

# **Beyond Extremism** **Muslim-Christian Dialogue in a Post-9/11 Era**

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Article abstract

Seeking to move beyond language of “extremism”, this article discusses some of the promises and perils of Muslim-Christian dialogue in an era after September 11, 2001. The author advocates for the public face of religion in secular societies, assesses several recent developments in Muslim-Christian engagements, and proposes steps for opening up a more fruitful contemporary collaboration between Muslims and Christians. Written from a Christian perspective, the article concludes by arguing for “dialogical openness” as a hopeful path toward interfaith mutuality.

# Beyond Extremism

## Muslim-Christian Dialogue in a Post-9/11 Era

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More than ever before, our precarious global matrix of international connections and dependencies requires cooperation across boundary lines, and this means relying upon relationships fostered by trust, honest dialogue, and mutual understanding. Recent past, especially since 9/11/2001, however, proves how challenging it is to build these kinds of relationships. Muslim-Christian dialogue seems caught up in an age of misunderstanding and extremist posturing. From the fierce traditionalism of Wahhabi Salafism to the adamant secularism of European countries seeking to suppress public displays of religious identity, from the militant strategies of al-Qaeda to the violence of the so-called War on Terror, from Muslim outrage over Danish cartoons to Pope Benedict XVI's comments about Islam in a speech at Regensburg, it becomes clear that dialogue in truth and love today is a task as difficult as it is necessary.

How do we move beyond the suspicion and mistrust that seem at times cemented in place? Putting an end to misgivings about each other seems an essential first step. For, according to the largest world poll of religious populations in history, 60% of Christians are prejudiced against Muslims, while 30% of Muslims are prejudiced against Christians (Goma 2010, 17). On the one hand, the modern period has seen the rise of Islamic resurgent movements that take the West and Christianity as threats to the Muslim

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way of life—a way of life strictly interpreted in opposition to all alternatives. Today it appears that public challenge to Islam risks being met in some quarters with violent retaliation rather than vigorous debate. Yet, on the other hand, Christians in Western regions must be circumspect before indiscriminately blaming Muslims for intolerance. And this includes criticizing moderate Muslim leaders for not taking a more dramatic stand against violence by fellow Muslims; for such an accusation overlooks the important 2006 Amman Message, which was an effort to stem violence in Muslim countries, initiated by King Abdullah II of Jordan and endorsed by many prominent Muslim leaders and scholars from across the world (see, <<http://www.ammanmessage.com>>). A good amount of critical self-awareness is required among Christians to ensure that polemics and unwarranted double standards are not advanced under the banner of Christianity.

Hence, speaking as a Christian theologian, I offer some reflections on contemporary challenges to dialogue between Christians and Muslims. Is it possible for Christians and Muslims to engage one another constructively within a context influenced so markedly by extremisms of one form or another—by reactionary and militant forms of Islam as well as by Christianity’s complicity in the colonial past and now in nationalist ideologies and global frameworks of empire? As a Christian theologian, I wager so. Moreover, I contend that it is imperative to wager so, such that we begin to forge ways to make it possible. Not only mutual understanding, but global security and peace are at stake. What, then, are the parameters for such interfaith possibilities? I will outline three basic points and conclude by suggesting that “dialogical openness” remains the most hopeful way forward into interfaith understanding and mutuality.

### **1. The Public Importance of Religion**

First, it is of paramount importance for Christians to encourage governments to take religions seriously. As theologian Hans Küng notes, “There can be no peace among nations unless there is peace among religions” (Küng 1991, xv). Why? Because religious traditions appeal to deep-seated beliefs and core values among peoples, and these motivate behaviors both for good and ill. Yet far too often precisely this point has been neglected in creating public arenas of debate and dialogue, not least in the making of foreign policy. This neglect fits well with the common belief that religion is not a matter of statecraft, but an individual affair confined to the private sphere. The roots of such a belief stem back to the European

Enlightenment, when authors like John Locke, reacting against the strife associated with religious wars, advocated a political peace involving the separation of spheres of faith from the sphere of state. Following Locke, Thomas Jefferson famously called for a “wall of separation”, a thick boundary needed to protect democratic governmental processes from being constrained by potentially divisive matters of religion. Indeed, it is often assumed that when religion becomes political it becomes oppressive and irreligious. This belief also matches with the secularist supposition, virtually a truism in modern Western-style universities, that religion is the epiphenomenon or sideline creation of non-religious factors, a by-product of other more basic conditions and motivations, even ideologies.

The overall result trivializes religion, suggesting that while religious traditions might be visible players on the surface of current events, the real show is going on somewhere else and must be addressed outside of religious matrices. Thus, in making peace, we don't need to talk to religious leaders, just political leaders. Accordingly, the public import and influence of Muslim and Christian faith is minimized, its association with the state explained in terms of the ambitions of groups for social cohesion, cultural identity, or political power rather than an expression of a vision of the collective good rooted in sacred scriptures and heritages. Equally trivializing are analyses of violent conflict that reduce religion's role merely to expressions of social grievances, economic disparities, historical resentments, or the hunger for prestige and influence (McTernan, 2003, Ch. 2). Now I do not want to deny the powerful influence of these factors upon religious traditions, especially for the troubled history of Muslim-Christian relations. One has only to think of Nigeria, for example, where a predominantly Muslim northern region resents the prosperity of an oil-rich and Christian southern region, much violence resulting. I do, however, wish to claim that it is a myopic mistake not to address religious traditions as public players on the global scene, players that can have distinct motivations that have little to do with identity politics, lack of education, or economic disparity. Issues around Jerusalem as a holy site, missionary endeavors, cartoons depicting Muhammad, and burkhas—these all involve interpretations of Qur'an, the sunna (tradition), and sharia in particularly religious ways.

The modern presumptions I am criticizing seem to be at work in assertions that “equality”, “freedom”, and “democracy” are gifts from the West that will be automatically be embraced by Muslim populations, once they get a real taste of it. This, however, is an effrontery to many Muslims, who

on the basis of Islamic precepts can accept neither the separation of church and state nor the privatization of religion that those in the West have come—for good and bad—to take for granted as part and parcel of democratic liberalism. Not that democracy is incompatible with Islam, but that its particular meaning, along with its accompanying notions of equality and freedom, will naturally differ when understood in Islamic contexts. Why? Because religious notions rooted in the Qur'an and Islamic jurisprudence drive the way people in Muslim communities think about these terms. Indeed, Islam has a long history of government by community consensus (*ijma*) according to rational interpretations of the Qur'an and Islamic traditions (*ijtihad*) (Sachedina 2001). Thus, not paying attention to religion here can cause more problems.

In fact, the very use of the word, “extremism”, illustrates the point. The term has become commonplace these days, especially in Western media, to connote an “over the top” or “radicalized” form of life that is threatening. But threatening to whom? Often the label “extremist” is employed in an effort to stereotype a religion “we” in dominant social positions don't like. Like the word, “fundamentalist”, which has a history in describing certain Christian groups (and which is sometimes wrongly used to describe Muslims), it is a pejorative term that distances and sets apart “those other people” who are perceived as outside the taken-for-granted norms of “our” social order, with its alleged stable and peaceful practices and institutions. Such a distancing move—which implies other terms like “fanatic”, “terrorist”, “ignorant”, and so on—functions more as a projection of “our” fears than a description of what is actually going on. The term “extremism” perhaps says more about the fear of difference, which may be perceived as dangerous to assumptions held dear and which are experienced as somehow challenged or eroded, than it does about ones labeled “extremist”. Certainly, I do not intend here to condone violence. Nor do I wish to dismiss the fact that some groups do display reactive mechanisms of resistance to social pressures or rapid change, and make this resistance a predominant part of their identity. Indeed, some Muslim groups (e.g., those rooted Wahabbi heritages) adopt an oppositional posture toward all that “un-Islamic”, defining Islam in narrow and restrictive ways, even to the point of expressing itself in aggressive actions toward other Muslims. I want, rather, to encourage circumspection in how words are used. There is danger in ascribing violence to “those others” and in so doing exempt Western and Christian heritages from critical scrutiny, masking their own violence and “extremism”. Indeed, like the Crusades and

conquistadors of past eras, the “War on Terror” might rightly be called “extremist”—a reactionary and shortsighted response to a set of issues understood in the starkest of terms. Or perhaps even certain aspects of globalization can be labeled “extremist”, insofar as they uproot, displace, and marginalize groups of people. Like the term “terrorist”, “extremist” is a term relative to context of use.

Part of the reason for such misunderstanding, I am arguing, is based upon the presumption that faith and politics should be disentangled, as if when combined extremism will inevitably result, with its violence. This is simply untrue, as examples like Mahatma Gandhi, Martin Luther King, Jr., and the Gülen Movement in Turkey teach us, along with the Catholic Social Encyclicals and Protestant Social Gospel traditions. Unlike a *New York Times Magazine* article suggested, moderate Muslims are not moderate because they don’t take Islam seriously, and neither are they moderate because they are serious but not political (Caldwell 2006, 43). So speaking the truth here means entertaining a richer notion of faith as engaged in political ventures. This would certainly square with Islamic understandings of *sharia*—a code of law grounded in ideals aimed at regulating right conduct for Muslims, based in Qur’an, hadith (sayings of the prophet), and sunna (tradition). And it would also acknowledge the often overlooked fact that faith-based ideals from the Bible are built into the fabric of Western societies, ideals that are commonly misremembered as secular in origin.

Let me give three brief examples of the problem I am addressing here. First, in 2005, Ontario witnessed a divisive discussion about sharia law. Some Muslim leaders proposed that sharia law be considered binding in family matters, though not in criminal law. Interestingly, fourteen years earlier, in 1991, the province had allowed for faith-based arbitration in family matters for other groups. But the media and public discourse highlighted mainly the dangerous threat to Canadian democracy posed by radicalized Taliban-like Islam, especially noting the threat to women. A brochure was produced, entitled, “Behind Closed Doors,” the message of which was clear: “those” foreign women need “our” protection. The point is that extremist reactions can also be found in a dominant culture’s reaction to others, “at home” in exclusivist Canadian responses to the new and unfamiliar (Hussain 2006, 157-59). A second, more recent, example emerged from a suggestion made in a 2008 lecture by then Archbishop of Canterbury, Rowan Williams that England might consider adopting sharia law in family matters (Williams 2008). Immediately after his remarks, he was met with fierce resistance, and on grounds similar to those

in Canada—namely, that this would be a step into the dark ages. Never mind that Christian family law has become practically embedded in Western legal systems. Indeed, and ironically, such myopia and misunderstanding—in its many facets and forms—has contributed to growing radicalism among Muslims. And it is not difficult to understand why. Many feel that Islam is disrespected and not taken seriously by the West. The Danish cartoons of Muhammad are a final case and point. Amir Hussain perceptively notes that the “issue is not simply about freedom of expression, as it is often made out to be. It is about who has the power to create stereotypes, and how those stereotypes affect the way we treat people” (Hussain 2006, 67).

Discussions about politics and Islam, therefore, must do more than simply dismiss Islam as an extremist-leaning religion, or alternatively claim that Islam is a mainly peaceful religion at heart (i.e., quiet and private) and that extremists have “hijacked” it for public gain. They must strive to take into account and accommodate how Muslims interpret their various predicaments. And just like Christians, Muslims are diverse and live in many different contexts (e.g., Sunni vs. Shia, Turkey vs. Iran). There is no singular “Muslim world” or univocal “Muslim identity”. As Paul Heck argues, “Religions are not objects for zoological classification but dynamic actors in their own right” (Heck 2009, 6). Thus in the end a better understanding of Islam in its various permutations needs to inform public discussion and foreign policy. Otherwise, Christian traditions in Europe and North America will find themselves at odds with Muslims, who will quite naturally and perhaps correctly suspect alliances between Western global imperialism and Christianity. One needs only to think of the famous “Clash of Civilizations” theory promulgated by Samuel P. Huntington, which too easily lumps all into two opposing camps (Huntington, 1996).

## 2. Building Bridges of Connection

This is illustrated dramatically by a second point, which stresses the urgent need for ongoing interfaith dialogue. We recall the remarks made by Pope Benedict XVI in his September 12<sup>th</sup>, 2006, address on faith and reason at the University of Regensburg. He approvingly cited a fifteenth century Byzantine emperor who accused Islam of being a faith “spread by the sword” and noted that some of the teachings of the Prophet Muhammad are “evil and inhuman” (Benedict 2006). While the lecture only mentions Islam in passing, and is overall quite erudite in its attempt to defend the rationa-

lity of religion against the dangers of relativism, damage to Muslim-Christian relations was nonetheless done. The Pope appeared to be levying a critique of Islam, making note of its propensity to violence in a way that conspicuously omitted any mention of Christianity's own history of violence.

Subsequent to these remarks, violence erupted in various Muslim communities. Churches were burned, people were killed, and death threats against the Pope were made. For a brief time, ironically, it appeared that Muslim "extremists" had confirmed the Pope's comments. The Pope made a meager apology, expressing regret that people were offended by his use of the quote. But many Muslims rightly criticized the apology for not going far enough. Then, however, moderate Muslims leaders stepped in and accepted the Pope's invitation to meet at the Vatican on September 25<sup>th</sup>. The results were positive. On October 19<sup>th</sup>, thirty-eight Muslim scholars and chief muftis from numerous countries met in Amman, Jordan, and officially accepted the Pope's apology, signing an open letter to be delivered to the Vatican in hope of opening further dialogue to counter prejudice against Islam. Their hope was that the Church can help ameliorate Western suspicions of Islam, suspicions that I believe have been augmented by the failures of European and North American civil leaders to take Islam seriously as a genuine player in Middle East politics. Subsequently, the Pope's largely successful visit to Turkey did much help quell Muslim suspicion of the Vatican.

The whole debacle regarding the Pope's comments illustrates the absolute necessity for interfaith dialogue in today's precarious global context. Religion is a real player on the scene, motivating behaviors and influencing attitudes. So my second point is that leaders, both political and religious, must work together to build bridges of mutuality based upon genuine understanding and respect. Indeed, religious leaders can help to validate peace processes. How so? By countering misunderstandings and persuading people of different faiths to work cooperatively to reinforce the core values necessary for people from various cultures and societies to live in harmony (Albright 2006, Ch. 5).

Given this, it is heartening that Cardinal Paul Poupard, then president of the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue (PCID), unveiled a message in 2006 commemorating the end of Ramadan that celebrated the potential for dialogue between Christians and Muslims. The document states: "The particular circumstances that we have recently experienced together demonstrate clearly that, however arduous the path of authentic dialogue may be at times, it is more necessary than ever." After noting the

need for such dialogue to address terrorism, injustice, poverty, and conflicts within and between countries, the cardinal continues: “Without a doubt, the credibility of religions and also the credibility of our religious leaders and all believers is at stake.” Why? Because, “Our two religions give great importance to love, compassion and solidarity” (PCID 2006). Love, to be credible, must be effective, realized in justice and peace.

At the end of Ramadan, in 2007, 138 Muslim leaders continued the conversation by sending an open letter to Christian leaders throughout the world in hopes of promoting Muslim-Christian cooperation and mutual understanding. The document is entitled, *A Common Word between Us and You*, and argues that without “peace and justice between these two religious communities, there can be no meaningful peace in the world” (*A Common Word* 2007, 2). This profound gesture provided an incredible opportunity for Christians to respond constructively, working to build relationships of mutual understanding and love. And indeed, many Christians responded positively, notably a group of theologians at Yale University including theologian Miroslav Volf (in 2007), Pope Benedict (in 2007), and the Archbishop of Canterbury (in 2008)<sup>1</sup>. Since then, numerous others have joined the chorus of authors responding and calling for a more robust dialogue between Christians and Muslims (for my own theological response, see Reynolds 2010). And there have been several major dialogue gatherings—at Yale, in England, and in Rome—that further the initiative.

### 3. Fostering Engagement and Understanding

But how can such mutual love work itself out in an ongoing way amidst allegations of extremism and actual occasions of violence? With this question, I come to the third point. Because there is no panacea, however, I outline several possibilities from a Christian perspective mindful of the fact they are only beginning points requiring further elaboration and implementation.

First, dialogue now must mean listening to and understanding the grievances voiced by Muslims, grievances that extend back to the Crusades and Spanish Inquisition, and that have been hardened by early xx<sup>th</sup> century betrayal and deception by Western colonial powers (e.g., Belfour declaration 1917), and further exacerbated by late xx<sup>th</sup> century occupations and exploi-

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1. See <<http://www.yale.edu/faith/acw/acw.htm>> and <<http://acommonword.com/index.php?lang=en&page=responses>>.

tations (from propping up the Shah in Iran to the invasion of Afghanistan and Iraq). Listening itself can be a profound affirmation of the other's voice, a "statement" of the intent to take seriously and display empathy. Further, learning from those who condemn us aids in the process of accepting our complicity in wrongs of the past, and more, in making public gestures toward reconciliation and restoration. Such gestures would indeed embody one of the fundamental axioms of Christian and Muslim faiths: the need for repentance, before God and others, who in turn may show mercy and compassion.

For instance, one of the principal roots of tensions in present Muslim-Christian relations has to do with past missionary endeavors by Christians. For centuries in Muslim regions, Muslims and Christians lived side by side, the latter granted a good measure of religious freedom as an officially "protected minorities" (*dhimmīs*). Occasionally suffering persecution, Christians under Muslim rule overall fared much better than did their counterparts in Christian regions (Lewis 1999, 129; Shah-Kazemi 2012, 59-74). Muslim animosity grew with the coming of European colonizers from the xvi<sup>th</sup> century onwards, joined by Christian missionaries whose primary aim appeared to be to undermine and replace Islamic faith and culture with Western Christian faith and culture. Christian faith seemed married to European power. Moreover, the tactics of the missionaries were experienced as exploitative: the poor targeted for economic assistance, the sick targeted for medical aid, the uneducated targeted for education. Rather than witnessing to faith in words and deeds of love, Christians sought converts, engaging in expedient means to achieve their end (Mohammed 1999, 71-2). Thus, is it heartening that recently Christian bodies from around the globe—including the Pontifical Council for Inter-religious Dialogue, the World Council of Churches, and the World Evangelical Alliance—produced a document entitled, "Christian Witness in a Multi-Religious World: Recommendations for Conduct", which acknowledges wrongs from the past and encourages respectful engagement and solidarity with other faiths (PCID, WCC, WEA 2011).

Second, Muslim-Christian respect and mutual understanding, however, does not mean simply accepting the violence that often ensues from grievances. Rather, it entails speaking hard truths together that name violence for what it is—dehumanizing, counterproductive, and religiously unjustifiable. To be sure, there are passages in the Qur'an that encourage the use of the sword. These, however, are mainly defensive in nature against aggressors (Q 2:190) or against *kuffār*—plural for *kāfir*, i.e., those

who reject God, non-Muslims, mostly polytheists—as those hostile to the message of Muhammad, except when they seek asylum (Q 9:5-6). The term, *jihad*, does not mean “Holy War” but rather “struggle” in a broad sense (as we shall explore shortly in more detail), and was employed initially as a kind of quasi “just war theory” to justify taking up arms defensively in a time of bloody conflict between Muhammad’s small but growing community and the powerful Quraysh of Mecca (Reza 2006, 75-81). Generally, accepted violence is directed *neither* toward Jews and Christians, who are mostly respected as “People of the Book” *nor* toward “infidels” generically understood, which is actually a term with Christian origins designating the non-faithful. Even when violence is condoned, the Quranic injunction against acting out of hatred and commendation of actions that are just and equitable takes precedence (e.g., Q 5:8). Furthermore, the basis for acting coercively can never be rooted in religious belief, for there should be “no compulsion in religion” (Q 2:256).

Even more, Islam is not exclusivist in the strict sense, holding that salvation comes only for Muslims and that truth is restricted to the Qur’an. Rather, it grants that God’s revelation also occurs outside the Qur’an through prophets affirmed by Jews and Christians (e.g., Q 2:62; 3:84; 5:82). While currently many Muslims do, in fact, hold to exclusivist positions, Shah-Kezemi suggests the deepest currents of Islamic tradition see religious diversity as something not merely to be tolerated, but more, respected as something willed by God (e.g., Q 5:48) (Shah-Kazemi 2012, 87-89). Keeping these caveats in mind, in addition to understanding the Qur’an in context, it is important to remember that violence and exclusivism also factors in the scriptures of Jewish and Christian traditions (e.g., see Nelson-Pallmeyer 2003 and Schwartz 1997). Accordingly, we must find ways to encourage all parties in dialogue to become self-critical and open to engaging and understanding the other more empathetically.

Reclaiming productive moments in our common histories can be a step toward fostering this empathetic understanding. First of all, it must be recalled that while Europe was in its so-called dark ages, Muslim scholars in Bagdad were advancing in sciences and retrieving the classic wisdom of the Greeks. Medieval Christian scholars, like Thomas Aquinas, learned their Aristotle thanks to the learning of Muslim philosophers before him. And the so-called “rebirth” of the European Renaissance was made possible, to a large degree, by wisdom flowing in from the Muslim world with the opening up of trade routes (Al-Djazairi 2005).

Another productive approach involves showing sensitivity to nuance in how interfaith terms have been employed variously throughout different Islamic contexts, like *dhimmīs* (protected minorities) or the two *dār*—*dār al-islām* versus *dār al-harb* (realm of peace vs. realm of war). Generally speaking, realms outside of Muslim jurisdiction were considered *dār al-harb*, but referenced neither strictly as populated by violent people nor as people with whom Muslims should wage war, for armistice agreements could be arranged with non-Muslim groups and their safety guaranteed in traveling peaceably through respective territories (Friedmann 2003, 54-56). *Dhimmīs* were those living within *dār al-islām* and who agree to pay the *jizya* (tributary tax) for political shelter and safety. Bestowed with the same rights and obligations under Muslim law, including opportunities to participate in economic and social frameworks, they were in large permitted to maintain their religious identity and practices. The status of being a “protected minority” was flexible, and extended beyond Jews and Christians often to include Zoroastrians, Hindus, and Buddhists (Friedmann 2003, 54-58 and 72-83; Shah-Kazemi 2012, 59-61).

To be sure, this was no egalitarian acceptance of non-Muslim faiths. In his *Tolerance and Coercion in Islam* (2003), Yohannan Friedmann references constrictive elements in Islamic law during the early years of Muslim expansion that move from more to less openness toward non-Muslims, and notes an increasing disagreement among scholars about the place of non-Muslims in Islamic societies. Yet, according to Shah-Kazemi, juridical writings are contextual and often informed by rivalries and defensive postures and, accordingly, must be judged by criteria from the Qur’an and the larger Sunna (Shah-Kazemi 2012, 63-64). It is true, there were cases of restriction and persecution, though it is also true that the general rule was tolerance (Mohammed 1999, 32-34), to the extent that many Jewish and Christian minority communities persecuted under Christendom’s rule found safe haven and even grew to flourish under Muslim rule (Aslan 2006, 85). Thus, while some authors highlight the inferior and “second class” status conferred upon *dhimmīs*, arguing it amounted essentially to servitude or “dhimmitude” (Ye’or 1996, 244-48), this should be weighed historically in contrast with Christian Europe’s level of intolerance and in light of numerous counter-examples where protected peoples were honoured wholeheartedly and defended fiercely (Hussain 2006, 125-30; Shah-Kazemi 2012, 62-74).

Furthermore, it is important to remember that Christians before our time, along with their critical appraisals, have also acknowledged the virtues of Islam. For example, in 1076, some twenty years before the First Crusade, Pope Gregory VII wrote a letter to Muslim leader al-Nasir of Bijaya (in present day Algeria), who had requested that a local priest be ordained bishop to care for Christians living in his domain. In this letter, the Pope gratefully acknowledges common faith in one God, though expressed differently, and a common historical ancestry traceable to Abraham (Mohammad 1999, 52). A few centuries later, Francis of Assisi, in 1219, encountered the Muslim Sultan of Egypt, al-Malik al-Kamil, and came away transformed by the experience. His writings afterward indicate, in the words of Paul Rout, “that his encounter with Islam had led him into a new horizon of religious vision that brought him to accommodate certain Islamic religious practices within his own Christian faith experience” (Rout 2011, 212; see also Moses 2009). More recently, such a transformation can be seen in the life and work of Fr. Louis Massignon (1883-1962), who recovered his Catholic faith through an encounter with Islam and Muslim hospitality, and as a result championed Abraham as the common patriarch of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, doing much to reappraise Islam for Christians in the modern period (Mohammad 1999, 49).

Given this, a third point emerges: it is crucial to acknowledge that the Qur’an recognizes an Abrahamic lineage that binds Judaism, Christianity, and Islam inseparably to relationship with each other and God. For Christians, theologically, this means Islam is not a separate religion, but in fact a sibling joined to Christianity in much the same way that Christianity is joined to by building upon its Jewish heritage. Put differently, Islamic tradition views Christians (and Jews) as religious neighbours that accept saving truth. Might it be possible for Christians to recognize Islam as a religious path stemming from the same merciful and compassionate God? Mindful of the often-wide gap between theological ideals and historical facts, between statements of faith and actual practices, holding up such a shared lineage can be a catalyst for dialogical mutuality.

One way of accomplishing such mutuality is to encourage reading sacred scriptures together, exploring mutually the literary and historical contexts of scriptural passages and also highlighting constructive over destructive passages. Indeed, there are many passages in our scriptures that call for mercy, compassion, peace, and understanding over hatred, injustice, and violence. These can mitigate more extremist interpretations. Among Abrahamic faiths, a recent movement called “Scriptural Reasoning” has

become popular to address precisely this concern and build positive understanding and relationships between Jews, Muslims, and Christians (see <<http://www.scripturalreasoning.org>>). Started in 1994 by Peter Ochs, the Edgar Bronfman Professor of Modern Judaic Studies at the University of Virginia, this movement facilitates gatherings of mainly religious educators and leaders to discuss specified scriptural passages. Theologian David Ford notes that the goal is not consensus but friendship (Ford 2006, 348), as the process among six or so participants in a particular session preserves differences as it establishes relationship through conversation over sacred texts chosen in advance by participants to focus a certain figure (e.g., Abraham) or theme (e.g., creation, justice, or hospitality) (see Kepnes, 2006). The results have been encouraging, as more groups arise across North America and Europe. This kind of “reading together” goes a long way toward building trust and opening up empathetic understanding between traditions. As Joseph Lumbard observes, “Only when our texts are read in relation to one another in a spirit of faith seeking understanding, rather than a spirit of polemic seeking division that so often plagues us, can we establish a dialogue that is based upon the central teachings that lie at the core of our religious traditions” (Lumbard 2010, 105). But the dialogue needs to be widened.

Christians and Muslims must actively seek out dialogue with each other on multiple fronts, engaging local communities, learned scholars, and esteemed leaders in productive conversations. Not only can this build bridges of understanding and mutuality, it can also help demonstrate good will to the global community at large, even amidst disagreements. True, many are not interested in dialogue, suspicious of motives given histories of broken relations. But, as a Christian, I believe that dialogue among some can send a signal of respect for Islam among others. And more, dialogue can begin to address grievances, and in turn may spill over and begin to loosen the hold of radical and militant interpretations of Islam often expressing those grievances. It may, perhaps, even lead to forgiveness and reconciliation (for examples, see Schenk 2008). But this also depends upon willingness to hear the truth spoken about extremism in Christianity and the West.

For such dialogue to remain vital and fruitful, it is crucial to remember that the line (that infamous “axis”) between good and evil does not run between people but through the middle of all human beings. Considering the often-misunderstood term, *jihad*, can help us here. For it does not mean “holy war” in its most basic meaning, but rather, struggle—the struggle to

live on the straight path, nurturing the good and resisting the evil in society as well as in our own souls. The “inner jihad” is indeed the struggle in the self to be righteous, whereas the “outer jihad” is to bear public witness and defend Islam, whether by example, preaching, the pen, or by the sword. It is said that Muhammad claimed use of the sword as the “lesser jihad,” living the Muslim life genuinely the “greater jihad.” Christian and Jews themselves can be understood as practicing “jihad” in the non-violent sense when speaking against injustice and promoting right relations (e.g., the slogan question, “What would Jesus do?”; see Esposito 2005, 254-56 and Hussain 2006, ch. 6). More recently the call for jihad has sounded from reactionary Islamic revivalist groups to justify their struggle for liberation from perceived aggression (Esposito 2005, ch. 7 and Epilogue; Reza 2006, ch. 9).

Yet it is important to note that at the heart of “extremist” forms of religion is not evil, but fear, which seeks to resist and nullify perceived threats and influences in order to protect a sacred value. A retrenchment strategy ensues that aims to build protective walls of insulation in a contractive movement, which re-centers a community on the basis of select items that serve as rigid boundary markers. In contrast to fear, however, the best in Christian and Muslim traditions insists on the transformative potential of openness to God to foster loving for one another. How so? As *A Common Word* encourages, by directing us to know and serve each other as neighbours. The Qur’an states: “O humankind We [God] have created you male and female, and made you into communities and tribes, so that you may know one another. Surely the noblest amongst you in the sight of God is the most God-conscious of you. God is All-knowing and All-aware” (49:13).

Christians and Muslims can learn much from each other in a spirit of mutual understanding. Each is called—from principles inside their respective traditions—to compete in goodness (Q 5:48) and help one another in righteousness and piety (Q 5:2). We are called to work for justice (Q 5:8, 7:29, 49:9). These activities are not unrelated to the love each tradition shares for God. Thus, as *A Common Word* expresses, love of God and love of neighbour are joined inseparably. Again, the Qur’an: “To each is a goal to which God turns them; then strive together toward all that is good” (2:148). Living this out via Muslim-Christian dialogue fulfills the best of what both traditions have to offer humanity. While on the one hand this may sound nondescript or politically naïve, on the other, it is the surest practical hope for forging interfaith mutuality and cooperation both

locally and globally. Indeed, Islam invites coming together for common cause in the name of the one God: “O People of the Book, come to common terms as between us and you: that we worship none but Allah” (Q 3:64). It is thus entirely fitting that *A Common Word* closes by quoting the following passage from the Qur’an, which addresses all People of the Book: “To each among you We have 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 has 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 you dispute” (5.48). We—Christians and Muslims—are not fortresses unto ourselves, but members of one another, making dialogue truly the path toward greater understanding.

### Conclusion: Toward Dialogical Openness

By way of conclusion, let me briefly highlight what dialogue as I am describing it might look like. First, as a form of mutual understanding, dialogue between Muslims and Christians is not a matter of regulations and procedural codes, a law to be applied univocally in every context. To be sure, it opens potentially to an ethic of compassionate regard, a kind of “golden rule” of doing to others as one would have them do to oneself. This requires being ready to listen and find worth in what another has to say, being ready to respond and give witness to one’s own perspective, and finally, being willing to change because of the conversation. But while any dialogue presumes such moral beginning points, its application is always particular and *ad hoc*, arising as needed in different ways and according to different sets of circumstances. This means that dialogue has to be negotiated and renegotiated in each instance and according to different exigencies. The details get worked out in the conversing, which is ongoing and never final. We find what we happen to share, discover differences in the process, and forge agreements. In the give-and-take, something together emerges: mutual understanding.

This is important to recognize because far too often the conditions for dialogue are prescribed in advance by one party, a party with a polemical attitude toward or an asymmetrical power advantage over another. A common way such imbalance occurs is for one voice to block or silence another as “wrong” and in need of convincing/conversion to the truth, either as an outright failure or as only a partial glimpse of a truth (alleged to be) more fully grasped by one particular perspective. This is exemplified

when one voice presumes authority and dominates the conversation. Rather than dialogical, the dynamic instead becomes monological. A further example of polemics, albeit more subtle, is the presumption of “common ground” before dialogue. “Common ground” can be a way for a dominant party to project their own vision onto another—for example, it can insert its own theology of what “should” be shared among faith traditions before learning from another tradition, thus hedging the conversation. This is why common ground should be seen as a flexible, ad hoc and situation specific achievement always contextualized in dialogue, not a firm axiomatic condition for parties to enter into dialogue. What can be presumed and taken for granted is some kind of a shared resonance between the differences and particularities of parties and their faith traditions, which allows the conversation to be possible—such as a common Abrahamic lineage and the worship of God—but which contains and honours dissonance as well as consonance (Reynolds 2006, 134-141).

However, even if dialogue is non-polemical, it can still be asymmetrical. For example, in a patriarchal setting full of fear, a dialogue between women and men is hedged from the start, as is a dialogue between persons or groups from different social standings, racialized frameworks, educational experiences, and so on. The task is to be mindful of such asymmetries and seek to address them accountably within the arc of striving toward the goal of mutuality, which in turn requires recognizing one’s own privilege and being an advocate for justice and social transformation (Nothwehr 1998). Understanding becomes distorted and ideologically charged within systems of discrimination and inequity. For example, racial and ethnic minority migrants to Canada often experience isolation because of language barriers, cultural dislocation, and a devaluation of international credentials, work experience, and professional networks that lead to limited employment opportunities and encourage living in enclaves unconnected with mainstream Canadian cultures (Reitz and Banerjee 2007). Within these circumstances, mutual understanding between Muslim migrants and established Christians of European ancestries can be fraught with perils.

But understanding is itself an ambiguous word with shades of meaning. In fact, I suggest it has three basic levels. First, it connotes having a grasp of something, perceiving and knowing it as a form of cognitive ascertainment. This doesn’t necessarily require sympathy or agreement, as in the case of understanding the causes violence and beliefs or practices that demean others. But it does entail the removal of distorting prejudg-

ments and stereotypes, and also cultivates respect for another as a human being. Dialogue moves past this first level in acts of attunement with another through empathy or sympathy, which sees another “as if” from their point of view or feels “as if” what another might feel in his or her shoes. This level is where mutuality and reciprocity open to genuine respect as compassionate regard for another. Yet a third level is achieved when compassionate regard moves to solidarity and ongoing relationship through common actions and shared initiatives—for example, Scriptural Reasoning, *A Common Word*, and the United Church of Canada’s document on Muslim-Christian relations, “That We May Know Each Other” (United Church of Canada 2006). In our post-9/11 era, all three levels of understanding are desperately needed (Reedijk 2010, 49ff.).

For this reason I am particularly proud to teach at a school like Emmanuel College, of Victoria University in the University of Toronto, where a Muslim Studies program is in its beginning phase, and well-known scholar of Islam, Aziz Sachedina, was its Distinguished Visiting Professor for the first year. This program will provide an unprecedented opportunity in Canada for Christian and Muslim students and leaders in training to study side-by-side and come to know each other. The possibilities for richer understanding on all levels are legion. The hope is also that it will provide training for Muslim chaplains and imams that is sensitive to a Canadian context along with its intercultural and interfaith character (see Toulouse 2012).

Certainly, what I am advocating here—and what is represented at Emmanuel—does not mean glossing historical complexities and simply accepting every perspective as true and good. For it is as bankrupt to say, “everyone is OK, and we should tolerate all” as it is to say, “only my group is welcome.” Why? Because an “anything goes” perspective grants unrestricted license for all points of view to have their day, even the worst—such as racism, sexism, exploitation, and all kinds of abuses of power. In Paul Tillich’s words, it is as important to avoid succumbing to “a tolerance without criteria” as it is “to an intolerance without self-criticism” (Tillich 1958, 123). On the basis of dialogical openness, with an ethic of honouring each other’s vulnerability to suffering, we must reserve the right to resist evil. This is why tolerance is simply not enough. First, it can easily slip into indifference, and indifference leads to carelessness and utter relativism. Truly some differences make a positive dialogical difference while others do not. What is more, second, tolerance often presumes a privileged position of superiority: “I will tolerate you, as long as you are not interfering

with or questioning my way”. Tolerance does not welcome differences; it merely “puts up with” them.

So, while tolerance is perhaps a step in the right direction, it ultimately can preempt truthful and compassionate relationship. There must remain the possibility of honouring other perspectives than my own, and in such a way that it becomes viable to reach out to another in a gesture of welcome that exclaims, “come in and be at home with me, sharing life with me.” It presumes *dialogical openness*, a willingness on my part not only to work side-by-side with another to address problems of shared concern, but to engage face-to-face and be-with another, to welcome and share space. And this contains several ingredients, the most important of which is hospitality.

Christians, Jews, and Muslims alike are called to welcome the stranger as a neighbour in hospitality (Reynolds 2010). Such hospitality is outpouring, not closed and self-serving. It does not traffic in fear, but in a sense of giftedness and abundance, grateful for having been given something that can now be offered to another—the gift of divine welcome. In Abrahamic faiths, this is the precisely the sharing of God’s mercy and love, and ideally it yields compassion and respect for others. Plenty of verses could be marshaled from the Qur’an and Bible to support the point (e.g., Lev 19:33-34; Mt 25:40; Q 2:177, 4:36, 49:13). But the crucial disposition is—at least if the stranger is one who comes unforeseen and is unknown—a receptiveness to surprise and a willingness to make oneself (i.e., one’s home) available, open and flexible to change once the stranger approaches. Such availability may entail renegotiating the household, or perhaps a church community or public school, reconfiguring the shared space according to those who now occupy it, opening space for daily prayers or perhaps even elements of sharia law. The key to unlocking the door of hospitality is maintaining an open and ready heart. And dialogue as a way to deeper mutuality and understanding can help lead us there. For, when hospitality is mutual, as Daniel A. Madigan suggests, “something new emerges, and what starts out as doing theology *in the presence of* the other become doing theology *together with* the other” (Madigan 2010, 59). This “together with” is the primary stuff of dialogical openness.

To conclude, let me offer several points to nuance what I mean by “dialogical openness”, speaking from the standpoint of a Christian. First, dialogical openness means that I must resolve to be myself. I don’t have to deny or water down my own convictions about what is meaningful and valuable. For instance, I am a committed Christian theologian. But this

does not mean that I should from the outset therefore reject all other religious perspectives as null and void, at worst evil and at best well-intended errors. To the contrary, being Christian means that I am indebted, dwelling in a “house” that is a gift, making me dependent upon a source of mercy and grace outside my own parochial projects and agendas, outside of the way I might draw boundaries around my world to insure my own security and salvation. Faith’s acknowledgement of the giftedness of life calls for something more than self-enclosure.

In part, this is because faith itself can never be absolute. Faith is seeing through a glass darkly, and this means I don’t possess God as an object to manipulate and guarantee my own perspective. Faith is built upon the experience of something that exceeds the control of its grasp. In this way, faith entails doubt and ambiguity (see Tillich 1958). It can never be absolutely sure, which makes faith akin to trust. And trust requires humility, the recognition that one’s perspective is limited and does not have all the answers. The opposite of faith, then, is not doubt, but fear—a fear of being limited and finite, of living in ambiguity and not having all the answers. Fear is the disposition that creates idols, which, unable to cope with uncertainty, fabricates an “absolute” from something finite in order to guarantee control. Fear compels the making of pseudo-ultimates that perform the role of security blankets. Fear in this way preempts dialogue, leading to closure rather than openness. As suggested earlier, it is what foments extremism.

Second, because my perspective is limited and does not “possess” God, but instead is given the gift of love, dialogical openness means that I welcome and listen to another as having something of potential value to contribute. If faith does not have all the answers, it becomes important to listen to others to hear what they have to say. Max Müller, a great nineteenth century scholar of religion, once said, “To know one religion is to know none” (quoted in Paden 1988, 38). This is particularly illuminating statement. For we are relational beings, and never become ourselves in a vacuum, alone, but rather in the presence of other people, as they reflect us back like a mirror and perhaps challenge us with their own presence (as in a friendship). Here, dialogue opens up enrichment: through the gift of another presence, each party grows and now sees themselves and each other in a new way. The fact is that no one of us can survey all of reality. Human beings see things only piecemeal, limited by position in time and place, perhaps even misled by power and privilege. Given this, others can offer correctives to shortsightedness and misdoings. Humans are beings

naturally oriented toward being supplemented and enlarged by the presence of others.

This becomes even more significant, when we consider relationship with God, who is always beyond the scope of human vision. We grasp only in fragments, and in language that reflects the limitations of finitude, the exigencies of time and place. As many theologians have posited, no human construct can exhaust the utter inscrutability and mystery of God. Indeed, stated positively, God's presence may be active in sources "outside" the boundaries—many of them artificial—of what a group considers to be "inside." Perhaps, then, we can learn more about God from faith traditions other than our own. Accordingly, cultivating a willingness to listen to other religious voices is not only a gesture of hospitality, but also a way of mutual enrichment. As Amir Hussain concisely summarizes, "It is through dialogue that we learn about ourselves, about others, and in so doing perhaps also about God" (Hussain 2006, 197).

This opens into a third point. In being myself and listening to another, I respond and am changed. Not that I now must give up on my original convictions—though the risk of this possibility is there. Rather, that I remember these convictions differently. Through hospitality's dialogical openness, my world is de-familiarized and disrupted. I grow and am transformed, rendered response-able to another. I find myself in a relation that opens up and indeed fosters solidarity. In this way, my Christian sense of reality is deepened by being lived out, welcoming another as one loved into being by God. Perhaps, too, I see the need for repentance of wrongs committed, the need to work for right relations with others in ongoing gestures love. Such is the case, for example, given the history of Christian complicity in violence against Muslims.

Dialogical openness holds great promise for interfaith peace between Muslims and Christians, moving beyond misunderstanding and mistrust. But by peace I do not mean the absence of tensions and disagreements. Rather, I mean the state of unique differences encountering one another in a kind of counterpoint, each contributing to the ongoing conversation and each becoming something new because of it. Genuine mutuality and partnership emerges in such a state, in which solidarity thrives and a collective momentum toward justice and love is created. Together, Christians and Muslims might (and must) find constructive ways to share our world and resist those forms of practice that threaten peace and shut down dialogue. For this, Muslims have important things to say to me—and I affirm this as a Christian. Even more, I am called to a robust solidarity with Muslim

sisters and brothers in the effort to know one another and dwell together fruitfully in the arms of the God we share. And within the arc of this relation, together we can, God willing, forge a common future.

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## Résumé

Cet article vise à dépasser le langage de l'« extrémisme » pour discuter des promesses et des risques du dialogue islamo-chrétien après le 11 septembre 2001. L'auteur défend le visage public de la religion dans les sociétés séculaires, évalue plusieurs développements dans les engagements islamo-chrétiens et propose certaines étapes afin d'ouvrir une collaboration plus fructueuse entre musulmans et chrétiens. Écrit dans une perspective chrétienne, l'article conclut en défendant une « ouverture dialogique » comme voie d'espérance en vue d'une mutualité interconfessionnelle.

## Abstract

*Seeking to move beyond language of “extremism”, this article discusses some of the promises and perils of Muslim-Christian dialogue in an era after September 11, 2001. The author advocates for the public face of religion in secular societies, assesses several recent developments in Muslim-Christian engagements, and proposes steps for opening up a more fruitful contemporary collaboration between Muslims and Christians. Written from a Christian perspective, the article concludes by arguing for “dialogical openness” as a hopeful path toward interfaith mutuality.*