

# Christian-Muslim Relations in the Land of Selective History

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This October, near my new office in Louisville, Kentucky, I watched the bicentennial celebrations of the launching of the Lewis and Clark expedition. While these re-enactments and festivities drew busloads of school children and many visitors, every day I also passed a weathered, leaning commemorative plaque marking the site of the slave pens that were a feature of Louisville later in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and another telling me that in 1833 the State banned the exporting (and thus the sale) of slaves until it was reinstated 16 years later. I imagined the political and moral struggle among the people of Kentucky in those years, memorialized in these two easily overlooked bronze markers.

Perhaps it is not surprising, then — given also my academic training in the history of religions and professional work as a “middle-man” in the building of inter-faith relationships — that it is history that is my focus in this brief essay. But let me be clear: the sort of history to which I want to draw attention is not the accounting of factors and events that have led to a certain venture or state of Christian-Muslim relations. Rather, it is the process of historical reflection itself, and the role it has to play in Christian-Muslim relations that seems more important to me.

Often, Christian-Muslim dialogue goes on with no or only a peripheral historical consciousness. Quite understandably, people gather to consider issues of doctrine (views of Mary in the Qurʾān and Bible) or practice (prayer and fasting in the two traditions), or to explore matters of common concern (the infringement of civil and religious liberties in the name of the “war on terrorism”), and reflect little on the historical significance of what is taking shape among and through them.

But what is the shape of the history we are living? What do we see when we look with an historical perspective at what is unfolding and developing in our own day within the Christian and Muslim communities in the United States, and in the living out of relations between them? It is just here, in the midst of the unfolding life of Christians and Muslims in the United States today, where I find the most promise for Muslim-Christian relationship and conversation.

Is something new happening within Christianity and Islam, and in Christian-Muslim relations, in the United States post-September 11, 2001? A Buddhist teacher in the Western half of the United States, when asked about Buddhism in America, used the image of a pear tree brought from one location, with a particular kind of soil, climate, moisture and so on, to a new location, with another kind of ecology. It will continue to be a pear tree, he said, but the fruit will look and taste different.

This sort of adaptation or transformation certainly has taken place in the Christian churches that have taken root in the soil of the United States, and I don't think many would disagree that there are abundant signs of similar developments within Islam. The American "ecology" has, in fact, called forth or at least provided the context for very new forms of Christian faith and practice, including what are called the "American-born churches," and a similar process is underway in the Muslim community in North America.

As examples, consider two Muslim organizations, one established and one quite new. The Islamic Center of Southern California is an outstanding representative of the many Muslim groups consciously engaged in the work of developing an Islam for 21<sup>st</sup> century America. In its mission statement, it states that "its function is to practice and propagate Islam in the United States of America by providing religious, educational and recreational facilities for members of the public at large. The emergence of an American Muslim identity is its prime goal."<sup>1</sup> Out of the ferment that followed 9/11/01 grew a new organization, Muslims Against Terrorism, now called Muslim Voices for Peace. It has a two-part aim: to do "outreach" to people outside the Muslim community, offering education about Islam and the values of Muslims, and to do "in-reach" to inspire Muslims to take a more active role in the formation and articulation of Islam so that their community's self-definition is not hijacked by outspoken and violent sectarians.<sup>2</sup> One can only hope that our churches are attending to their own ongoing transformation as faith communities half so well!

The import of these and many similar developments among Christians and Muslims is not only that our religious lives and institutions are changing and growing (as they always do), but that, in some places at least, they are changing with self-conscious, historical attention (not always the case) to time and place, to our social, geographical and temporal location.

What is happening is NOT that a “backward” Islam is catching up to post-enlightenment Christian modernity, as some “clash of cultures” theorists think necessary. Rather, there is ample evidence in Muslim and Christian communities in the U.S. of movements of conscious renewal that are engaging people in *being and living* their traditions — in relating their faiths to the social and historical realities in which we are living, and in taking part in the work and wonder of interpreting their traditions for a new time and place. This I find exciting and hopeful. Amid such ferment and renewal, should we not also ask whether and what sorts of unique and new forms of Christian-Muslim relations might be growing here in the United States?

The idea that there is a fresh, “new world” sort of relationship opens potential problems as well as possibilities. Last year at this time, at a gathering of Muslims and Christians called by the World Council of Churches in Geneva, a well-known Muslim leader from the United States spoke about the positive change in relations among American Muslims and Christians revealed by the behavior of so many people after September 11, 2001. He described what he perceived as a maturing of understanding, a deepening of respect, and much better ties between Christian and Muslim communities than was the case at the time of the Oklahoma City bombing in April, 1995. He went on to say that he thought Muslims and Christians in the United States were breaking through to a new and positive kind of relationship not possible elsewhere in the Muslim world, and ended by making the suggestion that Muslims and Christians here in America might have something worth exporting back to our countries of origin.

Not surprisingly, his presentation elicited skepticism and some strong counter-assertions of what others, not from the United States, saw, or thought they saw, happening here. Asserting American uniqueness and possible leadership in the realm of Muslim-Christian relations did not sit well with many non-U.S. Muslims — or Christians either. Especially distressed by this idea of an American ideal, a kind of “city on the hill” in the area of interreligious relations, were those Muslims living in the more historic parts of the Muslim world, who understood themselves as directly threatened by an American led and declared “war on terrorism” that seems to have Islam itself as one of its several targets. Christians present also found themselves thinking of the kind of colonial and neo-colonial “exportation” of religious understanding they and their forbearers had experienced in the coming of missionaries from the U.S., with their destructive as well as constructive consequences.

However, it is certainly the case that the Muslim-Christian relationship in the United States *is* developing a unique character, depth and strength. Even if the American shape of the relationship turns out to be much like that known by Christians and Muslims who have lived side-by-side in established

multi-religious societies elsewhere, it will surely have its own particular qualities, difficulties, and gifts.

We are now living into the answer to this question. Asking whether something new is happening within Christianity and Islam and in Muslim-Christian relations in the U.S. serves as a very useful lens to help us see what is in fact unfolding and developing in our communities and in our relationship.

This particular process of historical reflection *from the midst of our life together* deserves further attention as a methodology. It is both necessary and critical for success in our interactions to begin “in the middle” of the somewhat messy business of living together as Christians and Muslims, and to reflect on what is unfolding and developing in our communities and in our relationships.

My engagement in Christian-Muslim relations, particularly significant in the last four years, has taken place in the context of trying to see what kinds of connections might be possible between Christian and Muslim organizations. I have spent quite a bit of time as a combination of ambassador, matchmaker and liaison between Muslim and Christian institutions. My focus has been on religious persons and communities, living as all humans do in the middle of a web of ideas, events, languages, practices, institutions, sights, smells, and patterns that form and shape them, with and without conscious awareness.

For over seventeen years, I have been continually crossing over into the midst of communities that I know I do not truly understand, walking right into the middle of ongoing stories, and meeting people amid challenges of leadership or at points of opportunity or struggle and pain. Again and again, my questions are: how is this religious community working? How is the tradition being lived, experienced and articulated by those who practice it? What are its institutions or ways of organization? How has it changed and developed over time, and how is it changing now?

I am convinced that as grounded in our own traditions and well informed regarding each other’s as we may be, we can only start in the middle. We enter into conversation with each other in the middle of the rest of our lives, amidst the events of personal lives, community needs and celebrations, and somewhere in the ongoing stream of change and preservation, deterioration and reformation of our traditions. *Jumping in “in the middle,”* with awareness of being in the middle, and with alert attention to piece together what is happening and taking shape around us *is the necessary, most honest and unavoidable point of departure for full engagement and interaction with each other.*

An artist and traditional Native American from the Taos pueblo fixed this understanding in my mind when she told a number of us, with great feeling, how much she wished that people who came to the dances at the pueblo would realize that once they stepped across the boundary of the community,

they had no idea where they were setting their feet. They might be desecrating a certain piece of ground or a sacred dance by walking somewhere without asking the way. "When you come among us, you really do not know where you are." If we can only approach each other with this awareness, even when we do become knowledgeable about another's realities, we will begin in respectful presence with one another.

By starting from the awareness that we are aswim, as it were, in our lives as they are unfolding, we approach each other without assuming that we know what is going on in each other's lives and communities. Assuming that we know, without being told, what our conversation partner is thinking, feeling or confronting stops anything other than polite and superficial interaction. On the other hand, assuming that we do not know (fully or at all) what is going on makes real conversation possible in two ways: we do not shut off any areas or topics of conversation before we begin, we make room for as many of the realities of each other's lives as possible, and therefore create a respectful and welcoming opening for wide-ranging sharing and deeply probing interaction.

In another way, from a more formal or analytic perspective, *starting in the middle affirms the assumption that our traditions are historical and evolving. And historical reflection on what is now taking shape, emerging, or shifting can move us forward.*

There are few things that are as important and as tricky as historical reflection, especially in the United States. We live in a society that does not foster historical memory in general, and at a time like many others over the centuries and around the globe, when history is often manipulated for political and other ends. To work on locating our own religious community within the history of this country is difficult and essential work. To work together to historically locate both our communities, and also the unfolding of the relationship between them, is critical, for it opens the possibility of reaching a vision of a shared history, and working together to shape, or at least have an affect on, the time and place in which we live.

The area of political participation is one realm in which such an effort to "locate" ourselves is much needed. How are we to understand the relation of our communities to political power, the extent of our different and changing levels of access, and lack or denial of access, to political processes, and what this means about our relations with one another?

In the wake of the U.S. presidential elections of 2000, at meetings of Muslim organizations and in private conversations, I heard Muslims talking openly and with pride of the efforts the community had made to mobilize Muslim voters to take part in the election, and to make the Muslim voice heard

in national politics. The strategy, as I understood it, had been to promote support for George W. Bush and, early on at least, many felt that the election of Bush was an indication of some developing political muscle for American Muslims. Later in 2002 and early 2003, while the leaders of established “mainline” churches were unable to get an audience with the President to urge him to avoid war in Iraq if at all possible, Muslim leaders met with the President several times in regard to the safe-guarding of Muslim civil and religious rights in the United States.

While there are many examples of Christians and Muslims working as part of coalitions to advocate for or against certain aspects of public policy in our nation’s capitol, we have yet to have enough Christian-Muslim conversation about the waxing and waning of our communities’ relationships to power. How does this affect communal self-understandings, and communal abilities to shape society in ways that are amenable to our own growth and security? What does the changing shape of our political lives have to say about what we should be working on together? How does it affect our relations with one another?

Without joint reflection, these sorts of questions could lead to new tensions and estrangement.<sup>3</sup> On the other hand, thinking together about these questions — locating ourselves honestly and clearly vis a vis the political dynamics of the United States — could lead to both deeper understanding and appreciation of each other and less division as we work to shape our society.

A multi-religious and multi-cultural example of such historical reflection was carried out in 1993 in Santa Fe, NM. The National Council of Churches, the Presbyterian Church (USA) and others convened a gathering of historians (or story keepers) and social activists to reflect on the first 500 years of European presence in America. Present were historians and socially engaged persons from the Caribbean, the American Indian, African and African American Muslim and Jewish communities and from Orthodox and Protestant Christian backgrounds. All who gathered listened as the historian and contemporary activist from each group reflected on their community’s story of the first 500 years. After several days of listening, we then turned to the question of whether we could, out of such diverse perspectives, construct a shared history.<sup>4</sup> Out of this process of conversation emerged a desire for joint historical and social analysis, in order that we might together find our way to a shared future, in the shaping of which we might take active rather than passive roles.

We can address the U.S. environment of selective history through such efforts of joint reflection. Locating ourselves within the flow and dynamic of the structuring of society enables us to have more insight into the forces that really affect us. Using historical process in this way can allow us to work together to have an affect on this time and place in which we live.

Finally, is it possible for us as Christians and Muslims to talk of our religions as historical entities that are changing, and constantly under construction and reconstruction, as well?

Doctrinal or theological issues and matters of practice are always ripe subjects for conversation; there is much for us to learn from each other and explore together in considering the essentials and gray areas of orthodoxy and orthopraxy. For example, think what we might learn of practical as well as theoretical significance from a dialogue about our contemporary understandings and practice of evangelism and *dawab*. The straight path is a matter of natural concern and mutual interest for Muslims and Christians.

However, such conversations too often center on articulations of the unchanging principles and revealed mandates of both communities. It is equally or more important for us to talk of our religious traditions as themselves living, historical entities that are constantly being renewed, constructed and reconstructed.

For the Christian community, this is now a necessity; we are in need of continual help to remember that we who are living today ARE Christianity in this time and place. The pressures to freeze Christianity in a particular form, or at a particular point in time, are many. But the true dynamism of the tradition depends on our understanding that we are living and embodying this tradition today. It has its life in the struggling, adapting, celebrating community, which is making ever new application of the tradition for the ever new historical moment. Is this a discussion we can have?

Recently, I have been leading a series of multi-religious workshops called "Living Faithfully in the United States Today." The model for these was tested by a group from six religious traditions (Buddhist, Christian, Hindu, Jewish, Muslim and Traditional Native American) in two weeklong consultations at the Institute for Ecumenical and Cultural Research at St. John's University, Collegeville, MN.<sup>5</sup> In the workshops, a carefully gathered group is asked to begin conversation by talking in the first person about the challenges and joys of living faithfully in their own tradition in today's United States. This personal sharing of (hi)stories leads to a wide-ranging and open exploration of being religious persons of particular traditions, living together, in our society.

As I have facilitated this process, it has become clear to me that we can talk together about where our traditions chafe us, as well as how they nourish us. We can talk openly about our concerns regarding how our traditions are being used and misused by fellow religionists and by others outside our communities. We can even begin to explore together how our traditions are being reformed, and communal struggles around issues of reform and conservation of tradition. In this latter discussion we can talk about what is

“non-negotiable” in our traditions, what are areas for possible change, and areas in which re-construction of the tradition is underway.

The possibilities opened by such conversation are rich. For Christian-Muslim and wider inter-religious relationships, they come as good news. A larger roadblock than politeness to moving forward in Christian-Muslim relations is the approach that would try to bring together two traditions as if they are set in stone, two traditions portrayed as fixed in belief and practice and time rather than two traditions that are alive and in flux.

We are fundamentally historical beings, and our dialogue, to be successful — to deeply engage us with each other and with the realities of our living situation — needs to be profoundly rooted in such processes of historical location and reflection as these.

## Endnotes

1. From the Center’s web site, [www.islamctr.org](http://www.islamctr.org).
2. As they state on their web site: “To stand up, as Muslims, against those who preach hatred and violence in the name of Islam.” [www.mvp-us.org](http://www.mvp-us.org).
3. Lack of reflection on the political dynamics as well as the economic realities of their lives in America contributed greatly, for example, to the estrangement of African Americans and Jewish Americans following the period of working together during the civil rights campaigns of the 1960’s.
4. Brief mention of this conversation and an appreciation of its potential is included in Vincent Harding, “Healing at the Razor’s Edge: Reflections on a History of Multicultural America,” *The Journal of American History*, Vol. 81, No. 2, September 1994, 581–582.
5. The Institute, the Office of Interfaith Relations of the National Council of Churches (USA) and the Office of Interreligious Affairs of the U.S. Catholic Bishops Conference collaborated in developing this model. The Institute has published a description of the consultations and resulting insights as a booklet, “Living Faithfully in the U.S. Today.” Copies are available for \$2.00 from the Institute for Ecumenical and Cultural Research, Box 6188, Collegeville, MN 56321-6188, or at the web site [www.iecr.org](http://www.iecr.org).