



Christian-Muslim Relations: A Burdensome Past, a Challenging Future

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FIFTY YEARS AGO AN ESSAY ON THE SUBJECT MATTER THAT CONCERNS US HERE would most likely have included the words “Christianity” and “Islam.” During the past decades many of us have learned to avoid these two terms as much as possible, opting instead for the adjectives “Christian” and “Muslim” and the nouns “Christians” and “Muslims.” In certain contexts it makes sense to distinguish between normative Islam or Christianity and the distortions of these ideals in the realities of Christian or Muslim behavior, individually and collectively. But the issue at stake in the framework of the present discussion is the need to avoid self-constructed and monolithic images of Islam and Christianity and all speculations about the imagined relation between these two.

We want to deal, very selectively, with concrete data regarding Christian-

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Willem Bijlefeld's essay sets the stage for a consideration of the Christian engagement with Muslims in the present and in the future. What is written on the slate of past relationships has a controlling influence on the great challenge that faces the church in the coming century – its mission in the Muslim world. Essential to our understanding of this presentation is the awareness that when we consider Islam we are dealing with Muslim people. The essay is based on his inaugural address for the Islamic Studies Program at Luther Seminary, May 2, 1995.

Muslim relations in past and present, and that means with patterns of avoidance and encounter at certain times and places, in specific situations, and under particular conditions. The fact that we reflect on these data from within – for lack of a better and equally convenient term – a “western” Christian setting determines to a significant degree the choice of material to be included.

Implied in what has been said is that no attempt will be made to interpret Islam “in the light of the gospel” – as some Christians venture to do – and that no sketch of a so-called Christian theology of Islam is forthcoming. It seems to me that such exercises are dangerously premature. We have not yet reached the eschaton and ought to acknowledge that also in this respect “we know in part only.” As long as we live in history, we are not dealing with static and immutable entities, but with the realities of living and ever-changing persons and communities of faith.

I. “FORGET THE PAST”?

Even for those who accept the appropriateness of this focus on Christian-Muslim relations, the question of why we should begin with the past may still arise. Would it not be far more desirable to limit ourselves to the present and the future, especially since the past of our relationships is often seen and experienced in so many respects as extremely painful and most disheartening? One needs to be only superficially acquainted with what lies behind us to sense the appeal of the oft-quoted plea from the Second Vatican Council:

Over the centuries many quarrels and dissensions have arisen between Christians and Muslims. The sacred Council now pleads with all to forget the past, and urges that a sincere effort be made to achieve mutual understanding.¹

The theological significance of the Declaration from which these lines are quoted cannot easily be overestimated – even though its impact on actual relationships seems to have been less significant than often assumed – but this particular plea to forget the past is unrealistic and in a sense inappropriate. It is equally true for Christians as for Muslims that the past of our relationship is still very much with us and contributes significantly to the present situation. As far as the Christian side is concerned, several authors of otherwise very different persuasions seem to concur on this one point: for many centuries fear has been the most important factor in shaping western attitudes to the Muslim world. Writing about the first thousand years of western Christian contacts with Islam, Bernard Lewis referred to this phenomenon as characteristic of this particular relationship. Mentioning “the motives of faith and greed, which sent missionaries and traders all over the world,” he continued:

In medieval Christian Europe, in confrontation with Islam, there was a third motive, perhaps more compelling than either of the other two, and that was fear.²

¹“Declaration on the Relation of the Church to Non-Christian Religions,” proclaimed by Pope Paul VI on October 28, 1965, in *Documents of Vatican II*, ed. Austin P. Flannery (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975) 740.

²Bernard Lewis, *Cultures in Conflict: Christians, Muslims, and Jews in the Age of Discovery* (New York: Oxford University, 1995) 11.

Edward Said raised the same issue in his discussion of the later development of academic studies in this field: "Modern Orientalism carried within itself the imprint of the great European fear of Islam."³ And to give one more example, a few years ago Carsten Colpe published an interesting survey of the historical and theological reasons for the western fear of Islam.⁴

Events of the past two decades have occasioned a flood of journal and magazine articles that seek to rekindle the fear that is apparently still present in our society, at least as an undercurrent. The battle cries against "the perils of Islam" that appeared at the time of the Iranian Revolution and the hostage crisis have been collected and discussed more than once. Several articles have been written about what impact the Gulf War and the publicity surrounding it have had on Christian-Muslim relations. And in the aftermath of the Oklahoma bombing in April 1995, a large number of Muslims felt that some of their fellow Americans treated them as if they were responsible for this disaster, suspicious of them for no other reason than that they were Muslim. That Oklahoma police had to investigate death threats and threatening calls to two mosques in the city shortly after the bombing is a sad comment on our times. For many westerners, the word "Islam" stands for violence, cruelty, and oppression, and in their eyes fear of Muslims is therefore fully justified. "Fanaticism, violence, and the suppression of women" are three terms with which Islam was characterized in an article in the *Frankfurter Rundschau* of February 1991.⁵ This is just one illustration of the currency of anti-Islamic sentiments in western Europe as well. Mohammed Arkoun, living in Paris, did not overstate the case when he wrote in 1994:

It is no longer possible today to use the word Islam before a Western audience without immediately conjuring up powerful imagery combining the strongly negative connotations of the terms *jihad*, holy war, terrorism, fanaticism, violence, oppression of women, polygamy, repudiation, the veil as the Islamic headscarf, the rejection of the West, the violation of human rights and so on.⁶

"Forgetting the past" is apparently extremely difficult for Christians as far as their relations with Muslims are concerned. For the majority of Muslims "forgetting the past" is absolutely impossible. They feel that what happened for several centuries in their contacts with the "Christian West" still shapes to a considerable extent the reality in which they live, and this sentiment is not surprising. One of the facts people in the west easily overlook is that the period of colonialism and imperialism came to an end less than a lifetime ago. In his *Welteroberung und Christentum*, Horst Gründer dates the epoch of imperialism – characterized by him as a "vehement" stage in the process of western dominance – as beginning around

³Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Pantheon, 1978) 253-254.

⁴Carsten Colpe, *Problem Islam* (Frankfurt: Athenaum, 1989) 11-38.

⁵In an article by M. Luder, as quoted by Fuad Kandil, "Dialog der Religionen," *CIBEDO: Beiträge zum Gespräch zwischen Christen und Muslimen* 8 (1994) 177.

⁶Mohammed Arkoun, "Is Islam Threatened by Christianity?" in *Islam: A Challenge for Christianity*, ed. Hans Küng and Jürgen Moltmann (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1994) 49.

1880 and lasting till the early 1940s.⁷ Covering a period extended by a hundred years, from 1798 till 1956, Jensen's *Militant Islam* gives a listing of military and political events showing that

during these 150-odd years scarcely a decade, indeed scarcely half a decade, passed without some Muslim area somewhere in Asia or Africa being lost to the Western Christian powers or Muslims fighting against the encroachment of these powers.⁸

These few quotations and observations must suffice as a preliminary justification for the suggestion that we cannot deal meaningfully with the present and the future of Christian-Muslim relations without paying careful attention to the past.

II. THE HISTORY OF CHRISTIAN-MUSLIM RELATIONS

The problem facing us is that the study of the past of our relationship is not only extremely difficult emotionally, but is also hampered by the relative scarcity of available data. No comprehensive survey of this history has been written, and none will ever be produced. Admittedly, valuable studies exist on the history of polemical exchanges between Christians and Muslims and on the apologetic literature produced in that connection.⁹ But who would want to claim that these—in a sense elitist—documents give us any idea of how millions and millions of “anonymous” Muslims and Christians have related to each other during the thirteen hundred years of coexistence? Thinking of the endlessly diverse regional situations, the political contexts, the socioeconomic conditions, the cultural framework, and the patterns of human interaction that all need to be studied, one realizes how extremely limited our knowledge is.

There are a few areas about which relatively detailed information exists for specific time spans, e.g., Spain from the eighth until the early eleventh century, but these instances are the rare exceptions for the period up to the beginning of this century. There is a marked improvement in our knowledge of the situation since that time, thanks to a number of ethnological, sociological, anthropological, and area studies as well as to a gradual methodological shift in the field of the history of religions, a move away from an exclusive concern with classical historical and literary data. However, recent publicity on instances of alleged Muslim-Christian conflicts has created its own problems. Some people tend to interpret all events in which Muslims and Christians are involved in terms of their religious background. We personally witnessed in Nigeria in 1966 the beginnings of the Biafra war, and it

⁷Horst Gründer, *Welteroberung und Christentum: Ein Handbuch zur Geschichte der Neuzeit* (Gütersloh: Gerd Mohn, 1992) 12-13.

⁸G. H. Jansen, *Militant Islam* (New York: Harper & Row, 1979) 65.

⁹In English the richest collection of material is Jean-Marie Gaudeul, *Encounters and Clashes: Islam and Christianity in History*, 2 vols. (Rome: Pontificio Istituto di Studi Arabi & Islamici, 1984). For data from the medieval period see the excellent study by Erdmann Fritsch, *Islam und Christentum im Mittelalter* (Breslau: Müller & Seiffert, 1930). In French, medieval and contemporary material is masterfully surveyed in Georges C. Anawati, “Polémique, Apologie et Dialogue Islamo-Chrétiens. Positions classiques médiévales et positions contemporaines,” *Euntes Docete* 22 (1969) 375-451.

was surprising to notice how many people at that time objected strongly and highly emotionally to warnings not to interpret this exclusively or even primarily as a Muslim-Christian conflict, but to take into account the whole array of Ibo-Hausa relationships. For whatever reasons, even some of those directly involved wanted this war to be known in the outside world as a religious war. And in an article entitled "How Religious are the 'Religious Disturbances'?" an observer of the 1991 riots in Bauchi State, Nigeria, rightly challenged the interpretation of these events as primarily religiously determined.¹⁰ The same holds true for other regions where in recent years tragic unrest has involved people from different religious communities.

Even when we direct our attention to the relatively well-documented area of theological exchanges, we are faced once again with the difficult task of placing these pronouncements in the context of the situation in which they arose. It is irresponsible to suggest that theological statements are fully determined by the time and the place of their origin, but it is also meaningless to study them without paying careful attention to their *Sitz im Leben*. Just a few references to the history of Christian theological assessments of Islam can elucidate this point. The radical differences in pronouncements about Islam made by Byzantine Christians in the west and by Christians living in the Arab world in the ninth to the twelfth centuries cannot be interpreted solely in terms of different creeds. A ninth-century Nestorian patriarch writes that Muhammad walked on the way of the prophets, and a twelfth-century Melkite bishop in Sidon emphasizes how much the Bible and the Qurʾān have in common. In the same period some Byzantine theologians, at least one of them writing directly at the request of the emperor, do not hesitate to state in no uncertain terms that Muslims, far from worshiping God, worship the apostate demon.¹¹ A study of the Councils of Ephesus and Chalcedon and of the history and theology of these churches in general is certainly important when one considers their attitudes to Islam. However, ignoring the differences between the political and, certainly no less importantly, the pastoral settings in Constantinople and Sidon would thwart any effort at understanding the contrasting statements about Islam.

The fact that all Christian theological assertions about Islam need to be contextualized in their historical and socio-political setting is also unmistakably clear, for example, for sixteenth- and seventeenth-century German protestant pronouncements about the Turks and their religion. Friedrich Heer may well have been right in maintaining that ever since 1453 "the fear of the Turks has done more harm to inner-European developments than all the Turkish armies, occupations and political actions in Europe from the sixteenth to the eighteenth century."¹²

¹⁰Klaus Hock, "Wie religiös sind die 'religiösen Unruhen'?" *Africa Spectrum* 27 (1992) 43-58.

¹¹In my 1959 survey of numerous sharply contrasting data—including three of those referred to above—insufficient attention was given to the situations from within which they arose; *De Islam als Na-Christelijke Religie* ('s Gravenhage: van Keulen, 1959) 47-48, 80-81. An important study on the twelfth-century bishop of Sidon is Paul Khoury, *Paul d'Antioche: Évêque Melkite de Sidon (XIIe s.)* (Beirut: Imprimerie Catholique, [1965]).

¹²Friedrich Heer, "Europa nach dem Fall Konstantinopels," *Stimmen der Zeit* 152 (1952-53) 257.

Even fears and hopes based on false rumors are formative historical facts,¹³ and it is not difficult to trace the interrelatedness of what Martin Luther and, following in his steps, the authors of the *Türkenbüchlein* said about Islam and the real or perceived immediacy and urgency of the “Ottoman threat.” Hartmut Brenner pointed out that the proliferation of violently anti-Turkish pamphlets came to a temporary halt early in the seventeenth century, after the Turkish setback of 1606. Their publication resumed after 1664, when Sultan Muhammad IV succeeded in extending Turkish holdings of Hungarian territory beyond any previous borders, and came to a definite end only in the last decade of the century, after the final Turkish withdrawal from the walls of Vienna in 1683.¹⁴

These historical details can serve as a warning to the situation in which we find ourselves. Writing about “the spirit of detached and academic or humane inquiry [about Islam]...of the last one hundred years,” R. W. Southern observed: “This spirit of detachment was a product of superiority and of the conviction that there was nothing to fear.” Since in our time more and more people in the west begin to feel that they are no longer fully in control of their own and of world affairs, and since fear of “the Muslims” begins to shape once again the reactions of many, chances that a detached interest in Islam and a more sympathetic attitude toward Muslims will spread to ever wider circles of the population are disturbingly slim. The relatively few existing endeavors to promote a more adequate understanding of the Muslim world in our midst, and every new effort in this direction, should therefore be recognized and supported as being of the greatest importance.

III. OBSTACLES TO CHRISTIAN-MUSLIM UNDERSTANDING

If fairly little is known of the history of Christian-Muslim relations, one may wonder whether it is justifiable to characterize that past with the single adjective “burdensome.” This summary description is indeed one-sided. There have been countless instances of sustained and mutually enriching friendships between Muslims and Christians in many parts of the world. Muslim insights and contributions have had a major impact on western civilization in the areas of diplomacy and economics, in the sciences (especially mathematics and medicine), and in philosophy, as well as in various branches of the fine arts. But, as Robert Caspar observed, this “opening up” to the richness of the other never extended to the sphere of religion: “In this area,” he wrote, “the incomprehensibility is almost total.”¹⁶

¹³The most interesting example is the legend of “Prester John” and its impact on European history from the second half of the twelfth century to the middle of the sixteenth century. See, e.g., Gründer, *Welteroberung*, esp. 42-48.

¹⁴Hartmut Brenner, “Protestantische Orthodoxie und Islam. Die Herausforderung der türkischen Religion im Spiegel evangelischer Theologen des ausgehenden 16. und des 17. Jahrhunderts” (Theol. Diss., Heidelberg, 1968) iii.

¹⁵R. W. Southern, *Western Views of Islam in the Middle Ages* (Cambridge: Harvard University, 1962) 3-4.

¹⁶Robert Caspar, *Pour un regard chrétien sur l'Islam* (Paris: Centurion, 1990) 180.

When we search for the reasons why this has been the case for such a long time for Christians in the west, another major factor comes to mind in addition to the aforementioned element of fear – and not entirely unrelated to it. From the very beginning Islam was for these Christians not just another religion, but a theological mystery: How could God allow this community to come into being and to spread in regions in which the church up to that time had occupied such an important place? In Hourani's words: "What role, if any, did the victory of Islam over Christianity play in the providential order of the world?"¹⁷

Toward the end of the crusades, faced with repeated Muslim victories, Riccoldo da Monte di Croce (1243-1320) and others wrestled with the same agonizing question, "*Ubi est Deus, Deus Christianorum?*" ("Where is God, the God of the Christians?").¹⁸ Although perhaps less intensely – because the success of the Turkish armies was often seen as only a temporary setback – similar questions occupied also the authors of the sixteenth- and seventeenth-century *Türkenbüchlein* who interpreted "the Turkish peril as a scourge of God."¹⁹ Their anguished answers, theologically unacceptable as they now may be deemed to be, have a much greater human appeal than the acrimonious statements about Islam made by some nineteenth- and twentieth-century authors who, writing from within a position of supposed strength, have also sought to determine the place of Islam in God's plan for history.

Although obviously much more could be said about theological problems that face Christians and Muslims on their way to a deeper understanding of each other's faith-commitments, we rather stress here once again the crucial importance also of non-theological factors. In his remarks about obstacles Christians have to overcome in order to bring about a meaningful dialogue with Muslims, the Egyptian Fuad Kandil dealt in a 1994 article with the religious-theological blockades last, after having discussed emotional, cognitive, cultural, and social hindrances.²⁰ Since this Muslim author reflected primarily on obstacles for Christians, it seems appropriate that we highlight some of the major barriers for Muslims.

We touched upon this point earlier when we mentioned the western military and political intrusions in the Muslim world in the nineteenth and the first half of the twentieth century. Numerous Muslims see Christians in the light of what they

¹⁷Albert Hourani, *Europe and the Middle East* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California, 1980) 21.

¹⁸Riccoldo reports in his letter "To the True, Living God" that Muslims and others mockingly say that Christians, once confident that God would help them, now cry out in despair "Where is God?" There is no doubt that this reflects indeed the reactions of many Christians, as is movingly evident also from Riccoldo's other letters "To the Heavenly Court," one of which was translated by Jean-Marie Mériçoux, "Lettres du Frère Riccoldo...adressées à l'Église du Ciel," *Sources* 12 (1986) 206-212. See also Norman Daniel, *Islam and the West* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University, 1960) 127-33.

¹⁹John W. Bohnstedt, *The Infidel Scourge of God: The Turkish Menace as Seen by German Pamphleteers of the Reformation Era*, Transactions of the American Philosophical Society, N.S. 57/9 (Philadelphia: The American Philosophical Society, 1968) 25-31. See also Brenner, "Protestantische Orthodoxie," 191-200, and on Luther, Egil Grisli, "Luther and the Turks," *The Muslim World* 64 (1974) 184.

²⁰Fuad Kandil, "Dialog," 177-80.

perceive as a centuries-old and still ongoing war waged against “the house of Islam.” The middle link in this chain of events, the period of colonization and evangelization, is seen, on the one side, as a continuation of the crusades and, on the other, as finding its contemporary expression in various forms of neo-colonialism. In the discussion of this third stage, the topics of Orientalism and of the formation of the state of Israel come up with great frequency. Since many surveys and excellent analyses of Muslim reactions on this issue already exist, just one quotation, from one of the most insightful Muslim observers of Muslim-Christian relations, seems sufficient. In his 1989 article about “Roots of Muslim-Christian Conflict,” Mahmoud Ayoub observed: “Muslims see a sinister alliance between modern western colonialism, or the ‘new world crusadism’ as they call it, and ‘world-Zionism.’”²¹

Any memory may be selective, but a collective memory most certainly is. Clearly, justice is not done to the complex phenomenon of the crusades by focusing exclusively on the atrocities committed in the name of Christ. Yet it seems unavoidable that precisely these stories determine Muslims’ perceptions of the crusades. Records and reports with which for a long time only a relatively small number of people in the west were acquainted have in recent years come to the attention of Muslims worldwide. The recapturing of Jerusalem in July 1099 is the climax of all the shocking events recorded. In a chapter with the deliberately agonizing title “The Triumph of the Cross,”²² Steven Runciman summarizes in sober words what happened in the final stage of this battle. He writes about the crusaders rushing “through the streets and into the houses and mosques killing all that they met, men, women and children alike,” continuing their massacre that whole afternoon and all through the night. The author mentions the killing of the Muslims who had sought refuge in the al-Aqsa mosque, such a carnage that the person to whom we owe an eye-witness account of this scene reports that later that morning, when he visited the Temple area, “he had to pick his way through corpses and blood that reached up to his knees.” The massacre “emptied Jerusalem of its Moslem and Jewish inhabitants,” the latter having been burnt to death when the chief synagogue to which they had fled was set on fire by the crusaders.²³ From Runciman’s own comments on these events I quote two sentences:

It was this bloodthirsty proof of Christian fanaticism that recreated the fanaticism of Islam. When, later, wiser Latins in the East sought to find some basis on which Christian and Moslem could work together, the memory of the massacre stood always in their way.²⁴

Almost 900 years later this memory still stands in our way. Will it ever fade? Mohammed Arkoun recently proposed an initiative from the side of the Catholic Church that “could make all the tragic confrontations with Islam since the Crusades

²¹Mahmoud M. Ayoub, “Roots of Muslim-Christian Conflict,” *The Muslim World* 79 (1989) 33.

²²Steven Runciman, *A History of the Crusades*, 3 vols. (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1965) 1:279-88.

²³*Ibid.*, 287.

²⁴*Ibid.*

a thing of the past.”²⁵ The dream may someday be fulfilled, perhaps not so much through a single – be it complex – initiative, but through a long process of gradual and fundamental changes in attitudes towards the Muslim world among Christians world-wide.

In the meantime, those of us who are Christians should act and react to the Muslim memory of the crusades with the humility, to say the least, that behooves us. Occasionally we may have an opportunity to point out that numerous Christians did not “shout to God with the voice of triumph” while Muslims and Jews were massacred in Jerusalem. Christians’ criticism of the crusades even in the period from the eleventh to the fourteenth century has been well documented.²⁶ Since Luther’s extremely sharp utterances regarding the Turks are often quoted without due reference to this other dimension of his vision, it seems appropriate to mention the radical criticism of the crusades in his writings and in those of many who followed in his footsteps in the next century and a half. The literature contains strong protests against the shedding of blood for the purpose of recovering the tomb of Christ, and Hottinger expresses a keen awareness of the harm done to the eastern churches by these western undertakings. In the case of Praetorius, the criticism extends interestingly to the *Reconquista* of Spain, an event, the author maintained, that ultimately led to a great impoverishment of western Europe.²⁷

We observed earlier that many Muslims see the stage of western colonialism and imperialism as a direct continuation of the pattern of the crusades and often emphasize the interrelatedness of colonization and missions. It is widely acknowledged that the period of territorial expansion, political dominance, and economic/commercial exploitation was concurrently, as Gründer formulated it, a time of cultural expansionism and “spiritual conquest.”²⁸ On this point, too, we need to take deeply engraved conceptions seriously without ignoring other historical facts. In a 1993 article, “Mission and Colonialism,” Hans-Werner Gensichen discussed the complexity of this relationship throughout the centuries. For one of the periods, that of modern colonial imperialism, he distinguished three stages: mission as forerunner of colonialism, mission in its dependency on colonial powers, and mission in opposition to colonialism.²⁹ It is undeniable that many current images of the alliance between colonialism and mission are one-sided, but it is also clear that they have their origin in equally undeniable historical facts.

IV. A NEW PERIOD IN CHRISTIAN-MUSLIM RELATIONS

Because we dealt with the past as background to the present, we have already touched more than once upon the contemporary situation, a subject to which we

²⁵Arkoun, “Is Islam Threatened?” 53-57.

²⁶The most helpful study on this topic is still Palmer A. Throop, *Criticism of the Crusade: A Study of Public Opinion and Crusade Propaganda* (Amsterdam: Swets & Zeitlinger, 1940).

²⁷Brenner, “Protestantische Orthodoxie,” 204-207.

²⁸Gründer, *Welteroberung*, 14.

²⁹Hans-Werner Gensichen, “Mission und Kolonialismus,” *Zeitschrift für Missionswissenschaft und Religionswissenschaft* 77 (1993) 29-34.

now turn more explicitly. There is general agreement that from the middle of this century onward we have entered a new stage in the study of Islam by Christians and, partly as a result thereof, a new period in Christian-Muslim relations. Opinions differ as to how radical the changes are, but because of the trailblazing work of Louis Massignon and Kenneth Cragg (may these two names stand for many), and since the Second Vatican Council and the establishment of the dialogue unit of the World Council of Churches, we have turned a corner and new horizons are opening up. In western Europe the radical rethinking of the whole issue of Christians and people of other faiths did not begin with reflections on the relationship with Muslims, but rather in a soul-searching re-examination of Christian-Jewish relations immediately after World War II. Already in the 1950s, however, the world of Islam also began to receive the attention it deserves in these deliberations. A delineation of the shifts that took place in Christian theological thinking in this realm falls outside the scope of this article. The point to be made here is merely that important developments in Christian as well as in Muslim views of our relationship warrant a guarded optimism that we are on our way to a more promising future.

There are good reasons for the tentativeness of the statement just made. The term used in the subtitle of this essay, "a challenging future," is intended to give expression to both the hope and the concern that grow out of the present situation. One of the sobering developments in recent history, among Christians as well as Muslims, is the spread of trends that are often designated as "fundamentalist," a convenient but imprecise and therefore somewhat misleading generic term to characterize a number of comparable yet widely divergent tendencies. The excessiveness of the militant fanatics does not need to be commented upon. An ultimately far more important phenomenon is the religious-withdrawal symptom we witness in many circles, a sort of religious isolationism that is, potentially at least, as dangerous as any political and ultranationalistic isolationism. The defensive reaction of some people is to a large extent the result of the same globalization of communications and contacts that have made many others gratefully aware of the world's rich cultural and religious diversity. Those who want to protect and maintain the reassuring safety of the familiar understandably look upon the outsider, "the other," not as a source of renewal and enrichment, but as a threat.

Many other factors, considered by most of us to be largely beyond our control, also impact Christian-Muslim relations in our time. Although we may find it meaningless to continue talking about the "Christian west," at moments of tension and crisis some westerners couch their appeal for the defense of western civilization against outside forces in terms that are interpreted in the Muslim world as crypto-Christian and blatantly anti-Islamic and that therefore have an immediate impact on our relationship. However, the atmosphere in which we meet or avoid each other is determined not only by religious and semireligious statements but also by purely secular discussions and events. Our future relations will be less affected by even the most impressive theological pronouncements of an international dialogue conference than by our action and inaction on issues such as the use of the world's natural

resources, questions of poverty, justice, equality, discrimination, and marginalization, and the delicate problem of equal treatment of all nations, Islamic or not, in the foreign policy decisions of western governments.

While the complexity of these issues may seem overwhelming, there are also hopeful signs of a growing mutual understanding between Muslims and Christians, especially in the field of social ethics. News about the activities of Christians in Latin America and observations in other parts of the world have made a growing number of Muslims aware of the fact that there are Christians who see their involvement in social, economic, and political struggles as an integral part of their faith commitment. To many of these Muslims this comes as a surprise. A widespread image has been and still is that Christianity as a spiritual force, in the words of Fazlur Rahman, "almost never oriented either the polity or the other social institutions of the Christian people, except for marriage,"³⁰ and that it has now lost the opportunity to do so. Concern for the macro-structures of society was held to be a uniquely Islamic feature, and contrasting views on the issue of separation between church/religion and state seemed to point to a distinct division between us. In our time many begin to realize that these simplistic contrapositions are no longer valid, if ever they were.

Smail Balic, a prominent European Muslim leader, once warned against the danger of politicizing Islam by appealing to the slogan "*dīn wa dawla*" ("religion and state") and maintained that the freedom to make "autonomous decisions in secular matters" is anchored in the legitimately Islamic recognition of the twofold reality of *dīn wa dunyā* (religion and world).³¹ In his discussion of the role of Islamic law in contemporary society, Fazlur Rahman frequently defended the thesis of the priority of the moral teachings of the Qurʾān and the need to interpret the law "not only in light of the moral objectives and principles of the Qurʾān, but also in terms of the change in the social situation." This cautioning against a legalistic fixation of Islam in no way means abandoning the notion of Islam's relevance for the issues of society: Islam "has had, as its central task—and this in its very genesis—to construct a social order on a viable ethical basis."³²

As noted above, we find also in many Christian circles a renewed interest in questions of religion and society and a growing awareness of the need to find a balance between the recognition of civil liberties on the one hand and a concern for the well-being of society on the other. It is urgent that, wherever feasible, Christians and Muslims engage in common reflection on what it means to live as people of faith in the society in which God has placed them and explore possibilities for joint action.

³⁰Fazlur Rahman, "Islam: Challenges and Opportunities," in *Islam: Past Influence and Present Challenge*, ed. Alford T. Welch and Pierre Cachia (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University, 1979) 329.

³¹Smail Balic, "Der Islam vor der Herausforderung durch die Industriegesellschaft," *Islam und der Westen* 3/1-2 (1983) 4; see also his "Das Schari'a-Verständnis, in pluralistischer Gesellschaft," *Islam und der Westen* 1/1 (1981) 2-3.

³²Fazlur Rahman, "Islam: Challenges," 326, 330; cf. his *Major Themes of the Qurʾān* (Minneapolis-Chicago: Bibliotheca Islamica, 1980) 47-49.

Whether we find the term clarifying or hopelessly confusing, most of us have the illusion that we know what people mean when they speak about our time as “the age of dialogue.” An objective of dialogue widely agreed upon is to remove misunderstandings and to help us to understand, not just intellectually, but with our hearts, what faith means to those to whom we open up our lives and with whom we share our thoughts. But many of us are convinced that even with the best intentions we will not move beyond a series of enlightening “double monologues”³³ unless we recognize that dialogue requires also the willingness to rethink and restate our own faith from within this encounter. Without imposing this as a condition upon those willing to enter into a dialogue with us, we need to state explicitly that in our view inter-faith dialogue remains of limited significance without openness to change. In an in-depth dialogue the initial, fully understandable, and absolutely legitimate concern to safeguard what we have and what we have received can and should gradually recede in the light of the no-longer-threatening experience of being enriched by new insights. Maurice Wiles’s thesis that “full commitment and openness to change are not incompatible, that loyalty and self-criticism can coexist”³⁴ presupposes that we take the “absoluteness” of our faith commitments as seriously as the openness to change. The ultimate value of any dialogue is perhaps determined less by the extent to which it changes the perspectives of others than by the way it affects and changes us. Understood in this way, inter-faith dialogue is an extremely weighty matter. Those who approach it lightly inflict greater harm on it than even its most outspoken critics and opponents.

Much of the material discussed above has been selected to underline what seems to me a crucially important point, not just with regard to the new program of Islamic Studies at Luther Seminary in St. Paul, but with regard to any such program, whether located at a seminary or in a university department of religious studies. One of the ongoing problems facing several of these programs is their academic isolation. Unless all possibilities for cross-disciplinary and inter-departmental contacts at the seminary and within the university are used to the fullest extent possible, even the most comprehensive programs in Islamic Studies will continue to suffer from the lack of cross-fertilization with other fields in the humanities, and their impact will remain limited also as far as Christian-Muslim relations in a wider setting are concerned.

Earlier we touched upon the reasons why it seems premature to describe the future of those relationships in unreservedly optimistic terms. But the potentials of long-established programs in the study of Islam and of the promising new beginning in this academic field in St. Paul, as well as many seemingly unrelated developments in our relations with each other as Muslims and Christians, should be gratefully recognized as belonging to “the imprints of God’s mercy” that the Qur’ān admonishes us not to ignore. ⊕

³³Peter Antes, “Dialog oder doppelter Monolog? Bemerkungen zum Gespräch zwischen Christen und Muslim,” in *Gottes ist der Orient, Gottes ist der Okzident*, Festschrift für Abdoljavad Falaturi, ed. Udo Tworuschka (Cologne-Vienna: Böhlau, 1991) 425-437.

³⁴Maurice Wiles, *Christian Theology and Inter-religious Dialogue* (London: S.C.M., 1992) 81.