

**PRAYING WITH ONE ANOTHER:
MOMENTS IN WITNESSING TO GOD
BEING AT WORK IN OUR OWN LIVES**

Prof. Felix KÖRNER, SJ

In conversation with **Dr. Joseph Victor EDWIN, SJ**

Prof. Felix Körner SJ, professor of theology at the Pontifical Gregorian University, Rome. Joseph Victor Edwin SJ <victoredwinsj@gmail.com> is Lecturer in Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations at Vidyajyoti. He also serves as Secretary of Islamic Studies Association (ISA), Director of Vidyajyoti Institute of Islamic Studies (VIDIS) and Secretary of Christian-Muslim Relations South Asia (CMRSA). The interview focuses on the theological and practical intricacies involved when Christians and Muslims come together for common prayer.

In the first paragraphs, Dr. Edwin, the interviewer, places the interview in context.

In the wake of COVID-19, I have been invited to join many online prayer meetings organized by believers of different faith traditions to pray for the victims of the infection, the front line warriors against the infection like the medical personnel, and for the thousands of migrant laborers walking hundreds of kilometers under the blazing sun to reach their homes. I experienced certain intense moments of togetherness-before-one-God while listening to the Sacred Scriptures and prayers of different faith traditions.

Praying together in India is no novel experience. In most Catholic schools across the country, the prayer 'Our Father' is regularly recited by several hundred thousands of students who belong to diverse faith traditions. One will easily notice that in India, people easily join together in prayers organized during the blessing of a new house, celebration of life-cycle rituals, or memorial services for deceased friends. Many schools and public institutions do organize interfaith prayers to celebrate different religious feasts. Often participation in such prayers are seen as

social obligations but one cannot judge the hearts of those who attend such prayers. God works in their hearts in unique ways, bringing about the fruits desired by God. It should not be difficult for us Christians to recognise the beauty of such praying together, as we believe that we are all children of God in Christ through the Holy Spirit and since we are God's children, "God sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, the Spirit who calls out, 'Abba, Father'" (Galatians 4:6).

As a teacher of Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations, I have made it a point to take my students to my Muslim friends for friendly conversations on Islam and Muslims in India and to a mosque or a dargah for a visit. Often, while visiting mosques, when the time for the canonical prayers arrive we have been invited to join the Muslims for the *namaz*. I enter the mosque respectfully; however, I do not join them in lines and offer *namaz*. I either sit or stand respectfully with closed eyes raising my heart to the Triune God. I leave the students free to take their own decisions. Some students join the lines for *namaz* with Muslims and others stay respectfully in the corridors of the mosque.

On our return, I explain to my students why I do not join the lines and offer *namaz*. I tell them that I am quite happy to attend their prayer in the mosque but staying at the back, sitting or standing as is appropriate and silently joining in the prayer. To my mind, joining in lines with Muslims and performing the prayer with them gives a wrong signal; it may give an impression that I have become a Muslim. I tell them further that I do recognize their prayers as true worship offered to the one God whom we also worship albeit in different ways (cf. *Lumen Gentium* 16 and *Nostra Aetate* 3). Muslims do believe that *namaz*, one of the pillars of Islam, is the pure form of worship demanded of all men and women. Many Muslims think that we Christians have 'strayed away from the straight path' and that our faith and worship are corrupted by many innovations. Many popular Muslim preachers who indulge in polemics against Christians have done a great deal of 'messaging'

on these lines. In this context joining Muslims in namaz might be interpreted by some Muslims as ‘Christians recognizing the true form of worship’! It might confuse them. My identity as a Christian would then be on a slippery ground. That is why I stay away.

In my conversations with students of theology, practitioners of dialogue and experts on Christian-Muslim relations, many questions arise that pertain to interreligious prayer and praying together with people of other faiths, especially Muslims. In Taanayel, Lebanon (2019) I had an opportunity to hold a conversation on these questions with Prof. Felix Körner SJ, professor of theology at the Pontifical Gregorian University, Rome. I am grateful to him for helping me to develop our conversation into a fruitful theological fare.

Edwin: Do Muslims and Christians require a mutually agreed understanding of God before they can pray together?

Körner: The short answer is, no; but let’s look at things more closely. The Muslims I know have always been welcoming when it came to praying together. They invite their Christian friends to join their own rituals; they also suggest public events of common prayer. It is really the Christian side that is the difficult part in this. To get things clear, let’s proceed step by step. First, why are Muslims normally more generous in praying together, than Christians? So, what is a Christian theology of prayer? Then, what is meant by common understanding of God? And finally, which ways of praying together would be theologically sound?

Islam holds much more a *natural* theology. That is to say, the first human being was already a prophet. God sent many prophets to proclaim the same message to different peoples. There were some distortions in the transmission of that message; that is why new prophets were sent to set things right again; but if you put yourself at the service of the One God and reject other divinities, all is fine. Pray with us, welcome!

Christianity, by contrast, stands much more for a *history of salvation* theology. What is that to say? The Christian faith sees that there is a problem in the human being. We close ourselves in. Rather than opening ourselves up to the other, we think we have to make it by ourselves. We fall into self-centredness. And we cannot liberate us from that by ourselves. Rather, all our own efforts to be healed will be closing us in ever more; even our own religious efforts will only be more self-entanglement—if they are not accepting God’s healing. That is what happens in our prayer, too. The Christian faith does not say that we can pray by our own will. It is, rather, God’s generous gift that we can pray. Why? Because prayer is not just our attempt at speaking and listening to God. We pray, that is to say, we sense and may know that we are in communion with God. Prayer is, for us, communion with God given by God. That is why Christians often say: we pray “through Christ.” We can pray because of Jesus: because of his example, his words, his sacraments, because we have been transformed by the Easter events—from death to God’s ever-loving life.

Now, there is a Vatican document, *Dialogue in Truth and Charity* (DTC),¹ which says that we should not pray with the same words when joined by people from other religions. Why not? Because, says the document, praying together requires “a shared understanding of who God is” (DTC, n. 82). That is not well thought through. How to check whether we have a shared understanding of who God is? Our Trinitarian formula of three persons and one nature would have been strange to the first Christians; and look at today’s cultures: your Indian Catholic grandmother and a U.S. Baptist! Shared understanding? Still, there is a meaningful side to what the document says. Let me rephrase it: in a public prayer, we Christians want to give visible witness to our belief; and we believe that we come into communion with our

¹Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue, *Dialogue in Truth and Charity. Pastoral Orientations for Interreligious Dialogue* (19 May 2014).

heavenly Father through Christ. If we pray simultaneously and in the same words with non-Christians, that witness may be blurred.

So how to decide about praying together? When a person from another religion asks you for an intimate moment of common prayer, of course you pray together! Think of the many sick people who say: “Father, I am a Muslim, and I feel that I am about to die; can you pray with me?” Of course! As for public events, we often say, let us have one religion after another say their prayers. The others are present in respectful meditation. That is the “Assisi mode.” But there are also situations when the concern about witnessing to ‘our prayer made possible through Christ’ is less important than our witness that we are one human family before God. For example, when there is a conflict that looks as if it was brought about by religions. Then, it may be theologically sound to pray together simultaneously, with the same words, and publicly. Pope Francis made such a discernment in 2015. In Sarajevo, he proposed a common moment of prayer with one and the same text for Jews, Christians and Muslims; and he introduced the text by using different invocations of God. By this, he showed that we “believe in the same God, though in different ways.” This is a wise formula. It was first used by Pope Gregory VII in 1076, when writing to a Muslim prince; even Vatican II’s *Nostra Aetate* declaration alludes to it, and it has since then been quoted frequently, e.g., by Benedict XVI in his Ankara Address of 2006. We believe in the same God, but we do so in different ways.

Edwin: Can Christians engage in interreligious prayer if they “hold back” from Trinitarian language? Does this invalidate Christian prayer?

Körner: Our most fundamental prayers do not contain Trinitarian wording; think of the Hail Mary and indeed the Lord’s Prayer. Still, they do not “hold back” the mystery of the Trinity. Rather, it is always *implied* when we pray. And even with the shortest Christian prayer you can quite clearly see how the Trinity is implied:

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When you pray “Father,” or, as Paul says it in Jesus’ own language, when you pray “Abba,” you are addressing the Father through Christ in the Spirit. So, implicitly our prayer is always difficult for non-Christians. And often not only implicitly! Look at the Lord’s Prayer and the Hail Mary. God is addressed as “Father,” Our Lady as “Mother of God”. That can sound scandalous to others. So, the mystery of the Trinity is never “held back” when we pray. But you were not only asking about the mystery of the Trinity but about Trinitarian language. How to proceed in practice? My short answer to this is, interreligious prayer in public should proceed in the “Sarajevo mode,” as we may call it. That is the way Pope Francis indicated. Start with three introductory questions.

First, is it an exceptional situation of political stress and social challenge? In such a case, a truly interreligious a prayer can be a pathway to reconciliation—with respect for the remaining differences. Second, is it possible to prepare the event *together*? Representatives of all participating religions should discuss with each other beforehand the texts they want to use during the event. Otherwise you might create painful misunderstandings. And that can lead to more conflicts! When the Islamic side recites *al-Ikhlās*, the Qur’ānic Sura (112), so dear to Muslims, Christians may not like that. Why not? It contains a phrase easily understood as a rejection of the Nicene Creed: God “does not beget nor is he begotten.” If you feel that Christians may be insulted by that, tell your Muslim interlocutors about it and ask them to choose a more suitable text for the occasion. The same holds true if we want to use a Trinitarian formula. Muslims may understand well that we do not believe in three Gods; then you may use it. If it sounds, however, blasphemous to some participants, it may be wiser not to speak in expressly Trinitarian terms during the moment of prayer you are planning.

Third, however: are you ready to explain the point of the Trinitarian creed, once you get to a theological discussion? How to explain it? You may say that the Trinitarian profession is our

way to confess that in communion with Jesus we are already in ever-lasting communion with the One he called his Father.

With these introductory questions, let yourself be inspired by Pope Francis's own formula at Sarajevo. He worded it wisely. He used three ways of naming God when he said, "Now I invite you to say this prayer: to the Eternal, One and True Living God, to the Merciful God." The first is a typically *Jewish* naming of God, "the Eternal." But Christians and Muslims can join in naturally. "The Merciful" is the Divine name *Muslims* use most frequently; and again, it is also familiar to the other two religions. Between "Eternal" and "Merciful," the Pope put a triple naming of God: the "One, True, Living." Jews and Muslims can say that with conviction, the three names feature in their Scriptures; but Christians may see that as a New Testament wording (John 17:3, 1 Thessalonians 1:9); indeed, for us, it can be a Trinitarian formula.

Edwin: How might our understanding of interreligious prayer change if we understand prayer as an exercise in listening and receiving?

Körner: You are making an important point. Receiving—what? As I said above, real prayer as communion with God cannot be produced by us. It is a gift. But your point goes further! Listening—to whom? Receiving—from whom? We are listening to the other religious tradition at prayer: their words, their gestures, symbols, rites, and their reflections on prayer. Thus we are receiving inspiration, encouragement, sometimes even a necessary "humiliation," because we sense how generous the others' trust, faithfulness and self-giving are.

And in this, we are not only listening to another religion. God is free to choose just any way to communicate what he wants to give us. He can use all sorts of channels. A sunset can become a moment in which he wants to make me sense his tender hug. A poem can become an opportunity for me to understand his call. A religious tradition quite different from my own can become God's

way to make me feel how great he is. Even historical events, and not only pleasant experiences, will turn out to be such channels! Thus God will also remind me that He is greater, more generous than the ecclesial limitations we tend to draw. So when God chooses a non-Churchy way to communicate with us, He is challenging us Christians to step down from any arrogance.

We all want to get more and more rid of our false images of God, our projections onto God, we want 'to clean our glasses,' so that we can be in a more honest contact with God—and less and less fall prey to our own thoughts. Other traditions may offer methods of opening ourselves up to that receptive listening. Think of the postures that the Asian traditions offer: they can be a great help for a Christian in meditation; and likewise Rabbinic wisdom, Zen ko'ans, Sufi stories.

But how to learn to listen well? This is the key question! Because not everything that we may get from sunsets, poems, religions is ever-reliably true! The criteria we can always use are the following: does this help me to understand Jesus better, to love him more purely, to live more like him? (Cf. Ignatius of Loyola, *Spiritual Exercises*, n. 104.)

Edwin: What might be gained from approaching interreligious prayer as an exercise of seeing the other as someone listening to God?

Körner: "Religious experiences and outlooks can themselves be purified and enriched in this process of encounter." This is a quote from a 1984 Vatican document (*Dialogue and Mission*, n. 21).² Let us pray that through all our experiences we may receive purification and enrichment on our way to God.

Edwin: How do we relate the Christian understandings of the sacraments and the sacramental to Islam?

²Secretariat for non-Christians (now Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue), *The Attitude of the Church toward Followers of Other Religions: Reflections and Orientations on Dialogue and Mission* (10 May 1984).

Körner: The seven sacraments of the new covenant are the Church's ways to communicate the Easter transformation. It is really our most palpable way to get in contact with Christ and thus already sense that we are God's beloved children.

But the Church has always had other simultaneous understandings of the sacraments. Think of classical formulae like the "sacraments of the old covenant," or "sacraments of nature". So we can say, in a more general way, sacraments are celebrations that condense the history and message of a religion in signs believed to transmit salvation to the believers. We can say, in that sense, an especially "sacramental" event in Islam is the ritual prayer. What is really happening there? What is its logic? What I mean by that question becomes clear when we try to discover the logic of the Eucharist. It is a meal, the Lord's Supper, in which we receive the greatest gift, that is, communion with God. So, let us look with the same eyes at the ritual prayer of Islam, at the *salāt*. What is its logic? It is, rather than a meal, an audience: the sovereign receives his servants. They put themselves anew at his service. The individual may sense being put back into the communion with all God's servants; but the primary logic is: you are now in front of God. So if the Eucharist is "God's communion," I would say, the *salāt* is "God's confrontation." God calls people to serve. After the words and gestures of acknowledgement, reverence and worship, you go out again: service is due not only to God! God sends you to serve in this world, to serve other human beings.

The first gesture Muslims perform during the *salāt* is often misunderstood by non-Muslims. We see that they hold their hands near their ears. Is that a gesture of listening? When you ask Muslims they often respond things like: "No! By this gesture, I am throwing everything behind me that could come in my way to God. All distractions, even all mediations. Now it is me in front of God." We Christians would of course make another sacramental point here: sacraments are gifts; we cannot produce immediacy with God by ourselves. We need to receive the gift of his communion.

Edwin: Are there analogies between the sacrament of the Eucharist, the Real Presence and the Islamic understanding of the presence of the Divine in the Qur'ān? Can these be equivalent experiences of God's presence?

Körner: I had a good sharing on this with a Muslim friend some years ago. We were discussing adoration. She did not say the most intense moment is the ritual prayer, no. But she did not say she was adoring the Qur'ān, either. Rather, for her, the most intense moment of divine presence is *reciting* the Qur'ān. She said something like this: "It is at the same time my activity and God's. We seem to work together!"

Edwin: Should Christians pray the prayers of other religions as an alternative experience of God's presence? If so, are there specific Muslim prayers which are particularly appropriate for Christians to use?

Körner: When I was younger, I sometimes used the traditional Islamic list of the 99 most beautiful names not only as a personal recitation in Arabic; I also proposed the list to young Christians on weekend retreats. The task was: choose three names that particularly touch you. Maybe you choose the pair *al-Qābid / al-Bāsīt* and finally *al-Hādī*; that is, "God is the One who limits—and who widens; God is the One who leads." Now ask yourself: where in your life did you experience God as the One who limits and widens and leads? They were then sharing striking stories from their own experiences. It became an exercise in witnessing to God being at work in our own lives.

Edwin: How much should we be seeking to develop a theology of interreligious prayer and how much should we accept a more intuitive approach as an aspect of being in the "in-between time"?

Körner: We are still *on the way* to understanding. And until the end of History we'll keep learning, keep making mistakes, keep

being corrected by new discoveries. As Church, we are using our classical formulae. Our dogma is interesting because often it comes in paradoxes: “Son of God,” “Three in One,” etc. Our classical wordings have a beautiful, poetic, challenging form. They make us think anew. So our attitude toward doctrine and tradition is: we are not going to change the dogma. But we need to understand it ever more profoundly, and explain it anew. I also like to work with definitions. You have just seen that! Definitions may be helpful condensations of our belief, for the beginning of a dialogue. Then, in dialogue with the others and with the course of history, we hope to discover more profoundly what the classical formulae and our own definitions mean. That is why I keep saying that theology needs to become “interactive.”

On Hagia Sophia

Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan's decision to turn Hagia Sophia back into a working mosque is a major setback to the country's secular values that are already under attack from Islamists.

Mr. Erdogan, whose Justice and Development Party (AK Party) came to power in 2002 on promises of reforming the Kemalist state into a more inclusive and democratic one, has, instead, been systematically unmaking the secular republic. He has tightened his grip on power by moving religion to the centre of his governance. Now, with the decision on Hagia Sophia, his brand of Islamism is taking a giant leap forward. The symbolism is hardly lost on anyone. For Turkish Islamists, Hagia Sophia has always been associated with the “glory” of the Ottoman imperial era. He is appealing to those sentiments, while symbolically marking an end to Kemalist secularism. ... Whether the Hagia Sophia decision would help him politically or not, it could further fracture Turkish society and worsen international relations. Mr. Erdogan is opening the wounds of the past, which could have lasting consequences. Surely, 2020 is not 1453.

**“Museum to mosque: On Hagia Sophia ,”
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