



# “Thinking through” Islam<sup>1</sup>

MARK N. SWANSON

“Through” is a tricky preposition when its object is one of the great faiths of humankind, claiming the allegiance of about a fifth of the world’s people. I need not go farther than my mailbox or a few clicks away on the internet to find evidence of zealous Christians attempting to “see through” Islam, looking (they believe) beyond and beneath superficial pieties and apologetic constructions in order to comprehend the essential nature of Islam—to prepare for Christian evangelism, perhaps, or simply to affirm the superiority of their own Christian faith. This is not my intention with the expression “‘thinking through’ Islam.” To “think through” is not a matter of the other becoming transparent to my all-knowing gaze. While it does not exclude analysis and criticism carried out with the requisite humility, it has to do especially with ways by which that other may become not only an object of reflection but also a conversation partner and teacher.

I have borrowed my title from Richard Shweder’s *Thinking through Cultures: Expeditions in Cultural Psychology*.<sup>2</sup> In the introduction to his book Shweder writes:

The expression “thinking through cultures” is polysemous; one may “think through” other cultures in each of several senses: by means of the other (viewing the other as an expert in some realm of human experience), by getting the other

<sup>1</sup>This is a slightly revised version of a presentation given at the Fourteenth Annual Nobel Peace Prize Forum, “Striving for Peace: Who Is Responsible?” at Augustana College, Sioux Falls, SD (March 8, 2002).

<sup>2</sup>Richard A. Shweder, *Thinking through Cultures: Expeditions in Cultural Psychology* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1991). I am grateful to my colleague Mary Hess for drawing my attention to this book and to the typological possibilities provided by the paragraph reproduced here.

*Christians can “think through” Islam in at least four ways: to think about things “by means of” Islam; to get Islam straight in their own thinking; rigorously to interrogate and be interrogated by Islam; and to bear witness to Muslims in mutual engagement.*

straight (rational reconstruction of the beliefs and practices of the other), by deconstructing and going right through and beyond the other (revealing what the other has suppressed and kept out of sight), witnessing in the context of engagement with the other (revealing one’s own perspective on things by dint of a self-reflexive turn of mind).<sup>3</sup>

In the following few pages I will attempt to exploit these senses listed by Shweder in order to fashion a typology with which I can express a few hopes for Christian-Muslim conversation, especially in North America.<sup>4</sup>

### THINKING “BY MEANS OF” ISLAM

We may begin by asking, using Shweder’s language: In what realm of human experience is Islam expert? There are a great variety of possible answers. I will mention two, starting where we all should: with the praise of God.

Christians who have taken the time to read the Qur’ān or works of Islamic devotion, perhaps with the guidance of Christian interpreters such as Bishop Kenneth Cragg<sup>5</sup> or the late Constance Padwick,<sup>6</sup> will know that Muslims have expertise in the praise of God! This expertise was acknowledged by some of the earliest Christians to write in Arabic. The oldest Arabic-language work of Christian theology of which we have a nearly complete copy is a treatise written in the eighth century A.D. and preserved in a parchment manuscript at the Monastery of St. Catherine at Mount Sinai.<sup>7</sup> The treatise, entitled “On the Triune Nature of God” by its first editor,<sup>8</sup> begins with a lovely prayer, to which my rough English translation does not do justice:

Praise be to God,  
before whom there was nothing,  
and He was before all things;  
after whom there is nothing,  
and He is the Heir of all things,  
and to Him is the destiny of all things;  
who has preserved in His knowledge the knowledge of all things  
(and nothing but His knowledge is vast enough for this);  
in whose knowledge all things come to their end,  
and who has numbered all things in His knowledge.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., 2.

<sup>4</sup>I use the word “exploit” advisedly, knowing that I will probably distort what Shweder intended with these “senses.”

<sup>5</sup>Cragg has been engaged in sensitive listening to and wrestling with the Qur’ānic witness throughout his long and prodigiously productive career. See notes 11 and 28 below. For a study of Cragg’s work, with bibliography, see Christopher Lamb, *The Call to Retrieval: Kenneth Cragg’s Christian Vocation to Islam* (London: Grey Seal, 1997).

<sup>6</sup>See Constance E. Padwick, *Muslim Devotions: A Study of Prayer-Manuals in Common Use* (Oxford: One-world, 1961, 1996).

<sup>7</sup>*Sinai Arabic 154* (copied ca. A.D. 800), ff. 99r-139v.

<sup>8</sup>Margaret Dunlop Gibson, ed. and trans., *An Arabic Version of the Acts of the Apostles and the Seven Catholic Epistles ... with a Treatise ‘On the Triune Nature of God,’* *Studia Sinaitica* 7 (London: C. J. Clay and Sons, 1899). Samir Khalil Samir has prepared a new edition for publication.

We ask you, O God, by your mercy and power,  
that you make us to be among those who know your Truth,  
who follow your good pleasure,  
and who avoid your wrath;  
who give praise using your most beautiful names,  
and who speak using your most sublime similitudes.

You are the merciful one, the merciful Lord of mercy.  
You sat upon the throne,  
were exalted above all creatures,  
and filled all things.  
You give preference to what you will,  
but are not subject to others' preferring.  
You establish your judgments,  
but are not subject to others' judging.  
You have no need of us,  
but we are in need of you.  
You are near to the one who draws near to you,  
and responsive to the one who calls upon you and prays to you.  
For you, O God, are Lord of all things,  
and God of all things,  
and Creator of all things.

Open our mouths,  
loose our tongues,  
soften our hearts,  
and lay open our breasts  
that we might praise your noble Name,  
which is exalted and great,  
blessed and holy!  
There is no God before you,  
and no God after you.  
To you is the destiny,  
and all things are in the disposal of your power.<sup>9</sup>

In a study published elsewhere I have identified in this prayer at least twenty-two quotations from, parallels with, or allusions to Islam's sacred scripture, the Qur'ān.<sup>10</sup> The Arabic-speaking Christian author had heard the Qur'ān, had recognized in it a powerful language of prayer and praise, and had absorbed many of its phrases and cadences. He was thinking "by means of" Islam.

One area where the Qur'ān often moves its Christian readers is its celebration of the creation, full of signs of the power and mercy of God.<sup>11</sup> These include the ri-

<sup>9</sup>I published this translation in Mark N. Swanson, "Beyond Prooftexting: Approaches to the Qur'ān in Some Early Arabic Christian Apologies," *Muslim World* 88 (1998) 305-307. The phrase "all things are in the disposal of [your] power" is Kenneth Cragg's translation of the Qur'ān's "*ala kulli shay'in qadirun*."

<sup>10</sup>Swanson, "Beyond Prooftexting," 305-308.

<sup>11</sup>See, for example, Kenneth Cragg, *The Mind of the Qur'ān: Chapters in Reflection* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1973) especially chapter 9, "The Sacramental Earth."

otous diversity of humankind: “Among His signs are...the diversity of your languages and colors,” exclaims one characteristic passage (30:22).

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In stressing “diversity” I note that it has been a major goal of my own Evangelical Lutheran Church in America since its formation in 1988 to become a more diverse church, precisely in terms of the Qur’ānic pair “languages and colors,” but neither personal experience in congregations nor denominational statistics reveals any great progress being made in this regard. Muslims, on the other hand, “do diversity” well. To visit a mosque in North America is very often to visit a microcosm of the world. Of course, nowhere is the “catholicity” of Islam more apparent than during the annual pilgrimage to Mecca—the *hajj*—in which some two million Muslims from all around the world converge on a single place, the men all wearing the same pair of simple white garments, men and women together proclaiming their common servanthood before God.<sup>12</sup>

The power of Islam to bind people of different ethnicity together struck me very forcibly while reading Michael L. Budde’s essay on the 1994 massacres in Rwanda, in which, in the course of two months, approximately 800,000 men, women, and children died.<sup>13</sup> The great majority of the killed, and of the killers, were Christians; Budde judges the episode as one of the most spectacular failures of Christian formation in history. St. Paul may have claimed that “in Christ there is no Jew nor Greek, no slave nor free, no male and female” (Gal 3:28)—but such a claim broke down in Rwanda in 1994 when it came to Hutu and Tutsi, or even militant and moderate Hutu. Christians—Catholics and Protestants—butchered other Christians. But, according to one student of the terrible events, the tiny Muslim community in Rwanda proved an exception:

The only faith which provided a bulwark against barbarity for its adherents was Islam. There are many testimonies to the protection members of the Muslim community gave each other and their refusal to divide themselves ethnically....Muslims are often socially marginal people [in Rwanda] and this reinforces a strong sense of community identification which supersedes ethnic tags, something the majority Christians have not been able to achieve.<sup>14</sup>

<sup>12</sup>A great witness to the power of the pilgrimage to challenge racist attitudes is Malcolm X, *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* (New York: Grove, 1966) 318-342. See also his article “Racism: The Cancer that Is Destroying America,” in *Malcolm X: The Man and His Times*, ed. John Henrik Clarke (New York: Macmillan, 1969) 302-306.

<sup>13</sup>Michael L. Budde, “Pledging Allegiance: Reflections on Discipleship and the Church After Rwanda,” in *The Church as Counterculture*, ed. Michael L. Budde and Robert W. Brimlow (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2000) 213-225.

<sup>14</sup>Gerard Prunier, *The Rwanda Crisis* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995) 9, quoted in Budde, *The Church as Counterculture*, 220.

The historical experience of Islam in binding diverse peoples together into a community that can cohere even when nation-states dissolve along ethnic lines is well worth Christians' "thinking through."

#### GETTING ISLAM STRAIGHT

Historically, Christians have had a great deal of difficulty in "getting Islam straight." In the early days of Christian-Muslim encounter, many Christian teachers simply dismissed Islam with contempt. For St. John of Damascus in the eighth century, Islam was "the still-prevailing deceptive superstition of the Ishmaelites," number 100 or 101 in his great catalogue of heresies.<sup>15</sup> Later, Byzantine polemicists portrayed Muslims as idolaters; by tendentiously mistranslating a word in the 112th surah of the Qur'ān, they claimed that Muslims worshiped a God made of hammer-beaten metal.<sup>16</sup> In medieval Europe, a great number of stories to the discredit of Muhammad were eagerly passed from person to person. For example, he was a cardinal of the Roman Catholic Church who was a candidate for pope, lost, and got his revenge by starting a rival religion.<sup>17</sup> Guibert of Nogent, a historian of the First Crusade, admitted that he had no reliable sources for the life of Muhammad, but still repeated stories that he had heard because "it is safe to speak evil of one whose malignity exceeds whatever ill can be spoken."<sup>18</sup>

Much of this, of course, was war propaganda. And there is another story to tell, a fascinating and at times noble story of how the Christian West, very slowly, came into possession of real knowledge about Islam—a story in which Martin Luther too plays a role through his defense of the humanist Theodore Bibliander and his printer Oporinus who had gotten into trouble with the Basel city council for daring to print a Latin translation of the Qur'ān.<sup>19</sup>

But how far have we really come? Long before the events of September 11, 2001, our media and popular culture had programmed many North Americans to pair the words "Muslim" and "terrorist." Many American Muslims, for example, have been upset about a children's book entitled *The Terrorist*,<sup>20</sup> a story about an American girl in London seeking to avenge the bombing death of her younger brother at the hands of a Muslim girl. The many strongly negative reviews by readers found at amazon.com speak of gross stereotypes and misunderstandings of Is-

<sup>15</sup>Daniel J. Sahas, *John of Damascus on Islam: The "Heresy of the Ishmaelites"* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1972) 133.

<sup>16</sup>Daniel J. Sahas, "Holosphyros? A Byzantine Perception of 'the God of Muhammad,'" in *Christian-Muslim Encounters*, ed. Yvonne Yazbeck Haddad and Wadi Zaidan Haddad (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1995) 109-125.

<sup>17</sup>Norman Daniel, *Islam and the West: The Making of an Image* (Edinburgh: University Press, 1960) 83-84.

<sup>18</sup>R. W. Southern, *Western Views of Islam in the Middle Ages* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1962) 31; the translation is Southern's. This short book is a splendid introduction to the material mentioned in this and the next paragraph.

<sup>19</sup>Sarah Henrich and James L. Boyce, "Martin Luther—Translations of Two Prefaces on Islam: *Preface to the Libellus de ritu et moribus Turcorum* (1530), and *Preface to Bibliander's Edition of the Qur'an* (1543)," *Word & World* 16/2 (1996) 250-266.

<sup>20</sup>Caroline B. Cooney, *The Terrorist* (New York: Scholastic, 1997).

lam that they find in the book. Indeed, the mix of positive and negative reviews is itself an intriguing case study in the strikingly different perspectives operative among us about very significant issues.<sup>21</sup>

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Americans have experienced real terrorism since that fictional account was published. We—Christians and Muslims together—have been hard pressed to comprehend and explain how some people could commit atrocities “in the name of Allah.” In many places, Christians and Muslims have reached out to one another in a show of solidarity and a common rejection of murder in the name of God.<sup>22</sup>

At the same time, we have heard some stunningly negative judgments and wild generalizations about the Islamic religion which, again, commands the allegiance of some 1.3 billion people in our world. It may well be the case that Franklin Graham was misquoted when it was reported that he had called Islam an “evil” religion,<sup>23</sup> or that Attorney General John Ashcroft’s words or intentions were distorted when syndicated columnist Cal Thomas reported him to have said: “Islam is a religion in which God requires you to send your son to die for him. Christianity is a faith in which God sends his son to die for you.”<sup>24</sup> Whether or not the reports were accurate, it is clear that many American Christians wanted to believe them; the alleged Ashcroft quotation, in particular, was widely circulated on the internet and through email networks. We may need to ask: How far have North American Christians really advanced in our understanding of Islam beyond that of early medieval Europeans?

While the followers of Osama bin Ladin may haunt our nightmares, great numbers of North American Christians have come to know their increasingly numerous Muslim neighbors as decent, godfearing folk who seek to honor God in lives of decency and dignity, who are doing their best to make a good or better life for their children, and who find in their faith guidance for the moral life, appreciation for the goodness and beauty of the creation, deep reservoirs of patience in time

<sup>21</sup>There were, on 23 May 2002, sixty-three reviews online at: [http://www.amazon.com/exec/obidos/tg/stores/detail/-/books/0590228544/customer-reviews/qid=1022167768/sr=1-14/ref=sr\\_1\\_14/002-0688404-4903249](http://www.amazon.com/exec/obidos/tg/stores/detail/-/books/0590228544/customer-reviews/qid=1022167768/sr=1-14/ref=sr_1_14/002-0688404-4903249).

<sup>22</sup>One Qur’anic verse (among many) that figured strongly in the Muslim sermons and presentations that I attended after September 11 was 5:32, where, at the conclusion of the story of Cain’s murder of Abel, God decrees for the children of Israel that when one commits murder, it is as if that one had killed all of humankind.

<sup>23</sup>For one report on the Rev. Graham’s comments and later clarifications, see the Associated Press story, “Franklin Graham: Muslims Not Evil,” in the *Guardian Unlimited*, 4 December 2001; online: [www.guardian.co.uk/uslatest/story/0,1282,-1360483,00.html](http://www.guardian.co.uk/uslatest/story/0,1282,-1360483,00.html) [cited 23 May 2002].

<sup>24</sup>Cal Thomas, “Men of Faith in Washington, D.C., Need Our Prayers” at *Crosswalk.com News Channel*, 7 December 2001; online: [http://news.crosswalk.com/partner/Article\\_Display\\_Page/0,,PTID74088|CHID211724|CIID1108 858,00.html](http://news.crosswalk.com/partner/Article_Display_Page/0,,PTID74088|CHID211724|CIID1108 858,00.html) [cited 23 May 2002].

of trial, and finally, courage in the face of death. Some Christians have made it a point in their relationships with Muslims to observe and listen to them with care and respect as they practice and explain their faith, to read their scripture and other foundational books with generosity of spirit, and then to attempt the articulation of an understanding of Islam that Muslims can recognize as correct and insightful.<sup>25</sup> For these Christians, “getting Islam straight” may be a simple act of hospitality towards the other in all of his or her particularity. In an age when Muslims have become North American Christians’ neighbors, “getting Islam straight” also becomes a matter of obedience to the Eighth Commandment: “You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor.” Luther’s explanation of the commandment may serve us all well: “We should fear and love God, and so we should not tell lies about our neighbor, nor betray, slander, or defame him, but should apologize for him, speak well of him, and interpret charitably all that he does.”<sup>26</sup>

#### INTERROGATING—AND BEING INTERROGATED BY—ISLAM

For his third sense of “thinking through cultures,” Schweder speaks of “deconstructing and going right through and beyond the other (revealing what the other has suppressed and kept out of sight).”<sup>27</sup> Transposing this into possibilities for a conversation, I think of an interrogation—a questioning that is not satisfied with glib answers or time-tested apologies and that challenges the hearer to look at things in a different light. In a true conversation, of course, this interrogation must be mutual. According to this sense of “thinking through” Islam, Christians will ask hard questions, some of which have been formulated with special urgency in the months since September 11. But the same Christians must enter into this conversation with a readiness to listen very closely to the questions that Muslims ask and have long been asking Christians. Clearly, this sort of conversation can only take place where there is a certain level of trust and where power relations do not distort the exchange into a privileged polemic.

Let us begin with the need for Christians to listen. Islam as we know it is a post-Christian religion that arose in the early decades of the seventh century, and it interrogates Christianity about issues at the very center of its faith. Muslims have always been suspicious of the ways in which Christians talk about Jesus.<sup>28</sup> Why do Christians make divine claims for this beloved prophet and apostle of God? (“The Messiah, son of Mary, was simply an apostle. Apostles before him have passed away. His mother was a woman of truth. Both of them took food.”<sup>29</sup>) How can it be

<sup>25</sup>I learned something of the possibility and promise of this approach from a master, Willem A. Bijlefeld of Hartford Seminary.

<sup>26</sup>Martin Luther, *The Small Catechism*, in *The Book of Concord*, trans. and ed. Theodore Tappert (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg, 1959) 343.

<sup>27</sup>Shweder, *Thinking through Cultures*, 2.

<sup>28</sup>The Qur’anic passages about Jesus are conveniently gathered together and interpreted in English by Kenneth Cragg, *Readings in the Qur’an* (London: Fount Paperbacks, 1995) 163-171.

<sup>29</sup>*Ibid.*, 166: Cragg’s interpretation of Surah 5:75.

that such an honored and beloved prophet and apostle of God should die the ignominious death of crucifixion? Is it not God’s custom to *save* his apostles, as he saved Noah, Abraham, Lot, and Moses?<sup>30</sup> (“As for their claim that they killed the Messiah Jesus, son of Mary, the messenger of God, the truth is they did not kill him nor did they crucify him. They were under the illusion that they had.”<sup>31</sup>) How can three divine persons be one God? (“Believe, then, in God and His messengers and do not talk of three gods. You are well advised to abandon such ideas. Truly God is one God.”<sup>32</sup>)

These are serious questions! Over the centuries, Christians have been quite adept at ignoring or evading them. One extremely clever ploy by the first generations of Christian apologists to write in Arabic was to make the paradoxical nature of Christian faith into a virtue, and even a proof of its truth. If the Christian faith was accepted far and wide in spite of the fact that its teachings are unbelievable, *humanly*-speaking, then there must really be something *divine* about it.<sup>33</sup> To judge

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from the popularity of the argument among ninth-century Christians, it must have seemed convincing to them and may even have proved itself useful in interfaith conversation. But it is clearly an evasion that does not address the tough theological questions: What *do* Christians mean when we talk about the humanity *and* *divinity* of Jesus? *How is it* that the worship of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit is not tritheism? To speak coherently about these things with a Muslim interlocutor requires a Christian to go deep into the Scriptures and the Christian theological tradition.<sup>34</sup>

There are a number of questions that Christians will want to explore with Muslims. Three that have been around for a long time, but which have been asked with particular urgency during the past months, are: Islam’s attitude toward violence; Islam as religion and state, faith and polity; and the place of women in Islam. Christians’ questions in these areas need to be asked, and it is permitted to hope, at

<sup>30</sup>On the Qur’an’s witness regarding the mission of God’s apostles, see W. Montgomery Watt, *Bell’s Introduction to the Qur’an* (Edinburgh: University Press, 1970) 127-135, and Willem A. Bijlefeld, “A Prophet and More than a Prophet?” *Muslim World* 59 (1969) 1-28.

<sup>31</sup>Cragg, *Readings in the Qur’an*, 170: Cragg’s interpretation of part of Surah 4:157.

<sup>32</sup>Ibid, 169: Cragg’s interpretation of part of Surah 4:171.

<sup>33</sup>For a study of the Christian “true religion” apologies in the early Arabic Christian literature, see Sidney H. Griffith, “Comparative Religion in the Apologetics of the First Christian Arabic Theologians,” *Proceedings of the PMR Conference*, vol. 4 (1979) 63-87.

<sup>34</sup>One very interesting attempt to do just that was “Christian Witness to Muslims,” Report of the American Lutheran Church, Board for World Mission and Inter-Church Cooperation, Task Force on Christian Witness to Muslims (November 1985).



least, that they will make some useful contribution to the lively debates already taking place within the Muslim community.

We must note, however, that on issues such as these the interrogation quickly becomes mutual. On the question of violence, Muslims in the United States have sometimes expressed to me their amazement at American Christians' high tolerance for violence, whether on the streets of American cities (where Muslim immigrant shopkeepers have too often been victims) or in American popular culture. How many acts of violence are typically shown on prime-time television on any given evening? And while Christians ask about Islam's attitude towards violence as reflected in Islamic scripture and history, Christians will be asked about the place of violence in *their* sources and history. Christians must not forget the presence of holy war legislation and conquest narratives in the Bible.<sup>35</sup> Nor should Christians forget that, beginning with the story of Constantine's vision of the cross with the legend, "In this, conquer," the symbol of Christ's decision to *absorb* violence rather than to dispense it was transformed into a token of imperial military victory<sup>36</sup>—which is how the cross was experienced by the earliest Islamic community. Christians in the United States have not yet fully shaken off the Constantinian legacy of imperial theology, as many observed on Sunday, September 16, 2001, when there was a great rush of American flags into our sanctuaries.

It may be well for American Christians to bear these habits in mind as we ask Muslims about "religion and polity" issues. Muslims, for their part, frequently interrogate Western Christians about the church's complicity in modern secularism's banishment of religion from the public square to the realm of the private. Muslims ask: Is not God the Lord of *all* of life? There may be real benefit from Christians and Muslims together addressing questions such as: What public shape may our religious communities take, with integrity, in religiously plural nations with democratic institutions? If Islamic theory (but not always practice) has tended in principle to make a claim for Islam on all public space, modern Western Christians have largely gone along in theory (while not entirely in practice) with the exclusive claim of the secular on that space.<sup>37</sup>

Many American Christians have urgent questions about the role and place of women in various parts of the Islamic world, fueled by what we have learned about the oppression of women by the Taliban in Afghanistan. Again, however, the interrogation will move in both directions. Muslims in the United States regularly wonder about what they perceive as Christians' easy acceptance of demeaning attitudes towards, and expectations and portrayals of, women in American culture. An evening of television, or a visit to the local video store, is enough to drive home the point.

The last chapter of Moroccan sociologist Fatema Mernissi's delightful new

<sup>35</sup>Deuteronomy 20 is not read in Lutheran churches very often!

<sup>36</sup>For the story, see Eusebius, *Life of Constantine*, ed. Averil Cameron and Stuart G. Hall (Oxford: Clarendon, 1999) 80-82 (I:28-32).

<sup>37</sup>An intriguing article, especially when read in the light of Christian-Muslim discussions, is David S. Yeago, "The Culture of the Church in the Midst of the Nations," *Pro Ecclesia* 6 (1997) 146-171.

book, *Scheherezade Goes West: Different Cultures, Different Harems*,<sup>38</sup> is entitled “Size 6: The Western Women’s Harem.” These titles themselves may be enough to convey something of Mernissi’s point, but let me reproduce a few lines from the last chapter:

In feudal China, a beautiful woman was the one who voluntarily sacrificed her right to unhindered physical movement by mutilating her own feet, and thereby proving that her main goal in life was to please men. Similarly, in the Western world, I was expected to shrink my hips into a size 6 if I wanted to find a decent skirt tailored for a beautiful woman. We Muslim women have only one month of fasting, Ramadan, but the poor Western woman who diets has to fast twelve months out of the year. “Quelle horreur,” I kept repeating to myself.<sup>39</sup>

And later:

“I thank you, Allah, for sparing me the tyranny of the ‘size 6 harem,’” I repeatedly said to myself while seated on the Paris-Casablanca flight, on my way back home at last. “I am so happy that the conservative male elite does not know about it. Imagine the fundamentalists switching from the veil to forcing women to fit size 6.”<sup>40</sup>

Mernissi’s “size 6 harem” is the sort of humorous yet pungent formulation that may well help North Americans to see realities that they have—in Shweder’s words—“suppressed and kept out of sight.” As Christian-Muslim dialogue moves to the level of mutual interrogation, it will become a journey of self-discovery as well as one of exploration in the world of the other.

#### WITNESS IN THE CONTEXT OF ENGAGEMENT

As Christians are engaged with Muslims in genuine conversation, and especially as they work with one another for the benefit of entire communities, opportunities to “reveal one’s own perspective on things”<sup>41</sup>—indeed, opportunities to share the deepest commitments that we hold—will present themselves.

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*“as Muslims and Christians gather to think about the things that make for peace we will reveal to one another our deepest sources of hope and courage”*

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As Muslims and Christians together forged a new, Arabic-language civilization in the ninth and tenth centuries, translating the classics of Greek science and philosophy into Arabic and creating a new Arabic science and Arabic philosophy, they bore witness to one another, explaining and defending their Christian and

<sup>38</sup>Fatima Mernissi, *Scheherezade Goes West: Different Cultures, Different Harems* (New York: Washington Square, 2001).

<sup>39</sup>Ibid., 215.

<sup>40</sup>Ibid., 219.

<sup>41</sup>Shweder, *Thinking through Cultures*, 2.

their Islamic commitments, making use of the common language that they had developed together. As Muslim and Christian villagers gather together in Egypt, in Pakistan, in Tanzania, or wherever—to think about the health, education, and economic well-being of the people in their community—they will in subtle ways, as they give sacrificially of time and energy, exercise patience, and overcome difficulties, bear witness to the Lord whom they serve. And as Muslims and Christians gather in our cities to think about the things that make for peace and a civil society and the thriving of neighborhoods, we will reveal to one another our deepest sources of hope and courage.

It is important to stress that “dialogue” does not mean avoidance of difference. Christian-Muslim dialogue does not mean talking only about those points upon which we can agree and tiptoeing around real differences. My colleague Charles Amjad-Ali, who was for many years the Director of the Christian Study Centre in Rawalpindi, Pakistan, does not tire of pointing out that it is a mistake to think that the opposite of “dialogue” is “monologue”—as if “di-” were a numerical prefix meaning “two.” Rather, *dia* is the Greek preposition “through,” in this case through one’s *logos*, the word by which one lives, the concrete principles and commitments that shape a life. “Dialogue,” then, is not merely a matter of two people talking rather than one. Rather, it is that conversation that proceeds *through* the participants’ very particular beliefs and forms of life, in the hope that there will be a meeting in which new language is created, new insight attained, and new possibilities found for confronting common challenges.<sup>42</sup> In dialogue, all participants bear witness. And they do so peaceably, without manipulation, in the hope of new understanding, and in the expectation of being transformed, “converted” in ways that Christians and Muslims will leave up to God.

With “dialogue” I have returned to the preposition “through.” Lively Christian-Muslim conversation moves *through*—and not *above and beyond*—lived commitments and the particularities of historical, embodied existence.<sup>43</sup> The hope, for Christians, is that this down-to-earth conversation will be enabled and enlivened by the Spirit who “guides into all the truth” (John 16:13). ⊕

MARK N. SWANSON is associate professor of Islamic studies and director of the Islamic studies program at Luther Seminary, St. Paul, Minnesota.

<sup>42</sup>See Charles Amjad-Ali, “Towards a New Theology of Dialogue,” *Al-Mushir* 33/2 (Summer 1991) 57-69.

<sup>43</sup>In Prof. Amjad-Ali’s language: “The opposite of dialogue is not monologue but metalogue, which means achieving a transcendent reason through escaping or overcoming the prejudices of one’s own *logos*.” *Ibid.*, 60.