



Islam: Dimensions and Engagements

THIS IS A SPECIAL *WORD & WORLD* ISSUE ON ISLAM. IF ONE TAKES SERIOUSLY THE conjunction of “Word” and “world,” a special issue on Islam is certainly in place: Muslims represent such a high proportion of the *world* for which the *Word* is intended. After all, one out of every five human beings is a Muslim. The burden of this issue is that Islam and Muslims are now everyday realities for Christians almost everywhere. A special issue must therefore be viewed as a contribution toward making the subject of Islam non-specialist and a normal part of Christian concern.

It will take us time to reach even that modest goal, and the willingness of the Editors to help that development is therefore greatly appreciated. This issue has a double focus. On the one hand, it is intended to introduce some dimensions of Islam and to stimulate awareness of Muslim life, views, and issues. On the other hand, it will also point to the critical area of Christian-Muslim relations past and present, and to some aspects of Christian communication about Muslims and with Muslims.

The gospel, the treasure of salvation, has not been widely shared with Muslims in such a way that they perceive it to be the loving gift of God. Neither has its communication been understood as the activity of the lovers of God who are aware of and regret Christian failures of the past, and who now desire to make known God’s reconciling love in Christ from a position of deep friendship. Whatever it may mean for Muslims, it is quite clear that a fresh engagement of Christians with Muslims will mean renewal for Christians as they call upon their deepest spiritual resources, their most incisive theological reflections, and their most devoted missional energies, all of which are needed for the task. If the articles in this issue provide the reader with even a small hint of this reality, they will have made a useful contribution.

In Islam there are many prominent names assigned to Jesus. The already impressive list in the Qur’ān is enlarged in later traditions, and it keeps growing. The latest rather astonishing title was assigned by Yasser Arafat amidst the joys of Bethlehem on Christmas Eve, 1995, when he called on Muslims to celebrate the birth of Jesus the Messiah, the great revolutionary Palestinian! Muslims pay high respect to Jesus. Perhaps the most startling name in the Qur’ān is *kalimat Allāhi*, the

Word of God. Alongside that we place an old Arab proverb that says: “What comes from the lips, reaches the lips. What comes from the heart, reaches the heart.” God has spoken his Word from his heart of love. May that Word become visible in Christians in such a way that Muslims sense new dimensions in the greatness of God, and believe that the Word is for their world.

As guest editor of this issue, it is a pleasure to welcome the array of distinguished individuals who have agreed – despite their heavy schedules – to contribute their essays. All the contributors without exception have had or still have significant involvement with Muslims and with the Muslim world. It is not inappropriate to single out the author of the lead article, Dr. Willem Bijlefeld, Director Emeritus of the Duncan Black MacDonald Center for Christian-Muslim Relations at Hartford. He presented his article as the major address at the inauguration of the Islamic Studies Program at Luther Seminary, St. Paul, on May 2, 1995. Inaugurated by the Mayor of St. Paul, graced by the declaration of the Governor of Minnesota as “Christian-Muslim Relations Day,” and stimulated by the wise words of Dr. Bijlefeld, the program had an auspicious beginning in its service to the ecumenical church.* We thank him and all the scholars and church leaders who have made this special issue possible!

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