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MARK N. SWANSON

The Breadth and the Depth: Dimensions of Christian-Muslim Relations at Educational Institutions of the ELCA

What follows is a near transcript of my remarks at the Vocation of a Lutheran College conference, summer 2010. In my introduction to these remarks, I noted that while I am deeply indebted and grateful to the colleges of the ELCA, I do not teach at one! Therefore, rather than myself reporting on Christian-Muslim relations at the colleges of the ELCA, I proposed to let the participants in this conference do this reporting. I therefore kept my own presentation, reproduced below, brief so as to allow time for conversations in small groups and reports and discussion in plenary. At the conclusion of my remarks, participants were invited to think about the question: "In what ways has your institution 'made room' for Muslims?" Answers might deal with the teaching of Islam; with the reception of Muslim students in the classroom and in the college/university community; and in relationships with the wider community in which the institution is located.

Spatial Metaphors

I would like to reflect briefly on the spatial metaphors that we often use when speaking about our Lutheran institutions of higher education. (At least, I use them, and we've heard them used repeatedly at this conference.) We speak about *depth* and *breadth* dimensions, with the two being in some sort of tension or dialectical relationship. We can speak about "being deeply rooted in the tradition" or "going down deep into the faith," and about "broadening experiences," "the widening of horizons," and generally about "inclusion." Sometimes we bring these dimensions together into a single image. For example, we can think of a *tree*, with deep roots on the one hand, from which it draws its strength, and with spreading branches, in which a great diversity of creatures can live. Professor Jodock has given us the image of a *well*, "dug deep to nourish the whole community."¹ Indeed, he has used this spatial language to explain his "sectarian–non-sectarian" typology, where "sectarian" may demonstrate depth, but

not much breadth; and "non-sectarian" may aspire to breadth, but at the expense of depth. His "third way" then claims *both* depth and breadth and, he argues, it is in fact the depth that *enables* the breadth: "Because this is a Lutheran college, you, a Jewish prospective student, ought to come here." "Because this is a Lutheran college, you don't *have* to go to chapel."

I find this manner of speaking helpful, but I want to add just one word of caution. Professor Jodock suggested that the "both-and" character of this discourse may fit in with a specifically Lutheran paradoxical way of thinking and speaking. Examples abound: "already and not yet," "God hidden and revealed," "*simul iustus et peccator*," and so on. I remember my first systematic theology teacher, Prof. Larry Folkemer of Gettysburg Seminary,² who regularly spoke to us about a "tension between two poles." It is worth stressing this *tension*—lest our formulations become a justification for lazily landing on one side or the other of the paradox. The Lutheran "simultaneously righteous and sinner" slogan, for

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example, names a *struggle*; it should not be an excuse for sinning! The relationship between the depth and the breadth dimensions of our institutions requires constant exploration and tending. The claim that depth *enables* breadth is not a matter of mere observation, but rather a possibility that needs to be realized, or a task that needs to be accomplished, again and again.

I find these spatial metaphors useful in thinking about my own teaching. Depending on the context, and depending on who is in the classroom, I find myself putting stress on one dimension or the other. For example, I have experienced classrooms filled with life-long Lutherans, well catechized, but not very widely traveled. Some of them have known a single pastor for most of their lives; many of them went to college close to home. In such a classroom, I tend to go into “broadening mode”! If I’m teaching Church History, I want the students to meet Christians of other times and other places, some of whom might strike them as really weird. I want them to encounter the wild diversity of ways in which people have attempted to be disciples of Jesus Christ. In a World Religions class, I want them to meet and appreciate genuinely pious, winsome people who do *not* believe, say, in God as the Holy Trinity, or in the redemptive death of Jesus.

But I have also been in classrooms in which the typical student profile is rather different, including many students who have been passionately involved in service to the poor (in the US or overseas), in work for justice or for the defense of the environment, and who somewhere along the way have experienced what they think might be a call to ordained ministry. These students are not necessarily all that well catechized; they may even be relatively new to committed membership in a congregation. In such classrooms, the “deepening” moment in my teaching comes to the fore. In Church History, I want students to learn where the

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Church’s dogmas and institutions came from, what was at stake in the controversies surrounding them, and why these controversies continue to matter. In World Religions classes, my hope is that learning about the faith of the Other, while important in itself, will also be a spur to learning about one’s *own* faith.

I’ve exaggerated a bit in these last paragraphs: the profile of a class is never so clear-cut. What I do want to emphasize is that, in our teaching, we are called to attend to *both* the “breadth dimension” *and* the “depth dimension” when it comes to matters of Christian existence in and for the sake of the world. Furthermore—and now I’m coming to my assignment for this presentation—I want to argue that the study of Islam, and real engagement and conversation between Christians and Muslims, can contribute at both “ends” (as it were), *both* to the broadening of horizons *and* to the deepening of faith.

Broader Horizons

First, the “broadening of horizons.” I begin with a few words about the context in which I teach, the Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago. The Christian-Muslim contribution to LSTC’s horizons is not a new thing. In 1984, LCA missionaries to Egypt, Harold and Neva Vogelaar, spent a year’s leave at LSTC (while my wife and I house-sat for them in Cairo).³ In Chicago, Harold set out to do what for years he had done so effectively in Cairo: he visited mosques and Islamic centers, chatted with whoever would receive him, drank *many* cups of tea and coffee, and made friends. One of those friends was Dr. Ghulam Haider Aasi of the newly-established American Islamic College. Together they helped create the Committee for Improved Christian-Muslim Relations in Chicago. A few years later, when Harold returned to LSTC as a visiting professor, he and Dr. Aasi began team-teaching courses such as “The Bible and the Qur’an” and “Jesus and Muhammad.”

Between 1990 and 2004, a handful of Muslim students found their way to LSTC; one of them became the first Muslim chaplain in the United States Navy. But then in 2004, a group of five Turkish Muslim students, some of them already very well educated in classical Islamic studies, came to LSTC and began an M.A. program; their goal was to learn about Christianity so as better to be able to contribute to Christian-Muslim dialogue. Most of this initial group of students had graduated by the time I arrived at LSTC in 2006, but other Muslim students have followed them. And all the while, Dr. Aasi has continued to teach with us. All this means that, in recent years, Christian students at LSTC have had the opportunity to take classes with a Muslim professor; they’ve almost certainly had Muslim classmates, and, very frequently, friendships have developed. Christians and Muslims have shared space, festivals, a community. And they have shared their faith.

There has been a lot of interfaith activity on campus these past few years, as a generous endowment from friends of the seminary led to the establishment of both a faculty chair in Christian-Muslim studies and a Center of Christian-Muslim

Engagement, the latter with its own full-time Program Coordinator. A grant from the Henry Luce Foundation has helped us in our programming. We've sponsored a variety of conferences and seminars, e.g. the conference in March 2010 that we called "Shared Earth: An Interfaith Conference on the Environment."³ Our Program Coordinator is always on the lookout for interfaith activities *other* than lectures and conferences, including musical and theatrical events. (I thought of this at the present conference when someone mentioned the importance of *imagination* and not simply discourse in our relationships with others.) In any event, it is not very easy for a Christian student to come to LSTC and *not* encounter Muslims (and others) in a variety of contexts. Our students know that it is a religiously diverse world in which they are called to serve, and they have many opportunities to learn something about that world, and sometimes to delight in it.

Deeper Roots

I am especially interested in ways that relationships and conversations between Christians and Muslims not only lead to a broadening of experience and horizons, but *can* lead to learning more about and going deeper into their *own* faith traditions. This, indeed, is my most ardent hope for any kind of interfaith program in the seminary setting. But I need to emphasize the word "can," since this move from breadth to depth is by no means automatic. It is always tempting, and easy, to slip into superficial, lowest-common-denominator speech and ritual.

The Islamic tradition, from its appearance in the 7th century of the Common Era, has posed challenges to Christian belief and practice. Passionately affirming the uniqueness and unicity of God, Muslims have seen Christian trinitarian discourse as confused, at best. While Muslims revere Jesus Christ as an apostle and prophet of God, he is also seen as one of a sequence of messengers that finds its culmination in Muhammad, the final apostle and the "seal of the prophets." Claims that Christ is God or Son of God are clearly rejected in the Qur'an, and even the fact of the crucifixion, let alone its redemptive significance, appears to be denied by the Muslims' scripture.

All this may not seem like a very promising basis for Christian-Muslim theological dialogue! And indeed, from its 7th century beginnings, the history of Christian-Muslim dialogue is full of polemic, as each side searched out ways to claim that the Others' faith was false, or that the Others' scripture was false, or that one's own faith, as a whole, had some kind of divine seal of approval—usually involving prophecies and miracles (see Thomas and Roggema).

However, what some of us are discovering in places like LSTC is that the challenges that pious Muslims bring to

Christian believers are salutary ones. Some of these challenges have to do with things that we Christians may say we believe, but that we rather readily forget. For example, I hear Muslim colleagues and students emphasizing that *the beautiful life is the one lived consciously in the sight of God*, and that *God has a claim on the whole of our lives*, not just some dimension or compartment that we define as "religious." In our society, such convictions are often labeled "fundamentalist." But aren't there some connections between these convictions—e.g., "God has a claim on the whole of our lives"—and what at this conference we have been calling "vocation"?

"Muslims' questions about Trinity, Christology, and redemption can also be salutary."

I believe that Muslims' questions about Trinity, Christology, and redemption can also be salutary. I can bear witness that even at a Lutheran theological seminary, if you announce a pop quiz with a single question—"How is it that belief in the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit is not belief in three gods?"—you will cause panic. Some of the eighth- and ninth-century Christian theologians who were asked that question by Muslims took refuge in mystery: "The doctrine of the Trinity is so foreign to ordinary human reason," they said, "that there is no earthly reason to believe it. But people *did* believe it. So they must not have believed it for any earthly or *human* reason ... but rather because of *divine* power," made manifest in the apostles' miracles (Swanson, "Apology").

I don't think that such an answer will do! And, in defense of these eighth- and ninth-century theologians, they didn't stop there, but went on to craft elaborate apologies for the doctrine of the Trinity (Swanson, "Trinity"). But to respond to Muslims' questions, or to my question on the pop quiz, one is driven deep into Christian tradition. Every year I have my Church History students read from Gregory of Nyssa's great treatise, *To Ablabius: On Why Not Three Gods* ("Not Three Gods" 59-62). St. Gregory can help us!

Some of the topics that are most conducive to deep Christian-Muslim conversation are those conundrums of faith common to monotheists, for example:

- *human freedom and responsibility*: How do we rhyme God's sovereignty, on the one hand, with the human experience of freedom on the other?

- *the question of evil and suffering*: God is good; God is almighty; evil and suffering are realities. Can we say all three at once, and if so, how?

There are profound traditions of reflection on these topics in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. Here we can go deep into our traditions—*together*.⁵

One of the most exciting classroom sessions that I experienced last semester was in a course that I team-teach with my colleague Dr. Aasi entitled “The History of Religious Thought in Islam.” We had a class of about 25 students, including a couple of Muslims. What began as a presentation of the doctrines of some eighth- and ninth-century Muslim theologians (the early Muʿtazilah, to be specific) turned into a grand conversation about the nature and possibility of speech about God. We discussed anthropomorphic speech in the Qurʾan and the Bible—and in Christian theological discourse today. We had a truly illuminating conversation about the use of pronouns for God, in both traditions, in Arabic and in English. Dr. Aasi and I threw out the lesson plan; instead, we had a conversation not only in which Christians learned about Islam and Muslims about Christianity, but also in which Christians and Muslims learned about their own faith traditions as well. It *can* happen.

Hospitality

To conclude, I’d like to say a few words about a Christian practice in which, it seems to me, the depth and the breadth dimensions of our vocations as Christian educators come together: the practice of *hospitality* (see Swanson, “Commending Hospitality”).

We all, I think, desire that our institutions be hospitable places. But why? Many Christians who have paused to reflect on this question have discovered or rediscovered how very deep into the Bible and the Christian tradition the theme of hospitality can take us. In the Bible, we find St. Paul’s explicit command to “Pursue hospitality” (Rom. 12:13) and, in the Letter to the Hebrews, the exhortation “Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers” (Heb. 13:2). Stories about hospitality given and received recur throughout the Bible, culminating in the Incarnation of the Word, who came into the world seeking hospitality (John 1:10-13), who ate with tax collectors and sinners, who was guest and host, and who spoke of the feast to which many will come “from east and west, from north and south” (Luke 13:29). St. Gregory of Nyssa could speak of the entire creation as an act of divine hospitality. Why did God create the human being last, after the fashioning of all the other creatures? St. Gregory responds as follows:

As a good host does not bring his guest to his house before the preparation of his feast, but, when he has made all due

preparation, and decked with their proper adornments his house, his couches, his table, brings his guest home when things suitable for his refreshment are in readiness—in the same manner the rich and munificent Entertainer of our nature, when He had decked the habitation with beauties of every kind, and prepared this great and varied banquet, then introduced man, assigning to him as his task not the acquiring of what was not there, but the enjoyment of the things which were there. (*De officio hominis* 390)

That is, God is hospitable! The act of creation is a great act of hospitality in which God wills to be in relationship with the human creature and prepares magnificent space for that relationship. But then, *our* hospitality is a participation in the hospitality of God. This is a notion that illumines our understanding of other writings by early theologians of the church, of monastic practice, of discourse about the life of the Holy Trinity and our participation in that divine life, and of our participation in the Eucharist. “Why do Christians practice hospitality?” is one of those questions that, if we choose to reflect together upon it, will take us deep into our faith.

“Are we actively seeking ways to “make room” for Muslims in our communities—and in the schools in which we serve?”

That’s the depth dimension. But in the actual practice of hospitality, we *make room* for others (see Pohl). That’s another good spatial metaphor, one that involves breadth.

Our institutions’ hospitality to Muslims is an important witness in the present day. While it has never been entirely comfortable to be a practicing Muslim in the United States of America, we know how much harder it has become in the wake of September 11, 2001. At the present moment there is a great deal of anti-Islamic rhetoric in the air, amplified by the media. There is very loud agitation going on right now against the construction of Islamic centers in New York City, in Murfreesboro (TN) and in Riverside (CA). Politicians seeking an issue that might give them some advantage over opponents have been ratcheting up the rhetoric. This moment is one that tests our convictions. Do we indeed “pursue hospitality”? Are we actively seeking ways to “make room” for Muslims in our communities—and in the schools in which we serve? We have an opportunity to respond in freedom—in the courageous, neighbor-serving freedom about which Professor Jodock has spoken.

End Notes

1. For this and what follows, see Darrell Jodock's contribution to this issue of *Intersections*.
2. Prof. Folkemer died on May 26, 2011 at the age of 95. The previous year he celebrated the 70th anniversary of his graduation from the Lutheran Theological Seminary at Gettysburg. Among American Lutherans, he was a pioneer in championing the importance of a theological engagement with the world's religions. Note, for example, his recent publication, *No Mere Dialogue*.
3. For an account of and reflections on this history, see Vogelaar, "Twenty-Five Years," in a special issue of *Currents* on "Christians in a Religiously Diverse World," from which I cite a number of articles.
4. See Bernstein, "Celebrating God," for one of the presentations given at this conference.
5. We'll also discover that Christians, Muslims, and Jews have already been going deep into these issues since the Middle Ages! Cf. Burrell.

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