

That You May Know One Another: The Qur'an in Christian Worship

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In the fall of 2015 when Republican presidential candidates were elbowing for media attention, Ben Carson stated that he did not think Islam is consistent with the US Constitution.² Fellow candidate Donald Trump later called for a “total and complete shutdown of Muslims entering the United States.”³ National polls show that nearly half of all Americans would be reluctant to elect a Muslim president and about the same number think Islam is more likely to encourage violence than other religions.⁴

Part of my pastoral calling in such a context is assisting my congregation in encountering Muslim holy texts. My reflections here are rooted in this calling and I contend Christians in the US must deepen their understanding of these texts as a counterpoint to such Islamophobia.⁵ These reflections focus on my own experience of preaching on texts from the Qur'an and the Hadiths (sayings of the Prophet Muhammad) in recent years. And they invite readers to consider how practicing and proclaiming a form of Christianity that has reverence and respect for Islam and its holy texts is both a form of evangelical witness and of social justice. At the heart of these reflections I contend that both are two sides of the same coin, joined at the root as faithful responses to transformational

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2 Quoted in Sam Sanders, “Ben Carson Wouldn't Vote For A Muslim President; He's Not Alone,” on National Public Radio (Sept. 21, 2015). Available online at: <http://www.npr.org/sections/itsallpolitics/2015/09/21/442308328/republican-rhetoric-highlights-americas-negative-relationship-with-muslims>. Accessed Sept. 23, 2015.

3 As quoted in Russell Berman, “Donald Trump's Call to Ban Muslim Immigrants,” at *The Atlantic* (Dec. 7, 2015). Available online at: <http://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2015/12/donald-trumps-call-to-ban-muslim-immigrants/419298/>. Accessed Jan. 29, 2016.

4 Sanders, “Muslim President.”

5 The Council on American-Islamic Relations (CAIR) agrees that helping American learn about the Qur'an is a key step to overcoming Islamophobia. See www.explorethequran.com for information on the Council's ongoing campaign to give away one million copies of the Qur'an to American civic leaders and ordinary citizens. Accessed Sept. 30, 2015.

worship.

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On the first Sunday of September in 2013 my sermon included the following passage from the Qur'an: "O Humankind! We have created you of a male and a female, and fashioned you into nations and tribes, so that you may know each other... not despise each other" (Surah 49:13).⁶

The reading of the Qur'an in our worship service explicitly invited a reverence and attention mirroring that given to the Bible on Sunday mornings. That morning I had two strong motivations for such a provocative act in worship. First, the US was on the brink of taking broad military action in Syria. From the vantage point of that Sunday morning, despite the objections of congress and most American citizens, it looked like the President was about to launch an invasion.⁷ I believed God's nonviolent mission in the world called us to speak out against this prospect. President Obama himself had quoted the same verse from the Qur'an during the conclusion of his famous speech in Cairo addressed to Muslims of the Middle East in 2009.⁸ Perhaps the President's own words could be a prophetic voice calling a stop to military force.

Second, I discovered that a Muslim scholar, A. Rashied Omar, specifically drew on these two texts—Surah 49:13 and Hebrews 13:1–6—to call Muslims and Christians to practice hospitality toward each other.⁹ Here was an example of a Muslim scholar studying Christian scripture carefully enough to expound upon it in a peer-reviewed theology journal. Could I treat his holy text with as much care as he treated mine? Furthermore, Omar flipped on its head the notion that Islam teaches violence. Instead he urged Christian readers to notice how violence can be read into our own sacred texts: "The meaning of the text,' he contends, 'is often as moral as its reader. If the reader is intolerant, hateful, or oppressive, so will be the interpretation of the text.'"¹⁰ It was a timely ob-

6 Translation by A. Rashied Omar in "Embracing the 'Other' as an Extension of the Self: Muslim Reflections on the Epistle to the Hebrews 13:2," *Anglican Theological Review* 91, no. 3 (Summer 2009).

7 See Peter Baker and Jonathan Weisman, "Obama Seeks Approval by Congress for Strike in Syria," in *The New York Times* (Aug. 31, 2013). Available online at: http://www.nytimes.com/2013/09/01/world/middleeast/syria.html?_r=0. Accessed Jan. 29, 2016.

8 Barack Obama, "Text: Obama's Speech in Cairo," reprinted in *The New York Times* (June 4, 2009). Available online at: http://www.nytimes.com/2009/06/04/us/politics/04obama.text.html?pagewanted=all&_r=0. Accessed August 30, 2013.

9 Omar, "Embracing the 'Other,'" 441.

10 Omar, "Embracing the 'Other,'" 436, quoting Khalid Abou El Fadl.

servation as our country was poised for war with yet another predominantly Muslim country. That Sunday a reading from the Qur'an bolstered the call to faithful action instead of military force. And it deepened the call to practice hospitality to real Muslim neighbors in our community in face of the same threat.

Another Sunday while preaching on the Greatest Commandment of Jesus I included another saying from the Prophet Muhammad: "None of you has faith until you love for your neighbor what you love for yourself" (*Sahih Al-Bukhari, Kitab al-Iman*, Hadith 13). It was an opportunity to show how one of the foundational teachings of Jesus has resonance and corollaries across religious traditions, specifically in Islam. Like the first sermon, this was another opportunity to respond to Muslim scholars inviting theological conversation with Christianity. In a landmark text published and promoted in 2007, over a hundred prominent Muslim scholars from around the globe collaborated on a theological project called *A Common Word*, addressed to Christians.¹¹ The authors of this global interfaith project rooted their project in respective sacred texts, notably comparing Matthew 22:38–40 to sayings of the Prophet Muhammad.

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Leading into these sermons I had already heard Mennonite denominational leaders calling congregations to deepen their understanding of Islam.¹² Mennonite scholars had spent years in dialog with Muslim scholars, with the support of agencies like Mennonite Central Committee.¹³ And more recently Eastern Mennonite Missions has developed a team specifically supporting conversation with and learning about Muslims in North America.¹⁴ I take for granted that pastors and congregations are called to learn about Islam and its holy texts and to build relationships with Muslims near and far, whether one's purposes are evangelical or in pursuit of social justice. But the question remains whether and how Christians bring Muslim holy texts into the context of worship.

11 See <http://www.acommonword.com/>. Accessed September 30, 2015.

12 For the Mennonite Church USA response see: <http://www.acommonword.com/the-response-of-the-mennonite-church-to-a-common-word/>. Accessed September 30, 2015.

13 See the Winter 2006 issue of *Conrad Grabel Review* (24, no. 1). Editor's introduction available online at: <https://uwaterloo.ca/grebel/publications/conrad-grebel-review/issues/winter-2006/shiah-muslim-mennonite-christian-dialogue-ii>. Accessed January 29, 2016.

14 See <http://www.emm.org/index.php/resources/christian-muslim-relations-team>. Accessed January 29, 2016.

I invited my congregation to read Muslim holy texts in worship because I believe faithful Christian action originates in transformational encounter with God in worship. In other words, rather than engaging a wrestling match between evangelism and social justice I contend that both are forms of faithful Christian witness born out of transformational encounter with the divine Other. Tom Driver shows how transformation is a core function of religious ritual, making worship vital for social change. He says “that ritual embodies the principle of growth or dynamic process through which a society transcends itself, praising, evaluating, rebuking, and remolding life as it is presently lived.”¹⁵ Marlene Kropf, Rebecca Slough and June Alliman Yoder adopt this view when they say, “Christian worship is an encounter with the triune God experienced in the midst of community, which transforms and empowers members of Christ’s body for loving witness and service in the world.”¹⁶ Worship is where the faithful meet and praise God, yet this encounter is transformational. Worshipers emerge with new insight, tools and passion for the mission of God. Again, this mission transcends categories like evangelism and social justice. All facets of God’s mission are born of transformational worship.

Transformational worship invites participants to see God in both familiar and surprising places. So reading the Qur’an becomes sacramental—something “intended to mediate, the presence and power of the divine.” That is, worshippers encounter the text expecting to encounter God.¹⁷ Rashied Omar anticipates this kind of encounter when he writes, “In my view, the litmus test for ‘good’ and ‘bad’ religious practice is the extent to which we are willing to embrace the ‘other,’ whoever that ‘other’ may be.... [For], if we do not try to ‘know’ the other, how can we ever ‘know’ the Divine?”¹⁸ And I contend the reverse is true as well. If we do not experience a transformative encounter with God in worship, we will not respond to God’s mission in the world.

Moreover, transformational worship creates a liminal space where the faithful practice, or even act out, what they desire to do in the “real” world. In the case of my sermon described above, preaching only about Hebrews 13—“Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers”—could have been a teaching

15 Tom F. Driver, *Liberating Rites: Understanding the Transformative Power of Ritual* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1998), 189.

16 Marlene Kropf, Rebecca Slough and June Alliman Yoder, *Preparing Sunday Dinner: A Collaborative Approach to Worship and Preaching* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 2005), 39.

17 Monika K. Hellwig, “Sacrament: Christian Sacraments,” in *Encyclopedia of Religion*, 2nd edition, vol. 12, ed. Lindsay Jones (Macmillan Reference USA, 2005), 7958.

18 Omar, “Embracing the ‘Other,’” 441.

about hospitality. But reading from the Qur'an was a way to actually practice hospitality, to act out what we desire to do with real Muslim neighbors. In the same way, a sermon about the Greatest Commandment exhorts the faithful to love, but a service including Muslim teaching about love is a loving gesture itself. Such modeling deepens the power of worship to transform the participant. As Tom Driver describes, worship or ritual, "is, at the least, the preparation of groups of people for the spiritual work they must do."¹⁹

As I said at the outset, evangelism and social justice are two sides of the same coin. Both are about responding to transformational encounters with God by moving beyond the walls of the Christian community and joining in God's mission of witness and service. Both often run counter to the prevailing ethos of North American (or any) culture. So both require action, courage and risk. And at their core, both intend to convey Christ's love to the world.

The worship settings described above equipped participants for evangelism; they were practice for evangelism in unique ways. We practiced witnessing to the good news of Christ's love by enacting that love in our worship. Embracing Muslim holy texts in the sacredness of our sanctuary became an act of Christ-like love for our Muslim neighbors. In our overwhelmingly Christian community perhaps Muslim neighbors hear the "good news" of Christ's love when they see Christian neighbors embracing their holy texts in a spirit of respect and curiosity.

Likewise, the worship settings described above called participants to social justice by practicing an act of solidarity with Muslim neighbors. Embracing Muslim holy texts was a bold act of solidarity in itself, modeling the kind of bold action called for in face of threats of military force. By reading the Qur'an we practiced proclaiming our stance alongside those being labeled as enemies. Driver contends such confessional acts are vital to equipping communities to publicly stand in face of oppressive forces; "Confession is to *demonstrate* where one stands, what one chooses to be, what the group is, where it stands."²⁰

I am suggesting that evangelism and social justice are joined at the root. To rephrase Kropf et al., these two forms of action find common ground where they are rooted—in communal encounters with God that transform and empower. Such equipping worship vitally links the two in service of God's mission to the world.

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While my convictions about loving Muslim neighbors runs deep, I recognize

¹⁹ Driver, *Liberating Rites*, 182.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 114.

the limits of my experience and the provisional nature of my practice. As I reflect on the two sermons, I wonder how or if I would choose to include the Qur'an in future sermons or worship settings. A few guiding principles emerge from the above experiences. First, I only used Islamic texts specifically recommended by Muslim scholars and religious leaders for engagement with Christianity. This saves me from proof-texting and cherry-picking in texts that are mostly unfamiliar to me. Similarly, I have not sought to interpret these texts on my own. I opt for a trusting the good faith effort of these scholars to treat their own sacred texts with care, while recognizing every religion includes differing, contradictory and conflicting interpretations of its own teachings. Finally, when does the news of the day call us to reach beyond the comfort of the familiar to stretch ourselves to new understanding beyond the bounds of our tradition? Many times since September 11, 2001 I have thought that faithful Christian witness requires positive encounters with Islam.

In this essay I am seeking to give shape to a pastoral practice for engagement with the Qur'an and the sayings of the Prophet Muhammad. I put these reflections forward eagerly seeking counsel from others on this journey. And I put them forward sincerely seeking to be faithful to the call to love our neighbors as ourselves and practice hospitality to the stranger in the context of my ministry.