

# Toward a More Hopeful Future: Obstacles and Opportunities in Christian-Muslim Relations

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Like many who have been engaged in Christian-Muslim dialogical encounter over the past three decades, my involvements have included personal, academic and professional dimensions. A few words describing my particular history and activities at local, national, and international levels will help put the reflections below in context.

Issues of religious diversity and interfaith understanding were visibly present during my childhood. My paternal grandfather was one of nine children in a Jewish family that emigrated to Boston from the Poland/Russia area in the 1880s. It is a long, colorful story, including his marriage to my grandmother — a Presbyterian from Oklahoma. He remained Jewish and she remained Presbyterian. My father and his three brothers all became Christians. My older brother, younger sisters and I were taught what we experienced directly through our grandfather and the extended family: we were Christians, but it was also good to be Jewish. I discovered at an early age that many people in Tulsa, Oklahoma did not share this positive view of Judaism. I vividly recall hearing and reacting strongly to derogatory comments uttered casually about Jews. As a child, I interpreted such anti-Semitic remarks as direct ridicule of my grandfather and extended family.

During high school and college, I was actively involved in church and church-related organizations. At Oklahoma State, I began an academic study of religion through an undergraduate minor. Exploring the contrast between truth claims within the Christian tradition and the truth claims in other traditions was both puzzling and intriguing. My strong interest in religion — as a personal, experiential reality and a field of academic inquiry — led me to the M.Div.

program at the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville and doctoral studies at the Center for the Study of World Religions at Harvard University. My wife Nancy and I lived in the Center for six years. This setting fostered daily interactions with other doctoral students and visiting scholars from all over the world. As a part of the doctoral program, we lived for a year (1977–78) in Cairo and traveled extensively in Syria, Jordan, and Israel/Palestine. During October of 1977, Anwar Sadat stunned the world with his surprise trip to Jerusalem and the initial steps toward the Camp David peace process.

Through an unusual series of events, I was one of seven people invited to Iran in December 1979, an initiative to help facilitate communication in the early weeks of the Iranian hostage crisis. As one of two clergy in the group who had studied the Qurʾān and the Islamic tradition, I was warmly received and subsequently invited back on two other occasions during the 444-day hostage crisis. We were among the only Americans to meet with Ayatollah Khomeini, many religious and political leaders and the student militants occupying the U.S. embassy compound.

The quadrupling of oil prices in 1974, civil war in Lebanon, the ongoing Arab-Israeli conflict, the Iranian revolution and the hostage crisis left no doubt about the growing importance of Islam as a political, economic, social and religious force in the world. These developments coincided with my years in seminary and divinity school. My involvements in Iran and, subsequently, in Lebanon and Israel/Palestine, attracted considerable attention that led to numerous media interviews and lectures in colleges, universities, conferences, churches, synagogues and mosques. Serving as director of the Middle East office at the National Council of Churches in the U.S. during the 1980s, I continued to work on a range of interfaith issues — from developing policy statements and guidelines for dialogue to organizing and participating in interfaith dialogue programs and organizations. Since I began working in a university setting in 1990, the focus of my research, teaching and writing has centered on Islam, interfaith relations, and the dynamic intersections of religion and politics.

Throughout the past three decades, I have been an organizer and/or participant in a variety of local, regional, national and international interfaith dialogue programs. During this time, a major shift has occurred: the challenging concerns addressed by participants in interfaith dialogue have moved to center stage as converging issues in Christian-Muslim relations present tangible obstacles and opportunities in our increasingly interdependent world community. Religion has always been a powerful and pervasive force in the world. Religion has inspired people to their highest and noblest best. At the same time, religion has often provided the excuse or justification for some of the worst things human beings have done to one

another through the centuries. Christians and Muslims today comprise well over 40% of the world population and Christian-Muslim relations have become a central concern in our interconnected world community. Without question, the ways in which Christians and Muslims understand and relate to one another in the 21<sup>st</sup> century will have profound consequences for both communities — and for the world.

## **Education**

In several roles over the years — as a Christian minister, college and divinity school professor, writer, lecturer, and public policy activist — I have observed and learned a great deal about various dimensions of Christian-Muslim encounter. One overriding impression remains front and center: the large majority of Christians and Muslims continue to view each other with “detailed ignorance.” Despite, or perhaps because of extensive media attention, confusion and misunderstandings are readily evident among adherents in both communities. Most Christians in the West are aware of many details, ideas, images, and sound bite impressions of Muslims; and vice versa. Far too few have a broader, more coherent framework of understanding, a way to comprehend the religious, political, historical, and economic context connected to high profile events conveyed through different media. The problem is exacerbated by the heavy dependence for news on television, a medium that tends to emphasize the most dramatic and sensational events.

To put it directly: Education remains the top priority. Intentional educational efforts through focused study and personal encounter are more urgently needed than ever before. The obstacles are larger than a simple lack of knowledge. Much of what many people think they know is incorrect or rooted in a long history of misunderstanding and bias. The most negative images and fears are reinforced by the understandable media focus on the words and actions of extremists. A wise friend once observed that one who is standing on the edge of a cliff does not define progress as one step forward. Intentional educational efforts are the best way to take a few steps back from the precipice.

There is no magic wand to wave or single formula to follow. More accurate understanding — which includes efforts to understand those within both traditions who don't seek understanding or cooperation — comes through individual study, college and seminary courses, study programs in churches and Islamic centers, organized dialogue programs, and cooperative work on common problems in society. After half a century of thoughtful interfaith dialogue programs, it is frustrating to realize how much remains to be done at the most basic level. While it sometimes feels like the equivalent of teaching people to see that a room has four walls, a door and two windows, the need for the most basic information about Islam cannot be overstated. Helping

Christians to apprehend more accurately some foundational features of Islamic self-understanding — the nature of God as Creator, Sustainer and Judge of creation, the processes of God's revelation to humankind through various prophets and messengers, the centrality of Muhammad as a prophet and exemplar of the faith, ritual devotional duties (e.g., the Five Pillars of Islam) and various approaches to Islamic law, historical and contemporary understandings about the "People of the Book" (especially Jews and Christians), and so forth — is essential.

Without expecting large numbers of people to become experts, thoughtful, fair-minded educational programs help demystify the world's second largest religion. Inviting Christians to employ the "Golden Rule" in their effort to understand Islam more accurately is an effective way to encourage a fair-minded approach. I often ask Christians how they would hope a group of Muslims in Pakistan or Bangladesh, for example, might seek to understand and depict Christianity today. Wouldn't they hope that the effort would yield an understanding that most Christians would recognize as fairly representative of their religious tradition?

Non-Muslims quickly discern that Islam is not monolithic. Like all the major religious traditions of the world, Islam presents a richly diverse tapestry — a compelling framework for understanding human existence within God's creation, an inclusive approach to religious, political, social and economic life that inspired a great civilization. Islamic history also includes all the foibles, brutality, exploitation and abuses of power that one finds in all religious and political systems that have endured for centuries.

Having lectured and made presentations about Islam in more than three hundred colleges, churches, and conferences, I can attest to the ongoing need for basic information. In the aftermath of September 11, 2001, new opportunities and obstacles have emerged. On the one hand, we are clearly in the midst of an extended teachable moment. Numerous churches, denominational groups, and community organizations have begun serious study programs. The desire to know more about Islam and the sometimes turbulent forces at work in various predominantly Muslim countries now extends across the theological spectrum. Many Christians and churches, including some who define themselves as conservative or evangelical, are seeking understanding of and cooperation with Muslims. The demand for college and university courses related to Islam has increased dramatically.<sup>1</sup> Multiple and sustained educational efforts are underway. These represent tangible signs of hope, constructive endeavors that should bear fruit over time.

Unfortunately, there is a parallel movement evident among segments of the Christian and Muslim communities. In a raging battle of demonization, selected leaders portray the "other" as the enemy. In the now famous taped

messages following September 11, Osama bin Laden lumped all who disagreed with his understanding of Islam as “infidels” and enemies of true Islam. High profile Christian leaders like Pat Robertson, Franklin Graham, and Jerry Falwell have publicly denounced Islam as a “wicked and evil religion,” and characterized Muhammad as a “terrorist.” The pervasive influence of such polarizing rhetoric can be seen in numerous Islamic schools and Christian churches. Thoughtful educational efforts can provide an effective antidote to simplistic, poisonous approaches that portray contemporary conflict situations as religious wars between Christians and Muslims. Our educational efforts can and should directly address the areas of concern and confusion, including seemingly harsh passages in the Qur’ān and Bible that are often cited as bases for excluding or fighting the “other.”

Education through personal encounter is particularly important. Inviting Muslims into churches, for instance, serves to both humanize Islam and illustrate the diversity present in one’s own local setting.<sup>2</sup> In the process of developing relationships, people in both communities of faith become more open to pursuing what the Roman Catholic Church calls the “dialogue of life.” It can also be a natural way to develop relationships necessary for jointly sponsored cooperative projects in a community.

I have employed one version of education through personal encounter in courses on Islam and World Religions over two decades. Toward the end of the term, students go out into the community in teams of three in order to interview people whose religious traditions they have been studying. In addition to discovering that their community is a microcosm of our religiously diverse world, students are often invited into homes. Experiencing the hospitality of others, family life that often parallels their own experience and conversing in depth with some well-informed and some not-so-well-informed people of other traditions is invaluable. While reporting back to the class, many students indicate that this exercise was among the most instructive in their college experience. Years later, many students say that the assignment was the first step in what has become a process of awareness and inquiry they pursue well beyond college.

Educational efforts, particularly those involving personal encounter with people from other religious traditions, also facilitate an internal dialogue. Inevitably, most people will ponder larger questions related to particularity and pluralism. How do I make sense of religious diversity, of my particular religious experience in the midst of equally powerful and compelling experiences that are distinctively different? How should I understand the significance of those elements in religious life that are clearly paralleled in other traditions, such as worship, prayer, fasting, the responsibility to work for peace and justice, sharing resources with those who are less fortunate, etc.?

## Organized Dialogue Programs

Nearly half a century after formal dialogue programs began under the auspices of councils of churches and the Vatican, much has been learned. Many major denominations (e.g., Presbyterians, Lutherans, United Methodists, etc.) have offices and resources committed to interfaith dialogue. Interested individuals or congregations can easily access official statements, documents providing guidelines, and stories chronicling successful and less-than-successful dialogue programs. With the advent of the world-wide web, helpful resources from denominational groups, councils of churches and various interfaith organizations are widely available.

These resources are helpful in both practical and psychological terms. One need not reinvent the wheel each time a local group wishes to initiate a Christian-Muslim or multi-faith dialogue program. The accumulated knowledge and wisdom — written and human resources from decades of intentional engagement — can facilitate a more constructive dialogue. Knowing that one's efforts at a local level are part of a growing phenomenon helps empower people. While each setting is unique, it is nonetheless comforting to know that people of faith and goodwill have been seeking understanding and cooperation in various settings for many years. Conversations with counterparts in other cities or states can help focus programs, and identify particularly helpful approaches and people.

While not all organized dialogue is productive or "successful" in obvious ways, a great deal flows from the efforts. In addition to the learning that takes place through presentations, questions and discussion, people meet one another as human beings. Participants learn something about the way the world or their community or country looks through the eyes and experiences of people from another religious tradition. Sensitive dialogue partners can often identify common human concerns as they engage others respectfully. In addition to the formal presentations and discussions, a great deal happens around the edges, in the halls and over meals. In my experience, some of the most valuable encounter takes place informally when Muslims talk to other Muslims and Christians to other Christians. Organized dialogue often provides a structure for much-needed dialogue within communities of faith. Muslims and Christians who would not otherwise have or make an occasion to come together to talk about theological issues or contemporary religious/political dynamics, frequently find dialogue meetings to be a helpful framework.

Organized dialogue can and should move at several levels. There is great value in exploring understandings of God, revelation, human responsibility in the world, and so forth. Moving out further from the shore into deeper water is challenging, but can also be enriching. With careful planning and

participants who know one another, experimenting with common worship, for instance, can take the interfaith encounter to another level. Not everyone will wish to move in this direction, of course. Many who have done so report deeply moving, sometimes life-changing experiences.

While much work remains to be done, a great deal of progress has been made. Contemporary dialogue about common concerns in society — from economic exploitation and rampant poverty to ecological degradation, the crisis of AIDS, and the rehabilitation of convicted criminals — reflects a level of maturity some visionaries could only hope for a few decades ago. Wilfred Cantwell Smith, my mentor and friend, wrote in 1959 that he looked forward to this day and the unfolding process of interfaith encounter:

The traditional form of Western scholarship in the study of other (religious traditions) was that of an impersonal presentation of an ‘it.’ The first great innovation in recent times has been the personalization of the faiths observed, so that one finds a discussion of a ‘they.’ Presently the observer becomes personally involved, so that the situation is one of a ‘we’ talking about a ‘they.’ The next step is a dialogue where ‘we’ talk to ‘you.’ If there is listening and mutuality, this may become that ‘we’ talk *with* ‘you.’ The culmination of the process is when ‘we all’ are talking *with* each other about ‘us.’<sup>3</sup>

We live in a dangerous world where many people continue to frame fundamental issues in terms of a “we/they” orientation. Religion is at the heart of what matters most to the vast majority who inhabit this planet. Multiple approaches to organized interfaith dialogue are an increasingly important way whereby “we all” can talk more constructively *with* each other about “us.”

## **Cooperative Efforts in Society**

In my experience, an increasingly important component of Christian-Muslim dialogue is connected to cooperative efforts in local settings. More and more congregations, Islamic centers, and local organizations are recognizing that they can and should join together with other people of faith to address challenges confronting their communities. In Toledo, Ohio, for example, Jewish, Christian and Muslim congregations jointly built a Habitat for Humanity house in 2003. They plan to build another home in 2004. The sense of accomplishment and pride in modeling a cooperative approach within their community was unmistakable when the leaders of respective congregations shared their stories with me during a visit there last year. Extensive media coverage multiplied the benefits far beyond the family for whom the house was built.

Many chaplains working in prison settings have long been coordinating efforts, sharing resources and ideas in order to help Christians and Muslims

increase their chances for success after being released from prison. Everyone has an interest in reducing rates of recidivism among people who are incarcerated. Why shouldn't Christian and Muslim chaplains cooperate, share resources, and learn from one another?

During a recent visit to Baltimore, I discovered that the Board of Education there was considering changing the school calendar to recognize officially the two most important Muslim holidays. Various Christian, Jewish and Muslim leaders spoke eloquently to me of their advocacy in support of this change. The new schedule would put Muslim children on more equal footing with Jews and Christians in Baltimore. It would also reflect the demographic shift taking place in most major and mid-sized cities. This highly visible change would also present an opportunity for school-aged children, their parents and others to learn more about Islam.

With a little reflection, one can identify a range of societal issues where Christians, Muslims and others converge in their concerns and sense of responsibility. Achieving theological agreement should not be a prerequisite for cooperation. Imagine two researchers — a Southern Baptist from Georgia and a Muslim from India — working side by side at the Centers for Disease Control in Atlanta. Their research is focused on finding a cure for the devastating AIDS epidemic. It would never occur to these two researchers that they could not cooperate because of their theological differences as a Christian and a Muslim. As people of faith, they may bring a sense of mission or commitment to their work, but their different traditions would not block them from collaboration to conquer HIV/AIDS. Similarly, the interconnected global economy would grind to a halt if economic cooperation were dependent upon theological agreement.

As more and more local communities of faith recognize and pursue opportunities for collaborative work across religious lines, substantial benefits will follow. In addition to helping people in their community directly, working side by side facilitates the urgently needed educational opportunities discussed above. The process of engagement and collaboration also provides a means to live into more relevant theological understandings of pluralism. The wisdom lodged in sacred scriptures and traditions take on new meaning and different dimensions in each era. Collaborative endeavors present new opportunities to work out our theologies in the context of and with an experiential awareness of religious pluralism.

Cooperation does not nullify the responsibility Christians and Muslims feel to bear witness to their respective understandings of God's revelation to humankind. On the contrary, it can be a powerful form of witness. As Christians and Muslims become better acquainted and build trust, it is both natural and important to speak and listen respectfully to one another about

their faith and commitments. Muslims can learn from Christians about their call to a ministry of reconciliation, to provide food for the hungry, medical care for the sick, and so on. Christians can learn from Muslims about their responsibilities to reach out to those in need — widows, orphans, neighbors who are ill or impoverished.

The Qurʾān describes religious diversity as part of the divine plan. Different communities will not agree on all points, but the disputes should not lead to armed conflict. Rather, people of faith are told to compete with one another in good works and trust that, in the end, God will clarify the points of disagreement.

If God had so willed, He would have created you one community, but (He has not done so) that He may test you in what He has given you; so compete with one another in good works. To God you shall all return and He will tell you (the truth) about that which you have been disputing.<sup>4</sup>

There are no easy answers or simple solutions to the multiple problems present in our increasingly interdependent world community. There are many obstacles that have and will hinder progress for Christians and Muslims on the journey that lies ahead. But the way forward is not blocked. Adherents in the world's two largest and most geographically diverse religious communities can and must draw upon the best of their respective traditions if we hope to live far into the twenty-first century. We can and must build on the lessons learned from a difficult history and from fifty years of intentional efforts at interfaith dialogue. Through education, formal and informal dialogue and collaborative efforts in society, we can live into a more healthy and hopeful future.

## Endnotes

1. My personal experience at Wake Forest University corroborates the trend that has been well-documented in feature articles in several major newspapers.

2. Harvard scholar Diana Eck's work with The Pluralism Project is an invaluable resource. For more than a decade, Eck and a team of students and scholars have been documenting the changing religious landscape in the U.S. The helpful resources flowing from these efforts are available in three different forms: a website ([theppluralismproject.org](http://theppluralismproject.org)); an extraordinary CD-ROM program ("On Common Ground," published by Columbia University Press); and a book, Diana L. Eck, *A New Religious America: How a 'Christian' Country Has Become the World's Most Religiously Diverse Nation* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2001).

3. Wilfred Cantwell Smith, "Comparative Religion — Whither and Why?" in *The History of Religions: Essays in Methodology*, ed. by M. Eliade and J.M. Kitagawa (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1959), 34.

4. Qurʾān 5:48.