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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Christian–Muslim Dialogue: The Love of God and the Love of Neighbour in a World of Religious Differences.

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Abstract: This article looks at the “the love of God and the love of neighbour” as understood in Christianity and in Islam. It addresses the question “do Christians and Muslims have the same understanding of this?” We begin with the Syriac Orthodox Church, its experience of persecution and genocide, and the story of my grandparents’ survival. There follows an examination of the important letter “A Common word between Us and You” which was an initiative put forward by a group of Muslim scholars in 2007. I explain the differences in understanding of the concepts of the love of God and the love of neighbour between Christians and Muslims. I conclude by looking beyond the scripture texts of both faiths to consider how commitment to universal human rights can improve the lives of all people, those who have a faith, and also those who are without faith. I recall that my own family’s experience demonstrates the need for the positive thinking and understanding shown in the Common Word Letter, to strengthen our hope that the prayer the Lord has given us “may your Kingdom come in earth as in heaven” may be fulfilled.

Keywords: Christian-Muslim Dialogue, Love of God and Neighbor, Syriac Orthodox Church History, Religious Tolerance and Human Rights, A Common Word Initiative

Introduction

Our Lord Jesus Christ said to his followers, “if anyone would come after me, let him take up his cross and follow me.” (Matthew 16.24) I think it would not be an exaggeration to say that the people of the Syriac Orthodox Church have been marked by the cross throughout their history, knowing persecution, marginalization, and often expulsion from their homes because of their faith. As they have followed Christ faithfully in their lives, they have known very keenly the pain of religious difference which has been exploited by their enemies. Even in the world of the twentieth century their suffering continued. And so I open for you the story of my family since the days of my grandparents, who were born in the days of the Ottoman empire, in their ancestral lands of Ṭūr-‘Abdīn, where Christians survived as a minority within the Ottoman state.

In south east Turkey, the area of Ṭūr-‘Abdīn had for centuries been something of a refuge for the Syriac Orthodox Christian community, with its strongly built monasteries

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and surrounding villages. (Syriac press blog, 2020) In fact the name Ṭūr-ʿAbdīn means in Syriac, “Mountain of the Servants (of God.)”. The Ṭūr-ʿAbdīn region is populated by more than 80 villages and nearly 70 monastery buildings and was mostly Syriac Orthodox until the early 20th century. It is a region where the Christian faith was present from the earliest times. This is where my grandparents were born and grew up.

The 1915 Genocide and My Family History

My previous position in the Syriac Orthodox Church has been as Metropolitan of the Euphrates, with my diocesan church centre in Hasaka, north-east Syria. Until I was obliged to leave Syria because of the civil war situation, I worked for peace between the Christian and Muslim people of the area. At the same time, I have never been able to forget that I belong to a family which has experienced the sufferings of genocide. I think now of my grandfather Musa Rohm, who was one of the survivors of the 1915 genocide carried out by the Ottoman Empire, in which more than one million and a half Christians were killed. While in the West it is often referred to as the genocide of the Armenians, it also encompassed many Christians of Syriac identity.

The story of my grandfather and grandmother’s escape from this fate has profoundly influenced my life, inspiring me to search for peace between people of different religions. Surely there can be no justification whatsoever for killing people simply because they believe in a religion that is different from the religion of others. I consider the story of this genocide to be an example of a terrible injustice done to innocent people, where difference in religion was used as the vehicle to destroy their lives.

On April 24, 1915, based on a decree from the Sultan in Istanbul, the Ottoman military deported the Armenians to the Syrian desert in the Dayr al-Zūr region, where massacres were committed against the defenceless families. (United States Holocaust Museum 2023)

The military was not satisfied with killing the Armenians, but they also went beyond this target, killing Christians from the Syriac, Chaldean, Assyrian, and Eastern Orthodox communities. In the early months of the genocide, my grandfather was living in the Christian village of Bayaza, situated in the plains of Mesopotamia, a village to be found nowadays near the Syrian town of al-Qaḥṭānyyah, in al-Ḥasaka Governorate, where I became the Syriac Metropolitan. The entire region was then part of the Ottoman Empire. The whole atmosphere in the region was highly charged and troubled due to the First World War, in which the Ottoman Empire took part on the side of Germany against the Allies. The day came in May 1915 when, in the early morning,

four Christian men from Bayaza mounted their horses, and headed to the village of a Kurdish Muslim who was a leader in the area. They were responding to a request which came from him, to consult with him about conditions in the region. He had made to them promises of safe conduct, but he betrayed those promises and he had them killed. In that same afternoon, my grandmother Zahra began to feel that the four men's delay in returning home to Bayaza was not a normal occurrence, because their round trip should not have taken more than three hours. She was overcome with suspicion that something bad had happened to them, and that their village was under threat.

But she thought to herself that if she asked her husband to leave Bayaza, he would reject her request; he would not have agreed to leave the village community in these most difficult times. And so she took matters into her own hands, which was against the way she was brought up to think. It was a moment of crisis, and she reached a brave decision. She set out for Ḥbab, the village of her husband's family, the Roham family, in the Ṭūr-ʿAbdīn mountains. It was a journey of one full day on foot. Without her husband's knowledge, she went by herself, carrying her only son Elias and walking towards Ḥbab, intent on saving the child's life. (Elias, whom she carried on this journey – later to be my uncle - was only one year and a few months old at the time. Neither my father Adul-Ahad nor my aunt Martha had yet been born.)

When darkness fell, Bayaza, that small and friendly village, was suddenly attacked by an armed Kurdish militia allied with the Ottoman military. Only four men survived from the entire village, one of them being my grandfather. The aim of the attackers was clearly to kill all the inhabitants of Bazaya, women and children included. The four men hid in a grain warehouse (called *Kwara* in Syriac). One of the killers reached out his hand to explore inside the grain store, searching for anyone who might be hiding there, but fortunately he did not find them, so he cried out to his companions saying in Kurdish *Kasmaya*, which means "there is no one".

After these criminals had killed the peaceful people of Bayaza, they left the place. Then silence prevailed and all that could be heard was the sound of dogs that came to eat the flesh of the victims. After a time, these four who had so far survived, decided to leave the place one by one, so that in case any of them fell into the hands of the killers it would not be the four of them being caught together. Over the period of one hour, each of the four men withdrew from the *Kwara* safely, and they met at an agreed place outside the village. From there, they headed towards their families' villages in Ṭūr-ʿAbdīn. (The Christians living in the plains of Mesopotamia had come down to settle there from their homeland Ṭūr-ʿAbdīn with its strongly built monasteries that offered some security.)

My grandfather managed to reach his home village of Ḥbab exhausted, and he told his relatives there about the hideous massacre in Bayaza. When they asked him about his wife Zahra, and his son Elias, he told them that they were killed along with the rest of the village community. He said that he heard the voice of a child crying, and thought it was the voice of his child Elias crying for his mother. He was desperate to go out and save his child, but he was not armed, while the killers were carrying all kinds of deadly weapons. It was clear to him that if he went out to try to save his son's life, he could not succeed and he would be killed as well.

What he did not know, is my grandmother's part in the story. After she had made her way across the plain of Mesopotamia, she climbed up into the Ṭūr-ʿAbdīn mountains near the Monastery of St. Awgīn (Eugene.) She managed to reach the village of Arkaḥ, also known as Kharabala, and she and Elias were cared for by the family of the priest. Arkaḥ is the village next to Ḥbab, approximately five kilometers away, and the people of both villages knew one another. It happened that two days later, a man from Arkaḥ went to Ḥbab and he heard from the people there about the Bayaza massacre and how my grandfather had survived. So he went to meet my grandfather to tell him that his wife Zahra was safely in Arkaḥ. My grandfather could not believe his ears, because he was convinced that Zahra and little Elias had been killed. He eagerly hurried up to Arkaḥ to meet his wife and child. When he saw them, he was full of astonishment that they were still alive. He took them with him back to Ḥbab and they lived there until 1926.

At that time disturbances broke out in the villages of Ḥbab and Arkaḥ due to armed clashes between the Turkish army and the militia of a Kurdish leader called Ḥajo, who had taken charge of these two Christian villages as a refuge for him and his comrades. The Turkish army tracked down Ḥajo, so he and his comrades withdrew from both villages and went towards Syria. Then the Turkish army placed mines in the foundations of St. Elias Monastery in Ḥbab, and of St Malki Monastery in Arkaḥ. Both monasteries were completely destroyed so that Ḥajo would not come back to take shelter in these monasteries which he had taken over as his strongholds. These painful events in Ḥbab and Arkaḥ made my grandfather think about going back into Syria, now a newly-created state under the French mandate, because relative safety prevailed under its rule. He took his wife and son and went down to Syria, but he never returned to his house that he had left behind in Bayaza, nor did any Christian return there following the evil massacre that had engulfed the village. Muslim Kurds had occupied the village and they had used their violence to seize the properties of the Christians.

My grandfather died in 1970 and did not dare to sue the killers nor demand his property rights due to the absence of any human justice in the area. In Syria, my

grandparents had one more son, Abdullahad, who was to be my father, and one daughter Martha, my aunt. If my grandfather had been killed in Bayaza, my father would not have been born, and I would not be the teller of this story, this example of human tragedy connected to religious belief. This is just one story, but it is a link into a web of widespread human pain and suffering, human beings inflicting this upon one another.

By sharing this story, I hope to play my part in breaking the cycle of violence stemming from religious difference, and to promote the putting of religion on the right path towards the building of peace between peoples. Making use of religious identity in order to kill people is a most terrible crime. The rights of the victims must not be forgotten after their deaths. May hope remain alive in us, so that human societies will learn from the recounting of such horrific experiences to reject such violence and to live together in harmony. No community should be afraid of another, or attack the lives of others simply because of differences in faith, skin colour or ethnicity. In this building of a more peaceful world, we need to examine how we understand the concept of "neighbour". This is a key concept in the religious texts of Judaism, Christianity and Islam. Since the area that I come from, and the context of my life has been that of the overlapping of the presence of Christianity and Islam, and the consequences of this overlapping, I am now going to consider how far the exploration of what it is to be "a neighbour to one another" may help us towards the path of peace.

Is the understanding of duty to the neighbour the same in Islam as it is in Christianity? This is a question worth pursuing in the hope of improving relationships between Christian and Muslim communities the world over.

[A Common Word \(ACW\)](#)

To help me answer this question, I turn to a fundamental text for Christian-Muslim dialogue, the letter "A Common Word between Us and You". (A Common Word Letter, 2007) This letter was sent in October 2007 by a group of 138 notable Islamic scholars to the heads of churches around the world, calling on them for a dialogue to achieve peace between Islam and Christianity. The letter, known as 'The ACW Letter', was published on an official website of the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan. It expressed a commitment and feeling of responsibility towards the future of humanity so that people may live in peace. A copy of the letter was handed to the Vatican as an official communication. The Vatican responded positively by inviting Prince Ghazi of Jordan to visit the Vatican with a delegation of those Muslim scholars who had signed the ACW Letter in order to discuss the letter and the next steps. (Vatican 2007) In the same way, responses came from Christian leaders and institutions around the world that

valued the ACW Letter and its encouragement for a serious dialogue to promote peace between the two religions.

The Letter consists of three main sections: ‘Love of God’, ‘Love of Neighbour’, and ‘Come to a Common Word between Us and You’. The content of each of these three sections is first dealt with from an Islamic point of view, then the Muslim scholars introduce what corresponds to it in Christianity according to their own understanding of Christian faith.

Love of God and Love of Neighbour

I will first comment on the section “Love of God” which provides the way in to the understanding “Love of Neighbour”. The ACW letter states that the call to love God is at the core of Christianity and Islam. But we should note that the identification of God with love is not mentioned directly in the Qur’an. However the name of God as ‘loving’, *Wadūd* وُدود is included among the traditional 99 Beautiful Names of God. (Bible-Qur’an blog, Amr Khaled) Under the sub-heading ‘Love of God *Ḥub Allah* حُب الله’ it is stated that the call to love God is at the core of Christianity and Islam. *Ḥub Allah* means here the love of the human being towards God. In contrast, in our Christian faith, God is clearly identified with “love” in 1 John 4. 16. I would suggest that the meaning of “love of God” in Christianity and Islam has indeed some differences due to divergence in doctrinal concepts of the nature of God and the relationship between God and the human race. How that relationship is understood is of vital importance. The Christian doctrines of the Holy Trinity, and of our salvation through the sacrifice of Christ, both doctrines rejected by Islam, shape Christian understanding of the love of God.

And yet conservative Muslim scholars regard one who is not a Muslim (who is unable to proclaim both faith in the Oneness of God and in ‘Muhammad as Prophet’) as “an infidel” even if that person is a Christian or a Jew, a member of ‘The People of the Book’ according to the term used in the Qur’an. These scholars rely on a saying of Muhammad that a Jew or a Christian who does not believe his message will be condemned at death to the Fire of punishment. Those Muslims who hold such a belief and such an attitude, can hardly be credited with acknowledging the full humanity of non-Muslims. On the other hand, we have to recognise that for centuries Christians were willing to consign all non-Christians to hell-fire, regardless of their non-Christian faith beliefs.

However just as Christian perspectives on faiths other than Christianity have been modified through the reflection of theologians and scholars over the last two hundred years, so there are voices within Islam calling for the ‘People of the Book’ to be

considered neither polytheists nor infidels, basing their belief on passages from the Qur'an, such as Surah Al-Baqarah, verse 62 "Surely they that believe, and those of Jewry, and the Christians, and those Sabaeans, whoso believes in God and the Last Day, and works righteousness – their wage awaits them with their Lord, and no fear shall be on them, neither shall they sorrow."

Al-Azhar scholar Muṣṭafá Rāshid supports such an opinion in an Arabic article entitled "Christians and Jews are neither Polytheists nor Infidels, but People of the Book" (Rāshid, at www.ahewar.org). Rāshid received widespread criticism from Al-Azhar and many Muslim scholars. I think he and many others have made good contributions towards building religious tolerance. I need not emphasise how vital such religious tolerance is, in this world where we encounter evil forces such as ISIL (Daesh) who claim to be the true representatives of their faith. There is much more that could be said about "the Love of God" but we must now turn to "the Love of Neighbour".

In this second section, the ACW Letter does not talk in much detail about the love of neighbour; it has less content than the first and third sections of the Letter. One may wonder what is in the eyes of God more precious in this universe than a neighbour, that is, a human being. My attention was caught first of all in this second section of the Letter by the fact it launches the discussion about 'neighbour', not from the Qur'an, but from the *Hadith*, the collected traditions of Muhammad, based on his sayings and actions.

The ACW Letter introduces the love for neighbour with a worthy saying by Muhammad: "None of you has faith until you love for your neighbour what you love for yourself." The Arabic text of this saying also includes the word 'brother'. It reads: "No one has faith until he loves for his brother, *Akhī-hi* أخيه , or it is said for his neighbour *Jār* , what he loves for himself." The Arabic text can tell us here that a neighbour is as important to us as a brother. ACW claims that a neighbour must offer his neighbour generosity and self-sacrifice based on the understanding of Surah Al-Baqarah 2: 177.

ACW concludes its consideration of the love of neighbour in Islam with a sentence that summarizes the good intention behind writing the Letter, "Without giving the neighbour what we ourselves love, we do not truly love God or the neighbour." It then goes on to explain the love of neighbour in Christianity as being founded on the biblical commandment "Love your neighbour as yourself", which is equal in value to the greatest commandment, "Love the Lord your God with all your heart, from all your soul ..." (Matthew 22: 38-40). ACW understands that the love of neighbour in Christianity requires generosity and self-sacrifice exactly as it is in Islam. The explanation provided by ACW about the love of neighbour is an important contribution to

continuing dialogue between Muslims and Christians. However, we might reasonably ask further, “who is my neighbour in these three religions: Judaism, Christianity and Islam?”

In Arabic, the word neighbour *Jār* جار , means everyone who lives or works nearby. It has a geographical dimension. There are three types of neighbour in Islam:

- a. A Muslim Relative Neighbour is a Muslim by religion, a relative through the ties of blood, and a neighbour in the living or working place. Such neighbour has three rights to be given: the rights of Islam, of being a relative, and of neighbourhood.
- b. A Muslim Neighbour is Muslim by religion, and a neighbour in the living or working place. He has two rights to be given: the rights of Islam, and of neighbourhood.
- c. A Non-Muslim Neighbour, who is not Muslim by religion, but who is a neighbour in the living or working place. He has one right to be given, the right that belongs to neighbourhood. (Shams Al-Dīn *et al*, 2017)

Dr Jāsīmyiah Shams Al-Dīn and Dr Fāṭmah Al-Rashīdī say:

“Unfortunately, some believe that a non-Muslim neighbour does not deserve to be treated kindly or dealt with respect and appreciation. Islam has defined the relationship between Muslims and non-Muslims, especially the non-Muslim neighbour. A non-Muslim indeed has a creed that differs from the belief of Muslims, but this does not mean that he should not be treated well with full of respect, appreciation and good treatment.” (Shams Al-Dīn, *ibid.*)

The concept of neighbour and the duties towards him in Islam are based on verse 36 of ‘Surat An-Nisa’, which is not mentioned in this section of ACW. The verse reads:

“Serve God, and associate naught with Him. Be kind to parents, and the near kinsman, and to orphans, and to the needy, and to the neighbour who is of kin, and to the neighbour who is a stranger, and to the companion at your side, and the traveller, and to that your right hands own. Surely God loves not the proud and boastful.” (see reference ‘Surat An-Nisa’ for the Arabic.) It evidenced here that the duty of a Muslim neighbour towards his neighbour, whoever is he, in terms of generosity and self-sacrifice will help in promoting the spirit of cooperation and tolerance between them.

In Hebrew, the word neighbour, Re‘ā רֵעַ , means a friend, a companion, fellow, fellow-citizen, and the other person. (Brown *et al*, 2012)

In Syriac, the word neighbour, as mentioned in the Syriac *Peshitta* Bible, is *Qariba* ܩܪܝܒܐ , meaning a relative, a partner, a companion, and a friend (Manna, 1975). The geographical neighbour is called in Syriac *Shbaba* ܫܒܒܐ (ibid.)

The Gospel identifies the meaning of neighbour in the parable of the good Samaritan (Luke 10:25-37). Jesus gave this parable to tell his audience that a person who shows mercy to another is a neighbour, even if that person is commonly considered to be an enemy or corrupt. The Samaritan in the eyes of the Jews was a corrupt person and accused of mingling paganism with Judaism (Naseri, 2014). In the story, the Samaritan deserved to be counted as a neighbour to the wounded Jew by saving his life. Thus, a neighbour in Christianity is not someone who belongs to the religion, or who lives nearby, but whoever does goodness to others. The meaning of neighbour in Christianity transcends all boundaries of religion, race, colour, gender, and opinion.

ACW and the Hope for a Common Ground Between Islam and Christianity

In the third and final section of the ACW letter, “Come to a Common Word between Us and You”, the differences between Islam and Christianity are acknowledged. But it recognises the two commandments, the love of God and the love of neighbour, as “a common ground and a link between the Qur’an, the Torah and the New Testament.” Both commandments are based on an understanding of the Oneness of God. The ACW Letter hopes that this ‘common ground’ may be the basis for all future interfaith dialogue between religions. In this section the phrase is quoted: “Let there be no compulsion in religion...” (Al-Baqarah, 2:256) This phrase appears suddenly in ACW without explanatory details. It expresses tolerance for anyone who is not a Muslim since he is free to choose his own religion. The phrase is part of the verse, Al-Baqarah 256, “No compulsion is there in religion. Rectitude has become clear from error. So whosoever disbelieves in idols and believes in God, has laid hold of the most firm handle, unbreaking; God is All-hearing, All-knowing.”

Imam Ibn Baz, the Grand Mufti of Saudi Arabia 1992-1999, said that this verse is abrogated (*Mansūkhah*, منسوخة) and conservative Muslim Scholars have two comments to make about it:

First: it is abrogated by the verse of *Al-Sayf* السيف the sword, (Qur’an 9.5, see references) which is a term given to the fifth verse of Surah 9, Al-Taubah. This verse says: “Then, when the sacred months are drawn away, slay the idolaters wherever you find them, and take them, and confine them, and lie in wait for them at every place of ambush. But if they repent, and perform the prayer, and pay the alms, then let them go their way; God is All-forgiving, All-compassionate”. This is in agreement with what

is stated in Surah 8 Al-Anfal, 39: “Fight them, till there is no persecution and the religion is God’s entirely...”

Second: The compulsion to enter Islam does not include ‘People of the book’, and those under their status such as *Al-Majūs* المجوس , the Magi, as long as they pay *jizya* جزية , the Islamic taxation. Surah Al-Taubah supports this opinion in verse 29, “Fight those who believe not in God and the Last Day and do not forbid what God and His Messenger have forbidden -- such men as practise not the religion of truth, being of those who have been given the Book -- until they pay the tribute out of hand and have been humbled.” (Surah 9 v.29 see reference)

One may reasonably ask therefore how Islam has treated the ‘People of the Book’ and non-Muslims. Imam Ibn Baz includes ‘People of the Book’ among the ‘infidels and polytheists.’ They are like worshipers of idols, stars and planets, and like all other infidels and atheists. However, ‘People of the Book’ are excluded from the rest of the infidels and polytheists in that the Qur’an allowed Muslims to eat their food as in Surah 5, Al-Ma’idah, verse 5: “Today the good things are permitted to you, and the food of those who were given the Book is permitted to you, and permitted to them is your food...” In the same verse, the Quran allows marrying Christian women: “Likewise believing women in wedlock, and in wedlock women of them who were given the Book before you if you give them their wages, in wedlock and not in licence, or as taking lovers.”

Historically, Islam gave ‘People of the Book’ and the Magi the choice between these three options: accepting Islam, paying the *jizya*, or the sword (killing), but it gave the infidels and the polytheists only the choice and between Islam and the sword.

The ACW Letter claimed that “As Muslims, we say to Christians that we are not against them and that Islam is not against them—so long as they do not wage war against Muslims on account of their religion, oppress them and drive them out of their homes.” A close examination of this statement reveals that there is a misunderstanding about linking wars with Christianity. Nations are concerned about their interests and global coalitions are based on these interests and not on religion. The West is no longer a Christian entity as it was in the Middle Ages. It is ruled by secular laws that separate religion from the state. Regarding the secular life in the West, a question remains: Christianity has adapted itself to living with secularism in the West, will Islam adapt itself to it and make a balance between the Shari’a, the Islamic law, and secularism?

Accusing Christians of waging war against Muslims is misplaced. Unfortunately, religion has been both used and abused throughout history by those who practice politics.

Conclusion: The Hope for a Better World

Each faith needs to examine itself to ensure that as it expresses itself today in words drawn from the past, it does not “de-humanise” those who have commitment to another faith, or those who are without faith. No human being should be considered to be without human rights. In the secular age in which we live, particularly in the West, it might seem strange to refer to “the power of theology”. And yet it is true that a perverted theology which denigrates all human beings except “true believers” is a cause of violence, as we see in the rise of ISIL. And conversely, a theology deeply rooted in the scripture of the faiths, and in the lives and witness of those who have lived lovingly and not denied others access to the grace and love of God, a theology open to dialogue, still has the power to steer humanity towards that harbour of peace which is in accordance with the divine will.

At the same time, it becomes increasingly evident that relations between Muslims, Christians and people of other faiths need to be looked at within the framework of human rights. It is important that justice on the basis of common human rights is available to all, including to those of no religious faith (UN Universal Declaration, 1948).

The ACW letter will remain as a good initiative for peace to be valued by the generations to come. It points us to a better world for us all to share in. As I look back on the story of my grandparents and their survival, I have to reflect that if the neighbouring Muslims to my grandparents' village had the same good intentions and understanding of their faith that we now see in the ACW Letter, the massacre of Bayaza would never have happened. And I note with regret that similar crimes are still being repeated in many countries. The world that we work towards with faith, hope and love, the world for which we long but which is not yet, we ask for daily in our prayer to the Lord, “Your Kingdom come on earth, as it is in heaven.”

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Surat An-Nisa (Surah 4) v. 36:

وَأَعْبُدُوا اللَّهَ وَلَا تُشْرِكُوا بِهِ شَيْئًا وَبِالْوَالِدَيْنِ إِحْسَانًا وَبِذِي الْقُرْبَىٰ وَالْيَتَامَىٰ وَالْمَسَاكِينِ وَالْأَجَارِ ذِي الْقُرْبَىٰ وَالْأَجَارِ الْجُنُبِ (36سورة النساء) وَالصَّاحِبِ بِالْجَنبِ وَابْنِ السَّبِيلِ وَمَا مَلَكَتْ أَيْمَانُكُمْ إِنَّ اللَّهَ لَا يُحِبُّ مَنْ كَانَ مُخْتَلًا فُجُورًا

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