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Building Faith Neighbors: Church Colleges and Muslim Communities

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I AM FROM A QUIET, SLEEPY LITTLE TOWN, El Pueblo de Nuestra Señora la Reina de los Angeles del Río de Porciúncula (or for those of you, like me, who don't speak Spanish, the Town of Our Lady, the Queen of the Angels, on the River Porciúncula). This town is sometimes known as Los Angeles. Today, it is at once the largest Catholic archdiocese in the United States and the most religiously diverse city in the world. For the last dozen years, it has informed my thinking about cosmopolitanism and one of its concomitants, comparative religion.

I am a faith neighbor to you both geographically and religiously. Geographically, I grew up in Ontario, and spent summers working with my dad on the assembly line at the Ford Truck Plant in Oakville, building F-series pickups. Religiously, I'm your inter-faith neighbor, a Muslim.

As I said, I am from Los Angeles, so let me talk a little more about, well, me! I do this not to be self-indulgent. I am from Los Angeles, and people from Los Angeles tend toward self-indulgence. My example is illustrative of how a number of non-Christian students come almost by accident to the study of religion and theology. Some of you may be wondering how a working class Muslim boy from Toronto (the most cosmopolitan city in the world, according to the United Nations) ends up a professor of theology at a Catholic university in Los Angeles.

It was through the study of English literature, specifically the works of William Shakespeare and the visionary artist William Blake, that I first became attracted to the study of religion. You could not, for example, understand Blake's poetry or art without understanding the symbolic world that he had created, which in turn was deeply influenced by the Bible. At the University of Toronto, I was fortunate to be able to learn about Blake from Professors Northrop Frye and Jerry Bentley. They taught me to value the power of stories, which after all is what we do in the university. Ted Chamberlin is another English professor at the University of Toronto. He retired last year. When asked what we do as university professors, Ted says, "It is simple. We tell stories. We call the old stories teaching and the new stories research." In trying to understand Western stories, what Professor Frye called in one of his course titles "the mythological framework of western culture," I had to learn about the Bible. In doing so, I realized that I also needed to learn more about my own Muslim religious tradition.

At the university, I had the extraordinary privilege of being mentored by Wilfred Cantwell Smith, the greatest Canadian scholar of religion in the twentieth century. He founded and directed the Institute of Islamic Studies at McGill University in Montreal in 1951, before moving to Harvard in 1964, where for two decades he directed the Center for the Study of World Religions. He and his wife then moved back to their native Toronto where they lived until his death in 2000. One of Wilfred's most important books was 1981's *Toward a World Theology*. The subtitle of the book reflected his life-long work, "Faith and the Comparative History of Religion." He argued that our various religious traditions were best understood when taken together, or to use his words,

that their several histories, individually already complex, can be understood, and indeed can be understood better, and in the end can be understood only, in terms of each other: as strands in a still more complex whole. What they have in common is that the history of each has been what it has been in significant part because the history of the others has been what *it* has been. This truth is newly discovered; yet truth it is, truth it has throughout been. Things proceeded in this interrelated way for many centuries without humanity's being aware of it; certainly not fully aware of it. A new, and itself interconnected, development is that currently humankind *is* becoming aware of it, in various communities. (Smith 6)

To show the deep connections in our religious history, Professor Smith began the book with the story of Leo Tolstoy's "conversion" from a worldly life to a life of ascetic service as told in his *Confession* written in 1879 and published in 1884. The story that converted Tolstoy was the story of Barlaam (the hermit) and Josaphat (the Indian prince). In this story, Josaphat is converted from a life of worldly power to the search for moral and spiritual truths by Barlaam, a Sinai desert monk. Tolstoy learned the story from the Russian Orthodox Church; however, it was not a Russian story, as the Russian Church got it from the Byzantine Church. But it was not a Byzantine story either, as it came to the Byzantine Church from the Muslims. But the story did not originate with Muslims, as Muslims in Central Asia learned it from Manichees. And finally, it was not a Manichean story, as the Manichees got it from Buddhists. The tale of Barlaam and Josaphat is in fact a story of the Buddha. Bodhisattva becomes "Bodasaf" in Manichee, "Josaphat" in later tellings of the tale.

Wilfred's genius was not in simply pointing to the story's history but in showing how it moved forward in time. Those who know Tolstoy know that he influenced a young Indian lawyer, Mahatma Gandhi, who founded Tolstoy Farm in Durban in 1910. Those who know Gandhi know that the story does not end with him. Gandhi was an influence on a young African American minister, the Reverend Martin Luther King Jr. The story shows that we are connected to each other, both forwards and backwards in time.

WE ARE NEIGHBORS TO EACH OTHER. That is a very important metaphor. Again, I think of Wilfred. Someone asked Wilfred, "Professor Smith, are you Christian?" If the question had been "Are you *a* Christian?" the answer would have been a very simple "yes." Instead, Wilfred did what he always did when asked a question. He paused, repeated the question, and thought

about his answer. “Am I Christian?” he said. “Maybe, I was, last week. On a Tuesday. At lunch. For about an hour. But if you really want to know, ask my neighbor.”

Our neighborliness, our connections and dialogue, are closely related to what has become a key characteristic of Western society: pluralism. But let me be clear about what I mean by the word. First, pluralism is not the same thing as diversity. People from different religions and ethnic backgrounds may be present in one place, but unless they are involved in a constructive engagement with one another, there is no pluralism. In other words, pluralism is the positive value we place on diversity. Second, the goal of pluralism is not simply tolerance of the other but rather an active attempt to arrive at an understanding. One can, for example, tolerate a neighbor about whom one remains thoroughly ignorant. Third, pluralism is not the same thing as relativism. Far from simply ignoring the profound differences among and within religious traditions, pluralism is committed to engaging the very differences we have in order to gain a deeper sense of each other’s commitments. And it is important to note that this pluralism and dialogue are happening around the Muslim world, not just in North America.

In 2007, a number of Muslim scholars, clerics, and intellectuals based out of Jordan issued a call to Christian leaders with the publication of the document *A Common Word Between Us and You*. That document calls Christians and Muslims into dialogue based on the two great commandments in each tradition (found for example in Mark 12:28–32), love of God and love of one’s neighbor. In 2008, Saudi Arabia sponsored conferences on dialogue for Muslims in Mecca, and for Muslims and non-Muslims together in Madrid. In January 2009, I was one of a dozen Muslim scholars from the US and the UK invited to a conference at Al-Azhar University in Cairo on existing bridges of dialogue between the most important university in the Sunni Muslim world and the West. That conference also had Jewish and Christian participants.

Interfaith dialogue, I would argue, is at the heart of the Christian message. I could cite my favorite Gospel passage, the parable of the Great Banquet in Matthew 25, but you are probably quite familiar with that story.

Instead, let me take a story from my favorite Gospel, Mark, the earliest Gospel. As a Muslim, I read it each year to help me become more familiar with Jesus, an important prophet for Muslims. How many are familiar with the story of the Syro-Phoenician woman in Mark’s Gospel (7:24–30)? Those seven short lines vexed me from the time I read them as a graduate student:

From there He [Jesus] arose and went to the region of Tyre and Sidon. And He entered a house and wanted no one to know it, but He could not be hidden. For a woman whose young daughter had an unclean spirit heard about Him, and she came and fell at His feet. The woman was a Greek, a Syro-Phoenician by birth, and she kept asking Him to cast the demon out of her daughter. But Jesus said to her, “Let the children be filled first, for it is not good to take the children’s bread and throw it to the little dogs.” And she answered and said to Him, “Yes, Lord, yet even the little dogs under the table eat from the children’s crumbs.” Then He said to her, “For this saying go your way; the demon has gone out of your daughter.” And when she had come to her house, she found the demon gone out, and her daughter lying on the bed.

My problem with the story was that this didn't seem to be a gentle and loving Jesus. In the story, he is tired, and so he goes to the coastal regions of Tyre and Sidon. I can relate to that, as staring at the water is a nice way to rid yourself of your worries. The woman asks not for help for herself but for her daughter. She is in a triple category of being "othered"; she is a woman, a foreigner, and a non-Jew. Jesus comes not for her or her kind but for the chosen, the children.

The only way I could make sense of this was through one of my teachers at the University of Toronto, the Mennonite scholar Bill Klassen. This passage reflects Jesus as God with a twinkle in his eye, who knows what the woman knows, knows what she is going to be able to say.

However, I learned from Fr. Elias Mallon a different interpretation. We read this as docetics, who think of Jesus only in his divine nature. We forget the humanity of Jesus. What if we heard this as Jesus learning his role from the foreign, non-Jewish woman? That it is the woman who teaches Jesus. That he is come for all, not just for the chosen. Or to echo a song by Canadian singer, Bruce Cockburn, 1991's "Cry of a Tiny Babe," written in my hometown, Toronto:

There are others who know about this miracle birth
The humblest of people catch a glimpse of their worth
For it isn't to the palace that the Christ child comes
But to shepherds and street people, hookers and bums
And the message is clear if you have ears to hear
That forgiveness is given for your guilt and your fear.

SO, HOW DO WE MAKE CONNECTIONS with our Muslim neighbors? First we need to learn their stories, their histories, which of course are woven into our histories. Many North Americans are surprised to learn that Muslims have a long history on their continent. Historians estimate that between 10 and 20 percent of the slaves who came from West Africa were Muslim. The connection between Islamic civilization and the Americas, however, begins even earlier. When Christopher Columbus set sail for what he believed would be India, he recognized that the people there might not speak his language or the Castilian of his royal patrons. So he brought with him someone who could speak the language of the "other" civilization: Arabic. Luis de Torres was a *converso*, a Jew who was forced to convert to Christianity during the period in Spain known as the Reconquista, when the Roman Catholic Church purged Spain of its intertwined Islamic and Jewish heritage. Because of his heritage, Torres knew Arabic. Arabic was a language that Thomas Jefferson began learning in the 1770s, after he purchased a translation of the Qur'an in 1765. It was this Qur'an that Keith Ellison used when he was sworn in as the first Muslim member of Congress in 2007.

The first Muslim immigrants to North America, other than slaves, came from the Ottoman Empire in the late nineteenth century and the first half of the twentieth century. Many were itinerants who came to make money and return to their countries of origin. Some, however, were farmers and settled permanently. Mosques sprung up in 1915 (Maine), 1919 (Connecticut), 1928 (New York), and 1937 (North Dakota). From the time of the slave trade, there has been a consciousness about Islam in African American communities. Moreover, beginning with early

missionary work in the nineteenth century and continuing in the 1920s, there was a specific attempt to introduce and convert African Americans to Islam. Groups such as the Moorish Science Temple and the Nation of Islam exclusively targeted African Americans. When Warith Deen Muhammad took over the leadership of the Nation of Islam from his father in 1975, he brought the majority of his followers into Sunni orthodoxy. Today, the majority of African American Muslims are Sunni Muslims.

In the late nineteenth century, the first Muslims came to Canada as Arab merchants who often landed in the east but wandered to the frontier selling goods to remote farms in the west, and fur traders in the north. This early population was small, with the first Canadian census of 1871 listing thirteen Muslims. The first established Muslim settlement was in Lac La Biche in northern Alberta. The descendants of those settlers helped build the first Canadian mosque, the Al-Rashid Mosque in Edmonton in 1938. Today this mosque is recognised as a Canadian heritage site.

In the last half century, the Muslim population of the United States has increased dramatically through immigration, strong birth rates, and conversion. The Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965 allowed many more Muslims to immigrate than were allowed under the earlier quota system. Since the 1950s, the US census has not asked about religious affiliation, so there is less certainty about the size of its Muslim population. There are estimates as low as two million people and as high as ten million. My own research of America's immigration patterns, birth rates, and conversion rates—similar to those of Canada—leads me to conclude that both of these estimates are extreme. Instead, I and many other researchers estimate that there are between seven and eight million American Muslims.

Muslims are a very old community in the US, but a very new one when it comes to building institutions. As a child growing up in Toronto, I had very few Muslim role models. The ones that were most important to me were two African American athletes, Kareem Abdul Jabbar and the Greatest, Muhammad Ali. These days, for young North American Muslims, their Muslim heroes continue to be African American athletes, but also entertainers such as Dave Chapelle and



rappers such as Mos Def. The connection is with other North Americans, particularly African Americans, who have long experiences of discrimination and racism that many American immigrant Muslims face.

One opportunity that interfaith dialogue brings is increased cooperation and understanding. We can do this at the international or national level with our churches and mosques. Since 1980, the National Christian Muslim Liaison Committee has existed as an

official vehicle of dialogue. Led by the United Church of Canada, there have been a number of conferences and workshops on interfaith dialogue. Several useful resources have been produced as a result of these workshops. In 2004, the United Church published a study document entitled *That We May Know Each Other: United Church-Muslim Relations Today*. The subtitle of the document was indicative of its goal: "Toward a United Church of Canada understanding of the relationship between Christianity and Islam in the Canadian context." That document was circulated to various Muslim groups before it was publicly released. This interfaith work also involves the attendance of non-Muslims at Muslim rituals and celebrations and the attendance of Muslims at non-Muslim religious ceremonies. The result is an "Islam" that influences and in turn is influenced by the other traditions with which it comes into contact. As a result of the interfaith dialogue in a city such as Los Angeles, many non-Muslims are aware of some of the basic elements of Islam.

WHAT CAN WE DO AT THE INSTITUTIONAL LEVEL? We can partner with individual mosques or Islamic centers. The Muslim Christian Consultative Group in Los Angeles has a new program, Standing Together, which pairs churches and mosques. We can welcome Muslim students into our Christian colleges. American Muslims are an American success story, equal in wealth and higher education to non-Muslims. *Newsweek* did a cover story a few years ago on Islam in America, highlighting a 2007 survey by the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life which found that 26 percent of American Muslims had household incomes above \$75,000 (as compared to 28 percent of non-Muslims) and 24 percent of American Muslims had graduated from university or done graduate studies as compared to 25 percent of non-Muslims ("The American Face of Islam"). That Pew survey of American Muslims found that: "The first-ever, nationwide, random sample survey of Muslim Americans finds them to be largely assimilated, happy with their lives, and moderate with respect to many of the issues that have divided Muslims and Westerners around the world" (Pew Research Center).

At my own university, Loyola Marymount, we have some forty to fifty Muslim students, who attend because of the excellent reputation for both education and social justice in Jesuit and Marymount colleges. Our president, Fr. Robert Lawton, has spoken of the value that non-Catholic students (including not just other Christians, but members of other religious traditions, as well as atheists) have for Catholic universities. At our Mass of the Holy Spirit, the traditional beginning to our fall term, Fr. Lawton said in his homily: "Non-Catholics and non-believers are not here at the university simply because we need you to pay our bills or raise our grades or SAT scores. We want you here for a deeper reason. By helping us to doubt, you help us get closer to a deeper understanding of our God, this life and this world we share."

Muslim students can help us to understand more about faith, and we should recruit them because they can help us to be the best that we can be.

This is a tremendous opportunity for Muslims in the secular setting of North America, which is very different, for example, from the disestablishment of religion in France. This is the heart of interfaith dialogue, because institutions and organizations do not dialogue—people do.

Transformed relationships and understanding come from the discussions that take place between people.

WHAT CAN WE DO AT THE INDIVIDUAL LEVEL? Make a Muslim friend. The first step toward learning about Islam, then, is not to pick up the Qur'an and begin reading, or to observe prayer at a mosque. One starts by finding a Muslim friend with whom to speak. In large communities this is not a problem, since most everyone is in some kind of contact with Muslims. In smaller or more homogeneous communities, the range of options are admittedly more limited, but it is surprising how many mosques and informal Muslim associations exist outside the main urban centers. One's dialogue partner may be a neighbor, a doctor at the local hospital, a teacher, a restaurant owner, a university professor, a cab driver, a factory worker, a motel owner, or the manager of an ethnic grocery store. Sometimes one can make an acquaintance by working alongside people of other traditions in social justice or service projects such as food banks, blood drives, or other charitable causes.



As religious people, we share a common belief that it is our duty to help each other. I am reminded here of a quote I once heard, where someone asked a Christian minister about the quote from the Book of Genesis, where God asks Cain about his brother Abel. Cain responds with the famous line, "Am I my brother's keeper?" Many of us adopt that line, that we are not responsible for, or to, our brothers and sisters. This particular minister answered in a different way. "Am I my brother's keeper? Yes, because I am my brother's brother." We have lots of examples of people from different religions working together to help each other. In Canada, in 2004, we voted Tommy Douglas as the Greatest Canadian in a poll by the CBC (Canadian Broadcasting

Corporation). In the middle of our current health care debate, how many of us remember that he is the reason we have socialized medicine in Canada? And it was his Christian roots in the Social Gospel movement that spurred him. Not that it was his neighborly duty, but his Christian duty to take care of his neighbor. In the current debates about health care and immigration, we see many religious groups stepping forward to help people without demanding to see their identification, as some politicians would have us do.

As Muslims, particularly as North American Muslims, we need to become more visible as individuals and communities as participants in North American life. Those who work at church-related colleges can help us to do this, as we have much to learn from you. We can increase this participation in a number of ways. We can encourage our children to value the arts and humanities. We have a large number of Muslim doctors and lawyers and businesspeople. Where are the Muslim writers and artists and musicians and filmmakers and actors and journalists? We should encourage our children in these fields. If we want our stories told in the media, we need to do this ourselves. Zaraqa Nawaz has done this in Canada with her CBC television show *Little Mosque on the Prairie*.

Church colleges can also help Muslim communities through the training in Islamic theology offered by some theological schools, a wonderful example of our neighborliness. One thinks of established programs at Hartford Seminary, as well as newer programs at the School of Religion at Claremont Graduate University which has signed an agreement to work with Al-Azhar University. The Graduate Theological Union has created a Center for Islamic Studies. My own university has admitted its first Muslim imam into our MA program in theology. This signals an interesting partnership between theological schools who have the experience and skill to train students for ministry and Muslim communities who have almost no seminaries of their own in North America. Muslim communities are asking their imams, who were trained as textual scholars, to serve in roles as therapists, counsellors, social workers, pastors, and chaplains for which they often have no training.

LET ME CLOSE WITH TWO REFLECTIONS. The month of Ramadan is the most important time of the year for Muslims. For the first three weeks of the semester, my students saw me fasting, and I wanted them to make the connections between Christian and Muslim conceptions of prayer and fasting. For that, I used an article in the 23 October 2008 edition of the *New York Review of Books*, entitled “The Egyptian Connection,” in which William Dalrymple reviewed the work of Michelle Brown on the Lindisfarne Gospels. These gospels, illustrated around the year 700, are a treasure of religious art. In the year 950 a gloss in Old English was added to the Latin text, providing the first English translation of the gospels. Dalrymple wrote:

I for one had no idea until I read Brown’s book that Northumbrian, Celtic, and Byzantine monks all used to pray on decorated prayer carpets, known as *oratorii*, just as Muslim and certain Eastern Christian churches have always done, and still do. She also demonstrates how these prayer mats influenced the “carpet pages” of abstract geometric ornament which are such a feature both of Insular and early Islamic sacred texts.

All of this is a reminder of just how much early Islam drew from ascetic forms of Christianity that originated in the Byzantine Levant but whose influence spread both to the Celtic north and the Arabian south...

Today many commentators in the US and Europe view Islam as a religion very different from and indeed hostile to Christianity. Yet in their roots the two are closely connected,

the former growing directly out of the latter and still, to this day, embodying many early Christian practices lost in Christianity's modern Western incarnation.

Just as the Celtic monks used prayer carpets for their devotions, so the Muslim form of prayer with its prostrations derives from the older Eastern Christian tradition that is still practiced today in pewless churches across the Levant. The Sufi Muslim tradition carried on directly from the point at which the Desert Fathers left off, while Ramadan is in fact nothing more than an Islamicization of Lent, which in the Eastern Christian churches still involves a grueling all-day fast...

Certainly if a monk from seventh-century Lindisfarne or Egypt were to come back today it is probable that he would find much more that was familiar in the practices and beliefs of a modern Muslim Sufi than he would with, say, a contemporary American evangelical. Yet this simple truth has been lost by our tendency to think of Christianity as a Western religion, rather than the thoroughly Oriental faith it actually is. Because of this, we are apt to place Celtic monks, Coptic Desert Fathers, and Muslim Sufis in very different categories. But as the art of this period so clearly demonstrates, we are wrong to do so. These apparently different worlds were all surprisingly closely interlinked; indeed in intellectual terms perhaps more so in the eighth century than in today's nominally globalized world.

I completed my PhD dissertation on Muslim communities in Toronto under the supervision of the late Professor Willard Oxtoby, who died in 2003. In addition to being an academic, he was, like Wilfred Cantwell Smith, an ordained Presbyterian minister who also represented an inclusive view of Christianity. Will ended one of his books, *The Meaning of Other Faiths*, with the following words, and it is with the words of my teacher that I would like to conclude:

At no time have I ever thought of myself as anything other than a Christian. At no time have I ever supposed that God could not adequately reach out to me, to challenge and to comfort, in my own Christian faith and community. Yet at no time have I ever supposed that God could not also reach out to other persons in their traditions and communities as fully and as satisfyingly as he has to me in mine. At no time have I ever felt I would be justified in seeking to uproot an adherent of another tradition from his faithful following of that tradition. My Christianity—including my sense of Christian ministry—has commanded that I be open to learn from the faith of others.

It is this openness that Professor Oxtoby mentioned that I would hope that we all have. That those of us who are religious believe that God works not just in our own communities of faith, but in all communities of faith.

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Web Sites

[Amir Hussain's Web Site](#)

[Web site for A Common Word](#)

[Web site for the Christian-Muslim Consultative Group](#)

[Web site for That We May Know Each Other](#)