

Open Doors to Dialogue

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By strange coincidence, having been born and reared on the prairie in northwest Iowa, my interest in and eventual journey among Muslims began as a teenager. It started when a missionary who had spent years in Iraq became our next-door neighbor. Because of his advanced age, he needed transport, something I was eager to provide since I had just earned my right to drive. It was this man who introduced me to the Arab people. He loved their language, their literature, and their culture and taught me to appreciate and respect their religion. From that time on, I determined to serve the church in the Middle East.

After graduating from college I decided to attend New Brunswick Theological Seminary in New Jersey because of its association with the Reformed Church's mission to Arabia. Theologically, our pastor warned my parents it would be a grave mistake to allow their son to study in the liberal and decadent East. That makes sense when you realize I grew up in a community that was socially, culturally, politically and religiously conservative. Culturally, we only had two Jewish families in the neighborhood — a dentist and a jeweler, but no Blacks. People from my town once tacitly boycotted one of our two butcher shops for hiring an African-American college student to work in the back room. Our religious diversity consisted of the Reformed and Christian Reformed churches. Very little else was tolerated; Catholics lived and worshipped in the next town where they had a lovely church.

But that small homogeneous community, so proud of its Dutch heritage, introduced me to God in Christ, for which I will be forever grateful. Then, gradually, God introduced me to God's family, and it was much broader, fuller and added a richness to my life far beyond what my small family could provide. In fact, my life began to include many whom they had excluded. For this I will forever be grateful. I say all this for two reasons: one, so you will understand I have deep roots in Dutch evangelical piety that I still cherish and from which I continue to draw nourishment, and secondly to keep me aware that very conservative roots, Christian or Muslim, can form a good basis for honest and fruitful interfaith dialogue.

We've each been asked to comment on our experience of Christian-Muslim dialogue and give our opinion as to the prospects for such dialogue in the future. In my circles, I've met few who are dead-set against such dialogue, but there are many who fear dialogue and believe that dialogue without proclamation will ultimately be fruitless. Others see dialogue as a strategy for mission and a tool for proclamation. In my own journey, I've been deeply influenced by the ecumenical movement and by documents put out by the WCC, the NCCC and even by the Vatican, which tend to stress that dialogue has its own integrity and is itself a crucial form of Christian life and witness. And, of course, scripture has and continues to be central to my life.

So what are the principles that have guided me over the years? In a talk long ago in Cairo, Bishop Kenneth Cragg stressed to us the importance of openness: Have, he said, an open door, an open hand, heart, mind and, yes, an open creed. I've forgotten much of what he said, but over the years I've taken to heart this guidance for my own interfaith journey. So let me begin with the open door, which for me represents hospitality, something I experienced so much of in the Middle East, even during times of war. While I feel deeply about the importance of hospitality, I will make only two comments.

First: an open door suggests that interfaith dialogue can happen only when each partner has a home in which they feel secure enough to be hospitable. Only in a home is there space for hospitality and the need to have a door. Get rid of your home and doors become superfluous. On the other hand, lose the feeling of security and doors can close and even become bared. So it's been my growing conviction that the more at home and secure I am in my own faith, that is, the more deeply rooted I am in Christ, the more open and hospitable I can be to all people. Still, it's an on going struggle. Jesus' words in the Sermon on the Mount continue to challenge. If you greet only your own kind, those who think like you think, you are acting no better than did the pagans. Be as inclusive as your Father in heaven who sends the sun and the rain on the just and the unjust. For me, this issue of being more inclusive, of being open to those who are different, in particular, who have different religious perspectives, is epitomized in trying to avoid the terrible distinction so prevalent today of "us" vs. "them"; the "good" vs. the "bad." This is an ongoing struggle and one in which we dare not falter.

Second: in the Middle East, I gradually learned that our way of honoring someone was to invite him or her into our home, which we often did. But in Middle Eastern culture, the way to really honor someone is to wait to be invited into their home and then be a gracious guest. As I thought of this, it made sense. When we do the inviting it gives us "home court" advantage. We set the time, we are familiar with the décor, manage the food and, essentially,

as hosts, feel comfortable and in charge. When we go to their homes, all this gets reversed. This can be difficult and even awkward, but if we are willing to make the effort, it can be a very rewarding and gratifying experience.

Open hands: when hands are open in greeting, others are immediately put at ease. For me, open hands symbolize honest intention, an attempt to let you know that I have no hidden agenda or desire to harm or to hurt you. Conversely, should my desire be not to greet you but to beat you, my fingers instinctively curl into a clenched fist, which gives the appearance of defiance and enmity. Over long years in dialogue with Muslims, I have come to fervently believe that Christ is calling us, his followers, to live a life of humility and peace, to evince a spirit of gentleness all too seldom seen in us by our Muslim neighbors. Would this make us vulnerable, as people say? Yes, undoubtedly, and I know how counter-cultural being vulnerable is. Vulnerability is the one thing we try to avoid at all costs in this country. Yet I'm convinced it is the only way that will make us open to one another and consequently more dependent on the power of God. I see signs of this everywhere in the ministry of Jesus. I also see striking evidence of this in the *sujud* (prostration) of Muslims in prayer. There is no posture that makes one more vulnerable to fellow humans, nor more open and attentive to the presence of God.

And what about an open heart? In pondering this, I've often thought of Paul's admonition to the Corinthians to "open wide your hearts" and wondered what it might mean to open our hearts wide to Muslims? Let me share just one thought. Even now I receive notices of meetings with this alert: Please do not bring Muslim friends. For some years I attended such meetings, but then stopped because I no longer felt comfortable. I understand that some issues are extremely sensitive and perhaps best discussed in the company of fellow believers, but in my own journey, I have felt a deep need to be as transparent as possible, which means I have no desire other than to be a faithful follower of Jesus Christ and live in obedience to Him. For this I don't need to be in closed strategy sessions where, as sometimes happened, half truths masquerade as the whole story. I want Muslims to know my heart's desire and to learn from them when possible how best to fulfill my mission. This is not to imply that I don't keep confidences in pastoral conversations but that in interfaith relationships, I have become wary of those who say one thing among friends and another in different company. Such duplicity, it seems to me, generates all kinds of suspicion and ill serves the "open secret" of God's gracious mission made manifest in Jesus the Christ.

Then there is the struggle to have an open mind. Sometimes I think I understand what this means, but then again I'm not sure. When I sit with my ministerial peers in the Classis of Chicago and they still overwhelmingly stand

against the ordination of women, to say nothing about gender issues or how they feel about people of other faiths, I know I have an open mind. But when I listen to a lecture by John Hick and perceive him as ready to abandon the teaching of the incarnation, of the divinity of Christ for the sake of dialogue, then I think my mind is not that open. How and why would I ever want to relinquish what to me is so central to my Christian faith and experience? and if I were to relinquish it, to whom then would I be responsible and accountable? As an individual, I can say and think what I please, but I cannot, nor would I want to, as a member of the One, Holy Catholic and Apostolic Church.

What I have been able to do intellectually is to understand and appreciate that it is not the church that has and controls the mission of God, rather, it's vice versa. God has and uses the church in His mission, which is a divine endeavor that goes far beyond the doors and reaches of the institutional church. It's been my experience to find, welcome and affirm the gifts of God's Spirit in places quite apart from the church. I've also come to appreciate that among Christians, "in house" questions and the vocabulary we use to answer them frequently do not translate well to our Muslim friends (e.g., the word "begotten" in our creeds of "Son of God," etc.). Here, it seems to me, we must learn not only what to think, but how to think. For these issues, we need more than just knowledge, we need wisdom.

Finally, a few words about having an open creed. This probably sounds like an oxymoron, since creeds by their very nature are intended to limit and succinctly express otherwise far ranging ideas. But over the years I've come to appreciate that creeds (I belong to a creedal church) were always preceded by experiences and therefore should always be interpreted in light of, or tempered by, those experiences. To put it slightly differently, the essence of a creed is to provide space, a delimited area where the experience or experiences that gave rise to the creed in the first place can be repeated and reflected upon again and again.

For example, Muslims have often taken us to task for the doctrine of atonement. I've had to say to them, and to myself, many times, that it didn't begin as a doctrine but as an experience. With Peter, all the disciples said an absolute no to the cross for the one they had come to recognize as God's Messiah. But when it happened and they were there and then experienced the risen presence of Jesus after three days in the grave, they had to rethink their whole theology. Gradually, their certainty that God didn't need nor would want this for the forgiveness of our sins changed into a deep conviction that in the suffering and death of Jesus, God indeed was at work reconciling the whole of creation to God's self. But without their experience of what happened, the creed as it later came to be written would make no sense at all.

In a slightly different way, the same is true for the doctrine of original sin. Again, I've had to say to Muslim friends, and to myself, that it didn't begin as a doctrine but as an experience of the insidious nature, the destructive power and overwhelming influence of evil in our lives. If you haven't experienced this, I would say to them, forget the doctrine, it will have no meaning whatsoever. But if you have, then share with us in trying to describe the perversity of sin and human waywardness. In other words, let's talk about the experience before arguing about how we have come to describe it. The same is true for the doctrine of grace. Again, it didn't begin as a doctrine, but as an experience of being overwhelmed by a love, or a mercy that was undeserved; a divine love Christians see demonstrated in Jesus' willingness to die on the cross. If you've had that kind of experience, then you have a sense of what Christians mean when they exclaim that we are saved by grace and grace alone. I've often thought that Muslims probably anticipate that feeling when, by God's mercy alone, they will be welcomed into paradise.

When I read the above paragraph to my wife, she said "Well, what about the doctrine of the Trinity?" I smiled and said that's for another time.

Now, I assume some of you here today feel comfortable with this kind of openness and others perhaps don't. So let me share with you a few incidents from my own life that I feel confirm me in my venture. Two of these incidents are still in process, and while they are simple, they are also potentially painful, and consequently instructive in what they may teach about the need for openness.

Right now in Morton Grove, Illinois there are two pertinent lawsuits in the courts. One was filed by the Muslim Community Center, several of whose principals I know, against the village of Morton Grove claiming that their rights to religious freedom have been violated by the village's denying their construction of a mosque next to a school. The village claims it's a land use issue. Four acres is too small for a school and a mosque that holds 500 people. Muslims say the resistance is politically and religiously motivated. The other lawsuit has been filed by a group of citizens against the village, its officials and the Muslim Community Center aiming to put a stop not only to the building of a mosque but even to holding Muslim prayers on Friday in the school's gymnasium because the traffic caused by this is too disruptive. In talking with people about these issues, one senses a real lack of communication and appreciation for the genuine concerns of the other. Each group is seeking its own benefits to the exclusion of all else. Hospitality seems absent and it's not just doors that are being closed but hearts and minds as well. As one Muslim put it, "These are extremely sad days," to which another added, "For all of us. We could all do things differently."

Most of you probably heard about the incident in Palos Heights where a Reformed Church congregation, with which I've worked for some time, agreed

to sell their building to Muslims for use as a mosque. When some in the community got wind of this, they strenuously objected and eventually were able to block the sale. Again, incriminations were hostile, even vicious, lawsuits are pending, and the absence of openness on the part of many is obvious and chilling. And this incident happened before 9/11.

On a more positive note, my wife Mai and I, along with some Muslim friends, have been doing scores of workshops and adult forums in churches and schools. In these I have enjoyed pointing out how Muslims look to Abraham as an archetype of faith. We do biblical studies on the stories in Genesis. When it comes to the Prophet Muhammad, I always try to emphasize that his first mission was to overcome the power false deities had over his people, which he did by proclaiming the oneness of God. It was an arduous task for which he solicited the help of Jews and Christians whom he believed would be his allies in this struggle. Unfortunately, it didn't turn out that way. But it's nice to think the hope and expectation of that initial invitation may still be there as we confront the demons and false deities of our own day.

I feel it is important that Christians understand what was put in place to bind Muslims to one another and to God after Muhammad defeated his enemies and destroyed their idols. In other words, once idols are destroyed, what fills the vacuum? Here we look at such things as the basic beliefs of Islam, the five pillars, the rituals, the festivals, etc. Mai, as a Muslim, usually talks of these, especially the importance of prayer and demonstrates how it's done. After looking briefly at the period of Islamic Empires, their greatness and grandeur, their decline and subsequent subjugation to Western colonial domination, we focus specifically on events in the modern Middle East. Our feeling is that unless people have some background information, they will never understand why Muslims feel the way they do about the West. We also think it's important for them to know that while some Muslim "fundamentalists" may feel enmity toward the West, this is very different from saying that the fundamentals of Islam are antithetical to those of Christianity.

At the seminary we teach several courses on Islam and Christian-Muslim relations. In doing so, we employ a Muslim scholar who serves as adjunct faculty and team-teaches many of the courses. We believe it's imperative to have students hear the teachings and intricacies of Islam as a religion, not as a political ideology, from a Muslim. One course, "Religions in Dialogue," is team-taught by a Buddhist, a Christian and a Muslim. One great benefit of this team-teaching is that students see interfaith dialogue being modeled in class. We also teach a course on Palestinians and Israelis where people representing all sides are invited, through a series of public lectures, to present their points of view. Because we are part of the Association of Chicago Theological Schools, students can cross-register. This gives our classes a nice intra-faith

touch as well. We have the added advantage that each year most of our graduates, having taken at least one of these courses, go directly into the church as parish pastors.

Finally, a few words about another activity involving intense interfaith dialogue. Over the past several years we've held several retreats for couples who are either in or contemplating a Christian-Muslim marriage. We do this not in order to promote such unions, but because many people are finding their way into these relationships and are eager for guidance, encouragement and support. The worst thing, it seems to us, is to shun or abandon them. Not surprising perhaps, the mood at these gatherings is more somber than festive. Often people who considered their faith adiaphorous before such relationships now find that religion is something far deeper than they had ever imagined. This is particularly noticeable when issues relating to children and family are shared and discussed. It is at these times when emotions and tears surface that people find comfort and strength from one another. Some who attend come away feeling the risks are too high and decide not to marry. Others leave feeling strengthened, encouraged and confirmed in their decision. Not infrequently I've received calls from the parents of such couples expressing profound gratitude for what we were able to do.

Over all, my experiences in dialogue have been quite varied and in many ways have become internalized. I've enjoyed almost all of my encounters and firmly believe the church needs to encourage dialogue on every level, but in particular on the level of faith if we are to have any hope of living in peace with justice here on earth. Having lived in the Middle East for many years, I believe that the vast majority of Muslims do not seek the violent overthrow of their governments or to return to a medieval age. What they seek is to gradually create a new society based on Islamic principles which, I have come to believe, are not so different from those held dear by most Christians. What is needed now is not more military intervention or even a war of ideas, though the latter would be a vast improvement. What is needed is a meeting of Muslims and Christians, lots and lots of them, who will share names, stories and experiences, and in meeting, learn to greet one another, and in greeting, learn not just *about* one another, or *with* one another, but *from* one another. Being open to such knowledge, and here I would emphasize *mutually* open to such knowledge, is the essence of true dialogue.