[Openness to other faiths](https://nation.com.pk/23-May-2019/openness-to-other-faiths%22%20%5Ct%20%22_new)

Atle Hetland May 23, 2019

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The holy month of Ramadan is not only for renewal and reflection of faith, one’s relationship with God and the sacred aspects of life and the hereafter. It is also about our secular life, about improving ourselves and our relationship with fellow human beings – within own religion and beyond. The sacred and secular are both important. Faith is about how we live here and now, how we practice and show faith and love in everyday life. Love derives from the sacred, from God and from God within us, and it is up to us to reveal and practise it.

I am stating the obvious; that God’s love must be practiced, not only focused on in mosque and church. Growth in faith during Ramadan, and at all other times, means all-inclusiveness since love is universal. Thus, it also means openness to other faiths and spiritualities, not exclude them, as if they were lower or wrong. The Holy Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) wanted space for and inclusion of non-Muslims in the mosque so they too could worship and pray to God. In Pakistan, a Muslim majority country, there must always be openness to Christians, Hindus, Sikhs and other believers, and to seekers and non-believers.

When there is one dominant or official religion, sometimes a state religion, it becomes more difficult to have full openness to ‘the others’. We see that in Muslim countries in the Middle-East and elsewhere today, and we have seen it in Europe for long, where Christianity is dominant, religiously and culturally. Today, there is increasing numbers of Muslims and members of other religions in Europe, mainly due to immigration. Sometimes, ‘culturally Christians’ are more intolerant to other religions than the true Christians, who know that Jesus’ teaching was about non-discrimination, forgiveness and all-inclusion. With reference to the situation that time, the Apostle St. Paul wrote in the Galatians 3:28: “There is neither Jew nor Greek, neither slave nor free man, there is no male or female (...)”.

When I meet ordinary people in Pakistan today, they generally have great openness to others, be it other traditions within Islam, people who are less orthodox, or people who may find it difficult to believe to the letter the words in the holy books, and the way they are interpreted by religious leaders. In Christianity, which is my religion, there are many branches and sects, more than in Islam, I think. Today, Christians and others in my home country Norway want to think and reason about religious issues themselves, not only listen to the teachings of the pastors. The pastors, too, and their theological interpretations of many issues, have changed much in my lifetime; today, about half of the pastors and bishops are women, but until 1963, women could not hold such posts in what was then the state church. Women’s perspectives have begun influencing mainstream theology, especially in practical theology and deaconry.

Like in Christianity and other religions, changes in Islam, in the Muslim ‘ummah’, will mostly come from within. There will be borrowing and influences from outside, as there is in the Christian ‘ummah’, also caused by contributions of immigrants in Europe when religions now live closer side by side. Ecumenical cooperation and inter-faith dialog will become more important. Openness and dialog will enrich each sub-group within a religion and between religions, admitting that there are many traditions that are as good and sacred in other religions than one’s own. When we are already confident in our own faith, we will not be worried about ecumenical cooperation and inter-faith dialog; other religions will not ‘take over’ our own religion.

I believe that the faith of each person and community will always have its foundation and strength in the religion we grew up with. We can – and should – learn from other religions and traditions, but most of us will stay within our ‘childhood faith’, yes, even those who convert may keep many old traditions. Again, we should add dimensions and sacred insights of other religions and traditions.

I have lived for many years in countries with many Muslims: in Dar-es-Salaam and Nairobi East Africa; in Abidjan in West Africa; a bit in Washington in USA; and indeed, in Islamabad, with some visits to Kabul. Geographically, I have travelled far away from Norway, where I grew up. But as for faith and spirituality, tolerance and openness, I have only realised how similar people’s thoughts are everywhere; the longer I live, the more I realize that the differences are small, and when they exist, they are mostly of positive value and for enrichment. When I first lived abroad, I thought differences between people were big; now, I realise that they are not. Yet, we must keep an open mind to see and understand and see it, and we must not be afraid of discussing with others what may seem very different.

It is often thought that Christians, or let me say, Europeans, are more open to new thoughts in theology, not Muslims. Generally, it may be true, but certainly not always. Just now, the Norwegian media prove the opposite, and I will ‘report’ a bit about that below. The country’s Princess Märtha Louise, 47, is in the line of fire. She was ‘cheated’ of the throne to the Kingdom of Norway because when she was born only boys could be the first in line to ‘inherit the throne’, so it all went to her younger brother; today, the law has been changed, but not retroactively. After her divorce a few years ago, the princess now has a new fiancé, Derek Verrett, 44, who is a so-called ‘shaman’, a spiritual leader in his home country USA, inter alia, building on North Asian spiritual traditions. Together, they just now hold workshops in Norway on alternative thinking about religious and spiritual issues; they both belong to the Christian faith.

The Norwegian media are very critical to the couple’s messages. I would say that the media have a ‘closed mind’ to the unorthodox thinking. They even judge and conclude even before having studied the foundations and thinking of the ‘princess and the shaman’, their opinions, knowledge, Verrett’s ability to heal, their advice about social, psychological, and spiritual issues, and so on. The journalists may know very little about faith issues in general. The princess seems a modern woman, yet, she also believes in angels and spiritual forces. Is that wrong? We should not just say it belongs to the past and to developing countries, as Norwegian theologians and missionaries sometimes do. We should have an open and critical mind – also to alternative thoughts and unorthodox thinking. Maybe Asians generally, and Pakistani Muslims, can teach the Norwegians something so they, too, can have more open minds? None of us should think that we know it all at the outset. Especially during the holy month of Ramadan, Muslims reflect on the myriad of sacred and secular issues that we all wonder about.