Muslims, Christians, and the Challenge of Interfaith Dialogue

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Preface

The following text is the result of many years of engagement in Christian-Muslim dialogue at the local and national levels. On the Christian side, it represents conversations that have taken place in the World Council of Churches, the National Council of Churches, local ecumenical councils, and churches and denominations. On the Muslim side, it is the product of many personal conversations with Muslim students and friends, and of working with Muslim councils and organizations in a number of different venues in the United States. It also reflects the ongoing mission of Hartford Seminary, at which I teach, to study and reflect on dialogue and to bring together Muslims and Christians for conversation and engagement.

Much of the information conveyed here, therefore, is the result of personal experience. Many Muslim and Christian friends and colleagues have talked with me about their participation in the dialogue, and have shared their reflections on its strengths and weaknesses. I have tried to portray these experiences and opinions as accurately as possible, quoting materials that have appeared in written form and making general reference without specific notation to those things that have been said, or written, to me in person.

As dialogue itself is an experience of mutual cooperation and support, so this book would not have been possible without the help of all of the persons whose dedication to the importance of Christian-Muslim engagement is, I hope, evident in the following pages. My own involvement in dialogue has continued over many

years. For the past ten years that involvement has been centered at Hartford Seminary, which I believe to be one of the most important institutions in America for teaching about, and modeling in its classes and other programs, interfaith dialogue. I am grateful for all I have learned from colleagues who have been engaged in the dialogue process over many years. So also I owe thanks to the many Muslim and Christian students at Hartford Seminary who in classes and personal conversations have shown how enriching it can be when people of different religious traditions come together to share with one another.

Contents

Introduction

Phones started ringing off the hook. Email messages piled up. Engagement calendars became immediately filled as those who had some knowledge of Islam and Christian-Muslim relations tried to respond to the question on everyone's lips after September 11, 2001: Why did they do it? Tragedy often begets more tragedy, and the direct and indirect results of 9/11 have brought pain and loss, disillusionment and severe financial repercussions to many Americans as well as members of other societies. Adding to Western fears have been subsequent bombings in Madrid, Bali, London and elsewhere—terrorist acts acknowledged to have been perpetrated by Muslims—as well as the repercussions of U.S. military action in the Middle East. What is going on, Americans ask, and why is it that the religion of Islam seems to allow for such grisly deeds to be carried out on seemingly innocent victims?

Hundreds of books, thousands of journal articles, and an untold number of opinions expressed in cyberspace have been dedicated to trying to analyze terrorist movements linked in some way to the religion of Islam. American Muslims, horrified by atrocities perpetrated in the name of their precious faith, have agonized over the situation. They have spent a great deal of time denouncing violence and proclaiming Islam to be a religion of peace, and in more quiet ways, have begun examining the roots of their faith to find out what, if anything, justifies aggression and retribution in the Qur'an and the traditions of Prophet Muhammad. For the most part, American

Muslims have found themselves in a very difficult position. Many disagree strongly with various aspects of American foreign policy, believing that specific actions on the part of the American government such as the bombing and occupation of Iraq or unequivocal support of Israel serve to exacerbate already tense situations. But despite their conviction that it is the right of every American citizen to speak his or her mind publicly, they find it difficult to challenge the government at a time when the political actions they are critiquing are still popular with much of the American public. As Muslims they feel closely watched, fearful in response to government policies related to the "war on terrorism." And they cannot fail to notice when national polls indicate that anti-Muslim feeling in America has not been dissipated by their efforts to explain true Islam, but in fact has continued to rise.

Yet out of the ashes of the shocking acts of devastation has come increasing recognition on the part of many Americans that not only do non-Muslims need to learn more about Islam, but that Muslims need to be able to understand and articulate their own faith better both to themselves and to others. Part of this mutual process has been the furthering of a number of efforts at dialogue between members of the two religious traditions. This volume provides an overview and analysis of the recent history of Christian-Muslim dialogue in the United States, and the ways in which it has been furthered and enriched since September 11, 2001. So much has been happening in different cities and areas around the country, of course, that the specific examples cited can only suggest to the reader the kinds of events that are taking place, as well as the variety of thinking on the part of both Christians and Muslims as to what it means to be in dialogue and to take seriously the other's faith.

Chapter one, "Encountering Each Other," brings the reader straight into the heart of the dialogue process. Three vignettes about possible kinds of dialogue suggest the issues and concerns that face organizers and participants in these conversations as they struggle to get to know each other and to determine what, if anything, will form a future agenda for their talks. These dialogues represent some of the issues that could arise as members of particular groups struggle to decide how to talk with each other. Two of these sets of conversations are hypothetical, though based on the kind of exchange that actually has taken place, and a third represents the experience of a real group. Examples are provided of (a) Christians and Muslims brought together by a local ecumenical council representing a range of ethnic backgrounds; (b) African American Muslims and Christians struggling to determine what they have in common and what are the most important issues they need to address; and (c) Roman Catholic and Muslim women trying to find common ground

as women and the possibility of shared experiences in their individual forms of worship and spiritual life.

Chapter two, "The Legacy of Engagement," provides a brief history of Christian-Muslim relations since the beginning of Islam in the 600s CE. It explores the ways in which conflict as well as times of peaceful coexistence shared by these two great religions inevitably had shaped the responses that their members have toward each other. Is it possible to have useful and productive conversations in the relatively neutral context of a pluralistic America, that in theory supports freedom of religion for all, without acknowledging past realities, both painful and helpful? The Crusades of the tenth, eleventh, and twelfth centuries are nearly a millennium past, and yet they are once again vivid in the consciousness of both Muslims and Christians. In the so-called "peaceful period" in medieval Spain, when Muslims, Jews and Christians for the most part lived in mutual support and cooperation, some of the most creative work in the arts and sciences known in the historical record were fostered. Are there lessons from this period that can inform our life together today in the historically and geographically different places in which we now live? Christian views of the Prophet Muhammad and the Qur'an, the holy book of Islam, have rarely been other than uncharitable, sometimes to the extreme of fabricating wild and ludicrous tales. To what extent are these views latent in our modern Western views of the religion of Islam?

Chapter three, "Islam: A Truly American Religion?" returns us to the American context as it explores the history of the rise and growth of Islam in this country. How has American society been changed by the reality that we now have many millions of Muslims living as fellow citizens? Waves of Muslim immigrants, refugees and asylum seekers have brought new citizens from every part of the Muslim world, who have formed a community unique in the history of the world. Added to this already complex picture is the presence of significant numbers of African Americans who have chosen to identify with the religion of Islam. The chapter will consider how all these people live together, acknowledging both their personal ethnic and cultural affiliations and their bond with the Islamic faith. Woven through the narrative of how American Islam has come to grow and be part of American life are the many efforts that members of the American Muslim community have made to participate in, and sometimes even initiate, dialogue and conversation with their Christian (and sometimes Jewish) neighbors.

What have been the various ways in which Muslims and Christians have engaged in conversation with each other? Chapter four, "Models of Christian-Muslim Dialogue in America," will look at Christian-Muslim dialogue in the American context, suggest what have been the most popular models with both

Christians and Muslims, examine why some work better than others, and discuss the importance of setting specific goals so as to allow for the greatest degree of success no matter which type of dialogue is chosen. Some models are obvious, determined by the nature of the group that wishes to talk together. Others depend on the interests of the participants and the particular ends they want to accomplish. A number of Muslims who have taken part in Christian-Muslim conversations for a considerable period of time speak to their convictions about the importance of one form of dialogue over another.

Chapter five, "When Dialogue Goes Wrong," will illustrate how, even under the best of circumstances and with the best of intentions, attempts at Christian-Muslim dialogue may be disrupted or doomed to failure. Here we will look at some of the reasons why efforts to communicate can lead to disappointment, emphasizing that appropriate planning and anticipation can help avoid problems and frustrations. The chapter will look at how strong political convictions may serve to distract conversations to the point where continuing is impossible. In some cases it simply must be admitted that after a first "getting acquainted" session the group has little to say to each other and probably should not be encouraged to continue. Sometimes insufficient forethought has been given to the reality that certain combinations of persons really do not make appropriate dialogue partners. If you, your church or mosque, or any other local group in your community is interested in getting engaged in interfaith dialogue, you may find information here that will help you avoid the "dead ends" and get your group off to as promising a beginning as possible.

With the heightened interest in the fact of religious diversity in the United States, many Muslims and Christians have been turning their attention to what it means to live in a society in which majority status can no longer be taken for granted. Chapter six and chapter seven, which look at "The Pluralist Imperative" first from the Christian and then from the Muslim perspective, review contemporary scriptural and theological understandings of pluralism and what it means for Christians and Muslims to be part of an increasingly diverse America in terms of religion and of racial-ethnic identities. Chaper six will provide a synopsis of recent theological writings of Protestants, Catholics and evangelicals about dialogue, about pluralism, and about their understanding of why (if they do) Christians believe that interfaith conversation can enhance their own theological understanding. The Association of Theological Schools has encouraged reflection on the reality of theological pluralism as an important element in the training of pastors and religious leaders. Many Muslims also are pondering whether and how they can live as members of a minority faith in a land in which their religion is not dominant. Since 9/11 a few Muslims in the West have begun to address the subject of

religious pluralism. For the most part these efforts are being made as part of the concern to prove the legitimacy of pluralism within the Islamic understanding, and thus of Islam itself as a credible part of the American religious scene. Chapter seven will offer an analysis of some of these Muslim writings, comparing them with contemporary Western Christian thinking about pluralism in terms of the themes they address and the intent with which they are written.

Chapter eight, "New Directions," considers some of the ways in which interfaith dialogue in America is changing. Among the topics to be discussed are the following: (a) how our respective local and national organizations are beginning to work, often together, to provide both the impetus and the resources for interfaith conversation; (b) what women bring to the dialogue, and why some have become disillusioned with contemporary conversations, turning from talk to support and action; (c) ways to engage the interest of youth in developing relationships between Muslims and Christians and, increasingly, with Jews and members of other religions; and (d) the pros and cons of expanding the conversation from just Christians and Muslims to include Jews in an "Abrahamic" dialogue. Fundamentally, what is it that makes dialogue between Christians and Muslims in the United States of growing importance? Various answers have been given: National and international events make it essential.... Dialogue reduces prejudices.... We learn more about our own faith when we learn more about another.... It just feels good. These and many other responses are offered by those who have experienced religious dialogue.

This book is written for a variety of audiences. Muslims and Christians who have long been involved in dialogue may find echoes of their own experiences in this material. Church, mosque, or community leaders who would like to plan Muslim-Christian dialogue conversations in their own areas might benefit from guidance and perspective in learning how to do that. Academic audiences will be interested in the history of Christian-Muslim relations and how current efforts at engagement in the American context are a natural and legitimate part of those relations. The American public is searching for answers to questions of Islamic extremism and trying to reconcile what they hear on the nightly news with the efforts of members of the American Muslim community to reach out with care and concern to their Christian neighbors. Theologians in both the Christian and Muslim camps, who are rethinking the importance of developing a pluralist perspective, as Muslims and Christians again occupy common space, must find ways in which to accommodate each other at the deepest theological levels.

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I

Encountering Each Other

Following are three vignettes about Christian-Muslim dialogue. Each portrays a situation in which people, who have no experience in such engagement, take the first steps to be in conversation with those of the other faith tradition. The first setting portrays a dialogue envisioned by the members of a local ecumenical council, who are well versed in talking together as Christians but have not yet had the experience of engaging with members of the Muslim community. The second scene involves African Americans, Muslims, and Christians, who are struggling to find grounds for commonality that both include and move beyond issues of racial identity. The third describes interaction between Roman Catholic and Muslim women, raising the question of whether the mode of dialogue is different when men are not involved in the conversation. Each of these scenes could be located in any city or town in America. The first two presentations represent somewhat fictional or hypothetical groups. The descriptions only approximate actual attempts at dialogue, but they reflect many of the issues relevant to Christian-Muslim interaction found in the United States today. The third group is real and the particulars represent the experiences of its members.

A Local Ecumenical Council

"Why did I ever let you talk me into going to this thing?" Joe asked his wife. "I don't know anything about religion and I certainly