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INTER-FAITH DIALOGUE: BETWEEN PIETY AND PARTITION

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It is not often realized that Muslims attribute more miracles to Jesus than to the Prophet Muhammad. Muslims definitely believe in the virgin birth of Jesus and in such miracles as curing a leper or walking on water.

However, there are two types of miracles — those that require faith in order to believe, and those which are factually verifiable. Let us examine comparatively a set of miracles under each category.

Christians believe that Jesus died on the cross, and then came back to life. This is a miracle whose acceptance requires faith. Muslims believe Muhammad went to heaven without dying, and returned to Mecca via Jerusalem the next day. This too is a miracle whose acceptance requires faith. In the city where Jesus was killed, and then came back to life, Muhammad ascended to heaven *live* from the city, and then returned on the morrow. Muhammad's heavenly experience occurred on the night of "Miraj". It was that night which turned Jerusalem into a sacred city for Muslims, as well as for Jews and Christians.

According to Christians, Jesus departed from life and then returned to life. According to Muslims, Muhammad departed from this world *live* — and then returned to earth without dying in-between. Both miracles are faith-intensive.

On the other hand, there are two miracles which are factually verifiable — but did not qualify as miracles until centuries later. The Prophet Muhammad dictated the verses of the Qur'an orally, and his disciples wrote them down. The miracle is that today the Qur'an already qualifies as the most widely read book in

its original language in human history. This numerical statement is a miracle which is factually verifiable.

The Bible is the most widely read book in translation. No book in history has been translated into more languages than has the Christian Bible. And yet the majority of Christians on earth have no idea what language Jesus spoke.

Neither Jesus nor Muhammad picked up a pen to write down their own scriptures. Yet the books with which they are associated have become the most influential literary achievements in the history of the written word. It is miracles such as these which are factually verifiable — but unfolding slowly across centuries.

Today we are celebrating primarily “Jesus Son of Mary”, almost on his own. But why this week of January instead of December 25? According to the Julian Calendar of the Orthodox Church, Christmas was January 7 this year, rather than December 25 [Gregorian] last year. That includes the Calendar [Julian] of the Coptic Church in Egypt, as well as the Greek Orthodox, the Russian Orthodox and the Ethiopian Orthodox.

Jesus was not born in any of those countries, but his infant life was saved in what later became Africa’s first Christian nation. The infant Jesus found asylum in Egypt. According to the Gospel of Matthew, the angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph (Mary’s husband) and said:

“Rise, take the child and his mother to Egypt to stay there until I tell you. Harod is going to search for the child to destroy him.”
[Matthew 2, 13–23]

At least theoretically, Egypt saved the baby Jesus from being crucified at so young an age.

Elsewhere along the Nile Valley two thousand years later a referendum is taking place which is widely expected to result in the first religious partition of this 21st century. Africa’s largest country in territory may decide to split itself into two separate Republics — separating the Muslim sector from the sector which is Christian-led.

Such an outcome of the referendum in Southern Sudan this January 2011 would be a setback, but it would also be an opportunity to make amends and become better neighbours.

In the 20th century religious partitions included the split between Hindus and Muslims in the partition of British India, the split between Jews and Arabs in the partition of Palestine, and the split between Catholics and Protestants in the partition of Ireland. Religious partitions in the past were designed to solve one problem, and created other problems instead.

No wonder the Qur’an has advised nations and tribes to get to know each other better, and to learn from each other.

“O human kind! We have created you from a single pair of male and female, and made you into nations and tribes that you may know each other better. Verily the most honored among you in the sight of God is the most righteous among you. God is the most knowledgable, the best informed.”

Ya, ayuha nasu! Innā khalaqnaakum min dhakarin wa unthaa, wa jaalnakum shu'uban wa qabaila li-taarafu. Inna akramakum I'nda 'llahi atqaakum. [Sura Hujarat, 49 verse 13]

In this 21st century the human race has another opportunity to respect diversity and pluralism and to cultivate the ecumenical spirit of learning from each other as recommended by our scriptures. The United States could help by living up to its mediating role as the indispensable go-between.

The most relevant analogy to the North-South relationship in Sudan is the relationship between Serbia and Kosovo. In Sudan the Muslim North mistreated the Christian-led South — and today the South may decide to secede from Sudan.

In greater Serbia it was the reverse: the Christian Serbs mistreated the Muslim people of Kosovo — and those ethnic Muslims of Kosovo have already seceded from Greater Serbia. While in Sudan the aggressors were Muslims and the victims were Christian-led, in Greater Serbia the aggressors were *Christians* and the victims were ethnic Albanian Muslims of Kosovo — a reverse chain of culpability.

In its own history the United States was anti-secession, anti-partition and opposed to the Confederates, hence the American Civil War. But in its foreign policy toward Sudan, on one side, and Greater Serbia, on the other, the United States has favoured partition to create separate nations for Christians and Muslims.

In one of the most remarkable events of the 20th century the United States under Bill Clinton and Great Britain under Tony Blair bombed fellow Christian Serbs in order to protect Muslims of Kosovo, who were being brutalized by the Serbs.

In Sudan the United States helped negotiate a peace treaty between North and South, and supported a free referendum for Southern Sudanese Christians to give them the option of territorial separation from the Muslim North.

If (as expected) the Southerners of Sudan do decide to secede between now and February 15, let us hope their Muslim neighbours to the North will not only accept the results but will help to build and develop the poverty-stricken South. The wider Arab world should also find the generosity to mobilize some of their own petro-dollars in support of the re-construction of the South.

Above all, we should remind ourselves of the verse of the Qur'an which has affirmed that we have been created male and female, and fashioned into tribes and nations, that we may know each other and learn from each other. Surely the best of us before God are not necessarily Arab or non-Arab, Black or White, Northerner or Southerner. The best of us are the most humanely pious.

Inna Akramakum indaa 'llah atqaakum.