

Preaching in a Context of Christian-Muslim Tensions

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Has there ever been a context when Christian-Muslim relations were *not* characterized by tension? Allowing for degrees, so that some contexts show more tension and others less, it seems the answer is “no.” In thinking about the task of preaching, it is worth considering why this is so.

The reasons are complex and do not admit of straightforward distinctions between religious, political, or other causes. Christians and Muslims participate in communities whose basic narratives inscribe a universal vision. When the author of Ephesians wrote about the “one new humanity” by which previous distinctions between Jews and Gentiles had been “abolished” in Christ, or when contemporary Christians sing “In Christ There is No East or West,” the thought is one familiar, yet somehow disconcerting, to Muslims. Familiar, because Muhammad’s declaration “the foremost among you shall be the foremost in piety” also set aside racial and tribal divisions, so that anyone accepting the call for active submission to the guidance of God should regard other Muslims as brother or sister. This is somehow disconcerting, because the universal church rests its case on claims about the person and work of Jesus Christ. According to Islamic norms, these have been corrected by the Qur’an and the practice of Muhammad, the seal or last and greatest of the messengers sent by God.

When it comes to Christian-Muslim relations, even the things we share contain seeds of division. Consider the following tale, which at first blush suggests possibilities for good relations. According to standard accounts, a small group of Muslims left Arabia early on in the history of the movement (about 615 C.E.) They sought refuge in the Christian kingdom of Abyssinia (Ethiopia). Invited by the Negus—a kind of bishop-king—to explain themselves, these believers related stories of the hostility with which the citizens of Mecca (Muhammad’s home city) expressed hostility to the prophetic message. The Negus asked, “What does your prophet say?” and a member of the Muslim party recited the Sura or Chapter of Mary (Qur’an 19). The passage takes its title from verses 16-34, which relate the story of Jesus’ birth. Moved by the performance, the Negus threw his staff (the symbol of his authority) to the ground and declared, “By God, there is not so much separating you from us as the width of this stick!” The request for refuge was granted, and the believers lived under the protection of Abyssinia for a short period, after which they returned to Mecca.

Anyone reading Qur’an 19 will have reason to wonder about this, however. For the verses following on the account of Jesus’ birth proclaim:

A statement of the Truth about which they are in doubt: It would not befit God to have a child. He is far above that: when He decrees something, He says only “Be,” and it is. God is my Lord and your Lord, so serve Him: that is a straight path. But factions have differed among themselves. What suffering will come to those who obscure the truth when a dreadful Day arrives!

As Muslim exegetes have it, these lines correct the Christian “innovation” by which the man Jesus is identified by the title “son of God.” Perhaps we should ask just how wide was the Negus’ staff?

In some contexts, the answer has been “very wide indeed.” By 616 or 617, the believers mentioned in the story returned to Mecca. The hostility of the residents became more pronounced, and by 622, Muhammad ordered the migration to Medina. From this base, the Muslims launched a religious, military, and political campaign that would ultimately unify Arabia under the banner of Islam. But at the high point of the struggle, the following verses were revealed:

Fight those of the People of the Book who do not believe in God and the Last Day, who do not forbid what God and His Messenger have forbidden, who do not obey the rule of justice, until they pay the tribute and agree to submit. The Jews said, “Ezra is the son of God,” and the Christians said, “The Messiah is the son of God”: they said this with their own mouths, repeating what earlier disbelievers had said. May God confound them! How far astray they have been led! They take their rabbis, their monks, and Christ, the son of Mary, as lords beside God. But they were commanded to serve only one God: there is no God but Him; He is far above whatever they set up as His partners! (Qur’an 9:29-31)

It is worth noting that these verses from the “sura of the sword” feature prominently in the various declarations and treatises authored by Usama bin Ladin, Ayman al-Zawahiri, and other contemporary militants.

Lest we think expressions of hostility come only from the Muslim side, consider the long history of Christian pronouncements against Muslims, from Urban II’s justification of the First Crusade in 1095 as a way of retaking holy lands from a “vile and despicable race, worshippers of demons” to the characterization of Muhammad as a “demon-possessed pedophile” in the Caner brothers’ *Unveiling Islam* (Kregel, 2002). The latter formed the basis for the Rev. Jerry Vines’ remarks to the Southern Baptist Convention in 2002, and certainly did little to help dissuade those convinced with Franklin Graham, Charles Colson, and other prominent evangelicals that Islam is an “evil and wicked” religion by which those involved in the 9/11 attacks on New York and Washington could only be viewed as heroes of faith.

That said, the divide suggested by the Negus’ stick has not always seemed quite so wide. The story of the Muslims in Abyssinia suggests that the Christians there deemed it appropriate to provide sanctuary to a beleaguered community. No doubt, the recollections of this story provide the background to various sayings attributed to Muhammad in which Muslims are encouraged to “find friends among the Christians” when they must reach outside of their own community. In medieval Spain, we have records of extended collaboration between Christian, Muslim, and Jewish scholars engaged in the translation and interpretation of the approximately 500,000 volumes collected in the Cordoba library during the 10th century. The “Arab renaissance” of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries brought Christians and Muslims together in the service of revitalizing Arabic as a language of scholarship, journalism, and literature. Not least important in this regard is the fact that Lebanese Christian scholars such as Boutros al-Bustani (1819-1883) collaborated with American mis-

sionaries to translate the Bible into Modern Standard Arabic, as well as to found educational institutions recognized as a resource by both Christians and Muslims in the region.

My own experience in 30 years of interactions with Muslims suggests that the issues presented by Christian-Muslim difference need not prevent useful exchange and can even provide occasions for collaboration that call forth something unexpected. When I left Columbia Seminary in May 1980 to begin graduate study, I found it interesting that the program in religious ethics at the University of Virginia encouraged students to take a “minor” in a tradition other than Christianity. I did not anticipate that I would find so gracious a sponsor for the study of Muslim ethics as Abdulaziz Sachedina, however. With the encouragement of this historian, himself a devout practitioner of the form of Shiism Muslims know as Ithna`ash`ari or “Twelver” Shiism (one subset of which is established as the official religion of the Islamic Republic of Iran), I took courses, studied Arabic, wrote a dissertation on the development of appeals to divine commands or revelation as a source for Muslim ethics, and collaborated on a short book outlining Muslim and Christian understandings of religious liberty. When I came to Florida State in 1987, it was Sachedina’s encouragement (along with that offered by other scholars) which led me to focus on the relationships between Christian and Muslim thinking about just war and *jihad*. That this always controversial topic would become a central aspect of scholarly and interreligious exchange is, I confess, a somewhat mixed blessing. To those who say that my topic has become exceptionally interesting, I often reply that I liked the subject better when it was less so. Even after 9/11—certainly a period of strong tension—exchanges characterized by mutual respect are possible, and my own participation in the Malta Forum and other less formal settings provides one example.¹

Now, as to preaching in the current context, what ought Christian pastors to say? I hope it is uncontroversial to begin by saying that the kind of polemics illustrated in statements by Vines, Graham, and others are not helpful. As even a cursory analysis of these pronouncements will show, the references are to a standard, select set of verses from the Qur’an and incidents from Muslim history, all without reference to contexts, Muslim arguments about interpretation, or relevance to our current situation. Reading these “reflections,” one is tempted to think they all draw from a common source—perhaps the book by the Caner brothers already mentioned. In any case, they do not show the kind of effort that conscientious approaches to preaching should employ.

That Muslims engage in similar kinds of polemics is true, and an examination of leading twentieth century publicists from the Egyptian Sayyid Qutb (d. 1966) to the South Asian Abu`l a`la Mawdudi (d. 1979) will demonstrate an equally truncated engagement with Christian practice. Serious preaching ought not encourage such approaches. While it is important to know about them and to take their not inconsiderable influence into account, we should aim for something better. Specifically, Christian preaching should provide help for those struggling to understand the situation we are in, with the aim of reaching out to Muslims ready to make common cause.

With respect to the former goal, we can begin by noting the variety of settings in which Christians and Muslims interact. Thus, we can distinguish (1) the historically Muslim regions like the Middle East, North Africa, and South Asia, in which Christians are a distinct minority; (2) areas in which both communities constitute long-suffering

minorities whose well-being depends largely on the view of governments that are officially “uncommitted” (say, in China); and (3) areas to which Muslims migrated for economic and political reasons during the period after World War II (thus, Western Europe and the U.S.). Each of these settings poses a particular set of issues. With respect to the U.S., for example, it is significant that the largest percentage of Muslims arrived as immigrants following Israel’s victory in the Six-Day War (June, 1967) and that the standard set by U.S. policy resulted in a high proportion of those having professional skills (doctors, engineers, and the like). This means that the members of our congregations are most likely to know Muslims who are well-educated, relatively prosperous, and who provide important services to their communities. It also means that American Muslims have many reasons to hope that they and their children may enjoy the blessings of liberty associated with American society. While these Muslims have many complaints about U.S. policy in the historically Muslim regions, or with respect to the protection of minorities under duress, they are typically hopeful about their adopted—for younger Muslims, their native—country.

To push this further, one should say that Muslims in the U.S. are likely to see the religious and political context provided by the First Amendment as a protection and an opportunity. The combinations of autocracy and militancy presented in the “old country” are not to be forgotten—here is one reason for the very high percentage of American Muslims who dissent from U.S. support of Israel and from various aspects of the war on terror. Despite a number of well-publicized examples of “home-grown” radicalism, the majority of Muslims in the U.S. remain hopeful. We should expect them to take their place in the pantheon of religious actors contributing to the American experiment.

Our preaching, then, should try to distinguish various contexts in which Muslims and Christians interact, and insofar as our focus is on the United States, it is appropriate to speak about themes that encourage cooperation. Muslims and Christians in the U.S. share interests in social and political fairness; in developing ways to address issues in education, economics, and environmental policy; and in the attempt to encourage a foreign policy that combines realism with a sense of justice. Christian preaching should encourage themes that underwrite these interests, so that members of congregations are ready to seek common ground with their Muslim neighbors.

Among the many possibilities, let me mention two. The theme of natural law and the framework provided by the just war tradition provide important and creative ways by which preaching may speak to the U.S. context. I know that many readers will think of these as old-fashioned or even outworn. In my judgment, though, natural law and just war are two of the most neglected aspects of Christian tradition.

The reasons for this neglect are plain. With respect to natural law, the influence of Barth looms large. Here, the insistence that Christian ethics must construe “the right” with obedience to the command of the living God issued in a particular situation works against the regularities of judgment associated with natural law. More recent trends in theology and ethics stress that all human knowledge is constructed, and thus that appeals to a fixed or enduring “nature” of human beings run the risk of instantiating particular (and often oppressive) institutions or norms.

As John Calvin had it, however, the idea of natural law provides a Christian way of talking about the persistence, even the universality of certain kinds of norms. These represent standards of propriety in every society we know: do not murder, do not

steal, do not bear false witness. Following a common trope, Calvin identified these “minimum standards for cooperation” with the Second Table of the Decalogue, that is, with those commandments having to do with relationships between human beings. As such, the natural law does not represent the full panoply of Christian morality. It does, however, suggest that Christians ought not be surprised to find Muslims ready to honor, defend, and apply basic standards of justice and equity. Indeed, we ought to expect this.

Preaching on a text like Romans 2:14-16, meditating on the pronouncements of Wisdom in Proverbs 1-9, or reflecting on the meanings of the Decalogue provides an important message for our time. For such texts point to things that Christians and Muslims share. Interestingly, Islamic sources bear witness to a similar theme, in this case associated with *al-fitra* (“nature” or “natural morality”) and with *al-aman* (“the trust” by which human beings are constituted as viceregents of God). For Muslims and Christians alike, basic moral precepts are recognizable by all human beings. Reason (or in the parlance of the Qur’an, “reflection”) provides the means for this. To return to Barth, natural law does not represent the entirety of God’s specific commands. It does represent a starting point for Christian-Muslim cooperation, however. And Christians should be ready to build on this in conversations with their neighbors.

Similarly with the just war framework. Recent denominational pronouncements and some theological writing suggest serious reservations about this old tradition, which had in fact enjoyed a remarkable revival among American and British theologians, philosophers, and military personnel during the latter half of the twentieth century. Particularly among ecumenical or “mainline” Protestant denominations, however, the situation was somewhat different. While no one quite wanted to commit to pacifism, no one was really comfortable with the notion of just war. Thus developed the late twentieth century emphasis on peacemaking or the “just peace” notion, envisioned as a way of saying that Christian preaching ought really to encourage modes of behavior designed to delimit the occasions when people might be tempted to think of military action as an apt way of dealing with conflict. The evidence suggests that 9/11 and its aftermath fostered a stronger and more determined emphasis on this trend.

This is not the place for a full criticism of the peacemaking programs of the various Protestant denominations. I will suggest, though, that the lack of attention to just war thinking in Christian preaching ultimately constitutes a kind of neglect by which members of congregations are deprived of an important resource. Unless the standard position of the churches comes to be identified with pacifism, members of congregations need to hear about, rehearse, and argue in terms of the criteria by which Augustine, Thomas Aquinas, Martin Luther, John Calvin, and a host of others tried to adjudicate these questions: When is war justified? By whose decision? Who should fight? And how should war be conducted? For those earlier interpreters, discussion of just war often involved close attention to Romans 13 or to attempts to show that the Sermon on the Mount did not in fact rule out Christian participation in the military. In our day, one might be inclined toward the view that a full airing of the theme of God as warrior is necessary, so that preaching should point toward the way that the celebrations of God’s fighting for the people in Judges 4-5 and Exodus 15 are complemented by texts like Deuteronomy 20 (an early expression of the law of war), Amos 1-2 (where the Divine Judge deals with nations in terms of their war conduct), or Isaiah 9 and 11 (where the peaceable kingdom is actually brought about

by means of war). The Bible, in short, presents us with resources to talk about the full panoply of just war issues.

Interestingly enough, this is also a discussion in which Muslims can join. The framework of *ahkam al-jihad*, “the judgments pertaining to armed struggle,” provides a set of criteria analogous to those of just war tradition.² The just war framework, then, points to ways that Muslims and Christians can meet one another, as well as their Jewish and other neighbors, in deliberating about the pros and cons of U.S. and allied attempts to deal with issues raised by the conduct of al-Qa`ida and similar groups. To foster such discussion is no guarantee of agreement, of course. But preaching designed to encourage serious just war thinking can encourage healthy argument in the context of concerns common to citizenship, and that is no small contribution.

Finally, a few words about religious difference—that is, with respect to the width of the Negus’ stick. In suggesting that preaching emphasize themes designed for Christians to engage Muslims on the plane of citizenship, I do not wish to deny important differences between these two traditions. The Muslim critique of the doctrine of the Trinity, the divine sonship of Christ Jesus, or the denial of Christ’s death on the cross all point to significant differences in the ways Christians and Muslims understand God’s way of dealing with human beings. I think it is possible for individuals or small groups of Christians and Muslims to address these issues and to make some headway—at least, in the sense of enlarging mutual self-understanding.

I am not confident of such matters on any larger scale, however. The vocabularies by which Christians and Muslims speak of God are entrenched in scripture, in liturgical practice, and in the institutions of faith. These are difficult matters, and even if one approaches them with an exemplary combination of empathy and critical distance, it is not clear how far one will get or even precisely where one should go.

It is important, though, to speak against the kinds of polemics mentioned previously in this essay. And one way to do this will involve an acknowledgement of those things Christians, Muslims—and also Jews—share. Walter Brueggemann’s *Old Testament Theology* (Augsburg, 1997) outlines an approach to Old Testament theology by which difference and commonality are taken into account. The texts are thus understood in terms of claims and counterclaims, of “testimony, dispute, and advocacy.” Taking Brueggemann’s insight and extending it, we might say the three monotheistic communities constitute a diverse set of witnesses to the one God. If each has reason to believe that its testimony is more faithful than the others, each also has reason to recognize the power of the others’ claims. In this case, Christians are those whose testimony is framed by that gospel referenced by Paul when he wrote: “I am not ashamed of the gospel. It is the power of God for salvation...” To begin from this point and then to find a way to include—not in the sense of full agreement, but in the sense of recognizing spiritual power—the testimony of Jews to the unity of a community able to say “a wandering Aramean was my father...” or to Muslims who “bear witness that there is no god but God, and Muhammad is God’s prophet”—this is the challenge. In this sense, the challenge of Christian-Muslim relations, or more broadly of Christian relations to other religions, is to find ways to engage in argument that exhibits respect, even as it stands its ground.

How to preach in a context of Christian-Muslim tensions? In this case as in others, Christian preaching must testify to and be consistent with the story by which God made the world, inclusive of human beings, and called it good, and by which God

perseveres in the attempt to bring human beings into relationship with God's self, laying out the lines for human cooperation in the maintenance of social order even while preparing the way for Christ to come in the fullness of time and redeeming the world and thus bringing human beings to their destiny: to glorify God and to enjoy God forever.

Notes

1 Those interested will find pertinent information at http://religion.fsu.edu/john_kelsay.html.

2 John Kelsay, *Arguing the Just War in Islam* (Boston: Harvard University Press, 2007), as well as materials at http://religion.fsu.edu/john_kelsay.html.