QUESTIONS FOR H.R.H. PRINCE GHAZI OF JORDAN FOR SPECIAL FEATURE ON OXFORD ISLAMIC STUDIES ONLINE

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Q.1. You are now *Chief Advisor to H.M. King Abdullah for Religious and Cultural Affairs* and have been *Chairman* of the *Royal Aal al-Bayt Institute for Islamic Thought* for many years, and you have been deeply involved in promoting interfaith understanding and cooperation. You organized the *Amman Message* Initiative from 2004-2006. You were instrumental in launching the *A Common Word* initiative in 2007, and in the *World Interfaith Harmony Week* in 2010. These initiatives are unique in the history of Islam. What was your motivation for these initiatives?

In the United Nations resolution establishing the *World Interfaith Harmony Week*, you refer to "the moral imperatives of all religions, convictions, and beliefs to call for peace, tolerance, and mutual understanding." Encouraging those goals is really the challenge, isn't it? Can you describe responses to the initiative and give some examples of how various groups have supported it?

In the Name of God, the Compassionate, the Merciful

A.1. The *Amman Message* was H.M. King Abdullah II's idea. At his request, in November 2004, some Jordanian scholars issued a studied media-friendly declaration known as 'The Amman Message', trying to explain to the world—Muslims and non-Muslims alike—what Islam truly is. We realized quickly thereafter that this was not sufficient in itself, because the different Muslim denominations and schools of thought did not agree on an exact common doctrine or a common canon apart from the Qur'an (which is interpreted in slightly different ways) and the *Shahadatein* (the Two Testimonies of Faith—*There is no*

god but God, Muhammad is the Messenger of God). The 'Message' would not have the doctrinal authority to speak for all Muslims but only for 'Amman'. So we distilled the message down to three essential questions that would address and safeguard the fundamentals of Islamic thought and judgement: 'What constitutes a Muslim?'; 'Who has the right to issue a *fatwa* (juridical ruling) and under what conditions?'; 'Does anyone have the right to pronounce takfir (declare a person to be an apostate) and under what conditions?' We wrote to twenty-four of the world's greatest Islamic religious authorities of all denominations and when their answers came in, distilled them down to a common denominator. Then, over the course of a year, we took these 'Three Points' to every major international Islamic forum in the world—and hundreds of Islamic scholars—until there was a historically unprecedented international consensus on the essential doctrine of Islam. Our motivation therein was simply to promote peace, harmony, brotherhood and love between all Muslims, by identifying the doctrinal common ground between all Muslims, and thus by forcing them to recognize each other as Muslims and regard each other as brothers, for God says in the Qur'an: The believers are indeed brothers. Therefore [always] make peace between your brethren, and fear God, so that perhaps you might receive mercy (Al-Hujurat, 49:10). Thus, having an exact agreement on basic doctrine which unites Muslims makes it more difficult for people to use theology as a pretext for hatred and fighting. I say 'pretext' because all the traditional Islamic Madhahib (Schools of Jurisprudence) have long ruled and established that another person's—let alone another Muslim's-different beliefs (or lack of any belief) cannot be a cause in themselves for conflict with that person. This I believe was the intention of *all* the scholars who supported this initiative.

The *A Common Word* initiative came after the Pope's Regensburg address in September 2006: or rather, one year after our first attempt to respond amicably to the offense caused by that speech all over the Islamic world. All the 138 scholars who signed the *Open Letter* had that irenic motive, knowing full well that the signals that top Christian and Muslim authorities send out affect the 55 % of the world's population who are either Christian or Muslim, and therefore they affect world peace itself.

However, we were aware that there were voices in the Vatican saying that theological dialogue was not possible between Muslims and Catholics because Muslims believe the Qur'an is the Word of God—as if dialogue were only between those who agreed beforehand about everything. The Pope himself, I had heard, had initially wanted a dialogue based on the 10 Commandments which Muslims share with Christians and Jews (except the Sabbath, which Muslims do not share exactly, and which Christians keep differently from Jews). We did not want a dialogue based on extrinsic rules—which of course would not lead to an intrinsic recognition and understanding of each other's faith and spirituality as such—and we thought we could find a more profound premise for dialogue. Looking back on religious dialogues over history between Christians and Muslims (and Jews) the only ones that have led to a fruitful exchange of ideas and even spiritual teachings have been ones that have been posited upon a religious minimum common ground, namely: Neo-Platonism; Neo-Aristotelianism; Alchemy; Astrology; Hermeticism; Freemasonry and Perennialism (the idea that religions are formally different but similar in their respective mysticisms). All of these philosophies have found homes in both Islam and

Christianity (and Judaism), but really only on the margins of mainstream orthodoxy, and so the fruits of religious dialogues and exchanges based on them never really made it beyond those Muslims and Christians who *a priori* accepted these philosophies as innately compatible with their own religions. However, I had for years been struck by Jesus Christ's (pbuh) saying, after teaching the two *greatest* commandments: *On these two commandments hang all the Law and the Prophets* (Matthew 22:40). It seemed to us all that Islam was in exact accordance with this, and that Jesus Christ's (pbuh) words *all ... the Prophets* providentially extended forward in time to include the Prophet Muhammad (pbuh). Thus a dialogue based on this minimum *Common Word* would not only be spiritually fruitful but could engage the mainstream community of both religions. I believe H.H. Pope Benedict XVI came to appreciate this approach because he declared to us on May 9th 2009, at the King Hussein Mosque in Amman, Jordan:

'[T]he more recent *A Common Word* letter echoed a theme consonant with my first encyclical: the unbreakable bond between love of God and love of neighbour, and the fundamental contradiction of resorting to violence or exclusion in the name of God (cf. *Deus Caritas Est*, 16)'.

Indeed, in November 2011 at the Baptism Site of Jesus Christ in Jordan, we had the Second Meeting of the Catholic-Muslim Forum, and I am grateful to say that all the *A Common Word* conferences that I have attended, went, *Al-HamduLillah*, very well and led to increasing understanding, mutual respect, and perhaps even friendship and trust between the Muslim and Christian participants. As H.G. Dr. Rowan Williams, the Archbishop of Canterbury, said in 2010:

'The appearance of the *A Common Word [Open Letter]* of 2007 was a landmark in Muslim-Christian relations and it has a unique role in stimulating a discussion at the deepest level across the world.'

After the *Amman Message* (2004), which intended to promote peace, harmony, brotherhood and love between Muslims; and *A Common Word* (2007) which intended to promote peace, harmony, brotherhood and love between Muslims and Christians, we thought hard about how to expand the promotion of these values to everyone in the world of whatever faith (or no faith) without any exclusion, but in a way in which it would not lose its spiritual authenticity for believers in the One God. So in 2010, we launched the *World Interfaith Harmony Week* at the United Nations General Assembly. The resolution (A/Res/65/5) was adopted unanimously by the UNGA after considerable diplomatic efforts by Arab, Muslim and Central American countries and Russia. It read as follows:

'The General Assembly,

- 1. Reaffirms that mutual understanding and interreligious dialogue constitute important dimensions of a culture of peace;
- 2. *Proclaims* the first week of February of every year the World Interfaith Harmony Week between all religions, faiths and beliefs;
- 3. *Encourages* all States to support, on a voluntary basis, the spread of the message of interfaith harmony and goodwill in the world's Churches,

Mosques, Synagogues, Temples and other places of Worship during that week based on Love of God and Love of the Neighbour, or based on Love of the Good and Love of the Neighbour, each according to their own religious traditions or convictions;

4. *Requests* the Secretary-General to keep the General Assembly informed of the implementation of the present resolution.'

It will be noted that the diplomatically unprecedented central phrase of the resolution—'Love of God and Love of the Neighbour, or based on Love of the Good and Love of the Neighbour, each according to their own religious traditions or convictions'—excludes no one, of any religion or of no faith at all: every person of good will, with or without faith can and should commit to 'Love of God and Love of the Neighbour' <u>or</u> 'Love of the Good and Love of the Neighbour'. Loving the Good and the neighbour is, after all, the essence of good will as such. And referring to 'the Good' obviously does not necessarily imply belief in God or in a particular religion, even though for monotheistic believers 'the Good' is God precisely: Jesus Christ (pbuh) said: 'No one is Good but God Alone' [Mark, 10:18; Luke 18:19, and Matthew 19:17], and 'the Good' ('Al-Barr') is one of God's Names in the Holy Qur'an [Al-Tur, 52:28]. Thus speaking of 'the Good' is an ingenious theologically-correct but inclusive formula—in so far as it goes—that unites all humanity and excludes no one.

Thus the three initiatives—Amman Message (2004); A Common Word (2007); World Interfaith Harmony Week (2010)—not only share the same motivation of seeking to promote peace, harmony, brotherhood and love in the world, but do so, as it were, in a widening concentric circle that starts with Muslims who comprise about a quarter of the world; expands to Muslims and Christians together who comprise about half of the world, and finally extends to the whole world. They also, despite apparently different forms, rely fundamentally on the same idea: underlying the message they seek to promote with a theologically or spiritually correct doctrine that explicitly formulates the Common Word between Muslims, believers and spiritual beings as such. In doing so, they aim to take religion out of religiously-manipulated conflict, and enable political problems to be resolved by political means.

Both the *Amman Message* (see: www.ammanmessage.com) and *A Common Word* (see: www.acommonword.com) have entered into the international public domain, as it were, and are taught, studied or quoted in schools, universities and places of worship all over the world in various languages, so that we can no longer even keep track of them, *Al-Hamdulillah*. The 'Three Points of the Amman Message' are widely considered to be a unique consensus in the history of Islam, and *A Common Word* has been called 'probably the single most important initiative ever undertaken by Muslim scholars and authorities towards Christians' (Professor David Ford). I need hardly say, of course, that this is entirely due to the Grace of God and then to the great scholars and religious leaders (Muslim and Christian) who underwrote them or participated in them. Had I just issued them by myself, I doubt they would have even been accepted into an academic journal: it is the greatness and the goodwill of all those religious leaders and scholars that made these initiatives, and

it is their barakah that keeps them going. The World Interfaith Harmony Week (during the first week of every February; see:www.worldinterfaithharmonyweek.com) has been adopted and observed in many important places, from the British House of Lords to the top religious leaders of China, from the Malaysian Cabinet to the Baptism Site of Jesus Christ (pbuh) in Jordan. Other events as simple as interfaith neighbourhood breakfasts and public walks have been organized all over the world. However, until it is adopted and observed in schools, universities, community centres and places of worship everywhere in the world, it will not have reached its full potential as a multivalent global platform for interfaith harmony. It has, however, only occurred twice since it was launched in October 2010, and although we are planning to launch an annual prize for the best event or sermon for the World Interfaith Harmony Week starting 2013 Deo Volente, I have to admit that we are somewhat overstretched and need help in achieving 'global trickledown': the engine for all these initiatives (and more, such as www.altafsir.com, the largest and most popular Our'anic Commentary resource on the Internet in the world, and the new World Islamic Sciences and Education University [W.I.S.E.]) has been the Royal Aal al-Bayt Institute for Islamic Thought—which is a Jordanian N.G.O.—and we do not have the resources or manpower to do everything we want to. We are hopeful, however, that, God willing, others will bring this initiative to fruition, in sha Allah.



Q.2 Switching gears, you have recently published an exquisite study of love as it is treated in the Qur'an (*Love in the Holy Qur'an*; Kazi Books). It is the first comprehensive work on the subject in Islamic history. Why is this topic so timely just now? What would you like its impact to be?

A.2. Love is always timely. It is timely because it is timeless. The soul was created through love and for love, and it cannot be happy without love. Indeed, no one can live without love, most—if not all—of what we do is because of love or in pursuit of something we love (even if it is only ourselves and our passions). Love is not only the movement towards beauty, it is in itself beautiful. More than beautiful; love is truly sublime, and it is the highest power in the souls of human beings—so powerful that it can take us through death, without sadness or fear, and into eternal felicity, even in this life. But there are different kinds and objects of love, and not all love is good, or leads to what is good.

I have always been mystified by love, even as an undergraduate at Princeton University in the 1980s. I knew a few students who committed suicide because of love. I was puzzled by it and could not accept that it was 'heightened' or 'sublimated' lust or 'chemical and hormonal reactions', as modern psychology, chemistry and biology would have us believe. Yet no one around me seemed to know exactly what it was. Of course this was because modern science does not accept the existence of the soul and the spirit—let alone know and understand the soul's component parts and natural faculties—and since

human love is obviously located in the human soul, modern science will never be able to account for the mysteries of love.

I did my first PhD on love at Trinity College, Cambridge University in Modern and Medieval Literature, with the intention of trying to understand love; trying to understand what and why the ineffable experience of love was. Whilst I could not find all the answers I sought in literature, I did at least find in literary masterpieces some accurate rendering of the human experience of love. During that time I read everything I could in all the world's great religions about love. I realized that the secrets of love—especially love of God—were always known by the great spiritual figures of the past and manifest in the Scriptures. I also scoured philosophy for the truths of love. The best book I read on love—arguably the best human book ever written on love, was Marsilio Ficino's (d.1499) Christian Neo-Platonic Commentary on Plato's Symposium of Love—for it made Plato's Symposium and Phaedrus accessible (at least to me); it revealed so many of the secrets of beauty and love, and it made the greatness of Plato's work intelligible, behind the tropes of casual language, ancient context, strange anecdotes, Greek mythology and Socratic questioning....

At the same time, I started truly reading and meditating on the Qur'an, and seeing therein so much about love. I did this for about twenty years, slowly but gradually finding every truth about love that I had ever seen elsewhere in the Qur'an, perfectly expressed, absolutely true and infinitely resonating. Although I could see that Muslim scholars and mystics of the past knew everything I knew and much more about love in the Qur'an, none of them, to my knowledge, had ever—no doubt precisely because they fully realized it themselves existentially—wrote an academic systematic and comprehensive treatment of the subject based *solely* on the Qur'an. When the opportunity arose for me to do this under (the now *Grand Imam of Al-Azhar*) Shaykh Ahmad Al-Tayyib, as a PhD in Islamic Philosophy at the Azhar, I gratefully seized it. It only took me two months to write it, *Al-HamduLillah*, but in fact 20 years and one previous PhD to research it. It took another year or so to translate into English, even though a first draft was done by a very able young translator: Khaled Williams. I hoped an English translation might help correct some of the rampant misconceptions about Islam, particularly at this time with so much inter-religious animosity and violence; and I thought it would give depth and weight to all the intra and interfaith work based on the principles of love I have been blessed to work on, but these were not my real goals in writing the book, which was for me a 20 year-long quest.

I have two major goals in mind in publishing it both in Arabic and English (and actually also in Bosnian). The first is to give an adequate and comprehensive summary of what can be known about love in order to help people (if they so desire) better understand and thus cultivate the higher forms of love, and bring the lower ones to an end. Accordingly, I earnestly hope that the book will be taught at the university level (and I have deliberately written it in 'teaching-friendly' chapters for that reason precisely). Indeed, I hope that love as such will be taught as a serious academic subject at major universities, and that this book will be one of the books used. It is a matter of constant and bitter astonishment to me that no major universities teach love as such anymore, although it was previously the central spiritual, cultural and even intellectual preoccupation of entire civilizations (including, arguably, the pre-modern Christian, Neo-Platonic, Islamic and Hindu ones), and

is incontestably the central occupation of the life of every human being, not to say the life of every sentient being and the very reason for the creation of the entire universe! Having said that, Professor Paul Fiddes of Oxford University is planning an 'Oxford Symposium of Love' in 2013, and I hope this will lead to the first regular course on love being taught there, *in sha Allah*.

If my first goal in publishing *Love in the Holy Qur'an* arises out of 'love of love', my second goal arises out of love of the Qur'an. God says in the Qur'an, about the Qur'an:

And verily We have dispensed for people in this Qur'an every [kind of] similitude, but most people insist on disbelieving. (Al-Isra', 17:89; see also: 18:54; 30:58; 39:27-28)

And this Qur'an is not such as could ever be produced [by anyone] besides God; but it is a confirmation of what is before it, and a detailing of the Book, wherein is no doubt from the Lord of the Worlds. (Yunus, 10:37)

- ... And We have revealed to you the Book as a clarification of all things and as a guidance, and a mercy and good tidings to those who submit. (Al-Nahl, 16:89)
- ... It is not a fabricated discourse but a confirmation of what was [revealed] before it, and the details for all things, and a guidance, and a mercy for a folk who believe. (Yusuf, 12:111; see also 7:52)
- ... We have neglected nothing in the Book; then to their Lord they shall be gathered. (Al-An'am, 6:38)

The Classical Commentators are somewhat divided about exactly what these verses mean: Tabari views them as referring to the *Shari'ah* and all commandments and prohibitions; Fakhraldin al-Razi understands them as referring also to the fundamentals of religious knowledge (including moral, spiritual and theological knowledge); and Zamakhshari sees them as including not only all the whole *Shari'ah* but all forms and details of religious knowledge as well. We ourselves understand them as referring to all the forms and details of all philosophy as such as well. We intended through our book to prove this about an important branch of philosophy: the philosophy of love. Our book was intended to clearly demonstrate how everything about love—down to *the details for all things*—is contained in, and can be derived from, the Qur'an.

Moreover, we are equally certain—and, actually, can personally see—how similar complete expositions of other legitimate topics of philosophy as such could be written based solely on the Holy Qur'an, including: time, logic, ontology, cognition, ethics, psychology, anthropology, epistemology, hermeneutics, oneirology, numerology, metaphysics, soteriology, eschatology, jurisprudence, politics, sociology, comparative religion and other topics. I have been disappointed and irritated by so-called 'Islamic philosophers' like even the great Ibn Sina (Avicenna) himself, who writes entire philosophical treatises (like his Risalah fil-'Ishq-Treatise on Love) without a single reference from the Qur'an. Needless to say, this is not 'Islamic philosophy' at all, but 'philosophy by Muslims'—something potentially quite different. I thus humbly hope that my book will, God willing, stimulate a truly Islamic methodology (basing itself entirely on the Qur'an, with *Hadiths* as additional supplements) in philosophical discourse on the

topics mentioned, in accordance with Qur'an's being *a clarification of all things* and having *neglected nothing*.

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Q.3. You have served as the late King Hussein's—and after his death, King Abdullah's— *Advisor for Tribal Affairs* in Jordan. As we have seen in many parts of the world, tribal loyalties and inter-tribal competition can undermine efforts to forge national solidarity. (I have worked extensively in Pakistan, and have just returned from Libya, so the topic is on my mind.) How would you characterize the relationship between tribal and national loyalties in Jordan?

Speaking of tribal practices, Jordan has made significant progress in the struggle to eradicate so-called "honor killings". As we know, honor killings—the extra-judicial killing of women (and sometimes homosexual males) by family members in the belief that it is necessary to preserve the social standing of the family—do not reflect Islamic values. Yet traditionally they have been tolerated because they are so deeply a part of tribal life. Can you describe how Jordan has managed to deal with these crimes?

A.3. Working with, and for, the Tribes was truly an exhilarating and wonderful experience for me, especially when I felt that I was able to help in some way. I had always loved the Tribes and the desert, and as a young man had very briefly served as an officer in the Desert Police. Working with the Tribes I had the opportunity to come to know people and *Shaykh*s who had grown up entirely as nomadic Bedouins, on a camel-based lifestyle, almost without contact with the post-industrial world, and then had transitioned, in their own lifetimes to the age of Information Technology. Many of them have since passed on, but the dignity, sincerity, simplicity, generosity, combativeness and strength of some of the souls I met left deep impressions on me.

Naturally, the tribal system and way of life presents challenges to modern states and can have hard edges. One such edge is, of course, 'honour killings'. You are right to say that they are terrible and that they directly contradict the *Shari'ah*. What is not so well-known is that they go against traditional Bedouin nomadic law, which is relatively quite 'liberal', and would either ignore pre-marital sex or discretely force the couple to get married if there were a pregnancy. It is thus, strictly speaking, a sad 'neo-tribal', or at least 'post-Bedouin' Tribal phenomenon. I do not want to dwell on the details here because I have written extensively about it—and about some of my personal experiences with the issue—in my book *The Tribes of Jordan at the Beginning of the Twenty-first Century* (1999), which I believe is still available on Amazon. At the time, our strategy to deal with it was to condemn it; to teach and preach against it; to legislate more severely against it, and then to prosecute it more vigorously. I even once (in February 2000) organised a protest, with my cousin Prince Ali, outside our parliament about changing Jordan's laws concerning it (which were, oddly enough, actually Napoleonic in origin). We were not successful in eliminating 'honour crimes', but did manage to keep the numbers low.

This is of course not good enough. One 'honour crime', of course, is an inconsolable and irreparable tragedy; a unique inner world which has missed, for all eternity, its opportunity at a full life. God says in the Qur'an:

Because of that, We decreed for the Children of Israel that whoever slays a soul for other than a soul, or for corruption in the land, it shall be as if he had slain mankind altogether; and whoever saves the life of one, it shall be as if he had saved the life of all mankind... (Al-Ma'idah, 5:32)

Moreover, if truth be told, it is not merely the person killed who is destroyed (or rather, not destroyed, but only killed), but the murderer too is also himself ultimately a victim of this act and its consequences, since he has killed a beloved family member because of a distorted—and quite simply ignorant and *mistaken*—notion of social honour and shame, and will suffer forever, and be destroyed, because of it. God says in the Qur'an:

And whoever slays a believer deliberately, his requital is Hell, abiding therein, and God is wroth with him and has cursed him, and has prepared for him a mighty chastisement. (Al-Nisa, 4:93)

Each 'honour crime' is thus a damned double murder, a miserable murder-suicide: two inner universes which are destroyed forever....

Nevertheless, to put things into a global social perspective, Jordan suffers about 12-20 of these tragedies every year, and it has a population of 7 million people, at least 60% of which are tribal. Jordan also has the fourth or fifth highest rate of fire arms per capita in the world (the tribes are all armed) after Yemen, Iraq, Afghanistan and now, perhaps, Libya (there are over 15 million firearms in Jordan—more than double the number of people). Jordan is also the fourth water-poorest country in the world. Jordan has 15-25% unemployment and income per capita of some \$4,500 (compared to the USA's approximately \$45,000). Yet despite all of this the total number of murders per year (including 'honour crimes' and blood-feuds, which number 20-30 a year) is generally only between 70 and 120, i.e. 1.5 per 100,000 people per year. This is lower per capita than many European countries including Britain, which is ten times as rich per person, has much lower unemployment and practically no guns in private hands. It is only around *one sixth* the USA murder rate of 8 murders per 100,000 people (i.e. more than 25,000 murders a year), although the USA also has 10 times as much money per person; less than half Jordan's unemployment rate; 2.4 million people in prison (the highest rate in the world) and relatively less weapons than Jordan in private hands (albeit much more than Europe)!

In other words, the tribal system and way of life—despite the blood feuds and honour crimes—can, ironically perhaps, keep its members as socially safe as any system or ethic in the world, especially amidst economic poverty. Anyone who has lived as part of a tribal society knows full well that social crimes have immediate and inescapable consequences, and that any act of aggression will be met by swift justice, if not by the state, then by the victim's tribe; and so everyone thinks again before putting a foot out of place. This is one of the positive aspects of the tribal system.

Another positive aspect of the tribal system is that although loyalty to the tribe competes with, and sometimes undermines, national loyalties, when nations break down (such as in Iraq after the war, or in Somalia) tribal leadership takes and organises social life so that survival is maintained. Tribal structures and leaderships look after their members

like small irredentist states, and whilst these can be exclusive and partial, they are nevertheless strong and protective. Moreover, the stark truth is that a Western middle-class, capitalist lifestyle is not possible—neither ecologically nor economically—for every one of the world's seven billion inhabitants. The tribal system and way of life gives an additional sense of meaning and belonging in life that allows people to bear poverty—albeit that no one can or should bear abject poverty—with fortitude, nobility and dignity, and thus also with happiness.

But there is a higher reason to admire the tribal system. The tribal system and way of life provide an abundance of family and clan members, and thus also familial love and friendship, to an extent unimaginable in Western societies where few people know their own second cousins, or can say what their grandparents and great-grandparents stood for or where they lived. With these stronger and more numerous ties come extended responsibilities, and thus daily sacrifices to an extent unimaginable in Western societies where everyone makes their own decisions for their own benefit (and possibly for that of their spouse and children). The tribal system affords less 'privacy' (and anyway nowadays people seem to be strangely anxious to surrender all their time and most intimate privacy to the Internet) and more sacrifice, but in return grants—and teaches—more love. That, I feel, deserves the world's every respect, and its admiration.



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