

A Tale of Two Dialogues: 21st Century Christian-Muslim Initiatives

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Introduction

The nature of the relationship between Muslims and Christians has been ever marked by three fundamental dynamics: mutual antipathy, mutual affinity and mutual inquiry. In the modern era, and certainly since the mid-20th century, a sense of genuinely mutual inquiry – that is, of seeking, together, to understand each other, learn about each other, and strive together for the greater good of the common world we together indwell – has clearly emerged and become active. Such inquiry is born out of the sense of affinity, and given urgent impetus by the realisation of the negative consequences of allowing antipathy to gain the upper hand.

Christian engagement with Islam in the modern era – and certainly since the middle of the 20th century – is a story of affinity and inquiry struggling with an inherent countervailing tendency to antipathy. Early in the twentieth century missionary elements in the Christian Church began to question long-held exclusivist and negative assumptions held toward other religions. The question of the proper relation of Christianity to other faiths contributed to the agenda of the early ecumenical movement that led, by mid-century, to the formation of the World Council of Churches (WCC). So, by the middle of the 20th century, far-reaching changes were underway: other religions and their peoples were honoured, from within the world-wide Christian

church, as dialogue-partners and co-religionists capable of common cause action. In post-war mid-twentieth century the early emergence of globalization was beginning to be felt and improvements to mass-media, enabling a more rapid and immediate exchange of information, were well underway. Euro-centric Christianity was giving way to a genuinely global perspective of a Christian *oikumene*, that is, the emerging sense of the various churches joining together in a worldwide fellowship so expressing some measure of unity in diversity, and it is at this juncture that new — indeed epoch-making — developments occur.

Although there are many interesting dialogical developments in the latter half of the 20th century, of particular interest for us today are two 21st century initiatives undertaken by Christians reaching out to engage the Muslim world. The ‘Building Bridges’ seminar series, begun by the Archbishop of Canterbury in 2002, was very much a ‘top-down’ approach. By contrast, the Christian-Muslim Theological Forum (*Theologisches Forum Christentum-Islam*), initiated by an ecumenical group of young scholars in Germany, also in 2002, was more a ‘bottom-up’ process. Both have settled into a regular, more or less annual, conference-style meeting pattern with quality published outcomes. Both can be said to have been born of goodwill forged by mutual affinity and are at the cutting edge of contemporary developments in mutual inquiry. So what are they, exactly? And what lessons might they hold?

Building Bridges

The intention at the outset of the Building Bridges programme was to establish an environment for interfaith bridge-building in the sense of “creating new routes for information, appreciation and respect to travel freely and safely in both directions between Christians and Muslims, Muslims and Christians.”¹ Each year since 2002 a

¹Michael Ipgrave, *The Road Ahead: A Christian-Muslim Dialogue*, (London: Church House Publishing, 2002), 1.

group of invited Muslim and Christian scholars has met for three days of deliberation on a theological theme by means of public lectures, closed plenaries, and small-group sessions. Meetings have alternated between Christian- and Muslim-majority venues.

Initiated in England, Building Bridges moved to a Muslim-majority context for its second meeting, held in Doha, Qatar, in 2003, on the subject *Scriptures in Dialogue: Christians and Muslims Studying the Bible and the Qur'ān Together*.

Plenary presentations included an account of how the Bible is perceived by and functions for Christians; an explanation of the prominence of listening as a Qur'ānic notion; a reflection on the Qur'ān as theophany; a consideration of the ethics of gender discourse in Islam; a review of the history of biblical interpretation... and explication of various challenges of modernism, post-modernism, and fundamentalism.²

The 2004 seminar on prophecy considered the Christian and Muslim perspectives on the nature of prophecy. Also, two participants gave public lectures in which they analysed the emerging Building Bridges methodology. Miroslav Volf celebrated “the practice of Christians and Muslims reading their scriptures together”³ which was the main feature of the Doha seminar, and Mustansir Mir asserted that a credible Qur'ān-based “post-prophetic theology of inter faith dialogue” is both necessary and possible.⁴

The fourth seminar, in 2005, was hosted jointly by Catholic, Orthodox, and Muslim institutions in Sarajevo. The undergirding theme was the Common Good and the seminar addressed topics of faith and national identity. Case studies from Bosnia-Herzegovina as well as British, Malaysian, and West African contexts explored issues

² Lucinda Mosher, ‘A Decade of Appreciative Conversation: The Building Bridges Seminar under Rowan Williams’ *forthcoming*.

³ Miroslav Volf, ‘Hospitable readings: Comments on Scriptures in Dialogue’, in Michael Ipgrave (ed.), *Bearing the Word: Prophecy in biblical and Qur'anic Perspective*, (London: Church House Publishing, 2005), 20-28.

⁴ Mustansir Mir, ‘Scriptures in dialogue: are we reckoning without the host?’ in Ipgrave (ed.), *Bearing the Word*, 13-19.

of citizenship, religious believing and belonging, and the relationship between government and religion.

While unapologetically an initiative of the Archbishop of Canterbury, Building Bridges has been intrinsically ecumenical since its inception—a fact made all the more evident in 2006, when, for a second time, the Seminar was the guest of Georgetown University (a Roman Catholic, indeed Jesuit, institution) in Washington, DC. Christian and Muslim understandings of divine justice, political authority, and religious freedom were topics of discussion. In addition to scripture, the seminar examined, among others, writings of Saint Augustine, al-Ghazālī, the 16th C reformer Martin Luther, and Ayatollah Khomeini, as well as modern Islamic declarations on human rights. The discussion of texts other than scripture was a different experience from ‘scripture-dialogue’.

The sixth seminar was held in Singapore in 2007. With the theme of ‘Humanity in Context’, its focus was what it is to be human and ranged over topics of human dignity, alienation and destiny; diversity; and the relationship of humanity to the wider environment. The next seminar, in 2008, considered the interpretation and translation of revelation in the two traditions. Issues touched on included the ‘pre-history’ of revelation; the historical particularity and universal significance of an ultimate revelation; the possibility of continuing revelation; issues of translating the Word; and passages in which scripture itself reflects on how scripture is to be interpreted. This seminar incorporated discussions of *Generous Love*, a theology of interfaith relations prepared in early 2008 by the Anglican Communion Network for Inter Faith Concerns, and the final section of *A Common Word*—the pan-Muslim call for dialogue promulgated in October 2007. Building Bridges 2009, held in Istanbul in the anniversary year of Charles Darwin, focussed on the interface between science and religion. Observing that Darwin’s legacy “is by no means uniformly hostile to religious

faith” Archbishop Rowan Williams argued that “we need to understand better the whole nature of the challenge that scientific research poses to theology”.⁵

With *Tradition and Modernity* as the theme, the seminar in 2010 examined changing patterns in religious authority and different conceptions of freedom emerging in the modern world. Building Bridges returned to Qatar in 2011 for its tenth seminar. In a memo to invitees, Archbishop Williams pointed out that since the topic was prayer, this meeting, more so than in any previous, would take up matters of personal faith, practice, and experience alongside academic questions. In preparation, each attendee wrote briefly on, “What does prayer mean to you?” These mini-essays became part of this seminar’s resource anthology, along with scripture selections and excerpts from a broad range of classical and modern Christian and Muslim writings about prayer. The eleventh seminar – the final for Rowan Williams as Archbishop of Canterbury – had as its theme ‘Death, Resurrection and Human Destiny in Christian and Muslim Perspective’.

Since the retirement of Williams, Georgetown University has assumed the key organisational role, taking over from Lambeth Palace in London. What began as an Anglican initiative, albeit with a very ecumenical face, is now a Catholic (Jesuit) responsibility, but no less ecumenical for that. Indeed, together with Anglicans, significant numbers of Roman Catholics have participated from the beginning along with participants from a range of other Christian traditions—Orthodox, Coptic, Lutheran, Methodist, and Reformed. The theme of the latest seminar held once again in Doha, Qatar, in May of this year was ‘The Community of Believers: Christian and Muslim Perspectives’.

⁵ Rowan Williams, ‘Building Bridges in Istanbul’, in David Marshall (ed.), *Science and Religion: Christian and Muslim Perspectives*, (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2011), 3.

Since its inception, 157 individuals (77 Muslims; 80 Christians) have had the opportunity to participate in the seminars. The attempt to keep the number of Christians and Muslims nearly equal at each gathering has been fairly successful. Participants are not asked to represent a geographical or national constituency; rather they bring their own specialist perspective to the discussion.

The style of the seminars has been described as an exercise in “appreciative conversation” during which one remains rooted in one’s own tradition “whilst at the same time reaching beyond it” engaging in an exchange in which “people listen without judgement, do not seek consensus or compromise, but share the sole purpose of continuing the conversation in order to sustain relationships of mutual respect.”⁶ In being so described, ‘appreciative conversation’ has much in common with David Lochhead’s definition of the *dialogical relationship*: that is, a relationship of openness and trust which is clear, unambiguous, and has no other purpose than itself.⁷

Rowan Williams has noted that Building Bridges “was brought into being to fill what was thought to be a gap; a gap not at the diplomatic or political level but a gap of a lack of opportunity for serious, reflective, and fairly loosely-structured encounter between Christian and Muslim scholars.”⁸ This seminar series falls into the category of dialogical projects marked by both religious conviction and academic rigour. The Building Bridges style, he says, involves “working together, studying sacred texts together, and above all learning to *listen* to one another ... It is a style which has been patient, affirming, and celebrating.”⁹ Building Bridges is a continuing process, a work

⁶ Gillian Stamp, “And they returned by another route,” in Igrave (ed.), *The Road Ahead*, 112, 113.

⁷ David Lochhead, *The Dialogical Imperative: A Christian Reflection on Interfaith Encounter* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1988).

⁸ Rowan Williams, Remarks at dinner to mark the Fifth Building Bridges seminar, *op. cit.*

⁹ Rowan Williams, Preface to *Prayer*, *op. cit.*

in progress, as, too, is the German Christian-Muslim Theological Forum to which we now turn.

Christian-Muslim Theological Forum

In 2002 a group of young German theologians, interested in fostering a dialogue with Muslim scholars, began a process that led to the founding of the *Theologisches Forum Christentum-Islam*. The lead motivation was to establish a dialogical engagement that was balanced and equal in terms of the level of engagement and the expertise of the interlocutors. The specific goal was to facilitate an academic theological dialogue between Christians and Muslims in the German language on the basis that such dialogue can make an essential contribution to their common life. It was recognised from the outset that such dialogue, if it is to be successful and capable of development, requires an operational and organisational base, and security of continuity. This was gained in having both a committed organisational group and a home-base provided by the Academy of the Catholic Diocese of Rottenburg-Stuttgart. Further, the originating concept was of specialist symposia of invited or registered participants, not open public meetings as such. There was a sense that something had to be carefully nurtured. Thus, whereas Building Bridges began in top-down pomp and fanfare, the German initiative began with a phase of ecumenical, or inner-Christian, conversation and reflection. It grew quietly and steadily from the bottom up.

In the event, two conferences – in 2003 and 2004 – were held with Christian participants only, who had particular interest or speciality in Christian-Muslim relations. The purpose was to enable Christian reflection and discussion about engaging in dialogue with Islam. An ancillary aim was that the Forum should allow younger and new scholars an opportunity to share the results of their research and the Forum was indeed to prove a seed-bed for new and emerging scholarship in the area of Christian-Muslim dialogue as well as the development of Islamic theological scholarship within

the German context. In April 2004 a meeting involving Muslims was held to further develop the concept and programme for an on-going Forum. This resulted in the establishment of a joint Christian-Muslim core group to attend to conference organisation and resultant publications.¹⁰

In March 2005 the first symposium of the Forum proper, involving both Christians and Muslims, was held. From the outset, Christian participation has been fully ecumenical. And although Muslims were in the minority, nevertheless, as numbers of Muslim attendees built up, this too has been reflective of Islamic diversity in Germany. At this first Forum, guiding principles and values – self-critical awareness, multi-perspectival approaches, mutual consultation and learning, the application of interdisciplinary hermeneutical-critical scholarship and interreligious learning and study as the grounding paradigm – were formulated, and the commitment to publish the conference proceedings was made, a commitment that has been consistently honoured. Further, from the outset there was a clear aim to have a broad impact not just through publications, but also in the development of youth interest through an annual study week. Funding support for both the annual conferences and the youth study week programme has been forthcoming from the German Federal Ministry for the Interior. In other words, this form of Christian-Muslim engagement has received political interest and endorsement.

The first Forum had prayer as its theme. The roles of Jesus and Muhammad were explored in relation to the theology and practice of prayer with attention paid to the distinctive differences of the Trinitarian character of Christian prayer on the one hand and the public character of Muslim prayer on the other. The second Forum, in 2006, focussed on identity through knowing boundaries on the basis that identity can never be something static and essentialist, but must rather be dynamic, open and ready for

¹⁰ Cf Hansjörg Schmid, 'Das Theologische Forum Christentum-Islam: Eine Initiative für Christlich-Islamische Studien', *Zeitschrift für Missionswissenschaft und Religionswissenschaft* 89 (2005), 147-149.

learning and the processes of change. Identity is forged through concrete interpersonal relationships, and this applies to religious identity as much as to any other form of identity. In 2007, the Forum dealt with the sensitive topic of suffering and pain while the fourth, in 2008, explored the subject of ethics in the two faith traditions. Here opportunity was given to scholars of Christianity and Islam to focus on the rationality of ethics, not in order to subvert the sources of revelation, but to employ methods of rational argument in open discourse so as to provide non-religious reasoning and consideration of the findings of modern natural, social, and human sciences.

Scriptural interpretation in Islam and Christianity was the theme of the fifth conference, in 2009. In both religions there has been a monopoly of interpretations which has displaced contextual hermeneutics and has been rather inclined to misogynistic views. Yet, in both faiths there can be found great variety of interpretation and hermeneutical method, and there are extensive parallels between the Bible and Qur'an. In 2010 the interrelated topics of mission and conversion were addressed. The two virtually classic theological topics of God and Prophethood were the focus, respectively, of the Forum meetings in 2011 and 2012.

From the outset the Forum organizers identified as measures of success of the dialogical enterprise the development of inter-personal friendship between Muslim and Christian participants; the establishment of functional networks of scholars and others; engagement in the dialogue process as equals in the context of an intentional theological mode and level of discourse. To these were added the need for a secure location for meetings and the consistency of core personnel and the structure of the gatherings with the aim of assured outcomes, sound public relations, and the development of appropriate ancillary activities such as the Christian-Muslim study week. On all counts these key indicators have been well met. The impact and success of

this initiative in Christian-Muslim dialogue reaches well beyond the annual gatherings themselves.

Conclusion

Contemporary Muslim and Christian intention to engage in fruitful dialogue is clear. Yet the journey into this most critical of interfaith relations is by no means been an easy one; resistance, detraction and criticism from within both religions are constants. At times it seems that the links are fragile and the depth of mutual understanding achieved is rather thin. Pope Benedict's now infamous Regensburg address, though arguably taken – and so misunderstood – out of context, nevertheless was more than a simple *faux pas*; it was a reminder that the interfaith dimension of Christian-Muslim relations ever requires attention to be paid to the intra-faith challenge of bringing, and keeping, the communities of faith on board. This was where the work of the Building Bridges seminar series and the Christian-Muslim Theological Forum has yet a role to play beyond the value of the dialogical events themselves. They provide worthy models of dialogical engagement and a fund of resources for both scholarly investigation as well as the promotion of dialogical engagement. Such dialogical initiatives as these provide encouragement for the future.