

Preaching on Christian-Muslim Relations

John Kelsay

Florida State University, Tallahassee, Florida

I

To preach on Christian-Muslim “relations” already implies a certain kind of reflection. The topic implies that the two parties are here to stay. Further, it implies the desire to find something constructive about their interactions. Thus, two of the more typical avenues taken by well-known Christian preachers are closed for those who would speak on Christian-Muslim “relations.” For example, one cannot engage in polemics. Similarly, one who preaches on Christian-Muslim relations is not primarily interested in proselytizing. As I take it, she or he is directly focused on building bridges, or perhaps in exploring possibilities and problems associated with the relations between the members of two communities. The question may be “How should Christians think about Islam?” Alternatively, it may be “How may Christians and Muslims live together? Are there interests—religious, moral, political—that the members of these communities share?”

II

In any case, one of the great tasks of current preaching on this topic will be the provision of instruction.¹ For many congregants, there is a need for basic information. My own experience suggests that many still do not understand (for example) that “Islam” indicates a religion and “Muslims” those who practice that religion. Further confusion attaches to the meaning of these basic terms. When President Bush declared that Islam means peace, thus laying the groundwork for the judgment that the perpetrators of the September 11, 2001 attacks had “hijacked” Islam, he was not far off the mark. The Arabic word *islam* is formed from the root *s-l-m*, which does imply peace, well-being, and the like. Quite literally, however, *al-islam* means “the submission”; in its religious sense, the term suggests submission to the will of God. Theologically, to practice *al-islam* (and thus, to be a *muslim*) means to stand in a certain relation to the Creator, by which one gratefully acknowledges that all things come and will return to God, and strives to place all of her or his powers at the disposal of the Almighty. A simple way to ground such information is to note that five times a day, Muslims pray, each time beginning with the recitation of *surat al-fatiha*, the “opening” chapter of the Qur’an.

Praise be to God, Lord of the worlds;
Gracious and Merciful, Owner of the Day of Justice.
We worship you.
We seek your help.
Guide us in the straight path.
The path of those who receive your grace,
Rather than of those who receive your wrath;
The path of those who do not go astray.²

III

The need for basic information is very great. Indeed, it proves critical to the task of preaching, which in my view should encourage Christians to consider Muslims as fellow witnesses, participants in a long conversation regarding the proper mode of response to the Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer of life. As fellow witnesses, Muslims and Christians have enough in common to sustain conversation. At the same time, their testimony does not always agree. The future of Christian-Muslim relations will consist in negotiating this commonality *cum* difference: if I may put it this way, in imagining the testimonies of Christians and Muslims (along with Jews) as contributions to a rich tapestry of monotheistic faith. Christian preaching should help people to understand that such negotiation is possible, even in the midst of serious conflict. In this connection, let me suggest the following conversation starters.

The Practice of Reading Texts

Christians and Muslims share (with Jews) the notion that God communicates by means of the Word. They share, further, the notion that the practice of reading texts is a way of hearing or comprehending the divine word. Indeed, for Muslims this practice is so central that the classification “people of the Book” can serve as a shorthand designation for a community with a valid religious practice. The history of humanity is the story of prophets, sent by *Al-lah* (literally, “the god”) to “remind” humanity of its obligations. Every nation has its prophet; the greatest of these bring a Book, which in turn directs the life of an ongoing community.

The Word, proclaimed by prophets and preserved in books, is a constant in human affairs. Again and again, human beings are summoned (1) to faith in God, from whom all things come and to whom they will return; (2) to responsibility, in the sense of living up to standards described as the “well-known,” in the sense of a common morality human beings share; and (3) to preparation for Judgment, a present and, above all future reality by which God’s purpose is fulfilled. This threefold message is central to the Qur’an. Christians who read this text are always struck by its resonance with the great themes of their faith.

The sense of familiarity is enhanced by the recurrence of familiar names and stories: here is Moses contending with the people of Israel (Qur'an 2). Here is Joseph, sold into slavery so that he might provide for his people in a time of famine (Qur'an 12.) Here is Mary, the virgin mother of Jesus; here are Elizabeth, Zechariah, and Jesus' cousin John (Qur'an 19.) Here, above all, is Abraham, in some sense the father of us all, bearing witness to the power and goodness of the one true God. (Qur'an 6, 21, 37, and elsewhere.)

The list goes on. The emphasis on the divine word, the importance of texts, and the recurrence of great themes, figures, and stories—in short, the testimony to God as the Lord of history lend support to the characterization of Islam as a “biblical” faith. Such affirmation provides a nice starting point for imagining Christians and Muslims as co-witnesses to the call of God.

That's not all there is to it, though. Thus it is important that Muslims who speak about such matters describe the relation differently. For them it is more accurate to say that Christians are a “people of the Book” insofar as they bear witness to Islam. Thus Christians and Muslims share an emphasis on the Word as the medium by which God communicates; they share the practice of reading texts. They know the same names, and refer to similar stories. *But they do not read the same text.* Despite its familiarity, the Qur'an is not the Bible. The latter, with its sixty-six books and numerous authors and editors, constructed over centuries and referring to the life of diverse communities, presents something very distinct from the Muslim text, which is in theory a single-author work delivered in the Arabian Peninsula over a period of twenty-two years. Christians, assuming the completeness of God's revelation in Christ, have seldom engaged in serious readings of the Qur'an. Muslims, assuming that any helpful material from the Bible is reiterated in the Qur'an, are similarly disinclined to engage the biblical text.

Preaching on Christian-Muslim relations needs to address this issue head on. From the Christian point of view, it is at least possible to construe the Qur'an as a late, but significant contribution to the testimonies of the various biblical witnesses. We might take a cue from Walter Brueggemann's characterization of Old Testament literature as a pattern of “testimony, dispute, advocacy,” extending this notion so that the New Testament, extra-biblical Jewish and Christian literature, the Qur'an, and other Muslim texts are seen as moments in an extended conversation regarding the claims of monotheistic faith.³ That the partners do not agree, or that some moments are deemed more decisive than others is significant, though such considerations need not be conversation stoppers.

Preaching on Christian-Muslim relations requires the confidence to listen, as well as to speak—to enlarge and sharpen our understanding of God in ways that enable us to say with conviction that God is the Lord of *all* the earth, rather than one of several tribal deities competing for the job.

Doing Justice

Christians and Muslims read texts. They do so with a purpose, viz., to hear God's Word and thus to discern the direction of faithful response. For Muslims, all human beings are called to "command good and forbid evil," by means appropriate to their particular contexts. The much-misunderstood term *jihad*, or as it usually occurs in the Qur'an, the phrase *jihad fi sabil allah* ("in the path of God") receives its meaning in this connection. Quite literally, *jihad* indicates "struggle" or "effort" in the path of God or in the service of commanding good and forbidding evil. Muslims who insist that the term is badly translated as "holy war" are quite right, in the sense that the struggle associated with *jihad* may be carried out in many ways. The selection of the means of struggle is a matter of context. *Jihad* can be connected with hard work in one's worldly vocation; it can imply effort in devotional practice. It is nevertheless true that many of its most striking uses occur in connection with political responsibility, as in the saying attributed to Muhammad: "The greatest *jihad* is to speak a word of justice in the presence of a ruler."⁴ And, in contexts where political responsibility requires military force, *jihad* has to do with fighting. Muslim discussion of *jihad* indicates that fighting, as other approved means of pursuing justice, should take place with the intention to serve God. It is this fact, I believe, that leads scholars to consider the term as indicating a type of "holy war."

It must be said that such characterizations lend themselves to distortions, however. Thus it is important that Muslim discussions of fighting detail certain rules of engagement. These indicate when fighting may be justified, in terms of the overarching aim of commanding good and forbidding evil, or to put it another way, of doing justice. Thus, fighting must be (1) authorized by publicly constituted authorities; (2) for a just cause; (3) with righteous intent; (4) when conditions suggest that (a) the benefits gained will outweigh the burdens imposed, (b) there is a reasonable likelihood of success, in the sense of (c) achieving or restoring justice, and thus improving the conditions for peace, (d) when it's clear that fighting is actually necessary, as opposed to "pure" diplomacy. The rules of engagement also incorporate a code of conduct for warriors in the field. Thus, even fighters in a just war are required to avoid direct and intentional attacks on noncombatants, and commanders in the field are required to select strategies and weapons in such a way as to avoid the infliction of disproportionate or excessive damage.

What Muslims call *ahkam al-jihad* or the "judgments concerning armed force" thus bears comparison with Christian notions of the just war.⁵ The latter, signified by the phrase "just war tradition" indicates one of, if not the most longstanding modes of Christian reflection on political responsibility. In my view, it is most unfortunate that this tradition should be in such disrepair, precisely at a moment when we are most in need in the kind of discriminating

political intelligence it is meant to encourage. With apologies to those who work hard on this matter, I must say that contemporary Christian preaching appears to be governed either (1) by a concern to avoid *ever* saying that military action is justified, or (2) by an unqualified affirmation of the righteousness of current U.S. policy. (1) May be interpreted as a partial appropriation of just war tradition, in that it rests on the notion that war should be a “last resort”—the problem being that this criterion is interpreted in such a way as to render military force ineffective as a tool in most real-world political contexts. Similarly, (2) picks up on the notion that fighting should occur when there is a “just cause,” the problem in this case being that this criterion is interpreted in such a way that those who advocate some limits on U.S. policy are described as “supporting terror.” In either case, the failure to consider the just war criteria, those governing resort to as well as those governing conduct of war, inhibits one’s ability to think about political and military policy in discriminating ways.

The issues before us just now demand such thinking. It is noteworthy, for example, that precisely at a time when many Christians are convinced that Muslims are irrevocably committed to “holy war,” many Muslims interpret U.S. policy as a reenactment of the Crusades. Preaching on Christian-Muslim relations should address these concerns—not by withdrawing, as is the case with numerous representatives of both traditions who state simply that religion has to do with peace, and is never a motivation for war, but by deliberating about concerns common to both just war and *jihad* traditions. From that perspective, the most disturbing thing about the public statements of Usama bin Ladin and other al-Qa`ida leaders is the clear declaration of total or indiscriminate war against the U.S. and its allies. The 1998 *Declaration on Armed Struggle against Jews and Crusaders* is the most widely available example, with its statement that each and every Muslim who possesses the means has a duty to fight Americans and their allies, *civilians and soldiers*, in any country where that is possible. The rhetoric of talk-show hosts and other media personalities has obscured the way this statement, among other al-Qa`ida pronouncements, fosters an intense discussion among Muslims of all persuasions regarding the relationship of al-Qa`ida’s program to the *jihad* tradition, particularly with respect to the latter’s insistence that honorable combat requires that fighters avoid direct and intentional attacks on noncombatants.⁶

Christians and Muslims alike have reasons to condemn military or paramilitary action of the sort advocated by al-Qa`ida and like-minded groups. In this sense, Christian preaching should encourage people to think less about a clash between “civilizations” that are in some sense identified with Christianity and Islam, and more about the proper response to groups that advocate indiscriminate warfare. Whatever else the term “terrorism” suggests, it points to fighting that is total, in that fighters deliberately aim at targets selected to demon-

strate that they can make ordinary life very, very costly.

Muslims who engage this issue are clear on the condemnation of al-Qa'ida. They typically respond with two questions about U.S. policy. First, are the lives of Muslim civilians equal to those of others? From a just war point of view, the answer must be yes; upon closer examination, it becomes clear that the question is motivated by the extent of what a military planner would call "collateral damage" in connection with military action undertaken by the U.S. and/or its allies. Just now, cases in point are the ongoing campaigns in Afghanistan and Iraq, and also Israeli attempts to delimit terrorist activity by Palestinians. It bears saying that U.S. policy does not countenance direct and intentional attacks on civilians. At the same time, it appears that current U.S. military doctrine, with its emphasis on overwhelming force, may lead to actions that violate the just war (and *jihad*) concern to avoid disproportionate or excessive force. Raising questions about weapons and tactics is a necessary and, I think, constructive contribution of the just war tradition to discussions of current conflicts.

The second question raised by Muslims has to do with Israel, particularly in terms of U.S. support for political and military policies undertaken vis-à-vis Palestinians. The issues here are numerous and difficult. Suffice it to say that preaching on Christian-Muslim relations can make a contribution in this regard simply by connecting the issue to such a basic imperative as that presented by Micah 6:8 (What does the Lord require of you, but to do justice....). I do not say that identifying policies consistent with justice in the Israeli/Palestinian conflict is simple. But the invocation of justice is a necessary first step, particularly in a time when the airwaves and bookshelves are so filled with material designed to encourage interpretations of this conflict through the lens of dispensationalist theology or apocalyptic theories of a seemingly inevitable clash between Christians and Jews on one side, with Muslims and secular humanists on the other.

Affirming the Divine Initiative

"The Lord your God, the Lord is One." (Deuteronomy 6:4)

"There is no god but God..." (the *shahada* or basic "witness" of faith in Islam)

Preaching on Christian-Muslim relations should encourage congregants to imagine Muslims as co-witnesses to monotheistic faith. So I am arguing; in fulfilling this task, no theme is more important than the affirmation of divine sovereignty. For Christians and Muslims, as well as Jews, all begins with God; in time, all ends in God as well. As an old Muslim creed has it, that which happens, "the good of it and the evil of it, the little of it and the much of it," is

from God.⁷ Or in biblical terms, “I the Lord make both weal and woe” (Isaiah 45: 7).

Christian reflection on this theme leads in a number of directions, any of which may be enriched by taking Muslim sources into account. Thus, if one focuses on the question of evil, she or he will find that Muslims deal with the matter in ways rather similar to Christians. Since God and God alone is properly called “creator,” evil cannot have an independent existence; even Iblis, the “satan” of Islamic tradition, is a creature of God. His story, told for example in Qur’an 7:11 ff., shows the archetypal pattern by which “evil” is identified with an unwillingness to accept God’s world and a corresponding assertion of a creature’s will to power.

The primary sense of God’s sovereignty in Islam, as in Christianity, is affirmative, however. Thus testimony to the unique lordship of God ought not to focus overmuch on the “problem” of evil, or of the mysteries associated with providence and predestination (in Muslim terms, God’s *qadar* or decree in relation to the human *istita’a* or capacity to act.) For Muslims, God’s sovereignty is above all shown by the divine initiative by which human beings are called from a life of heedlessness to one exemplified by *taqwa* or piety. In this, God’s provision of guidance, by which human beings may discern and travel “the straight path,” is a gift beyond measure. A human being who has not heard God’s call, or who has yet to begin to strive in God’s path, is not fully developed. She or he leads a truncated existence. Turned in on the self and its constant anxieties about security, the “unsubmitted” person is in constant psychological and social turmoil. Should she or he continue along this path, an observer will rightly say “that one is destined for destruction,” for such is the inevitable consequence of denying one’s finitude.

This depiction is not identical with Christian notions of salvation by grace through faith. Neither is it completely alien. If faith, in the sense of the Pauline *pistis* signifies a kind of condition or state by which human beings find themselves able to acknowledge God as trustworthy, and thus inclined to grateful obedience to the divine imperative, then “submission” in the sense that Muslim sources intend might be described as the condition by which one is enabled to count God as trustworthy and to show gratitude through the performance of God’s will. In either case, a rightly ordered life is the result of God’s initiative. God’s grace, God’s guidance are received as a gift; one who reflects on the experience of godliness will find herself or himself driven again and again in the direction of gratitude. “If anyone boasts, let him boast in the Lord,” writes the apostle (I Corinthians 1: 31). “Remember God’s grace to you, how you were enemies, but God put love between your hearts” (Qur’an 3:102).

IV

In preaching on Christian-Muslim relations the challenge is to imagine, or even better, to recognize the Muslim “other” as a conversation partner in the construction of monotheistic faith. I close with verses from the Qur’an which I believe will resonate with any Christian congregation:

Say: Truly my Lord guided me onto the straight path;
A religion of justice,
A path trod by Abraham the monotheist.
He was not among the idolaters.
Say: Indeed, my prayer, my sacrifice, my life and my death come
from God, the Lord of the worlds. (6:62-63)

Notes

1. In this connection, some readers may find helpful my “Booklines” essay in the *Cresset* LXV, No. 2 & 3 (Christmas/Epiphany 2001-2002): 46-50, which is designed as a guide for those wishing to “read up” on Islam. Those lacking access to this journal may write to cresset@valpo.edu, or to jkelsay@garnet.acns.fsu.edu

2. Qur’an 1:1-7. Here as elsewhere in this essay I have made use of Yusuf ‘Ali’s translation of the Qur’an, making alterations of my own whenever I judge these would reflect more accurately the sense of the Arabic text. Please note: the common Muslim mode of referring to this and other “chapters” of the Qur’an is to indicate a “division” or “wall” (thus, *sura* or *surat*), then a traditional “title” usually related to the subject matter of the text in question. Here, *surat al-fatiha* designates the position of the text as the “opening” chapter in the Qur’an. The text is also referred to as the “seven oft-repeated,” indicating its liturgical relevance.

3. See W. Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament: Testimony, Dispute, Advocacy* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1997). James Kugel, *In Potiphar’s House: The Interpretive Life of Biblical Texts* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1994) provides an important example of exegetical work designed to listen to such a range of witnesses.

4. This is perhaps the point to note that Muslims read the Qur’an in conjunction with *ahadith* or “reports” of the exemplary practice or *sunna* of the Prophet. The statement cited here is from a popular compendium of reports called *Mishkat al-Masabih*; this is available in a translation by James Robson (Lahore: Sh. M. Ashraf, 1963-64). My “Booklines” essay (cited above) comments on some of the relevant literature concerning *ahadith*. Michael Cook’s massive study, *Commanding Right and Forbidding Wrong in Islamic Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001) discusses this and other relevant texts in great detail. A shorter version of Cook’s argument is contained in *Forbidding Wrong in Islam: an Introduction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003.)

5. John Kelsay, *Islam and War: A Study in Comparative Ethics* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1993) is an extended discussion of these matters.

6. See John Kelsay, "Islam, Politics, and War," *Sewanee Theological Review* 47/1 (Christmas, 2003): 11-19; also, "The New Jihad and Islamic Tradition," Foreign Policy Research Institute WIRE (www.fpri.org 11/3, October 2003).
7. 'Aqida I. For discussion of this text, cf. W. M. Watt, *The Formative Period of Islamic Thought* (Edinburgh: at the University Press, 1973), 292ff.