

CLOSE ENCOUNTERS OF THE VULNERABLE KIND: CHRISTIAN DIALOGICAL PROCLAMATION AMONG MUSLIMS

A. H. MATHIAS ZAHNISER

Ted Hudson had just completed a very successful month of street witnessing in Rome.¹ The unexpected interest of the Italians in the Gospel and its ability to transform them had strengthened Ted's confidence in speaking openly about the Christian way of salvation. Now, a visit to Frankfurt, Germany, to see some old friends from his engineering school days afforded him a golden opportunity for sharing his faith—this time with a Muslim. But he was not prepared for the results.

His friends had asked Ahmad Mustafa, an Iranian, to put Ted up in the extra bed in his room. Their rooming together provided the two young men a chance to engage in what became a nearly night-long discussion. Ahmad, in his mid-thirties and away from wife, children and extended family for studies in Europe, was a humble man whose neat and clean appearance stood out—even in a country like Germany. Ahmad's love and loneliness for his family were matched only by his appreciation for his Islamic faith and the purity which it required. Both family and purity would dominate the long discussion between the two men and the significant events which occurred in its aftermath.

When Ahmad, whose parents and parents-in-law had arranged his happy marriage to his cousin, spoke of family, he included all his relatives, most of whom lived in the same vicinity in Iran. Unlike Ted, Ahmad did not think of himself as an individual apart from his family—his life was an extension of his family unit. For him, the freedom from family, which Ted's individualism required of him, would have been a kind of death. To Ahmad family was sacred.

A.H. Mathias Zahniser is the John Wesley Beeson Professor of Christian Missions at Asbury Theological Seminary in Wilmore, Kentucky.

Ted shared with Ahmad the significance of his conversion to Christ and the exciting events that resulted from his month of mission in Italy. Ahmad talked enthusiastically about Islam—which he was sure was the way to God. He particularly stressed that purity of mind and body were important to Islamic faith. Even though he was not well-informed about Islam, Ted felt that the Spirit helped him to explain to Ahmad the cleansing from sin and the inner purity that he had experienced in Christ.

The next morning Ahmad related to Ted the details of a vivid dream he had during their short night's sleep. Clothed all in white, Ahmad found himself walking in a deep gutter with no way of escape. The harder he tried to avoid staining his white garments with the filth of the gutter, the more polluted they became. Overcome by his frustration, he went to the side of the gutter and wept. Suddenly a great torrent of water rushed over him leaving him on flat ground with his garments restored to a sparkling white. Relieved, but not yet feeling completely clean, he walked until he came to a river. Compelled by an inner demand, he waded into its current and lay down. Coming up out of the river, he felt completely clean inside and out.

When Ahmad asked him what he thought of the dream, Ted read the story of Jesus' conversation with Nicodemus recorded in John's Gospel and all the other passages on baptism and the new birth that he could think of. Ted could tell that the Spirit was at work because Ahmad seemed to take the Bible readings and the dream as God speaking to him. Eventually, Ted asked Ahmad if he would consider becoming a Christian. Ahmad informed Ted that if he did become a Christian "his family would treat him as though he were dead.

Months later Ted would write, "I thought of the verses where Jesus talks about loving him more than his father and mother and began to realize the radical nature of what Christ was saying to the people of his day." But he did not have the heart to recite these verses to Ahmad.

Thoughts raced through Ted's head: If Ahmad were to convert, he would lose all that was sacred to him—the faith which had taught him the importance of purity and the family that was the joy of his life. Yet where else could he find the purity that Islam urged upon him but in Christ? Ahmad's family life seemed closer to God's design than Ted's own; and Ahmad's desire for purity and attempts to obtain it, though unfulfilled, seemed to Ted more respectable than his own. Yet he and not Ahmad had found cleansing from sin and inner satisfaction in Christ. Although Ted felt that Ahmad had been moved by the Spirit, he could not bring himself to quote any more verses or press Ahmad any further.

Ted's experience with Ahmad, a devout Muslim, illustrates three crucial dimensions of Christian witness among Muslims: (1) the importance of intimate dialogue, (2) the work of God's Spirit in prevenient grace, and (3) the role of vulnerability in being convincing. Taken together, these dimensions compose an approach or model for evangelism which I call, "close encounters of the vulnerable kind."

DIALOGICAL PROCLAMATION

Ted had spent a month in Italy proclaiming the Gospel; he had experienced the heady and holy joy of seeing people come to Christ through street witness. The

majority of these people had some kind of Christian background; and, as far as I know, none of the persons who accepted Christ in Italy were Muslims. Ahmad was a Muslim for whom becoming a Christian meant losing what he held most sacred—his family and his faith.

Yet Ahmad would not have been facing these choices if it had not been for the witness of Ted—not through the proclamation of street witnessing, but through the intimacy of a long evening's conversation. Their experience fits Ruel Howe's well-known definition of dialogue: "the serious address and response between two or more persons, in which the being and truth of each is confronted by the being and truth of the other."² The seriousness of the conversation between Ted and Ahmad can hardly be denied; it literally dealt with life and death matters. And both found themselves challenged by the life and faith of the other.

Readers may contrast proclamation, the presentation of the claims of Christ so as to influence people to trust in Him for forgiveness and reconciliation with God, with inter-faith dialogue, a mere sharing of information about religion. Yet in the case of Ted and Ahmad, dialogue led to conviction of sin, if not to conversion and incorporation into the body of Christ. Dialogue has a lot to commend it as an approach to the proclamation of the Gospel.³

Dialogue and Understanding

In a dialogical context Christians increase their understanding of Islam. Ted came to wish that he had known more about Islam than he did at the time of his dialogue with Ahmad; yet even if his proclamation had been better informed about Islam, had he not come to understand the Islam of Ahmad through dialogue, his witness would have been far less effective.

One of my very memorable experiences of learning about Islam occurred in Chicago where my students and I were listening to Muslims, questioning them, and sharing with them. I had read that Christians incorrectly compare Muhammad to Jesus and the Qur'an to the Bible. The Qur'an compares to Jesus in that both represent the primary focus of divine revelation.⁴ I presented this idea to our hosts as follows: "It is my understanding that according to Christians, God reveals Himself in Jesus, while, according to Muslims, God reveals Himself in the Qur'an." To my surprise, they all said, "No, God does not reveal *Himself*; in the Qur'an he reveals *His will*." They went on to insist that God cannot be known because nothing analogous to Him exists in human experience on the basis of which humans could comprehend Him. Sometime later, immediately after speaking at a church in Michigan on Christian witness to Muslims, I was confronted by a bright young man with a serious objection to my conviction that Christians and Muslims worship the same God. I asked him how, since but one God exists, we could be worshiping different gods? He said, "But their concept of God is false." "Muslims do have a different view of God," I replied, "but isn't it the same God that they claim to be speaking about? After all, Christians worshipping in Arabic use the Arabic word *Allah* for God." "No," he insisted, "Muslims do not worship our God." The next person I talked to was an Iranian former Muslim who had become a Christian. I told him about my previous conversation. "I think you

are right," he said, "when I was a Muslim I loved and worshipped God; when I became a Christian I felt I *knew* him." What I had learned in dialogue proved true in experience: Muslims and Christians worship the same God; but through Christ God reveals Himself.⁵

However much we may know about Islam in general, we cannot understand the faith of the specific Muslims to whom we would proclaim the Gospel unless we enter into intimate dialogue with them.

Dialogue and Appreciation

In dialogue with Ahmad, Ted not only increased in understanding his partner's faith, he also came to appreciate it deeply and the family solidarity which resulted from it. Dialogical interaction with Muslims bears fruit in deep appreciation for them and their faith on the part of Christian participants. For example, most of my students come from a Christian tradition like my own in which ritualism is generally frowned upon in favor of meaningful spontaneity. Yet, one of the most distinct changes in my students' view of Islam resulted from the mere observation of the prayers which Muslims are required to perform in a carefully prescribed way five times a day. My students and I have come to appreciate Muslim piety and devotion almost to the point of envy.

But there is another side to this appreciation. Christians' lack of appreciation for Muslim faith, practice and culture has hindered evangelism. Tom Trueman, an experienced Christian worker among Muslims, laments the fact that the missiological practices which have so greatly improved evangelistic effectiveness among tribal peoples have only lately been introduced into Muslim mission practice. The practices to which he refers are based upon a high regard for the cultures of these peoples, whereas Christian missionaries to Muslims have typically undervalued Islam and Islamic culture, deeming it false, superficial and shallow. In part because of this lack of appreciation, Christian-Muslim relations have been characterized by fear, unfair criticism, inappropriate comparisons, arrogance, ridicule and violence. Trueman argues that missionaries who do not take seriously Muslim moral standards, manners, values, learning styles and leadership will not likely gain a hearing.⁶

As Ted discovered in his conversation with Ahmad, dialogue uncovers the positive dimensions of Islam, increasing appreciation. And as he reflected later on his failure to lead Ahmad further toward conversion to Christ, Ted wished that he could have recommended to Ahmad a Christian community in Iran which expressed its faith and life in forms similar enough to those of Islam that Ahmad and his whole family would have been attracted to it. Ted wished that Ahmad could have been like those first Jewish Christians who gave their lives to Christ without having to renounce their culture. Such a reasonable alternative will never be realized until we come to appreciate Islam.⁷

PREVENIENT GRACE AND THE WORK OF THE HOLY SPIRIT

From the perspective of intimate dialogue, Ted became aware that the Holy Spirit had been at work in Ahmad's life preparing him for Ted's witness. Ted sensed the Spirit enabling his witness and discerned the work of the Spirit in Ahmad's response.

In a striking and obvious way, the Holy Spirit used Ahmad's dream and Ted's interpretation (which, by the way, Ahmad had requested of him) to help Ahmad realize that true purity, while unattainable by human effort, could be experienced through the river of the new birth.

In reflecting upon this memorable event several years later, Ted wrote,

God was much more understanding of Ahmad and his desire to be cleaner than I was. I grew up in California and thought that Ahmad was a bit strange for all his worry about modesty and cleanliness. However, God was moving far beyond my level of understanding and was speaking to Ahmad directly.⁸

I doubt that the Spirit would have worked in Ahmad so freely if it had not been for their intimate dialogue; and even if the Spirit had worked freely in Ahmad's experience, it is unlikely that Ted would ever have known it and been able to respond to it had he limited himself to street-witness proclamation.

According to John Wesley, God is at work in the lives of all people to bring them to repentance and saving faith.⁹ He called this action of God prior to salvation "prevenient" grace, or the grace that goes before. Given this prevenient gracious activity of God's spirit that goes on everywhere, it is foolish to proclaim the Gospel without first being sensitive to that activity among the people, or in the person, to whom we direct our witness. E. Stanley Jones, the missionary evangelist, calls the good things, the Christ-like light, scattered among the peoples of the world, "the very footprints of God." He goes on to say, "Everywhere that the mind of man has been open, through the crevices of that mind the light of God has shown in."¹⁰ Proclamation without dialogue, then, will miss the rich fruit born of discerning the work that God is already doing in the life of those to whom evangelistic witness is directed.

A startling example of prevenient grace emerged during a relatively brief dialogue in which I and some of my students were engaged with a small group of Jews. In the course of the discussion a young Jewess named Virginia asked me if I believed in proselytism. I said no that I did not and quoted what Jesus said about those who searched land and sea to make converts whom they turned into people twice the child of hell as themselves. Virginia replied impatiently, "No, no. Let's put it this way, would you like me to know Jesus?" I said, "Yes, Virginia; I would like you to know Jesus. Through Jesus I have come to know God, the most important reality in my life. There is no one I would not like to introduce to Jesus." "That is proselytism," she snapped. "Then I am guilty as charged," I admitted.

An orthodox Jew, whose name I have forgotten, then startled all of us by saying, "No, Virginia, I know what Matt means, for I too have come to know God through Jesus." He went on to explain that he had washed dishes with a student at Garrett Seminary in Evanston, Illinois, for three years. "Jesus was so visible in that man's life," he declared, "that it made me hungry for God." "If I had not had a rich Jewish heritage," he went on, "I would have become a Methodist."

As if we were not already adequately stunned by prevenient grace, Sylvan, a Reformed Jew in our circle, confessed, "I too have come to know God through Jesus." He went on to explain that through reading about Jesus in the Gospel of John he

came to know God. He was unsure about Christian doctrines, such as the trinity and the incarnation, and had remained Jewish. But, by his own testimony, he had come to know God through Jesus.¹¹

Ted's experience with Ahmad has given us a taste of the potential fruit of these close encounters where dialogue and proclamation come together. But intimate dialogue in which we attempt, as Ted did, to proclaim the Gospel, also extracts a price from the witness. Because we accept the risk of opening ourselves to our partners in dialogue, and because we accept the task of confronting them with the challenge of Christ's claims upon their precious lives, these close encounters involve risk and vulnerability.

CLOSE ENCOUNTERS OF THE VULNERABLE KIND

Ted discovered his vulnerability to the faith and life of Ahmad in the course of their intimate dialogue. To be sure, Ted was able to bear witness to his own faith and to its transforming effect in his life. But he could not avoid the impact of Ahmad's deep personal quest for purity and the positive effect of Ahmad's faith on his family life. Furthermore, because the dialogue enabled Ted to get to know and admire Ahmad, he found it impossible to urge him to forsake faith and family even to receive from Christ the cleansing new birth that Ahmad's dream had promised. Thus, in dialogue we encounter two kinds of vulnerability. We experience both (1) the threat of being impacted by the faith and life of our partners in dialogue, and (2) the pain of having to put them in a position of anxiety and suffering. Or, put another way, we recoil from the threat of being converted that is born of the openness which intimate dialogue requires; and we recoil from the threat which Christian conversion poses to our partners, because the intimacy of dialogue makes us feel it so keenly.¹²

If Ted had encountered Ahmad on the street and offered the kind of street witness that had proven so fruitful among Italians, he would have avoided both kinds of vulnerability. But he would not have been the instrument of the Spirit's impact upon Ahmad that he was, and Ahmad would have been even less apt to accept the Gospel offer than he was. On the other hand, if Ted had avoided pressing upon Ahmad the claim that Christ could offer him the cleansing and purity of heart that his dream had promised, he would have avoided the pain of putting Ahmad in a position of anxiety and suffering. He could have avoided a lot of discomfort by satisfying himself with a friendly exchange of information about their two faiths.

In other words, we can avoid vulnerability by avoiding the closeness of dialogue in the process of proclamation, and we can escape vulnerability by avoiding the encounter of proclamation in the process of dialogue. But if we allow ourselves to engage in a close encounter that embeds proclamation in dialogue, as Ted did, we can expect to experience the kind of vulnerability that Ted experienced. But we shall also discover, as Ted did, that God works with us through his Spirit in the process. After all, God took the way of vulnerability in reconciling the world to himself through Christ (Phil. 2:1-11; 2 Cor. 5:17-21). In Christ, God subjected himself to the pain of human rejection and self-love. Through Christ, in love, God took upon himself the painful task of presenting human beings whom he loved with a choice between the

security of family and faith and the forgiveness, cleansing and wholeness that arrives when they give up all to follow him (Luke 14:25-27). In a sense, God's mission of vulnerability can be summed up in the short verse we Sunday school scholars always used when a memorized verse was called for, "Jesus wept" (John 11:35).

From the safe distance afforded by proclamation without dialogue, we can, without any real discomfort to ourselves, insist on those radical claims of our Lord which occasion a painful crisis of choice in our hearers. But unless we feel the kind of pain that made it hard for Ted to press these claims upon Ahmad, they are not likely to have much effect on a Muslim. Ted will learn by painful experience to press the radical claims of Jesus upon those partners in dialogue in whom he senses the Spirit at work. And they will take his message seriously because he will convey it in the same spirit that made it so hard to convey it to Ahmad. He will find in the Spirit of God the source of strength to accept those close encounters of the vulnerable kind which give the Spirit opportunity to engage his heart and the hearts of his partners in dialogue in the painful but liberating process of conviction (John 16:8).¹³

Notes

1. This dialogue between Ted and Ahmad is based on a case study done for one of my classes at Asbury Theological Seminary. The names and places have been disguised, but the narrative remains faithful to the case study.
2. Ruel L. Howe, *The Miracle of Dialogue* (Greenwich, CT: Seabury Press, 1963), p. 4.
3. The bibliography on dialogue is enormous. A particularly constructive discussion, which also has brevity to commend it, is Norman Anderson's in *Christianity and World Religions: The Challenge of Pluralism* (Leicester, England and Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1984), pp. 184-194.
4. Wilfred Cantwell Smith was the first to show that Jesus in Christianity is parallel to the Qur'an in Islam and not parallel to Muhammad (*Islam in Modern History* [New York, NY: New American Library, 1959], p. 25, n. 15). Seyyed Husein Nasr, a Muslim scholar, clarifies and enhances these connections well in *Ideals and Realities of Islam*, 2nd ed. (Mandala Books London: Unwin Paperbacks, 1979), pp. 43f. See my chapter in the *Proceedings of the Wheaton College Theology Conference*, 1992, " 'People of the Book' or 'People of the Person' "? (in press).
5. Kenneth Cragg has made this point very clear when he says: "Those who say that Allah is not 'the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ' are right if they mean that God is not so described by Muslims. They are wrong if they mean that Allah is other than the God of the Christian faith." Putting the matter grammatically, Cragg concludes that "predicates about God may differ widely but God as the subject of differing predicates is the same subject," *The Call of the Minaret*, 2nd ed. (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1985), pp. 30 and 31.
6. Tom Trueman, "Fresh Thinking on Muslim Missions," *Mission Frontiers* (December, 1989), pp. 8-11.
7. Phil Parshall in *New Paths in Muslim Evangelism: Evangelical Approaches to Contextualization* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1980) provides a detailed scenario of a community of Christians of Muslim background which is adjusted to their cultural and religious practices which are not incongruent with biblical faith. See also Charles H. Kraft, "Dynamic Equivalence Churches in Muslim Society," *The Gospel and Islam: A Compendium*, Abridged Edition, ed. Don M. McCurry (Pasadena, CA: MARC, 1979), pp. 78-92.
8. From the case study mentioned in note one.
9. Colin W. Williams, *John Wesley's Theology Today* (New York, Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1960), pp. 45-46. See Wesley's sermon, "On Working Out Our Own Salvation" *The Works of*

John Wesley, ed. Albert C. Outler (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1986), 3: 199-209. For a thorough discussion, see Charles A. Rogers, "The Concept of Prevenient Grace in the Theology of John Wesley" (Ph.D. diss., Duke University, 1967). Mark Royster has examined this concept in relation to world evangelization in his dissertation, "John Wesley's Doctrine of Prevenient Grace in Missiological Perspective" (D.Miss. diss., Asbury Theological Seminary, 1989). Olin Alfred Curtis' brief discussion of the divine side of preparation for Christian conversion could in fact be illustrated by Ahmad's experience. In brief outline, according to Curtis, God gives a vision of righteousness, a vision of the Holy God, a vision of sin, and a tender invitation, *The Christian Faith Personally Given in a System of Doctrine* (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Publications, 1956; a reprint of the original 1905 edition), pp. 351-352.

10. E. Stanley Jones, *The Christ of the Indian Road* (New York, NY and Cincinnati, OH: Abingdon, 1925), pp. 186-187 (At least one other 1925 printing has the same material on page 176).

11. It was not possible to follow up on any of the participants in this unexpected dialogue.

12. E. Stanley Jones, who pioneered this dialogical approach to witness which I am calling for, stressed his own openness to conversion. In India, where he served as a missionary, dialogue between people of the major faiths was legitimate as long as it was assumed that nobody would change from one religion to another. When Jones spoke of conversion in his round table discussions, he precipitated some strong disagreement. He always responded to these objections by stressing his own openness to conversion (Jones, *Christ of the Indian Road*). A recent advocate of dialogue in evangelization who stresses the importance of openness to conversion is Vincent J. Donovan. He argues that dialogue must be characterized by the sharing of the "authentic gospel" and "a true openness to conversion," *The Church in the Midst of Creation* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1989), pp. 115-119. Whether the openness in dialogue is to a conversion to another religion, if truth should require it, one meaning of conversion to Jones, or to the conversion attending a deeper apprehension of the truth, requiring a radical rearrangement of priorities and commitments, the meaning of conversion to Donovan, it results in vulnerability and even anxiety.

13. The word in John 16:8 translated "convince" is from the Greek infinitive *elenchein*, a word that is used in the New Testament both in the sense of proving someone wrong and of convincing someone of something (Friedrich Büchsel, "Elencho," *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, ed. Gerhard Kittel, trans. and ed. Geoffrey W. Bromiley [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964]). The kind of dialogue that I am suggesting here might be called "elenctic" from this Greek word.