

Unity of God and Unity in God

Mohammad Ali Shomali

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Introduction by Imam Aftab Haidar: We hope and pray that this journey will continue with the blessings and prayers of all of you who are present here. I am indeed very honored to introduce an extraordinary personality, Dr. Mohammad Ali Shomali. He is a great Muslim scholar, academic, and religious leader. Originally from Tehran, Islamic Republic of Iran, he studied at the Islamic Seminary of Qom in Islamic sciences. He also achieved his master's degree in Western philosophy and later completed his studies at the University of Manchester. His research topic was ethical relativism, and he also conducted post-structural research on ethical issues related to life and death.

He moved to the UK, to London, where he headed a number of Islamic institutes, including the Islamic Center of England—a very important and active center in the UK. There, he promoted the values of common good, peace, love, and justice. He has played a significant role in promoting interfaith dialogue. I would like to highlight the great academic work he and his team have accomplished, alongside Christian leaders. You may have heard Father William speak about the journey of interfaith dialogue.

His publications are extensive. In fact, I don't want to take too much of your time, but if you Google him, you will find Dr. Shomali has thousands of YouTube lectures. Last night, he mentioned approximately 4,500 lectures available online. I don't know the exact number of books he has published or the academic works he has contributed to journals and universities worldwide, particularly in Europe and other Western institutions.

He continues to be a humble servant of God—that is how I would like to summarize him. He is my elder, my senior, and my teacher, a humble servant of God, striving to serve His creation. Dr. Shomali.

Dr. Shomali:

Peace be with you. In the name of God, the Compassionate, the Merciful.

¹ Dr. Mohammad Ali Shomali, *Unity of God and Unity in God*, lecture, Pretoria, South Africa, December 7, 2024, Islamic Lectures by Dr. Shomali, YouTube video, 36:12, December 29, 2024, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=F0cvidc0N2o>.

I am very grateful to God for giving me the blessing of being here with you in this sacred place, this chapel dedicated to the remembrance of God. What we are doing here is also an act of remembrance of God, who is the God of all of us and who desires us to be united.

I thank everyone who helped organize this event. I thank all the guests who accepted the invitation and joined us today. I also thank the members of our Shi'a-Catholic dialogue group. I wish I could introduce each one properly. We have guests from Canada, Senegal, Germany, South Africa, Tanzania, the US, Iran, and Kenya. This demonstrates their commitment, as they traveled long distances despite their busy lives to join us here in South Africa.

Father William helped me in mentioning some details about our program, so I will give you a brief introduction to how we became involved in this dialogue and, more importantly, some of the reflections we have developed over time, and we try to implement.

We also have a short clip prepared, which provides a quick overview of the first nine rounds of Catholic-Shi'a dialogue. If it's ready, we can watch it now. (Video clip²).

So we send our salutations to the souls of Abbot Timothy Wright, Abbot Notker, and Fr. Godefroy who are great members of our dialogue. We continue to pray that the dreams for this dialogue, the dream for unity around God and prayer for God, will come to fruition.

So without any training, without any mandate, without even any advice, when I was in Manchester for my PhD, and I was very busy as a student, I was also asked to lead the Shi'a community in one of the centers, which was mostly used by Iranians and some Iraqis. I thought this was a golden opportunity to learn more about Christianity. In the seminary and university, we have courses on Christianity and Christian theology, but in my life, I had never lived with Christians before (We don't have a large population of Christians in Iran).

And so I thought now I should use this opportunity to know more about Christianity as lived and practiced. And as you know, Manchester is a kind of secular environment. And in the 90s, there were not many foreign initiatives for dialogue.

So, we faced challenges finding practicing and committed Christians for dialogue. For us, a practicing Christian who truly lived their faith was essential for meaningful engagement. If a Christian does not practice his or her faith, we cannot really understand what Christianity is about.

² Unity in God, *Catholic-Shia Dialogue: A Timeline (2003 to present)*, YouTube video, 18:53, January 2, 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=re9m03Ed1zQ>.

Finally, what happened was, my wife had a friend in Italy who introduced us to a Christian movement in the UK. One of their members visited us in Manchester, and we were later invited to attend a day-long gathering at the University of Hope in Liverpool.

This was the first time I attended a Christian gathering. Despite being in a secular society, we were amazed by the love of the people there for God. It didn't matter that they were Christians; we felt their genuine love for God. I was sitting next to a priest, who was also a Benedictine monk and a friend of the Focolare Movement. This was my first interaction with a priest and monk, but I didn't feel like I was sitting with a rival. Instead, I felt I was sitting with someone very much like myself. I told him I'm from a seminary background. Is there a Christian seminary I can visit so that we can know each other more and learn from one another? I expressed my interest in learning more about Christianity as it is lived and practiced.

He suggested visiting Ampleforth, which is not a seminary but a place for formation of monks. He was from the same community. So we visited together and that led to friendship with Abbot Timothy Wright, who also was invited to Iran.

This marked the beginning of our Catholic-Shia dialogue in July 2003, and from Round 4, monastic interreligious dialogue, the Benedictine monks became our partners. Father William played a significant role in these efforts. So this is one line of many lines of dialogue and friendship with Christianity, and especially with the Catholic Church that developed. However, I also had a relationship with some Protestants, for example, with the Mennonites in North America, with whom we have many rounds of dialogue.

We also have a good friendship with the Anglican Church. But with the Catholic Church, the level of work is much more in both quality and quantity. Our relationship with the Benedictines, as well as with monks and nuns, continued to deepen. Simultaneously, our connection with the Focolare movement also flourished, particularly from 2015 onward—a historical moment that marked a significant milestone after many years of mutual acquaintance. For the second time, I took a group of our sisters—some of whom are here—with me for a four-week formation program in Loppiano, a small and beautiful spiritual town. Following that, we embarked on a very important project that is dear to our hearts: Wings of Unity, in collaboration with Sophia University, which was founded by the late Chiara Lubich. So far, we have completed two rounds of Wings of Unity with our friends at Sophia University. God willing, in just a week, we will hold the 13th round of Wings of Unity.

We have held Weeks of Unity in Italy and Kenya to share our understanding of unity. It has now been over 25 years—perhaps 27 years—since I became seriously involved in Christian-Muslim dialogue. While I am open to other forms of dialogue, my main focus and interest remain in dialogue between Muslims and Christians, particularly between Catholics and Shi'a. I believe this focus is grounded not only in theological reasons but also in the realities we face.

Over these 27 years, I was not just a practitioner of interreligious dialogue, or organizer, or a participant. I have always been thinking very hard about what theological and spiritual implications this work has for me as a Shi'a Muslim and what God wants from us.

Unfortunately, we often think of God as either a Muslim God or a Christian God, making it difficult for us to comprehend God as universal—beyond being exclusively Muslim or Christian.

This doesn't mean that all religions or religious communities are the same in God's eyes. No, each individual is unique, and every person is distinct to God. So, when we say God is universal, we are not suggesting that we are all the same.

But we say He is so great and so high that despite the differences—and maybe even preferences, maybe somebody more pious, maybe some less pious—we are all for God, His children. And God doesn't want us to bring our partitions to His level. God doesn't want us to understand His will based on our experiences or our limited knowledge.

Sometimes, I use this example: imagine your grandfather has several children. One child is your father, and your father has his own family. Then there's your uncle, your cousin, etc. Each family—like your family or the family of your uncle or aunt—has their own relationships. They always look at the family of the uncle or aunt as another family, a family which they may love and be very close to, but it is still *another* family. "My home" and "their home" are different.

But for your grandfather, you are all one family. Your grandfather doesn't look at his children and their families as different families; they are all one family. He may see differences—maybe one child is more loyal or closer to him—but still, all of them are one family.

So, we are all the family of God. We are all children of God. And the more we rise towards God, the more we are able to have a Godly vision of other realities. The more we are attached to ourselves, the harder it is to have a Godly vision.

One thing we find about people who are very close to God, as described in Islamic literature, is that God says: "These are the people who look at my creatures in the way that I look at them."

A real mystic is the one who can look at people through God's eyes, from His perspective.

What we normally do, unfortunately, is bring God down to our level. We say, "God is the God of my sect, the God of my religion, the God of my tribe, the God of my nation." We turn God into a tribal god. A tribal god can give you instructions to destroy other tribes and add to your own land. Some of the worst things happen when religious people put their ego and selfishness in the mouth of God and the scriptures. They interpret everything to suit their own interests.

When God is reduced to the level of human beings and becomes a tribal, sectarian God, He is not the real God, and this can be very dangerous. We need to rise towards God.

We may belong to different nations, different tribes, different sects, denominations, and religions. Yet, we must become men and women of God who have concern for every human being. For God, every creature is special, unique. We need to help people go towards God—not just towards our tradition.

One of the things I have learned over the years is that we should learn how to listen to God together. In Catholic-Shi'a dialogue, and in projects like "Wings of Unity," I've said that after so many years of friendship, trust, love, and dialogue, we need to go further.

We shouldn't remain in dialogue forever. Dialogue is good, but it is only a starting point. Some people talk about tolerance, but I think tolerance is, in some cases, disrespectful. Saying, "We should tolerate each other," implies distance. Human beings should love each other, not just tolerate each other.

Even dialogue is not enough. Sometimes, I use this example: when a man and woman want to explore the possibility of marriage, they meet and have dialogue. But marriage is not just about dialogue—it's about building unity.

Similarly, Muslims and Christians can have dialogue, but that's not enough. We need to start recognizing how much God has already put among us that makes us united. The differences are there, and we don't want to dilute our faith or compromise.

But if you remember one sentence from me, please remember this: *God is so great, so high, and so central that, in addition to the unity of God, nothing else should matter to us.* If anyone says, "God is 80% important to me, and 20% are other things," this is to underestimate God. If I share God with you, how much do I share with you? Everything. For someone whose life is centered around God, everything is God.

Yes, then it is a matter of how to respond to God, how to pray to Him, how to act according to His will—those come later. But the main thing is that God should be the center of our lives and the reason for our lives.

I find my Christian brothers and sisters who have dedicated their lives to God closer to me than my family members who may not have devoted their lives to God—even if they share my faith, language, and even DNA.

But if they have not devoted their lives to God, they are not as close to me as my Christian brothers or sisters, or Sunni brothers or sisters who have devoted their lives to God.

We have to get together to around God who is Absolute Truth, who is Absolute Beauty. And if you are attracted to God, there is no way not to be a Voice of Unity. Any person who is attracted to God brings light, hope, unity, peace, and fraternity to this world. You don't find any man of God who would divide people. Who would say, "This part of humanity is important; the rest is not important." These are better than others. They are superior to others. There is no place for discrimination or racism or anything like that for people of God.

In 2017, when we had the Catholic-Shi'a dialogue, our theme was "Unity of God and Unity in God." Over time, we have understood this theme better. I really understand that Unity of God must be reflected in unity *among people*. You cannot say, "I'm a monotheist, but I don't bother about unity among people." Unity of God must be echoed in unity of mankind.

Thanks to God, when we had a public event like this in Kenya, because we were meeting in the Subiaco Center for Benedictine sisters (we have Sr. Lusina here), but on the side we had two half-day programs at the University of Tangaza. The theme was "Unity of God and Unity in God." When we shared with them the good news of love and friendship built over the years and we talked about "Unity of God and Unity in God", our brothers in Tangaza University said, "Every year we should have something under this motto."

We started having three-week courses on Islam and Christianity. Everything planned and taught was by us and Tangaza University together—in fellowship. And right now, Fr. Innocent from Tangaza is in Qum, Iran, for the second time. Up to last summer we have had five annual courses in Tangaza (had it not been for Covid, it would have been more). For three weeks, Muslims and Christians have lived, studied, and eaten together under the motto: "Unity of God and Unity in God."

So, we have done this for many years now, in our International Institute for Islamic Studies (IIIS) in Qum (I'm based in the UK, but still I continue in IIIS) which is for training clerics for

international activities. I also have online students from different countries—mostly from North America and students in London. No matter which institute or platform they use, for many years we have made this part of our formation. They must experience living with Christians. They must travel with us to—whether it is Italy, Kenya, Switzerland (for the World Council of Churches and visits with the Focolare), or in other countries (even Brazil and Argentina), any person who is learning from this humble servant of God, Islam or Shi'a Islam, must also learn how to implement unity of God and unity in God especially in Christian-Muslim relationships. Some may say one thing within the community—perhaps discouraging talk of dialogue—but then speak about it in public. That's not the approach we take.

We have one consistent approach to formation. It's essential that every monk, nun, priest, imam, and sheikh learns to recognize the unity of God among ourselves—how to live together as servants of the same God and how to be witnesses for Him. We need to be joint witnesses for God, standing together as witnesses. I believe we should strive for a collective sainthood. I sometimes say to my Christian and Shi'a brothers and sisters that throughout history, God has inspired many saints. As a Muslim, I accept that God may still inspire, even today, a Christian saint, a Jewish saint—anyone He chooses. God has also inspired some Muslims.

I would benefit from the wisdom that God has given to any person. I don't discriminate. I don't say, "I love wisdom only when it comes from Muslims, or from a Shi'a." I love any wisdom, and I'm thirsty for it. But I think there is a wisdom that God has not yet given anyone, neither Muslims nor Christians: the wisdom that we need for establishing universal fraternity. This wisdom has not been given to anyone so far. I believe this is too great to be given to one saint or to one tradition. It is only when we are together, united, and joined in our hearts to create a collective sainthood that God will then inspire that collective sainthood to understand how to implement His plan for universal fraternity.

So I don't pray for a Shi'a to understand that, or a Catholic to understand that. I wait for a group of Shi'as, Sunnis, Christians, Jews, etc. God can choose those who are united with each other, who love each other, and who have no trace of ego, even religious ego, in their hearts. It is only then that God can inspire them how to move towards universal fraternity.

May God use each of you for His plan for unity. May each of you become voices for unity. May God help us on this journey together. This is indeed a journey that we cannot travel on alone.

Thank you very much.