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# Christian Hospitality and Muslims

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*ABSTRACT: This theological reflection incorporates the work of three Christian thinkers, Wilfred Cantwell Smith, Willard Oxtoby, and Thomas Michel SJ, who have helped the author, a Muslim, to better understand interfaith dialogue between Muslims and Christians. The reflection draws on music and popular culture to explore the idea of faithful Christian witness, and how Christian hospitality can help Muslims and Christians to be better faith neighbours. The connections between Muslims and Christians are examined throughout this reflection.*

How would it be if you were standing in my shoes  
Can't you see that it's impossible to choose  
No there's no making sense of it  
Every way I go I'm bound to lose.  
(Brian May, "Too Much Love Will Kill You")

Starting with a lyric from the rock band Queen is not the conventional beginning for a theological reflection by a Muslim on Christian hospitality. However, for me, the song sung by Freddie Mercury (who recorded the vocals in 1988, but would be dead of AIDS for four years before the song was released in 1995) captures the nuances and conflicts of the topic. I explain by way of confession. Although I am a Muslim, I was born in a Catholic missionary hospital in Pakistan, St. Raphael's, and brought into the world at the hands of a nun, Sr. Elizabeth. Some fifty years later, I find myself teaching theology at a Catholic university in Los Angeles. Holy Mother Church, it seems, has a way of bringing us all back to her bosom.

I cannot remember the first record I ever bought, but one of the first half-dozen was Queen's 1977 release, *News of the World*. At that time, I had no idea that the lead singer, Freddie Mercury, was a Parsi (a South Asian Zoroastrian) who was born in Zanzibar with the name Farrokh Bulsara. It was only after his death that I learned his back story. I had assumed he was another white English singer, although I knew he was familiar with Islamic culture from the "Bismillah" lyric in "Bohemian Rhapsody"; "The Prophet's Song" from the same record in 1975; and "Mustapha" from 1979 (Mustafa, or "the chosen" is one of the names of the Prophet Muhammad). What I loved about Freddie, aside from his superb voice, was the showmanship with which he led the band onstage. He was important for his talent, not for his identity. This for me was an early example of what I would later come to know as faithful witness. I loved him for his music and only later came to know about his heritage as a Zoroastrian of Indian descent. That, for me, is also the best sense of Christian mission, to express your Christianity through the poetry of your lives.

A second reason why the lyrics are relevant is the difficulty in being a Muslim in contemporary North America. Hinduism, Buddhism, and Judaism are not seen as religions of violence by Christians, and Christians rarely see their own Christianity as a religion of violence. In the case of Buddhism, people usually have preconceived notions of Buddhism as a religion of peace. In class, I often bring out the cover of Michael Jerryson and Mark Juergensmeyer's edited collection, *Buddhist Warfare*, with its picture of a novice in robes holding a handgun, to disabuse them of that notion. All of our religions are religions of peace and violence, but it is Islam that is usually seen only through the lens of violence and fear.

Often, it is the satirists who understand things that the mainstream media does not. For the case of Islam, a particularly delightful example comes from Stephen Colbert where, in a segment titled "Radical Muslim Snacks," he examines the "threat" that *halal* ("permissible") food brings to non-Muslims.<sup>1</sup>

A plea, here, to Christians to speak out when those in your community malign us, just as we Muslims must speak out when those in our community malign you. Without naming names (I am a Canadian, and we Canadians are nothing if not polite), there are a number of people in the Christian tradition who have said hateful things about Islam and Muslims. This certainly cannot help the cause of hospitality.

We can be seen in conflict and competition, and we have been in both conflict and competition in our history and our present as Christians and Muslims. The Great Commission for you and the Qur'anic teaching on *da'wa* or calling people to Islam for us are certainly in competition. It is because of those commandments in our traditions that we are the two largest religious traditions in the world. But we can also be in cooperation with each other, being in what the Catholic Church describes as a culture of dialogue. I have learned the most about Catholic perspectives on this from my friend and Jesuit colleague, Fr. Thomas Michel. About this dialogue, Tom wrote:

. . . the focal question is not whether the church should be proclaiming the Gospel or engaged in dialogue, but rather whether Christians are actually sharing life with their neighbors of other faiths. The basic distinction is not between being a church in dialogue or one that proclaims the Gospel, but rather the option of being a church that is following the Spirit's lead to partake humanly in life with others, and thus constantly engaged in dialogue, witness, and proclamation, or else that of being a church that is closed in on itself and exists in a self-imposed ghetto with little concern for and involvement with people of other faiths with whom Christians share culture, history, citizenship, and common human destiny.

When people of various faiths live together—not simply cohabiting the same town but sharing life *together*—the question of dialogue or proclamation doesn't arise. When they work, study, struggle, celebrate, and mourn together and face the universal crises of injustice, illness, and death as one, they

don't spend most of their time talking about doctrine. Their focus is on immediate concerns of survival, on taking care of the sick and needy, on communicating cherished values to new generations, on resolving problems and tensions in productive rather than in destructive ways, on reconciling after conflicts, on seeking to build more just, humane, and dignified societies.<sup>2</sup>

I return to this culture of dialogue later in my reflection.

Islam is a post-Christian religion. I mention that not to state what is obvious to readers, that Islam comes chronologically after Christianity, but that Muslims have to account for Christians in a way that Christians do not have to account for Islam and Muslims. So this is one difference between our discussions of Islam as compared to the discussions of other religions. Unlike Jewish, Hindu, and Buddhist texts, for example, the Qur'an mentions Mary and Jesus, as well as other figures from the New Testament such as John the Baptist and Zechariah. In fact, Mary is mentioned more by name in the Qur'an (34 times) than she is in the New Testament (19 times). The story of the virgin birth is mentioned in the Qur'an (Chapter 19, The Chapter of Mary). Jesus is named in 15 chapters (and 93 verses) of the Qur'an. More to the point, 11 times he is referred to as *al-massihyah*, Arabic for the Hebrew, *moshiach*, the messiah, which becomes the Christ in Greek.

I mention this because at the University of Toronto, I had the extraordinary privilege of being mentored by Will Oxtoby and Wilfred Cantwell Smith. I'll mention Will at the end of my reflection, but I need to acknowledge here, as I do every day, my debt to Wilfred and Muriel Smith for teaching me as much about Christianity as they taught me about Islam. On the intertwined relationship between us, Christians and Muslims, Wilfred wrote this in 1977:

Christians throughout their history have been *muslim* (in the literal meaning of that term; they have consecrated themselves to God's will and truth) as best they have been able to discern how to be so; in the highest sense to which in the best light of their intellect and conscience they could rise. Muslims throughout theirs have been *Christian* (in the literal meaning of that; they have been followers and reverers of Christ) as best they have been able to discern how to be so; in the highest sense to which in the best light of *their* intellect and conscience they could rise. And if it be retorted that Muslims have not been Christian in the *true* sense of that word, or that Christians have not been *muslim* in the true sense of that, then a possible riposte might in turn be that also relatively few Christians have been Christian in the true sense, or Muslims muslim . . .

. . . the historiography of the Islamic-Christian encounter will be moved to a new level when we have learned to see it as the intertwining destiny of human beings whose relation to

God has for now fourteen centuries taken these two classes of forms.

The religious history of the world is the history of *us*. Some of us have been Muslims, some Christians. Our common history has been what it has been, in significant part because of this fact. Yet it is a common history for all that; and cannot be properly understood otherwise.

And if that be true of the past fourteen centuries, how much more so of the coming fourteen.<sup>3</sup>

In 2007, based out of Jordan, a number of Muslim scholars, clerics, and intellectuals issued a call to Christian leaders with the publication of the document *A Common Word Between Us and You*.<sup>4</sup> That document calls Christians and Muslims into dialogue based on the two great commandments in each tradition, found for example in Mark 12:28–32, love of God and love of one's neighbour. It is instructive for us to remember that when Jesus is asked about the greatest commandment, he repeats the words of the *shema*, Deuteronomy 6:4, "Here O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one." This verse is incredibly helpful to me when speaking to Muslim audiences to address Muslim misconceptions of Christianity. Some Muslims mistake the Triune God with the polytheism of three gods. Of course, this isn't true, and although Christian faith *is* Trinitarian, it is anchored in the same unity of God that Muslims know from the *shahada*, "there is no god but God." To be sure, we Muslims and Christians both get this from the Jewish tradition.

Mark is my favourite Gospel, and as a Muslim, one of my practices is to read it each year during the Lenten season to help me become more familiar with Jesus, who as mentioned above is an important prophet for Muslims. One of the most puzzling stories in Mark is the Syro-Phoenician woman.

Those seven short lines (Mark 7:24–30) vexed me from the first time I read them as an undergraduate student in English translation, and again when I read them in Greek as a graduate student:

From there [Jesus] arose and went to the region of Tyre and Sidon. And He entered a house and wanted no one to know it, but He could not be hidden. For a woman whose young daughter had an unclean spirit heard about Him, and she came and fell at His feet. The woman was a Greek, a Syro-Phoenician by birth, and she kept asking Him to cast the demon out of her daughter. But Jesus said to her, "Let the children be filled first, for it is not good to take the children's bread and throw it to the little dogs." And she answered and said to Him, "Yes, Lord, yet even the little dogs under the table eat from the children's crumbs." Then He said to her, "For this saying go your way; the demon has gone out of your daughter." And when she had come to her house, she found the demon gone out, and her daughter lying on the bed (Mark 7:24–30 NKJV).

The woman asks not for help for her, but for her daughter. She is in a triple category of being “othered”: she is a woman, a foreigner, and a non-Jew. Jesus comes not for her or her kind, but for the chosen, the children. The only way I could make sense of this was through one of my teachers at the University of Toronto, the Mennonite scholar Bill Klassen. This passage reflects Jesus as God with a twinkle in his eye, who with the omniscience of God knows what the woman knows and knows what she is going to say before she is able to say it. While this story is sometimes used as an example of hospitality, with great temerity, let me suggest a different reading. Don’t think of this in the context of hospitality; instead think of it in the context of mission and pedagogy. I learned this interpretation from Fr. Elias Mallon. He said that we read this as docetics, who think of Jesus only in his divine nature. We forget also the full humanity of Jesus. What if we heard this as Jesus learning his role from the foreign, non-Jewish woman? That it is the woman who teaches Jesus. That he is come for all, not just the chosen. Or to echo a song by the Canadian singer, Bruce Cockburn,<sup>5</sup> 1991’s “Cry of a Tiny Babe,” written in my hometown of Toronto:

There are others who know about this miracle birth  
The humblest of people catch a glimpse of their worth  
For it isn’t to the palace that the Christ child comes  
But to shepherds and street people, hookers and bums  
And the message is clear if you have ears to hear  
That forgiveness is given for your guilt and your fear

If mission were ever to “work” on me, it would be because of the theology in the lines above. And more importantly, it would be because of the Christian hospitality that I have experienced.

At Loyola Marymount University, we have some fifty Muslim students, who attend because of the excellent reputation for both education and social justice in Jesuit and Marymount colleges. Our past president, Fr. Robert Lawton, has spoken of the value that non-Catholic students (including not just other Christians, but members of other religious traditions, as well as atheists) have in Catholic universities. At our Mass of the Holy Spirit in 2008, the traditional beginning to our fall term, Fr. Lawton said this in his homily:

Non-Catholics and nonbelievers are not here at the university simply because we need you to pay our bills or raise our grades or SAT scores. We want you here for a deeper reason. By helping us to doubt, you help us get closer to a deeper understanding of our God, this life, and this world we share.

Muslim students can help us to understand more about faith, and we should recruit them to our schools because they can help us to be the best that we can be.

Many of us Muslims have heard the proclamation of the Gospels. Some of us have even read them in Greek. The key here is not only to proclaim the gospel, but to live it out. That’s what Fr. Michel spoke of so eloquently in the

passage I quoted earlier about the culture of dialogue. I only wish that more people would read the New Testament and discover the Jesus, the Christ, found therein. Let me quote my favourite lines from the New Testament, from Matthew's Gospel. And as I read these words, I am reminded by Jack Miles 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 Banquet:

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 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 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 (Matthew 25:31–46 NKJV).

I feel the need here, again, to confess, confess the terror that I sometimes feel when I read these words and am reminded at how often I fail to live out what Jesus commands us. Then again, perhaps I wasn't invited to do this reflection as a means to proclaim the gospel but to write about Islam.

We are alike in many ways, we Muslims and Christians. While we are both Western, we are also deeply Eastern. I would argue that at its beginnings, Christianity is not at all a Western religion but, like Judaism before it and Islam after it, a deeply Eastern, or Oriental religion. To help my students to make the connections between Christian and Muslim conceptions of prayer and fasting, especially during the times of Ramadan and Lent, I use an article in the October 23, 2008, edition of the *New York Review of Books*, titled "The Egyptian Connection," where William Dalrymple reviewed the work of Michelle Brown on the Lindisfarne Gospels.<sup>6</sup> Illustrated around 700, they are a treasure of religious art. In 950 a gloss in Old English was added to the Latin text, providing the first English translation of the gospels. Of these gospels, Dalrymple wrote:

Michelle Brown demonstrates convincingly how the same Coptic and Eastern Christian manuscripts that influenced the

Lindisfarne Gospels also influenced the work of early Islamic painters and calligraphers. The fascinating point that emerges from her book is that, to a considerable extent, both the art and sacred calligraphy of Anglo-Saxon England and that of early Ummayyad Islam grew at the same time out of the same East Mediterranean culture compost and common Coptic models.

I for one had no idea until I read Brown's book that Northumbrian, Celtic, and Byzantine monks all used to pray on decorated prayer carpets, known as *oratorii*, just as Muslim and certain Eastern Christian churches have always done, and still do. She also demonstrates how these prayer mats influenced the "carpet pages" of abstract geometric ornament which are such a feature both of Insular and early Islamic sacred texts.

All of this is a reminder of just how much early Islam drew from ascetic forms of Christianity that originated in the Byzantine Levant but whose influence spread both to the Celtic north and the Arabian south. The theology of the Desert Fathers was deeply austere, with much concentration on judgment and damnation, a concern that they passed on to the Irish monks:

The space of air is choked by a wild mass  
of [Satan's] treacherous attendants . . . .  
The day of the Lord, most righteous King of Kings, is at hand:  
a day of anger and vindication, of darkness and of cloud . . .  
a day also of distress, of sorrow and sadness,  
in which the love and desire of women will cease  
and the striving of men, and the desire of this world.<sup>7</sup>

There is much in the Koran—notably its graphic hell scenes and emphasis on Godly Judgment—that, though off-putting to many modern Western readers, would have been quite familiar both to a Desert Father and a monk on Iona. Today many commentators in the US and Europe view Islam as a religion very different from and indeed hostile to Christianity. Yet in their roots the two are closely connected, the former growing directly out of the latter and still, to this day, embodying many early Christian practices lost in Christianity's modern Western incarnation.

Just as the Celtic monks used prayer carpets for their devotions, so the Muslim form of prayer with its prostrations derives from the older Eastern Christian tradition that is still practiced today in pewless churches across the Levant. The Sufi Muslim tradition carried on directly from the point at which the Desert Fathers left off, while Ramadan is in fact nothing more than an Islamicization of Lent, which in the



Eastern Christian churches still involves a grueling all-day fast. . . . Certainly if a monk from seventh-century Lindisfarne or Egypt were to come back today it is probable that he would find much more that was familiar in the practices and beliefs of a modern Muslim Sufi than he would with, say, a contemporary American evangelical. Yet this simple truth has been lost by our tendency to think of Christianity as a Western religion, rather than the thoroughly Oriental faith it actually is. Because of this, we are apt to place Celtic monks, Coptic Desert Fathers, and Muslim Sufis in very different categories. But as the art of this period so clearly demonstrates, we are wrong to do so. These apparently different worlds were all surprisingly closely interlinked; indeed in intellectual terms perhaps more so in the eighth century than in today's nominally globalized world.<sup>8</sup>

We can use the metaphor of hospitality, and that is a good one. Parents entrust their children to us as students. If we accept them into our schools, into our care, we have a duty to protect them, not to violate them. Another useful metaphor is that of the neighbour. We are neighbours to each other. That is a very important metaphor. Again, I think of my teacher, Wilfred Cantwell Smith. Someone asked Wilfred, "Professor Smith, are you Christian?" If the question had been "are you *a* Christian," the answer would have been a very simple "yes." Instead, Wilfred did what he always did when asked a question. He paused, repeated the question, and thought about his answer. "Am I Christian," he said. "Maybe, I was, last week. On a Tuesday. At lunch. For about an hour. But if you really want to know, ask my neighbour."

Let me close with a reflection on the other mentor who I mentioned, Professor Willard Oxtoby of blessed memory. In addition to being an academic, he was, like Wilfred Cantwell Smith, an ordained Protestant minister who also represented an inclusive view of Christianity. Will ended one of his books, *The Meaning of Other Faiths*, with the following words, and it is with the words of my teacher that I would like to conclude:

At no time have I ever thought of myself as anything other than a Christian. At no time have I ever supposed that God could not adequately reach out to me, to challenge and to comfort, in my own Christian faith and community. Yet at no time have I ever supposed that God could not also reach out to other persons in their traditions and communities as fully and as satisfyingly as he has to me in mine. At no time have I ever felt I would be justified in seeking to uproot an adherent of another tradition from his faithful following of that tradition. My Christianity—including my sense of Christian ministry—has commanded that I be open to learn from the faith of others.

It is this openness that Professor Oxtoby mentioned that I would hope that we all have. That those of us who are religious believe that God works not just in our own communities of faith, but in all communities of faith.

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#### ENDNOTES

1. <http://www.colbertnation.com/the-colbert-report-videos/372154/january-25-2011/threatdown---radical-muslim-snacks--flying-robot-drones---coked-up-vacuums>.
2. Thomas F. Michel, *A Christian View of Islam: Essays on Dialogue*, ed. Irfan Omar (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2010), 21.
3. Wilfred Cantwell Smith, *On Understanding Islam: Selected Studies* (The Hague: Mouton Publishers, 1981), 263-4.
4. Available at <http://www.acommonword.com/>.
5. I need to disclose here that as a Canadian, I am required by Canadian law in any publication outside of Canada to mention by name at least one Canadian artist.
6. Those unfamiliar with the Lindisfarne Gospels may learn more about them from The British Library Board: <http://www.bl.uk/onlinegallery/features/lindisfarne/home.html>.
7. Thomas Owen Clancy and Gilbert Márkus, *Iona: The Earliest Poetry of a Celtic Monastery* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1995).
8. <http://www.nybooks.com/articles/archives/2008/oct/23/the-egyptian-connection/>.