From Competition and Conversion to Co-operation and Conversation: Dynamics of Christian-Muslim Engagement

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Two books, *Islam & the West Post 9/11*[1] and *Islam and the West: reflections from Australia*,[2] cover a range of theoretical issues, regional-specific topics and case studies that explore issues related to the theme of Islam and the West. These are but two in a great flood of publications. Interest in contemporary Islam is high. The stakes are high. If global warming is a cause for concern, the idea of an interreligious meltdown between Islam and Christianity – which between them encompass the majority of the entire population of the globe – cannot be lightly brushed aside, given today the upsurge in 'fundamentalist' (I use this expression cautiously) ideologies and related assertive, even terrorist, activities. But there are two other recent books which argue, in effect, that a meltdown is by no means inevitable, and that, indeed, the prospect for friendship between the peoples of these two great religions is eminently possible and supremely to be desired.

Seyyed Hossein Nasr, in his *The Heart of Islam: Enduring Values for Humanity*, remarks that "Islam is an inalienable and inseparable part of the Abrahamic family of religions and considers itself to be closely linked with the two monotheistic religions that preceded it. Islam envisages itself the complement of those religions and the final expression of

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[1] Ron Greaves, et. al., (Eds.), *Islam and the West post 9/11*, Aldershot: Ashgate, 2004.
[2] Shahram Akbarzadeh and Samina Yasmeen, (Eds.), *Islam and the West: Reflections from Astralia*, Sydney: UNSW Press, 2004.

Abrahamic monotheism, confirming the teachings of Judaism and Christianity, but rejecting any form of exclusivism".[3] Nasr likens the Islamic world to

> a Persian medallion carpet; it has incredible diversity and complexity, yet it is dominated by a unity into which all the complex geometric and arabesque patterns are integrated. … one can gain a better grasp of the whole by separating the patterns and seeing how each is related to vertical and horizontal dimensions of the religion of itself as well as to cultural, ethnic, and linguistic factors. Then reuniting the patterns and seeing how they all fit together yields a vision of the total spectrum of Islam, in which unity leads to diversity and diversity is integrated into unity.[4]

However, Islam is no monolith: "Of course" says Nasr, "not all Islamic societies are exactly alike and it would be wiser to speak of Islamic societies rather than society …"[5] The richness of diversity of culture and forms of religious expression is quite different to the diversities that obtain within Christianity, but no less so in range, scope and significance. Conversing about our own diversities, instead of posturing over presumed superiorities of unity, would be a good place to start a friendly dialogue.

Richard Bulliet, in his provocative *The Case for Islamo-Christian Civilization*,[6] attempts to make the case for a fresh re-think of the relationship between the Christian West and the world of Islam – a timely counterpoint to the standard and somewhat pessimistic appraisals of this most critical of international relations. Bulliet advocates understanding, and so re-thinking, the essential relationship between the two religio-civilization blocs as one of a dynamic symbiosis, rather than the received tradition of inherent and unchanging antipathy, even hostility. He rejects the rhetoric of Samuel Huntington's famous "clash of civilizations" and is critical of the presumption that casts the question of the relationship

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[3] Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *The Heart of Islam: Enduring Values for Humanity*, New York: HarperSanfrancisco, 2002, 42.
[4] *Ibid*, 57.
[5] *Ibid*, 172.
[6] Richard W. Bulliet, *The Case for Islamo-Christian Civilization*, New York: Columbia University Press, 2004.

between the world of Islam and the Judeo-Christian, and now secularised, world of the West in terms of something having gone fundamentally wrong with the Islamic side. Bulliet tilts at all the windmills of the received tradition about the nature of the relationship of the West and Islam, especially that which predominates in the corridors of current American power.

Bulliet's notion of an Islamo-Christian civilization is a profoundly challenging concept given the current climate wherein it is the differences which are insisted upon – differences that imply irreducible otherness and so the impossibility of rapprochement or reconciliation. In fear of Islamic imposition the predominant contemporary response of the West is to insist on the imposition, in targeted Islamic countries, of a western form of socio-political ordering. Western Christendom's Islamophobia is historically well attested. But need that be the final word? Bulliet thinks not, and nor do I.

From Competition to Conversation: the challenge of Christian-Muslim friendship
In the modern western world Islam is perceived by many as a threat. A standard reaction is one of fearful concern, of anxiety about an unknown quantity, of prejudice propagated through media bias and popular distortion. I prefer a more positive outlook – Islam poses a challenge to Western society: religiously, ideologically and culturally.[7] A threat is something that evokes a defensive response, even hostility and reactive aggression. A challenge is something we rise to meet. It evokes a reaction of anticipation; it stimulates the desire to attain new accomplishment, and it excites expectation at the prospect of new encounter and the chance to attain new vistas of experience and understanding.

The first challenge is that of understanding Islam, of allaying anxiety and fear through proper knowledge and sympathetic investigation. This is the element of ongoing educational engagement. For each to understand the other better is the first goal of interfaith dialogue. For there to be any hope of countering misperception, correcting false image, and combating mischievous prejudice, then learning for the sake of genuine, critical, and yet at the same time empathetic, understanding constitutes a prime

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[7] Douglas Pratt, *The Challenge of Islam: Encounters in Interfaith Dialogue*. Aldershot: Ashgate, 2005.

challenge. And in the case of Islam and the West, in terms of a cultural and social dialogue, as well as Islam and Christianity as related religions, it is certainly the primary challenge that needs constantly to be addressed.

The second challenge is to engage actively in dialogue or, as I prefer to think of it, in 'dialogical conversation'. It is one thing to gain knowledge from afar, to construct a mode of understanding at a distance, to pursue an intellectual encounter in abstraction. The deeper challenge is that of taking the plunge of face-to-face encounter, the plunge whereby we expose ourselves to the scrutiny and response of each other. This is the challenge of engaging in conversation with one another, and seeking avenues of co-operation. And it is a great challenge because the history we share is one of mutual competition and the presumption of conversion as the goal of interaction – with its inherent assumption that in order for my faith to be true, yours must be false, therefore in order for you to have access to the truth, you should convert to my religion, my viewpoint.

Furthermore, I believe it is only as we take the plunge to engage in conversation that we are prompted to deeper self-reflection and so to further growth in understanding and learning. Self-critical reflection in the cause of dialogue that strengthens the dynamics of friendship requires us to be alert to the formative processes of our respective religious traditions, and to what that may teach us. What might we have in common? What constitutes variation on a theme as it were, and where do we radically differ? On what basis may we, as Christians and as Muslims, seek to forge genuine friendship? Do our religious tenets and convictions allow for détente? Or are we doomed to a perennial competitive context?

Although the foundations of our beliefs lie in our respective scriptures – Qur'an and Bible – the articulation of them into definitive doctrines has emerged, broadly speaking, out of each religion's historical development. Each, in their formative years, took the witness of their scripture *and* the witness of faith-experience – for Christians *Tradition,* for Muslims *Sunnah* – and moulded their respective orthodoxies. Doctrine and dogma

cemented orthodox identity. Yet for both religions, the task of conceptual re-interpretation and formulaic articulation – if not development and change in particular beliefs, or at least in the understanding of them – have continued through the processes of respective scholarly debate and discussion. And these processes continue. Christians might refer to it as theological rethinking; Muslims might call it a task of *ijtihad*. And the reason this can happen without a collapse into contextual relativism is because of a simple principle that is common to both religions. I call it the *akbar* principle, from the Arabic Islamic phrase '*Allahu akbar*: God is most Great'. God is indeed greater than our speaking; our thinking; our writing. We are free to be adventurous, even daring, in our thinking about God and the things of God, because there is nothing we can do to diminish the reality of God. God is Greater. Therefore the task of improving our understanding of God, of God's Will, of God's Way, is never-ending. This is the exciting dimension of faith. This is a basis for hope – hope that we can transcend the inheritance of hostility and, in true submission to the God whose Will is revealed in the Word that has come to us in personal form (Jesus) on the one hand, and in an uttered form (Qur'an) on the other, find common ground and common cause on which to build relationships of friendship, trust, respect for difference, and openness to expanding our horizon's of mutual understanding.

Elsewhere, in an historical review, I have suggested some key terms that describe dominant motifs of Christian-Muslim interaction. Historical epochs of encounter may be denoted by key-terms such as 'expansion', 'equilibrium', 'exhortation', 'enmity', and 'exploration'.[8] But these terms are to be understood as not denoting historical phases as such: they also indicate aspects or dimensions of contemporary relationship. Expansion can be seen to be indicative of the 'expansiveness of self-confidence' – religion in the expansion mode is determined and assertive, and this is a contemporary feature of both Islam and Christianity. But the sense of 'equilibrium', which refers to a hesitancy to be overly self-assertive, and an inclination to humility and a measure of openness to the religious 'other', is also arguably a component element of contemporary relationship, at

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[8] Douglas Pratt, 'Christian-Muslim Relations: Perceptions of Encounter and Perspectives on Dialogue' *CSIC Occasional Papers: Christian-Muslim Reflections* No 4, Centre for the Study of Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations, University of Birmingham, UK, December 1995.

least in some quarters. So, too, is the contemporary reality of mutual exhortation: criticism and judgement, proclamation and witness which, in more extreme forms, seeks to declare an exclusive truth and engage with the 'other' only in order to win, certainly abound. This is the continuing element of competitive praxis, of seeking victory through conversion which, in the cause of a God-given challenge to honour the Divine Will by fostering friendship, needs to be urgently challenged. Likewise propensities toward dismissive, derogatory, and deprecatory prejudice that mark a climate of enmity are abroad still today and are manifest in various situations and contexts.

However, these negative elements notwithstanding – and they by no means give the whole picture – perhaps the motif of 'exploration' in the sense of mutual positive engagement, which now appears to be gaining as a feature or mark of contemporary Christian-Muslim interaction, needs to be affirmed and fostered further. For here we are returned to the fundamental challenge of a sincere, tentative, open and honest quest to know and befriend the religious and cultural 'other' – for Christian to know Muslim, and for Muslim to know Christian – and to do so in a climate of mutual recognition of integrity and validity, even as there is recognition of difference and diversity.

How might we proceed? What might be grounds for justifying and pursuing a dynamic of friendship between Muslim and Christian – at least from the Christian side? First, I suggest there are statements which, at least in their English equivalent, would appear, in principle, not to be problematic so far as Christianity is concerned. The use of expressions of honour and respect, such as the phrase *peace be upon him*, for example, springs to mind. Although not part of the usual language of Christian piety, or normal Christian expression, it would not be inappropriate for a Christian to utter such a phrase in respect of honoured and venerated figures, and this may certainly be done so as an expression of politeness and an acknowledgment of the context of our discourse, such as when in an Islamic environment and to a Muslim audience. Furthermore, there are, I believe, statements and articulations of Islam that a Christian may indeed utter in good faith yet without either giving offence or compromising their own integrity. For instance, there are Islamic locutions which, although most often uttered in their Arabic form, in

another language could just as easily be a Christian statement. Phrases such as: 'There is only One God'; 'In the name of God'; 'Thanks be to God'; 'God willing'; and so on, for example, come to mind. Statements such as 'Muhammad (*pbuh*) is a Prophet of God', or 'Muhammad (*pbuh*) is the Seal of the Prophets' might also come into this category.

Secondly, and briefly, there is the matter of the conceptual or interpretive element to dialogue, especially with respect to the place and function of theological reflection in the dialogical, or conversational, process. Here the analogy of light and prism might be useful. Each of these faiths proclaims the oneness of God and the oneness of the Truth of God. Yet, to a greater or lesser degree, great complexes of concept, doctrine, and intellectual debate have been produced by thinkers seeking to fathom and express the truth of divine revelation on either side. As a consequence, the heritage of theological encounter is largely one of competing claim, counterclaim and, in the end, mutual dismissal of the other's viewpoint. In effect, the assumption has been that each religion is talking about the 'incoming light' on the basis that only it has the right prism of conceptual construct or interpretive framework whereby to refract the light and thus perceive it in its true full glory.

Now, the analogy is based on a presumption of one light of Truth, one Divine Reality, wherein different religions – or at least the religions of revelation – are, in effect, different prisms held up to that light. Thus the diverse theologies, explications, practices and perspectives of these religions are the product of the different prisms and the way they are held, as it were. Religions often argue on the basis of their different refractions of the light of truth, assuming that their particular refraction equates to the original light itself. To recognise, in the process of conversational dialogue, that what we offer to each other is a refracted perspective, unique, distinctive, and valuable as such, and potentially open to complementarity from the perspective of another's refraction, may constitute no bad starting point. Arguably, for instance, the doctrine of the Trinity is a refraction of the truth of the oneness of God through the particular prism of historically bounded experience and language, and a historical set of concerns and conceptual tools for dealing with these.

The point of the analogy is both to help set the context for conversation and to help unlock the process whereby dialogical conversation tends to end where it begins – the agreement to disagree – because, among other reasons for such an outcome, there has been no recognition of the prism effect. Without such a recognition of what is really the interrelationship of the absolute and relative dimensions to all religious discourse there is no prospect of a perspectival shift such that might allow for, in the context of dialogical encounter, the upholding of novel interpretation on the grounds that it is just that: interpretation; a new, possibly combined, refraction of that ultimate truth which in and of itself changes not nor can it be changed. This relates to the hopeful and exciting dimension of Christian-Muslim interfaith conversation I mentioned earlier.

In today's world it is imperative to affirm the integrity of the process of dialogical engagement – of conversation at depth – and to respect the uniqueness and integrity of our Muslim dialogical partner as the one to whom we are called and challenged to relate to. The way of dialogue is arguably the way of engagement in Christian ministry as such. It is the way of the acceptance of the other and openness to the presence of God in and through the other. So it is that the dialogical dynamic of Christian-Muslim engagement may yet take us from a history of competition to a future of co-operation, from being dominated by the quest for conversion to being open to the possibilities of conversation.