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Between Suspicion and Trust

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The history of Christian-Muslim relations is characteristically *ambivalent*. There has been a pattern of simultaneous attraction and repulsion between these communities over several centuries of social, cultural, and political interactions. In the past, this pattern was often marked by an increase in mutual trust during periods of peace and prosperity, and an increase in mutual suspicion during times of turmoil and scarcity.

The world is witnessing today an unprecedented level of safety, comfort, and abundance *as well as* an equally unprecedented level of mayhem, violence, and scarcity. The disparity is stark, and the underlying paradox is affecting the dynamics of Christian-Muslim relations. On the one hand, increasing friction between these communities is leading to a rise in intolerance, accentuation of boundaries, exchange of strident polemics, and violent conflicts; on the other hand, the recognition of the futility of worldly competitiveness as well as an acknowledgment of common grounds is stimulating efforts aimed at dialogue and cooperation. It is likely that one of these opposing trends will soon acquire greater momentum and thus determine the future trajectory of Christian-Muslims relations.

Given that the Christian and Muslim communities represent the two most influential religious traditions in the world, the trajectory of their relations is bound to affect the overall condition of humankind. In this background, we may want to ponder our responsibilities as scholars and educators. Are we supposed to act as objective bystanders who, if we are concerned at all, merely report to our students the minimal facts about what has happened and what is going on? Or are we to become active participants in shaping the dynamics of Christian-Muslim relations in ways that reflect our ethical priorities? The choice is relatively

obvious, particularly for those of us who draw the inspiration for our vocational lives from religious faith—regardless of which label we use to identify our particular faith community. But even if faith does not play a major role in our lives, a simple desire to make the world a better place would also help clarify the choice.

Whether we use the viewpoint of transcendent faith or that of ordinary human welfare, it is difficult to ignore the urgent need to bring about a significant *shift* in the historical pattern of Christian-Muslim relations—away from suspicion and hostility, towards trust and understanding. Given the magnitude and the unprecedented nature of the challenges that the world is facing today, one could say without exaggeration that there has never been a time more suitable than *now* to bring about such a shift. As scholars and educators, we can contribute to this shift by taking advantage of the opportunities that are unique to our vocation. Through our words and deeds, we can establish models of Christian-Muslim relations that would allow us to both embody and promote our deeply held commitments and cherished values.

While the media glorifies "bad news" by incessantly reminding us of the negative side of Christian-Muslim relations, it is important that we also acknowledge the "good news" by recognizing the many positive developments. In this context, it is impossible to overstress the significance of the universal Christian endorsement of the Muslim initiative called "A Common Word." On October 13, 2007, no less than one-hundred thirty-eight Muslim scholars and religious leaders from around the globe came together in signing an open letter addressed to their Christian counterparts. The letter drew attention to the fact that "Muslims and Christians

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together make up well over half of the world's population," and, for this reason alone, if peace and justice cannot be established between these communities, "there can be no meaningful peace in the world." The heart of the Muslim letter is the extensive theological discussion on what is perhaps the only realistic foundation for promoting peace and understanding between Christians and Muslims—the love of the One God and love of the neighbor—two principles that are as central to the Islamic tradition as they are to the Christian tradition. The open letter and the various Christian responses are available at the official website for this initiative [http:\\www.acommonword.com].

Another positive development is the recent publication of *Was Jesus a Muslim?* The author, Robert Shedinger, is associate professor of religion at Luther College in Decorah, Iowa. Despite the provocative title, the book is much more concerned with the nature of religion and contemporary Christian-Muslim relations than it is with the person of Jesus. The value of the book lies primarily in the solution it offers to the virtual deadlock in Christian-Muslim dialogue.

Shedinger argues that the very concept of inter-religious dialogue is fraught with difficulties, primarily due to the uncritical assumption that there exist in the real world certain well-defined entities called "religions." He quotes several Muslim thinkers who have expressed serious reservations vis-à-vis the idea that Islam is a "religion" in the modern, Western sense of the term. They have insisted that Islam is much more than a set of beliefs, customs, and rituals; that its teachings are as relevant for the political and economic spheres of society as they are for the spiritual and moral lives of individual believers; and that restricting Islam to the narrow confines of a "religion" is an imperialist strategy for the de-legitimization of popular resistance against tyranny and injustice. How can there be genuine inter-religious dialogue between Christians and Muslims, Shedinger asks, if one party refuses to accept the very category that defines the dialogue?

In Shedinger's view, these reservations on the part of Muslim thinkers are to be taken seriously, for they direct our attention not only to the self-understanding of Islam but also to the historical process through which the modern Western category of "religion" has come into being. The modern usage of the word "religion" is historically unprecedented, a fact that was demonstrated more than forty years ago by the Canadian scholar Wilfred Cantwell Smith. More recent works by Asad, Jonathan Z. Smith, Dubuisson, Fitzgerald, Masuzawa, McCutcheon, Sullivan, and Cavanaugh have confirmed that "religion" is not an entity out there in the world but is a social construction with a specific genealogy in Western history.

While *religious phenomena* obviously exist in the empirical world, a definite *thing* called "religion" is no more than an artificially reified abstraction.

Muslim resistance to the categorization of Islam as a "religion" not only problematizes the notion of inter-religious dialogue, it also challenges the twin processes of *reification* and *domestication* that have severely restricted the role of religious impulses in the public sphere. To *reify* religion is to conceptualize it as an object with distinct boundaries; to *domesticate* religion is to remove its teeth and claws, to render religious impulses "harmless" by bringing them under the control of the status quo. These twin processes of reification and domestication have been instrumental in the emergence of what scholars are now calling "a secular age." Across the globe, these processes have served to prevent, or at least criminalize and restrict, the "intrusion" of religious impulses into the spheres of power. The latter have been designated "secular," not to protect religion from worldly corruption—which is the official explanation—but to limit people's access to power by de-legitimizing the motivation, inspiration, and language of their grievances and demands. According to Shedinger, the discourse of *sui generis* religion—the idea that the religious sphere can be defined by its unique *essence* which fully distinguishes it from all other spheres of human life— acts as a tool for the de-politicization of religious impulses and the suppression of popular sentiments. After religion has been reified as a distinct, circumscribed entity, domestication is achieved by outlawing *in principle* any religiously motivated demand or dissent that seeks to influence the worldly spheres of power.

To say that Islam is not a religion is to affirm that the teachings of Prophet Muhammad, peace be upon him, cannot be confined to the private world of the individual believer without doing extreme violence to the integrity of these teachings. Once this is recognized, it is only a small step to the further insight that the same truth applies to the teachings of Jesus of Nazareth as well. The use of the private/public distinction to keep religion out of the worldly spheres of power would have appeared equally pernicious to both Jesus and Muhammad. It is primarily in this sense that Shedinger answers the question "was Jesus a Muslim?" in the affirmative. Both Jesus and Muhammad have taught that the love of the One God naturally, and inevitably, spills over into the love of neighbor. As a result, genuine religious impulses cannot be restricted to the achievement of spiritual enlightenment and personal salvation alone; such impulses are also, and with equal force, directed at achieving justice and liberation at social, political, and economic levels. For the followers of Jesus and Muhammad, therefore, what should be of far greater concern is not the

politicization of religious impulses but their forced exile from the public sphere.

The political significance of the love of neighbor was as foundational to the teachings of Jesus as it was to the teachings of Muhammad, peace be upon them. This powerful truth went underground in the Christian tradition, though it never disappeared completely. The dissenting edginess of Jesus' teachings went through an artificial softening over time, as expressed in the widening of the sacred/secular distinction in the Christian tradition. As sociologist Robert Bellah notes, this happened at least partly because early Christians were forced to work out some sort of compromise with the Roman Empire, leading to the development of "a monastic ideal of radical withdrawal from the world" and the granting of "a

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degree of independent legitimacy to the secular society and its political structure." The problem was compounded, of course, with Emperor Constantine's effort to make the Christian faith a handmaiden to the throne. In the Islamic tradition, on the other hand, this essential truth suffered a *de facto* marginalization at a relatively early stage, though it continued to thrive in the religious community as an imperative of faith and as an inspiring ideal. Both Sunni and Shi'ite Muslims view the introduction of hereditary monarchy within half-a-century of Prophet Muhammad's death as one of the worst catastrophes in Islamic history. The beginning of dynastic and non-representative rule was associated *in practice* with a gradual separation between the religious and political spheres. And yet, the "worldliness" of Islamic ethics was simply too strong to be easily overshadowed by a politically impotent "other-worldliness." Bellah has insightfully noted that in Islam the religious community's abiding suspicion of the political elites ensured that a complete severance between the sacred and the secular would never be considered legitimate. As a whole, the Muslim community has consistently rejected the notion that the worldly spheres of power ought to remain independent of religious influences—a significant achievement that is sometimes derided by ignorant observers as the "failure" of Islam to separate the church and state.

In this background, Shedinger is in agreement with the feeling that is widespread in the Muslim world, viz., Islam is not a "religion" in the narrow sense; instead, it is best viewed as a religiously inspired movement for social justice and human liberation.

Today, Christianity is recovering the political significance of the love of neighbor as well as the dissenting edginess of Jesus' teachings through various forms of liberation theology; we see this in the works of Rauschenbusch, Gutiérrez, Cone, Wink, Crossan, Borg, and many others. Islam, on the other hand, began to *lose* this key insight during the period of European colonialism, largely due to the influential Western discourse of *sui generis* religion. As Carl Ernst documents, within the context of Christian proselytizing and European domination in the Muslim world, this discourse presented Christianity and Islam as eternal, mutually exclusive rivals. It also sought to locate the "blame" for Muslim resistance to foreign invasion on the illegitimate and irrational tendency of Islam to transgress its proper religious domain. The political nature and "this-worldly" implications of Islamic ethics, however, were recovered and restored rather quickly in the twentieth century; we see this in the works of Mawdudi, Qutb, Shari'ati, Khomeini, Rehman, Al-Ghannouchi, Esack, and many others. Despite their widely divergent views, these scholars are unanimous in denouncing the reduction of Islam to the status of a mere "religion."

A prominent Muslim voice that Shedinger does not discuss in his book—but that is of crucial importance in the present context—belongs to the Indian poet, philosopher, and theologian Muhammad Iqbal (1877-1938). In the twentieth century, Iqbal was one of the first Muslim thinkers to protest the imperialist effort to de-politicize Islam. He contended that the "liberation" of the political sphere from the moral regulation of religion was a recipe for unrestrained tyranny. When a prominent religious figure advised his fellow Muslims to avoid rocking the boat since the British government was allowing them "religious freedom," Iqbal responded in an Urdu poem: "Just because the mullah is allowed to prostrate, the simpleton believes that Islam too is free." ("Hindi Islam" 548)

Iqbal's deep appreciation and powerful exposition of Islam—not only as a program for the personal growth and salvation of the individual but as an ever-evolving social and political system aimed at directing the spiritual evolution of humankind—remains unsurpassed to this day. Most of the thinkers that Shedinger discusses in his book were directly or indirectly influenced by Iqbal's ground-breaking thought. In his major English work, *The Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam* (1934), Iqbal compares the Christian and Islamic traditions in

terms of their respective attitudes regarding the matter/spirit dichotomy—a discussion that may help elucidate the contemporary promise of Christian-Muslim cooperation.

> The great point in Christianity is the search for an independent content for spiritual life which, according to the insight of its founder, could be elevated, not by the forces of a world external to the soul of man, but by the revelation of a new world within his soul. Islam fully agrees with this insight and supplements it by the further insight that the illumination of the world thus revealed is not something foreign to the world of matter but permeates it through and through. (Iqbal 7)

To paraphrase, Christianity's gift to the world is the great religious insight that the Kingdom of God is to be found *within* the human soul, that spiritual realization is perfectly natural to the human disposition. Islam fully accepts and embraces this insight, but also takes it a step further. The Kingdom of God that is revealed within the soul, says Islam, is neither alien nor opposed to the concrete, material reality. In fact, spiritual reality *permeates* material reality in a way that no aspect of the latter is deprived of the spirit's illumination.

Iqbal then goes on to contend that both Islam and Christianity are in full agreement that the spirit has to be affirmed; the difference lies in their respective attitudes towards how to achieve such an affirmation. In its historical manifestation, a significant part of the Christian tradition focused on the *contrast* between spirit and matter, concluding that the world of matter was to be renounced or transcended before the world of spirit can be realized and affirmed. Islam seeks to correct that mistaken conclusion.

> Thus the affirmation of spirit sought by Christianity would come not by the renunciation of external forces which are already permeated by the illumination of spirit, but by a proper adjustment of man's relation to these forces in view of the light received from the world within. (Iqbal 7)

Iqbal does not deny the contrast between spirit and matter. His point, however, is that the dichotomy should be neither widened nor ignored; instead, it should be recognized and reconciled. Such is the Islamic imperative of *tawhid*, of making one.

> It is the mysterious touch of the ideal that animates and sustains the real, and through it alone we can discover and affirm the ideal. With Islam the ideal and the real are not two opposing forces that cannot be reconciled. The life of

the ideal consists, not in a total breach with the real which would tend to shatter the organic wholeness of life into painful oppositions, but in the perpetual endeavour of the ideal to appropriate the real with a view eventually to absorb it, to convert it into itself and illuminate its whole being. It is the sharp opposition between the subject and the object, the mathematical without and the biological within, that impressed Christianity. Islam, however, faces the opposition with a view to overcome it. (Iqbal 7-8)

The reconciliation between spirit and matter, between the ideal and the real, is to be achieved by establishing the proper balance in the relationship between human beings and the forces of the physical world external to them. This is where *revelation* plays a central, directing role. The envisioned balance is possible only with the help of the illumination of the Kingdom of God within the human soul. The forces of the physical world are not to be renounced; instead, they are to be harnessed and used in the service of humankind's spiritual evolution, in accordance with the imperatives of revelation.

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With the help of even these short, and admittedly inadequate, quotes from a major Muslim thinker, the road ahead for Christian-Muslim relations can nevertheless be envisioned. It is easy to see that the discourse of *sui generis* religion would be diametrically opposed to Iqbal's vision of Islam, who insists elsewhere that there is no ontological conflict between spirit and matter, for matter is nothing other than spirit realizing itself in time and space. What is noteworthy in the present context is that contemporary developments in Christian theology have increasingly moved away from the classical spirit/matter dichotomy that had dominated medieval Christianity and which Iqbal identifies as problematic; various forms of feminist theology, eco-theology, and liberation theology have paved the way within the Christian tradition for an attitude of greater respect for the concrete, material reality. It is no longer a heresy to say that the world of matter reveals the world of spirit; that the human body need not be deprived or punished in order for the spirit to shine through; that the earth along with the life that it supports is inherently sacred; or, even, that the world is God's body. With

this ongoing effort to bridge the spirit/matter dichotomy, the separation of religious impulses from other aspects of life is becoming increasingly untenable.

All of this goes to show that some of the most fundamental insights of Islam and Christianity are rapidly coming together—even if few have recognized this tremendously auspicious development. Nowhere is this growing consensus more pronounced than in the rejection of the discourse of *sui generis* religion, by *both* Muslims and Christians. As a community, Muslims have always insisted that politics ought to serve the values bestowed upon us through revelation, that faith in God is worthless if it does not manifest in the love of one's neighbor, and that religion has jurisdiction over the whole person rather than on a mere fragment thereof. For this reason, Muslims have found it incomprehensible, if not scandalous, that Christianity in the West is almost nonexistent outside of the Sunday morning service—or so it seems. On the other hand, many Western Christians have harbored misgivings about Islam's insistence that religious teachings are supremely relevant to the worldly spheres of power; in view of the bloody history of Europe, they are justifiably afraid that such a claim will only produce greed, violence, and corruption. Some

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Christians have even found in the Islamic attitude a violation of Jesus' command that one should render unto Caesar what is Caesar's and unto God what is God's—perhaps forgetting that *nothing* belongs to Caesar.

Against this background of mutual suspicion and misunderstandings, Shedinger's book reveals a developing *convergence* between the Christian and Muslim communities on an insight common to both traditions: *Religion is a spiritual force for social justice and human liberation.* This insight is so powerful that its recognition on a wider scale would overcome the bitterness between Christians and Muslims that is generated by their theological bickering. This is not to suggest that doctrinal issues are unimportant, but to emphasize that theological discussions are most productive when they take place in an environment of mutual trust; such an environment emerges organically when members of different faith communities *work together* for common goals.

According to Shedinger, questions of doctrine are inherently complex and are further surrounded by a long history of

polemics and apologetics. Consequently, whenever an "interreligious" dialogue between Christians and Muslims is initiated that focuses exclusively on doctrinal matters, it quickly reaches a veritable dead end—an agreement to disagree. On the other hand, Shedinger argues, real and substantial progress is bound to happen if the focus of such dialogues is shifted away from theological doctrines and towards the nature of *religion* itself.

Shedinger proposes that Christians and Muslims should explore together the modern Western construction of "religion" as an entity that stands in stark contrast to all that is "secular." In doing so, they would also explore whether such an understanding of religion fits with what they know of their own experiences, traditions, and scriptures. In critically examining the modern understanding of religion, Christians and Muslims are likely to discover not only the real nature of religious phenomena but also the many commonalities that exist between the two traditions. This would not eliminate their equally important differences, of course, but it would help create a congenial environment in which mutual empathy could flourish.

The purpose of the proposed dialogue, however, is much more than polite agreement; it is to develop *solidarity* for a concrete purpose. Shedinger predicts that if Christians and Muslims were to focus together on the nature of religion, they will discover novel ways of thinking about the relationship between religion and other aspects of life; this has the potential of leading significant portions of the Christian and Muslim communities to join hands for bringing about a more just and peaceful world. As solidarity develops through the actual experience of working together for common goals, the level of mutual trust will rise and progress will naturally take place in theological discussions as well. More importantly, the proposed dialogue will pave the way for the members of both communities to participate in a synergistic enterprise for realizing their common values of social justice and human liberation.

To reiterate, the Muslim letter "A Common Word" and Robert Shedinger's book *Was Jesus a Muslim?* are two important signs that direct our attention towards what needs to be done. Both texts offer creative ways that *we*, as scholars and educators, may utilize in order to bring about the much needed shift in Christian-Muslim relations. While "A Common Word" offers a solid *theological* foundation for dialogue and cooperation between Christians and Muslims, Shedinger's book brings out the concrete issues that need to be addressed by the two communities. Taken together, they represent a radically new opportunity for Christians and Muslims to put their faith into practice—*together*.

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