



Dialogue and Evangelism in Relation to Islam

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I. THE SETTING

ANY CHRISTIAN WHO HAS HAD A DEEP FRIENDSHIP WITH A DEVOUT MUSLIM HAS surely sensed a genuine kinship in the experience of God. Much in the Qur'ān sets up reverberating resonances with what we read in our own scriptures. The relationship between Muslim and Christian rightly construed always presupposes this. Not only do we share in a common humanity, we are given guidance by and called to serve the one and same God.

This came to me like something of a thunderclap some years ago. I had been asked by the local Muslim community to participate in a dialogue with a Muslim apologist from Canada. On the night of Good Friday that year someone else was to meet this controversialist in an exchange on Trinity and the unity of God. I was not able to attend. An urgent phone call I received late that night by a deeply con-

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How then is the mission of the church to be carried out in Muslim contexts? Shall it be in terms of dialogue, in terms of evangelism, or both? There is an almost unending discussion of the relation of dialogue and evangelism in the Christian mission, and the engagement with Muslims simply highlights a general question. The author sets forth critical factors that must be considered.

cerned Christian indicated that not all had gone well for the Christian side. The agitated Christian on the other end of the phone line wanted to come and tell me how to engage the Muslims in controversy to prevent a second disaster. He wanted to show me how to make some knock-down arguments that would shut the mouths of the Muslims. I was horrified, but had to oblige a visit by him. As for the exchange I was involved in, it began the next day, on Saturday before Easter Sunday. At noon some four hundred or more people, mostly Muslim with a few Christians, gathered in the great hall of the student union at the nearby university. We had about three hours together.

I was asked first to present for thirty minutes what I had to say on the Christian understanding of Bible and Qur'ān. The speaker, professor Jamal Badawi, then gave his understanding of the same topic. I then responded to him and he responded to me. At that point the floor was opened to the audience to pose questions. A long line immediately formed at the microphone on the floor.

Up to this point I thought things had gone quite well. We had genuinely exchanged views. I was not therefore ready for the first question, though I probably should have been. A young man (by his dress I judged he was from Nigeria) simply shouted out the challenge: "Why are you Christians so violent!?" Quite a start.

Well, I made a few brief comments about the Christian teaching about love and the Christian failure to live up to that call. I referred to some of the primary historical instances of that Christian failure, ranging from Crusades to Palestine. This was before the Gulf War. And then I concluded with measured statements a comment to this effect: "Yes, we Christians have much for which to repent. But I think both Christians and Muslims have much for which to repent. That is why we both need a God of mercy!" I was stunned by a hushed "Ahhhh" that went through the whole crowd. "Yes," that hush seemed to say, "that is why we both need a God of mercy."

This thunderclap of a hush startled me into awareness of how much and how deeply we as Christians and Muslims do indeed share. Awarenesses of this kind do not come often in one's life, but when they do come they permanently shape the assumptions from which one proceeds from then on. That evening, at the gracious invitation of our Muslim hosts, my wife and I spent several hours at the Muslim center and joined with them as they broke the fast of Rama.dān, participated in their mosque supper, and sat in attendance as they queried Badawi about matters that concerned them in their faith and life.

We know, of course, that this assumption of deep kinship is far from universal in the relations amongst Christian, Muslim, and Jew. Samuel Huntington has made a theory out of this in his argument concerning the "Clash of Civilizations."¹ As we end the twentieth century and enter into the twenty-first, the "fundamental source of conflict" will be neither ideological nor economic, but cultural. The

¹Samuel Huntington, "Clash of Civilizations," *Foreign Affairs* (Summer 1993) 22-49.

“principal conflicts of global politics will occur between nations and groups of different civilizations.” The “centerpiece” of this conflict will be that between the west and non-western civilizations. The civilizations of which he speaks are “the highest cultural grouping of people and the broadest level of cultural identity people have short of that which distinguishes humans from other species.” There are many levels of identity going from family and village to state and religion. Embracing all of these in one grand synthesis is a civilization. In the world today he identifies six or seven such civilizations, some large, some small. Prominent amongst these, of course, is Islamic civilization. His concern is to give guidance to western political leaders as we enter the twenty-first century. It is at the fault lines between these civilizations that conflict will arise.

One such fault line, of course, is in Bosnia, where western, Slavic-Orthodox, and Islamic civilizations meet. The task of the west for the foreseeable future is in the short term to promote as much cooperation as possible, while for the long term to maintain military vigilance so as to be ready to meet any conflict that will arise because of the differing values of the west and any one or more of these other civilizations. All these other civilizations, in varying degrees, tend to be antithetical to liberal democracy. Thus this eternal watchfulness as the west seeks to expand its range of influence.

This hypothesis may sound awfully self-serving, not to say arrogant, especially if seen from the perspective of one of these other civilizations Huntington identifies. It is hardly necessary to accept this hypothesis hook-line-and-sinker to acknowledge that conflict indeed does shape much of the awareness and relationships between Christian, Muslim, and Jew. We see it at the macro- and micro-levels all the time.

We ought not to bury our heads in the sand and say it is not so, but to look at this conflict, based as it is on a sense of mutual antagonisms and interests, squarely in the face, even if it discloses our own and each others’ ugliness. Denial will get us nowhere.

One double-sided example. Recently in the *New York Times* this episode was noted in an article.² We read:

Last December, about 5,000 people packed the Hyatt Regency hotel in downtown Chicago for the annual meeting of the Muslim Arab Youth Association. Midway through the meeting, a speaker suddenly announced that a Palestinian policeman had bombed a Jerusalem bus, killing himself and wounding 12 Israelis. “Allah Akhbar,” roared the crowd, offering spontaneous praise.

Some years ago, in a country where there have been repeated clashes between Muslim and Christian, some Christian leaders, appalled by a particularly violent series of incidents, called together the Christian community in one of the large churches. The hope was to help turn the community away from violence and towards peace. It was announced to the large crowd gathered that so and so many

²*New York Times*, 16 August 1995, A6.

Christian churches had been destroyed and so and so many Christians killed. The congregation was soberly silent. It was then announced that so and so many Muslim mosques had been burned and so and so many Muslims killed. A spontaneous cheer went up from the Christians gathered.

Our considerations thus take place in a setting in which attitudes range all the way from a sense of deep affinity (with acknowledged difference, to be sure) and a sense of deep alienation and hatred. It is clear for both Muslim and Christian that these hatreds do not stem from the *da'wah* (mission) of the Muslim or the gospel of the Christian faith. Rather, social, historical, political, economic, psychological, and other factors have polluted our respective faiths at many points. Coming at this from the Christian side we ask, "Is the gospel up to helping us in this fluid context?" Hopefully, consideration of dialogue and evangelism from the Christian perspective (Muslims of course have their own considerations on related matters in which they are also engaged) will contribute to a genuine relationship that acknowledges both commonality and difference and at the same time closes the door to alienation and hatred.

II. THE NATURE OF WITNESS, DIALOGUE, AND EVANGELISM

Both Muslim and Christian are under the obligation to bear witness to God's wonderful works. To fail to do this is to be an unfaithful Muslim or an unfaithful Christian. All of life is lived under this rubric. How might this obligation look from the Christian side?

The Christian witness is intimately linked with the cross. This is evident from the New Testament term *marturia* which means both witness and martyrdom. Apparently vulnerability to death is integral to witness.

Now, of course, this line of thought might heighten the tension. After all, does this not imply that the one to whom I bear witness is the potential enemy that will destroy me? Has this theology of martyrdom not intensified the Christian fear of the enemy in past history?

It will not, if Christians read the relationship of witness and vulnerability from within the cross of Jesus. Here the governing theme is not the enemy that harms, but the love that gives. There is always a risk in prophethood. Both Jesus and Muhammad experienced this, Muhammad at the hands of the people of Mecca and Jesus at the hands of the people of Jerusalem. "Therefore I send you prophets...some of whom you will kill and crucify, and some you will flog...and pursue from town to town" (Matt 23:34). Jeremiah is the quintessential sign of the persecuted prophet in the Hebrew scriptures. At the heart of this linkage between witness and vulnerability are the words of Jesus: "...just as the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many" (Matt 28:20). Witness, prophet, Son of man, servant, and many other terms can quickly be gathered around this nexus of witness in vulnerability.

How then shall we interpret this linkage for our purposes here? For the Christian the obligation to bear witness comes with some built-in qualities. Devoid of

these qualities a perversion of witness takes place. What are some of these qualities?

Witness comes exposed, without the power to coerce. When coercion enters in, witness is perverted. Witness seeks not its own welfare, but the welfare of the other. When methods are introduced that compromise the integrity of the other, witness is perverted. Witness takes different forms in different contexts. When a univocal dogma of witness—proclamation and nothing but proclamation, or understanding and nothing but understanding—takes hold, witness is perverted. The manner of witness is congruent with the content of witness. When the manner is triumphant and the content is the cross, witness is perverted. All of these and many more qualities are embedded in the way of the cross Jesus took and the discipleship to which Jesus calls those who are his witnesses.

If witness, bearing witness to the gospel, is the overarching word to describe Christian existence in the world, then dialogue and evangelism are two—but by no means all—of the modes in which this bearing witness takes place. Both dialogue and evangelism are modes of witness. They can be nothing less; they should be nothing more.

Let us characterize them in as epigrammatic a form as we can. Evangelism is a public offer; dialogue is a public reasoning. Evangelism originates in confession; dialogue arises out of interrogation. Evangelism is towards the other and seeks to convey an offer that carries its own compelling power; dialogue is towards each other as it seeks to make and to heed a persuasive accounting of the faith—that one's and mine. The goal of both is change.

Evangelism invites others to experience the transformation that faith in the crucified and risen Lord Jesus can bring; dialogue opens up the mutual partners to change, to change in the way they understand and live their respective faiths, so that there occurs some kind of interpenetration of life commitments. Evangelism implies the possibility of a big change occurring—a change from one paradigm of existence to another. Dialogue initiates many little changes, so that the faith one holds and the life it enables is still held, but held and lived differently. Neither Islam nor Christianity can give up on either the possibility of a big change or the necessity of many little changes. The one cannot give up the call to all people to come to the Good; the other cannot give up on the invitation to all people to hear the Good News.

Let us now comment briefly on each of these separately.

Dialogue

Dialogue is a public reasoning that arises by virtue of interrogation. Dialogue always implies that some kind of offer or presentation has been made that invites response. That response may be one of simple acceptance or outright rejection. Alternatively, the response may be more complex, such as a questioning for further clarification, the proposal to consider an alternative faith commitment, the desire to set differences aside even while cooperating in one way or another. It is in this middle range of response to each other that dialogue arises. Why do you believe

this way and not that way? What makes you so sure? What importance does that have for your life? How do you view my faith? Are there ways we can cooperate in our world to make life better for all?—questions voiced or implied. And so the questions continue back and forth, giving rise to dialogue and the responding, thinking, interpreting, interpenetrating, and acting that it involves.

This dialogue can take place at different levels of intensity and in many shapes and forms. As for the different intensities, let us call them low-, mid-, and high-level intensities with a fourth counter level of intensity called the sublevel.

Low-level intensity of dialogue involves essentially the exchange of information. This can happen in the ordinary course of life as Muslim and Christian live a common life together and interact on a daily basis. Exchange of information takes place here as a natural by-product of life together. Or, it may be the highly disciplined activity of scholars engaged in research, who broaden and deepen our knowledge and share ideas. Meetings and conferences may be called for this purpose. The ways in which this low intensity level of dialogue can take place are manifold.

Mid-level intensity aims for more. The concern has to do with what is done with the information that is at hand. How does this information, first, shape our mutual attitudes? Does it lead to understanding? Is there respect and appreciation of one another? Might we even in our difference become bosom friends? This information may also, second, shape our actions. We may discover ways in which our lives interpenetrate, or we may actively promote ways in which that will happen. The concern for action is a concern to mutually bring positive change into our world, particularly at those points where our lives face some kind of threat—enmity and potential war; poverty and potential degradation of life; pollution and the potential disruption of the life-sustaining powers of our environment; entertainment and the potential distortion of values; economic change and the potential for social dislocation, prejudice, and the irrational enmities that well up, and on and on. The quest for transformed attitudes may lead to a transformation within our educational systems. The quest for transformed behaviors might lead to various kinds of constructive social, cultural, economic, and political activity.

High-level intensity is the most rare commodity of all in dialogue. Exchange of information is widely practiced already in many areas of life, although surely not yet enough, or with sufficient intent and discipline. The quest for understanding and cooperative effort is becoming increasingly important as we seek for a world in which the greeting *salām ‘aleikum* (“peace be to you”) is truly germane. But the genuine engagement of the deepest convictions in mutual respect and without rancor is still the exception. Perhaps this is so because our respective faiths are so intimate a part of our existence, and exposing ourselves to each other at these most intimate and holy levels is not easy. Nor should it be easy. Perhaps it is not easy because we do not yet really care about each other that deeply. Yet, dialogue’s fullest birth takes place here where faith truly speaks to faith.

The sublevel of dialogue, if it can be called that, really reflects the dark underside of our cultures and the distorted ways we hold our faiths. Emotionally

it can be as strong as a seething hatred; verbally it can be polemical charge and countercharge; actively it can be the endeavor not only to weaken and diminish each other but even to exterminate one another in the name of God or faith. As Luther puts it in the *Small Catechism*: "From this preserve us, heavenly Father!"³

Evangelism

What might this possibly mean for our mutual relations? There is something particularly discomfiting about it, for it is both the most obligatory upon us – for it arises directly out of our confession – and yet it is potentially the most offensive to our neighbor who may well resent a claim concerning the lordship of a crucified and risen Savior. The problematic is little different from the Muslim side as well, for nothing is more incumbent upon the Muslim than to bear witness that there is no God but *the* God, and Muhammad is his definitive prophet-messenger. Don't we have here that awful contradiction in which the spear that can penetrate everything encounters the shield which nothing can penetrate?⁴ Isn't evangelism a recipe for disaster?

Surely one thing must be acknowledged from the outset. Evangelism or, for the Muslim, witness to God's unity and Muhammad's prophethood, places the witnesses in a potentially far more risky situation than dialogue, for in dialogue two parties have already agreed to mutuality. But perhaps precisely here is the critical factor. Evangelism truly carried out places the witness in a vulnerable and precarious situation – thus the meaning of the term "martyr" – while the community within which witness is borne defines the terms of the witness's presence or rejection.

Some people breathe the word conversion in the same breath that they say the word evangelism. In evangelism don't Christians try to convert people, it is asked? Really?

There is a threefold fallacy implicit in putting things this way. It is implied that coercion (including external inducement) is involved in conversion – the coercion fallacy. If such a thing takes place – as it has in fact repeatedly – it already falls under the strictures of a deformed witness. This first fallacy, in turn, implies a prior fallacy in which conversion is regarded as a human task – the anthropological fallacy. And both these are, again, associated with a third fallacy, namely, that change induced within cultures is bad, that the status quo should be preserved at all costs. Cultures are viewed as though they were like an ecological preserve, where every change is considered bad. This is the romantic fallacy.

What is conversion? From the Christian side it is the Latin for the New Testament term *metanoia*, meaning change of mind. Such a change is an event that transpires within the depths of a person or community in response to God's movement within and upon the heart. As the Christian understands it, it is the

³Martin Luther, "Small Catechism," in *The Book of Concord*, tr. and ed. by Theodore G. Tappert (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg, 1959) 346.

⁴The meaning of the Chinese word "contradiction" (*maodun*).

work of the Spirit alone, working through the word. It is a spontaneous response of the heart, an upwelling from within, faith. Wherever the gospel takes effect there is conversion. To forbid the possibility of change within the depths of one's heart as a spontaneous act of faith in response to some message is another name for tyranny. To prevent the possibility for change within the human heart or to forbid change violates the very humanity such forbidding purports to preserve. Both the Muslim and Christian confession require such freedom for witness and both are equally obligated to let God be God as the message of the Qur'ān and the word of the gospel are shared with all people.

Yet, the Christian must take heed to the frequently encountered opposition to Christian evangelism. Is not much, though not all, of that opposition due to the fact of a history of uncaring evangelism, an evangelism that isolates a supposed care for people's "souls" from care or genuine interest in the real lives of the people themselves? Is it an evangelism of objects, perhaps of individuals and groups "targeted," rather than an evangelism within relationships? Is it not to friends that one can speak the deepest thoughts? If there has been so much uncaring witness, will not evangelism today have to become a witness that issues from care? Our next section will explore theologically something of what this means for the Christian.

III. EXPLORING ONE LOCUS — MERCY AND LOVE

We have talked about the nature of witness and the setting within which witness takes place. We have acknowledged a deep affinity in our common confession of a God of mercy. Yet there remain differences between our communities of faith that reach beyond culture, history, and politics and into the heart of our faith itself. Can we talk about this and, if so, how?

It seems correct to say that Islam accents faith in a God of mercy and the Christian a God of love. What is implied in this?

Mercy is always the prerogative of power. The one without power is not in a position to exercise mercy. The unity of God, the singular lordship, the creating and revealing power of God, the awful majesty of a God who acts out of God's own freedom when and where God wills and without obligation, and the right and power of God to dispose of all things as God pleases are the theological background to divine mercy. That such a God of power is merciful is not the expected thing, is indeed a surprising thing made known in God's revelation. God chooses to be merciful when and how God pleases. We are the servants, God is the master. To usurp that order of things is to question God's own Godhood. Mercy is not our due but God's free choosing.

A parable of Jesus conveys this dynamic in a powerful way. A king called a slave to give account for an astronomical sum he owed — 10,000 talents or the value of 10,000 years of wages. Since he was unable to pay, the king ordered him and his wife and children, together with all that he had, to be sold. When he begged for pity, the king relented and in mercy forgave his entire debt. Exonerated, the slave then grabbed a fellow slave who owed him a day's wage. Despite pleas for mercy,

he threw this small-time debtor into prison. Hearing of this, the king summoned the already forgiven debtor slave into his presence, denounced his merciless behavior and withdrew his forgiveness, handing him to the jailors to be imprisoned and tortured till he paid up (Matt 18:23-35).

Here we see the dynamics of mercy at work. Mercy is a prerogative of power, but not an obligation. It is freely given and freely withdrawn and in both the giving and the withdrawing the one who does so is not accountable to any rule or principle outside of that one's own freedom. So it is in our relationship with God. Mercy is entirely of God's free will.

Love, however, while including mercy, has different dynamics. Love at its truest and deepest always involves vulnerability. While the powerful can both show mercy and love, those in a position of weakness can love even if unable to show mercy. Love, moreover, has obligation built within it. If the master-servant relationship is the best social metaphor to show the nature of mercy, it is the parent-child metaphor that best grasps the dynamics of love. However wayward a child, the parent remains parent and cannot but love that child and seek in every way possible to lead it to the good. For the parent to reject or disown the child would be the end of love. By becoming a parent one is obligated to love. By becoming a master one is not obligated to mercy.

Jesus told another powerful parable concerning the prodigal son. In that son's insolence, profligacy, and shame he had given up all right to sonhood, but the father as father was unable and unwilling to give up his fatherhood. His heart ached for his son as he longed for his return. The father knew the unwritten law of parenthood that when the child is sick or in trouble the parent is equally sick and troubled. Only upon restoration of the child is the parent well. When the wayward son did return the father responded with utter joy and unabashed tears, calling for a wild celebration of the occasion (Luke 15:11-24).

When scripture says that God is love (1 John 4:8), it points to this inescapable law of love—love cannot choose not to love, for love creates its own obligation. For love to cease to love would be to violate its own self. In this free will to be bound to love lies God's holiness. Love so obligated is intrinsically vulnerable, vulnerable to the pain of rejection by the one who is loved. In love God created, and God is vulnerable to the pain of the world's waywardness. In love God called a people to be his own, risking the unfaithfulness that in fact took place. In Jesus God loved unto death, having risked our rejection of that love.

What does this contribute to our theme? It is this. Witness, if it is to be Christian witness, is not exercised from a position of power but always in the mode of vulnerability. This does not mean that folly is to replace wisdom or that beggary is to replace resources. But it does mean that neither wisdom, resources, nor knowledge is to be used to secure the witness from vulnerability, to make the Christian presence with and amongst others impregnable to pain and loss. The power of the gospel does not lie in the power of the witness. The eternal paradigm of Christian witness is the cross, where the rejected and weak one, unable now to extend mercy, exercised love and forgiveness—"Father forgive them, for they

know not what they do" (Luke 23:34). No truer words were spoken than the words of those who mocked—"He saved others; he cannot save himself" (Matt 27:42). What a paradigm!

Is it not a matter for great astonishment that Christian history has seen so little conformity to the paradigm of the crucified? Not only have we failed to comprehend God's love, we have failed to understand God's mercy. ⊕