



That We May Know Each Other

United Church–Muslim Relations Today

Toward a United Church of Canada understanding of
the relationship between Christianity and Islam
in the Canadian context

Authorized for study in The United Church of Canada by the 38th General Council

Please respond by May 1, 2005

The Committee on Inter-Church and Inter-Faith Relations
The United Church of Canada



That We May Know Each Other: United Church–Muslim Relations Today
Toward a United Church of Canada Understanding of the Relationship between Christianity and
Islam in the Canadian Context

by the Committee on Inter-Church and Inter-Faith Relations



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O mankind! We created
You from a single (pair)
Of a male and a female,
And made you into
Nations and tribes, that
Ye may know each other
(Not that ye may despise
(Each other). Verily
The most honoured of you
In the sight of Allah
Is (he who is) the most
Righteous of you.

Surah 49:13

But I say to you that if you are angry with a brother or sister, you will be liable to judgment.... So when you are offering your gift at the altar, if you remember that your brother or sister has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother or sister, and then come and offer your gift.

Matthew 5:22-24

Preamble



What follows is a document written for The United Church of Canada in the Canadian context.

The 36th General Council meeting in August 1997 authorized for study across the church a document on United Church–Jewish relationships. As part of its report to the Council, the Sessional Committee commended the Committee on Inter-Church and Inter-Faith Relations for the process of *Bearing Faithful Witness* and asked that similar studies be undertaken with other faith traditions, in particular Islam and Aboriginal spirituality.

In reflecting on the process, the ICIF committee identified the importance of these three relationships as foundational to The United Church of Canada’s theological understanding of the world’s religious diversity. It also recognized these studies as part of the commitment expressed in *Mending the World*, which names the search for justice for God’s creatures and healing for God’s creation as the church’s first priority, and joining “with other persons of good will in the search for justice, wholeness and love” (page 5).

The United Church’s relationship with Judaism is inextricably linked to the church’s complicity in anti-Semitism and the need for a commitment to overcoming it. Bearing faithful witness to Judaism means, among many things, recognizing the Jewishness of Jesus and that the love of God is given in both Torah and gospel. Our relationship with Judaism, the Committee felt, is important not only for our own self-understanding but also lays a foundation for our approach to other faiths.

Islam, represented in this document, confronts us with the meaning of a later revelation and the question of differing interpretations of core faith stories. We are “cousins” joined together through the lineages of Isaac and Ishmael. As such, we need to know each other better. But more than this, we are challenged to explore new ways of understanding each other for the sake of the well-being of our world. Similar to the *Bearing Faithful Witness* process, a proposed statement on the relationship of the United Church to Islam was approved by the 38th General Council for study across the church.

Our relationship with First Nations’ spirituality, through the work of an ICIF Committee called Circle and Cross, is underway. It will present a major report to the 39th General Council.

That We May Know Each Other has been written for the Canadian context. The writers are aware that many of our global partners find themselves in situations of much greater complexity with Muslims than what is represented in these pages. We hope, nevertheless, that this document will contribute in some small way toward the larger exploration of Muslim–Christian relations underway throughout the world.

From Islam's very beginnings, Muslim-Christian relationships have presented profound theological and social challenges to Christians. Throughout the many years of interaction there has remained a central question of whether it is possible for people of one faith to ever adequately understand and interpret another faith. We believe that Christians should approach the task of seeking to understand Islam with humility and caution. The difficulty is that all of us see the world through particular lenses that shape and determine both what we see and how we understand. It is almost impossible to step out of one's own identity to see others as they see themselves. Yet it is precisely this question of respecting what followers of a tradition say their faith is that has characterized The United Church of Canada's approach to interfaith dialogue for the last two decades. *That We May Know Each Other*, therefore, starts from the assumption that we must understand accurately what Muslims themselves believe Islam to be. Recognizing this, we have consulted with Canadian Muslim organizations with which we have had a history of relationship. We have asked for their help in ensuring that where this document deals with interpretations of Islam we, as much as possible, have been accurate. We have asked the question, do you see yourself and your faith accurately and faithfully reflected in these pages?

This document goes much further than simply interpreting what Muslims believe to beginning an exploration of what this means for our own Christian self-understanding. Like all experiences of coming to know another, we are ourselves changed in the process. Our hope is that the church will be changed in the experience of truly coming to understand our Muslim neighbours.

Finally, we offer to the reader this expectation: Living faith is always embodied, taking form in the lives of human beings. We do not believe it is possible to know each other simply by reading a document. This resource is therefore meant as an introduction and invitation to a journey of understanding that must ultimately come from face-to-face contact, from conversation, from hospitality, and from friendship. In summary, this document is about seeing Muslims as neighbours, as friends, and most of all as people whom God has called to faithfulness.

Note: There is a response form at the end of this study guide. The responses will relate to the proposed statement found on pages 1–2. Both group and individual responses are welcome. Responses will be especially helpful to guiding the That We May Know Each Other Steering Committee in confirming, altering, or refining the particulars of the proposed statement. Leaders might reflect ahead of time on the best way for their group to complete the response form. This guide calls for it to be completed during Session 4.

Please return the response form on completion of your study.

Final date is May 1, 2005, to

The Committee on Inter-Church and Inter-Faith Relations
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Muslim References

All references from the Qur'an are taken from *The Meaning of The Holy Qur'an* by A. Yusuf Ali (Beltsville, MD: Amana, 1997). Muslims believe that the only true version of the Qur'an is in Arabic and that all translations are secondary paraphrases. Yusuf Ali's translation is the most widely accepted English paraphrase. Within the Qur'an, a chapter is called a "surah" and each surah is divided into verses.

Throughout the document the traditional phrase of "the Prophet" is used interchangeably for Muhammad. This is done to respect the manner in which most Muslims refer to Muhammad and to avoid repetitious use of his name.

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The contents of *That We May Know Each Other* are the responsibility of the Committee on Inter-Church and Inter-Faith Relations of the Justice, Global and Ecumenical Relations Unit of The United Church of Canada.

Participation of members of the writing team and those who have been consulted does not necessarily imply agreement with the final content or theological direction of the document.

Every attempt has been made to ensure that the contents of this document relating to an interpretation of Islam and Islamic practices are accurate and faithful to Muslim self-understanding. The ICIF Committee welcomes any assistance in ensuring that errors in this regard are noted and corrected.

Please feel free to photocopy this document for personal or congregational study.

Contents

Proposed Statement on the Relationship of The United Church of Canada and Islam	1
Chapter 1: Why This Document Is Needed	3
The Goal of Understanding	4
Differences in Understanding	7
Chapter 2: A Brief History of Islam	9
The Birth of Islam	9
The Expansion of Islam	10
The Crusades and Colonialism	11
The Branches of Islam	13
Chapter 3: The Islamic Way of Life	17
Chapter 4: The Bible, the Qur'an, and Revelation	24
A Christian Understanding of Revelation and Holy Scripture	24
The Qur'an's Claims for Itself	24
The Question of Critical Study of the Qur'an	26
A Christian Understanding of the Qur'an as Revelation	29
The Report of the Commission on World Mission	30
Can Christians Affirm Muhammad as a Prophet?	32
Chapter 5: Understanding Our Differences	35
The Doctrine of the Trinity	35
The Crucifixion	37
Chapter 6: Common Challenges and Paths toward Change—Building a Just Society	42
Muslim Ethics	42
Muslim Views on War and Non-Violence	47
The Role of Women in Muslim Societies	48
Issues around Sexuality	51
Chapter 7: Paths of Reconciliation	53
One Experience of Reconciliation	55
Appendix A: The Trinity and Christian-Muslim Relations	62
The History of the Doctrine of the Trinity	63
Contemporary Trinitarian Thought	65
Appendix B: On Hosting Muslim Visitors or Visiting a Mosque	68
Appendix C: Comparative Fundamentalism	71
Christian Fundamentalism	71

Hindu, Buddhist, and Jewish Fundamentalism	71
Islamic Fundamentalism	72
Appendix D: The Commission on World Mission	74
Appendix E: The Contribution of Wilfred Cantwell Smith	78
Appendix F: Advice for Christians Reading the Qur'an	81
Appendix G: Stories in My Neighbour's Faith	83
The Tragedy of Karbala	83
Shannon's Song	86

Study Guide **91**

Notes for the Leader	93
Session 1: Why This Document Is Needed	94
Session 2: The Bible, the Qur'an, and Revelation and Understanding Our Differences	98
Session 3: The Islamic Way of Life and Common Challenges and Paths toward Change —Building a Just Society	101
Session 4: Paths of Reconciliation	104
Response Form	106
Glossary	108
Bibliography	113

Proposed Statement on the Relationship of The United Church of Canada and Islam



Note: This Statement is authorized for study by the 38th General Council. The Committee on Inter-Church and Inter-Faith Relations will develop a process of study and response and will report to the 39th General Council, 2006.

Preamble

The United Church of Canada is called continually in all courts of the church to bear witness to Jesus Christ in the midst of our neighbours and in the world. In accordance with that call, the 36th General Council (1997) requested that an exploration of the relationship between The United Church of Canada and Islam be undertaken.

This proposed statement is accompanied by a document entitled *That We May Know Each Other*, which is intended for study and discussion, to aid individuals and congregations in this process of exploration. The Committee on Inter-Church and Inter-Faith Relations invites comments on the following component parts of a proposed statement to be brought before the 39th General Council (2006).

The United Church of Canada:

Acknowledges a long history within Christianity of hostility and misunderstanding toward Muslims and Islam and seeks to commit itself to a journey of reconciliation with Muslim neighbours.

Acknowledges the prophetic witness of Muhammad, and that the mercy, compassion, and justice of God are expressed in the Qur'an, regarded by Muslims as the authoritative word of God.

Affirms that God, whose love we have found in Jesus Christ to be boundless, creative, and resourceful, and who creatively and redemptively works in us, also works in others.

Affirms that God is creatively and redemptively at work in the religious life of Muslims and that we share with Muslims a belief in one God and a common spiritual origin in the faith of Abraham.

Affirms that Jesus is accorded immense honour as a prophet in the Qur'an and by Muslims.

Affirms the self-witness of Islam as a religion of peace, mercy, justice, and compassion.

Affirms with Muslims a vision of a common humanity that leads us into collaboration for peace and justice in the world.

Affirms a vision of Muslim and Christian relationships no longer bound by past histories of ignorance, indifference, and ill will.

Invites the church to participate in dialogue that upholds the integrity of each tradition, while allowing the faithful witness of each tradition, and is characterized by careful listening to each other.

Invites the church to seek out opportunities to strive together with Muslims to seek justice and resist evil.

Chapter 1

Why This Document Is Needed



Muslims and Christians together comprise over one-third of the world's population. For much of the history of our two peoples, vast distances of culture, language, and geography have separated us, but increasingly we now interact daily as neighbours, friends, and co-workers. Inter-marriage is also bringing a whole new dynamic of relationship between our communities of faith. Fourteen hundred years ago the Qur'an stated that Muslims and Christians will surely find themselves as the "nearest in affection," and for at least some of the history of interaction between our two communities these words have proven true. Today, however, the relationship is clouded by tensions in many parts of the world. Perhaps as never before, it is imperative that we truly seek to understand and know each other.

The events of September 11, 2001, and the ensuing "war on terrorism" have presented a significant challenge to Muslim-Christian relationships, with some suggesting the potential, however inaccurate, of a feared "clash of civilizations." In North America, there is unmistakable evidence of what many now call "Islamophobia." The fact that some terrorists are Muslims is used to characterize all Muslims, and the Islamic faith in general, as supporting terrorism. Increasing examples of unfair and racist portrayals of Muslims and Islam, as well as situations of discrimination, led to the formation within the last few years of the Council on American-Islamic Relations, which now regularly reports on incidents of discrimination in Canada and across North America.

In some places in the world the tensions between Muslims and Christians have become intertwined with issues of cultural survival and what has been called "identity politics." In Indonesia and Algeria, violent clashes between Muslim and Christian communities have resulted in the deaths of people of both faiths. In some Muslim majority countries, Christians have charged Muslims with systemic discrimination and worse. Muslims complain of the continued colonialism and exploitation of the West, linking Christianity with Western hegemony. With the end of the Cold War, the fall of communism, the attacks of September 11th, and now the war on terrorism, Muslim majority nations are under threat of becoming vilified as the global enemy of the West, an enemy that justifies a continued commitment to vast expenditures of money on armaments and military power.

But the events of these past years have also opened before us an unprecedented opportunity to forge new ground. Across North America, mosques and churches are beginning new forms of contact. Church communities are recognizing that understanding the faith of their Muslim neighbours is a basic necessity to faithful engagement in society. But more than this, we believe there is a new recognition that old patterns of understanding or misunderstanding between Muslims and Christians

undermine the potential for peaceful collaboration and therefore the well-being of the world we share. In particular, old patterns of theological exclusiveness, which portray a discontinuity between Christianity and Islam, have blocked possibilities of mutual openness and respect and have accentuated feelings of fear and mistrust.

The authors of this paper believe that the prediction of the Qur'an that Christians and Muslims can be the "nearest among them in love" (Surah 5:82) is possible and preferable to an alternative path of increasing tension, mistrust, and violence. We believe, furthermore, that the task of reconciliation between Muslims and Christians is at the heart of what the church needs to be about as we seek to be faithful participants in God's mission today.

A Common Heritage

God promised Abraham that he would be the father of a great nation (Gen. 12:1–3) and that his descendants would be as many as the stars in the sky (Gen. 15:1–6). Sarah, however, was barren. So she brought Hagar, her slave girl, to Abraham so that he might at least have a child through her. When she became pregnant, Sarah was jealous and Hagar fled to the wilderness. There an angel comforted Hagar and told her that her son was to be called Ishmael and that her offspring would "greatly multiply" so that "they cannot be counted for multitude" (Gen. 16:10).

After Ishmael was born, Abraham received a further promise that Sarah would conceive and give birth to a son to be named Isaac. Abraham, both incredulous and overjoyed about the promise of Isaac, nevertheless interceded before God for Ishmael. And God answered, "As for Ishmael, I have heard you; I will bless him and make him fruitful and exceedingly numerous; he shall be the father of twelve princes, and I will make him a great nation" (Gen. 17:20). In Genesis 25:13–15, we have the record of Ishmael's lineage, which leads to Arabia. Muslims trace this lineage on to Mecca and Muhammad.

While Genesis indicates that God made an eternal covenant with Isaac (Gen. 17:19–21), it is also true that Ishmael was included in God's covenant with Abraham before Isaac's birth and was circumcised with Abraham (Gen. 17:23). Genesis also records that at Abraham's death both Isaac and Ishmael were present for his burial in the cave of Machpelah (Gen. 25:9).

In the Genesis record we therefore have two lineages: one through Isaac leading to Jerusalem and Jesus, the other through Ishmael leading to Mecca and Muhammad.

The Goal of Understanding

God's mission, the United Church has affirmed, is about seeking healing for creation, the mending of God's broken world. To be involved in this task, the church is called to be in relationship with people of other faiths who share this perspective. The United Church believes that the need to address the suffering and injustice of the world is primary to living out the Christian faith. Therefore, if our beliefs have contributed to the suffering of God's creation, they must be challenged and revised.

The question of what the church believes is at the heart of this document. This document suggests that the church must encourage its membership to grow in understanding Muslims as they would wish to be understood. But we must also be about searching for new ways of theologically understanding Islam and its relationship with Christianity, new ways of affirming, in the words of a United Church

statement from 1966, that “God is creatively and redemptively at work” within Islam. It is through creating such theological acceptance that we believe it will be possible to sustain long-term mutual relationships of respect, trust, and common action for the sake of the world we all inhabit.

Do We Worship the Same God?

The question of whether we worship the same God is more of a theological issue for Christians than for Muslims. Muslims readily accept a continuity of history and revelation among Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. Muslims are following in the tradition of Abraham, Moses, and Jesus in worshipping Allah, the Arabic name for God. The difficulty for Muslims comes in associating anything else with God (*shirk*). Many Muslims believe that Christians are guilty of *shirk* in associating Jesus with God, but this does not negate the fact that Christians are still worshipping the one God.

If God truly has been revealed as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, then for Christians to speak of God is always to speak of the triune God.

While Jews do not accept a Christian understanding of a triune God, nevertheless few Christians would argue that Jews worship a different God. “For there is no distinction between Jew and Greek; the same Lord is Lord of all and is generous to all who call on him” (Rom. 10:12). Many Christian churches, the United Church included, have questioned the idea of supersessionism, that the church has replaced Israel in God’s purposes and plan. In doing so we have acknowledged a continuity in God’s purposes between Judaism and Christianity regardless of our different understandings of the content of revelation. We can affirm that Torah for Jews is God’s self-revelation. In other words, we worship the same God regardless of the difference in understanding of how God chooses to reveal God’s self.

It is possible to speak in a similar manner of the God witnessed to by the Qur’an. Different conceptions and ways of speaking of God do not negate the common orientations to the one God known by many names. Christians and Muslims worship the same God, the God of Abraham, Sarah and Isaac, Hagar and Ishmael.

Early in the history of interaction between Muslims and Christians, there were indications this was not a difficult affirmation. In 1066, a Muslim ruler requested that one of the local priests be ordained a bishop in order to adequately look after the needs of the Christians in his domain. The Pope at that time, Gregory VII, wrote the following letter to the Sultan al-Nisar:

The good God, Creator of all things, without Whom we can do nothing nor even imagine it, has inspired this [gesture] in your heart. He who illumines every person who comes into this world has enlightened your mind. For Almighty God, who desires that all people be saved and no one lost, approves in us above all the fact that, after having loved God, we should love our fellow, and that what we do not wish to be done to us we should not do to others. You and we both owe this charity to ourselves, especially because we believe in and confess the One God, albeit in different ways, and we praise and venerate Him every day as Creator and Governor of this world. We pray with heart and mouth that, after a long sojourn in this life, the same God may guide you to the bosom of happiness of the Holy patriarch Abraham.¹

To acknowledge that God is creatively and redemptively at work within Islam assumes it is the same God that both Muslims and Christians worship, who has come to Christians through the gospel and who, Muslims believe, has come to them through the Qur’an. While it is important to nuance such theological affirmations (see the later sections on revelation and on the Trinity in chapters 4 and 5), nevertheless to fail to affirm that Muslims and Christians (and indeed Jews) worship the same God has significantly negative implications for relationships with Muslims and other people of faith.

Such an approach is sometimes called “exclusivist,” meaning that there is only one true faith and all others are false. The authors of this document have chosen not to articulate this approach because we believe that such an approach is not consistent with the understanding of God in Christ prevalent in The United Church of Canada.

Describing the Relationship of Christianity to Other Faiths

The United Church document *Reconciling and Making New*² outlines four approaches to describing the relationship of Christianity to other faiths:

Exclusivist Approach

- The only path to God and salvation is an explicit confession of faith in Jesus Christ as Saviour and Lord.
- Jesus Christ is the sole mediator between God and humanity.
- Those who do not make an explicit confession of faith in Jesus Christ may be excluded from the love and ultimate purposes of God.
- Texts such as John 14:6 and Acts 4:12 are cited.

Inclusivist Approach

- The reconciliation of the world takes place uniquely through Jesus Christ.
- The saving work of Christ is essential for peace with God.
- There is room for salvation of those who make no explicit profession of faith in Christ.
- Grace is experienced and Christ is present wherever people experience the goodness of God’s creative love and redemptive mercy.
- Jesus Christ is the Wisdom/Word through which all things were made and through whom all things will be restored and perfected.
- John 1:1–5 and Colossians 1:15–20 are cited.

Pluralist Approach

- There are many paths to God.
- There is no absolute “court of appeal” by which to evaluate the different paths.
- Jesus is the way for Christians but not necessarily the path for all.
- No single religious tradition can speak with finality about God/spiritual truth/ultimate truth.
- Isaiah 55:8 and 1 Corinthians 13:12 are cited.

Transformationist Approach

- From its beginning Christianity has been a constantly evolving expression of faith.
- Respectful dialogue and mutual learning may lead to transformation for all participants.
- Christian faith may be transformed by such encounters in ways that we cannot imagine.
- Mark 7:24–30 and Acts 10:1–16 are cited.

While the primary approach of this document will be seen to be moving between what are sometimes theologically called inclusivist and pluralist positions,³ we also want to acknowledge that these categories present significant limitations today, with many overlapping understandings and approaches. We recognize that within the United Church of Canada there are a wide variety of understandings of and feelings about these approaches. We wish therefore to introduce wider theological images of mutual respectful relationships between Muslims and Christians. Whatever the language we use, we believe it is critical that the United Church find the theological language that

allows it to affirm the plurality of the world's religious life as a sign of a sovereign God who cannot be contained within one culture or tradition.

It should be understood, then, that categories of religious perspective are, in the end, made secondary to the call for common action for the sake of a suffering world. Our institutional church life, including our theological endeavours, are judged by their capacity to bring healing, justice, and peace into our troubled world. *Mending the World: An Ecumenical Vision for Healing and Reconciliation*, a United Church of Canada statement, says it this way:

The world is in serious trouble; the churches should join with peoples of good will to work together for the cause of peace, justice and the healing of God's creation. One person expressed it this way: "The chief ecumenical scandal of our time is not the disunity of the church. Rather it is the institutional preoccupation of the church in the face of the suffering of the world."⁴

With this in mind, we want to invite the church to claim both the integrity of its own identity and the importance of relationship with the other. We believe that it is possible for the church to continue to affirm its own distinctive self-identity while affirming that other faiths and traditions will have their own self-understanding. Our emphasis is on allowing others to define for themselves how they see themselves and affirming that God has many ways of being known in the world.

This means that a starting point is the humble acknowledgement that it is possible there is more than one religious path or tradition in and through which God has chosen to reveal God's self. As we will suggest later in this document, scripture teaches that the Word and Wisdom of God is not limited to Christians, and the Spirit of God is free and faithful. Such a starting point opens us to the discovery of truth and wisdom in the other. With this expectation, the purpose is not to collapse the differences between traditions but rather to affirm and cherish the differences because ultimately they are each gifts of God, which can be life-giving and transformative. Receiving the wisdom and insight of others, we believe, can serve to correct and sharpen our own understanding of God's purposes in the world. While religious diversity, in other words, is both challenge and blessing, it is not something to be feared but welcomed.

Differences in Understanding

In this context, the differences between Christianity and Islam on the nature of Jesus present significant difficulties. The Qur'an's explicit denial that Jesus died on the cross and that Jesus can in any way be identified with God are two irreconcilable points of difference with the historic Christian faith. We will note later as well the Islamic rejection of the historic Christian understanding of the Trinity. These and other differences of understanding need to be accepted for what they are. But they should also invite us into deeper exploration. The awareness of the immense honour accorded to Jesus as a prophet within Islam and the belief that God vindicates Jesus by not allowing him to die on the cross allow us to sense the importance Muslims accord God's justice and the role of prophet. They also allow us to see in sharper contrast the significance that the Christian understanding of the nature of God places on incarnation, on God's intimate relationship with humanity, and on power expressed through weakness, and of the Islamic emphasis on God's omnipotence.

Finally, assumptions of superiority exist in both traditions, and both need to be challenged to find new theological understandings through which to build relationships of equality and respect. This document will address some of the difficult challenges that exist in the relationship and, in doing so, in some small way will invite our Muslim brothers and sisters to explore new ways of relating to Christianity. Our conviction is that our task as Christians and as members of The United Church of Canada is to explore and perhaps even contribute to a global path of reconciliation. It is our hope that this document will assist the members of The United Church of Canada to approach our Muslim sisters and brothers with a realistic understanding of both the challenges and the theological and practical resources available to us for building a society in which Muslims and Christians can truly know and understand each other.

The Names of God

Muslims commonly speak of the 99 names of God (although Muslims understand that these names are by no means exhaustive). These names are the attributes of God; they have been gathered together on the basis of references in the Qur'an to the activities of God. The most significant attribute is mercy, since almost every surah of the Qur'an begins with the phrase "In the name of Allah, Most Gracious, Most Merciful."

Allah, The Compassionate, Most Merciful, The Sovereign, The Holy One, One Who Is Immune from All Distress, Giver of Peace, The Giver of Protection, The Mighty, The Over-Powering Lord, The Self-Glorious, The Creator, One Who Gives Life, Fashioner of Shapes, Exceedingly Forgiving, One Who Has Control Over All Things, The Giver of All Things, The Sustainer and Provider, Remover of Difficulties and Giver of Decisions, The All-Knowing, The Strengthener of Sustenance, The Extender of Provisions, The One Who humbles and Lowers, The Exalter, The Giver of Honour, The Giver of Dishonour, The All-Hearing, The Seer, Maker of Immutable Judgments, The Just, Most Affectionate and Knower of Innermost Secrets, All-Knowing, The Clement, The Great, Forgiving, Highly Grateful, Most High, Most Great, The Protector, The Giver of Sustenance and Strength, The Reckoner, Exalted, Benevolent, The Caretaker, The Answerer of Prayers, The Lenient, The Wise, Most Loving, Most Venerable, The Resurrector of the Dead, Omnipresent, The Truth, The Provident, Almighty, The Invincible, The Patron, The Praiseworthy, The Keeper of Accounts, The Originator, One Who Has the Power to Create Again, The Giver of Life, The Giver of Death, The Everlasting, The Sustainer of Life, The All-Perfect, The Venerated, The One Unequaled, Free from Want, The All-Powerful, One Who Causes Advancement, One Who Causes Retardation, The First, The Last, The Obvious, The Latent, The One Responsible for All Things, Far Above the Attributes of Creation, The Good, The Oft-Returning, One Who Takes Retribution, One Who Pardons, The Kind, Possessor of Sovereignty, Majestic and Benevolent, The Just, The Assembler, Free from Need, Supplier of Needs to Others, The Hinderer, One Who Can Cause Loss, One Who Confers Benefits, The Light, One Who Gives Guidance, The Deviser, The Eternal, The Supporter of All, One Who Guides along the Path of Virtue, Most Forbearing.

Notes

1. *Recognize the Spiritual Bonds Which Unite Us: Sixteen Years of Christian-Muslim Dialogue* (Vatican: Pontifical Council for Inter-religious Dialogue, 1994), p. 4.
2. Committee on Theology and Faith, *Reconciling and Making New: Who Is Jesus for the World Today?* (Toronto: United Church Publishing House, 1994).
3. For an introduction to inclusivist and pluralist approaches to the relationship of Christianity to other faiths, see *Reconciling and Making New*, *ibid.*
4. The United Church of Canada, *Mending the World: An Ecumenical Vision for Healing and Reconciliation* (Toronto: The United Church of Canada, 1997), p. 3.

Chapter 2

A Brief History of Islam



The Birth of Islam

In the seventh century, Mecca was a religious and commercial centre providing a gathering place for trade caravans from throughout the region. It was also a place for the worship of numerous gods, focused within a shrine, the Ka'ba, built around an ancient meteorite. Jews and Christians in small numbers also lived within the city, many of them Arabs who had left behind their tribal beliefs. Within the city and the surrounding area were also a small number of Arabs, neither Christians nor Jews, who believed in the one God. Muslim tradition names these *hanif* as faithful representatives of the lineage of Abraham.

Muhammad lived and worked within this Meccan society for the first 40 years of his life. Although his family worshipped at the Ka'ba, it is said that Muhammad showed a deep spiritual sensitivity that drew him into isolation and meditation. In C.E. 610, at the age of approximately 40, Muhammad began to receive revelations in the form of a voice and visions. For a long time only a small group of family and friends listened to his revelations.

Showing Respect

“The peace and blessings of God be upon him” is the traditional saying of respect that Muslims say upon hearing the name of Muhammad. This statement is sometimes used as well by Muslims after speaking the name of Jesus.

The early revelations centred on the coming Judgment Day of the one God, when all people would be accountable for their deeds. To prepare for the Judgment Day, the revelations said, life must be centred on trust in God and gratitude for God's goodness. And the way to show this gratitude was through

freeing the bondman;

Or the giving of food
In a day of privation

To the orphan
With claims of relationship,

Or to the indigent
(Down) in the dust.

Then will he be
Of those who believe,
And enjoin patience (constancy,
And self-restraint), and enjoin
Deeds of kindness and compassion.

Surah 90:13–17

At the heart of the revelation was the call to a radical monotheism standing in opposition to the idolatry of Meccan society. As more and more people accepted the message, opposition within Mecca increased, leading to a withdrawal from Mecca of the followers of what would only later become known as Islam (“serving God”). In C.E. 622, a small number of Muslims (people submitted to the will, power, and authority of God) made the journey to Medina in what has become known as the *hijra*, or emigration. It is this date that marks the first year of the Islamic calendar.

In Medina, Muhammad established the basis of Islamic society. In response to the continuing revelations, he taught that Muslims constitute an *umma*, a community, based not on tribal blood connections but on faith. This new community, dramatically different from the competing and warring tribes that so marked Arabia to this point, would be founded on justice for the weak and oppressed, increased status and equality for women, and social welfare as the concern of all.

Muhammad’s prestige and the number of his followers grew dramatically. In C.E. 630, Muhammad and his followers returned to Mecca with little resistance. The Ka’ba was emptied of its many idols and dedicated to the worship of the one God. Within a year the whole of the Arabian Peninsula was joined together under Islam. By C.E. 632, the year of Muhammad’s death and some 23 years after the first revelations began, the stage was set for a wider expansion of Islam and one of the most significant revolutions in history.

The Expansion of Islam

Following Muhammad’s death, caliphs Abu Bakr (632–634) and Umar (634–644) completed the expansion of Islam into Arabia, Palestine, Egypt, Libya, and Mesopotamia and extended influence into Persia and Asia Minor. By 711, Islam had spread across North Africa and its followers had won a decisive battle in southern Spain. By 712, it had spread east as far as the Indus River territory that is now Pakistan. In Asia Minor, the Islamic world bordered on Byzantium. Constantinople withstood two sieges in 674–678 and 717–718. After consolidating power throughout most of the Iberian Peninsula, Islam crossed the Pyrenees into France in 718. By Western accounts, this expansion was stopped by the victory of the Franks under Charles Martel at Tours and Poitiers in 732. Arab historians prefer to cite the loss of the French city of Narbonne in 759 as the decisive event. Attempts to recapture this city in the eighth and ninth centuries were unsuccessful, and the Arabs withdrew south across the Pyrenees.

The Abbasids conquered the Umayyad Caliphate in 750–754 and, with the exception of Spain, established control over the Islamic world.

Much of the successful expansion of Islam was due to the power of the Arabian armies. However, in the midst of the military assimilation, there were also sweeping conversions to Islam. Many of the converts from Christianity were assisted in part by the theological confusion over the complex issues and debates surrounding the nature of Jesus. The theology of Islam seemed much simpler and easier to engage than the paradoxes associated with the Trinity and the dual nature of Jesus. For Muslims the creed was simple: “The only God is God and Muhammad is his prophet.” It has also been suggested that the Trinitarian formulations of the ecumenical councils in the end represented a compromise between Latin- and Greek-speaking Christians. This meant that no formulations were articulated in the languages and thought patterns of the Middle East, leaving an immense vacuum that helped prepare the way for the spread of Islam.¹

The spread of Islam was fast and permanent. In Spain, the dominance of Islam lasted 800 years. In Arabia and North Africa, the dominance remains. The remarkable and thorough spread of Islam was no doubt due to social, political, and military reasons. But underneath it also lay the power of the central universal message of submission to God.

Universal Messages

Christianity and Islam both have claimed from their beginnings to have universal messages intended for all of humanity. Both have also claimed these messages to be final and complete revelations of truth. In both cases, however, patterns of triumphalism and exclusiveness have replaced interpretations that would have left open spaces of mutual recognition.

Christian theologians of the second and third centuries (Justin and Origen especially) saw the divine Logos as active throughout all of creation. So Paul was able to declare to the Athenians that God has never left Himself without a witness (Acts 14:17), and the early church heard the voice of God in the ancient Greek philosophies. Similarly, the Qur’an affirms that in every community a messenger has come and that divine wisdom is found in the diversity of human culture, language, and religion. The purpose of this diversity, the Qur’an states, is that men and women might co-operate in a life of righteousness and outdo each other in righteous deeds. These early expressions of openness, however, were overtaken by patterns of triumphalism and exclusion forged in the tragic history of the Crusades.

The Crusades and Colonialism

By the 10th century, the internal cohesion of the Islamic world was breaking down and many factions within Islam established regional dominance. These factions were often in conflict with one another. In the 11th century, the Seljuk Turks (Muslim but non-Arab), while battling with Arab Islamic groups, grew to become a powerful force on the Byzantine border. They were victorious in a major battle over the Byzantines at Manzikert in 1071 and reached the Aegean Sea by 1080. In 1094, the Byzantine emperor felt sufficiently threatened by the Seljuks to request military assistance from Western Europe.

Europe at this time was in the midst of its own internal strife and warfare, and both civil and religious authorities found some relief in focusing their warring subjects on an external enemy. In 1095, therefore, Pope Urban II responded by proclaiming the First Crusade. Urban II's motivation was undoubtedly also tied to a desire to strengthen the position of the Western Church following the split between the Eastern and Western churches over papal power in 1054. Underlying this, however, was the vision of liberating the Christians of Asia Minor from the Turks and then marching on to Jerusalem to free the Holy Lands from the hands of the "pagans." The 200 years of conflict that followed have clearly been interpreted differently within their respective communities. Western accounts in Romantic literature have seen the Crusades in terms of pious kings and chivalrous knights in shining armour, protecting beleaguered pilgrims and endangered sacred sites, and seeking to regain Jerusalem from the hands of the "infidel." In the Muslim world, valiantly unified believers under divine guidance repelled unprovoked aggression on the part of a unified Christian world, vindicating not only the truth of their faith against the blasphemous heathens but also the superiority of Islamic culture over that of the backward Europeans.

Reality, however, from the European side had more to do with military expansionism, political ambition, lust for plunder, and the need for an external enemy to unify warring factions. And from the Muslim side interpretations have been developed in response to European colonialism and Western-backed developments in the Middle East. Muslim accounts from the Middle Ages in fact make little mention of the Crusades and focus more on internal conflicts. Nevertheless, in recent times, the Crusades have become a powerful symbol of Western Christian colonialism.

The Crusades continued off and on into the 13th century. Probably the most significant enduring change in territorial control happened in Spain. Venice expanded its influence in the Aegean, and Latin Christians sacked (Orthodox Christian) Constantinople in 1204. Bernard Lewis says that the "only measurable consequences, within the Islamic world, were an improvement and extension of commercial relations with Europe, and a worsening of relations with local Christians."² Some commentators extend the crusading spirit to include the defeat of Granada in 1492 and the expulsion of Muslims (and Jews) from Spain.

In the 13th century, the Mongols swept across Asia and into Europe. After victories in Russia (1238), Poland, and Hungary (1241), the Mongols pulled back following the death of the Great Khan Ogedei. Known as Tartars after one of the Mongol tribes, they maintained an aggressive presence in the Crimea until 1783. Mongols swept through former Persia as well, and captured and massacred the caliph and inhabitants of Baghdad, the Islamic capital, in 1258. The Mongol advance was stopped by defeat in the battle of Ain Jalut (1260), but the Mongols maintained control of much of the region. Before a century passed, Mongols (including Tartars) converted to Islam. In Asia Minor, on the western edge of Mongol territory, Osman, the founder of the Ottoman dynasty, acceded to power in 1281 in the small territory of Sogut. In their western expansion, the Ottomans crossed the Dardanelles in 1354, defeated the Serbians and Bosnians at Kosovo in 1389, and established control over the Balkans. In 1453, the Byzantine Empire ended with the fall of Constantinople. The city became the capital of the Ottoman Empire, and its name changed to Istanbul.

Through much of the next centuries—ones that for Western Europe involved the Renaissance, internal wars, the Protestant Reformation, the Enlightenment, the French Revolution, the Industrial

Revolution, and development—Eastern European countries were engaged in battles with the Ottomans. Twice (1529 and 1683) the Ottoman forces laid siege to Vienna before being pushed back. After the Peace of Carlowitz (1699) and through the 18th century, Russia, Austria, and Poland advanced against the Ottomans. The demise and dismantling of the Ottoman Empire occurred during and following World War I, resulting in the emergence of Turkey as a modern state.

As European political and economic colonial interests expanded throughout the world, increasing contact and competition with Islamic political and economic interests occurred, particularly in India, Africa, and East Asia. Much of the contact was hostile. The interest of European Christians in learning about Islam coincided with this period of colonial expansion and began for the dual purposes of preventing Christian conversion to Islam and of winning converts to Christianity from Islam. Only in the present day has there been an interest in learning about Islam for the purpose of building respectful understanding and peaceful co-operation.

What remains the dominant legacy of the Crusades, therefore, is that the history of colonialism combined with missionary activity and the underlying history of the Crusades is what Muslims see in almost every aspect of Western interaction in Muslim societies. For many Muslims, religious interaction with Western Christians is seen not simply as a question of belief but as a matter of political and economic domination in which Western colonialism and the Crusades are still very much alive.

This is compounded for many Muslims by the knowledge of the immense contributions that Islam has made to almost every aspect of modern life. The translation of ancient Greek manuscripts into Arabic preserved and passed on these writings to European civilization. Muslim scholars in the 8th, 9th, and 10th centuries laid the foundations for trigonometry, the science of optics, modern physics, the practice of medicine, and chemistry. Islamic architecture remains some of the most beautiful and inspired work in all of history. Through to the 14th century, Muslim influences contributed to almost all of the advances of science and civilization in both Eastern and Western societies but declined dramatically following the influence of the Crusades, the re-conquest of Spain, and other historical transitions.

One of the main challenges in Muslim–Christian relationships is to confront the negative stereotypes of Islam that have covered over the vast historic contributions of Islamic civilization and to acknowledge the indebtedness of all of Western civilization to the Arab and Islamic world.

The Branches of Islam

Sunni and Shi’a

The two largest branches of Islam are the Sunni and the Shi’a, accounting for almost 95 percent of all Muslims. The largest “school,” as it is often called, within Islam is the Sunni, who claim to follow the way or custom of the Prophet. Sometimes called the “orthodox,” Sunnis recognize the first four caliphs, adhere to one of the four Sunni schools of law, and reject any special religious function for Muhammad’s son-in-law, Ali. Since most of the material in this study refers to Sunni Islam, it is not necessary to offer specific details of Sunni beliefs. “Shi’a” literally means “a partisan” and refers to the party or partisans of Ali.

When Muhammad died in 632, Abu Bakr was elected his successor (caliph). Ali, who was just 30 years old at this time, had stayed at Muhammad's deathbed and was not present for the election. A number of Ali's followers, however, felt he had unjustly been passed over. Umar followed Abu Bakr as the second caliph and, after him, Uthman. These successions took place in the context of growing dissension and conflict between various factions. When Uthman was assassinated, Ali was finally elected the fourth caliph in 656. Ali himself faced significant opposition and was assassinated in 661.

The main division between the Sunnis and Shi'a was not originally related to a theological issue but rather to the question of succession. Since the division, however, significant theological differences between the majority "orthodox" Sunnis and Shi'a have developed. Shi'a believe the successors to Muhammad must be his direct descendants. Ali, the Shi'a believe, held a special spiritual function alongside Muhammad that gave Ali and his successors a right to spiritual leadership in the community. While in both Shi'a and Sunni communities the term "Imam" is used generally to signify the leader of prayers, for Shi'a it takes on a deeper meaning, referring to Ali and his descendants. This meaning varies greatly among the many branches of Shi'a Islam. But generally "Imam" refers to a very select group of immediate descendants of Ali (the number of the descendant from which the branch traces its origins refers to the sect of Shi'a Islam, for example, the "twelvers"), who have been granted special graces and at times miraculous powers, and function as intermediaries between Allah and humanity. One major branch of Shi'a Islam believes the disappearance of the 12th Imam was in fact an occultation and the Imam is still mysteriously alive and will return as the promised Madhi, the one who will return at the end of time to restore righteousness before the day of judgment.

It has been suggested that this concept of Imam resembles the Christian concept of Logos and makes the Imams (for the largest Shi'a branch, Ali and his 11 descendants) intermediaries necessary for salvation. This, of course, is in direct contrast to Sunni Islam's emphasis on submission to Allah alone.

For a dramatic portrayal of the importance of the remembrance of the death of Hussein, the grandson of the Prophet and the central event in Shi'a history, and the interconnection with Christian understandings of the death of Jesus, see "The Tragedy of Karbala" in Appendix G: Stories in My Neighbour's Faith.

Isma'ilis

Another branch of the Shi'a, the Isma'ilis, trace their origin to the death of the sixth Imam within the Shi'a succession. The sixth Imam, Ja'far, is credited with developing a legal code known within Shi'aism as the Ja'fari School of Thought. On Ja'far's death his eldest son, Isma'il, was passed over for succession in favour of a younger son, Musa. A small group of Shi'a supported the succession of Isma'il, thus splitting the Shi'a into two branches. The Isma'ilis subsequently divided further into two main sects, one of which is headed by the current Aga Khan.

Many other sectarian groups have formed throughout Islamic history, not unlike the divisions in Christianity. Like Christianity, some branches have stepped completely outside "orthodox" beliefs and are no longer considered by the majority of Muslims to be Muslims.

Ahmadiyya

One particular group in this category is important to mention because of its presence in many Canadian cities. The Ahmadiyya movement developed from the followers of Hadhrat Mirza Ghulam Ahmad, who was born in 1835 in Qadian, a small village in the district of Punjab in India. The founder of this community claimed to be a prophet who received inspiration, but one who was sent without a book of scripture or a new religion. He maintained that he was subordinate to Muhammad. Some other Muslims disapprove of this claim to special inspiration.³

Sufis

Sufis emerged among the first generations of Muslims in the seventh century. Sufism is not so much a Muslim branch as it is a form of mysticism and therefore represents an attitude rather than a distinctive ideology. In most respects, early Sufis did not differ from other early Muslims. Their approach was, and still is, characterized by a concern for sincerity, integrity, and inner peace. One of the early Sufis, Rabia, was a former slave owner who wrote poetry that has influenced almost all later Muslim mystical poetry. Rabia stressed that spiritual maturation depended on the motivation for the quest. Wrong intentions would spoil the process of spiritual growth. The concern for intimate, personal knowledge of God is a Sufi characteristic. Rabia's poetry is an example of the craving for such knowledge.

From the 10th century onwards, Sufi orders came into being. This happened at roughly the same time as the Christian religious orders were being reinvigorated by St. Bernard and others. Forty major Sufi orders developed throughout the Muslim world from Spain to India in the Middle Ages. Perhaps the most famous are the Whirling Dervishes, who spin rhythmically while chanting. Sufi orders were established first by holy or devout people, friends of God (*wali*), who developed specific modes of spiritual discipline for their adherents. Until the 20th century, Sufi practice was widespread throughout the Muslim world.

Unlike the Christian orders, Sufi practice does not require celibacy or obedience to a superior. Poverty, however, is valued. Sufi practice often stresses the 99 attributes of God, with the intention of internalizing these characteristics in the person. One Sufi image is that one should polish the mirror of one's heart so that the attributes of God can be recognized by others. In other words, if one could become merciful, others might recognize the mercy of God and transform themselves. The aim of mystical practice among Sufis is the transformation of consciousness.

In both Christian and Sufi traditions, the popularity of the orders has declined in the modern period because of the social changes brought about by industrialization. On the other hand, the increase of literacy means that the poetry of famous Sufi poets like Rumi is being widely read throughout the world by Muslims and non-Muslims alike. Further, most of the liberal Muslim thinkers of the 20th century have been what might be called neo-Sufis. They have not explicitly identified themselves with the practices and disciplines of the traditional Sufi orders, but they have stressed the need to develop an individual conscience rather than to accept an abstract ideology. This emphasis means that believers have to continue to test in practice the things their leaders tell them.

The greatest religious reformer of the Muslim theological tradition, al Ghazali (d. 1111), affirmed that religious awareness must be based on personal, intuitive awareness of the goodness and mercy of God. Unless this is personal knowledge, the allegedly religious person is just obeying abstract rules without comprehending why.

Muslim reform movements in our time that have based themselves on this insight have tended not to be radical or aggressive. Sufis continue to attempt to change consciousness by persuasion and example.

Notes

1. Ovey N. Mohammed, *Muslim-Christian Relations: Past, Present, Future* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1999), p. 27.
2. From *ISLAM AND THE WEST* by Bernard Lewis, copyright © 1994 by Oxford University Press, Inc. Used by permission of Oxford University Press, Inc.
3. Yohanan Friedmann, *Prophecy Continuous: Aspects of Ahmadi Religious Thought and Its Medieval Background* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1989).

Chapter 3

The Islamic Way of Life



The revelation to Muhammad involved criticism of the pre-Islamic way of life of the people of Mecca and the Bedouin tribes. The earliest revelations called on the Meccans to abandon their traditional religious and social practices; to acknowledge the reality of the one God who was the Creator, Sustainer, and Final Judge of all people; and to accept new moral codes. These moral codes included abandoning tribal values and accepting membership in a new universal human community. This new community would be open to all human beings who would acknowledge and serve the one God.

The first believers were a small minority who accepted the revelations coming to them through the Prophet Muhammad. Their emigration to the neighbouring city of Medina is comparable to the significance of the exodus from Egypt of Moses and his followers. In both cases, the purpose of the exodus was to set up a new way of life.

Jihad

Jihad—“striving in the cause of God,” is usually translated as “holy struggle,” but this is misleading. *Jihad* is divided into two categories, the greater and the lesser. The greater *jihad* is the warfare within oneself against any evil or temptation. The lesser *jihad* is the defence of Islam, or of a Muslim country or community, against aggression. It may be a *jihad* of the pen or of the tongue. If it involves conflict, it is strictly regulated, and can only be defensive.

Thus Muhammad said: “In avenging injuries inflicted on us, do not harm non-belligerents in their homes, spare the weakness of women, do not injure infants at the breast, nor those who are sick. Do not destroy the houses of those who offer no resistance and do not destroy their means of subsistence, neither their fruit trees, nor their palms.”

Jihad cannot be undertaken to convert others because there “cannot be compulsion in religion” (2:256). If these regulations seem on occasion to be ignored, that failure is an offence to be answered for on the Day of Judgement.¹

While there is much debate in the media concerning the meaning of *jihad*, it is important to support those within Islam who struggle to recover the deeper, original meaning of the term. Muhammad said: “The most excellent *jihad* is when one speaks a true word in the presence of a tyrannical ruler.”

During the first years after the *hijra* to Medina, a foundation was laid for understanding Islam as an all-encompassing code of living. Treaties signed between Muhammad and the leaders of Medina indicate that what the Prophet intended was the basis for a new social order. A Muslim would be one

who “submits” to God’s will over all of human life. For Muslims, therefore, the central concern has always been to obey the will of God more than to be concerned about theological beliefs.

One basic difference between Muslims and Christians can thus be seen in the attitude toward political power. Muslims usually think that, following the example of Muhammad, they are expected to work out in practice the implications of the Qur’an for social, economic, political, and religious life. They think the one who received and implemented the revelation, the Prophet, ought to be its exemplary model. This is why the *Sunna*, the practice of the Prophet, is important as a source of guidance for all subsequent Muslim individuals and societies. It is also why *Shari’ah*, or Islamic law, is seen by many Muslims as the only acceptable basis for civil governance. This interrelationship of political and religious power in Muslim societies has both bewildered and troubled Western observers.

Christians, on the other hand, who have the life of Jesus as their model, tend to separate political and religious issues. Christians have often understood the death of Jesus at the hands of the Romans as an indication that all forms of political and social life are inadequate. On the practical level, however, following the conversion of the Roman Emperor Constantine to Christianity, Christians did accept political power and tried to incorporate Christian values into public laws and institutions. Thus Christians theoretically think that no state can be as good as it might be, but most try to do what they can to improve conditions of life in the world.

The Christians in the Arabian Peninsula during Muhammad’s lifetime reflected many of the ideals of the world-renouncing ascetics of fifth- and sixth-century Christian Egypt. Many of those ascetics had taken to living in caves in the desert and were observed by the pre-Islamic Arab tribes. Muslims of the day then tended to assume that Christians were generally world-renouncing and failed to understand the moral obligations to work for better social, economic, and political institutions.

Once the Muslim community had been established as a new form of social, political, and economic life in Medina, Muhammad served as head of the community. Thus revelations in this period often command the people to obey God and the Prophet.

Muhammad lived as simply as the other believers did; his belongings were few. His dwelling was immediately beside the mosque built to serve as the centre for the new practice of daily prayer. Friday at noon was the time when a sermon was given in the mosque. Muhammad delivered the sermons himself. After his death, his companions took on this role. Subsequently, delivering the sermon was sometimes done by the political leaders and sometimes by the scholar-jurists (*ulema*).

Muhammad’s role in the new community was based on the belief that the new revelation provided directions for better forms of social justice than had yet existed. In some respects, the Prophet also served in ways similar to the leadership of the pre-Islamic tribes. Leaders commonly settled disputes. The Prophet also did this as a kind of chief justice, except that in his case the Qur’anic revelations served as the guidelines. Later Muslims developed court systems and legal codes based on the same notions, namely, that human institutions of justice should be modelled on the guidance of the ideals transmitted through the revelations.

Specifically, this meant abolishing blood revenge, the code that had served to maintain stability among the Arab tribes for centuries. In the place of blood revenge, justice should be done in resolving conflicts through the medium of institutions designed for that purpose. This ideal of universal justice made possible through such institutions commanded loyalty to the God of justice, who treated everyone in the same way.

In the new community of Medina a mosque was built and the believers developed the patterns of ritual observance, based on the Qur'an and the practice of the Prophet, that have been followed by Muslims ever since. Muslims are expected to follow what are called the five pillars of Islam:

1. To bear witness that there is no god but God, and that Muhammad is the prophet of God.
2. To perform ritual worship (*salat*) five times daily at appointed times.
3. To fast from break of dawn to sunset during the month of Ramadan.
4. To give alms (*zakat*) regularly.
5. To go on pilgrimage (*hajj*) once in a lifetime, health and wealth permitting.

Al Fatihah

The introduction to *Al Fatihah*, The Opening, Surah 1, says:

*First comes that beautiful Surah,
The Opening Chapter of Seven Verses,
Rightly called the Essence of the Book.
It teaches us the perfect Prayer.
For if we can pray aright, it means
That we have some knowledge of Allah
And His attributes, of His relations
To us and His creation, which includes
Ourselves; that we glimpse the source
From which we come, and that final goal
Which is our spiritual destiny
Under Allah's true judgement: then
We offer ourselves to Allah and seek His light.*

Al Fatihah reads as follows:

*In the name of Allah, Most Gracious, Most Merciful.
Praise be to Allah,
The Cherisher and Sustainer of the Worlds;
Most Gracious, Most Merciful;
Master of the Day of Judgement.
Thee do we worship,
And Thine aid we seek.
Show us the straight way,
The way of those on whom
Thou hast bestowed Thy Grace,
Those whose (portion)
Is not wrath,
And who go not astray.*

The affirmation that there is no god but God and that Muhammad is the prophet of God is spoken into the ear of the newborn child and at the death of every person. It is called out five times a day from the minaret of the mosque as the call to prayer. The phrases are written in mosques and on manuscripts that often hang on the walls of Muslim homes. At daily prayers, the first surah of the Qur'an, *Al Fatihah*, is recited. This prayer begins with praise of Allah, "The Cherisher and Sustainer of the Worlds; Most Gracious, Most Merciful; Master of the Day of Judgement." Believers ask to be guided on the straight path and not to be led astray. These basic themes are similar to the themes of the Lord's Prayer.

The Call to Prayer

Five times a day in mosques all over the world, the call to prayer, the *azan*, is sounded. In Muslim countries the *muezzin* calls the *azan* out from the *minaret*. Often Muslims in North America complain that, unlike many churches, which can sound bells and chimes to call people to worship, most municipal codes prevent mosques from using loudspeakers for the *azan*.

Allahu Akbar, which begins the call to prayer, literally means "God is greater." The whole call, however, is usually translated as follows:

God is the Greatest. God is the Greatest. God is the Greatest. God is the Greatest. I bear witness that there is no god but God. I bear witness that there is no god but God. I bear witness that Muhammad is the Messenger of God. I bear witness that Muhammad is the Messenger of God. Come to Prayer. Come to Prayer. Come to Success. Come to Success. God is the Greatest. God is the Greatest. There is no god but God.

In addition to the regular required times of ritual worship, Muslims can offer personal prayers (*dua*) at any time. In the Sufi religious orders, which developed in the Muslim world about the same time as the medieval Christian religious orders, a variety of forms of spiritual discipline came into being, such as chanting, slow whirling in a circle, and concentrating on specific devotional exercises. All these forms of devotion were understood to be additions to the regular daily ritual worship. Muslim children gradually learn to fast by beginning with easier fasts; they begin to fast with the adults for the whole month of Ramadan when they are thought ready to accept adult responsibilities.

The Qur'an indicates several times that the Muslim way of life has been established once believers begin to practise the daily ritual worship and to give alms. The two phrases *salat* and *zakat* indicate the beginning of a proper orientation to the Creator and Final Judge of all being.

... But it is righteousness
To believe in Allah,
And the Last Day,
And the Angels,
And the Book,
And the Messengers;
To spend of your substance,
Out of love for Him,
For your kin,
For orphans,

For the needy,
For the wayfarer,
For those who ask,
And for the ransom of slaves;
To be steadfast in prayer,
And practise regular charity....

Surah 2:177

When the new Muslim community was established in Medina, the regular giving of *zakat* was understood to be the way the members of the community would help the less fortunate. The alms were distributed through a central authority to the needy people. In addition to the regular giving of *zakat*, Muslims are encouraged to be as charitable as they can in whatever ways they can. The jurists later worked out guidelines on what would be reasonable in terms of *zakat*. The sum of two and a half percent of income was often indicated as the desirable minimum.

In many parts of the Muslim world, the people celebrate the birthday of Muhammad. Known as Mawlid un Nabi, this occasion involves chanting poems in memory of the Prophet and sometimes taking part in Sufi rituals of *dhikr*, the remembrance of God. Chanting the 99 attributes of God is one such form of mystical discipline. These 99 names are based on the statements in the Qur'an as to what God is and does. Sometimes Muslims use strings of 99 prayer beads, on which each bead refers to one attribute of God. Practices such as these reinforce concentration, *zhikr*, on the attributes of God. In some parts of the Muslim world in the modern period, there have been objections from modernizing reformers against some of these traditional rituals, such as the Mawlid festivals.

The legal, political, economic, and social structures of the community developed over time. They were understood to be based on the practice of the Prophet Muhammad. In Sunni Islam, four major schools of Islamic law developed in the ninth century. The Shi'a also established their own schools of law. The jurists worked out principles of jurisprudence, *fiqh*, which were believed to make possible the organization of the life of the community. *Fiqh* teaches that the institutions should be based on four sources in descending order of authority:

1. The Qur'an
2. The *hadith*: stories about the actions and decisions of the Prophet
3. Analogy
4. Consensus

In the Middle Ages, consensus was understood to mean the consensus of the jurists. In the modern period, some Muslims maintain that consensus should operate through democratically elected parliaments. The word *Shari'ah* refers to the collections of religious law articulated by the four major Sunni schools of jurisprudence and the Shi'a schools of jurisprudence. In the Middle Ages, different schools of law operated in different parts of the Muslim world. There are differences in all the schools of law in relation to specific issues. The issue of comparison between the schools involves the complex study of technical issues.

In the modern period, the establishment of new Muslim countries with constitutions and elected legislatures has created much turmoil in the Muslim world because of issues relating to how much authority the medieval forms of the *Shari'ah* should have in modern Muslim societies. There have been diverse responses to this complex question.

Following the collapse of the Ottoman Empire, the Turkish-speaking people of that empire created the nation of modern Turkey. Medieval legal and political structures were replaced with democracy based on the Swiss legal code. In Egypt, the new legal code was based on the thought of an earlier Muslim reformer, Muhammad Abduh, who had been the equivalent of Chief Justice of Egypt. His system chose examples from earlier Muslim thought that seemed especially relevant and helpful under modern conditions as the basis for modern law. A prime example is that most modern Muslim countries have given women the right to initiate divorce, since precedents can be found in teachings that predate the Middle Ages.

In 1979 the Shah of Iran was driven out by a revolution that resulted in the nation being ruled by the *ulema* under the leadership of Ayatullah Khomeini. Although Khomeini had been in exile in France, his ideas had been circulating throughout Iran. His theory was that government should be in the hands of the experts in Islamic jurisprudence. Theological students were put in charge of all the branches of government. Subsequent reform movements within Iran argue that this form of government is not feasible.

Ayatullah

The best translation of this term is perhaps "Sign of God." Most Ayatullahs spend their lives in studying, writing and teaching as others before them have done for centuries. This term is most often used by the Shia in Iran in acknowledgement of those who through their learning and their piety are best able to guide the people. But as with distinguished jurists in other traditions, the Ayatullahs of Iran by no means necessarily agree with each other.²

At the personal level, however, *Shari'ah* forms an important basis for the way Muslims live their lives and fulfill religious practices. Issues of human rights violations associated with *Shari'ah* in the press are often simply a failure to distinguish *Shari'ah* from issues of local custom.

Islamic Holidays

There are two main holidays in Islam. During the ninth month of the Islamic calendar, the month of Ramadan, Muslims are required to fast from dawn to dusk. The purpose, the Qur'an states, is to gain spiritual awareness, the strengthening of the soul. Eid ul Fitr (Festival of Fast-Breaking) follows the end of Ramadan. Eid festivals last for three days, during which feasts and parties are held. Gifts and cards can also be exchanged. The second festival, Eid ul Adha, marks the end of *hajj*. This festival commemorates Abraham's attempted sacrifice of his son Ishmael, and is celebrated with parties.

Other celebrations include the birthday of Muhammad, Mawlid un Nabi, and for Shi'a Muslims, Eid ul Ghadir, the announcements of Ali's succession to the Prophet. Shi'a Muslims also observe Ashura, mourning the martyrdom of the Prophet's grandson Hussein.

Islamic holidays occur in the Muslim lunar calendar of 354 days, or twelve 29- and 30-day months. These months each begin with the new moon. Because the Gregorian calendar, in use in the West, is based on the 365-day rotation of the earth around the sun, the Gregorian and Muslim calendars do not conform. Therefore an annual check is necessary to determine the Gregorian date that corresponds to a particular Islamic festival. A general rule is that the date will advance 11 days from one year to the next.

Notes

1. John Bowker, ed., *The Oxford Dictionary of World Religions* (London: Oxford University Press, 1997).
2. Shahrough Akhavi, *Religion and Politics in Contemporary Iran* (New York: State University of New York Press, 1980), chapter 5. Used by permission.

Chapter 4

The Bible, The Qur'an, and Revelation



A Christian Understanding of Revelation and Holy Scripture

The Christian Bible does not claim to be revelation itself. Rather, it gives testimony to God's own act of self-disclosure, which is revelation in the primary sense. The Bible has authority as Holy Scripture for Christians because it is a record of God's dealings with humanity and as such points to the character and purposes of God thus revealed. Sometimes Christians speak of the Bible as "the Word of God." According to the Christian understanding of the Bible, the Word of God is Jesus Christ (e.g., in Jn. 1:1–14 and Rev. 19:13). For some Christians it is persuasive to speak of the Bible as the written word of God, the record of God's gracious initiatives with creation through the living Word. For others, it is truer to say that the Bible *becomes* God's Word through the guidance and testimony of the Holy Spirit. In every case, the United Church has affirmed in its 1992 study, *The Authority and Interpretation of Scripture*,¹ that the Word of God is larger than the text of the Bible.

The biblical Word, regardless, does speak to those who have ears to hear. Christians pay the Bible the high respect they do because they experience in this collection of historical narrative, poetry, saga, prophetic oracle, letters, genealogies, and so on nothing less than the story of God's search for humanity, and through it God speaks afresh to them. Some theologians speak of the Bible's self-authenticating character. By this they mean that what is ultimately convincing about the Bible is that they experience God's presence and power working through the story it tells.

So Christians can see the Bible as a book comprised of various kinds of writing, each of which shows to some degree the differences and even fallibilities of the varied writers. At the same time, in the very midst of the humanness of the testimonies, they can encounter the presence of the living God who long ago called the writers to their witness.

The Qur'an's Claims for Itself

For Muslims, the Qur'an is literally the words of God, a recitation of words spoken by God. It is God who speaks throughout the text, setting forth the truth of monotheism and its ritual and ethical implications in a culture and at a time when polytheism and idolatry prevailed. The Qur'an does contain passages that appear akin to biblical categories, such as proverbial sayings, laws, and narrative; what stands out is that always there is a single voice speaking—God's. The Qur'an, for Muslims, is the revelation of the will of God.

While the text of the Qur'an came into being only after a period of oral tradition, it is regarded as a transcript of a tablet preserved in heaven. From the beginning of the revelations in the cave, Muhammad's task was simply to "recite" what he heard.

There is a consistent summons to righteous living in the Qur'an and an emphasis on the consequential nature of all actions. The Day of Judgment and the realities of paradise and punishment are of towering importance in its pages. Since it makes no significant distinction between the spiritual and the material, the Qur'an concerns itself not only with the nature of God and human destiny but also, for example, with laws for marriage and divorce and the distribution of property after death.

Like the Bible, the Qur'an regards nature and the unfolding events of history as pointing to the existence and power of One who is alone God. The Qur'an contains significant narrative material, some of it recording events of Muhammad's day and some of it retelling biblical stories. One role of the Qur'an, in fact, is to confirm the divine authorship and teaching of the book of Moses and the gospel of Jesus (Surah 46:12). In Surah 5:44, 46 of the Qur'an, God says:

It was We who revealed
The Law (to Moses): therein
Was guidance and light.
By its standards have been judged
The Jews, by the Prophets
Who bowed (as in Islam)
To Allah's Will, by the Rabbis
And the Doctors of Law:
For to them was entrusted
The protection of Allah's Book,
And they were witnesses thereto...

And in their footsteps
We sent Jesus the son
Of Mary, confirming
The Law that had come
Before him: We sent him
The Gospel: therein
Was guidance and light,
And confirmation of the Law
That had come before him:
A guidance and an admonition
To those who fear Allah.

In the Qur'an, Jews and Christians are collectively "people of the Book," but where the text of the Bible and of the Qur'an diverge—for example, with respect to the story of Jesus—the Qur'an maintains that the biblical record has been corrupted. Hence the Qur'an is seen not so much as bringing new revelation but as confirming, augmenting, and correcting the record of previous revelations that in their original forms were consistent with the Qur'an. It is not the Muslim claim that the original record of the Bible was ever in error; this could never happen, Muslims believe, because it is God's Book. Though God truly gave revelation of Godself to Jewish and Christian

The Qur'an

Unlike the Gospels, which are a collection of different narratives about the actions and sayings of Jesus as gathered by key disciples, the Qur'an is instead the recorded revelation that Muhammad pronounced to his followers.... The Qur'an is not a book of stories and traditions that one sits down and reads from start to finish. Muslims do not approach the Qur'an as a literary work, but as the primary collection of the words of God; its anecdotes are important not as history but as teaching, above all illustrating the role of the Prophet as the conveyor of God's words. Its 114 surahs are arranged roughly in order of size, starting with the largest without regard to content or inner structure. Many surahs contain passages that abruptly switch topics: detailed prescriptions of inheritance law may be followed by accounts of the Israelites rejecting Moses or vivid depictions of the after life. All this is conveyed in resonant lines that employ all the powerful resources of rhythm and rhyme that Arabic possesses. The Qur'an was viewed as a repository of the words of God, expressed with brevity and eloquence, which reflects primarily on the Prophet's mission to convey God's will to humanity.²

apostles, Muslims believe, the divine commandments were disobeyed and both groups divided into rival sects. With this disobedience came also the corruption of the written text of the Bible. From the Qur'an's perspective, there is only one Book of God, and Christians and Jews are repeatedly addressed as "people of the Book" and admonished to cease persecuting Muslims and to believe God's apostle. While there is only one Book, however, it has been corrupted on earth by Jewish and Christian scribes. Yet now, Muslims believe, God's Word is faithfully recovered in the Qur'an. Christians might, however, be somewhat understanding of this perspective, given two millennia of Christian rearrangement of the Hebrew scriptures to suit doctrinal purposes.

The Question of Critical Study of the Qur'an

Christians approaching the Qur'an sometimes ask whether Muslims have gone through processes of critical study of their scripture comparable to what Christians have experienced since the beginnings of the historical criticism of the biblical record in the later 19th century. When Christians begin to read the Qur'an, they notice many narratives similar to the biblical accounts, both to some of the narratives of the Hebrew scriptures and the New Testament, as well as one story from the apocryphal Gospel of Thomas—the story of Jesus fashioning a bird from clay and then setting it in flight (Surah 3:49 and 5:110). From the point of view of critical scholarship common in Christian theological study, this use of biblical stories appears to be a case of literary dependence. Surah 12, the story of Joseph, is an example. In another instance, just a few phrases indicate apparent knowledge of the Parable of the 10 Maidens: "One day will the Hypocrites—men and women—say to the Believers: 'Wait for us! Let us borrow (a light) from your Light!' It will be said ... 'Then seek a light (where Ye can)!'" (Surah 57:13). How are Christians to think about these similarities?

The first point to note is that the Qur'an is the revelation conveyed through one prophet, Muhammad. Biographies of the Prophet were written within 100 years of his death in C.E. 632. Many of his companions were living in close association with him during the 23 years in which he was receiving revelation. About 70 people accompanied the Prophet during his exodus (*hijra*) from Mecca to Medina in C.E. 622. Many of these people were the sources of the later materials in the biographies and *hadith* literature that provide information about the Prophet Muhammad's life. We therefore have a lot of information from the very early period about his life and work.

Abrogation in the Qur'an

The Muslim experience of receiving revelation is significantly different from anything in Christian experience. For this reason, we should avoid assuming that issues relating to the authority of scripture are readily comparable between the Christian and Muslim traditions. It is wiser to acknowledge difference and try to imagine what the experience of the other has been.

Muhammad himself became convinced that a "trusted spirit" was delivering to him a message that he was to deliver to his people.

*... for he brings down
The (revelation) to thy heart
By Allah's will, a confirmation
Of what went before.
And guidance and glad tidings
For those who believe—
Surah 2:97*

For a period of 23 years, he continued to receive revelations in this manner. He and the others who became Muslims were convinced these words did not originate in his mind. These Muslims underwent radical changes in their lives because they believed God was directly addressing them.

During this 23-year period, the basic affirmations of revelation, the will of God, the purpose of creation, the nature of humanity, and the certainty of the Judgment Day did not change. Other more mundane issues did, however, change. For example, in the Meccan period, the Muslims were told to pray facing Jerusalem. After the emigration to Medina this changed, and they were told to pray facing Mecca. Issues such as the diversity of religious communities and the possibility and actuality of miracles likewise developed over the course of the chronological revelations of the Qur'an.

After the death of the Prophet, a tradition of commentary on the Qur'an (*tafsir*) developed. Knowledge of *tafsir* has been central to the training of Muslim religious leaders ever since. One of the first requirements was a thorough knowledge of the Arabic of the Prophet's time so that terms could be understood. A second requirement was knowledge of the events of the Prophet's life so that the meaning of particular revelations could be understood in their context. This latter discipline was called study of the contexts (*Asbab al-Nuzul*, the contexts of revelation). In other words, Muslims have always accepted that revelations occurred in context, and that when the context changed, the message of the revelations changed.

The technical term abrogation (*naskh*) was used to refer to the notion that one revelation abrogated or replaced another, as in the case of the direction of prayer. The discipline of studying abrogation became very complex because there has not been consensus among Muslims as to which revelations abrogated which other revelations.

While Muslim scholars have generally agreed on a number of these abrogations there have also been disagreements with respect to others. The matter has become very technical and abstruse among jurists. For this reason, it is not possible to indicate readily all the abrogations that have been generally accepted.

In the seventh century, Christians and Jews were living in Mecca, Medina, and elsewhere in the Arabian Peninsula. Many of them had been there for centuries. The biographies of Muhammad mention some of the Christians and Jews who played roles in the life of the Prophet. From a non-Muslim perspective, it is clear that many of the biblical and extra-biblical narratives were generally known in the milieu in which the Prophet grew up. The similarity of the narratives in the Bible and the Qur'an can be considered natural given that these stories were known to the Prophet and his

friends. The revelations he received were couched in his native language, using the images and stories familiar to him.

Most importantly, however, the Qur'an consistently uses these stories as vehicles for framing its own distinctive message. Careful comparative study of the biblical and Qur'anic narratives about Adam, Noah, Abraham, Lot, Joseph, Moses, David, Solomon, and Jesus, among others, makes it very clear that, in every case, the Qur'anic narrative is used to convey a Qur'anic message. The story of Noah, for example, is one of the first Qur'anic examples in which the image of the biblical prophet is used as a vehicle to warn the people of Mecca to repent quickly lest they suffer the fate of those in earlier times who refused to listen to the prophets (Surah 71). This is the consistent message throughout all the instances of the Qur'anic use of biblical narratives.

In general, Muslim responses to what they have learned about Western biblical criticism have tended to confirm what they already believed: that the Qur'an was necessary to correct the corrupted biblical record. This is the message that Yusuf Ali has given many English-speaking readers of his commentary. There are, at the beginning of the 21st century, Muslim interpreters of the Qur'an who are familiar with contemporary Western scholarship. In few situations, however, do these scholars ever find that such scholarship changes radically the traditional Muslim understanding of the Qur'an. The question of whether the Qur'an is the result of literary dependence on the Bible is understood to be answered as we have already indicated. Yes, the Qur'an includes names and narratives similar to those of the Bible; this has been known since the first Islamic centuries. All these names and narratives are, however, incorporated into the text of the Qur'an in such a way as to support the basic themes of the Qur'an. The biblical narratives, in other words, are always used to illustrate the message that the Qur'an is delivering to humanity.

Anglican author Kenneth Cragg has written a significant study of the impact of the Qur'an on the Prophet Muhammad and his followers. His book, *The Event of the Qur'an*,³ stresses the revolutionary and transformative effect of the revelation on the lives of those who responded to its challenging message. The Qur'an was experienced by the first Muslims as a forceful demand that they change the direction of their lives. The Muslim community came into being among those who accepted the challenge. Another excellent study of the impact of the Qur'an on the first believers is *Approaching the Qur'an* by Michael Sells. Sells explains the literary heritage of pre-Islamic Arabia:

Muhammad recited to an audience that had developed one of the most finely honed and scrutinizing tastes in the history of expressive speech. This love for language had been a poetic heritage ... that, along with the Qur'an, was to become the wellspring for the new Arabic Islamic civilizations.⁴

Christians who wish to learn something of the Muslim understanding of the Qur'an need to learn to view the Qur'anic verses within the context of Muhammad's life and to recognize, as Canon Cragg says, the transformative power that the event of the Qur'an had and still has on the lives of Muslims. The historical experience of Muslims in relationship to the Qur'an has therefore been significantly different from that of Christians and their scriptures. Given that, methods of historical critical study would be deemed by most Muslims to be inappropriate and irrelevant.

A Christian Understanding of the Qur'an as Revelation

Muslims receive the Qur'an as direct revelation of the divine. In the Christian scriptures, we witness multiple and varied instances of divine self-revelation specific to people, communities, and time: in the Torah; in the prophets; in the gospels through Jesus' actions, teaching, passion, and resurrection; and in the witness of Paul both personally and in the early church.

In the United Church (as developed in *The Authority and Interpretation of Scripture*, 1992), we declare that scripture, tradition, experience, and reason demonstrate that God will be revealed to individuals and communities and in time according to divine purpose. The United Church takes that to be the essence of the position on the Commission on World Mission that God is redemptively at work in the religious life of humanity. Therefore, Christians may affirm that the Qur'an is revelation

The Nativity of Jesus in the Qur'an

*Relate in the Book
(The story of) Mary...*

*Then We sent to her
Our angel...*

*She said: "How shall I
Have a son, seeing that
No man has touched me,
And I am not unchaste?"*

*He said...
'That is
Easy for Me: and (We
Wish) to appoint him
As a Sign unto men
And a mercy from Us'...*

*And the pains of childbirth
Drove her to the trunk
Of a palm tree...*

*At length she brought
The (babe) to her people...
They said. "O Mary!
Truly an amazing thing
Hast thou brought!"...*

But she pointed to the babe...

*He said, "I am indeed
A servant of Allah:
He hath given me
Revelation and made me
A prophet;*

*"And He hath made me
Blessed wheresoever I be,
And hath enjoined on me
Prayer and Charity as long
As I live."*

Surah 19:16–31

to Muslims while not being authoritative for Christians. As Jews do not require Jesus to be authoritative for their covenant with God, so Christians do not require the Qur'an to give authority to our covenant.

The Report of the Commission on World Mission

Critical to the path of the United Church understanding of its relationship with people of other faiths has been the *Report of the Commission on World Mission*, the principal recommendations of which were adopted by the 22nd General Council in 1966.⁵ The report urged the church to define its mission as including a dialogue with other world faiths. The most important recommendation of the report is that the church “recognize that God is creatively and redemptively at work in the religious life of all mankind [sic]” (page 435).

The report argues that the missionary endeavour must reject any sense of cultural superiority and learn to listen as well as to speak. “The Christian must make special efforts to encounter men [sic] of other faiths, and to enter into persuasive dialogue with them, only in ways that will engender mutual trust” (page 354). The new missionaries must also be prepared to let go of any control over the outcome of the endeavour. The distinctive role of the missionary in other religious communities “is basically to present the knowledge of Jesus Christ, and release it to become a formative force in the life of that community” (page 343).

The report also distinguished between two ideas of revelation. One is the more static view that revelation is the divine message directly imprinted on passive recipients. The other is the more dynamic view that God's message comes as challenge, evoking response. Since humans have considerable freedom in responding to God's call, it is possible to think of other faiths and ideologies as various kinds of response “to the challenge of a revelation from God.” Then comes another example of lifting up constructive tension between confidence in Christ and openness to new learning (page 353):

While recognizing a revelation of God to all people, the problem is to determine which kind of response is most adequate, and most in accord with God's wishes. To the solution of this problem the Christian brings the touchstone of the person of Christ, recognizing that by this touchstone some of the things he [sic] has traditionally prized may have to be surrendered, and that some of the things that other people have to contribute may be gratefully accepted.

It is the question of “gratefully accepting” what other faiths have to contribute that points to one possible Christian response to the Qur'an.

One approach emphasizes that there exists a “general salvation history”⁶ that includes the religious traditions of the nations. This covenant has been in effect since God's covenant with Noah. Even after “special” salvation history begins, Abraham recognizes Melchizedec as a priest of the Most High, Paul quotes Stoic philosophy, and the Book of Proverbs gathers from far and wide. From this one may conclude that wisdom, if not truth, can be found in other religions and ideologies.

This Noahide covenant can also be seen as an “everlasting covenant”⁷ (Gen. 9:16). This event of salvation and grace sketches in advance the outline of the covenants that are to be made with Abraham and Moses. Thus Israel and the nations share a common base: They are alike in a state of covenant relationship with the true God, and under this, God’s salvific will.⁸ The universal Noahide covenant includes under its rainbow other religious traditions.

In this formulation, acknowledging God’s activity in “general salvation history” allows Christians to discern in the scriptures of other traditions authentic manifestation of God, mediated through the eternal Word. The Word addressed to other religions, then, would also become a Word spoken by God to Christians.

Vatican II and Roman Catholic Appreciation of Islam

The Vatican document on the church, *Lumen Gentium* (1964) acknowledged that all religions have potential as instruments of salvation. *Ad Gentes* (1965), the decree on mission, affirmed that treasures of truth and grace can be found in all nations “as a sort of secret presence of God.” In the declaration on non-Christian religions, *Nostra Aetate*, it is stated that the church rejects nothing of what is true and holy in other religions. Moreover, Catholics are called to dialogue and collaboration with the followers of other religions.

In the time since Vatican II, Pope John Paul II’s encyclical letter, *Redemptor Hominis* (1979), affirmed the magnificent spiritual inheritance manifested in all religions, and stated that openness to other religions in dialogue is not a betrayal of Christian commitment but an expression of it. Pope John Paul has also made numerous addresses in which he has spoken of Muslim faith. He has said that Muslims, like Catholics, “have the faith of Abraham in the one, almighty and merciful God.” Again, to a group of Muslim youth, he said: “Your God and ours is the same, and we are brothers and sisters in the faith of Abraham.”

The World Council of Churches’ Conference on World Mission and Evangelism (1996) at Salvador, Brazil, also took note of the importance of the experience of the divine in other religions. Conference participants were in disagreement about the significance of this experience:

Some do not doubt that people of other faiths experience decisive moments of deliverance, integration and communion which come to them as a gift, not achievement, and that these experiences are akin to what Christians experience as salvation in Jesus Christ. Others question whether such experiences attest the fruits of the Spirit, the presence and grace of God in them.⁹

Then the report takes up the question of the identity of the animating spirit of such experiences:

Can a distinction be made between a spirit which is present in the whole of creation, including forms of culture and religion and the Holy Spirit? Herein the Christian understanding of the very identity of God is at stake. The Christian faith affirms that God is one, and therefore the spirit present in the cultures and religions of humanity in mercy and judgement may be said to be none other than the Holy Spirit, that is, the Spirit of God who is eternally

united to the Son and the Father. Such convictions lead some to ask whether the triune God is redemptively present even where the gospel is not preached and Jesus Christ not named as Saviour and Lord.¹⁰

Theologians have noted that the prophetic charism is found outside Israel, and for many, Muhammad is viewed as a genuine prophet. Perhaps the real problem is not that of revelation or prophetism but of Holy Scripture. Recognizing the cosmic ministry of the Holy Spirit, it is possible to speak of a word of God addressed to a particular community. This would not be to endorse the whole of the scripture of another religion as inspired, or to say that it contains God's decisive revelation. But it would affirm that contact with God has been "partially yet authentically recorded."¹¹ Thus it is possible to say that while the fullness of revelation is found in Jesus Christ, this does not limit the continuing revelation of God in history. Jesus Christ is the criterion that the Christian uses to sift truth from untruth in other religions and ideologies.

For more on the report and on the Commission on World Mission, see Appendix D.

Can Christians Affirm Muhammad as a Prophet?

Good relationships with Muslims depend significantly on the level of respect and truthfulness with which Christians speak about Muhammad. Christian history is full of examples of misinformation and outright misrepresentation of Muhammad's life. For many Muslims there is a deep bewilderment about why, when Muslims so readily revere Jesus as a prophet, Christians cannot also so acknowledge Muhammad.

We believe it is important that Christians strive to speak truthfully and respectfully of Muhammad. We also believe it is a possible, though major, step forward in Muslim-Christian relationships for Christians to acknowledge Muhammad as a prophet of God. This presents significant challenges, however, not the least of which is the different understandings of "prophet" in the two traditions.

In Islamic thought, prophets are messengers, "those who are sent" with a new revelation, or bring glad tidings, or warn. Prophets are always human, never perfect; nevertheless, it is by virtue of their exceptional character, temperament, and truthfulness in speech and deeds that they are brought into contact with angels and receive revelation.

The *hadith* speaks of 124,000 prophets, a symbolic number so large that no people can claim that they have not received warning of the universal judgment. To every people and nation, the Qur'an says, God has sent his messengers (Surah 10:47) and among them no distinctions are made (Surah 4:152). Muslims acknowledge, however, major prophets (*rusul*) or "messengers" who bring new major revelations, among them Abraham, Moses, Jesus, and Muhammad. For Muslims, Muhammad is the "seal of the prophets," the one final messenger who does not so much bring new revelation but completes (and corrects) humanity's hearing of God's revelation, which has come in many ways beforehand.

For Christians, Jesus is not simply a prophet. Muslims need to be reminded that while Jesus is seen as a prophet, for most Christians he is this and more. He is the one, Christians believe, whom the

prophets foretold, who is both fully human and fully divine, a representative of both God and humanity, capable of mediating one to another.

For Christians, the term “prophet” has been used widely with understandings that vary greatly from one tradition to another. Referring to early Christian prophecy, one general definition speaks of the prophet as an “immediately-inspired spokesperson for God,” someone who represents the “present, immediate voice of the deity.”¹² However, many churches, the United Church included, would more comfortably speak of prophets as those who, in the community of believers, call people back to obedience to God, reveal injustice, call the community to repentance, and claim justice for the oppressed.

We believe that in this later context there certainly should be no difficulty in affirming Muhammad as a prophet. Any reading of his life reveals the extent to which he sought to overcome injustice and oppression and called people to obedience (and submission) to God. Christians should readily affirm Muhammad as a prophet of justice and obedience to God. It is, however, the former definition of a prophet as an “immediately-inspired spokesperson for God” that is the most challenging and perhaps the most difficult for Christians to address.

A number of well-known theologians have argued that it is possible for Christians to accept this understanding of the prophethood of Muhammad. Roman Catholic scholar Hans Küng suggests that Muhammad’s prophetic role originated not in his own mind but in divine revelation coming from God. He argues that New Testament scripture is open to the expectation of prophets after Jesus, provided their teaching is in basic agreement with his. The Qur’an, he suggests, recapitulates an original understanding of Jesus’ message lost in the early Hellenistic development of the Christian community. The church therefore needs to embrace Muhammad’s insights as a way of recovering this obscured history.¹³

Protestant scholar Montgomery Watt considers Muhammad truly a prophet and that Christians should recognize this, since throughout history there have been many upright and saintly Muslims.¹⁴ Watt emphasizes primarily ethical principles in determining that Islam provides a satisfactory quality of life for individuals and communities and, therefore, as Islam can be judged “true,” so also can Muhammad be seen to be a prophet of God.

Christians cannot of course affirm Muhammad as the “seal of the prophets.” To do so would mean affirming for Christians the primacy of the Qur’an over the Gospel of Jesus. However, we believe that it is possible for Christians to affirm Muhammad as one of a number of unique voices who followed in the prophetic traditions of Abraham, Moses, and Jesus, or, in other words, to affirm the “prophetic witness” of Muhammad. It is important to acknowledge as well that the prophetic witness of Muhammad is linked inextricably to the Qur’an. Therefore it is necessary, in affirming this, to also invite the possibility within the Christian community of a recognition of the Qur’an as an inspired word from God, as God’s revelation directed to the people who would come to be known as followers of Islam—in other words, to acknowledge that the mercy, compassion, and justice of God is expressed in the Qur’an, regarded by Muslims as the authoritative word of God.

Notes

1. The United Church of Canada, *The Authority and Interpretation of Scripture: A Statement of The United Church of Canada* (Toronto: United Church Publishing House, 1992).
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8. Dupuis, 1997, p. 226, quoting Bernhard Stoeckle, ed., *Concise Dictionary of Christian Ethics* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1967), pp. 1053–54.
9. From the report of the WCC Conference on World Mission and Evangelism, December 1996, *Called to One Hope?—The Gospel in Diverse Cultures* (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1998), p. 5. Used by permission.
10. Ibid.
11. Dupuis, 1997. See pp. 245–48.
12. David N. Freedman, ed., *The Anchor Bible Dictionary* (New York: Bantam Doubleday Dell, 1992).
13. Hans Küng, et al., trans. Peter Heinegg, *Christianity and the World Religions: Paths of Dialogue with Islam, Hinduism, and Buddhism* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1986).
14. W. Montgomery Watt, *Muslim-Christian Encounters: Perceptions and Misperceptions* (London: Routledge, 1991).

Chapter 5

Understanding Our Differences



Previous chapters cited several theological issues that highlight significant areas of difference between Muslims and Christians. In this chapter we will return to two of these issues in more detail in order to describe the particular challenges and opportunities they provide for interfaith dialogue conversations with Muslims.

The Doctrine of the Trinity

The doctrine of the Trinity has been a source of some confusion for some Muslims as they seek to understand how Christians can claim to believe in One God and yet use the traditional Trinitarian formula of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. To the Muslim ear, this formula and its many variations sound like some sort of belief in many gods (polytheism) and idolatry.

Appendix A of this document is a more thorough review of the development of the doctrine of the Trinity and its impact on dialogue between Christians and Muslims. Here we will simply indicate some of the ways in which the doctrine of the Trinity can assist Christians in respectful relations with Islam.

While the concept of the Trinity has been problematic to Muslims historically and in the present, many of the recent developments in Trinitarian thought have actually created new opportunities for dialogue. The emphasis on Jesus Christ as a saving experience of and encounter with God is increasingly seen in a non-exclusive way. That is, Jesus Christ as a historical person is not understood as God's only attempt to bring light and life and salvation to the world. In fact, what Christians experience in Jesus is a God who is infinitely resourceful and relentless in pursuit of humankind. God does not limit God's self to one moment of salvation. Rather than seeing Jesus as an exhaustive expression of God's love, we are learning to see Jesus in a way that is more inclusive, allowing the possibility of recognizing God's redemptive love in other faith traditions.

One way of understanding Jesus in this way is found in the ancient doctrine of the divine Logos. The prologue of John's gospel says:

In the beginning was the Word [Logos], and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being

through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people.

John 1:1-4

This Logos can thus be thought of as being always present everywhere and potentially expressed anywhere. One can see the possibility of this way of thinking so as to allow Christians to see other religions as being expressive of this Logos as well.

Another possibility for thinking inclusively is found in the doctrine of the Holy Spirit within the Trinitarian understanding of God. The Spirit can function much the same as the Logos idea. The Spirit connotes God's creativity, love, ecstasy, inspiration, transformation, and liberation. Language of God's self-revelation in and through the Spirit communicates more of God's heart and being, God's personal presence.

This, too, is an important issue in interfaith conversation, since it addresses the question of how and in what sense God is present in the world after the conclusion of Jesus' earthly life, as well as how God was present to humankind before Jesus. The Spirit, after all, was present before the birth of Jesus.

In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters.

Genesis 1:1-2

The wind, or Spirit, was evident in the life of Jesus and was experienced after Jesus throughout the world. The incarnation of God in Jesus is not a confinement of the Spirit but is the Spirit's breakthrough into human life.

In this way, Jesus Christ is a full, normative, decisive expression of God's Spirit without implying that Jesus Christ is the only or exhaustive expression. Jesus defines God's Spirit but does not confine it. Jesus is God's self-revelation "once and for all" but not "once and that's all." To believe in Jesus the Christ is not to insist that God's activity in the world is limited to one time and place; to confess belief in God as Spirit is to insist that the divine love that came to perfect expression in Jesus is also to be found elsewhere. For Christians, Jesus Christ is the lens through which we recognize the Spirit of God at work elsewhere. Therefore, we fully expect to find God's Spirit at work in other faiths. We do not, however, expect to find the workings of God's Spirit in other places and faiths to be fundamentally inconsistent with what we have experienced in Jesus Christ.

In terms of our relationship with Islam, contemporary Trinitarian thought provides openings to ask how the Spirit of God whom we recognize in Jesus Christ has also revealed itself in the Islamic faith. So while our Trinitarian understanding of God may present a theological difficulty for our Muslim neighbours, it actually provides Christians with a way of understanding how the same God we experience in Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer can also be present in the faith and faith lives of Muslims.

Once, in Lebanon at a Christian–Muslim dialogue, I had breakfast with a young Muslim from Pakistan who asked me if Christians worshipped God or Jesus. Spilling my orange juice, I tried to explain how we understand the Christian doctrine of the Trinity and found that in his presence I understood that doctrine better than ever before. I knew as we talked that he had a window too, through which, from a different angle, God's light streamed. There was a glow on his face that was the imprint of something holy; he was not what used to be called a "heathen." As we compared our points of viewing, God came clearer to both of us. Clearer than if we'd been viewing alone, or with people who agreed with us. Not that we abandoned our windows; but we shared our looking, and that day both were blessed by light.

The Right Reverend Bruce McLeod

The Crucifixion

Another apparently significant difference between Christians and Muslims (and also opportunity, perhaps, for mutually enriching dialogue) is that Christians accept and Muslims deny the crucifixion of Jesus Christ. As is well known, according to the gospel accounts and the subsequent Christian tradition, Jesus was crucified on Good Friday, a tragic event anticipated by his persecution, humiliation, and torture at the hands of those who opposed his work and person, but in contrast the Qur'anic account reads:

That they said (in boast),
"We killed Christ Jesus
The son of Mary,
The Messenger of Allah"—
But they killed him not,
Nor crucified him,
But so it was made
To appear to them,
And those who differ
Therein are full of doubts,
With no (certain) knowledge,
But only conjecture to follow,
For of a surety
They killed him not—
Nay, Allah raised him up
Unto Himself; and Allah
Is Exalted in Power, Wise—

Surah 4:157–58

Yusuf Ali offers the following commentary on this passage:

Note 663. The end of the life of Jesus on earth is as much involved in mystery as his birth, and indeed the greater part of his private life, except the three main years of his ministry. It is not profitable to discuss the many

doubts and conjectures among the early Christian sects and among Muslim theologians. The Orthodox-Christian Churches make it a cardinal point of their doctrine that his life was taken on the Cross, that he died and was buried, that on the third day he rose in the body with his wounds intact, and walked about and conversed, and ate with his disciples, and was afterwards taken up bodily to heaven. This is necessary for the theological doctrine of blood sacrifice and vicarious atonement for sins, which is rejected by Islam. But some of the early Christian sects did not believe that Jesus was killed on the Cross. The Basilidans believed that someone else was substituted for him. The Docetae held that Christ never had a real physical or natural body, but only an apparent or phantom body, and that his Crucifixion was only apparent, not real. The Marcionite Gospel ... denied that Jesus was born, and merely said that he appeared in human form. The Gospel of St. Barnabas supported the theory of substitution on the Cross...

Note 664. There is difference of opinion as to the exact interpretation of this verse [verse 158, starting "Nay, Allah"]. The words are: The Jews did not kill Jesus, but Allah raised him up ... to Himself. One school holds that Jesus did not die the usual human death, but still lives in the body in heaven.... Another holds that he did die ... but not when he was supposed to be crucified, and that his being "raised up" unto Allah means that instead of being disgraced as a malefactor, as the Jews intended, he was on the contrary honoured by Allah as His Messenger...

While the Muslim account of Jesus is congruent with much of the Christian account and is respectful of the prophetic role of Jesus, Muslims characteristically deny the Christian passion and crucifixion narrative. The denial does not appeal to what a historian would regard as empirical evidence but rather is based on a prior theological conviction, namely: that God, not Jesus' enemies, is victorious in the life and destiny of Jesus; that God so honours Jesus that God would not let him be so treated; that God would protect and thus vindicate such a great prophet as Jesus.

Christians, for their part, also believe that God vindicates Jesus; this is what resurrection, ascension, and exaltation of Jesus to the "right hand of God" symbolizes. However, for Christians, the vindication happens after (and perhaps in) the crucifixion, not before it or in place of it. It is precisely the one whom the world rejects whom God honours; it is the humiliated Jesus whom God exalts; it is the crucified Jesus whom God raises from the dead and gives the name above all names. As Paul writes:

... being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death—even death on a cross. Therefore God also highly exalted him and gave him the name that is above every name...

Philippians 2:7-9

Paul does recognize, however, that this is not an easy truth to accept, going as it does against common prior assumptions about God's ways. The preaching of the cross, says Paul, is admittedly a "stumbling block" to all of us who subscribe to the theology of, say, Job's "comforters."

They believed that there must be a relation between virtue and prosperity and also therefore between vice and misfortune. Thus we balk at having to believe that Jesus would be allowed to suffer, be humiliated, and be executed. Paul acknowledges this difficulty and addresses it:

For Jews demand signs and Greeks desire wisdom, but we proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, but to those who are the called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God.

1 Corinthians 1:22-24

A reasonable sign or sacrament of God's presence we might assume would be the flourishing and prosperity of a community that seeks to follow God's laws. Karen Armstrong says that this would be a natural way for Muslims to think. Accordingly, they characteristically are puzzled by Christians finding such signs in the crucified Jesus and the communion elements of bread and wine, symbolizing his broken body and spilt blood.

What Paul calls "stumbling block" and "foolishness" only grows stronger when the crucifixion is presented not only as pertaining to Jesus but, in and with Jesus, also God; that is, the passion narrative is an account not only of the crucified Jesus but also of the crucified God.

This is especially the case both for Muslim and Christian theology shaped by Greek philosophy so influential in the medieval period. According to this philosophy, that which is perfect cannot change because change suggests a lack or defect. When someone or something changes, there is either movement away from the perfect or toward it; in both cases there is imperfection. The perfect, in this understanding, would be then complete, unchanging self-possession. It would be in a state of being, not becoming. If change is itself an imperfection, how much more would suffering be. Hence the idea of a crucified God would be puzzling and foolish to a Greek schooled mind; it would be this and also offensive to many or most Muslim minds.

It is, however, in all honesty, probably at least foolish if not offensive to many Christian minds as well. For while Christians readily affirm that "God was in Christ"—that is, that Jesus Christ was God incarnate—they recoil from the full consequences of that belief.

This is so because, while there is virtually universal agreement that God is perfection itself, there has been confusion about the meaning of perfection. There has been an ongoing competition between two ideals of perfection, what we may call, following A.N. Whitehead, a Caesarean and Galilean ideal. According to the former, perfection is power, whereas for the latter, it is love. The former is self-contained; the latter is relational. The former is coercive; the latter is persuasive.

Although we Christians have given lip service to the Galilean vision, ironically it has all too often been the Caesarean ideal that has most shaped our thinking and acting. As Whitehead put it, we have given to our God the attributes that Caesar coveted rather than those Christ exemplified.

We are all aware of the crude political sense in which Christianity has been used as a tool for imperialisms of various sorts. Church institutions have employed religion to establish power over laity. Liberation theologians explain how wealthy classes use religion to suppress poorer classes.

We all recall how wars of aggression have been legitimated by ceremonial prayers and pious rhetoric. Surely the Galilean ideal has been corrupted in all this. But the Galilean spirit has been corrupted in even more subtle ways. The form of Christ was maintained, but not the material content. Think of the messianic idea itself: Jesus proclaimed that “whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant” (Mk. 10:43). But many of his followers thought in more aggressive, militaristic, self-promoting terms.

With regard to the concept of God, the Galilean ideal has only occasionally been able to transform the Caesarean ideal. Too often the opposite has occurred: While Christ represents humility and suffering love, our belief about God has often given pride of place to ideas of immutability, omnipotence, and self-sufficiency.

This is not without practical consequences, for, as Calvin tells us in the first lines of the Institutes, our understanding of God and understanding of ourselves are inseparable. We mirror back to God the perfection that we take God to exemplify.

Jürgen Moltmann has explored ways Caesarean understandings of God have influenced our understandings of ourselves and our important relationships in the history of the West. He points to the co-development of the idea of a powerful but unresponsive God and monarchy. The monarch acts on others but does not respond to them.¹

Moltmann also shows the impact of the Caesarean ideal on family life. The father has felt authorized to represent the omnipotent Father in the home. He seeks to determine all but be determined by none.

Moltmann also finds a correlation between the idea of the God who dominates the world and the idea of the soul seeking to dominate, and never to learn from, the body. This is also echoed in the more general problem of modern culture’s technological attempt to master, control, and dominate nature. We not only disregard the claims of our bodies but also remain deaf to the cries of the earth and our fellow inhabitants of the earth.

Happily, however, the Galilean ideal has not disappeared but continues to haunt our consciousness—and even to break through into our thinking and action. Witness the fact that most Christian theologians today are struggling against ideas of a static, domineering deity in favour of a God whose perfection is defined by reciprocating, interactive, even suffering love rather than sheer power. In short, there is a retrieval of a more Galilean concept of God.

And the revival of the Galilean vision of the suffering God is not unrelated to the renewed appreciation of at least some of the motifs of earlier Trinitarian thinking. For whatever its conceptual difficulties, the Trinitarian idea of God symbolizes a social concept of perfection. The triune God stands over and against the world of rugged individualism, unilateral power, self-sufficiency, and so on. It represents power only as qualified by love for the other and the ideal of social relatedness. This hardly implies that the notion of divine oneness is abandoned. But the model of oneness is balanced by the model of manyness in oneness—that is, of community.

Within the Trinity the individual integrity of each of the members is not violated but preserved. The members, however, are not there simply for their own benefit; they are there for one another.

They are persons in social relationship. Moltmann finds this implicit in the original Trinitarian insight, namely: The Father can be called Father only in relation to the Son, and the Son can be called Son only in relation to the Father, and the Spirit exists only in the love between the two. God's perfection consists, then, in giving of Godself to others and in coming in others to Godself. God not only gives to others but also allows others to give to Godself. The greatness of God is God's self-emptying love, in the gentleness that limits and even weakens God's own power so as to allow others space also to be, to act, and to give, that is, to be something or someone and to exercise some power of their own. The greatness of God, then, may be said to be such that it creates others who themselves can create and play some role in their own self-creating and in doing so can contribute to the joy of God. God and the creature are not rivals. Indeed, as Irenaeus said, God's glory is in the creature becoming fully alive.

We have offered these reflections recognizing that these two areas represent the most significant theological points of divergence between Islam and Christianity. It is also important to acknowledge that there are many other possible theological approaches to the interpretation of the Trinity and the crucifixion within the United Church. However, our intention is to suggest that a journey of reconciliation with Muslims need not be seen as requiring a convergence of thought or a denial of the core understandings of either tradition. Instead, what we believe to be important is sharing what we believe to be among the central insights of our Christian faith, that God exists and is known in relationship, and that Jesus reveals to us the nature of God's power made perfect in weakness. Certainly, many other insights of faith can be named, but always in ways and words that are inadequate to express their full meaning. Our hope and expectation is, however, that in dialogue with others we will gain further insights not only about the other but also about ourselves. And perhaps we will come to understand and express these insights even better than is now possible.

Note

1. Jürgen, Moltmann *The Trinity and the Kingdom of God* (London: SCM Press, 1981).

Chapter 6

Common Challenges and Paths toward Change—Building a Just Society



In this chapter we examine some areas of common concern to our two faith communities as well as some of the historical and theological suppositions that undergird that concern. Our assumption is that these areas of common concern will provide opportunities for working together concretely in our communities.

Some challenges being faced by members of the Muslim communities in Canada and members of the United Church grow out of a shared concern and commitment toward building a more just society. Our communities share a passion for social justice, which grows out of lived engagement with those most prejudiced by the unjust realities in the Canadian and the global context.

We will also address issues that represent potential difficulties in understanding between our two communities.

Muslim Ethics

The ethical imperative to the citizens of Mecca in the first phase of Muhammad's career was essentially to abandon polytheism for monotheism, and to implement universal codes of justice. Polytheism was linked to tribalism because in pre-Islamic Arabia many tribes had their own divine being to serve as protector. To abandon the tribal gods involved a radical change in how the Arabs understood the meaning and purpose of their lives.

The early revelations refer several times to the need for a greater social justice for all people than was practised in the Mecca of Muhammad's time. The Qur'an indicates how people should treat each other:

(It is:) freeing the bondman;
Or the giving of food
In a day of privation
To the orphan
With claims of relationship,
Or to the indigent
(Down) in the dust.

Then will he be
Of those who believe,
And enjoin patience, (constancy
And self-restraint), and enjoin
Deeds of kindness and compassion.

Surah 90:13-15

The main result of the Qur'anic imperative was to shift moral responsibility away from tribal mores toward a universal ethic in which all individuals would be directly responsible to God. The human obligation was no longer restricted to the welfare of the other members of the tribe, but was now expanded to include all the members of the new community of believers, and, beyond that, to all human beings.

Muhammad said: "God will say on the Day of Resurrection: 'O son of Adam, I was sick and you did not visit Me.' He will reply: 'My Lord, how could I visit You, when you are the Lord of the universe?' God will say: 'Did you not know that My servant so and so was ill, and yet you did not visit him? Did you not know that if you had visited him, you would have found Me with him?'"

Abu Hurayrah, Hadith Qudsi 18

According to the Qur'an, every person will have to answer directly to God on the Judgment Day in terms of how each has responded to this imperative. This means that no human institution can serve to mediate the final judgment to people.

Muslims affirm that in a just economy everyone should receive adequate food, housing, health care, education, and all other goods that are normal in the society in which they live. And furthermore, the Qur'an stresses that those who are given more wealth, ability, and education must use those gifts for the benefit of those in need.

The imperative to social ethics in the United Church tradition understands our actions to be in response to the grace of God extended to us in Christ Jesus. Concern for those prejudiced by the social order is of utmost concern to the Jesus whom we encounter in the gospels, and hence those people become the central focus of our work in manifesting God's reign of justice and mercy. Judgment in the afterlife for deeds left undone in this life is not a strong motivating factor for action, but rather commitments made in the covenant of baptism provide the framework for resisting evil, living in respect in creation, and loving and seeking justice.

For Christians, the Ten Commandments are among the most familiar biblical texts that contribute to an understanding of ethical behaviour. The Qur'an also contains a set of commandments that are similar in content, though addressed to specific needs of that community at that time.

Who receiveth guidance,
Receiveth it for his own
Benefit: who goeth astray
Doth so to his own loss:
No bearer of burdens

Can bear the burden
Of another: nor would We
Make Our Wrath visit
Until We had sent
A messenger (to give warning)....

How many generations
Have We destroyed after Noah?
And enough is Thy Lord
To note and see
The sins of His servants....

Take not with Allah
Another object of worship;
Or thou (O man!) wilt sit
In disgrace and destitution.

Thy Lord hath decreed
That ye worship none but Him,
And that ye be kind
To parents. Whether one
Or both of them attain
Old age in thy life,
Say not to them a word
Of contempt, nor repel them,
But address them in terms of honour....

Your Lord knoweth best
What is in your hearts:
If ye do deeds of righteousness,
Verily He is Most Forgiving
To those who turn to Him
Again and again (in true penitence).

And render to the kindred
Their due rights, as (also)
To those in want,
And to the wayfarer:
But squander not (your wealth)
In the manner of a spendthrift.

Verily spendthrifts are brothers
Of the Evil Ones
And the Evil One
Is to his Lord (Himself)
Ungrateful.

And even if thou hast
To turn away from them
In pursuit of the Mercy
From thy Lord which thou

Dost expect, yet speak
To them a word
Of easy kindness.

Make not thy hand tied
(Like a miser's) to thy neck,
Nor stretch it forth
To its utmost reach,
So that thou become
Blameworthy and destitute.

Verily thy Lord doth provide
Sustenance in abundance
For whom He pleaseth, and He
Provideth in a just measure,
For He doth know
And regard all His servants.

Kill not your children
For fear of want: We shall
Provide sustenance for them
As well as for you.
Verily the killing of them
Is a great sin.

Nor come nigh to unlawful sex
For it is a shameful (deed)
And an evil, opening the road
(To other evils).

Nor take life—which Allah
Has made sacred—except
For just cause. And if
Anyone is slain wrongfully,
We have given his heir
Authority (to demand Qisas [satisfaction]
Or to forgive): but let him
Not exceed bounds in the matter
Of taking life: for he
Is helped (by the Law).

Come not nigh
To the orphan's property
Except to improve it,
Until he attains the age
Of full strength: and fulfil
(Every) engagement [promise],
For (every) engagement
Will be enquired into
(On the Day of Reckoning).

Give full measure when ye
Measure, and weigh
With a balance that is straight:
That is the most fitting
And the most advantageous
In the final determination.

And pursue not that
Of which thou hast
No knowledge; for
Every act of hearing,
Or of seeing,
Or of (feeling in) the heart
Will be enquired into
(On the Day of Reckoning).

Nor walk on the earth
With insolence [pride]: for thou
Canst not rend the earth
Asunder, nor reach
The mountains in height.

Surah 17:15-37

Perhaps the quintessential expression of Muslim social ethics and the firm grounds for interfaith action for social justice can be found in Surah 5:48:

To thee We sent the Scripture
In truth, confirming
The scripture that came
Before it, and guarding it
In safety: so judge
Between them by what
Allah hath revealed,
And follow not their vain
Desires, diverging
From the Truth that hath come
To thee. To each among you
Have We prescribed a Law
And an Open Way.
If Allah had so willed,
He would have made you
A single People, but (His
Plan is) to test you in what
He hath given you: so strive
As in a race in all virtues.
The goal of you all is to Allah;
It is He that will show you
The truth of the matters
In which ye dispute.

Or in a more modern translation,

We have revealed to you the book with truth, confirming the Scriptures which came before it... For each of you We have ordained a Law and a Way. Had God pleased, He could have made all of you a single community. However it is His will to test you by the revelation given you, so compete in goodness. To God you will all return and He will resolve your disputes.

Source unknown

The call to “compete in goodness” sets the stage for collaborative action. Already United Church congregations have joined together with Muslims in initiatives such as The Campaign against Child Poverty, Refugee Resettlement Groups, and many initiatives that developed after September 11, 2001.

Muslim Views on War and Non-Violence

Like Christian history, Islamic history is full of incidents of violence and conquest. And like Christians, Muslims have struggled with an inconsistency between the ideals of their faith and the harsh realities of life. Nevertheless, Islam today is too often wrongly depicted as a religion of violence. Many Muslims struggle to separate horrendous incidents of cultural and political violence from the core teachings of the faith.

From the inception of Islam, the Qur’an sought to offer alternatives to the violence that consumed Arab society of its day. The Qur’an abolished the traditions of tribal blood revenge and put in their place institutions whereby justice could be sought without violence. These institutions evolved over time into legal codes and court systems. In the Qur’anic version of the murder of Abel by Cain, the lesson drawn is that to kill other than for just reason is as if one had killed all humanity. It must be remembered that Qur’anic verses sometimes cited in this regard were in response to particular historical situations in the earliest Muslim community.

Early in its history, the first Muslim community found it necessary to engage in warfare. After the people of Mecca had driven the Prophet and his followers out of his native city, the new Muslim community established its new way of life in the city of Medina. Three times armies came from Mecca to try to exterminate the new community. War was justified in this context as a necessary means for survival for a community under siege.

Fight in the cause of Allah
Those who fight you,
But do not transgress limits;
For Allah loveth not transgressors...
But if they fight you,
Slay them.
Such is the reward
Of those who suppress faith.

But if they cease,
Allah is Oft-Forgiving,
Most Merciful.

And fight them on
Until there is no more
Tumult or oppression,
And there prevail
Justice and faith in Allah;
But if they cease,
Let there be no hostility
Except to those
Who practise oppression.

Surah 2:190-93

However, the overall emphasis in the Qur'an is clearly that mercy, justice, and forgiveness prevail in human relationships.

The Role of Women in Muslim Societies

One question that remains important for an increased sense of comfort in working together with Muslims is concern about the place of women in Muslim communities. There is a great deal of misunderstanding around the options available to Muslim women. For instance, in the West there is a tendency to focus attention on the *hijab*, or covering, worn by Muslim women and whether that covering is a form of oppression or at least a visible indicator of more complex oppression. It is important to understand that Muslim women themselves are divided on the issue. Some find it convenient for moving effectively in society while others find it oppressive and unnecessary. There is no requirement for such a covering in the Qur'an. In fact, after conversion to Islam, the Arabs did not change their style of dress in any way. What it does represent is the Muslim regard for modesty in both men and women.

Today Muslim women are working to recover the hidden stories of women in Islamic civilization. The story of Muhammad's wife Khadija is often celebrated as a woman who ran her own business and whose support allowed Muhammad to follow his calling. Razia Sultan is also recalled as the only woman to have occupied the throne of Delhi (C.E. 1236), which she assumed at the age of 19. She was known for a just and equitable reign. Many women, it is being discovered, have written and contributed to the history of Islam but, like women in other traditions, have published their writings and research under the names of husbands and other male relatives. Today, Muslim women seek to lift up these contributions and the role of women in the formation of Islamic culture.

Marriage

A common misconception centres on the degree of freedom and self-determination experienced by married Muslim women. Stereotypes abound of women trapped in patriarchal marriages marked by mistreatment and severe restriction of movement. Extreme examples often reflect the customs of a particular society that have become wrongly associated with Islam. The Qur'an established marriage as a specific institution with rights and responsibilities. Marriage is a contract entered into by two parties in front of witnesses. Both parties must enter the marriage of their own free will.

Divorce is likewise the dissolution of a contract and can be initiated by either the husband or the wife. There is no suggestion of any impurity or personal failure involved in divorce. The Qur'anic perspective is one of rights and obligations that ensure the well-being of all parties involved. One challenge in the Muslim community is to see that the rights afforded to women in the Qur'an are carried out in practice.

The reality of intermarriage with members of other faith communities also presents challenges for families as they learn to understand and accept when their children choose partners outside of their own faith community. It presents challenges to our faith communities as we seek to help those couples and families negotiate commitments to living out their respective faiths and raising children within a particular faith tradition.

The Qur'anic ideal of marriage is stated as follows:

Among His Signs is this,
That He created you
From dust; and then—
Behold, ye are human beings
Scattered (far and wide)!

And among His signs
Is this, that He created
For you mates from among
Yourselves, that ye may
Dwell in tranquillity with them,
And He has put love
And mercy between your (hearts):
Verily in that are Signs
For those who reflect.

Surah 30:20-21

Equality for Women

It is a common understanding with the United Church community that Jesus affirmed the value of women in his culture and that the community surrounding him included the participation and leadership of women. Yet women continue to struggle for full social and religious status within the Christian community as a whole and within The United Church of Canada. The Qur'an is ambiguous about whether the sexes shared an equal *social* status. Texts can be cited for both sides of the issue as it was played out in society. Yet clearly both men and women within Islam are accorded the same value *before God*. Still, the challenge of full inclusion of women in the life and leadership of the Islamic community, as it is in the Christian community, is an ongoing challenge.

As many Christian feminists have done with Christian scripture, Muslim women are saying the Qur'an needs to be interpreted by women for their own situations by returning to the original context of revelation and asking how that relates to the situation today. (See Amina Wadud-Muhsin, *Qur'an and Woman*.¹)

There is agreement among Muslim women who are studying the Qur'an, either in scholarly pursuits or for personal knowledge, that women and men *both* need to read the Qur'an in the language understood by each individual (i.e., English, Urdu, Chinese, Spanish). Furthermore, both women and men need to reflect personally on the Qur'an and not simply accept the opinions of authorities in their communities.

As in all forms of research, Muslim women scholars hold many differing views. For example, many argue that the Qur'an contains no theological justification for mistreating, abusing, and discriminating against women but that the basis for most of these abuses (as in many religions and societies) has been the cultural reality of male-dominated, power-based societies.

Others hold different positions. Riffat Hassan is a Muslim woman who argues, as many Christian feminist theologians have about Christianity, that such abuses are rooted in the tradition itself:

However, it is still not clearly and fully understood, even by many women activists in Pakistan and other Muslim countries, that the negative ideas and attitudes pertaining to women that prevail in Muslim societies, are in general rooted in theology—and that unless, or until, the theological foundations of the misogynistic and androcentric tendencies in the Islamic tradition are demolished, Muslim women will continue to be brutalized and discriminated against, despite improvements in statistics such as those on female education, employment and social and political rights. No matter how many socio-political rights are granted to women, as long as they are conditioned to accept the myths used by theologians or religious hierarchs to shackle their bodies, hearts, minds, and souls, they will never become fully developed or whole human beings, free of fear and guilt, able to stand equal to men in the sight of God. In my judgement, the importance of developing what the West calls “feminist theology” in the context of Islam is paramount today with a view to liberating not only Muslim women but also Muslim men from unjust structures and laws that make a peer relationship between men and women impossible.²

Her critique, though strongly stated, will no doubt remind readers of similar feminist critiques within Judaism and Christianity.

Issues around Sexuality

Marry those among you,
Who are single, or
The virtuous ones among
Your slaves, male or female:
If they are in poverty,
Allah will give them
Means out of His grace:
For Allah encompasseth all,
And He knoweth all things.

Let those who find not
The wherewithal for marriage
Keep themselves chaste, until
Allah gives them means
Out of His grace....

Surah 24:32-33

The main import of this Qur'anic teaching is that no sexual relations were to be permitted outside of legal marriage, and that the man accepted as part of his married status the obligation to care for the welfare of the wife and children. This teaching has a tremendous impact, for example, on Muslim young people growing up in Canada. In Canadian youth culture, dating is expected. Muslim youth being raised in traditional homes, however, are not permitted to date unchaperoned. Powerful cultural signals from their peers are in direct conflict with those of their families. The potential for generational conflict is tremendous, as is the potential for conflict among Muslim peers as they negotiate which signals they will follow.

Another area of tension is likely to be found in The United Church of Canada's affirmation of being an inclusive and welcoming community for all people, regardless of sexual orientation. While the church has worked for several decades on various statements on human sexuality, a summary of its position can be found in the affirmations of the 37th General Council (2000). The Council affirmed that human sexual orientations (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgendered, and heterosexual) are a gift from God, part of the marvellous diversity of creation. And the Council called the church to affirm lesbian and gay partnerships, actively work for their civil recognition, and recognize them in church documentation and services of blessing. In 2003, the church formally affirmed same-sex civil marriages.

While the Muslim community contains as much breadth and diversity as the Christian community, it is likely correct to say that most Muslims regard homosexuality as a lifestyle choice unacceptable before God and find themselves in significant disagreement with the United Church position.

Polygamy

Since, for many Christians, the Muslim community seems to be very conservative when it comes to culture and social issues of relationship, the question of polygamy poses a problem at first glance. Polygamy, while present in the Qur'an, is extremely restricted because of inherent difficulties. Although a Muslim man is permitted to marry up to four wives, according to the Qur'an the wives must be treated justly and equally. Permission should also be granted by the first wife.

Ye are never able
To be fair and just
As between women,
Even if it is
Your ardent desire...
If ye mend your ways
And practice self-restraint,
Allah is Oft-Forgiving,
Most Merciful.

But if they disagree
(And must part), Allah
Will provide abundance...

Surah 4:129-30

While permissible, such marriages have seldom taken place except in situations where many women were left widowed as a result of war. Most Muslims would agree with later teachings that monogamy is the preferable state.

Notes

1. Amina Wadud-Muhsin, *Qur'an and Woman: Rereading the Sacred Text from a Woman's Perspective* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999).
2. Riffat Hassan, "The Issue of Woman-Man Equality in the Islamic Tradition," in *Women's and Men's Liberation: Testimonies of Spirit* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1991), pp. 67-68.

Chapter 7

Paths of Reconciliation



To thee We sent the Scripture
In truth, confirming
The scripture that came
Before it, and guarding it
In safety: so judge
Between them by what
Allah hath revealed,
And follow not their vain
Desires, diverging
From the Truth that hath come
To thee. To each among you
Have We prescribed a Law
And an Open Way.
If Allah had so willed,
He would have made you
A single People, but (His
Plan is) to test you in what
He hath given you; so strive
As in a race in all virtues.
The goal of you all is to Allah;
It is He that will show you
The truth of the matters
In which ye dispute.

Surah 5:48

This passage from the Qur'an is said to have been spoken by God to Jews, Muslims, and Christians. Like a number of other passages, the text suggests that God could have chosen to create all people to be one religion. Instead of religious uniformity, however, diversity serves God's purposes in another way—that of inviting peoples of faith into “a race in all virtues.”¹

There are other, sometimes more dominant, emphases among Muslims that profess Islam as the only true faith and support a strong tradition of mission (*da'wa*) similar to the evangelical emphasis of conservative churches. Nevertheless, there are also passages within the Qur'an that open the possibility of affirming a world of religious diversity. We have tried in our turn to point to ways in which Christian theology can be open to and accepting of such diversity. The reader will have noticed

a variety of theological perspectives with a common theme: that of inviting the church to acknowledge that Muslims have heard and are following a distinctive word from God.

The present state of tension and misunderstanding, demonstrated by the profound differences in understanding of current world events between Muslims in Islamic countries and non-Muslims in the West, suggests that an immense and complex task of reconciliation is before us. The alternative to beginning this journey of reconciliation is increasing mistrust, further fostering of extremist movements, and most significantly the loss of the best gifts and resources of both faiths directed toward healing the world we share.

It is the search for justice for God's creatures and healing for God's creation that the United Church has lifted up as a new ecumenical imperative. Our call is to join together in this work of healing with any and all who share this conviction.

This imperative proceeds out of the conviction that solutions to the challenges posed by ongoing political conflict, racism, poverty, and environmental degradation, require the assembled resources of a broad partnership among religious communities and secular organizations. No one religious community or group can accomplish the task alone.²

The United Church has for many years placed an emphasis on God's mission to the whole world, in which we are one participant among many called to the service of God's reign of justice for all. We have come to speak of this in terms of partnership, recognizing that right relationships are the first signs and fruits of God's coming reign.

Our experience and understandings of global relationships have led us to an awareness of the extent to which old patterns of colonialism pervade our theologies and our actions. Assumptions of superiority and racism collude with profound imbalances of power to cloud relationships across North and South divides. With global partners we have found it necessary to continually engage in intentional and painful explorations of the nature of our relationships in order that we might move closer to true partnerships of mutuality and reciprocity. We have done so because we believe right relationships are not only signs of God's reign in our midst but also one of the ways God chooses to bring justice into the world. We have also learned the difficult lesson that even our best intentions can lead us into the worst of evils.

We believe that similar patterns of exploration are now necessary in our relationship with Muslims. We believe we need to address together assumptions of superiority, practices of dominance, the existence of racism, and histories of colonialism that continue to fracture our relationships. What is required is careful consideration of processes of reconciliation necessary to build relationships of respect between our two communities.

Reconciliation is commonly understood as the act of "making good again" (*Random House Dictionary*). This dictionary (or socially accepted) definition unfortunately feeds an understanding of reconciliation as a restoration of the status quo. Instead, reconciliation needs to be defined by those involved, what needs to be overcome or undone, and what outcome is sought. Robert J. Schreiter, a Roman Catholic theologian, describes reconciliation as a spirituality and a strategy or process that is

always about a new creation or transformed relationships. Most significantly, it is about relationship—with self, the other, and God.

Personal reconciliation, “the restoration and healing of a damaged humanity,” prepares individuals for the work of social reconciliation, “the reconstruction of a more just and safe society in which the violence of past wrongdoing will be prevented from occurring again in the future.”³

Schreier describes the four steps in the ministry of reconciliation—accompaniment, hospitality, making connections, and commissioning—all of which are acts of community and call on our deepest capacity to listen, embrace truth, seek justice, and be re-membered or transformed.

The call to reconciliation ministry is made explicit in the World Council of Churches (WCC) declaration of the Decade to Overcome Violence: Churches Seeking Reconciliation and Peace (2001–2010). The WCC names interreligious conflict, racism, war, the legacies of the Crusades, and colonization as violence requiring our full justice-seeking attention as individuals and in community.

Reconciliation is made concrete in a spiritual practice that transforms relationships. In the only explicit gospel lesson on reconciliation, Jesus teaches about the necessity of being reconciled with brothers and sisters before leaving gifts at the altar. Jesus is clear about responsibility, saying, “So when you are offering your gift at the altar, if you remember that your brother or sister has something against you...” (Mt. 5:23, 24). We are asked to take the first step, not to wait until the person having “something against” takes the initiative. We must rebuild our strained and shattered relationships with each other even as we build our relationship with God.

The Test of Friendship

In dialogue, the best way to show our sincerity to each other is to be open and to have the freedom to express ourselves without hiding or repressing what we are thinking or feeling. Such freedom is a sign of our trust with each other. It is only strangers who have to be cautious and excessively polite. Friends are free to ask questions and to explore and tell each other what is in their minds and hearts. This is the test of friendship and trust.

Dr. Fuad Shahin, long-time leader among Southern Ontario Muslims

One Experience of Reconciliation

One of the authors of this document brings the experience of a global partner organization in India. This organization, the Henry Martyn Institute (HMI), works for understanding and reconciliation among Christians, Hindus, and Muslims in the context of significant social oppression. HMI defines reconciliation as follows:

In the context of existing oppression in India, we understand reconciliation as a process of struggle of the people to bring together estranged persons leading towards transformed relationships and structures based on justice.⁴

The Henry Martyn Institute of Islamic Studies was founded in 1930 as an agency of the church for training missionaries to evangelize Muslims. In the 1960s and 1970s, it was also engaged in interfaith dialogue, although it did not give up its evangelistic orientation. During this period, the understanding of mission was mainly one of preaching the gospel to Muslims in order to draw them to Christ. In the worsening context of interreligious misunderstanding and suspicion, of riots often fomented in the name of religion, the Institute undertook a review of its past work. Through a lengthy period and difficult process lasting over a decade, it made a shift from evangelism to interfaith relations and reconciliation.

The first sign of a new direction came in 1982, during an evaluation of the first 50 years of the Institute's life and work. The committee reviewing the evaluation report offered the following reflection:

During its discussion the Evaluation Committee realized that there is another model of evangelism, based on Liberation Theology.... According to this approach traditional Christianity and Islam have to be reinterpreted to discover the essential human and liberating elements in them and proclaim them to the people, so that religion itself becomes a tool for liberation.⁵

A further watershed moment occurred in December 1990 during a time of exceptional violence between Muslims and Hindus. The old city of Hyderabad was paralyzed for almost a month. Hundreds of people died, and many more suffered in the riots centred mostly in the slums. At that time the present director of the Institute wrote:

Where does inter-religious dialogue fit into this scenario? Certainly not in conference hall discussions about the finer distinctions between different theologies. Not even in "live-togethers" of the well educated and secularly committed followers of inter-faith encounter. Rather it must take place at the grass-roots level—in the streets—where death and fear and destruction are isolating the followers of different faiths. After the rioting is over, when the army returns to its barracks, there are broken hearts as well as broken bodies left behind. Those of us who yearn for better relations between people of different traditions cannot ignore the cry for a healing touch; in the midst of conflict we find a new and necessary frontier for inter-religious encounter.⁶

This significant change necessitated a major revision in HMI's constitution and a restating of its goals. Now the primary work of the Institute is defined as being "an expression of the Church's ministry of reconciliation." The constitution speaks about helping churches to fulfill a unique peace-making role and of the need to study and understand Islam and other religions, to work toward the removal of misunderstanding and suspicion, to promote justice and peace, and to collaborate with people of other faiths on common concerns. It became a springboard for launching various types of programs to promote reconciliation: work with Hindus and Muslims in the slums; training workshops in conflict resolution and community building; efforts to help empower like-minded groups in some of the most troubled areas of India; and unique interfaith efforts, such as Women's Interfaith Journeys, which have come out of the partnership between HMI and The United Church of Canada.

And finally, its name underwent a change to the Henry Martyn Institute: An International Centre for Research, Interfaith Relations and Reconciliation.

A Woman's Interfaith Journey

The first Women's Interfaith Journey was a project developed jointly between the Henry Martyn Institute and The United Church of Canada. It recognized that most interfaith work had been developed out of male models of relationship and conversation, and it sought to explore women's approach to interreligious collaboration. Since then several other "journeys" developed by HMI have focused on women's engagement in situations of interreligious conflict. Diane D'Souza, coordinator of the Women's Journey project, writes the following about the experience:

On a more mundane, less emotional level, one of the things which was different about the Journey as a model of encounter was the sheer number of types of exchanges which contributed to learning. This especially comes into focus when we contrast the Journey with conference models of "interfaith dialogue" where giving papers and holding discussions are the main tools being used. Here we communicated and learned by singing, praying, listening, talking, reading poetry or prose—our own and others'; by painting, drawing, and creating; listening, crying, reaching out, and comforting; by witnessing, massaging, getting angry, acknowledging feelings, visiting a sick mother, sharing stories of our lives; by writing, listening, thinking together, listening, thinking apart for oneself, listening; by performing rituals; by dreaming, visioning, sharing our visions; and, of course, by listening.

Some years ago professor Wilfred Cantwell Smith invited students of religion to move away from the study of "-isms" to the study of people: Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists, Sikhs. I believe we have moved even further: from the study of people to a model of knowledge grounded not simply on understanding but on bonds of relationship, friendship and even love.

The experience of HMI leads us to believe that the church has the obligation to take the initiative in seeking reconciliation with our Muslim brothers and sisters, and that this task must involve an openness to the transformation of both relationships and structures.

The starting place of reconciliation is found, Schreier reminds us, in accompaniment and hospitality. While today we have come to think of hospitality as something we share with people close to us, in times past it meant welcoming strangers into one's home, offering them not only food, shelter, and protection but also respect, acceptance, and friendship.

The following statement on hospitality was developed by the National Council of Churches (USA) Interfaith Commission as an invitation to churches to hold "open houses" for Muslims:

Hospitality as the welcome of strangers has deep roots in biblical tradition; it was understood by the early church to be a fundamental Christian practice.⁷

In Genesis 18, Abraham and Sarah welcome three strangers, offering them water, food, and rest. In showing such hospitality to those they first considered strangers, Abraham and Sarah are unexpectedly blessed. For the ancient Israelites, showing hospitality was intimately connected to their identity as God's people. They had been strangers themselves, and in their covenantal relationship with God knew themselves to be dependent on God for welcome and answerable to God for the welcome they showed others: "...you know the heart of an alien, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt" (Ex. 23:9).

For Christians, hospitality takes on additional significance in the words of Jesus, who says that in welcoming a stranger we are in fact welcoming him (Mt. 25:31–46). Leaders in the early church took these words seriously. Paul, in his letter to the church at Rome, instructs believers to “extend hospitality to strangers” (Rom. 12:13). And the Letter to the Hebrews reminds us, “Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it” (Heb. 13:2).

The Bible reminds us of the central importance of showing hospitality. It encourages us to welcome into our homes, churches, and communities those whom we perceive to be strangers. In so doing, we bear witness in our actions to the gracious, generous and hospitable love of God, and follow the example of the one who incarnates that love, Jesus Christ.⁸

Hospitality and friendship with Muslim neighbours will also invite accompaniment. It will mean learning about Muslim festivals and celebrations and special greetings that can be exchanged. And it will mean understanding the particular challenges that many Muslims face today in Canadian society. Many Muslims have expressed deep appreciation for their Christian neighbours’ concerns for them in the face of increasing discrimination, racism, and misunderstanding. And hospitality and accompaniment will lead to the underlying question of acceptance.

Muslims and Christians live side by side in this world, and their respective religious traditions continue to evolve and change. The church has lived for all its existence in situations of cultural and religious plurality. For many Christians, particularly in the East, Muslim–Christian relationships are about living together; sharing a common life, traditions, and values; and respecting differences. Dialogue is often seen in the East as a Western construct, a conceptualization of what for the rest of the world is interrelationship, interaction, collaboration, and coexistence. It is in the West that we are just discovering the reality of what most of the world has accepted for millennia—that religious plurality is a given.

Both Muslims and Christians have resources within their traditions for acknowledging the religious diversity that is present in the world, yet both have extensive histories of mission, seeking the conversion of the other. We believe a starting point for reconciliation is the rejection of proselytism in which each targets the other for conversion and therefore, by implication, extinction.

This does not exclude honest and sincere witness in lived relationships of what gives life and hope to each of us. Individuals will continue to make personal choices about faith, which will lead to conversion from one religious tradition to another. We need to be sensitive, however, to the significant differences in understanding of individual versus communal rights present in traditional Islamic societies. For many of these societies, conversion from Islam is regarded not simply as a personal faith decision but as a rejection of the social order and of God. It is also important to recall the history of Christian mission and its interconnection with colonialism and the effects that this still has today on most Muslims. In the spirit of reconciliation, it is the church that finds itself confronted by the words of Jesus: “So when you are offering your gift at the altar, if you remember that your brother or sister has something against you....”

Islam and Other Religions

Professor Mohamed Elmasry, President of the Canadian Islamic Congress, writes the following about Islam and other religions:

Islam is perhaps unique among the world's major religions in that its holy book the Qur'an explicitly provides five guidelines for Muslims on how to view other faiths. What are these five divine guidelines that the Qur'an clearly presents to Muslims for building tolerance and understanding among differing religions?

- 1. Everyone's God-given human dignity must be respected, regardless of their religion, race, ethnic origin, gender, or social status (17:70). Because they are all created by God Almighty, the Maker of All, humans must treat one another with full honour, respect and loving-kindness.*
- 2. Islam teaches it is by Divine Will that God's human creation follows different religions, or no religion at all (no religion is somewhat treated as a religion) (11:118), (10:99), (18:29). But God Almighty is not pleased when some of His servants (according to the Qur'an all humans are servants of the Creator in one way or another) choose not to believe (39:7).*
- 3. The Qur'an states clearly that freedom of religion is a God-given right (18:29), (10:99).*
- 4. The final judgment of all humanity lies in the hands of the One Almighty, their Creator, to whom we all return (22:68–69), (42:15).*
- 5. God loves justice and those who strive to practice it, especially toward people who are different from them in any way, particularly in religious belief (5:8), (60:8).⁹*

We believe the church needs, therefore, to search for ways of affirming theologically the possibility that God's purposes are being served through the continued existence and growth of both Muslim and Christian religious traditions. To affirm this does preclude what we have earlier described as an exclusivist stance, the belief that there is only one true path to salvation. But we hold open the option that this can be affirmed through a wide range of theological positions. The foundational marker that we have chosen to lift up is the affirmation of the 1966 Commission on World Mission that God is creatively and redemptively at work in the religious life of humanity, or as we have focused on in this report, in the religious life of Muslims. We suggest that such terms are helpful in understanding that isolation is no longer an option. Reconciliation must always flow out of an interrelationship between communities that continue to define their own identities. But the future of our world requires a new level of accountability to each other. To paraphrase Wilfred Cantwell Smith (see Appendix E), our goal is to help Muslims be better Muslims and for Muslims to help Christians be better Christians for the sake of the world we inhabit together.

Out of this can flow a new openness that can transform the church. We have already indicated the church's commitment to a larger ecumenism directed toward the common task of healing the world. We believe the United Church is called to build new structures of collaboration with Muslims who share our commitment to justice, peace, and the healing of creation. In the same way the church has throughout its history provided leadership in building ecumenical forums and structures, today we believe we should engage ourselves and our resources in this new direction.

We would especially encourage the formation of Muslim–Christian bodies at local and regional levels. While multifaith organizations are important venues for shared experience and work at a community level, we should not miss the particular need at this time for deeper understanding and

collaboration between Muslims and Christians. Particularly, we need avenues in which Muslims and Christians can together witness to the fact that tensions in various parts of the world do not point to a supposed “clash of civilizations,” and that the history of encounter has witnessed a strong stream of mutual friendship.

A United Church chaplain with the Canadian Forces relates his experience of working with a Muslim officer to prepare an interfaith service:

LCol Shahid (officers go by their first names, not their last) and I struck up a relationship as we had invited his Regiment to participate in our Remembrance Day ceremony, thus it fell to me to discuss any religious preferences or practices that they might want to observe as Muslims while on parade with us. This led to one of the most delightful and meaningful exchanges I have ever had with a Muslim. During my tour in Bosnia I had more than several conversations with the Muslim Imam concerning spiritual matters. These were invigorating and are forever etched in my memory. However, LCol Shahid bridged any gap that might have existed between our faiths by the generosity of his spirit and his immediate establishment of the commonalities that existed between us as Christians and Muslims. In LCol Shahid's thinking, there were two broad categories of people with whom one might work on deployment in a multinational operation such as the UN: those of faith and those with secular views ... only one must work with both while not insisting that each must believe the same. In his mind, working with the believer was far superior to that of a non-believer because of the natural commonalities. However, he espoused that even those who are secularly minded stress the importance of being good human beings, being altruistic. This would be the common ground upon which any co-operation would be established or partnership built.

In terms of those of other religions, his notion was that care must be taken not to negate what the other believes. In his mind, it was not a question of trying to prove the other wrong. This would only deter from creating a harmonious professional environment. Religion was to be a means of precipitating these kinds of homogeneous relationships between participating nations.

He stressed the fact with me that ours were divine religions. We were people who were both blessed with God's book. As a result of this, interaction was significantly easier. It was not his intention to stress any painful differences that existed between us (and he knew what they were) but rather to emphasize the commonalities. He stated it succinctly. There was one God and that we as human beings were to live clean, peaceful lives before him without prejudice.

We believe that we should also not neglect the difficult task of listening deeply to each other, and of seeking our own self-awareness and understanding in the light of other ways of thinking. This task is more complex than the first one because it suggests that dialogue with Muslims is not just a method but also a source for our theology. The Wesleyan quadrilateral identified by Albert Outler represents a use of sources in which scripture is interpreted by scripture itself, by Christian tradition, by experience, and by reason.¹⁰ It may be that in the task of understanding theology today we should add a further aid—the outcomes of dialogical conversation. We are hopeful that the time will come when theological and ethical explorations within the church will not be undertaken without asking what our Muslim friends might contribute to our work and self-understanding.

Furthermore, we hope for a church where we can learn from others the best and richest contributions of their faith. We believe it is possible to enrich one's own spiritual awareness through the experience of rituals and instruction in another religious tradition. This area will need careful and cautious development, but many congregations have richly benefited by inviting Muslim presence into congregational life and worship.

From the experience of the Henry Martyn Institute, we wish, finally, to suggest that the path of reconciliation between Muslims and Christians is now a process involving the struggle of the people. The new directions that are necessary will most likely come not from international or national meetings but rather from many local encounters between congregations and mosques, between individuals and small groups of Muslims and Christians.

We wish to celebrate the many initiatives taken by United Church congregations after September 11, 2001. Across the country, hundreds of congregations and their members initiated contacts with Muslims, attended open houses at mosques, wrote supportive letters, or offered other tangible signs of concern. Muslim neighbours nevertheless remain deeply concerned about misunderstanding and misinterpretations of Islam. There are still far too many signs of continuing identification of Muslims in general with terrorism. Systemic racism continues to be far too real for most Canadians of non-European heritage.

This is therefore a time of significant need and challenge as well as a time of new openness and potential. The authors of this document invite the church to see the path of reconciliation between Christians and Muslims as an important task for this time. Our hope is that this document in some way contributes to this journey.

Notes

1. Yvonne Y. Haddad and Wadi Z. Haddad, eds., *Christian–Muslim Encounters* (Gainesville, FL: University Press of Florida, 1995).
2. The United Church of Canada, *Mending the World: An Ecumenical Vision for Healing and Reconciliation* (Toronto: The United Church of Canada, 1997), p. 20.
3. R.J. Schreiter, *The Ministry of Reconciliation: Spirituality and Strategies* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1998), p. 65. Used by permission.
4. Henry Martyn Institute, Hyderabad, India. Used by permission.
5. Diane D’Souza, *Evangelism, Dialogue, Reconciliation: The Transformative Journey of the Henry Martyn Institute* (Hyderabad, India: Henry Martyn Institute, 1998). Used by permission.
6. Andreas D’Souza, quoted in D’Souza, 1998. Used by permission.
7. National Council of Churches, Interfaith Open House Project, “Hospitality.” Accessed April 24, 2003, from www.nccusa.org/interfaith/openhouse-hospitality.html.
8. Ibid.
9. Personal communication from Prof. Mohamed Elmasry, 2002.
10. Albert C. Outler, “The Wesleyan Quadrilateral—in John Wesley.” In Thomas A. Langford, ed., *Doctrine and Theology in the United Methodist Church* (Nashville, TN: Kingswood Books, 1991).

Appendix A

The Trinity and Christian–Muslim Relations



Without doubt, one of the central issues in the discussions between Christians and Muslims has been and will be the oneness of God. Judaism, Christianity, and Islam are the three great world religions that profess a basic monotheism. The pious Jew confesses, “Hear O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one.” The Christian follows Jesus’ formulation of the great commandment, “You shall love the Lord your God with all of your heart, soul, mind, and strength,” and the Muslim’s confession of faith, the *shahadah*, begins, “There is no god but God....”

Qur’anic references to the Trinity include Surah 4:171–75, and 5:73–76. In the Middle Ages, some Muslim theologians explicitly set out to deny the reasonableness of the doctrine of the Trinity.¹ In our time, the contemporary Imams who might be found in mosques in Canada will probably have studied these earlier Muslim theologians. Both sides in the medieval debates use Aristotelian categories and logic as their framework. The Muslim conclusions were that the Christian ideas were not rational. The Muslim logicians were convinced that they had proved that Jesus could not have been other than a normal man.

The 20th-century Muslim theologian Fazlur Rahman has written as follows on this topic:

The truth, then, appears to be that Muhammad must have encountered various views at the hands of various representatives of Christianity and that the Qur’an appears to address different groups at different points.

In any case, the unacceptability of Jesus’ divinity and the Trinity to the Qur’an is incontrovertible, as is the fact that Jesus and his followers are regarded as exceptionally charitable and self-sacrificing. The Qur’an would most probably have no objections to the Logos having become flesh if the Logos were not simply identified with God and the identification were understood less literally. For the Qur’an, the Word of God is never identified simply with God. Jesus, again, is the “Spirit of God” in a special sense for the Qur’an, although God had breathed His spirit into Adam as well [15:29, 38:72]. It was on the basis of some such expectations from the self-proclaimed monotheism of the Christians—and, of course, Jews—that the Qur’an issued its invitation: “O People of the Book! Let us come together upon a formula which is common between us—that we shall not serve anyone but God, and

that we shall associate none with Him" [3:64]. This invitation, probably issued at a time when Muhammad thought not all was yet lost among the three self-proclaimed monotheistic communities, must have appeared specious to Christians. It has remained unheeded. But I believe something can still be worked out by way of positive cooperation, provided the Muslims hearken more to the Qur'an than to the historical formulations of Islam and provided that recent pioneering efforts continue to yield a Christian doctrine more compatible with universal monotheism and egalitarianism.²

Medieval and modern Muslims alike have found the Trinity intellectually unacceptable. Thus a dilemma is posed today for those on both sides who might want to enter into serious efforts at mutual understanding. Christians—in liturgy, hymnody, creed, doctrine, and theologies—have steadily affirmed the threefoldness of God, and this is quite troublesome to our Jewish and Muslim dialogue partners. It sometimes arouses suspicion about the seriousness and completeness of Christian monotheistic commitment, or understanding, or both. Muslims and Jews ask, in other words, whether we are in serious danger of slipping into some sort of polytheism and idolatry. So the question at issue is this: Does the Christian's Trinitarian confession—that in the being of the eternal Deity there are three essential distinctions, traditionally named Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—not represent a regression from the faith that there is only one God and this God is one?

The History of the Doctrine of the Trinity

In seeking to answer this question, Christians might try to become clearer about our Trinitarian language. Some historical background may help. The doctrine of the Trinity did not crystallize until the fourth century, although it may be reasonably claimed that in some sense it was prefigured or implicitly present in the New Testament and in the language of the early church. The crystallization was precipitated by at least two historical controversies. One was generated by Marcion (c. 100–160), whose radical contention was that the Creator and the Redeemer were two different gods, not one. The other was generated by Arius (c. 250–336), whose contention was that Christ, the Logos and Redeemer, was neither fully divine nor fully human but was a third reality, somehow partly divine and partly human. The first, Marcionism, was understandably judged by the Christian community to betray Christianity's Hebrew Bible heritage, and the second, Arianism, was judged to fall short of doing justice to the experience of salvation itself (since only the truly and completely divine God can save us finally). In response to these two challenges, the Christian community judged it necessary to insist on the unity of Christ and God, while also recognizing the distinction between them. Convictions or judgments are one thing, however, and adequate theologies are another.

There followed an intense and ongoing period of Trinitarian reflection on how these basic convictions of faith were to be thought out or conceptualized. Some—especially in the Eastern, Greek-speaking churches—so emphasized the distinction between God and Christ (and the Holy Spirit) that they truly verged in the direction of a sort of tri-theism, that is, the belief that Father, Son, and Holy Spirit represent three distinct centres of consciousness and agency found in community, united so to speak by virtue of sharing a sort of common social identity and purpose. Others—especially in the Western, Latin-speaking churches—so stressed the unity of the one and only God that they seemed to have difficulty avoiding saying either that the one and only Deity died on Good Friday or that Jesus was

only a teacher, a mere, even if inspired, human being and not God incarnate at all. It was hard to get it right. What came to be regarded as the orthodox solution, in response to both, was that of trying to hold together both the oneness and manyness of God. Eastern Christians spoke of one being (*ousia*) in three distinctions (*hypostases*), while Western Christians spoke of one being (*substantia*) in three persons (*personae*).

Although these doctrinal and theological efforts are worthy of enormous respect, shaping and guiding the history of Christian thinking and speaking like great banks of a river, it is obvious that the language of the early and medieval church, with its conditioning by cultures and languages other than our own, is not readily intelligible today and is indeed the source of much incomprehension and misunderstanding. For example, the meaning of the key word “person” has shifted over the ages. In earlier times, people who spoke Latin understood in the word “persona” something like a part or role someone played in a drama. Our word “person” today is invariably taken to refer to a distinct, individual centre of consciousness and decision-making. Thus the idea of three divine persons—Father, Son, and Holy Ghost (or even Creator, Redeemer, and Spirit)—understandably strikes many as incompatible with monotheism. The language of three persons (returning to the Latin *personae* or substituting the Greek *hypostases* does not likely help!) has been problematized by the passage of time and cultural-linguistic mutations and shifts, necessitating transposing the intentions and insights of the past into a contemporary idiom.

This linguistic change, among other things, has led contemporary theologians to rethink and restate Trinitarian doctrine. Such theologians tend now to attempt to get beneath Trinitarian concepts and doctrines to the religious experience and concrete historical origins and developments that generated the original theologizing. They want to recover the original meaning of the doctrine. And they want to see how this doctrine relates to religious life and practice. They want to think it through, not as a speculative concept descending on us ready-made from above, but as an expression of religious experience originating from below, here on earth, in time and space, in historical and cultural encounters and contexts.

The doctrine’s intention, they emphasize, is not to propose a conundrum of a quasi-mathematical sort, about three being one and one somehow being three. It is an attempt to express the meaning of human transformation and salvation. The past formulations of the doctrine are not to be treated as sacrosanct mysteries. God is mystery, being finally incomprehensible in greatness and goodness, but doctrines are not themselves mysteries. They should be intelligible attempts to state the meaning of the original experience of salvation in terms that are intelligible and relevant today, with the realization that theologizing is an ongoing and never complete activity, and is an ongoing pilgrimage that is Christian life itself. Every age will find that “time makes ancient good uncouth,” as a hymn puts it, and that the search to rethink and re-express the faith once delivered to the saints is the vocation of every believer who wishes to love God with mind, as well as heart and soul.

Contemporary Trinitarian Thought

One of the most striking features of contemporary Christian theology is the ferment in Trinitarian thinking. Indeed, it has become at or at least near the centre of the work of some of the scholars in the field today. Any attempt to summarize emerging results within the limits of our space here would involve oversimplification. However, with that said, several results can be ventured.

There is the emerging recognition that at the heart of the church's thinking and speaking has been a triple concern, and this must be reflected in subsequent theologizing:

1. There has been the concern to recognize and make clear that there is one and only one and undivided God. This is clear especially if we note the historical conditions of the early creeds. Early Christians found themselves encompassed by a plethora of Mediterranean, Greek, and Roman polytheisms, in the face of which they were ridiculed as atheists for their resolute refusal to recognize the gods commonly accepted. Christian refusal was obviously the result of the Christian heritage of strict and radical Jewish monotheism. While Christians wanted to explain their worship of Jesus Christ, they were at pains to do so without breaking with this heritage or capitulation to a cultural context with which both they and the Jewish communities were at odds. Therefore, tri-theism was not an option. In worshipping Jesus Christ, no lapse was intended or allowed into polytheism. This was at the basis of the rejection of Marcionism.
2. There was, however, an equal desire to bear witness to a concrete, historical, transforming, liberating, redeeming experience—the experience of salvation in the person and event of Jesus Christ. The experience of and language about God were not to be located in abstract speculation or mystical flights from the world but rather mediated and engendered by an event in the world, encountered concretely. This was not the result of a search for God but of early Christians' finding themselves found by God in Jesus Christ. Put differently, the transcendent God was experienced to be immanent and present in the life, death, and resurrection of a human being. The doctrine of the Trinity was an effort to express and preserve in words and thought the experience of this transcendent One who lies at the basis of Christian faith.
3. There was the attempt to rethink the nature of God in light of this event—that is, to think through the meaning of God being our Saviour. There was the belief not only that Jesus corresponded with God but also that God corresponded with Jesus—that God was Jesus-like. The monotheism of Christian faith could not be limited to the bare monotheism of philosophy. The God of Jesus Christ was anything but a remote, impersonal being, standing in aloof superiority to the world, but was taken to be a living God, acting on and interacting with the world creatively, redemptively, providentially. If philosophers thought of God as an unmoved mover of the world, so impersonal as to be oblivious even to the existence of the world, the God Christians believed in numbers the hairs on our heads and marks the fall even of the lowly sparrow. The perfection commonly ascribed to God had to be rethought in light of Jesus Christ. It could no longer be thought of as the perfection of mere absoluteness, for this God is related to the world. It could not be thought of as the perfection of mere timelessness, for God enters time. It could not be thought of as unchangeable, for the God of Good Friday suffers with and for us. God's perfection as love had to be rethought, for Christians found the biblical God to love not only by giving but also by allowing us to give back to God through service.

While it is clear that a clean break must be made with anything remotely like polytheism or tri-theism, taken metaphorically, the language of social relationship expresses something important about the perfection of God's love. Just as one might think of the Father needing the Son to be Father and vice versa, one might venture to say that God's love is not one of self-sufficiency and independence alone but also of social relatedness, reciprocity, and sharing. Christians were not the only ones to see this; Jewish mystics, for example, spoke of creation in terms of not only God doing something but also of a divine withdrawing a bit to allow space for something and someone else to be and do. God thus allows the creatures to contribute to the fullness of the divine life by their beautiful acts—or to contribute to the glory of God, in later Christian language. In divine humility God serves the world, and in doing so allows the creatures the honour of serving God by serving each other.

The above three points are generally taken now to be guiding lights for ongoing Trinitarian reflections. It remains to observe one further thing: Contemporary, historically informed thinking is finding that the doctrine of the Trinity, rather than being a dogmatic block to interreligious dialogue, is a basis and stimulus to it for Christians. The emphasis on Jesus Christ as a saving experience of and encounter with God is increasingly seen in a non-exclusivistic way. That is, Jesus Christ, as a historical person, need not be seen as an isolated island of light in an otherwise dark and Godless world. Indeed, to think of God as so limited is increasingly judged to be incompatible with what, in fact, is revealed in Jesus, namely a God of “pure unbounded love” (Charles Wesley), infinitely resourceful, and in relentless pursuit of the “lost coin” and “wayward sheep.” To limit God, and thus the possibility of salvation, to a tiny patch of time and space unacceptably implies that God is either unwilling or unable to love all creatures, contrary to the explicit teachings of Jesus himself. Rather than seeing Jesus as an exhaustive expression of God's love, we are learning to see Jesus in a way that is more inclusive, in a way that is more in keeping with a worldwide perspective of human history and, indeed, of a cosmic vision.

Some Christians are finding in the ancient doctrine of the divine Logos a resource for expressing this broader vision. Recall that some early Christians—the author of the Gospel of John, for example—spoke of Jesus as the incarnation of the eternal Logos of God. “Logos” was associated with the ancient Greek philosophical understanding of the rational structure of the world based in the mind of God. Thus one can see that this Logos may be thought of as being always implicitly present everywhere and as possibly coming to explicit expression anywhere. Some early Christians thought of Socrates and Plato as being partially expressive of the Logos, which came to perfect expression in Jesus Christ. One can see the possibility of this way of thinking so as to allow Christians to see other religions as being expressive of this Logos as well.

Another possibility for thinking inclusively, however, is found in the doctrine of the Spirit or Holy Spirit, to which the Trinitarian formula itself explicitly speaks. This doctrine can function much as does the Logos idea; many see it preferable to the Logos strategy precisely because it is less rationalistic. The Logos idea plays on the idea of rational structure, divine truth, and so on capable of being grasped intellectually. Unfortunately, this often gives rise to the idea of revelation as the communication of propositional truths about God. Spirit, however, seems to connote not only truth but also creativity, love, ecstasy, inspiration, transformation, liberation, and so on. Thus, to speak of God revealing through the Spirit suggests not so much God revealing truths about Godself but as revealing God's own heart and being, God's personal presence.

At the heart of Trinitarian thinking was not only the issue of God's presence in Jesus Christ but also of how and in what sense God is present in the world after the conclusion of Jesus' earthly life and how God was present to human beings before Jesus. The language of God as Spirit was a way of speaking of God's immanent creativity, love, and redemptive activity throughout the entire cosmic processes of creation and salvation. The Spirit, after all, was present before the birth of Jesus, was the dominant factor in the life of Jesus, and was experienced after Jesus throughout the world. Can we not also expand these insights to see the Spirit as emerging and guiding the entire evolutionary processes of nature as well as throughout the world of human history? Along these lines, we can see the incarnation not as apart from this broad activity but as its decisive focal point. The incarnation is not a confinement of the Spirit but is the Spirit's breakthrough. It is a breakthrough in which the universal Spirit of God is able to express in human life qualities that characterize divine action throughout the cosmos, especially the qualities of self-giving love. This love comes to expression in a human life in a way consistent with human freedom.

In this sense, one can best speak of Jesus Christ as a full, normative, decisive expression of God's Spirit without implying that Jesus Christ is the only or exhaustive expression. Jesus defines God's Spirit but does not confine it. Jesus is God's self-expression "once and for all" but not "once and that's all." To believe in Jesus the Christ is not to insist that God's activity in the world is limited to one time and place; to confess belief in God as Spirit is to insist that the divine love that came to perfect expression in one individual, Jesus, is also to be found elsewhere. Indeed, Jesus Christ is the lens through which we Christians recognize the Spirit of God at work elsewhere. Because of what we experience of God in this one person, we indeed fully expect to find God at work elsewhere, for God's love is boundless and resourceful. We do not, however, expect to find the workings of God's Spirit elsewhere to be fundamentally inconsistent with what we have experienced in Jesus Christ, however different—perhaps enrichingly different—they may be.

Notes

1. Yvonne Y. Haddad and Wadi Z. Haddad, eds., *Christian-Muslim Encounters* (Gainesville, FL: University Press of Florida, 1995).
2. Fazlur Rahman, *Major Themes of the Qur'an*, 2nd ed. (Minneapolis, MN: Bibliotheca Islamica, 1989), p. 170.

Appendix B

On Hosting Muslim Visitors or Visiting a Mosque



The name Muslims use for a mosque is *masjid*, translated directly as “a place of bowing down.” It is not uncommon as well to hear *masjids* referred to as Islamic Centres. Mosques are open daily throughout the week for the five daily prayers and for personal meditation and reflection. In addition, the mosque often serves as a community centre for special dinners, weddings, and funerals. Many mosques in Canada now also have a weekend school for the children of members, and some have full-day school programs.

Most mosques and Islamic Centres welcome contact with neighbouring churches. Visits are usually most welcome, as are other forms of contact. It is important, however, to be careful and considerate about expectations. There are many more churches than mosques, and some mosques have had many requests for hosting confirmation classes and other visits. Overall, the priority for contacting mosques needs to be on building long-term, respectful relationships, not on meeting the needs of congregational programs for interfaith experiences.

When visiting a mosque, men and women should dress modestly. This means loose clothing that covers the arms and legs is essential. While many mosques are flexible about hair covering for non-Muslim women, it is recommended as a sign of respect for the tradition that women cover their hair with a scarf. Shoes are to be removed at the appropriate place when entering a mosque. Look for where others have left their shoes, and never enter the prayer hall with shoes on.

Every mosque contains a place (fountain or washbasin) to do *wudu*, the ritual washing performed by Muslims before prayer (non-Muslims are not expected to do this ritual washing). The small curved niche in the prayer hall indicates the direction of Mecca and orients the lines that will be formed for the prayers. Usually separate prayer areas for men and women are marked off in some way. Many mosques also have some kind of minaret, where the call to prayer is made.

It is always necessary to pre-arrange a visit, especially if a group is involved. Permission should be asked if visitors wish to witness prayer. It is generally acceptable only for Muslims to participate in the prayer line at the mosque. Visitors are usually asked to sit at the back or the side during prayer.

Men should exercise care in greeting Muslim women. It is wise to wait for a handshake to be offered rather than to assume that one is appropriate.

It is entirely appropriate to invite a Muslim participant in an event or meeting to offer a prayer or blessing for a meal if the individual is comfortable with praying or speaking in public.

The same guidelines apply for inviting any member of another tradition to speak or participate in a Christian service or worship. It is understood that they are guests and as such would not expect the service to be any less than what it usually is. However, care can be taken in selecting scripture and hymns to emphasize God's universal love and the common commitments we all share for God's mission in the world.

It is important to check in advance the wording of liturgies or readings that *Muslim guests are asked to share in reading*. While most Muslims will not object to traditional Christian language within a Christian service, spoken by Christians, it is inappropriate to ask them to participate in a shared reading that is in conflict with their own beliefs. In this context, language that speaks of God as Father is inappropriate, as is using the language of Lord, Saviour, and so on for Jesus.

In joint services of worship (interfaith services), care should be taken to ensure that all participants (Muslims, Christians, and others) are free to speak from within their own tradition. Careful planning involving representatives of all the traditions who participate is important for such services.

When hosting gatherings for Muslims, care must also be taken to provide acceptable food choices. *Halal* foods (ritually prepared for Muslims) can usually be found in large cities. However, all kinds of fruit are acceptable, as are most desserts and breads. Most importantly, avoid all forms of pork (including bacon bits in caesar salads) and shellfish. If in doubt, check with your Muslim colleagues in advance about what to serve.

United Church clergy are at times faced with requests for pastoral care for people of other faiths. The following story comes from Rev. Don Collett of West Vancouver United Church and suggests that the wisest approach is always based on careful listening and compassion.

One Saturday recently, when I was the on-call chaplain, I was called by a social worker who was with a family at the hospital. The family was Muslim and wanted somebody to come and read the Qur'an over the body of a relative who had just died. I spent the next hour or so trying to make contact with the Islamic community, trying desperately to get in touch with someone who would come to this family's aid. I learned a great deal and made a lot of contacts, but for one reason or another no one was able to help me help this family.

When I telephoned the social worker to tell her that I was not able to find anyone, she reported that the family was becoming agitated. "Would you come?" she asked. I was reluctant, out of fear that, by what I might say or do, I would offend or hurt the family. I learned that this was a Shia Moslem family and I worried that something I might do or say might prevent the dead relative from getting a proper burial from a mosque. It was clear at this point, however, that if I did not go I would be doing more harm.

So I went. All the family wanted was a prayer—a blessing, a few words about how God might receive their beloved relative. As I prayed in the presence of

their loved one, all the reading that I had done about Islam over the last year came to the fore. I knew that, for Muslims, the promise of paradise in the afterlife was central. So I prayed to Allah, whom I take to be my Lord God also—who is merciful and just and all loving.

In those few moments in that hospital room with that family, there were many moments of pure crystal, where God intruded upon our lives and taught us many things we didn't know about gratitude and friendship. They were grateful that a Christian minister would come and be so respectful. I was grateful because I had an opportunity to make a positive difference in their lives. We were all grateful that we live in a country where such a thing as this could happen. Many moments of grace.

Believe it or not, having put that rich experience behind me, I was called again the next day on the way to church. This time, the family was Zoroastrian. I know absolutely nothing about that religious tradition. It was as if I was being invited into a permanently different place, as if I could not slip back now into the former life.

Again, there was no one who could come to this family. Would I come? I told them that I would be glad to come but that I could not possibly make it until noon, until after my own worship time. Incredibly, they said they would be glad to wait. And so just after noon, three hours after the original phone call, after I returned from worship in my own congregation, I spent another holy time, in a holy space, with a family who had lost its mother. They said they needed only one prayer to liberate them toward the next stage in their grieving process. And so I prayed.

And again, the gratitude was overwhelming. Theirs and my own. Later, they called to thank me again and ask if they could make a donation to our church. So much gratitude. So much thanksgiving. So much grace.

Finally, a note about some difficulties that congregations have experienced in planning public events with Muslims on Islam. In planning such events (evening sessions, guest speakers, and so on) with Muslim guests, it is wise to be prepared for those who might attend with some concern or even anger. In many parts of Canada, recent immigrants from some Muslim countries will attend such gatherings to speak about their difficult experiences as Christians in these countries. Perhaps it is best to encourage them to stay after the meeting for some more private conversation. In many cases, the stories are indeed true and difficult. However, the emphasis needs to be on building new and better relationships with Muslims.

Appendix C

Comparative Fundamentalism



Fundamentalism is a 20th-century phenomenon, a reactive movement to what is perceived as destabilizing social change. Although differences exist among the religions owing to varieties of scripture, religious authority, ritual practices, and social codes, the similarities among contemporary fundamentalist movements in all religious traditions are striking.¹ It must be emphasized that the vast majority of fundamentalists in all religions do not take part in acts of terror, but are merely struggling to live a pious life in a world that is inimical to their faith.

Christian Fundamentalism

From 1910 to 1915, a series of pamphlets entitled *The Fundamentals* was produced by a group of American Protestants. A Baptist newspaperman wrote that a *fundamentalist* is a person willing to do *battle royal* for the *fundamentals* of the faith.² The label “fundamentalist” has since become widely used for any person in any religious tradition who sees him- or herself as ready to do battle for what are perceived as threats of alteration to doctrine in relation to changing social context. A fundamentalist tends to think in categorical terms of “pure fundamentals” on the one hand and “impure modernity” on the other.

In North America, the bombing of the government building in Oklahoma City in 1995 can be seen as linked with the extremist Protestant fundamentalist groups that have developed particularly among those whose lives have been disrupted by changes in the ways farms are owned and operated.³ Such groups tend to focus on the Book of Revelation in the New Testament as the source of their ideology. They envisage sudden and violent change in the social and political order.

Hindu, Buddhist, and Jewish Fundamentalism

Hindu and Buddhist forms of fundamentalism have similar characteristics.⁴ The Hindu and Buddhist movements developed first as ways of reaffirming traditional cultural values after the collapse of the imperialist controls over India and Sri Lanka. They have changed, however, into aggressive modes of ideological control opposed to any dissenting views. Typically, fundamentalists affirm that only one version of the tradition is valid, and insist on political control so that their version can be imposed on all people. Fundamentalists cannot abide diversity and dissent.

Jewish fundamentalist movements have mainly developed within Israel and are characterized by insisting on adhering to traditional norms. One such movement, *Gush Emunin*, developed after the Israeli victory in the war of 1967. Members of the movement see this victory as the will of God and see the expansion of Israel as part of God's purpose. In this sense, the state is perceived as sacred.⁵

Islamic Fundamentalism

The two earliest Islamic fundamentalist movements were the *Jama'at-i Islami* of South Asia,⁶ and the *Ikhwan-i Safa* (Muslim Brotherhood) of Egypt and the Arab world.⁷ The latter formed in Cairo in 1928. Maulana Mawdudi, the founder of the *Jama'at-i Islami*, published his first major book, a study of *jihad*, in 1929 when he was working in Delhi.

These forms of fundamentalism thus developed in the context of the miseries of the big cities in the Depression era; villagers coming into the city lost their traditional forms of mutual support and needed new structures. The fundamentalist movements have found their major sources of support from among alienated people in such contexts.

Mawdudi subsequently wrote many short books and pamphlets that became the major sources of fundamentalist ideology throughout the Muslim world. His works have been translated into many languages and are often for sale in mosque bookstores. His basic idea was that there are at present two conflicting ways of life: modernity, which he called *Jahiliya* (pagan), and Islam, as understood by him. Those who join the organization must accept the view of Islam Mawdudi propagated. Other Muslims are seen as belonging to paganism. This view of Islamic history is a 20th-century notion. In the seventh century, the first Muslims overthrew the pre-existing idolatrous world of the pre-Islamic Arabs. Mawdudi introduced the new idea that the situation in the 20th century is exactly the same—namely, Islam has come into the world to overthrow paganism just as it did in the seventh century. All the forms of Islamic life between the seventh century and the present are dismissed as deviant and irrelevant. Mawdudi argued that an Islamic revolution is the will of God and must necessarily come about once his organization is in power. His followers advocate a form of government under one leader, an *Amir*, who will be selected because of his righteousness. Democracy is therefore rejected.

Many other Islamic fundamentalist movements have come into being over the last century, but they all share a similar belief: They are fighting paganism in order to restore the political, social, and economic order they believe is the will and purpose of God. Their rhetoric often focuses vividly on the evils of the pagan modern world as they see it. Changes in the role and status of women are often mentioned in such rhetoric as “demonic” societal changes that are likely to lead to widespread social anarchy, corruption, and destruction of sound family life.⁸

The Taliban of Afghanistan are an offshoot of the Islamic extremist movements that developed in India and Pakistan.⁹ *Talib* means “student” in Arabic. The student movements of the *Jama'at-i Islami* in Pakistan based most of their ideas on Mawdudi's writings. Mawdudi was not a proponent of violence; he saw the battle as one of competing ideologies. The students, however, were impatient with the slow-moving approach of ideological argument and opted for violence instead. The social unrest resulting from the chaos in Afghanistan following the departure of the Russians gave them the opportunity to seize power and try to implement their ideology.

Writing in response to the events of September 11, 2001, Dr. Karen Armstrong addresses the particular form of fundamentalism characterized by Osama bin Laden:

Osama bin Laden is from Saudi Arabia, where a particular form of Islam, Wahhabism, is practiced. Wahhabism was an 18th century reform movement, not unlike Puritanism in Christianity. It wanted to get back to the sources of the faith, get rid of accretions and additions, and all foreign influence. Thus Wahhabis wanted to eliminate the practice of Sufism, the mysticism of Islam, which developed after Muhammad's time; it was deeply opposed to Shi'ite Islam, another later development. And Wahhabis wanted to rid Islam of all foreign influence.¹⁰

Bin Laden follows a program of action that was fashioned by Sayyid Qutb, an Egyptian fundamentalist ideologue. It includes

withdrawal from the world, a period of preparation and finally an offensive against the enemies of Islam. The program completely distorts the meaning of the life of the Prophet Muhammad, who was forced to engage in war but who achieved victory by an ingenious and inspiring policy of non-violence. Bin Laden roughly subscribes to this kind of Sunni fundamentalism. His quarrel with the United States is not, however, over theological differences. He resents what he regards as its partisan and one-sided support for Israel, its support of such unpopular leaders as the Saudi kings and President Mubarak; and the continued bombings and sanctions against Iraq, which have deprived the Iraqi people (though not Saddam and his cronies) of food and drugs, as a result of which thousands of Iraqi children have died of cancer. All this Bin Laden regards as an act of war against the Arab peoples. All this seems to him, and to many people in the Middle East, an American war against Islam.¹¹

Notes

1. Martin E. Marty and R. Scott Appleby have edited five volumes in a series entitled *The Fundamentalism Project* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, various years). The volumes deal with fundamentalism in relation to the family, the state, economics, education, and science. All the world's major religious traditions are discussed.
2. Nancy T. Ammerman, "North American Protestant Fundamentalism," in Martin E. Marty and R. Scott Appleby, eds., *Fundamentalisms Observed* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), p. 2.
3. Joel Dyer, *Harvest of Rage: Why Oklahoma City Is Only the Beginning* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1997).
4. Martin E. Marty and R. Scott Appleby, eds., *Fundamentalisms and the State: Remaking Politics, Economies, and Militance* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993). For Hindus see pp. 233–55, for Buddhists pp. 589–619, for Jews pp. 68–87.
5. *Fundamentalisms Observed*, pp. 469–77.
6. Seyyed Vali Reza Nasr, *The Vanguard of the Islamic Revolution: The Jama'at-i Islami of Pakistan* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1994).
7. John O. Voll, "Fundamentalism in the Sunni Arab World: Egypt and the Sudan," in *Fundamentalisms Observed*, pp. 345–402.
8. Martin E. Marty and R. Scott Appleby, eds., *Fundamentalisms and Society: Reclaiming the Sciences, the Family, and Education* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993). Part two of this volume considers fundamentalism and the family in the cases of Protestants, Sunni and Shi'a Muslims, Mormons, and modern Japanese social movements.
9. William Maley, ed., *Fundamentalism Reborn? Afghanistan and the Taliban* (New York: New York University Press, 1998).
10. Karen Armstrong, "Fractured Fundamentalisms." Accessed on-line April 25, 2003. These quotes are drawn from an article which appeared originally on www.beliefnet.com. Used with permission. All rights reserved.
11. *Ibid.*

Appendix D

The Commission on World Mission



The church should recognize that God is creatively and redemptively at work in the religious life of all mankind [sic].

Christians have much to learn, as well as to contribute, through dialogue with people of other faiths. Their special responsibility is to present the knowledge of God in Christ Jesus in humble and sincere dialogue in ways which will respect each other's integrity.¹

Critical to the path of the United Church understanding of mission has been the *Report of the Commission on World Mission*, the principal recommendations of which were adopted by the 22nd General Council in 1966. This report broke new ground in calling on the church to establish relationships of partnership with the younger churches to which the United Church and its predecessor denominations originally had sent missionaries. It also offered a significant critique of the way in which historic mission (often unwittingly) had assumed Western enculturation as integral to the gospel. Moreover, it announced the possibility of a new paradigm for the work of theology. The quotation above points to what the authors of the report envisaged as the emergence of a new world context: The interpenetration of cultures through travel, immigration, and new forms of communication would lead ultimately to the reality of one world. This global civilization would not be based on superficial homogenization but rather on cross-cultural connection and interaction.

The report notes that the theology of the early church was formulated as the outcome of intimate and continuous encounter between the knowledge of Jesus Christ and the Greco-Roman patterns of thinking and living. And today, the report argues, a like dynamic is possible in the encounter with other world faiths. Thus, what is needed in carrying out mission is not the presentation of precisely defined formulations to people of other faiths, but a mission

conducted in a way that will facilitate intimate, continuous and creative encounter between the knowledge of Jesus Christ and the thinking of people who have come through neither the Hebraic nor the Graeco-Roman traditions, or of other people for whom these traditions have lost much of their meaning.²

Such interaction would necessitate a “reconceptualization” of theology and approach. The church would have to move beyond its Western rationality to approaches more Eastern in form, entering the risk of dialogue in which the participants do not come from a common historical or philosophical

tradition. In such encounter, Christians may be led to deepened understanding of their own faith.

It is important to note that the report does not endorse the simple substitution of dialogue for evangelism. Rather, it urges the church to define its mission as including a dialogue with other world faiths “in which are tied together both the evangelism that proceeds by listening and the evangelism that proceeds by speaking.”³ Indeed, the report uses strong and traditional language in describing the content of the Christian missionary message:

The primary basis of the missionary imperative lies in the Christian’s conviction that God sent Christ to penetrate [sic] the world and to redeem humanity from within; that Christ founded a community of people, forming the church, to continue the work He had perfectly initiated; and that the events of Christ’s life, death and resurrection, provide both the pattern for the church’s mission and the dynamic for its performance....

Contemporary Biblical studies have reinforced the conviction that the *missionary imperative arises fundamentally out of God’s act in sending Christ and in establishing the Church to continue His work.*⁴

At the same time, there is a repeated reminder that missionary endeavour must eschew any sense of cultural superiority and learn to listen as well as to speak: “[T]he Christian must make special efforts to encounter [sic] men of other faiths, and to enter into persuasive dialogue with them, only in ways that will engender mutual trust.”⁵ The new missionaries must also be prepared to let go of any control over the outcome of the endeavour. The distinctive role of the missionary in other religious communities “is basically to present the knowledge of Jesus Christ, and release it to become a formative force in the life of that community.”⁶

The report canvasses the possibilities for a Christian’s attitude to other faiths current at the time:

Views range all the way from a belief that Christianity is radically opposed to all other faiths, and must altogether displace them, to the view that Christianity is the fulfilment of other faiths. For the former point of view, there is no real point of continuity between other faiths and Christianity; Christianity cuts across and makes irrelevant all that has gone before. For the latter point of view, there is continuous development from other religions to Christianity, which fulfils what they in more imperfect ways anticipated. The former tend to emphasize the uniqueness of the revelation of God in the historic person of Christ; the latter tend to emphasize the universal operation of the Logos among all people.⁷

The assertion that God is creatively and redemptively at work in the religions of humankind clearly stakes out the Commission’s own position. If one adopts the accepted distinction among exclusivist/inclusivist/pluralist positions,⁸ then this crucial assertion rules out the exclusivist position, namely that Christianity must displace all other faiths. The statement also seems to rule out the Barthian teaching that all religion is by nature discontinuous with the gospel. All religious life may be judged and found wanting in the light of the gospel, but it is the conviction of the report that all religious life is also affirmed and dignified by God’s active involvement. The overall approach of the

report is to hold in constructive tension both the understanding of a new, religiously plural context and the historic mandate of the church to witness to God's mission to the world in Jesus Christ.

When the report speaks in theological terms rather than those of comparative religion, it tends to take an inclusivist stance, affirming that God's active involvement is through the universal presence of the eternal Logos.⁹ According to John 1:1–5 (also Col. 1:15–20 and Heb. 1:1–2), it is through the Logos or eternal Word that all things come to be and finally will be perfected. While Christians know the Word as incarnate in Jesus Christ, it is this same Word who, although unknown and unnamed, “has always been operating in the life and thought of non-Christian peoples.”¹⁰ It is unlikely that the authors of the report would have endorsed Karl Rahner's concept of the “anonymous Christian,” since that would seem to deny the authenticity of the spiritual experience of, for example, a Hindu as a Hindu. However, they might well have endorsed the concept of an “anonymous Christ.”

At times, one is left with the impression that the inclusivist position is the most venturesome that the authors of the report could conceive.¹¹ However, the report also evidences openness to a pluralist approach at a time when this option was only just beginning to be articulated. The report views the ongoing existence and growth of other world faiths both as a historical reality and as theologically significant. In the section entitled “Rethinking the Relationship between Christianity and Other Faiths, and the Uniqueness of Christianity,” the report suggests that the church “should probably welcome the religious plurality of the modern world” because “rather than limiting effective encounter in dialogue with non-Christians, the religious pluralism of the modern world may facilitate it.” Religious plurality will drive us “back to a better understanding of [our] own faith,” helping us to disentangle ourselves from a solely Western enculturation of Christian faith and theology. This will allow us to understand the core of our own faith better and to grow in respect for our neighbours of other faiths.¹²

The report also may go so far as to signal the appearance of the transformationist option in understanding other religions and cultures. To enter into the process of dialogue entails the possibility of transformation. While patterns of interreligious connection have occurred throughout history, in recent times the tempo of this interconnection has increased. Eastern and Western traditions continue to grow toward a future yet to be discerned. In this future, Hindus will be Hindus, not in any past sense but in some future one; the future of Buddhists will be Buddhist, in a way yet to be created; the future of the Muslim world will be the next chapter in the ongoing evolution of an Islamic history now vigorously in process.¹³

As the world changes, the report argues, religious communities will be challenged by the need to develop a new element in their individual and corporate lives—compatibility. Because of its history and present position, Christianity is called to do so first, to lead the way. This compatibility has a clear objective in mind, because for the first time the world's religious communities are facing shared problems. “Christians, Jews, Muslims, Hindus and the others are being called upon to collaborate in building a common world ... not merely a world of which we can severally approve, but also one to the building of which the faith of each can aspire.”¹⁴

Notes

1. *Record of Proceedings of the 22nd General Council, 1966 [ROP 1966]* (Toronto: The United Church of Canada, 1966), pp. 435–36.
2. *ROP 1966*, pp. 425–26.
3. *ROP 1966*, p. 426.
4. *ROP 1966*, p. 341.
5. *ROP 1966*, p. 354.
6. *ROP 1966*, p. 343.
7. *ROP 1966*, p. 351.
8. For a brief description of these positions in recent United Church documents, see Committee on Theology and Faith, *Reconciling and Making New: Who Is Jesus for the World Today?* (Toronto: United Church Publishing House, 1994) p. 36f., and The United Church of Canada, *Mending the World: An Ecumenical Vision for Healing and Reconciliation* (Toronto: The United Church of Canada, 1997), pp. 16–17.
9. For an example of the use of Logos Christology in a recent United Church report, see *Mending the World*, pp. 17–19.
10. *ROP 1966*, p. 351.
11. The report ironically commends such theologically divergent scholars as Hendrik Kraemer and A.C. Bouquet, and describes A.C. Bouquet as one “who strongly champions the view that the eternal Logos has always been operating in the life and thought of non-Christian peoples” but “nevertheless says that this ‘does not abate one whit the unique glory of the once-for-all discontinuous incarnation in Jesus.’” *ROP 1966*, p. 351.
12. *ROP 1966*, p. 352.
13. *ROP 1966*, p. 324.
14. *ROP 1966*, p. 326.

Appendix E

The Contribution of Wilfred Cantwell Smith



Wilfred Cantwell Smith (1916–2000) is widely regarded as one of the world’s most significant scholars in the field of the history of religions and Islamic studies. He was a minister of The United Church of Canada; a member of Bloor Street United Church, Toronto; the holder of the Birk’s Chair of Comparative Religion in the Divinity Faculty at McGill; the founder of the Institute of Islamic Studies at McGill; and, subsequently, the Director of the Centre for the Study of World Religions at Harvard. He was also for several years the President of the American Academy of Religion. Just before his death, the Government of Canada awarded him the Order of Canada.

Smith was born in Toronto and educated at the University of Toronto, where he was an active member of the Student Christian Movement. He went to Cambridge in 1938 to study theology with H.H. Farmer and found himself in the midst of a tumultuous student generation that was frantic about the Spanish Civil War and the fierce conflicts between socialism and fascism taking place in Europe. Like his friend and contemporary, George Grant, Smith had been a pacifist since his secondary-school studies at Upper Canada College. His early education had convinced him that World War I had been a disastrous conflict rooted in nationalistic greed. Grant stayed in London to help the voluntary efforts of the Fire Brigades during the Blitz. Smith responded to the crisis by going to India with his new wife, Muriel, a daughter of former Canadian missionaries in China. At that point, Smith was thinking about how to help India achieve independence from European domination.

In Lahore, then still part of India, Smith took a position teaching Islamic history at Forman Christian College. At that time, Smith saw himself as an adherent of Nehru’s cause of working for the independence and free development of India. Smith and his wife visited Nehru in his prison cell in Lucknow in 1941. Smith’s first book, *Modern Islam in India*, published in 1943,¹ gives us a vivid picture of the young Canadian’s responses to the tensions and hopes of Lahore in the early 1940s. At that time, he hoped Nehru could build a socialist India that would unite all the Indian peoples—Christians, Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists, Jews, and others. Smith was very stimulated by a group of young socialists like himself in Lahore at that time. They shared many values in spite of the diversity of their religious backgrounds. All were united in their support of Nehru and in their commitment to the struggle to free India.

The violence that broke out at the time of the independence of India and Pakistan in 1947 shattered Smith’s confidence in his own comprehension of the forces at work in India and in human history.

Over 10 million people were uprooted, and terrible mutual slaughter took place between members of different religious communities. One of Smith's Muslim friends from his early days in Lahore, K.G. Saiyidain, stayed with India but wrote an open letter to Nehru in which he said an even greater evil than the actual violence were the seeds of mutual hatred and desire for revenge that resulted from the events of partition.² Smith went back to Canada and accepted a chair in Comparative Religion in the Faculty of Divinity at McGill. He undertook to develop the university's new Institute of Islamic Studies in order to work toward modes of study that would be acceptable to both Muslims and non-Muslims. Like Saiyidain, Smith understood much would have to be done to combat the forces of religious hatred loose in the world.

Smith wrote that the horrors of the partition violence were "burned" into his consciousness.³ In all his nine subsequent books, Smith echoes the refrains he took up after the shock of partition. He had also been shocked by the discovery of the horrors of Soviet repression of dissidents. He gave up his simplistic notion of an immanent divine purpose active in human history, a purpose that was readily intelligible to the enlightened human mind. Never again did Smith say that affirmations of transcendence are nothing more than "pie in the sky" nonsense.

His aim when he returned to Canada was to develop modes of studying the religious history of humanity that would do justice to all traditions. Such study should encourage sound knowledge and mutual respect between adherents of different religious traditions. This knowledge should help enable all of us to comprehend better how we make choices about which elements of our heritage we will affirm as we work in the present to build our common future. We all inherit much by way of ideas, practices, doctrines, social codes, and so on from our ancestors. We have to make decisions on what to use from this heritage as we focus on trying to act constructively in the present. This emphasis on how people use their cumulative traditions was the approach to the comparative study of human religious history that Smith tried to develop at McGill and subsequently at Harvard.

Smith spoke of "corporate critical self-consciousness," which meant that all people need to become self-conscious about their own religious histories. We need to know how the symbols of our heritage have been used in the past in diverse contexts, and how we, as individuals, have used those symbols in our own crises. We need self-consciousness, individuation, so that we can recognize where we come from and why we think as we do. Then we need community across traditions; we need to talk seriously with people from other traditions who have also become self-conscious about how their traditions have functioned over time. Once we have this mutual critical self-consciousness, we can begin to talk together about what we should do next.

When we are self-conscious about how our symbols have affected us, we have a better chance of learning not to be blind instruments of forces driving us without our comprehension. When we lack critical self-consciousness, we are much more likely to act without reflection and without constructive insights into the probable fruits of our activity. For example, just to think of "the other" as a demonic force, without ever trying to understand the other as a person, can lead to unreflective violence. Much of Smith's life and work was dedicated to trying to teach people to be reflective about their religious lives. He was one of the first scholars in the West to write about the dangers of unreflective fundamentalism.

Many readers of the later Smith find his idea of transcendence difficult, yet it is central to his developed thought. It means, for one thing, that he learned intellectual humility the hard way. As a young scholar of Indian Islam, he was shocked to discover that historical events were not unfolding in the way his socialist analysis had taught him to believe they would. Transcendence, in this respect, means in Smith's writing that reality, what is going on around us, is always much more complicated than we can fully comprehend. We therefore need to be careful not to fall victim to closed intellectual systems that attempt to explain everything.

This is important to interfaith work since it suggests that goodness, justice, love, and mercy are much bigger and more rooted in reality than we can fully grasp within one religious tradition. We have intimations into what transcendent goodness, justice, love, and mercy might be, but there is always more to be grasped and realized, shaped into new structures, and used for new human creations. The process never ends. In a little book written in 1951 entitled *Pakistan as an Islamic State*, Smith commented that one of the Muslim citizens of the new Pakistan told him that following the goal of building a good society was like being pulled by a kite. The kite is the transcendence that pulls us despite the limitations of our intelligence.⁴

Smith's most successful effort to communicate to a wider Canadian audience was through a series of lectures given on the CBC Radio's *Ideas* program in 1961. These lectures were later published under the title *The Faith of Other Men*.⁵ One of Smith's key notions was that the biblical and Qur'anic notions of "faith" were different from our common understandings of "belief." The Qur'anic word for "faith" is *iman*. In both the Qur'an and the Hebrew Bible, the term comes from a verb denoting a way of relating oneself to the universe—a stance, a perspective. The Pauline image "now we see through a glass darkly" (1 Cor. 13:12) conveys this notion. Seeing through a glass darkly is faith rather than belief.

In his CBC lectures, Smith maintained that this notion of a faith stance toward the transcendent exists in all the major religious traditions and that people in all traditions think of themselves as maturing and growing toward becoming more fulfilled and coherent as individuals and communities. Smith believed if Muslims and Christians see themselves as living their lives under judgment from God and as trying to mature into people ready to meet their Creator, then they can more easily learn to respect each other.

Notes

1. Wilfred Cantwell Smith, *Modern Islam in India* (Lahore: 1943).
2. K.G. Saiyidain, *Education, Culture and the Social Order* (London: Asia Publishing House, 1963). See pp. 266–73.
3. Wilfred Cantwell Smith, *Questions of Religious Truth* (New York: Scribner, 1967), p. 108.
4. *Pakistan as an Islamic State* (Lahore, Pakistan: Ashraf, 1951), p. 26.
5. *The Faith of Other Men: The Christian in a Religiously Plural World* (New York: Harper & Row, 1961).

Appendix F

Advice for Christians Reading the Qur'an



It is not easy for non-Muslims to grasp quickly or easily what it is Muslims hear when they hear the Qur'an speaking to them with authority. Non-Muslims often find reading the Qur'an confusing because it cannot be read like the Bible. The Qur'an is not organized in the same way as the Bible or most ordinary books. Therefore, it can be difficult to understand the Qur'an when it is approached with the same expectations as any other book.

The word "Qur'an" means "recitation." Muslims believe Muhammad heard the angel Gabriel speaking the words of the Qur'an. Muhammad then recited these words, which were later recorded by secretaries. Through the centuries since that first recitation, the Qur'an has continued to be recited and heard by faithful Muslims. The art of reciting the Qur'an is studied throughout the Muslim world. A person who can recite the verses of the Qur'an effectively is highly valued by the community. So the Qur'an is first of all heard and only later read.

To understand what Muslims hear when these verses resound in their ears, minds, and hearts requires an imaginative effort on the part of non-Muslims. Appreciating the religious experience of Muslims is something like art appreciation for Christians. The surahs of the Qur'an are aimed directly at the transformation of the human heart.

Although Arabic is not the mother tongue of most Muslims around the world, they still insist the Qur'an must be taught and recited in Arabic. It is not possible to convey the power of the Arabic in translation because the patterns of rhyme cannot be duplicated in other language. When we read a translation of the Qur'an in English, we must bear in mind that we are not experiencing the Qur'an the way Muslims experience it. Centuries of Arabic poetry created a highly sensitized audience for the Qur'an, with its language of great lyricism and beauty. Students of Islam do not simply learn the surahs; they absorb the rhythms and sounds, taking them to heart in the deepest way.¹

Unlike the Bible, the Qur'an has not been edited to give a chronological history. No linear history is presented by the Qur'an. Instead, the Qur'an is arranged by the length of the surahs, beginning with the longest and ending with the shortest. After the Prophet's death, those who put together the remembered verses into a written Qur'an did so knowing these verses had come to them exactly as the Prophet had recited them. To read the earliest revelations to Muhammad, one should look at the end of an English translation of the Qur'an because the earliest revelations are also the shortest.

The key to understanding what Muslims hear in the Qur'an is remembering that Muslims hear the Qur'an as challenge, promise, and judgment. The earliest surahs were a diagnosis of the society of that time. Materialism and a lack of seriousness about life were the major challenges. The promise to believers was that by recognizing the Creator and modelling their lives on justice, charity, and devotion, they could lead transformed lives. This call is paired with the certainty of divine judgment in this life and beyond. All of the later teachings of the Qur'an with respect to how human life should be lived flow from these key ideas.

A Christian reader will encounter in the Qur'an many of the same personages found in the Bible, though the stories differ a great deal. The prophets mentioned in the Qur'an include Noah, Abraham, Moses, Lot, David, Solomon, Jesus, as well as several others. The Old Testament literary prophets such as Amos, Isaiah, and so on are not mentioned. These references to earlier prophets are reminders to those who hear the Qur'an today that this message has been given many times before, to the Hebrew prophets and to Jesus the son of Mary.

For more detailed instances of teachings with respect to particular issues such as creation, social and legal matters (usury, marriage, divorce), Judaism, and Christianity, one may refer to an index. References to these and many other topics are scattered throughout the Qur'an. Most of the detailed teaching on such issues came later, after the community was well settled in Medina. Yusuf Ali's translation is recommended because it has a useful commentary that explains Muslim thinking with respect to social and theological issues through the centuries. A recent book by Michael Sells, *Approaching the Qur'an*,² is one excellent guide to hearing the Qur'an as Muslims do and is recommended to those who wish to explore the Qur'an further.

Note

1. Michael Sells, *Approaching the Qur'an: The Early Revelations* (Ashland, OR: White Cloud Press, 1999), pp. 7–11.

2. Ibid.

Appendix G

Stories in My Neighbour's Faith



The following two stories originally appeared in *Stories in My Neighbour's Faith: Narratives from World Religions in Canada*, a publication of United Church Publishing House (Toronto, 1999). The authors of these stories are Canadian Muslims who have worked closely with United Church of Canada congregations in interpreting Islam.

The Tragedy of Karbala

In the history of Islam no human drama is as compelling in its high tragedy as the story of Karbala. No doubt there are other tragic stories in Islamic history, but the power of the story of Karbala over my mind lies not in its historical but in its archetypal, timeless character, bound by strong emotional ties to what is most sacred in Shi'a Islam.

Imagine a child of three or four repeatedly exposed to the sacred narrative of Karbala, recounted with dramatic symbolism and expressions of communal sorrow. That is how, as children, my sister and I first encountered the story. My father was a western-educated, open-hearted Shia Muslim of India. I grew up among people of all religions who were constantly coming to our home. The evenings of every Muharram (first month of the Muslim lunar year) in our home were devoted to the commemoration of the tragedy of Karbala through poetic recitation of the narrative in mournful chants and laments. The atmosphere was replete with sorrow and weeping and occasional rhythmic, ritual beating of the chest, a symbol of shared suffering with the martyrs of Karbala and an affirmation of devotion to and solidarity with the prophet Husain and his family, who sacrificed their lives for faith. The act of weeping was seen as salvific, the sorrow a bond between the mourners and the sacred ones who were mourned.

The seeds of this tragedy go back to the rise of Islam in early seventh century Arabia, with the prophet Muhammad proclaiming a new message: the unity of God and equality of humankind—yes, not merely mankind. This message was so revolutionary that it threatened not only the polytheistic beliefs of innumerable warring tribes but also the social, economic, and gender power structures of the day. That threat gave rise to hostilities against the prophet and his family, particularly in the clan of Banu Umayyayya, with Abu Sufyan at its head. The hostilities continued generation after generation, despite the fact

that all had embraced Islam. With the spread of Islam from Persia to Syria, wealth flooded the Muslim world, giving rise to luxury and decadence. In 680 C.E. Yazid, grandson of Abu Sufyan, assumed power in Damascus as the caliph of Muslims and pitted himself against Husain, the saintly grandson of the prophet. So began the great tragedy of Karbala.

As children we knew nothing of this historical backdrop. All we knew was the story as it unfolded with symbolic ceremonies, in deep reverence and sorrow. Here is how that story was recounted.

Yazid, the cruel and depraved caliph in Damascus, demanded that Husain pledge unquestioned allegiance to him as the spiritual head of all Muslims. Yazid knew that unless he had the allegiance of the prophet's family, his oppressive rule could be challenged and he could be overthrown. So he made all attempts to extract allegiance from Husain. But Husain refused. He would not compromise with Yazid's tyrannical rule and thereby disgrace Islam, which championed the oppressed and had always stood for a life of simplicity and austerity. Consequently, Husain's life in Medina was made impossible, and he was hunted from city to city. Then a party in Kufa, Iraq, invited Husain to live among them as their teacher and guide. He accepted the invitation and embarked on the fateful journey to Kufa.

Wide-eyed we listened to the narrator reciting tearfully how Husain left Medina with his family and companions, knowing that he would never return. With a caravan of one hundred men, women, and children, Husain crossed 900 miles (1440 km) of desert on horses and camels, in the scorching Arabian heat.

When he was within a few miles of Kufa, Husain met people coming from Kufa and heard of the terrible murder of his cousin, Ibn Muslim, sent in advance to announce Husain's arrival. Among the men who bore this news was a poet who told Husain not to go on to Kufa, "For the heart of the city is with thee, but its sword is with thine enemies, and the issue rests with God." As Husain was mourning the death of his cousin, a small force of Yazid's army appeared, demanding that he surrender and pledge allegiance to the caliph or face certain death. What a terrible choice! It would mean not only Husain's own death but also the death and suffering of his family and companions. Yet Husain refused once again and so was surrounded by the enemy troops. All routes of escape were blocked. So on the first day of the month of Muharram, Husain camped at Karbala.

The description of Karbala always frightened me—a parched and desolate land with searing heat, howling wind, blowing dust, and this small caravan of anxious men and women caught in the midst of evil forces, resigned to the will of their God.

For ten days messages passed back and forth between Kufa and Karbala without resolution. The governor of Kufa, under instruction from Damascus, refused all alternatives except a battle. My heart pounded each time I heard that more and more enemy troops arrived at Karbala. They camped at a distance, on the banks of the Euphrates. On the eighth day Husain's access to

the water supply was cut off, the abundant streams of the Euphrates still within sight.

The tenth day of Muharram, called Ashura, fell on October 10, 680 C.E., and that day Husain's camp was attacked at dawn. It was no battle, seventy men against an army of four thousand, yet Husain's supporters fought valiantly in contempt of death. In horror we heard his young son, his brother, his very young nephews, and his companions were all brutally massacred. Husain carried the body of each martyr from the massacre field to his camp and laid it on the sand, where his family mourned the death of each loved one. In the end as the sun went down, Husain was alone. He went into the tent to take leave of his family. His sister, Zainab, said that he instructed them to remain firm in their faith, as that was their battle, and that he thanked God for all the blessings bestowed upon him. He then prayed for those who were fighting against him, "not knowing truth from falsehood."

Then Husain took to the battlefield and was immediately surrounded by lancers and swordsmen. After a short while the call for evening prayer was given. Husain got down from his horse and knelt on the sand in prayer. At that moment his head was cut off and raised on a spear as a sign of victory. All Husain's men had already been killed, and the order was given to trample their bodies under the horses' hooves. That night the enemy troops marched into Husain's camp, looted, and then burned the tents. Terrified and grief-stricken, the women, children, and Husain's sick son, Abid, left the burning tents behind to sojourn alone on the burning sand under the night sky.

Husain's family was then taken captive—Abid in chains, holding the rope of a camel; the severed head of Husain in front, paraded on a spear. Under army escort, the family was taken to Kufa and then Damascus. No one knew who they were or what had happened. The story of Karbala would have been lost were it not for Husain's sister, Zainab, who recounted the tragedy wherever the caravan stopped, soldiers whipping her each time she spoke. And so the story of Karbala was preserved.

To me the story was about the faith and suffering and martyrdom of the most sacred and holy beings in my religious tradition: the beloved family members of the holy prophet, caught in the terrors of history as they stood against the world for the sake of truth and justice. Husain died a martyr, bearing witness, and that witness redeemed what would otherwise be known as a failure and defeat. His martyrdom dealt a death blow to the corrupt regime at Damascus and all it stood for.

I grew up listening to this narrative over and over again, chanted lyrically in my mother tongue, Urdu, a beautiful language born of a blending of classical Sanskrit, Persian, and Arabic. The narrative evoked powerful images: images of massacre and desperation; of courage, pain, and pathos; of love and faith and sacrifice; images of captive women, wounded at heart by the horrors of the day, wandering through the desolate desert night; images of burning tents and enemy soldiers encroaching with burning torches. At eight years of age in the early hours of the morning of Ashura, suddenly, I too was at Karbala,

sobbing on the sand, terrified, helpless, sick at heart with the burden of grief and rage. My mother could hardly control me as I fell to pieces.

Out of the shock and pain at the sudden experience of the inexorable betrayal of all I held sacred, my heart broke open, and gradually, without my realizing it, my emotional and spiritual response was no longer confined to the suffering of Husain and his family but extended to every incident of brutality and injustice, wherever it occurred. Later through stories and poetry in Urdu I learned also about the crucifixion of Jesus Christ. Slowly my understanding also grew about Jesus' suffering willingly, remaining loyal to his message, refusing to render evil for evil. And again I found myself facing the same spiritual anguish as when I thought of Karbala. These two events in the religious history of humankind have affected me so profoundly that I dare not think about them too deeply or too realistically. If I do, I feel I may crumble again. But deep down each time a tragedy of tyranny and injustice occurs, the story of Karbala awakens and is re-enacted deep within me; each time a new cross is erected in a personal Calvary.

Pondering all these things, I have gradually moved to the conviction that God resides not in prayer and fasting alone but more so in faithfulness to one's truth and in the willingness to fight against wrong until death, in love and pain and suffering, through the eternal battle between good and evil.

Zohra Husaini, Edmonton, Alberta

Shannon's Song

As a Muslim I accept the Qur'an to be the very word of God, revealed to the Prophet Muhammad in the seventh century. It is in the words of the Qur'an that I find the themes that are important to me: love and mercy, peace, justice, and compassion. At this point in my life one verse in particular is most meaningful. (The translation from the Arabic original is my own.)

... And God has put between you Love and Mercy.
Truly in this are Signs for those who reflect.

Qur'an 30:21

Many verses in the Qur'an speak of the "Signs of God," which are everywhere. Trying to understand or decipher these signs is one of the duties incumbent upon all Muslims. As I understand it, the verse speaks of the love and mercy that are found in human relationships, specifically, the relationship between married people (mentioned in the verse immediately prior). And the root or cause of human love and mercy is divine love and divine mercy, two of the attributes of God.

I did not truly begin to understand the many levels of meaning of this verse until I met my wife, Shannon L. Hamm. Shannon was born in Winnipeg and grew up in southern Manitoba a member of The United Church of Canada. To say that Shannon was the most amazing woman that I had met would be

an understatement. She was so involved with the world; she loved to travel, talk, dance, and especially sing. While I remember her as a singer, she was also a first-rate thinker, the recipient of many academic awards, and a truly gifted leader, whether working with university students, abused women, mentally disabled children, or head-injured adults. And she worked with all of these. Shannon and I were married on August 19, 1989. The service we designed included readings from both Christianity and Islam, including a longer passage from the Qur'an that contained the verse above.

Shannon challenged my world, the know-it-allness that only a twenty-three-year-old male can have. She taught me about peace and justice and the need to make a difference with our lives. Although she discovered her answers within a Christian framework, she helped me to find my own answers within a Muslim framework. This is important for me to say because terrible misunderstandings persist about Islam as a religion of violence and Muslims as a violent people, stereotypes which are as destructive for Islam as they are for any other world religion.

As I read the Qur'an, I discovered its overwhelming emphasis on the mercy and compassion of God: the idea that reconciliation and forgiveness are preferable to retribution, that mercy takes precedence over wrath. In addition to the Qur'an, Muslims have the life of the Prophet Muhammad as an example. In reading about his life, I repeatedly encountered images of love and compassion, ranging from everyday acts, like playing with his grandchildren, to acts of statesmanship in forgiving those who had persecuted him for the ethical monotheism he preached. And I discovered countless examples in the Muslim tradition of people who practised mercy and justice, people such as Badshah Khan, who worked with Gandhi using non-violent resistance as a way to end colonial domination in South Asia.

I learned that these teachings of peace and justice were not foreign to Islam but an integral part of it. To me, this was the secret of interfaith dialogue—not that we seek to convert each other, but that we help one another find what is meaningful in our own traditions—that Shannon, as a Christian, could help me become a better Muslim.

Transformed by my experience with Shannon, I began to do interfaith work, largely, but not exclusively, with the United Church. The challenge to work towards a just society led me to join a number of groups, including the World Conference on Religion and Peace, the World Interfaith Education Association, and Science for Peace. Again I did all this within a Muslim framework, trying to follow the examples that I had been given from within my own tradition.

And then my world changed.

On July 7, 1992, Shannon died suddenly of a pulmonary embolism. I was twenty-six; hers was the first death of someone close to me, and I had no words for it, no models for my grief. At that point I did not stop believing, but I did not know what to believe. I could not reconcile the ideas of a loving and merciful and all-powerful God with a God that would let Shannon die. At her

death Shannon was twenty-eight, the clinical manager of the Centre for Behavioural Rehabilitation, working with people with acquired brain injury. She was the classic example of a wonderful young woman doing important, ground-breaking work. And I could not imagine a God that would let her die, taking her away so quickly from such critical labours.

Of course, I have never been the same since. Shannon's death taught me many things, and in her death she continues to be one of my teachers. I remember old conversations in different ways, thankful for a teacher who left me with answers to questions I had not yet learned to ask. And while there has been none of the communication with Shannon that I have so desperately sought since her death, occasionally I am blessed with some sense that she is still here—that her song is still being sung in her own beautiful voice.

One of the times I heard this song was while offering prayers in the Lodge at the Dr. Jessie Saulteaux Resource Centre in Beausejour, Manitoba, in a gathering led by Stan McKay and Janet Silman. The Lodge that day held people from several traditions, and we all prayed together as well as offered our own prayers in our own languages. Another time was at a United Church service in Toronto. July 7, 1996, was the fourth anniversary of Shannon's death, and it happened to fall on a Sunday. I had no idea what to do with myself that day. For no conscious reason that I can recall, I decided to go to the church that Shannon sometimes attended in Toronto, Trinity–St. Paul's on Bloor Street. I had never been to a church by myself for no reason before. The minister, Joan Wyatt, was on holiday, and the service was conducted by Michael Cooke, Juliet Huntly, and Sarah Yoon. And everything about that service was connected to Shannon, as if it were her memorial service. We sang one of her favourite hymns, there was a reading from a book she loved, the importance of meaningful work was stressed, and we held hands and danced for the closing hymn. Of course, these people had no knowledge of Shannon, and I had never met any of them prior to that day's service. It was just one of those magical moments.

Despite such moments I have also come to understand that my faith, my Islam, does not bring me healing. Instead, it does something infinitely more powerful. It allows me to live broken. It allows me to understand something of the gift that is life. As a believer, I know that at some point, Shannon, God, and I will meet again. And I will be asked what I did with this life I was given, what difference I made with that life.

And I have been so incredibly fortunate to be given a life, and texts for how to live that life, and a teacher to help me read those texts, and many more teachers since that first, best teacher. In the fall of 1997 I returned to San Francisco, a city I had last visited five years before, only months after Shannon's death. Five years later an important change came over me. As I sat down to a meal with one of my teachers, professor Michel Desjardins of Wilfrid Laurier University, I realized just how many gifts I had been given. The question that I had been asking—"Why me?"—was still my question; its emphasis, however, was totally different. Instead of "Why me? Why am I so cursed? Why do I no longer have Shannon around?" now the question was

"Why me? Why am I so fortunate to be given so many teachers and friends?"

What will I do with all that has been given to me? In my own poor way I too will try to sing Shannon's song. I turned to my favourite complete chapter of the Qur'an (chapter 93), "The Morning" and found solace:

By the morning
By the night when it is still.
Your Lord has not forsaken you, nor is your Lord displeased
And The Last will be better for you than The First
And your Lord will give you so you will be content
Did your Lord not find you an orphan and shelter you?
And find you erring, and guide you?
And find you needy, and enrich you?
So do not treat the orphan harshly.
Nor drive away the petitioner.
And proclaim the bounty of your Lord.

These words were first given to the Prophet Muhammad and through him, to all people, myself included. They are the words to Shannon's song. Help people work towards justice and mercy in this world. Proclaim the goodness of the Lord.

Let her song be sung.

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