

# Muslim Intellectual Responses to Interfaith Dialogue and Human Fraternity Documents

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## **Abstract**

*This paper discusses the intellectual response of INSISTS Muslims to interfaith dialogue and the document on human fraternity signed by Pope Francis and Imam Ahmad Al-Tayyeb which is a product of interfaith dialogue. This paper finds that INSISTS intellectuals reject interfaith dialogue as a method, but do not differ in their views on the universal values of Islam contained in the document. This paper is a literature study combined with observations on the INSISTS community. Rejection of interfaith dialogue is a consequence of a “respectful and critical” attitude towards Western discourse and the principle of caution in carrying out activities that will lead Muslims to infidelity.*

**Keywords:** Human Fraternity, INSISTS, Muslim Intellectuals

## **INTRODUCTION**

The document on “Human Fraternity for World Peace and Living Together” signed by two religious leaders, Pope Francis and Grand Imam Ahmad Al-Tayyeb on February 4, 2019 is a product of interreligious dialogue. The document has not only been disseminated around the world but also become an object of study, one of which is by the Catholic University in Lyon, France which regularly organises the PLURIEL International Congress (for instance see ‘4<sup>th</sup> PLURIEL congress’ 2024). The Pope said that, “faith in God unites and does not divide. It brings us closer together, despite our differences, and keeps us away from enmity and hatred.” The document consists of various important issues that are interesting to be elaborated, especially from the view of INSISTS Muslim intellectuals. As an Islamic community that chooses ‘respect-criticism’ (Wan Daud 2019) as an intellectual way of dealing with differences of opinion, this paper tries to elaborate the views of INSISTS intellectuals on the issues in the document. So far, there is no specific article written by INSISTS intellectuals in response to the document, but many of their writings have addressed these issues. Thus, this paper refers to the views of INSISTS intellectuals on the issues in the document.

An Indonesian Muslim intellectual community founded by postgraduate students of ISTAC Malaysia. They were particularly influenced by Syed Muhammad Naquib Al-Attas and Wan Mohd Wan Daud, the two ‘master teachers’ at the university. INSISTS’s subsequent thinking was heavily influenced by these two figures, especially in the Islamic worldview. The writings of INSISTS intellectuals such as Hamid Fahmy Zarkasyi, Adian Husaini, Syamsuddin Arif and Ugi Suharto refer to the thoughts of Al-Attas and Wan Daud, who taught them to be ‘respectful-critical’ of other people’s thoughts, even those that are different (Wan Daud 2019; Bachtiar 2017; Mumtazi 2020). INSISTS intellectual criticism of western thought is more about the concern of a critical attitude so that Islamic thought is not contaminated by western thought. Although in practice, INSISTS intellectuals also take thoughts that are considered constructive and useful that are considered not to interfere with Islamic thought.

## **RESULT AND DISCUSSION**

### **Human Fraternity Document**

In the introduction, it is explained that “Faith leads the believer to see in his or her neighbour a brother or sister to be supported and loved. Through faith in God, who has created the universe, creation and all humanity (equal by grace), the faithful are called to express this human brotherhood by protecting creation and the whole universe and supporting all people, especially the poorest and most needy.” (Francis & Al-Tayyeb, 2019). The

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document also observes that this transcendental value served as the starting point for a number of meetings characterised by an atmosphere of friendship and fraternity in which we shared our joys, sorrows, and the problems of our present world. The document continues, "We do this by taking into account scientific and technical advances, therapeutic successes, the digital age, mass media and communications. We also consider the level of poverty, conflict and suffering of so many brothers and sisters in different parts of the world as a result of the arms race, social injustice, corruption, inequality, moral decadence, terrorism, discrimination, extremism, and many other causes." (Francis & Al-Tayyeb, 2019)

Francis & Al-Tayyeb believe that "From our fraternal and open discussions, and from a meeting which expressed great hope in a bright future for all mankind, the idea of this Document on the Brotherhood of Man was born," the document reads. It continues, "It is a text that has been honestly and seriously thought out so that it becomes a common statement of good and sincere ideals. It is a document that invites all those who have faith in God and faith in the brotherhood of man to unite and work together so that it may serve as a guide for future generations to promote a culture of mutual respect in the awareness of the great divine grace, which makes all men brothers and sisters." (Francis & Al-Tayyeb, 2019)

The contents of the document are as follows. I will quote major parts of it as follows:

"In the name of God, who has created all human beings equal in rights, duties, and dignity, and who has called us to live together as brothers and sisters, to populate the earth and to recognise the values of goodness, love, and peace; In the name of innocent human life, which God has forbidden to be killed, affirming that whoever kills one is like one who kills all humanity, and whoever saves one is like one who saves all humanity; On behalf of the poor, the destitute, the marginalised, and those most in need, for whom God has commanded us to help as a duty required of all, especially the rich and well-off; On behalf of orphans, widows, refugees and those exiled from their homeland and country; on behalf of victims of war, persecution and injustice; on behalf of the weak, those living in fear, prisoners of war, and those tortured in every part of the world, without distinction; In the name of people who have lost their security, peace and the possibility of living together, being victims of destruction, catastrophe and war.

In the name of the human brotherhood that embraces all human beings, unites them and makes them equal; In the name of this brotherhood that is torn apart by policies of extremism and division, by systems of unbridled profit or by hateful ideological tendencies that manipulate the actions and futures of women and men; In the name of freedom, which God has granted to all human beings by creating them freely and making them different thanks to this grace; In the name of justice and mercy, the foundation of prosperity and the cornerstone of faith; In the name of all people of good will who exist in every part of the world; In the name of God and everything stated so far; Al-Azhar al-Sharif and Muslims from East and West, together with the Catholic Church and Catholics of East and West, declare to accept the culture of dialogue as the way; mutual cooperation as the code of conduct; mutual understanding as the method and criterion." (Francis & Al-Tayyeb, 2019)

The two religious leaders said that they believe in God and in a final encounter with Him and His judgement, "...based on our religious and moral responsibility, and through this document, call upon ourselves, to world leaders and the world's international and economic policy makers, to work hard to spread a culture of tolerance and living together in peace." They also took the initiative to intervene as soon as possible to stop the bloodshed of innocent people and end the wars, conflicts, environmental destruction and moral and cultural decline that the world is experiencing today. To this end, they call upon the intelligentsia, philosophers, religious leaders, artists, media practitioners and culturists in every part of the world, to rediscover the values of peace, justice, kindness, beauty, human brotherhood and coexistence in order to affirm these values as an anchor of salvation for all, and to promote them everywhere. (Francis & Al-Tayyeb, 2019)

This declaration, according to Francis & Al-Tayyeb (2019), it comes from a profound consideration of our present reality, assessing its successes and in solidarity with the suffering, disasters and catastrophes, firmly believing that among the main causes of the crisis of the modern world are the insensitivity of the human conscience, the departure from religious values and the widespread individualism accompanied by a materialistic

philosophy that deifies man and introduces worldly and material values in place of the highest and transcendental principles. While acknowledging the positive steps taken by our modern civilisation in the fields of science, technology, medicine, industry and welfare, especially in the developed countries, they wanted to stress that, associated with such historic advances, however great and valuable they may be, there is a moral decline affecting international action and a weakening of spiritual values and responsibilities. They write: "All this contributes to a general feeling of frustration, alienation and hopelessness that leads many people to fall into the vortex of atheistic extremism, agnosticism or religious fundamentalism, or into fanatical and blind extremism, which ultimately fuels individual or collective forms of dependency and self destruction." (Francis & Al-Tayyeb, 2019).

Francis & Al-Tayyeb (2019) said that history shows that religious extremism, national extremism, and also intolerance have given rise in the world, be it in the East or the West, to what might be called signs of a "third world war that is unfolding little by little." In some parts of the world and in many tragic circumstances, these signs have begun to take on a painful appearance, such as in situations where the exact number of victims, widows and orphans is unknown. Moreover, they also see other regions preparing to become the stage for new conflicts, with outbreaks of tension and build-ups of weapons and ammunition, and all this in a global context overshadowed by uncertainty, disillusionment, fear of the future, and driven by narrow-minded economic interests. "We also affirm that major political crises, situations of injustice, and the lack of equitable distribution of natural resources - favouring a wealthy minority to the detriment of the majority of the earth's population - have produced, and continue to produce, large numbers of poor, sick and dead people. This has led to catastrophic crises that have taken their toll in various countries, regardless of the natural resources and youth resources that characterise these nations. In the face of such crises resulting in the deaths of millions of children from poverty and hunger there is an unacceptable silence at the international level." (Francis & Al-Tayyeb, 2019).

It is clear in this context how the family as the basic nucleus of society and mankind is crucial in bringing children into the world, raising them, educating them, and nurturing them with a strong moral education and a sense of security at home. Attacking the institution of the family, trivialising or doubting its important role, is one of the most threatening crimes of our time. They also emphasised the importance of awakening religious consciousness and the need to reawaken this consciousness in the hearts of the new generation through sound education and adherence to moral values and correct religious teachings. In this way, we can confront individualistic, selfish, conflicting tendencies, and also overcome radicalism and blind extremism in all its forms and expressions. The first and foremost purpose of religion is to believe in God, to honour Him and to invite all women and men to believe that the universe is dependent on God who governs it. He is the Creator who has moulded us with His divine wisdom and has endowed us with the gift of life which must be protected. According to the Priest and the Pope, this is a gift that no one has the right to take away, threaten or manipulate for his own ends. Indeed, everyone must safeguard this gift of life from its beginning to its natural end. We therefore condemn all life-threatening practices such as genocide, acts of terrorism, forced displacement, human trafficking, abortion and euthanasia. We also condemn policies that support these practices. (Francis & Al-Tayyeb, 2019).

They see political manipulation of religion. The document writes that, "Moreover, we emphatically state that religion must not provoke warfare, attitudes of hatred, hostility, and extremism, nor must it provoke violence or bloodshed. These tragic realities are the result of the perversion of religious teachings. They are the result of political manipulation of religions and of interpretations made by religious groups who, in the course of history, have taken advantage of the strength of religious sentiments in the hearts of women and men to make them act in ways that are not related to religious truth. This is done to achieve political, economic, worldly and petty goals. Therefore, they call on all parties to stop using religion to incite (people) to hatred, violence, extremism and blind fanaticism, and to refrain from using the name of Allah to justify acts of murder, exile, terrorism and oppression. They ask this based on our shared belief in God who did not create men and women to kill or fight each other, nor to be tortured or humiliated in their lives and circumstances. Allah, the All-Powerful, does not need to be defended by anyone and does not want His name to be used to terrorise people. (Francis & Al-Tayyeb, 2019).

## **INSISTS Muslim Intellectual Response**

INSISTS is a community of Muslim intellectuals who think critically, especially towards Western thoughts that are considered inappropriate for Muslims. This community was formed based on intellectual discussions that resulted in the formation of a formal community that then published books, articles, and various contents with an Islamic vision (Bachtiar, 2017; Mustofa, 2019). For INSISTS intellectuals like Syamsuddin Arif, religion is something noble and should not be manipulated for any purpose. In various writings, INSISTS intellectuals like Syamsuddin Arif state this, but they disagree on the prohibition of politics using religious values. Value-free thinking is agreed upon by them. They are more inclined to how religion is best understood, in accordance with the Islamic worldview. In *Islam dan Diabolisme Intelektual*, Syamsuddin Arif (2017) criticizes various concepts and phenomena that are considered un-Islamic, such as liberalism, pluralism, feminism, and others.

The document is in line with previous International Documents that have emphasised the important role of religions in building world peace, upholding a firm conviction that the authentic teachings of religions invite us to remain rooted in the values of peace; to defend the values of mutual understanding, human brotherhood and harmonious coexistence; to reestablish wisdom, justice and love; and to reawaken religious consciousness among young people so that future generations can be protected from the realm of materialistic thinking and from the dangerous policy of unbridled greed and indifference based on the law of force and not on the force of law. The document says of freedom of religion, that "Freedom is the right of every person: every individual enjoys freedom of belief, thought, expression and action. Pluralism and diversity of religion, colour, sex, race and language were willed by God in His wisdom, through which He created mankind. This divine wisdom is the source from which the rights to freedom of belief and freedom to be different derive. Therefore, the fact that people are forced to follow a particular religion or culture must be rejected, as must the imposition of a cultural way of life that is not acceptable to others. Justice based on mercy is the path to follow to achieve the life of dignity to which every human being is entitled." (Francis & Al-Tayyeb, 2019).

Syamsuddin Arif believe that the relationship between Islam and Christianity at the intellectual, socio-cultural and political-economic levels occurs in three patterns. First, the polemic-apologetic pattern: Opposing or hostile and apologetic, i.e. talking away from issues whose purpose is to defend themselves, characterised by a war of beliefs; each side tries to bring down the other. For example, Yahya Ad-Dimasqi (Johannes Damascenus, lived around 655-750 CE), the author of the book *Peri Haireseon*, accused Islam of being heretical and deviant because it teaches fatalism. Among Muslims there were also scholars and intellectuals who were active in polemics against Christianity, such as Ibn An-Nadhim in the book *Al-Fibris* (2017, p.94-95). Second, the conflict-confrontational pattern: Military action and physical combat in a series of Crusades from the 11th to the 13th century AD, the massacre and wholesale expulsion of Muslims from Andalusia (the Iberian peninsula in what is now Portugal and Spain) and the colonisation of Islamic lands around the world (Middle East, Asia and Africa). This confrontation was caused because: (a) both Islam and Christianity are missionary expansionist in the sense that they want their adherents to preach to others so that clashes of interests often occur; (b) the crusades over several centuries that left a thousand impressions that are difficult to forget, and (c) the colonisation and looting of Muslim countries by European Christian nations that are still fresh in memory. All these factors have had a major impact in destroying the harmonious relationship between Islam and Christianity. (2017, p. 98-99). Lastly, the irenic-persuasive pattern: full tolerance, living together in harmony and peace (peaceful coexistence) with people of other religions as practised for centuries during the time of the Prophet in Medina and generations after him in Baghdad, Andalusia, and others. (2017, p.100-101)

According to Syamsuddin Arif (2017), the idea and activities of interfaith dialogue are new, because there is not a single verse of the Qur'an that recommends dialogue. Islam and the concept of interfaith dialogue were initiated by the Church at the Second Vatican Council. Because of this, some contemporary Muslim leaders disagree on this issue. For example, intellectuals who agree with interfaith dialogue namely Ismail Raji Al-Faruqi, Mahmoud Ayoub, and those against namely Fazlur Rahman and Syed Muhammad Naquib Al-Attas. Those who are pro-dialogue argue that (a) dialogue aims to eliminate misunderstanding, prejudice and hatred between one another, (b) dialogue is an effort to establish friendship with people of other religions, reduce tensions, encourage cooperation, mutual respect and understanding. All this is especially important for Muslims living in

Western countries as a minority group so as not to be hated, antagonised and oppressed. Those who oppose dialogue argue that (a) interfaith dialogue activists are unaware that such dialogue subtly leads to confusion, compromise, syncretism, relativism and religious pluralism, thus paving the way for proselytization, (b) interfaith dialogue is like the Vatican's 'Trojan city' which can be dangerous for Muslims, (c) each participant assumes that all participants are of equal status, other religious beliefs are not necessarily wrong, and discards the belief in Islam as the only true religion (Arif 2017, p. 101-102). According to Syamsuddin Arif, historical facts show that what Muslims have done since the first century of hijriyah is one of the following combinations: (a) wise, rational and persuasive da'wah, which invites other religions to convert to Islam. In contrast to dialogue that considers all religions equally true, (b) polite and firm debate, which is answering Christian arguments in various forums and media with logical and rational reasons, and (c) military action or war if all these paths do not work according to the instructions of the Al-Quran and the sunnah of the Prophet. (2017, p.104).

In this view, Syamsuddin intends to explain how Muslims view interfaith dialogue. He sees interfaith dialogue as a means aimed at shifting a Muslim's faith to be closer to infidelity. In Syamsuddin's view, "if Muslims have acknowledged and believed that religions are equally true and have the same essence, then apostasy is only one step away." (2017, p. 104). This fact explains that according to Syamsuddin, interfaith dialogue is 'something that can bring Muslims closer to infidelity (*kufr*).' The human fraternity document as part of the product of interfaith dialogue can be called a 'product that can lead to infidelity' if a Muslim 'acknowledges and believes that other religions are equally true.' Syamsuddin tends to understand that 'there is only one truth', and that is Islam, and there is no other truth besides Islam. My observation in attending interfaith dialogues several times is that the participants in interfaith dialogues do not always intend to understand that 'all religions are equally true', but rather see that 'even though we have different religions, we can unite to achieve common interests'. So, interfaith dialogue is sociologically better understood as a mechanism to bring together religious figures to jointly create order in society with a religious approach.

The values contained in the document above are actually universal values in Islam such as respect, tolerance, coexistence, dialogue, and so on. These values actually exist in various Islamic texts and are taught from generation to generation. My field research about INSISTS intellectuals community found that they reject *interfaith dialogue as a method*, not rejecting the universal values contained in the document. This means that all religious adherents have faith in the truth of their religion, and therefore can only tolerate as a mechanism for establishing good social relations.

## CONCLUSION

Some Muslims do not agree with the view of interfaith dialogue, but they realise that efforts to create a peaceful and tolerant life are important in this day and age. Moreover, Islam has a history of peaceful co-existence with other religions. Muslims who reject inter-religious dialogue think that inter-religious dialogue requires acknowledging that the truth is in other religions, while in Islam the truth is in Islam. It is important for Muslims to study the concepts of human fraternity in Islam or *ukhawah basyariyah* based on the Qur'an, the Prophet's sunnah, and traditions in Islamic history from the past to the present to serve as a foundation in building a harmonious and tolerant interfaith life together. The human fraternity document, especially related to interfaith dialogue, needs to be elaborated in more detail regarding important issues in the document with various Islamic references. In the Indonesian context, so far there are not many Muslim intellectuals who explain the contents of the document thematically and comprehensively.

In the intellectual context of INSISTS, I see that they are more careful with Western thoughts such as interfaith dialogue. The principle of caution is shown in the opinion of Syamsuddin Arif above, which generally concludes that there is no interfaith dialogue in Islam. This attitude is theoretical in the sense that Syamsuddin Arif's study means religious texts. On the other hand, Syamsuddin does not see that sociologically, Islamic communities in various places in the world experience interactions, acculturation that are not always 'Islamic', but are intended to create social order. Interfaith dialogue in that context, and what Francis and Al-Tayyeb did, seems to be more in the context of social relations on how to create a society that respects each other, coexists, but does not mix up interfaith worship rituals.

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