also noted the absence of
meaning to life. And I thought about the verses that call upon us to take care of the feeble, of the
orphan, of the elderly, the sick people, the neighbor. Even if some people understand these verses at
the literal level of giving food and drink, I know they mean a lot more.
Nadia, an assistant from L’Arche in France, at a meeting in Kuwait in 2009.

“In taking care of my son, I feel more fulfilled in my faith. I realize that in serving my son and the poor in
general I am in some way carrying out my mission as a believer, something I had not realized earlier. The
idea of loving and taking care of others had not been a part of my earlier faith. A person of faith is not
satisfied with just himself; he must reach out to others, regardless of physical or social differences.”

Mustafa started to visit families who had children with a disability, to give them support. After a request
from L’Arche, he also began to teach religion to the children and enjoys this very much. “I love Rohan
dearly. Before, I didn’t pay much attention to him, but with L’Arche I have completely changed.” He
rereread the hadiths, the Qur’an, searching to see if there was anything about children with disabilities. In
one of the hadiths, he read that a child who cannot differentiate good from bad is totally without sin.
Mustafa realized through his readings that to be at the service of his child, and of the other children,
was as good as, and even more important than, doing prayers. “If I go to Paradise, it will be thanks to my
son. I am very grateful to L’Arche for their help.”

Mustafa, the father of Rohan, a core member in L’Arche Mymensingh, at a meeting in Bangladesh in 2011.

In L’Arche I discovered that people with disabilities are close to God. I also discovered the true meaning
of this hadith: “None of you are believers before he loves his brothers as He loves.”
I put myself in the shoes of people with disabilities and, as I don’t like it when people don’t respect me, I respect them. I am grateful when I am thanked for small things. I do the same to others.

I also learned silence and contemplation. Silence means being able to recognize that each thing is made by God and to be grateful.

Amira, an assistant in L’Arche in Bethlehem, Palestine, at a meeting in Kerala in 2014.
An Islamic Perception of the Human Person and Handicap

Nayla Tabbara

Oneness of humankind

According to Islam, all humankind has the same origin, for all humankind comes from one soul. The Qur’an says “O people, fear your Lord, Who created you of a single soul, and from it created its mate, and from the pair of them scattered many men and women” (Al-Nisaa’ 4:1) and “And He it is Who produced you from a single soul.” (Al-An’am 6:98)

Being created from a single soul means that we are all the same in principle. Yet the Qur’an also explains that even if we come from one single soul, God made us diverse, from different colors, different nationalities, and different shapes: “And of His signs is the creation of the heavens and the earth and the diversity of your languages and your colors. Indeed in that are signs for those of knowledge.” (Al-Rum 30:22)

Therefore we are one in principle but different in our colors, shapes, nationalities, and this difference is a will of God and a sign from God.

Dignity of all humankind

God has honored all humans: “Verily we have honored the Children of Adam” (Al-Isra’ 17:70).

This is a dignity bestowed by God on all men and women. It is God-given to all humans, so no one can take it from another. Moreover, the dignity of each and every human is to be respected equally.

A hadith of the Prophet says: “People are equal like the teeth of a comb; no one has more favor above the other, whether Arab or non-Arab, black or white, except through piety. The most honored among you is the most pious.”17 A different version of this hadith says: “There is no preference of the Arab above the non-Arab or of the non-Arab above the Arab, nor preference of the Red on the Black or the Black on the Red, except in piety, the most honored among you is the most pious.”18

17 Mustadrak al wasa’il.
18 Bayhaqi.
The Qur’an does not really specify why humans have been favored by God amongst His creatures, but this favor is a gift given by God that we have to protect, in ourselves and in others. We also should be able to see this gift, this value, in ourselves as well as in others.

Likewise, from verses such as: “So, when I have made him and have breathed into him of My Spirit” (Al-Hijr 15:29), we can see that God gave the breath of life to all humans, in sharing His Spirit. Therefore, the Spirit of God is in all humans and can be manifested in our hearts and souls, inasmuch as they are purified, on the condition that people accept their inherent vulnerability.

Limits of humans

For although all humans are honored by God, all humans are also limited and have shortcomings. The Qur’an describes many of the limits and shortcomings of humans, which make us look at ourselves as we are: endowed with a great dignity from God, and at the same time full of limitations! The Qur’an says for example:

“man was created weak” (An-Nisa’ 4:28), man is “hasty” (Al-Isra’ 17:11), man is “a wrong-doer, an ingrate” (Abraham 14:34), “in the love of wealth he is violent” (Al-‘Adiyat 100:8); man is also “ever grudging” (Al-Isra’ 17:100), he is “rebellious” and “thinks himself independent” (Al-‘Alaq 96:6–7), he is “very argumentative” (Al-Kahf 18:54), and “anxious” (Al-Ma’arij 70: 19–21).

Each human being is therefore a favored creature endowed with an honor given by God, yet at the same time a creature limited both psychologically and behaviorally, and we are all equal in this respect. We are all psychologically impaired, and we need to accept that to be fully human.

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<th>Four ideas underpin the concept of vulnerability of the human person:</th>
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<td>The first is the contrary of pride. Pride is to think that we can do anything and resist anything. Vulnerability is recognizing that we have limits.</td>
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<td>The second is that by accepting our vulnerability, we accept to adhere to our own image, not to try to be the image that society wants us to project or that we would like to project but to be ourselves, to be authentic, to admit that sometimes we are afraid, that we sometimes feel like crying...</td>
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<td>The third is that vulnerability means being positive. Vulnerability can be an occasion for personal growth, for progression. Paradoxically it can be an occasion to become stronger because we are no longer afraid of this weakness. We tell ourselves, “Yes I am tired, yes I am sick, I cannot resist everything, I am not made of steel.”</td>
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<td>The fourth point is the presence of God. We cannot be afraid as believers because we know that God watches over us, that we are in His hands and that the only grave thing that can happen is to be away from God.</td>
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Fr. Jean Jacques Pérennès, o.p., director of the Ecole Biblique de Jérusalem, at a meeting in Kuwait in 2009.
I personally have learnt from L’Arche to accept at the same time the beauty in me revealed by the first encounter with persons with handicap, and also to admit my own limits as a normal part of me. Not trying to hide them or punishing myself for sometimes feeling envy, jealousy, lack of love, or other counter values, accepting them as part of me was in fact a liberating act. It allows me not to focus on them but to keep on going in my mission in life knowing that I carry a lot of imperfections, and that those imperfections are normal and that with them, I can still love and work for the good.

It has allowed me to be honest with myself and with others, and to waste less time on self-flagellation, and spend more time on being.

I have learned that the more we accept our limits and vulnerability, the more we become transparent and allow God’s spirit to work through us. And I learned that we cannot discover this spirit in us without the light of the other.

Islam also teaches us that weakness in human beings is a constitutive part of our nature. In fact, the limits of the human person and his/her fragilities seem to be part of God’s plan and will for us. A hadith declares: “All the sons of Adam are continuously prone to sinning, and the best sinners are the constant repentants.” Therefore each human being has to acknowledge all at once the honor or greatness within him/her that comes from God and the fragility and limits inherent to him/her that make us human and that God wants us to have.

**Human faculties and handicaps**

Moreover, all human beings have the following faculties, besides the body:

- The soul
- The heart
- The mind

The level of development of these faculties is not what is important. What is important is what we do with them, how we purify them.

The soul (*nafs*) needs to be upright, directed to the spirit and not to material greed, for the spirit is what is pure and comes from God: “And a soul and Him Who perfected it, and inspired it (with conscience of) what is wrong for it and (what is) right for it. He is indeed successful who causes it to grow, and he is indeed a failure who stunts it.” (Ash-Shams 91:7–20). In our lives we have our soul turned either to greed for material things, to egoism, to indifference, or towards gratuity, altruism, and caring, and thus towards the spirit.

The heart has to be sound, meaning strengthened and clear and filled with love not with hate: “But only he (will prosper) that brings to God a sound heart” (Ash-Shu’ara’ 26:89).

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19 Tirmidhi.
The mind needs to be cleaned from negative thoughts and filled with constructive thoughts, however small they might be: “Indeed, he thought and deliberated. So may he be destroyed [for] how he deliberated. Then may he be destroyed [for] how he deliberated.” (Al-Muddathir 74:18–20)

All human beings are therefore called to be pure in heart, mind, and soul, whether they have a visible disability or not. This is why the Prophet also says: “God does not look at your image but looks at your hearts.” God sees our value not in our shapes, but in our hearts.

I have witnessed in L’Arche that, when a person with intellectual disability has received love and reassurance, their soul (nafs) can reflect purity and transparency a lot more than a person without visible disability. This is because, as experience shows, a person with visible disabilities does not demand material things and is a lot less prone to be guided by egoism than a person with no apparent disability. This explains why when the hearts of persons with disabilities are at peace, they are capable of generating pure unbound love more than any other person.

**Perception of handicap**

In this light, a person with a disability is seen as a blessing, not a curse. For persons with disability, with their simplicity, can reflect the most purely this Spirit of God within, as they, with their visible limitations, remind each person of their less visible limits, humanizing thus their surroundings.

Many families when blessed with a child with disability could think or be told that their child is a curse or a result of their sin, yet the spiritual reality is the contrary, the child with a disability is a blessing to his/her surrounding, especially if he/she receives the dignity, the love, and the care he/she deserves.

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**Mustafa, the father of a disabled child in Bangladesh, speaks of how he and his son tried to change people’s perceptions of his son with a disability:** “The people surrounding me see these children very negatively. My own sister rejected my son at a wedding: “Why did you bring him here?” I was shocked, especially as it was in front of everyone. I reminded her that, according to Islam, she was the one who was in the wrong. Then, little by little, she changed, and now she gives Rohan a warm welcome. There are still people who look at him with disapproval, who avoid him… One day a person said to me that he was the fruit of my sins. I went to the mosque, I spoke with an Imam, and then I went to see that person who had spoken those words to me. It ended with him coming to my home and meeting Rohan. Since that time, he now watches over Rohan when he sees him outside. With those I meet, I try to put an end to the idea of a link between sins and disabilities. “God alone knows why there is a disability.” Things have changed a lot in my immediate neighborhood – today everyone appreciates Rohan for who he is.

Mustafa, the father of a core member in L’Arche Mymensingh, at a meeting in Bangladesh in 2011.

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20 Sahih Muslim, 2564.
Tina, who works at the Taizé Care Center in Bangladesh, tells her story that shows that children with a disability have the pure hearts that the Qur’an asks for. She knows about mental disability not only through her work, but also through her family, her sister (14 years old). Today she is very involved in her sister’s life. In the past it was not always easy to tolerate how others looked at her sister. This personal experience has allowed Tina to feel closer to children in the center, to understand them better. “I adapt myself to their way of communicating.” “My sister has been my guide, my teacher.”

“Before, I didn’t know anything about people with disabilities, but thanks to my sister Irma, I have grown to understand many things. I believe that God, in His Almighty nature, acts fairly, in our differences with others, and the different religions. I have a deep respect for other religions. As for people with disabilities, many people, from all different religions, call on people to help them, but they themselves do not act.”

“For me, people with an intellectual disability have no dishonesty in them. They truly have pure hearts. This purity comes from their direct ‘connection’ to Allah. They are really a holy people – they are the first to correspond to certain ‘criteria’ that define devoted people in the Qur’an.”

Tina, from the Taize Day Care in Mymensingh, at a meeting in Bangladesh, in 2011.

Abou Bakr is the brother of one of the core members who has been in Asha Niketan for 25 years. His brother always accompanied the family everywhere, including to the mosque.

“If society rejects people with disabilities, it is because in their families they are not really accepted either. As a Muslim, I consider these people to be very important for the world. They will be the first to go to heaven. They are a gift from God. It is only if we have faith of that sort that we can have consideration for these people. We could call L’Arche a “House of God.”

Abou Bakr, the brother of a core member in Asha Niketan, at a meeting in Kerala, India, in 2014.

At birth, each person receives a challenge, a test. For some, it is a disability. God gave us this ordeal to test our trust in Him, or to see whether we would turn against Him and see it as a punishment. If we pass the test, we are chosen.

To be disabled is a gift from God. We are called to be grateful.

The parents of Muslim core members in Asha Niketan, at a meeting in Kerala, India, in 2014.

This change of perception concerning handicap is fundamental in today’s society, and it has been brought about by l’Arche and other organizations worldwide and by the struggle of persons with handicaps themselves. Yet it is important not to generalize in the over-sacrilization of persons with disabilities as a reaction to a previous generalized cultural rejection. For although there is a plus given by the handicap in the relation, as was shown above, in the end it is all about the relationships between people, not about categorization.
Now I accept others in a new way. My family supports me yet still thinks that persons with handicaps are weak and that we should treat them kindly. I was able to tell them that a person with handicap is a person like any other.

Dina, an assistant in L’Arche Mog el-Hobb in Alexandria, Egypt, at a meeting in Lebanon in 2015.
On Brotherhood and the Need for Each Other

Nayla Tabbara

The other is my mirror

The other is important in my life as a Muslim because the other is my mirror: he/she shows me my beauty and my goodness, and at the same time points out to me my shortcomings, helping me advance, and encouraging me to the good and to patience and perseverance. The Qur’an says: “By Time! Verily man is in [a state of] loss, except those who believe, and perform righteous deeds, and enjoin one another to [follow] the truth, and enjoin one another to patience.” (Al-Asr 103:1–3).

The Qur’an thus defines friendship by pointing out the role we play towards each other: “And the believers, both men and women, are allies of one another; they enjoin decency and forbid indecency; they observe prayer and pay the alms, and they obey God and His Messenger. Those, God will have mercy on them. Truly God is Mighty, Wise.” (At-Tawba 9:71).

In this sense, friendship is about being there to show to the other both the good in him/her and his/her limitations. A hadith says “the believer is the mirror of the believer.” We are thus mirrors to each other: we can show each other our vulnerability and we can show each other our dignity and inner beauty.

The mirror of the person with a handicap

A person with a handicap can be a perfect mirror of the human person’s two sides: due to intellectual disability, he/she can have the possibility to reflect more than any other the purity of his/her spirit, not veiled by intellect, by an extended ego, or by attachments to material possessions, and due to his/her weakness, he/she reflects more the weakness inherent in humanity.

According to the experience of assistants from L’Arche, there is a transformative experience after a real encounter with a person with an intellectual disability, after being “touched by their mirror.”

Tania, an assistant at L’Arche in Mymensingh, Bangladesh, describes how this was achieved in her life at the community:

Before joining L’Arche, Tania was providing after-school support in Dacca, not far from the Orphanage House, a place where children with disabilities are “deposited.” This place had welcomed many children who are now core members in the community. It was due to an invitation by Anti, a doctor, that Tania first met people with disabilities. In the beginning, she only did the work for money, it was a profession…but as Tania got to know them she understood what they were looking for: friendship.
She gave her time more and more freely. One day her mother reminded her she didn’t have to “do that” to bring in money for the family. But by then what Tania was receiving from the persons with disabilities had little to do with money. In effect, the depth of these persons, their honesty and their freedom regarding material questions, helped Tania to understand the importance of the present moment, of the joy in daily life, of grace given.

In the community, Tania notes, people are often joyful, and they give little importance to the material things they have. This community environment is sufficient for them.

Describing the depth of the friendship, Tania adds: “The core members know me well. They know how I am feeling just by looking at me, and me too, I have become very close to them.”

“They are more than my friends – they are my soul mates. I feel an intimate bond with them. I know when they are worried about something, I can feel it. And they feel the same for me.”

Tania, an assistant in L’Arche Mymensingh, at a meeting in Bangladesh in 2011.

A transformative brotherhood

In the Islamic tradition, brotherhood is a core value that has been lived from the times of the Prophet. In fact, when the first Muslims emigrated from Makka to Medina, they could not have survived without the tie of brotherhood. The people of Medina each offered their brotherhood (ikhâ’) to a migrant from Mecca. This meant that the person from Medina shared equally all that he/she had with the person from Mecca, and this allowed the first Muslim community to survive.

With time, brotherhood was experienced more in the spiritual sense, people feeling that they are brothers and sisters in a community at large (umma), and some people lived a deep brotherhood that they called futuwwa. Its aim was that brothers shared everything, but most importantly, they played the role of mirrors to each other, helping each other grow spiritually. Al Hakim Abu Ahmad al Hafiz says: “The rights of brotherhood demand that one feels for one’s brother the affection of a sincere heart, that one educates one’s brother with one’s words, that one supports one’s brother with one’s possessions, that one serves, through correct spiritual conduct, as a model for one’s brother on the path, and that one defends the brother in his absence in the best possible way.”

The people who were engaged in this form of spiritual brotherhood directly realized its transformative effect. Thus they say: “The encounter with brothers, even if very brief, is a source of blessings,” and “the encounter between brothers helps in religion and appeases the worries.”

The L’Arche experience adds a plus to this transformative effect of brotherhood, because it joins with it the transformative effect of encounter with a person with a handicap.

Kathy puts this in beautiful words saying:

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“I have learned that our life experience with the vulnerable is a like a light. We can read our past history and our future through this light”

Kathy, responsible for the mission of L’Arche in Palestine, at a meeting in Fayoum, Egypt, in 2008.

Yet this light and this transformative effect is not a given. One has to go beyond the difficulty of daily life in the community and open up to the spiritual fruits of this life. Tania says:

“Each day I discover something new with the core members. I have become ‘addicted’ to their presence. I think that those who did not stay were unable to see past the difficulty of the work. They had not discovered what was hidden inside.”

Tania, an assistant in L’Arche in Mymensingh, at a meeting in Bangladesh in 2011.

Tania also describes concretely the transformative effect of this brotherhood:

Today I am taking initiatives with our core members and their families. Community life has changed me. There is a deep peace and trust that dwells in my heart, allowing me to face difficulties and the unexpected.

Tania, an assistant in L’Arche in Mymensingh, at a meeting in Bangladesh in 2011.

In the French context, Yamin also describes the transformative effect that not only strengthens each person but allows each one to accept oneself fully and as one is:

“In the beginning I was sometimes trying to hide who I am. More and more I realise that there is no problem and I am accepted as I am. This is easier with core members than with assistants though.”

Yamin, an assistant in L’Arche in France, at a meeting in Trosly in 2012.

This brotherhood or friendship is actually what is demanded from all persons living in the community, be they core members or assistants, and the transformation is reciprocal, as well as the learning:

What are the needs of the Muslim members of the community?

- Friendship.

Reply of parents of Muslim core members in Kerala, India, in 2014.

The expression “The call of the poor,” used often in L’Arche, did not mean anything to me until I encountered Salman in a hospital in Kuwait. Touching him touched me deeply. He wanted relationship;
he moved from one person to another, shaking their hands to communicate. He fought hard to keep us from leaving him. He cried. For me this is the call of the person with a handicap. He/She wants to have a relationship.

Yamin, an assistant in L’Arche in France, at a meeting in Fayoum in 2008.

We live together and learn from the experience with our core members about love and how to welcome others...

Israfil, an assistant in L’Arche Mymensingh, Bangladesh, at a meeting in Trosly in 2012.

At the beginning I thought I had knowledge that I could transmit to the core members in the workshops. I was told: Make sure that you also receive, as the exchange in enriching. I understood how L’Arche takes care of persons with disabilities with all their value.

Dina, an assistant at L’Arche Mog el Hobb in Alexandria, Egypt, at a meeting in Lebanon in 2015.

A threefold relationship

This transformative effect is actually the effect of pure love between brothers and sisters, which is heightened in the case of intellectual disability, where one experiences the purity of love that is not connected to personal interests and material needs. This love is exemplified in a hadith called the hadith of those who love each other in God:

The Prophet said: “Among God’ worshipers, there are people who are neither prophets nor martyrs, but prophets and martyrs envy them on the Last Day.” He was asked: Who are they? He replied: “These are people who loved each other in God, without being relatives nor having common gain. By God, their faces are light, and they are guided by light. They shall have no fear on the Day where people will fear, and they shall have no sadness, and he quoted the Qur’an: ‘In truth, the friends of God will be safe from all fear and will not be saddened’ (Yunus 10:62).”

True brotherhood, true friendship is thus also a closeness with God, as it allows one to live the practices of faith in a different light and with a deeper meaning.

I have learned that the presence of the person with a handicap reveals the beauty and the importance of my relationship to God. The presence of a person with a handicap allows the encounter of people of other faiths. The relationship with a person with a handicap is a mirror that reflects the beauty of my own faith.

Nadia, an assistant in L’Arche in France, at a meeting in Fayoum, Egypt, in 2008.

My experience in Alsafina (L’Arche in Syria) was very enriching on the spiritual level. Now I am more aware of the contents of the Qur’an.
There was an autistic person in the workshop, Fadi. When he heard the call to prayer, he used to pull my sleeve. I told myself that God was calling me through him. He used to ask me if I did my ablutions. We prayed together, with Fatima, a 25-year-old autistic woman who was very happy to wear the prayer clothes. Fatima did not know how to perform the different steps and gestures of the prayer, so Fadi would teach her. These moments have marked me deeply and their memory remains very strong.

Majdoleen, responsible for the contact group in Kuwait, at a meeting in Fayoum in 2008.

In my own experience, it is very different to live Ramadan in the presence of persons with handicaps: it is a moment when we feel the most vulnerable and this vulnerability joins the vulnerability of persons with handicaps. It is something of the same order that is shared. Ramadan thus takes all its meaning with persons with handicaps.

Wassim, a member of the contact group in Kuwait, at a meeting in Fayoum in 2008.

**Mending and healing**

In fact, one can witness that from this brotherhood and friendship, both core members and assistants receive a form of healing that mends their relationship to themselves, to others, and to God.

I come from a Muslim family that is quite open and not very religious. I was a volunteer for one year at L’Arche. At that time I wanted to be a sports teacher. I used to play sports for six to seven hours per week. An injury put me in a situation of vulnerability. The people from L’Arche used to visit me and ask how I was doing. They would come by minivan to my house. This is the true meaning of friendship. They used to tell me: “Don’t stay home, come to the workshop!” Then I decided to study music and civic education, because the relationship with the persons with disability changed me. When I was weak, they accepted me. This transformed my life qualitatively. The people close to me and my parents did not understand it. I also started to feel responsible in my religion. My relationship with persons with disabilities made me unconsciously responsible towards them, I had to be an example myself. I had seen how they had accepted my weakness. If we allow them to give all that they have, they too can be transformed. This helped my faith grow.

Haytham, an assistant in L’Arche Bethlehem, Palestine, at a meeting in Lebanon in 2015.

I have learned from core members’ simplicity. If I am not feeling well, I go see them and they open me up again.

Dina, an assistant at L’Arche in Alexandria, Egypt, at a meeting in Lebanon in 2015.
My life in L’Arche has helped me reconcile with difficult things in my life, like the death of my mother. What I live in L’Arche transforms me, allows me to unify the different dimensions of my life.

Nadia, an assistant in L’Arche in France, at a meeting in Fayoum in 2008.

After some years, though, I felt a little upset with the people who were in charge. With the core members I felt something mysterious. They felt I was not really happy. Without words they showed me that they felt my sadness. It helped me to go beyond what was difficult and look for a solution.

Nadia, an assistant in L’Arche in France, at a meeting in Trosly in 2012.

The person with a handicap is so innocent, so authentic, that he/she directly makes all my armor fade away. At L’Arche, persons with a handicap start by asking: “What’s your name?” and everything else follows from that. In my case, my name and my face can make me the target of racism. When I was looking for internships I was refused many times because of that. With the persons with a handicap I never had that problem.

I was even surprised that no one at L’Arche ever asked me about the origin of my name. One day, a person with disability heard me speaking Arabic. She asked: “What are you speaking?” “Arabic,” I replied. She said: “Oh, you are an Arab?” I said: “Well, can’t you see it from the way I look?” And she said: “Well, no.”

Bit by bit I felt things relaxing, I became more comfortable. Persons with a disability taught me to relativize, to put my questions in the right place. This peace allows me to be much more open and more apt to perceive what is in the depths of myself.

Yamin, an assistant in L’Arche in France, at a meeting in Fayoum, Egypt, in 2008.

The community has allowed me to discover my own gifts and capabilities. I work on the computer, I can study, I have more potential. Before, I was a “hard” person, I answered back to each act of “aggression,” but since then I have understood that answering back does not make me any different from the aggressor. One day my mother said to me, “You have become a very spiritual person.”

Tania, an assistant in L’Arche Mymensingh, at a meeting in Bangladesh in 2011.

Years ago a group of people walked into the compound of our community in Bangalore carrying a person who was naked, unable to speak coherently or to walk... They said to the community: this person cannot survive on the street, will you take him?

He seemed to respond to Urdu, so we thought he could be Muslim; he had to have a name, and because he might have been Muslim they called him Abdullah. The welcome was chaotic, but little by little he started to find his place in the group.
Every Friday the assistants took him to the nearby Mosque. The problem was he shouted and refused to wear long trousers, but still they would take him there.

One day the assistant accompanying him went with him to the big mosque on the other side of the city...

Of course Abdullah started shouting and they were asked to leave. As they were leaving, someone in the mosque cried out: “Ilias!” Abdullah turned around. The man said “This is my cousin, Ilias.” His father and his sister came to the community: Abdullah took his father around showing him the place where he lived. The assistants thought that the father had come to take Abdullah home, but then the father said “No, he’s found a life here, he has grown, he has learned to work, to walk... but I want to invite you all to my place.” The next day he sent a bus to transport the entire community to his house.

It seems that one day, Abdullah’s mother had left him for a moment, and he rushed out of the house and into a rickshaw. The driver started out and then became aware that Abdullah could not communicate, so he left him at the hospital. The family went to the police to let them know that Abdullah was missing, and we went to the police to let them know that we had found a young man, but these facts were never put together. The mother had not left the house since his disappearance, and they believed he had been taken for the kidney trade...

When we honour what the person is, new life emerges... When we can just live together as human beings then there is healing, restoration, dignity, hope, witness...

Eileen, L’Arche International Vice Leader, at a meeting in Trosly in 2012.

At what times in your life did you feel close to God?

During those times when I had been neglected, when I felt lost. And also when my stepmother hit me...

Does God love Koushoun?

Allah never hits me. He consoles me. He loves me.

Koushoun, a core member at L’Arche Mymensingh, at a meeting in Bangladesh in 2011.

We are gifts to each other and to the world

From all the above examples of mutual healing and mending, it becomes clear that assistants and core members are gifts to each other.

One of the first elements of life in community is that we do not choose each other. We receive our brothers and sisters as a gift from God.

Fr. Jean Jacques Pérennès, o.p., at a meeting in Fayoum, Egypt, in 2008.
Yet this gift is not always easy. There are difficulties that assistants and core members go through, and sometimes there is a struggle to go on accepting this gift and not wanting to return it!

I think the first step is to say, “I want to stay in L’Arche,” and then I live into the reality of myself and of the other, beyond the honeymoon. Then there is the invitation to ask myself: “Do I still choose this, knowing that I can’t continue with my own strength, I can only choose it because it’s an invitation from God, because the relationships are given by God, because my Yes in this deepens my own relationship with God.

Eileen, L’Arche International Vice Leader, at a meeting in Trosly in 2012.

Finally, it is very important to remember that although we are endowed with these feelings as a community, as brothers and sisters who are a gift for each other, we are also asked never to have a closed community but to work on relations with others outside the community.

In the community we try to have good relationships within and outside the community. This is necessary for each human being, to have good relationships with everybody.

Israfil, an assistant in L’Arche Mymensingh, Bangladesh, at a meeting in Trosly in 2012.

Our group from L’Arche is important in the eyes of society.

When one of our core members misses prayer in the mosque, our neighbours are worried and they pass by.

Israfil, an assistant in L’Arche Mymensingh, Bangladesh, at a meeting in Kerala in 2014.

Only in this manner can L’Arche fully play its role as a sign for today’s world. Amira describes what she saw in the community of Al-Fulk in Egypt:

In society there can be so much pressure: I didn’t feel it in Al-Fulk.

It is incredible to think that Muslims went to a Christian centre for the session in Alexandria. It is a show of strength to share in times of conflict. It strengthens our relationships.

We cannot change international relations but we can change within ourselves and be ready to forgive. I learn patience from people with disabilities with regard to society that oppresses them a lot.

Amira, an assistant in L’Arche in Bethlehem, Palestine, at a meeting in Kerala in 2014.

From opening up to disability and to religious diversity, and from making from both the cement of humanity, L’Arche can be a sign of diversity, resilience, and peace in a world torn by rejection, discrimination, exclusion, and conflict.
On the Meaning of Divine Mercy in Islam

Amer Al Hafi

The name “The Most Merciful” (Al-Rahman) is a name unlike any other of the 99 names of God, for it supersedes all names and creatures. God says in the Qur’an: “The Most Merciful [who is] above the Throne established. To Him belongs what is in the heavens and what is on the earth and what is between them and what is under the soil.” (Taha 20:5-6)

There is in fact a close relationship between the Mercy of God and the creation of humanity, for Mercy has preceded all creation and encompasses all of it. God created the human person only to have mercy on him/her and to bring him/her closer to Him through the God-given ability to learn and be creative: “The Most Merciful, taught the Qur’an, created man, [And] taught him articulate thought.” (Al-Rahman 55:1-4)

The name “The Most Merciful” combines all meanings of beauty and beneficence. The more meanings of this name that are revealed to humans, the luckier they are in knowing the Qur’an and having articulate thought.

The name “The Most Merciful” is also the source of every kind of compassion and kindness between God’s creations. The one who is merciful is so by mercy from God, the Most Merciful, as expressed explicitly in God’s words: “So by mercy from God, [O Muhammad], you were lenient with them. And if you had been rude [in speech] and harsh in heart, they would have disbanded from about you. So pardon them and ask forgiveness for them and consult them in the matter.” (Al-Imran 3:159)

The Qur’an gave the name “The Most Merciful” only to God, and its meaning can be rightfully attributed to none other than Him, for His mercy is all-encompassing. God, however, gave the name “Very Merciful” (Al-Rahim), which is also one of His names, to His Prophet, for He says: “There has come to you a Messenger from among yourselves. Grievous to him is what you suffer; [he is] concerned over you and to the believiers is kind and mercifful.” (At-Tawba 9:128)

The Prophet is in fact the greatest example of divine mercy; Anas bin Malik thus reported: “I have never seen anyone more merciful to one’s family than God’s messenger.”

The mercy of God and fear of him

Divine mercy is the foundation and origin of everything; it encompasses all things and is overcome by none. In order to urge people to draw closer to His mercy, God ordered them to undertake useful actions that allow them to feel the meanings of mercy. He thus ordered them to pray: “And establish prayer and give alms (zakat) and obey the Messenger – that you may receive mercy” (An-Nour 24:56), and to reconcile: “So reconcile between your brothers, and fear God, that you may receive mercy” (Al-Hujurat 49:10). Therefore, whoever seeks God’s mercy must pray, give alms, and reconcile between people.

The wisdom of linking divine mercy to these matters is, as such, mercy for the human person, so that no one does injustice to him/herself or inflicts harm on others under the guise of divine mercy.

The believer should in fact balance between hope for divine mercy and fear of incurring God’s wrath: “(…) they hope for His mercy and fear His punishment. Indeed, the punishment of your Lord is ever feared.” (Al-Israa 17:57)

Combining mercy and fear has educational meanings that elevate personal work and refine behavior, as the Messenger of God (peace be upon him) said: “If believers had full knowledge of the chastisement of God, none would covet His Paradise; and were an unbeliever to know the mercy God has, none would despair of it.”24

Regardless of one’s problems, no person should ever despair of God’s mercy and forgiveness, for despair estranges humans from God and prevents them from returning to Him: “Say, ‘O My servants who have transgressed against themselves [by sinning], do not despair of the mercy of God. Indeed, God forgives all sins.’” (Az-Zumar 39:53)

Despairing of God’s mercy is the worst sin that a human may commit, for it denies God His greatest characteristic, i.e., mercy. Accordingly, the true believers are the ones who hope God will have mercy on them and His creation, whereas the disbelievers are the ones who despair of God’s mercy, whether for themselves or any of God’s creations.

Divine mercy is the origin and the end

God says in the Qur’an: “And when those come to you who believe in Our verses, say, ‘Peace be upon you. Your Lord has decreed upon Himself mercy: that any of you who does wrong out of ignorance and then repents after that and corrects himself – indeed, He is Forgiving and Merciful.’” (Al-Anaam 6:54)

Abu Hurairah narrated that the Messenger of God (peace be upon him) said: “Verily, when He created creation, God wrote it upon Himself, that: ‘My mercy prevails over My wrath.’”25

24 Sahih Muslim, vol. XVII, p. 70.
Mercy came before creation and before human responsibility (taklīf), before sin and repentance, before Paradise and Hellfire. Were it not for mercy, God would not have created the world, for it is through mercy and for mercy that His creation came to be. No creation would have come into existence out of the womb of Divine Providence if it were not encompassed by this absolute Mercy, whether we as creatures are aware of that or not. Nor can people’s sins conceal the mercy of the Lord of the worlds and the Most Merciful, for since the mercy of God prevails over His wrath, nothing can prevail over it.

The Messenger of God said: “Were you not to commit sins, God would create people who would commit sins and ask for forgiveness, so that He would forgive them.”

Universality of divine mercy

According to the Imam al-Ghazali: “God’s mercy is total and universal. It is total insofar as He wants to meet the needs of the needy, and it is universal insofar as it encompasses the deserving and undeserving alike, and prevails in the world and the hereafter.”

And the hadith about intercession reads: “On the Day of Resurrection when God takes from Fire everyone who has good in his heart equal to the weight of an atom, He says: ‘The angels have interceded, the apostles have interceded and the believers have interceded, and no one remains (to grant pardon) but the Most Merciful.’ He will then take a handful from Fire and bring out from it people who never did any good and who had been turned into charcoal, and will cast them into a river called the river of life; from it they will come forth like pearls with seals on their necks. The inhabitants of Paradise will recognize them and say: ‘Those are the ones who have been set free by the Compassionate One, Who has admitted them into Paradise without any (good) deed that they did or any good that they sent in advance.’”

Such is the intercession of the Most Merciful in the hereafter for those who have no good in their hearts equal to the weight of an atom and who never did any good, and this confirms that divine mercy goes beyond our limited notions.

God said in the Qur’an: “So if they deny you, [O Muhammad], say, ‘Your Lord is the possessor of vast mercy...’” (Al-Anaam 6:147)

Hence the fact that the doors of divine mercy remain open even to those who deny the message of prophets confirms that divine mercy is vast and inclusive of the disobedient.

In another hadith, the Messenger of God (peace be upon him) said: “God created mercy in one hundred parts and He retained with Him ninety-nine parts, and He has sent down upon the earth one part, and it

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is because of this one part that there is mutual love among the creation so much so that the animal lifts
up its hoof from its young one, fearing that it might harm it.”

So if merely one part of God’s mercy is enough for creatures to be merciful to one another other in this
world, what can the ninety-nine parts of mercy do on the Day of Resurrection?

When the Prophet, with his companions, saw after war a woman looking for her child to breastfeed him,
he said: “God is more kind to His servants than this woman is to her child.” If a mother’s mercy
towards her child is the primary example of human mercy, God’s mercy towards His servants is far
greater than that.

In another hadith, the Messenger of God said: “A man sinned greatly against himself (in another version:
he never did any good), and when death came to him he charged his sons, saying: ‘When I die, burn me,
then crush me and scatter [my ashes] into the sea, for, by God, if my Lord takes possession of me, He
will punish me in a manner in which He has punished no one [else].’ So they did that to him. God said
then to the earth: ‘Produce what you have taken’ – and there was the man! And God said to him: ‘What
induced you to do what you did?’ The man said: ‘Fear of You, O my Lord,’ and because of that God
forgave Him.”

If divine mercy embraced this man who never did any good and who doubted Resurrection and God’s
capacity to hold people accountable, how can we exclude any of His creation from such mercy?

Divine mercy is what brings a human being into Paradise. Were it not for this mercy, no one would cross
the threshold of Paradise regardless of his/her deeds! It is in this sense that the Messenger of God
(peace be upon him) said: “Nobody will enter Paradise with his deeds.’ We said: ‘Even you, O
Messenger of God?’ He said, ‘Even me unless God grants me His mercy.’

God’s mercy and love

God combines mercy and affection – which is one of the degrees of love – both of which are among the
99 names of God. Indeed, mercy is derived from the Most Mercifull, whereas affection is derived from
the name the Loving One (Al Wadud).

Affection is a divine gift with which God rewards His believers for their faith and good deeds, as in His
saying: “Indeed, those who have believed and done righteous deeds – the Most Mercifull will appoint for
them affection.” (Maryam 19:69)

This verse, which came in the Surah entitled Maryam, confirms God’s affection for Sayyida Maryam
(peace be upon her), and her position in the hearts of believers who follow Jesus and Muhammad
(peace be upon them). The affection appointed by God to His believers is the end sought by the pure at

29 Sahih Muslim, vol. XVII, p. 69.
30 Sahih Muslim, vol. XVII, p. 70.
31 Sahih Muslim, vol. XVII, p. 72.
32 Sahih Muslim, vol. XVII, p. 159.
heart. It is a gift from God to His believers, and it entails the love of creation towards them in addition to their love of God. This teaches us that God’s love comes hand in hand with the love of humans. He who is loved by God loves all things and is loved by all things.

There are four levels of affection: divine love for humans, humans’ love for God, humans’ love for Creation and, finally, the love of humans by the Creation. He who lives these four levels has received the full manifestation of God’s name: the Loving One (Al-Wadud).

Affection derives from the Most Merciful, as in the verse “The Most Merciful will appoint for them affection” (Maryam 19:69). It does not derive from the Name “the Victorious” or “the Compeller.” Indeed, the name “Most Merciful” is the source of every divine affection and love. It is the optimal name for all the meanings of divine beauty and giving. The Qur’an says that God placed in the hearts of the followers of Jesus compassion and mercy: “And we placed in the hearts of those who followed him (Jesus) compassion and mercy.” (Al-Hadid 57:27) This is in keeping with faith in Jesus whom the Qur’an described as a mercy from God: “We will make him a sign to the people and a mercy from Us.” (Maryam 19:21)

The Qur’an combined mercy and affection when speaking of marital relations: “And of His signs is that He created for you from yourselves mates that you may find tranquility in them; and He placed between you affection and mercy. Indeed in that are signs for a people who reflect.” (Ar-Rum 30:21)

Affection and mercy are the primary base for a perfect marital relationship between a man and a woman. This relationship is a microcosm for the relation between creation and the Creator, which embodies the deepest and most comprehensive meaning of affection and mercy.

Whoever believes in the Most Merciful does not seek causes of conflict and does not make hatred a basis for his/her thinking and behavior. The evil invoked by people to justify their hostility and hatred is incidental and passing, whereas good is original and preponderant.

**Divine mercy and human difference**

Whoever understands the meaning of all-encompassing divine mercy does not perceive difference between people as a pretext for hatred. Indeed, God created people of different colors, races, and religions, and this diversity derives from a hidden mercy, perceived by the pure hearted, for it pushes them to have the will and delve into reflection in seeking the best understanding of diversity in accordance with the divine truth, as God said: “And if your Lord had willed, He could have made mankind one community; but they will not cease to differ.” (Hud 11:118)

When we look at difference between people from this perspective, we will view the difference between civilizations, cultures, and religions as a blessing and mercy from God.

Divine mercy manifests in God’s creation of man as well as in His Love, compassion, beneficence, forgiveness, guidance, forbearance, and forgiveness. The more a human being understands these
meanings, the more this leads him/her to believing in total mercy, which is God, the Most Merciful, the All-Merciful.

The ultimate end for which God sent His messengers and prophets is mercy: “And we have not sent you, [O Muhammad], except as a mercy to the worlds.” (Al-Anbiya 21:107)

Are the values on which L’Arche is based Christian? I would say they are much more universal... How do we discover what is truly universal and speaks in many contexts?

Jean Vanier, at a meeting in Trosly in 2012

I discovered this community and prayer life at the service of core members, and noted the convergence with Christians in the community in their common desire to serve. This interreligious spirit is enriching for me, and confirms that difficulties come from our personal limitations more than anything else. There are some people outside the community who say that we are “living like Christians.” They do not understand that we share in common what is basically asked of us in all our religions: that is to help the weakest, and to help each other.

Tania, an assistant in L’Arche Mymensingh, at a meeting in Bangladesh in 2011.

My experience of this life is like having a bag and going to the market and putting things into the bag. I discover that we can learn something from different cultures, religions, and people. Local people, our family, L’Arche members have a mutual understanding as human beings.

God created us to love each other.

If we discuss what we belong to, we cannot live together. But when we work together, we all want to support and help each other.

In our community, we have lots of festivals, celebrations. And in daily life we support the core members. We invite people to see this so that they can understand us better. We live together in mutual respect.

When we go to pray we have support from people helping us to better know our religious tradition.

We take one day a week to discover the Christian tradition and one day to focus on Muslim tradition.

We are all learning from each other.

Israfil, an assistant in L’Arche Mymensingh, at a meeting in Trosly in 2012.

In other institutions that I know, people are called patients. Here, it’s a family, we eat together. I also learn about God.
An assistant would say “Salam” to me every morning, but I had been taught not to reply if the person was a non-Muslim. Then I discovered that he was using this term because he respected my religion. I am happy to work in L’Arche because it brings me closer to God, and then God blesses me more.

Shakeela, an assistant at Asha Niketan Nandi Bazaar, India, at a meeting in Kerala in 2014.
An Islamic Perception of Religious Diversity

Nayla Tabbara

“O people, fear your Lord, Who created you of a single soul, and from it created its mate, and from the pair of them scattered many men and women; and fear God by whom you claim [your rights] from one another and kinship ties. Surely God has been watchful over you.” (An-Nisaa 4:1)

We are all, as humans, created from one single soul, meaning that we are all one in principle. Yet, within this unity, God has willed us to be different.

His will to make us different did not stop at difference in language and color or shape. Strangely enough, the Qur’an tells us that God willed us to be different in our religious paths. He says in the Qur’an: “To every one of you, We have appointed a divine law and a way. If God had willed, He would have made you one community, but that He may try you in what He has given to you.” (Al-Ma’ida 5:48). Thus He did not want to make us one community of believers, but it was He who appointed to us a different divine law and way. In another verse He specifies: “To each is a direction towards which to turn; therefore compete in good deeds and towards the good. God will bring you all back to Him. For God has power over all things” (Al-Baqara 2:148) and “And for every community, We have appointed a [holy] rite that they might mention God’s Name over the livestock that He has provided them. For your God is One God, so submit to Him. And give good tidings to the humbly obedient.” (Al-Hajj 22:34)

This means that each community has its own practices and rituals, and that people are to respect and honor this diversity coming from God.

From exclusivism to pluralism

So why then are there people who in the name of Islam refuse other religions and disrespect other practices? This is because we have other verses in the Qur’an that make it harder to understand that diversity is willed by God. These verses are Al-Imran 3:19, which says: “Pure religion for God is Islam,” and Al-Imran 3:85: “Whoever desires a religion other than Islam, it shall not be accepted from him and in the Hereafter he shall be among the losers.” These verses and the verses mentioned above are in apparent contradiction, and we need the expertise of scholars in interpretation to help understand God’s message from this apparent contradiction.

Three solutions have been advanced. The first is the easy one that was taken by interpreters from the Middle Ages and still upheld by rigorist scholars and by extremist groups. This solution says that the two verses in Al-Imran abrogate the other verses. This means that for them these verses erase the other verses mentioned above as well as all other verses in the Qur’an that talk about diversity as a will of
God. Yet their solution, although easy, does not follow the methodology of the Qur’an or the methodology of abrogation. Because first, the Qur’an warns against taking parts of the Qur’an and refusing others saying: “What, do you believe in part of the Book, and disbelieve in part? What shall be the requital of those of you who do that, but degradation in the life of this world; and on the Day of Resurrection to be returned to the most terrible of chastisement?” (Al-Baqara 2:85). Second, abrogation is a concept related to practices, like the gradual banning of alcohol, so each verse is abrogated by the one following it in the chronology of revelation, and we move from the verse saying alcohol has good and bad in it, to the verse enjoining not to be intoxicated before doing the prayers, to the verse saying to move away from alcoholic drinks. In this case the two verses are not verses concerning legal issues, and they both belong to surah Al-Imran, that was revealed before the surah Al-Ma’ida that clearly mentions that religious diversity is willed by God.

Thus this first position is actually very weak.

Another position has been developed from the earliest times and it is to consider Islam in these verses as meaning Islam in the wide sense. Islam in the wide sense being larger than the religion of Islam, and it encompasses all religious paths that submit to God, according to the verse: “The best religion is to submit to God (aslama) while doing the good, following Abraham’s community, and God took Abraham for a well beloved.” (An-Nisa’ 4:125)

A third interpretation allows us to accept Islam in the strict sense as the best religion, but accepting at the same time other religions as also paths to God. In this way, all Muslims can truly say that the best religion is Islam, i.e., the best path to God, but at the same time respect other religions as sent from God and paths to Him.

In fact, the second and third interpretations are more in harmony with the rest of the Qur’an’s message about other religions. These are called pluralistic interpretations that accept other religions, and consider people in other religions as believers, while the first interpretation is called exclusivist and is based on takfir, i.e., on considering others as infidels.

**Salvation and recognition**

The Qur’an in fact promises salvation to the People of the Book (the Jews and the Christians), to the Sabeans (the religion of the followers of John the Baptist/Prophet Yahya), and to all those who believe in God and in the Day of Judgment (meaning those who believe that we are responsible for our actions and that we all will return to God) and who do good deeds. In fact, the same verse with minor changes is repeated twice in the Qur’an as if to underline that salvation is promised to all those mentioned: “Those who believe, and those who follow Judaism, and the Christians and the Sabians – any who believe in God and the Last Day, and work righteousness, shall have their reward with their Lord; on them shall be no fear, nor shall they grieve” (Al-Baqara 2:62) and: “Those who believe, those who follow Judaism, the Sabians and the Christians – any who believe in God and the Last Day, and work righteousness – on them shall be no fear, nor shall they grieve” (Al-Ma’ida 5:69). The expression “on them shall be no fear nor
shall they grieve” means that they are not to fear the last judgment and after that judgment they will be happy. This means that they are promised Paradise by God, who is the one God, and the God of all: “And do not dispute with the People of the Book unless it be for the good and in the most virtuous way, except [in the case of] those of them who have done wrong, and say: ‘We believe in that which has been revealed to us and revealed to you our God and your God is one and the same, and to Him we submit.” (Al-Ankabut 29:46)

Yet the Qur’an is very careful not to generalize. Thus another verse explains that salvation is not a matter of identity but is related to our actions: “Not your desires, nor those of the People of the Book (can prevail): whoever works evil will be requited accordingly. Nor will he find, besides God, any protector or helper. If any do deeds of righteousness – be they male or female – and have faith, they will enter Heaven, and not the least injustice will be done to them.” (An-Nisa’ 4:123–124) Thus we do not go to Paradise because we are Muslims or Christians or Jews or belong to this or that religion, but based on our good deeds, and of course based on God’s mercy.

Also, the Qur’an is very careful in naming groups. Although some of our imams tend to call followers of other religions infidels (kufrar) or associators (mushrikin), the Qur’an uses these two terms only to talk about the polytheists of Makka who were fighting the Prophet and the first Muslims. For the other religions the Qur’an either calls them People of the Book (mainly for Judaism and Christianity) or calls them by their name: Christians, Jews, Sabeans, Mazdaens. The Qur’an does mention kufr (infidelity) in other religions only when pointing out differences in dogma, but never calls the others infidels or associators except for the polytheists of Makka.

Finally, although the Qur’an only mentions four religions, some Muslim scholars believe that it opened for us the way to consider many other religions as sent from God, as it talks about diversity in general as a will of God, but also as it has verses such as Fatir 35:24: “Truly We have sent you with the truth, as a bearer of good tidings, and a warner. And there never was a people, without a warner having lived among them.” This means that all humans have received a prophet or messenger. The Qur’an adds in Surah An-Nisaa’ 4:163–164: “We have revealed to you as We revealed to Noah, and the prophets after him, and We revealed to Abraham and Ismael and Isaac, and Jacob, and the Tribes, and Jesus and Job and Jonah and Aaron, and Solomon, and We gave to David the Inscribed Book. And messengers We have told you of before, and messengers We have not told you of.” Thus the Qur’an says that God sent messengers to all nations but that He did not mention their names to us in the Qur’an. This has allowed many scholars over the centuries to consider other religions such as Hinduism and Buddhism as religions sent by God, although not mentioned directly in the Qur’an.

Relationship with people from other religions

The first step of relationships with people of other religions is recognition, i.e., recognition that what they follow is a religion and that this religion is willed by God. Following that come different steps in the relationship.
“O mankind! We have indeed created you from a male and a female, and made you nations and tribes so that you may come to know one another (Li-ta’arafu). Truly the noblest of you in the sight of God is the most God-fearing among you. Truly God is Knower, Aware.” (Al-Hujurat 49:13) This verse is always quoted in encounters of dialogue because it carries a call for opening up to others, going towards them and meeting them. Some scholars also explain “so that you may come to know one another (Li-ta’arafu)” as being an order from God to go to others from different ethnicities and religions, to meet them and know about them. Yet other verses in the Qur’an invite Muslims not to take Jews or Christians for allies, and some people translate it as not taking them as friends, such as the verse: “O you who believe, do not take Jews and Christians as allies; they are allies and protectors of each other. Whoever amongst you affiliates with them, he is one of them. God does not guide the folk who do wrong.” (Al-Ma’ida 5:51) There are even verses that call for fighting the People of the Book, and these are verses taken as such by today’s extremists: “Fight those of the People of the Book who believe not in God nor the Last Day, nor hold that forbidden which hath been forbidden by God and His Messenger, nor acknowledge the religion of Truth, until they pay the tribute (Jizya) with willing submission, and feel themselves subdued.” (At-Tawba 9:29)

But the well-versed scholars know that these verses are to be understood in their context. They were revealed at the time of fighting between the first Muslim community and some Jewish tribes in Medina, thus the call to fight is limited to that period of time and to that area, and the call to beware from taking Jews and Christians as allies refers to allies of war during this period of conflict. Otherwise, the Qur’an calls for more than friendly relations with other religions, especially with the People of the Book.

“Today the good things are permitted to you, and the food of those who were given the Scripture is permitted to you, and permitted to them is your food. Likewise, the believing married women, and the married women of those who were given the Scripture before you, if you give them their wages in wedlock, and not illicitly, or taking them as lovers” (Al-Ma’ida 5:5). This means that the Qur’an calls for close relations with People of the Book, especially for eating together, allowing eating from their food (except that which has been proscribed by Islam such as pork meat and alcohol), but also calls for intermarriage between Muslim men and women from the People of the Book.

Moreover, in Al-Ma’ida 5:48, “To every one of you, We have appointed a divine law and a way. If God had willed, He would have made you one community, but that He may try you in what He has given to you. So vie with one another in good works; to God you shall all return, and He will then inform you of that in which you differed.” God calls us to deal with people of all religions with respect of their religion as willed by God, to share responsibility with them for doing good on earth, and not to waste time in discussions and arguments about the differences of our dogma but to know that we will all return to God, and that He will explain to us in the end our differences and the reasons behind them.

Recognition of the other’s religious experience, books, and houses of worship

In addition to calling for good relations, the Qur’an invites us to recognize the wisdom and the light in other religious books, saying: “Surely We revealed the Torah, wherein is guidance, and light” (Al-Baqara
5:44), and “And We caused Jesus son of Mary to follow in their footsteps, confirming the Torah before him; and We gave to him the Gospel, wherein is guidance and light, confirming the Torah before it, and as a guidance and an admonition to the God-fearing.” (Al-Baqara 5:46)

More than that, the Qur’an asks Muslims to turn to the People of Book to ask for their guidance when we do not understand passages in the Qur’an as the Qur’an and the Bible are so close to each other: “So, if you are in doubt concerning what We have revealed to you, then question those who read the Scripture before you. Verily the Truth from your Lord has come to you; so do not be of the waverers.” (Yunus 10:94)

Finally, the Qur’an not only recommends recognizing and respecting the houses of worship of the other religions but considers all houses of worship of God as places where Muslims can pray in deep faith and sincerity as it considers that all humans have to respect and can pray in any place appointed for worship: “Say [ô Muhammad]: “My Lord has commanded equity. Direct your faces to Him in all places of worship and implore Him with sincere faith” (Al-A’raf 7:29) and “O sons of Adam, wear your ornaments in all places of worship.” (Al-A’raf 7:31)

When I pray I am in contact with Allah. When I wake up, I thank Him for my day. I ask Him to give me the courage to do what I need to do. With the people in my home, I feel that I am with Allah. I can’t see Him but I see Him through these people.

For example, we asked Kushum from the community: “Why do you like to stay in L’Arche? And why do you love Allah?”

She replied: “I like being in L’Arche because Allah gives me food to eat there.”

With Christian assistants, I am careful not to discuss religious questions. I feel happy when Christian assistants get up early with me during Ramadan and when they let me rest when I need to.

Before coming to L’Arche, I thought that it was shameful to be Christian. My view has changed. When I hear biblical texts, I realize that they can be inspiring. I think it is important to teach the Muslim core members about the Muslim faith and I am careful about what I say because Christian assistants are listening to me and I don’t want to give them a bad impression.

Today, I know that I can participate in the joy that emerges from religious celebrations that are different from my own.

Tania, an assistant in L’Arche Pushpo Nir, Mymensingh, Bangladesh, at a meeting in Kerala in 2014.

I thank God that I am in L’Arche. When times are hard I ask Him to show me the right thing to do. Thanks to the pre-foundation group and to Jean Vanier, I have understood that they were not trying to make us Christian but simply human.

Because we don’t have a L’Arche home, we don’t have time for prayer or any religious practice. Nothing is specifically Christian or Muslim: we just respect each other.
People from other religions, through their questions and way of being, make me think about my own religion.

Some believe that they possess the truth and know better than others. People with disabilities just give with an open heart. We are “contaminated” by them.

We live the spirit of prayer through relationships.

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<th>Amira, an assistant in Maan lil-Hayat, L’Arche Bethlehem, Palestine, at a meeting in Kerala in 2014.</th>
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Religion is very necessary for me. I am a Muslim. I go to the Namaz and I also follow the rule of fasting and reading the Holy Qur’an. I also serve others. Before coming to L’Arche I knew only about my own religion, but now I become familiar with the Christian religion also, and a little with Hinduism. I am really happy with these experiences. In every religion people are invited to walk along the right path. We learn not to misbehave with each other. Every person needs the guidance of religion. The creator is one. He gives us life and strength. We are asked to respect the religion of each person.

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<th>Aley, an assistant in Pushpo Nir, Mymensingh, Bangladesh, from the booklet prepared by L’Arche Bangladesh Pushpo Nir Community in 2014.</th>
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On Social Responsibility in Islam

Amr Abdelaty Saleh

“Social responsibility” is an ethical framework which suggests that an entity, be it an individual or even a community, has an obligation to act for the benefit of society at large. This responsibility can be passive, by avoiding engaging in socially harmful acts, or active, by performing activities that directly advance social goals. It is a commitment that everyone should have towards society – contributing towards social, cultural, and ecological causes.\(^{33}\)

To understand the relation between this term and the religion of Islam, we need to start by recalling some facts about Islam as seen by Muslims.

Islam is the fullness of the divine revelation to humanity through the prophet of Islam Muhammad (peace be upon him), the last ring in the chain of prophets before him, such as Adam, Noah, Abraham, David, Moses, and Jesus. Islam is first and foremost a personal journey to God, the One, Allah. Yet it is important to emphasize that Islam is not an individualistic type of religion or a religion that “exclusively” focuses on the human-to-God relationship. It also focuses on human-to-human relationships. Therefore any classical book of Fiqh – Islamic Jurisprudence – consists of two major parts: Ibadat or acts of worship and Mua’malat or dealings with others.

Moreover, despite the individual responsibility that is part of each person’s faith and deeds in Islam, the Qur’an addresses the congregation of Muslims, in plural form, when addressing these individual obligations: O believers, believe in God and His messenger, O believers establish prayer, O believers, pay the poor due, and the same thing for the pilgrimages. We find the same use of the plural addressing pronoun when the Qur’an is warning Muslims about adultery: O believers, do not approach adultery. Even when addressing an economic ruling as the prohibition of usury, the Qur’an addresses the Muslim community rather than just the Muslim individual.

These examples reveal that Islam is not just a personal journey to God, carried by an individual, but it is also a journey that should be made within a caravan. Indeed, the caravan and the individual must share the same destination and travel routine. Furthermore, the travelers must be willing to support and protect one another when help is needed. This image is understood from the Qur’anic verse (Al-Tawba 9:71) that tells us that the Believers, men and women, are protectors one of another: they enjoin what is just and forbid what is evil: they observe regular prayers, practice regular charity, and obey Allah and His Messenger, On them will Allah pour His mercy: for Allah is Exalted in power, Wise.

Such understanding might explain to us the prohibition of monastic life in Islam, even if every individual is responsible to justify her/his deeds in this life to God in person (“And all of you are coming to God on

the Day of Resurrection alone”)\textsuperscript{34} and shall be asked – in person – about every aspect of his/her life as illustrated by the hadith narrated by At-Tirmidhi that Abu Barzah reported: The Messenger of Allah (peace be upon him) said, “Man’s feet will not move on the Day of Resurrection before he is asked about his life, how did he consume it, his knowledge, what did he do with it, his wealth, how did he earn it and how did he dispose of it, and about his body, how did he wear it out.”\textsuperscript{35}

These meanings can be emphasized by another hadith in which the prophet Mohammad (peace and grace be upon him) says, “A believer is, for another believer, like a single body. If one of the organs is in pain, all other parts of that body are also troubled.”\textsuperscript{36} This metaphor that illustrates the connection between the individual and the collective in Islam points, in the Islamic heritage, to what we today call “social responsibility.”

The concept of social responsibility – according to Islam – has different degrees that start with a person’s responsibility towards him/herself, then towards his/her family, then towards his/her community, then towards the whole society, and finally towards all the societies that exist on Earth. This responsibility is not limited to other human beings only, but it is extended to birds, animals, plants, and even insects, which are all understood as communities in Islam. For example, the Qur’an says, “And there is no creature on [or within] the earth or bird that flies with its wings but [that they are] societies like you. We have not neglected in the Book a thing.”\textsuperscript{37} But as we stated earlier, the core and the heart of this frame of social responsibility is the Muslim individual him/herself. One can’t do anything to others if one neglects oneself. No one can imagine a good football, volleyball, or any sport team without good individuals (teammates). The first step thus is to be good yourself so that you might be good for others. Allah says in the Qur’an: “and by the soul and by Him Who perfectly proportioned it* and imbued it with (the consciousness of) its evil and its piety* He who purifies it will prosper* and he who suppresses it will be ruined.”\textsuperscript{38} This is a profound verse that expresses the Islamic perception of the human being. It is an oath that God makes by the soul He created, and by Himself who adjusted and regulated it to be suitable to the task given to it – to follow our conscience and to choose what is right. Islam emphasizes that even when people give a person answers (fatwa), one must always double check them with her/his own heart/conscience; Wabisah bin Mabad reported: I went to Messenger of Allah (peace be upon him) and he asked me, “Have you come to inquire about piety?” I replied in the affirmative. Then he said, “Ask your heart regarding it. Piety is that which contents the soul and comforts the heart, and sin is that which causes doubts and perturbs the heart, even if people pronounce it lawful and give you verdicts on such matters again and again.”\textsuperscript{39}

The Qur’an also teaches us to seek through the wealth that Allah has given us to make our abode in the Hereafter, and also not to forget our share from this world; and to do good to others as Allah has done.

\textsuperscript{34} Qur’an 19:95.
\textsuperscript{35} Jami’ at-Tirmidhi. Chapters on the description of the Day of Judgment, Ar-Riqaq, and Al-Wara’.
\textsuperscript{36} Sahih Muslim. The Book of Virtue, Enjoining Good Manners, and Joining of the Ties of Kinship.
\textsuperscript{37} Qur’an 6:38.
\textsuperscript{38} Qur’an 91:7–10.
\textsuperscript{39} Ahmad and Ad- Darmi in Riyad as-Salihin, The Book of Miscellany.
good to us; and to try not to make mischief on the earth, for Allah does not like the mischief-makers.\textsuperscript{40} Being ordered to “do good to others as God has done good to us” takes us to the second level of social responsibility, which could include one’s own family, neighbors, colleagues, friends, fellow citizens, fellow humans, and even fellow life-beings as we mentioned before. The Qur’an asks us to protect ourselves as well as our kindred from the devil and thus from the Hell fire: “Believers, guard yourselves and your kindred against a Fire whose fuel is human beings and stones.”\textsuperscript{41}

Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) made it clear to Muslims that each of us is a “shepherd” or a “guardian” who is responsible to his/her own folk/subjects; The Prophet (peace be upon him) said: “All of you are guardians and are responsible for your subjects; the ruler is a guardian of his subjects, the man is a guardian of his family, the woman is a guardian and is responsible for her husband’s house and his offspring; and so all of you are guardians and are responsible for your subjects.”\textsuperscript{42} This \textit{hadith}, recorded by the six major books of Sunnah, teaches that all of us are guardians and are responsible for people under our care. And since Muslims believe that the human being is the \textit{khalifa} or God’s vicegerent on earth,\textsuperscript{43} the entire universe is under each person’s care, and we are thus shepherds and guardians of the entire universe in general and of every living creature in particular as it is stated in the following \textit{hadith}: Abu Hurairah reported: Messenger of Allah (peace be upon him) said, “While a man was walking on his way he became extremely thirsty. He found a well, he went down into it to drink water. Upon leaving it, he saw a dog that was panting out of thirst. His tongue was lolling out and he was eating moist earth from extreme thirst. The man thought to himself: This dog is extremely thirsty as I was. So he descended into the well, filled up his leather sock with water, and holding it in his teeth, climbed up and quenched the thirst of the dog. Allah appreciated his action and forgave his sins.”\textsuperscript{44} The Companions asked: “Shall we be rewarded for showing kindness to the animals also?” He (peace be upon him) said, “A reward is given in connection with every living creature.”\textsuperscript{45} The prophet is not only emphasizing the responsibility of Muslims towards every living creature, but also expressing a divine appreciation for those carrying out such responsibility.

Indeed, this responsibility can be narrowed down to one’s community. The teachings of Islam on this are countless and we can tell that Islam is making it very clear that looking after the venerable members of the community – the weak travelers of the caravan – is equal to – in the sight of God – the highest level of performing acts of worship; Abu Hurairah reported: The Prophet (peace be upon him) said, “One who strives to help the widows and the poor is like the one who fights in the way of Allah – \textit{Mujahid}.” The narrator said: I think that he (peace be upon him) added also: “I shall regard him as the one who stands up (for prayer) without rest and as the one who observes fasts continuously.”\textsuperscript{46}

\textsuperscript{40} Qur’an 28:77.
\textsuperscript{41} Qur’an 66:6.
\textsuperscript{42} Bukhari and Muslim.
\textsuperscript{43} See Qur’an 2:30, for example.
\textsuperscript{44} Another narration says: “Once a dog was going round the well and was about to die from thirst. A prostitute of Banu Israel – the children of Israel – happened to see it. So she took off her leather sock and lowered it into the well. She drew out some water and gave the dog to drink. She was forgiven on account of her action.”
\textsuperscript{45} Bukhari and Muslim.
\textsuperscript{46} Bukhari and Muslim.
This *hadith* is not an exception; on another occasion, the Prophet (peace be upon him) marked the best Muslim houses not by the ones full of scholars, prayers or recitations of the Qur’an. Abu Hurairah reported that the Messenger of Allah, may Allah bless him and grant him peace, said, “The best house among the Muslims is the house in which orphans are well treated. The worst house among the Muslims is the house in which orphans are ill-treated. I and the guardian of the orphan will be neighbors in Paradise like that,” indicating his two fingers.47 I don’t know any other occasion where the prophet promises such close relationship to him (peace be upon him) ...

In one final example we can see a dialogue between God and one of us – a son of Adam – on the Day of Judgment.48 This dialogue emphasizes the divine appreciation of those carrying out their responsibility towards others: Allah (mighty and sublime be He) will say on the Day of Resurrection: O son of Adam, I fell ill and you visited Me not. He will say: O Lord, and how should I visit You when You are the Lord of the worlds? He will say: Did you not know that My servant So-and-so had fallen ill and you visited him not? Did you not know that had you visited him you would have found Me with him? O son of Adam, I asked you for food and you fed Me not. He will say: O Lord, and how should I feed You when You are the Lord of the worlds? He will say: Did you not know that My servant So-and-so asked you for food and you fed him not? Did you not know that had you fed him you would surely have found that (the reward for doing so) with Me? O son of Adam, I asked you to give Me to drink and you gave Me not to drink. He will say: O Lord, how should I give You to drink when You are the Lord of the worlds? He will say: Did you not know that My servant So-and-so asked you to give him to drink and you gave him not to drink. Had you given him to drink you would have surely found that with Me.49

In the previous paragraphs, I have attempted to explain the term “social responsibility” from an Islamic perspective; how does Islam, the religion that – on one hand – teaches and emphasizes individual responsibility for each one’s deeds in this life, give – on the other hand – great importance to one’s social responsibility towards one’s community, society, all human societies, and even non-human societies? This responsibility is considered not only as the summit of the acts of worship, but also as a guaranteed path towards each Muslim heart’s yearning, the company of the beloved Muhammad (peace be upon him).

When I was younger, I wanted to be a good student and open a business. But my family was unable to financially support me to continue with my studies. As my father couldn’t take care of me, I decided to take care of myself. I left my family home when I was 15 and went to Dacca. I did different jobs – dishwashing, construction work, and painting. I took young people with me whom I had fed and lodged

48 A similar dialogue is to be found in previous revelations to Man before the Qur’an, see Matthew 25:42–43, for example.
49 Muslim.
and who then worked with me. But after a fall, I realized that all of that had been for nothing because when I woke up at the hospital, everyone had disappeared. That was my first lesson.

I became a beggar at the Mazar, when a person invited me to her home. She asked me what I wanted to do with my life. I answered “study,” but that I hadn’t had the time for it.

In this orphanage there were many people with a disability – most of them are now in the community. A man asked me to take care of these people. This was my first experience with people with disabilities. I was paid five euros a month. I became an assistant in that house. This “community” moved to Mymensingh after scandals broke out at the orphanage. I was one of the few assistants who accepted to move.

Life was difficult, there was no pay, and there wasn’t enough food... I left Mymensingh for Dacca, only to come back a little later.

I got to know the community of L’Arche through a brother of Taizé (Guillaume), and this was the brother who had asked the person in Dacca to “recuperate” people with disabilities. That was how I got to know L’Arche.

Later, I learned that my parents thought I was dead. I realized then how much love they felt for me.

I am happy to be here. I want to help the community to become even better. I help assistants when they come – I have seen many come and go. I have learned a lot about the learning process at L’Arche, about spirituality.

-You worked with people with disabilities in a particularly difficult context. Where did you find the strength to do that, and to continue?

I couldn’t leave them. It was that simple. I received more love from them than from my own family. Today I have started to visit my family again, but my place is here with the people of the community. It is like Salma, for example (a core member). I believe that God entrusted to us the responsibility of these people. In some way it is a sort of mission that He has entrusted to me.

Wadud, an assistant in L’Arche Mymensing, at a meeting in Bangladesh in 2011.
On Leadership in Islam: 
a Commitment to Teach and to Serve

Amr Abdelaty Saleh

In the absence of contemporary models of Islamic leadership, Muslims are lost between Islamic values, Western ideals and theories, and the inability to reclaim the beacons of Islam. Leadership in Islam is not a one-way concept where people blindly follow the leader; rather it is a process where a leader guides willing followers. The willingness to follow a leader is the same that Muslims display when they gather in collective worship, i.e., prayer and pilgrimage, also when they fulfill their duties such as paying zakat (almsgiving) and fasting. These acts of worship are done out of submission to the one God, Whose final Messenger Muhammad (peace be upon him) was not only the best leader of the nation but also the best follower of God, and it is his character, in every way of life, that Muslims seek to emulate. Allah addresses us in the Qur’an by saying:

“You have indeed in the Messenger of Allah a beautiful standard character for anyone whose hope is in Allah and the Final Day, and who engages much in the praise of Allah.” (Al-Ahzab 33:21)

So Muhammad (peace be upon him) is the one every Muslim individual should aspire to live up to, even though we know that we can never be as sincere, as committed, as caring, as wise, or as just as him. But he is the role model, and that is important; indeed, leadership is one of the fields in which Muslims aspire to follow the beautiful standard model of Mohammad (peace be upon him). Naturally what the Prophet says and advises us to do is of utmost importance. In one hadith, he (peace be upon him) is quoted to have said:

Every person is the shepherd of a flock: the leader is a shepherd and will be asked about his flock. The husband is a shepherd of his household and shall be asked about his flock. The wife is a shepherd of her household and shall be asked about her flock… All of you are shepherds and all of you shall be asked about your own flock. (Bhukhari: 901)

This hadith emphasizes the importance of social responsibility on every level, and it underlines that everyone bears a certain amount of responsibility according to his or her social position. In the same spirit another hadith affirms the Arabic proverb: “The weakest is the leader of the caravan” (Ahmad: 16528) because according to the Prophet (peace be upon him), the weakest is the one who determines the pace, so that everyone arrives safely. The leader therefore is not only a chief, but also a guardian or a shepherd to his flock; in the words of Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him), “The leader is the servant of his followers.” (Narrated by Al-Khatib in his History: 10/187.) In today’s world, this means that every shepherd of any flock has to not only act as a chief but also as a committed servant who is serving
and looking after his caravan, paying special attention that no one, especially the weakest ones, are left behind!

This is to be applied at all the different levels and kinds of leadership; governments have to not only be committed to the responsibility of leadership they carry. They need to act as servants to the people and to pay special attention to minority groups, the weak, and the less-advantaged groups among the nation.

Likewise, teachers need to feel responsible and committed to their educational leadership. Serving and paying extra attention to the less-advantaged students as well as respecting and meeting the special needs of the students from ethnic and religious minorities will make our schools function much better.

Parents who follow the teachings we have just described feel responsible and committed to parenthood and serve well their little flock, making sure that all children receive the amount of care, patience, and love that is required to grow up well and to live a dignified life. Indeed, they will be aware that the children with mental and/or physical disabilities require more patience, love, and care than their able-bodied siblings.

It becomes clearer by looking at the weakest people in a society: we can see if real leadership is practiced, and if those in power take seriously their responsibilities of serving their people, or whether they seek their position for personal gain. Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) urged Muslims to appoint a leader, even if they are on a trip with just three members; “If you were three, elect a leader.” (Al-Bazzar: 329 § Al-Sana’ni: 6960) Likewise when Muslims pray together, they appoint one of them to lead the prayer.

The Muslim leader has many responsibilities; as emphasized by the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him), his role is to protect his community against tyranny and oppression, to encourage God-consciousness and taqwa, and to promote justice. 50

A responsibility like this should not be taken lightly. In fact, the Prophet Muhammad has warned us against entering into a position of authority on our own accounts by saying:

“Do not ask for a position of authority, for if you are granted this position as a result of your asking for it, you will be left alone (without God’s help to discharge the responsibilities involved in it), and if you are granted it without making any request for it, you will be helped (by God in the discharge of your duties).” (Bukhari: 6704)

An exception to this rule can be made only when a person sees a potential crisis or disaster and he has the necessary expertise required to deal with it; in this case one may offer to do a certain task, as Prophet Yusuf did, when he requested: “Set me over the storehouses of the land; I will indeed guard them with full knowledge.” (Yusuf: 55) Dealing with public affairs exposes people to different interests and pressures. In order to allow the appointed government officials to do their job honestly and with the best interests of their people at heart, it is necessary for them to be free from financial temptation. Allah has ordered that those responsible for collecting Sadaqat (Alms) be paid out of Sadaqat:

50 For more details, read Chapter 2 of Badawi and Beekun: Leadership, an Islamic Perspective, 1999.
“Alms are for the poor and the needy, and those employed to administer (the funds); for those whose hearts have been (recently) reconciled (to the truth); for those in bondage, and in debt; in the cause of Allah; and for the wayfarer: (thus is it) ordained by Allah, and Allah is full of knowledge and wisdom.” (At-Tawba: 60)

In accordance with this verse, it was the practice of Umar Ibn Al-Khattab to pay the state officials high salaries to ensure that they would not be tempted by bribes. The leader of a community thus has many responsibilities and s/he will be held to account for everything in his/her administration. Nonetheless Islam recognizes the power of the leader, and as any Muslim leader should follow the Prophetic example, his/her followers likewise should follow the Prophetic example, obeying and serving their leader and community in every way, although the leader is advised not to use his power to push his/her people towards any evil. Umar Ibn Al-Khattab said to his people: "I have appointed over you governors and agents not to beat your bodies or take your money, but rather to teach you and serve you.” (Ibn Abdelbar, Al-iqd al-fareed: 1/490)

As a matter of fact, Umar’s sense of justice and care for the weak was such that he ordered a part of today’s Amr Ibn Al As Masjid to be torn down because it was built in a place that was formerly the house of an old lady, and she hadn’t given her permission to construct the mosque in her place of residence. (Ibn Abdel Hakam, Futuh Misr: 290)

On another occasion, an Egyptian Christian boy and his father were beaten by the son of the Muslim ruler. They complained to the Caliph, Umar Ibn Al-Khattab, who ordered that they be given their rights and that they may beat those that humiliated them, retaliating in the same way. (Ibn Abdel Hakam, Futuh Misr: 290)

In general, the leader should be someone who has expert knowledge in his/her particular area, so someone who leads the prayer should have a superior knowledge of Islam compared to those he leads. To illustrate this further, the same person leading the prayer one day may be a follower once he is joined by someone with more Islamic knowledge. This shows clearly, when it comes to religious matters, that there is no clergy in Islam, rather knowledgeable people ideally aid each other.

While commonly the followers are expected to follow their leader, obedience to the ruler is only required as long as what s/he commands is in accordance with God’s law. Any real Muslim leader has to serve God and act in accordance with His law and with reference to the Prophetic example. S/He has to work on developing a strong Islamic moral character, increasing his/her belief in God as s/he progresses through the four stages of spiritual development: Islam, Iman (faith), Taqwa, and Ihsan (beneficence).

It becomes clear that in order to abide by God’s law a leader must do more than enforce the rules, rather it is as God says in the Qur’an:

“It is not righteousness that ye turn your faces to the East and the West; but righteous is he who believeth in Allah and the Last Day and the angels and the Scripture and the prophets; and give the wealth, for love of Him, to kinsfolk and to orphans and the needy and the wayfarer and to those who ask, and to set slaves free; and observe the proper worship and pay the poor-due. And those who keep their treaty when they make one, and the patient in tribulation and adversity and time of stress. Such are they who are sincere. Such are the God-fearing.” (Al Baqara 2:177)
Islamic leaders are asked to apply all these aspects to their rule and to be just, even if it is against the rich or their own family. The Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) said to one of his companions who tried to make an excuse for a rich woman who was caught stealing: “By Allah, if Fatima, the daughter of Muhammad was caught stealing, I would cut off her hand.” (Bukhari: 3514) The Qur’an further insists:

“O you who believe! Stand out firmly for justice, as witnesses to Allah, even though it be against yourselves, or your parents, or your kin, be he rich or poor, Allah is a Better Protector to both (than you). So follow not the lusts (of your hearts), lest you avoid justice, and if you distort your witness or refuse to give it, verily, Allah is Ever Well Acquainted with what you do.” (An-Nisa’ 4:135)

Leaders and followers are both required to work on themselves to improve their qualities, following the example of the Prophet (peace be upon him) and be mindful of the one who created them as well as the purpose they were created for. God says in the Qur’an:

“O ye who believe! Have taqwa towards Allah as should be, and die not except in a state of Islam” (Al-Imran 3:102).

The term “taqwa” is a very difficult term to translate with an equivalent word or even a phrase. In Islamic literature, the term is always described with a number of attributes that we should see in those who possess it. Some of these attributes can be read in the Qur’an:

“Those who spend (freely) whether in prosperity or in adversity; who restrain anger and pardon (all) men; for Allah loves those who do good, And those who having done something to be ashamed of, or wronged their own souls earnestly bring Allah to mind; and ask for forgiveness for their sins, and who can forgive sins except Allah? And are never obstinate in persisting knowingly in (the wrong) they have done.” (Al Baqara 2 :134–135)

Taqwa is a state of mind, spirit, and conduct that the members of the entire community aspire to reach. Yet it’s a long process of self-improvement that requires lots of hard work at the level of every member of the community as well as at the level of the whole community. In Islamic tradition this progress and this journey is called “Jihadul Nafs,” a combat against the ego, a high level of Jihad that encapsulates the process of inner struggle towards self-betterment. Leaders and followers who practice this principle are continuously monitoring and evaluating their intentions and actions, and acting to improve themselves accordingly. They work hard at practicing what they say, and encourage others in this struggle for self-improvement. A community leader is someone who should be a facilitator of this struggle and a guide to the travelers in his/her caravan.

To sum up the requirements for leaders of a people: they are required to act justly regardless of their personal interests; they have to have faith; they need to take care of those in need, for the love of God; they need to be steadfast in prayer and practice charity. They have to observe all contracts and no matter what, they have to be patient. Furthermore, the Islamic model of leadership emphasizes Khuluq or behaving ethically towards both Muslim and non-Muslim members of the community.
In our community life every assistant/core member should live like this. When I first joined the community I tried to trust everybody.

After one month I was named responsible for one core member, who was in a very bad condition. As I spent all the time with him I realised how much he depended on others. He was taken to hospital, where he was treated properly and could come back to community. I felt at peace when he came back in good condition.

The core members depend on the assistants, they need their support. When the assistants are well, the core members are well too.

Israfil, an assistant in L’Arche Mymensingh, at a meeting in Trosly in 2012.

Our community lived a difficult passage after the departure of the community leader. It was the core members who enabled us to keep our focus and direction.

Nadia, an assistant in L’Arche in France, at a meeting in Lebanon in 2015.
Afterword

Jean Vanier

My story before and since L’Arche is quite a long one. I was an officer in the British Navy for eight years. I left the Navy to be close to God and to discover the gospel of Jesus. I almost joined a Christian community in Harlem, New York, to devote myself to the African Americans there who lived in great poverty. In the end, I studied philosophy and theology in France. I had always had in my heart the desire to devote myself to the poor for the love of God; I felt that living with the poor, living charity, was essential, especially when it is done following a call and a mandate from God, the God of mercy and clemency. I began this life with the poor in France in 1964 by hosting two persons with intellectual disability, who had been locked up in a violent and painful institution where eighty men had been abandoned by their families. The institution scared me, I could feel the pain inside these men with mental handicap, but I knew that I could not live there. However, I was able to host two men from the institution, Raphaël and Philippe, in a little house that I was able to acquire thanks to the help of some friends. Raphaël had meningitis when he was a child, which made him lose the ability to speak and made his body very frail. Philippe’s arm and leg were paralyzed as a result of encephalitis. He talked a lot and had an intellectual disability. We had much joy in living together: a beatitude heralded by Jesus: “When you give a feast, do not invite your friends, your brothers or sisters, your relatives, or your rich neighbors; But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind… and you will be blessed by God.” (Luke 14) It was around the table, during our work in the garden and our times of prayer that our little community grew. There was a lot of joy between Raphaël and Philippe who were very glad to have found this new family (their parents were deceased), and especially glad to have left that institution where they were terribly bored. This small community, which I called L’Arche, attracted many people. A Canadian couple that belonged to a Protestant Church visited and were very happy with the experience. Back in Canada they started an Anglican community where they lived with handicapped persons. That is how L’Arche began to open up on the ecumenical level. The third community was born in France with a Catholic vision; the fourth, with an interreligious perspective, was founded in India at the request of a disciple of Mahatma Gandhi who was committed to helping people with disabilities. This disciple of Gandhi provided us with a beautiful lot of land in Bangalore. That is how the interreligious aspect was born in L’Arche. Most of the young people hosted in L’Arche in India were Hindu. Its board of directors was made up of Christians, Hindus and Muslims. That is how we discovered that no matter the religion, cultural background, abilities and disabilities of men and women, they were all human beings wounded by rejection and humiliation, but with hearts so simple, thirsting for acknowledgement and friendship.

Often, they were individuals who had been excluded from social life and considered a source of shame by their families. And yet, we discovered the value and beauty of their hearts, and their openness to God. We became aware then that in each religion there is a path towards God and human happiness, as well as windows towards the unity of the larger human family throughout the world; that we should shun competitiveness and rivalry and work together for the poor and those who suffer, for every human being is important and was created by God. Every person should grow up in their own faith, inside their
own religion, find happiness and a path for growth within their own religion in order to love others. That way each person can discover how important they are to God, for they are God’s children. God is the God of mercy and clemency who loves every human being, and desires not war and hatred but love and life for everyone.

At L’Arche we have discovered that living a true relationship with vulnerable persons transforms not only them but also the one who is involved with them.

I hope that this booklet proves to be a resource for the Muslim members of L’Arche, but also for those adhering to other religions and philosophies and who are called to know more about their Muslim brothers and sisters.
L’Arche and Islam reflection group members and invited guests

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