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Faith and Culture

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McGinley Lecture Muslim Response

Amir Hussain

Greetings and good evening: *al-salaamu alaikum wa rahmatullahi wa barakatahu* (Peace be upon you and the Mercy and Blessings of God). I am honored and delighted to be invited back to Fordham to offer a brief response to the wonderful spring McGinley lecture that we heard from Fr. Ryan. A very simple and a very sincere “Thank you” to all of you here. I need to single out Fr. Joseph McShane for his hospitality and his kind introduction, Sr. Anne-Marie Kirmse for her help with the arrangements, Rabbi Polish for his remarks, and of course to Fr. Ryan for inviting me to respond to his lecture.

We all began our remarks last November in memory of our teacher, Wilfred Cantwell Smith. On January 24, Wilfred’s widow, Muriel MacKenzie Struthers Smith, passed away in Toronto. I was privileged to be asked by her family to speak at her memorial service on February 7, and I began my remarks with the Chinese Communist saying, “Women hold up half of the sky.” That line was appropriate on both Chinese and Communist counts, as Muriel began life in China, the daughter of missionary parents, and she and Wilfred both had—how to say this in polite company?—youthful indiscretions with Communism. I will return to Muriel at the close of my response, but let me offer my remarks this evening in memory of her.

I will keep my remarks brief, as Fr. Ryan has done a superb job with his lecture. I am, as ever, amazed by his erudition, and can only congratulate you, yet again, on your wise decision to make him the Laurence J. McGinley Professor of

Religion and Society. I also want to say what a delight it was to re-read H. Richard Niebuhr's text, *Christ and Culture*. Almost sixty years old, the book is still marvelous, to the point that I found the new introductions in the fiftieth anniversary edition by Martin Marty and James Gustafson to detract from it (and by that comment I don't mean any disrespect to Professors Marty and Gustafson, both of whom I admire).

There are almost no references to Islam or Muslims in Niebuhr's text. The Prophet Muhammad is mentioned once in passing on page 13, and there is a reference to Muslim and Jewish Aristotelianism on page 130. To Christian eyes, this may not seem surprising. After all, why should Muslims be mentioned in a book about Christ? However, to Muslim eyes, there should be some mention, as Jesus is named in fifteen chapters and ninety-three verses of the Qur'ān. More to the point, eleven times he is referred to as *al-masih*, Arabic for the Hebrew, *moshiach*, the messiah, which becomes the Christ in Greek.

As a Muslim, the Qur'ān commands me to understand Jesus as Christ, and so I read the New Testament to learn more about him. Of Christ in the New Testament, Niebuhr writes: "The fact remains that the Christ who exercises authority over Christians or whom Christians accept as authority is the Jesus Christ of the New Testament."¹ To this, all that I can say is, "From Niebuhr's lips to God's ears." I only wish that more people would read the New Testament, and discover Jesus, the Christ, found therein. Let me quote my favourite lines from the New Testament, from Matthew's Gospel. And believe me, I understand the irony of a Muslim reading from the Gospels in front of priests and nuns. Thankfully,

this isn't a Mass so I'm allowed to do this.

And as I read these words, I'm reminded by Jack Miles, a friend of Fr. Ryan in their salad days at Harvard, that the "you" in the Greek text, when Jesus is speaking, is not the singular you, the individual Christian, but the plural you, the Church. This is the parable of the Great Judgment, Matthew 25:31-46, which I don't remember Niebuhr citing in his text. It runs in part:

When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the holy angels with Him, then He will sit on the throne of his glory. All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate them one from another, as a shepherd divides his sheep from the goats. And he will set the sheep on his right hand, but the goats on the left. Then the King will say to those on his right hand, "Come, you blessed of my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world: for I was hungry and you gave me food; I was thirsty and you gave me drink; I was a stranger and you took me in; I was naked and you clothed me; I was sick and you visited me; I was in prison and you came to visit me." Then the righteous will answer him, saying, "Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you drink? When did we see you a stranger and take you in, or naked and clothe you? Or when did we see you sick, or in prison, and come to visit you?" And the King will answer and say to them, "Assuredly, I say to you, inasmuch as you did it to one of the least of these my brethren, you did it to me" (Mt 25: 40).

I feel the need here, with Fr. Ryan beside me, to confess—to confess the terror that I sometimes feel when I read these words, and am reminded of how often I fail to live out what Jesus commands us. Then again, perhaps I wasn't brought on this panel to proclaim the Gospel, but to talk about Islam.

Niebuhr uses a common Christian metaphor, that of the world,² as a pejorative synonym for culture, and a contrast to Christ. The same metaphor exists among Muslims, *din* (or religion) and *dunya* (the world). The world, of course, usually carries negative connotations. It is what my Rastafarian friends,

following usage in Jewish history, refer to as Babylon. Or to quote from Niebuhr citing C. H. Dodd's translation of the First Letter of John 2:16: "pagan society, with its sensuality, superficiality and pretentiousness, its materialism and its egoism."³ For a good Angeleno such as myself, this of course is a description of New York City, although, I *can* see how you here in Gotham might think of it, instead, as a description of the City of Angels.

Fr. Ryan has marvelously articulated for us examples of the tension of these two opposites, faith and the world, in Judaism, Christianity and Islam. This is what Niebuhr refers to as faith against culture. In the modern Muslim context, the example of Muhammad ibn 'Abd al-Wahhab illustrates both faith against culture, as well as faith against faith. It is instructive to remember that in the eighteenth century, when Ibn 'Abd al-Wahhab wanted to drive out the foreigners from Arabia and purify what he saw as a decadent culture, those foreigners were not Christian Europeans, but fellow Sunni Muslims, the Ottoman Turks.

Another helpful dichotomy was one articulated by our teacher, Wilfred Cantwell Smith, that of "faith" and the "cumulative tradition." Of this, Wilfred wrote in 1981:

. . . It seems quite evident, and readily demonstrable to the sensitive and informed, that what used to be called the religions are each finite, human and historical –as well as infinite, divine, and timeless. This applies to one's own, as well as to others.

Each is a divine-human complex in motion. That is why careful historical scholarship separates each into two component elements: what I have called respectively 'cumulative tradition' and 'faith'. In faith, we are in touch with God. Seen more largely, God, if we are to use that theistic term, is in touch with particular men and women and children, at particular times and places, through particular mundane forms. Human history is and always has been in part

mundane, transitory, finite; and in part, transcendent. Human beings, each in a particular earthly context, are in relation to God; faith is my name for that relation, wherever, and in whatever form, it occurs. More precisely, it names the human side of the relation. Historical awareness is increasingly able to see that the cumulative tradition is finite, human, and historical. It is in constant process. To imagine that any cumulative tradition is stable is now seen as a historically conditioned, albeit historically understandable, error. Christian doctrines have evolved. They are still evolving. None is finally true. The Torah and the *shari'ah* (Jewish and Islamic 'Law') came into historical existence slowly; and today they are in process of revision.⁴

There is so much more to talk about here. Perhaps during our discussion I could talk more about the faith of culture, that, for example, of Muslims for Progressive Values, or the Humanistic Judaism of Rabbi Sherwin Wine, and my own experiences at Wine's Birmingham Temple.

Or we could talk of faith integrating culture. Here, I think most often about the success of Jesuit missions in Asia, where other Christian missions often failed. Those failures often originated in European Christians trying to turn Asians into Europeans. The Jesuits, instead, expressed the Christian message in Asian terms, and did not require Asians to become Europeans.

Another great good accomplished by Jesuits is in their universities, in one of which I am privileged to teach. This semester, for example, I am doing a course at Loyola Marymount in Los Angeles on Muslim/Jewish theology, team taught with Rabbi Chaim Seidler-Feller, for over 30 years the Hillel Director of UCLA. In that classroom, I am discovering connections that Rabbi Polish mentioned in his response, as my experience as a Muslim in North America has been that of one member of a minority. I have only lived briefly in places where Islam was the dominant religion. In that regard, I share the Jewish experiences of being a

religious minority.

But let me end here with a reference to Muriel Smith that I promised at the beginning. In any discussion about faith and culture, we, particularly when it is a male “we,” have to keep at the front of our minds the crucial roles of women in both faith and culture. I was reminded of that at Muriel’s funeral. Born in China, she was educated in English Canada. When Wilfred was hired at McGill in 1949, they moved to Montreal. At that point, they had three small children, Arnold, Julian, and Heather, with a fourth, Brian, born in 1951.

So there was Muriel, an English Protestant woman in a French Catholic city with a husband at work and four small children at home. And in those days, new professors did not command the princely sums that we currently enjoy, and so there were economic hardships as well.

In this context I thought for the first time about the shared experiences, the shared culture, of Muriel and my own mother, Feroza. My mother is a Muslim woman from Pakistan, who found herself in Protestant Toronto, raising two small children on the working class salary of my father, Iqbal, who worked in factories. Until that moment, I had always thought of Muriel as a white woman of privilege, with no connections to a poor immigrant woman of color like my mother. Although living in very different cultures, these two women shared in both faith and culture. Women, we need to remember, hold up half of the sky.

Thank you!

NOTES

¹ H. Richard Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture*, rev. ed. (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 2001), 12.

² *Ibid.*, 32.

³ *Ibid.*, 48.

⁴ Wilfred Cantwell Smith, "History in Relation to both Science and Religion," in W. C. Smith and John Burbidge, eds, *Modern Culture from a Comparative Perspective* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1997), 16. This chapter was originally published by Smith in the *Scottish Journal of Religious Studies* 2 (1981): 3-10.