



Deradicalizing and Reconstructing Christian-Muslim Relations: Six Models

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Christian-Muslim relations remain a burning issue and a challenging task for both religious communities. The issue is global in its compass and demanding in its requirements. In the case of the church in North America, it involves members at multiple levels, not least those with special responsibilities for the church's ministry and mission. For theologians, the concern for better Christian-Muslim relations represents a call for greater attention to theologies of goodness that can inform common living in the global village. For missiologists, this matter obliges earnest consideration of the profound implications of deep friendship for evangelistic outreach. For all members, it necessitates examining relational patterns that can make sense for both Christians and Muslims and that can be practically helpful in normal life.

In reflecting on this urgent matter I will look briefly at the problem, which I describe as relational radicalization,¹ and then consider six models that can be used

¹I use the term "radicalization" in the sense of a severe disruption of human relations, and "deradicalizing," then, is their healing. The meaning is derived from one of the modern semantic streams in the word "radical." The classical connotations of the latter term range from mathematics to politics. In idiomatic usage today, the word "radical" is often narrowly clubbed with revivalists, extremists, and Islamists, becoming a virtual synonym for Muslim terrorism. For that negative usage, the more exact phrase "violent extremists" is much preferable. This essay does not deal with either terrorism or counterterrorism, but with human relations.

There have been good times (more or less) and bad times in the history of Christian-Muslim relations. Given the severe disharmony of the present, we need ways to think about breaking through hatreds and building up possibilities. Here are six models for our consideration.

in our reconstructive task. They are chosen for their common relevance to both religious communities.

For both Christians and Muslims, core intuitions govern their view of human relations. For Christians, that fundamental theme is the self-giving love of God in Christ, who seeks the welfare of all humanity, and that approach is to be reflected by believers. For Muslims, it is the principle of surrender to God, who wills obedience and piety as laid out in the Qur'an. Since both of these core intuitions have to do with goodness, it is not surprising that there are common factors in their expression. These common factors, although embedded in their primary theological frame of reference, overlap in significant ways and allow us to develop a phenomenology of functional relation-building. I refer to them as "models" that can be practically utilized by both Christians and Muslims in the effort to deradicalize and to repair their relationship. To concerned and suffering humanity their existence offers possibility and hope.

THE CURRENT DETERIORATION IN CHRISTIAN-MUSLIM RELATIONS

Certainly there are places in the world where Christian-Muslim relations are relatively harmonious. Since we do not pay much attention to what is not problematic or headline news, they tend to go unnoticed. Nevertheless, despite this encouraging though neglected fact, it is also true to say that Christian-Muslim relations have deteriorated, especially in Western regions. There has been a movement from a kind of coexistence to disharmony. The situation is more severe than an erosion of natural civility and kindness. Both Christians and Muslims are, as it were, breathing in a polluting atmosphere of fear and hate. That has produced a kind of emphysema of the spirit, a loss of the elasticity needed in common life, and a drastic worsening of mutual relations. The decline has become a major problem of our time, and it can be ignored only at our peril.

The peril needs little demonstration. The path to the well-being of the human community today passes through the field of Christian-Muslim relations. That view is based on the fact that there are so many Christians and Muslims. In the global population, 53 percent is at least nominally Christian or Muslim. The country-by-country picture is even more startling. Out of the 154 nations of the world that have a population of more than one million, 115 (or 75 percent) have a Christian or Muslim majority population, and these nations possess a full 82 percent of the world's GDP.² This does not leave much to the imagination. If there are flowers on this field, the world will have beauty; if not, it will be sterile, even ugly. In a sense, Christians and Muslims together hold the fate of the world in their hands.

It is true that, in the past, relationships between Christians and Muslims were often harshly troubled, but we now have moved past traditional and predictable misunderstandings into a relational predicament so severe and so intense that it

²For my calculations, I have used the *Economist's Pocket World in Figures: 2010 Edition* (London: Profile Books).

deserves the term radicalization. Deradicalizing that predicament is now a “hot good” for the world. That is so not only because it is crucial for the globe’s *shalom*, but also because—within reason—it is achievable in our generation. Before suggesting some approaches to that goal it may be useful to consider in brief how strangely the current crisis developed.

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After World War II, global intercultural conditions seemed to be improving. The colonial era had shut down, and the trend was toward mutual discovery, tolerance, and commercial cooperation. The signs were everywhere. The study of Islam was routinely included in the religious studies curricula of North American universities. Muslim immigration into Western societies was welcomed. On the Muslim side, the beginning of the oil flow from Damman Well No. 7 in Saudi Arabia on March 20, 1938, was the forerunner of a post-World War II period of commercial entente. The admission of Muslim countries to the United Nations produced for them a feeling of empowerment. There were still contentious issues, the main one being Palestine, but that had not yet become the consuming dispute it is today. After World War II, people were giving their primary attention to Cold War dilemmas. When those problems more or less ended twenty years ago, the world breathed a sigh of relief. At last, no overwhelming crises! But tumult was brewing in two spheres that were to disturb the forward progress.³

The first of those two influential spheres was the Muslim desire for change. That hope was in keeping with the emergence of independent Muslim nations. Reform was in the air in the Muslim world, but philosophically it took two opposite directions. One was modernity in life and education, which does not require further comment. The other was the restoration and replication of the past, a position sometimes called revivalism. The proponents of this view had two eloquent champions and theorists. The first was Abul Ala Mawdudi (d. 1979) in South Asia, who eloquently put forth a utopian vision—we have to go back and, in the essentials, precisely restore the pattern of early Muslim believers. Moreover the Qur’an must be dealt with literally, not historically. Modernity in general is dangerous and produces secularism. The other leader of this revivalist view was Sayyid Qutb of Egypt (d. 1966). He asserted that Muslims must liberate themselves from Muslim dictators, as well as from disturbing outside influences, in order to get back to the origi-

³The full story of Christian-Muslim relations is a complicated one, going back to the birth of Islam itself, but it has been well studied. The contemporary era is complex in itself, and it has not yet been fully treated. There are other factors that have played into the current development in addition to the two influences mentioned. These two are lifted up here for their primary importance and North American relevance.

nal social democracy of Islam. That cannot be done without uprisings and violence, since dictators will not go quietly. Both of the philosophical streams—modernity and revivalism—were and are involved in Muslim change, often producing some internal anxiety and contention; but in itself their interaction did not result in a downturn in Christian-Muslim relations. For that to occur, another material influence had to enter the scene, however regrettably.

The second stream of influence had to do with enemy creation in “the West”—or, more accurately, in some Western societies. When the world rejoiced over Cold War closure in the early 1990s, not everyone in Europe and North America was equally happy. The joy over the crisis-vacuum was not fully shared in some military-industrial circles; crises are the lifeblood of arms industries. To the astonishment and dismay of many, the phrase “Green Threat” began to appear in Western public language. Green is believed to have been the Prophet Muhammad’s favorite color, and the “Green Threat” was therefore a thinly veiled reference to Islam. As the media figure Pat Buchanan rather graphically put it in 1960: “To some Americans, searching for a new enemy against whom to test our power and mettle, after the death of communism, Islam is the preferred antagonist.”⁴ This was a newly minted enemy, with little basis in factual reality, and it took a lot of disinformation to develop the theory. Then in 1996, Samuel Huntington’s influential work, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of the World Order* came along to reinforce, in scholarly form, what was to become grand conspiracy thinking and alienation ideology.

The phrase “clash of civilizations” became instant media language. It was catchy, and as an idea it served the two influences outlined above. On the side of some Westerners, it fed the thought that, in order to save our civilization and its energy resource base, we needed to support the very leaders whom Muslim revivalists were trying to dislodge. On the revivalist side, the opinion gained prominence that friends of enemies are in effect as bad as the enemies themselves. This view enabled some Muslim advocates of the return to an early ideal to get around accepted distinctions in regard to the use of violence. At the same time, the widely discarded thesis that “the West” was the inveterate foe of Islam was dusted off and put to new use.⁵ The base for mutual militancy was now well and truly laid in both spheres.⁶ Terrorists and mercenaries smiled, and their agendas flourished. Normal relationships between ordinary Christians and Muslims suffered in the process, and so we landed where we are today.

⁴*New Hampshire Sunday News*, November 25, 1990; quoted in John L. Esposito, *The Islamic Threat, Myth or Reality?* rev. ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995) 5.

⁵This idea was introduced in the wake of nineteenth-century colonial expansion. Wilfred Cantwell Smith argues that Jamál al-Dín al-Afghání of Cairo (1897) was the first Muslim reformer “to use the concepts ‘Islam’ and ‘the West’ as connoting correlative—and of course antagonistic—historical phenomena.” See Smith, *Islam in Modern History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1957) 49.

⁶The merging of influences suggested here cannot be precisely dated. A seminal public declaration was Osama bin Laden’s opinion, published in a London Arabic newspaper in February 1988, stating that since the United States had declared war against Islam, it was the duty of Muslims to kill Americans.

It is my view that humanity has been essentially duped, victimized by aggressive polarizers, and led to believe that there is a permanent fracture in global society, while both religions have been abused. The assumption of an irreversible relational radicalization is steadily reinforced from emotional extremes of the two religious communities—Islamophobic rhetoric from one side and cries of “Great Satan”-ism from the other. The voices suggest that the world is once again hopelessly split, and apart from some sort of Armageddon there is nothing that anyone can do about it.

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Can anyone settle for that? Certainly not global citizens, and certainly not religious people committed to goodness. The question arises whether individuals can make meaningful interventions in a problem of such dimensions and with such inflamed passions. The intent of this essay is to say yes. It is individuals who can and must do it. In human relations, the hope lies on the ground. It is at that level that goodness takes root and personal relationships become cherished in a way that weathers the storms. It is a truism that people are now less interested in macro-interventions, less trusting in leadership rhetoric, and more inclined to micro-interventions in myriad forms that have a cumulative impact. In the end, it was not power politicians or corporation managers—though their contributions were essential—rather, it was a couple of smart engineers who capped the oil flow deep in the Gulf of Mexico. In the capping service that is needed for the troubled depths of Christian-Muslim relations, there is no reason why the Johns and Marys, the Alis and Aminas cannot do some creative engineering of their own. One Muslim woman thinks so. Sheema Khan, a Canadian scientist, writes: “Our commitment to dialogue, justice and compassion can go a long way, both at home and abroad.”⁷

In that spirit I suggest a group of models that may be of some help in deradicalizing Christian-Muslim relations. They are tied to the following assumptions:

1. the problem of radicalized relationships must be addressed from both sides;
2. we must seek and find models that both sides understand and appreciate;
3. the models must have relevance to ordinary people and leave no one out;
4. it is up to each side to relate a model firmly to its core spiritual intuition.

The models I recommend as starting points are ideas common to both Christians and Muslims, and they point to the possibility of converging relationship rather

⁷Sheema Khan, *Of Hockey and Hijab: Reflections of a Canadian Muslim Woman* (Toronto: Tsar Publications, 2009) 104. Khan holds a chemistry doctorate from Harvard. She played hockey for McGill University’s team and helped to introduce women’s intramural hockey at Harvard.

than civilizational clash. I call them the recollection model, the “most certainly religious” model, the “talking things through” model, the model of peacemaking from below, the community self-change model, and the model of deep friendship.

SIX DERADICALIZING MODELS

1. *The Recollection Model*

A subheading to this approach might be: “Have We Forgotten Good Memories?” By this I refer to the fact that noteworthy examples of good Christian-Muslim relations do exist, throughout history and in our time, that they should be remembered and celebrated, and that they can be replicated.

I recently read a story related to the early history of America. The Mayflower immigrants had landed in what is now Massachusetts. The Pokonet Indians lived at the head of Narragansett Bay—near what is now Warren, Rhode Island—about sixty miles from Plymouth, where the Pilgrims had landed. Two of the Pilgrims set out to visit the Pokonet chief, Massasoit. They later reported that beside the trail were circular foot-deep holes that had been dug where “any remarkable act” had occurred. When the traveller passed by, he or she was to recall the act and pass the story on to others.⁸

Muslims have their good memory holes related to Christians, and the one they especially like to stand beside goes back to the very beginning of Islam. Muhammad had been courageously proclaiming his message of one God in Mecca—where there were many idols, with a large tourist industry built around their shrines. What he was saying did not go over well, and the opposition led to persecution. The seventy new Muslim believers had to leave Mecca. They packed up and went across the Red Sea to Ethiopia. There the Christian king, called the Negus, welcomed them. He was pleased with the respect they showed for Jesus and Mary, and he gave them refuge until they could return again to their homeland. With great appreciation, Muslims repeatedly refer to that incident in their writings. It is one of their favorite memory holes.

Most Christians who have had some living contact with Muslims have a favorite memory hole. I would like to share a personal one. In Kerala in southwest India, I was invited to lunch by three distinguished Muslim leaders: the head of the state’s Public Service Commission, the editor of the main Muslim newspaper of the area, and a professor of sociology. I did not understand the purpose of the occasion, but it soon became clear. After the dishes had been cleared away, Savan Kutty, the commissioner, put a startling question to me, “When did you begin to like us?” I was stunned and at loss for a suitable reply. Finally, I decided to tell the following story.

My wife and I were living in a small house in the middle of a large Muslim town. I had screened in the veranda to make space for a little office. My wife had re-

⁸Nathaniel Philbrick, *Mayflower: A Story of Courage, Community, and War* (New York: Viking, 2006) 105ff.

tired for the night. It was toward midnight, and I was working late, though limited by the kerosene lamp. It was monsoon time, and the rain was pounding down. Suddenly three turbaned men appeared out of the darkness. My Malayalam language skills were poor at that stage, and I could not make out their story. They gestured that they wanted me to come with them. I was filled with a sense of foreboding, for they were from a notorious area. Finally, however, I agreed to go. I left a note on the bedside table, took an umbrella, and off we went. The final two kilometers we had to walk through the rice fields on narrow mud banks, in pitch dark and a driving rain. I was not very happy. In the distance a light flickered in a little tea shop. Inside was a strange sight. A man was being held in tight grasp. The tea shop owner knew a little English and explained. Earlier, when the man came in for tea, they had spotted a red booklet in his pocket and had forced him to disclose it. Lo and behold, it was the registration certificate of my car, which had been stolen. So three men had walked seven kilometers in late night and in a deluge in order to tell me that they had recovered my document!

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Such was the tale. I said to my prominent lunch companions, “That was when I began to like you.” They were satisfied.

It is important to remember good things. It is especially meaningful in our society because of its indulgent, perhaps sickly, fascination with evil, illustrated by steady “in your face” presentations of violence. I once asked a well-known interviewer for a national TV channel, “Eve, why don’t you show more good things on TV?” She replied, “Roland, good things aren’t news.” She stated the conventional wisdom. But in Christian-Muslim relations good things *are* news. In the midst of relational anxiety, it is appropriate to spend a little time beside our good memory holes and pass the stories on.

2. The “Most Certainly Religious” Model

When we engage in the act of recollection, negative memories—especially recent ones—crowd in, and therefore we must quickly turn to our second paradigm. I call it the “most certainly religious” model, because it is about forgiveness, about turning teaching into practice. A subheading is: “Have we forgotten to say, ‘I’m sorry?’” In the case of both Christianity and Islam, the principles of penitence and forgiveness represent basic views. They express core ideas of what God does and what goodness demands. These principles also reflect what people generally think about religion itself—that it has something extra to offer, something beyond the ordinary in the field of human relations.

This makes both Christians and Muslims seem vulnerable. There is, in fact, widespread criticism that the religions do not do what they say and that they are a source of misery. So the question is sometimes asked, “Shouldn’t we get rid of the religions?” Instead of getting annoyed, it is better for religious people to admit that there is a problem. The problem is not setting goals too high for human nature; it is rather not working hard enough at their attainment, not being religious enough. Despite emphasizing forgiveness, neither Christians nor Muslims have adequately applied their core teachings to the hard case of Christian-Muslim relations. They have not plunged into the depths of their own resources and drawn up healing waters. A Jewish woman named Marianne Pearl presents a challenge to both. Her husband Daniel was the *New York Times* reporter who was murdered by zealots in Karachi. She was pregnant when it happened (2002), and she wrote these words:

Revenge would be easy, but it is far more valuable in my opinion to address this problem of terrorism with enough honesty to question our responsibility....[I hope] I will be able to tell our son that his father carried the flag...not for revenge but for the values we all share: love, compassion, friendship and citizenship, far transcending the so-called clash of civilizations.⁹

From the Muslim side, Sheema Khan declares, “The universal values enunciated by Mrs. Pearl are deeply entrenched in Islam.”¹⁰ We see that in the beautiful Quranic names for God that refer to forgiveness. The Qur’an portrays God as al-Ghaffūr (the Forgiver), and as al-Ghaffār (the All-Forgiving One). With strong insight, a Sufi writer, Shaikh Toson Bayrak, declares that without divine forgiveness “there could be neither a society nor a single family.”¹¹ The classical theologian al-Ghazālī states the implication for our behavior. He defines forgiveness as putting the veil over the other’s evil. Commenting on al-‘Afū, a divine name that means “the One Who Erases Sin,” he says, “Man’s portion of this is self-evident: it consists in forgiving everyone who does him wrong...as he sees God most high is the One who does good to the disobedient.”¹² It is a formidable challenge that “the Teacher of Islam” gives to his fellow Muslims.

As for Christians, their emphasis on forgiveness, divine and human, is central. It is described as the article of faith on which the church stands. Forgiveness comes from God who declares sinners righteous for Christ’s sake; as Martin Luther says, God “daily and richly forgives.”¹³ Forgiveness comes from God, yet Jesus the Messiah also insisted that divine forgiveness and human forgiveness are connected. He advised that when you pray, say, “And forgive us our sins, for we ourselves forgive everyone indebted to us” (Luke 11:4). The concomitant step is to seek forgiveness for our wrongdoing by travelling the road of restitution and reconciliation.

⁹Quoted by Sheema Khan, *Hockey and Hijab*, 4.

¹⁰Ibid.

¹¹Sheikh Tosun al-Jerrahi al-Halveti, *The Most Beautiful Names* (Brattleboro, VT: Jerrahi Foundation, 1965) 21.

¹²Al-Ghazālī, *Ninety-Nine Names of God in Islam*, trans. Robert C. Stade (Ibadan, Nigeria: Daystar, 1970) 37, 70, 115.

¹³In the explanation of the Third Article of the Apostles’ Creed in Luther’s *Small Catechism*.

It is now a decade since a group of Christian young people illustrated how fundamental this model is in the pursuit of global goodness. Their story is called “the Reconciliation Walk.” July 15th, 1999, marked the 900th anniversary of the disastrous moment when the Christian warriors of the First Crusade entered Jerusalem, slaying many Muslims and Jews in the process. As 1999 dawned, the group of Christian youth decided that they would do something to express their regret to Muslims. Starting from Köln in Germany, where the Crusade commenced, they literally walked through the Balkans into Turkey. As they went, they voiced their apologies for the cruel events of the past to whoever would listen. They had a leaflet that said:

Nine hundred years ago our forefathers carried the name of Jesus Christ in battle across the Middle East. Fuelled by fear, greed and hatred, they betrayed the name of Christ by conducting themselves in a manner contrary to his wishes and character....We renounce greed, hatred and fear, and condemn all violence done in the name of Jesus....Jesus the Messiah came to give life. Forgive us for allowing His name to be associated with death.¹⁴

The Turkish public was aroused as they passed through and sounded its praise. The Walk continued down through Antioch and into the Holy City, where the young people offered their love and brotherhood.

“We renounce greed, hatred and fear, and condemn all violence done in the name of Jesus....Jesus the Messiah came to give life. Forgive us for allowing His name to be associated with death.”

The model we have just considered speaks to an acute need. Can Christians and Muslims roll up the carpet of spiritual forgetfulness, grasp the hem of their belief, and lead the world in this special resource? There is a beautiful Tradition (Hadith) in Islam that says: “Your best alms are the smile in your brother’s face.”

3. The “Talking Things Through” Model

The third suggested model for the deradicalizing task is “talking things through,” which is the literal translation of “dialogue.” A subheading is: “Does dialogue really help?”

In this connection I refer to a contribution from a creative young nurse, Susheela Engelbrecht, whose natural talents for public health service were honed at Johns Hopkins University. She developed a public health program in Muslim-majority Senegal of such high quality that it was later taken up by the country’s government as its national policy. I followed her around villages observing her form of dialogue in life. Susheela wrote these words:

When we enter into relationships with people of other faiths, with open hearts

¹⁴See Roland E. Miller, *Muslims and the Gospel: Bridging the Gap* (Minneapolis: Lutheran University Press, 2005) 275.

and minds, stereotypes can finally begin to erode and true dialogue can take place, dialogue that enables mutual sharing in the context of true friendship, humility and respect; dialogue that is entered into without arrogance or ulterior motives, dialogue between friends.¹⁵

This keen global citizen identifies the qualities that are needed in dialogue of any kind.

The three main types of dialogue are formal discussions with preset agendas, informal conversations at local levels, and cooperative efforts to solve grassroots problems. Each has its value for our model. For an illustration of the first type, I go to the dialogue program of the Lutheran World Federation in the decade 1991–2002, when I served as the chairperson of the Islam Group. We met for formal discussions with Muslim scholars and leaders at numerous sites, and we learned a lot. We learned what all who wish to study a religion or engage with its adherents in the current context must do, namely, that understanding another person is a fine modern interpretation of loving one's neighbor.¹⁶ We found that Christians want to discuss theological issues while Muslims prefer practical ones. We learned that we must talk more about conflict resolution or miss the chief anxiety of the age; and we discovered that dialogue actually helps in the daunting deradicalizing task.

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I invite you to travel with me in your imagination to northern Nigeria, the prime example of progressive dissolution in human relations. The cauldron boils to the present day. Walk with me through the town of Bauchi and look at the churches and mosques that have been torched. My guide is a pastor, Penuel Dalatu, later to become a graduate student in Islamic Studies at Luther Seminary, Saint Paul. But now he is disconsolate. He shows me his own fire-blackened church. The death toll is in the thousands, more Muslims than Christians. Flash forward to a year later. Now I am travelling with a remarkable Lutheran bishop named David Windibiziri. He is driving me to Kano. We pass a new billboard beside the road with one huge word in the middle, "CRUSADE." Below it is the announcement that Reinhold Banke, a demagogic evangelist, will speak that day. We

¹⁵Luther T. Engelbrecht, "The Christian Remembering of the Muslim in Prayer and Worship," *Word & World* 16/2 (1996) 213.

¹⁶The value of the personalist approach seems obvious now but was not always so. To my knowledge the first major religious studies scholar to press this point was Wilfred Cantwell Smith. See his observations on the relation of love and the study of other religious people in "Comparative Religion, Whither and Why?" in *The History of Religions: Essays in Methodology*, ed. M. Eliade and J. M. Kitagawa (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1959) 34–39, especially page 39, note 18.

hurry to get there ahead of time to meet Muslim leaders, but fail to do so. Banke makes a public speech before thousands that lampoons Muslim beliefs. That night Kano burns. Over 3500 die, and about 35 mosques and churches are destroyed. In vain, the government has sent a military helicopter to remove Banke from the country. Too late. The damage is done.

Now flash forward to one more year later. With others, Windibiziri and I have determined that Nigerian Christians and Muslims need to talk things through. Bishop David has managed to pull it off! We are in a room in Jos, fifty Nigerian Muslims and fifty Christians together, both men and women. Wing Commander Husain, the government designate, takes the chair. One by one, the issues are put on the table and vehemently addressed. The women from both sides take the lead in demanding some creative action. This must end, they say.

It is evening now. The Muslim leaders are sitting on the floor in a circle. They allow me to join them. They are talking about Shari'a, their Islamic law, and their sincere desire is to have it recognized by the state. What is your opinion, they ask. I suggest that since the Prophet Muhammad and his first successors did not have the Shari'a, perhaps they could wait for a time. The dialogue is on, as we talk it through. In 1995, the then Crown Prince Hassan of Jordan spoke about these things in Christ Church Cathedral in Oxford. He said:

Religious communities around the world have become so polarized and segmented as to threaten the very fabric of contemporary society. The phenomenon of religious militancy is not peculiar to Islam, nor is it the exclusive preserve of religions....I believe that interfaith dialogue must be intensified....We must harness our effort for the common good of all believers.¹⁷

Can we talk through what is implied in his simple phrase "the common good"?

4. The Model of Peacemaking from Below

A subheading for our fourth model might be: "Does it matter what I do?" More than a few might answer, "Not much!" Remembering the good, forgiving, dialoguing—an ordinary person can do those things. But peacemaking? The world is too complex. Global citizens have to understand and accept their limitations. Peacemaking has to come from above, that is from global political and social leaders.

That opinion is understandable; a great deal of formal peacemaking activities must go on from above. We have to be thankful for those high-level efforts. Who will not applaud George Mitchell's endless trips back and forth between Jerusalem, the West Bank, and Cairo? Yet there is also a peacemaking from below that has its own power. There is a small village named Budrus on the Israel-West Bank border. The new Wall of Separation being built along the border was to pass through the village's precious olive trees, destroying them. The villagers engaged in a nonvio-

¹⁷See *Christian-Muslim Dialogue, Theological and Practical Issues*, ed. Roland E. Miller and Hance Wakabana (Geneva: The Lutheran World Federation, 1988) 368ff.

lent protest, supported by Israeli peace activists. They mounted fifty-five demonstrations in all and won when the government finally decided to skirt the orchard. The signal moment came when a young Muslim girl named Iltezam, though terrified, stood in front of a bulldozer until it retreated. Intimations of Tiananmen Square!¹⁸

Iltezam's action was spontaneous. But peacemaking from below can also be intentional. The sacred scriptures ask that we walk through the doors of peacemaking service. They will not let their adherents alone. As for the Bible, after Ps 34:14 says, "Depart from evil and do good," it immediately adds, "seek peace, and pursue it." Peacemaking may for some be a policy choice, but essentially it belongs to the good. So pursue it! Jesus, who is named "Our Peace," utters these famous words: "Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God" (Matt 5:9). The Qur'an is straightforward in its demand: "Make peace among men, for God both hears and knows" (2:224). There it is, plain and simple, it stops you in your tracks: Be a peacemaker, God is watching! In Sura 23:96, the Qur'an goes on to advise that the normal way of thinking is an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth, but then it adds that there is a better way: "But he who pardons and puts things right, then his reward is with God." The passage reminds us that someone has to start breaking the cycle.

And around us are the great souls of humanity who show us the power of individual purpose. Breaking the cycle of radicalization means stepping into the middle and taking risks. For the wildest example of personal intervention in Christian-Muslim conflict, we have to go to the past, to Francis of Assisi (d. 1226). He had been persistent in his effort to journey into Muslim areas with his message of selfless love, but had been twice thwarted. Finally, he managed to take a ship to Damietta at the mouth of the Nile River. There, in 1219, under the command of Cardinal Pelagius, the members of the Fifth Crusade were facing a Muslim army. It was surely one of the weirdest of the Crusades, because Sultan Malik al-Kamal, the Viceroy of Egypt, was a conciliatory person and had contributed to a time of peace. Nevertheless, the Crusaders came on. Francis took permission to engage in a peace mission, crossing the firing line and standing between the two contending forces. Muslim soldiers seized him and took him to the startled sultan who received him graciously, joined in discussion, and then sent him back with an honor guard. What they said to each other we will never know, and what resulted from the mission is unclear. But what we see is enough.

St. Francis dared to seek peace and pursue it, despite the probability of suffering. He believed that two things are needed for Christian-Muslim engagements. One is intellectual preparation. Taking precedence to that, however, is what he called "suffering in reparation."¹⁹ Heart and head. In putting the two together, Francis offers an approach to the task of creating healthy Christian-Muslim relations that remains valid.

¹⁸See *The Economist*, August 21, 2010, 71.

¹⁹G. Bassetti-Sani, "Mohammad and St. Francis," *Muslim World* XLVI/IV (1956) 343.

In the same general context of interreligious alienation and apparent hopelessness, this time in present-day Gaza, rises the stirring figure of Izzeldin Abuelaish, a Muslim medical doctor specializing in gynecology. Dr. Abuelaish was born in a Palestinian refugee camp, but received a scholarship to study in Cairo. After his graduation, he chose to work in Israel, commuting from his home in Gaza. He saw his healing profession as a bridge for human relationships. Many Israelis supported his reconciling efforts, though others opposed him. When a bomb tragically struck his Gaza home, killing several of his children, a friendly Israeli TV anchor immediately brought the sad event to the attention of the public, producing general consternation. Nevertheless, despite his burden of personal suffering, Abuelaish argues that, if we persevere in showing mutual decency, understanding will gradually prevail. Now in Canada, his message wherever he speaks is the simple, consistent declaration: "I will not hate."²⁰

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Christian-Muslim relations that remains valid.*

5. *The Community Self-Change Model*

The subheading is, "Can religious communities change?" Can whole groups intentionally cultivate needed attitudinal and behavioral changes to better their relationships with other religious communities? As we have already noted, some observers think not. Yet there are happy examples of that development. Some of these are quite localized and generally go unreported, while others stand out as substantial and striking testimonies to what is possible.

By the phrase "religious communities" I refer to a defined group within the broad compass of a religion. An example from Christianity would be the Lutheran family in North America. For example, the question could be raised: Do the attitude and the behavior of North American Lutherans in regard to Muslim neighbors require testing, and if such a test indicated the need for improvement, would there be a power for change that would contribute to the deradicalizing and reconstruction of relationships? What models are available as Lutherans place this demanding issue of our time on their agendas? The same question faces the Muslim "ummah," the embracive term for general Muslim society. Within the ummah there are many distinctive groups. It is there that the ability to make positive change is weighed, and it is there that we find a particularly moving example of achievement, one that was set by a group known as the Mappila Muslims of Kerala.

On the southwest coast of India lies the heavily populated state of Kerala. It is notable for the relative equilibrium in its religious population. Hindus are the majority, but Muslims and Christians each make up over one-fifth of the populace.

²⁰See Izzeldin Abuelaish, *I Shall Not Hate: A Gaza Doctor's Journey on the Road to Peace and Human Dignity* (Toronto: Walker, 2011).

The configuration developed from very early times. Christians in Kerala believe that the Apostle St. Thomas founded their church, but quite certainly Middle East Christians entered by the third century and were welcomed by the Hindu people. With similar generosity they greeted Arab Muslim traders and settlers after Islam was born. All this took place in a peaceful context. Gradually, Christians and Muslims grew in number, creating the remarkable triological socioreligious milieu of today. The unusual interreligious harmony lasted over eight centuries, representing a unique memory hole.

The harmony ended when Europeans came after 1498, seeking Kerala's spices. Particularly the Portuguese manipulated the interreligious situation to their advantage, drawing the Hindu and Christian spice producers to their side, cutting Muslims out of the picture. There were also religious overtones in that strategy. Thus, for example, the militant Afonso de Albuquerque who established Portuguese hegemony at Goa in 1510 was the same individual who planned to invade Mecca and seize the bones of Muhammad, holding them in ransom for the recovery of Jerusalem.

The tragic result of the early colonialist period in Kerala was the end of the interreligious harmony. Among Mappila Muslims their new situation produced anger, hatred, and militancy. They became poor, oppressed, and fearful people who took refuge in defensive religious traditionalism. Their frustration issued in a long series of hopeless guerrilla outbreaks fed by a declared martyr ideology. The outbreaks culminated in the unhappy Mappila Rebellion of 1921, whose violence shook the foundations of the Hindu-Muslim entente in India's Freedom Movement. The British rulers, many of whom regularly referred to the Mappila Muslims as "hopeless" or as "religious fanatics," put down the rebellion with considerable loss of life. Human relations were just another casualty. Although at individual levels generous people kept doors open to each other, Muslims now hated Hindus and Christians as their economic and religious oppressors. Given this dire condition in its recent past, how can we explain the fact that today Kerala culture is once again noted throughout India for its positive relations? Somehow the old ideal rose again like a phoenix from the ashes.

For the answer we must go to the Mappila Muslim community's decision for self-change. The key to this noteworthy development was the vision and will of a group of enlightened leaders, ranging from a dynamic physician-reformer, Dr. P. K. Abdul Ghafoor (d. 1984), to the still active pioneer educator, Professor K. Jaleel (b. 1922), to the remarkable religious saint and political leader, Sayyid Mohamed Ali Shihab Thangal (d. 2010). They determined to deal with their problems in a new way, and gradually a community consensus developed to support them. Many other factors fed its evolution, but the dominant one was the *intentional* deliberation of leaders such as these who in effect declared, "It shall not be so among us any longer."

This was a dramatic reversal and a great human victory that led to a restored harmony and the recovery of a stirring model. Community self-change is infec-

tious. Mahatma Gandhi sensed that and used to remind the people of India that “when I change, I change others.”

But that takes us to “the greatest of these....”

6. *The Model of Deep Friendship*

A subheading of this model might be “Can the human reflect the divine?” That is, can human friendship image divine friendship? With this model we arrive at what in our view is the key paradigm in Christian-Muslim relations, the pattern of God’s friendship.²¹ But first we must examine the principle of human friendship that is a model of its own and that is recognized for its value by both Muslims and Christians, without dissent. Human friendship and divine friendship are linked as are creature and Creator, and together they provide our major resource in human relations.

while some passages of the Qur’an sternly warn that not all Christians are the same in their attitude toward Muslims, the favorable and significant description is that they are “the nearest in affection” to Muslims

Human friendship. Human friendship is a beautiful thing, and between Christians and Muslims it is desirable, possible, and personally highly rewarding. It is an informing element in the application of our other models, lifting them above mere utilitarianism and crisis management. It is not time- or culture-bound. At its best it warms the heart and bridges relationships. It is “the bridge over the river why,” answering the question of why we should bother about Christian-Muslim relations. I am not alluding to the casual use of the term friend, with a diluted content, but friend as represented by the words of Solomon (Sulaiman Nabi) who said: “A friend loves at all times” (Prov 17:17). It is this kind of consistent friendship that is so highly esteemed by Muslims, and in their internal relationships it is regularly combined with hospitality and generosity. With discretion, it is to be extended to Christians and Jews who are regarded as “people of the scripture,” that is, those who have received God’s revelation. While some passages of the Qur’an sternly warn that not all Christians are the same in their attitude toward Muslims and that they have gone astray in some of their teachings, the favorable and significant description is that they are “the nearest in affection” to Muslims (Qur’an 5:82). Expressing that conviction, in Ottawa, Canada, the Ottawa Womens’ Muslim Association annually conducts its grand “Festival of Friendship,” hosting community leaders from all backgrounds. To the best of their ability, and with great success, they are publicly applying the model of human friendship.

Nevertheless the model of human friendship has its limitations, and to stay on that level is to miss its clue to something more profound. Ordinary human friendship is often imbued with self-interest. It is frequently emotional and

²¹I have treated the theology of deep friendship more fully in Miller, *Muslims and the Gospel*, 257–267.

changeable. It may lack staying power. It is certainly too frail to bear the full load of Christian-Muslim relations. We need an unshakeable ideal and an influx of energy from outside ourselves, and so we turn from a creature quality to the deep friendship that we learn from God, our merciful and compassionate Lord.

Divine friendship. As Muslims understand it, divine friendship is focused on God's created wonders, God's generosity to humankind, and God's care for believers. God is called "Our Protecting Friend." Christians share those emphases but take divine friendship as the key to the understanding of God's character and God's relation to a straying world. In that sense, divine friendship is a virtual synonym for the term *agapē*, selfless love. Christians believe *agapē* to be the very nature of God, who is not merely friendly, but who is friendship itself. Because it is inherent in the divine character, God's friendship is not dependent on our response and is also shared with those who do not deserve it. It holds nothing back. It is not emotional, self-interested, changeable, impermanent, or frail. It is self-forgetting, even self-giving. The distinction between divine and human friendship is especially striking in the way it deals with rejection. It does not end when reciprocity fails. It reaches out and is ready to suffer. Jesus the Savior said, "No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends." And, having commanded love, Jesus adds, "You are my friends if you do what I command you" (John 15:12–14).

Yet can humans really reflect what is divine? Muslim theologians have doubted and have argued the question, but some contemporary Muslim thinkers are forthright in affirming the possibility and the necessity. The Iranian sociologist Ali Shariati (d. 1977) declares that as a creative being the human is "in possession of a quasi-miraculous power that enables him to transcend the natural parameters of his own existence."²² With the divine spirit in us we are to go forward where the wayfarer "is engaged in a constant migration from his self of clay to his divine self...so that this animal made of mud and sentiment can take on the characteristics of God."²³ St. Paul in the Christian context puts it in these words: "Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus" (Phil 2:5).

These are trenchant calls to rise to the highest ideal. Can we aspire to that level? To use Albert Schweitzer's picture, we are to throw ourselves into what is now a wildly spinning wheel of Christian-Muslim relations in order to stop it, or at least to slow it down, even though we may be left hanging on the wheel as Christ once was. Who is sufficient for these things? Are there any models of the Model? It is good news that there are indeed, and their number is growing. One such example is the startling figure of a Trappist monk named Dom Christian de Cherge. The Trappists are a part of the Cistercian Order of Benedictine monks who are committed to austere living and silent adoration. Dom de Cherge was an Abbot in the Tibhirine Monastery in the Algerian Atlas Mountains in the difficult days of 1992–1995 when 40,000 people were killed in the crisis. Dom de Cherge had a pre-

²²Ali Shariati, *Marxism and Other Western Fallacies*, trans. Hamid Algar (Berkeley: Mizan, 1960) 25f.

²³Ali Shariati, *On the Sociology of Islam*, trans. Hamid Algar (Berkeley: Mizan, 1979) 90f., 96.

monition that he would not survive. In 1993, he wrote a “Spiritual Testament” and left it with his family to be opened in the event of his death. He was among a group of seven monks who were taken by militants in 1996 and beheaded. Xavier Beauvois has directed a French language documentary of this group, *Des hommes et des dieux (Of Gods and Men)*, which was released in February, 2011. It reveals how doubt and rage are associated with great tasks—“it is mad to stay”—until God’s Spirit makes possible what is impossible.

Dom de Cherge’s “Testament” was opened and read on Pentecost, 1996. He wrote:

If it should happen one day—and it could be today—that I become a victim of the terrorism which now seems ready to encompass all the foreigners in Algeria, I would like my community, my Church, my family, to remember that my life was given to God and to this country. To accept that the One Master of all life was not a stranger to this brutal departure.

After asking for his family’s prayers, the Abbot shares a prayer of his own:

I should like, when the time comes, to have a space of lucidity which would enable me to beg forgiveness of God and of my fellow human beings, and at the same time to forgive with all my heart the one who would strike me down.

He refuses to allow his relationship with Muslims to be destroyed, and so he says:

This is what I shall be able to do, if God wills: Immerse my gaze in that of the Father, to contemplate with Him His children of Islam as He sees them, all shining with the glory of Christ, fruit of His Passion, filled with the Gift of the Spirit whose secret joy will always be to establish communion and to refashion the likeness, playing with the differences.

In that light, after thanking his family and friends, he addresses the one who did the murderous deed:

And you too, my last minute friend, who will not know what you are doing, Yes, for you too I say this THANK YOU AND THIS “A-DIEU”—to commend you to this God in whose face I see yours. And may we find each other, happy “good thieves” in Paradise, if it please God, the Father of us both... AMEN! ²⁴

Not many of us can emulate that spirit, but all of us can move forward from where we are. I commend readers to the constructive task in Christian-Muslim relations for the sake of our common life and future, and ask only that they engage in it with compassion and with an absolute commitment to hope. ⊕

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²⁴This wording of Fr. Christian’s Testament is found at <http://www.monasticdialog.com/a.php?id=497> (accessed May 20, 2011). For a review of the film *Of Gods and Men*, see *The Economist*, February 19, 2011, 95.