

Owning our Past: Pondering Alternatives for the Future

by Dr. Harold Vogelaar
*Former Professor of Christian-Muslim Studies and Interfaith Relations
Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago*

Over the years as I've engaged Muslims in varied conversations it has become increasingly clear that good relations falter more on matters of politics and power than on faith and practice. Because of this and based on recent readings I would like to venture a few thoughts that hopefully might open the way for an interfaith discussion inclusive of political and other forms of power, but not at the expense of faith and practice. On the contrary, the focus will be primarily on faith but in a way that makes it central to the larger task of ordering society toward a common good. I begin with a recent experience.

In January of 1998 three Muslim students from Mahidol University in Bangkok arrived in Chicago. They had come to study at LSTC as part of an exchange program. As a way to stretch an already meager budget the two men, both from Indonesia, stayed at my home. What had begun as an austerity measure turned out to be an experience with rich dividend. For one thing it allowed me to work on my hospitality skills as together we set down guidelines for living together amicably. It was Ramadan, the month of fasting for Muslims, so I decided to join in the experience of withholding food and other delights during the daylight hours. I had often thought of doing this while living in the Middle East, but had never taken it seriously. Now during these shortened winter days I made the plunge and it bonded us almost immediately.

There were other things that bonded us as well. Because it was my custom to say the Lord's prayer and read a short passage of scripture each morning, I invited them to join me which they did and in Arabic. Both had learned the language in their years of Qur'anic studies and were delighted to recite the Lord's prayer and read the Gospels in Arabic. We began with Matthew and Jesus' Sermon on the Mount, a passage many Muslims appreciate. To reciprocate, I often joined them at night, after breaking fast, in reading from the Holy Qur'an, again in Arabic. While we weren't strict in this routine, we did it often enough it became something eagerly anticipated.

What made these sessions interesting is that our attitude remained positive. Reading the sayings of Jesus would invariably prompt them to respond by quoting some Qur'anic verse or Prophetic utterance that would complement the teaching. Similarly readings from the Qur'an often prompted me to relate teachings of Jesus. This positive stance allowed us to remain focused on the instruction rather than be drawn into distracting arguments and created an environment of freedom for the Spirit of God to work. It was different from so many conversations where the tendency is to respond in ways that counter a point being made and so diminish rather than strengthen its positive implications.

Let me give just one example. During Holy Week in that year, Muslims celebrated their Eid al-Adha and Jews their remembrance of Passover. As part of our reading during those days we studied the

stories of Abraham in both the Bible and the Qur'an. We agreed that we could either spend time arguing about whether it was Isaac or Ishmael who was the intended sacrifice, or we could talk about the costliness of being obedient to the will of God, which for Abraham, in both traditions, meant being willing to sacrifice a beloved son. Not surprisingly, we decided to talk about the cost of Godly obedience and what it meant for Abraham and what it means for each of us in our own day and circumstance. High on the list for my friends was how they should respond to the corruption in Indonesia, to the great disparity of wealth and the tremendous hardship being imposed on the poor, especially women, by the financial downturn sweeping South East Asia. Interestingly enough, recent events have demonstrated just how costly unwelcome responses can be. What our table conversations revealed is that when we turned to our sacred texts with new questions,¹ especially those dealing with daily life, we were often surprised at how relevant and how similar the guidance offered is.

This is not to say that differences were glossed over or considered of less importance. On the contrary, we spent a lot of time on difficult issues such as trinity, incarnation, crucifixion and human sin, but always within the framework of friendship and against a backdrop of shared convictions. I remember one night sitting on the floor in front of a blazing fire in the living room when the subject turned to grace and law. After long conversation one of them said: "I think I'm beginning to understand. As Muslims we feel comfortable having rules and regulations to know how to carry out the teachings of Prophets. I want to know how to love my neighbor and what it means specifically to love one's enemy. I need clear examples. As Christians, on the other hand, you seem to focus primarily on grace and love with little reference to rules and regulations." As we pondered these words and nuanced them, it seemed the observation was probably correct but that each needed to be informed by the caution of the other. We agreed that when emphasis is placed primarily on rules and regulations, on doing things right, fear and punishment tend to lurk nearby and may outweigh mercy; on the other hand, when love operates without rules, license is never far away and grace without strictures can become cheap. More than ever I wanted to share with them a word about the grace of God, of God's undeserved love; more than ever they wanted to share with me a word about God's favor when the divine law is honestly obeyed and kept. For all our differences, the focus that night was clearly on complementarity, each needing the other to challenge and bring out the best in both.

Another story will allow me to segway into that issue I spoke of earlier, namely the larger task of ordering society toward a common good, and how this might be done in ways that promote cooperation, not confrontation, and mutual respect, not reproach. I remember one day sitting around the kitchen table talking about religion and politics and listening intently as my Indonesian friends ventured the opinion that

¹ The caveat here is questioning the questions. Are the queries being asked truly universal and common to all or are they cultural specific? Those who claim the latter often refuse to answer any questions not raised by themselves. But if the question is an honest and not simply a rhetorical one, than it deserves serious attention. For an instructive study on this exercise, see the book edited by Mark Heim from Faith and Order of the NCCC titled *Grounds for Understanding : Ecumenical Resources for Responses to Religious Pluralism*, Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co / Published 1998.

the ministry of Muhammad and the message of the Qur'an are primarily spiritual in nature and only secondarily political. They wanted to remind me that whatever happened politically at Madina and later, should not cause me to lose sight of the deep spiritual struggles that engaged the Prophet as he attempted to free people from their bondage to false deities. Islam should not be seen or thought of, they said, only in terms of what is political and military. To illustrate they pointed to the ministry of Muhammad at Makka where the powers of this world were, indeed, arrayed against him not with him, and he had only the strength of his message, the charisma of his moral character and a few rag tag followers to sustain him. Yes, they said, Madina can be seen as a fulfilling of the Makkan prophetic mission, but never as its replacement. If this is true, I said, could one add the words: "nor its completion"? The distinction, it seemed to me then and now, is a critical one because while Madina will always remain a model for establishing or reestablishing political rule for Muslims, does it have to be seen, necessarily, as the only and complete one?

My guests pointed out that Muslims like Mahmoud Taha from the Sudan and others have already said no. They said such thinkers see Madina primarily as a first attempt by the Prophet and his followers to establish a Muslim society governed by the principles of an Islamic vision, and as such it need not be viewed as normative for all times. They also referred to modern Indonesia with its unique structure of *pancasila* as a possible example of how such thinking might be implemented.

Encouraged by these conversations, I reread the works of Mahmoud Taha and the scenario I would like to suggest in this paper is similar, yet different. Instead of saying the Prophet attempted to establish a Muslim society governed by the principles of Islam, could one say that Madina constitutes the first attempt by the Prophet and his nascent community to unmask the powers of this world, to harness and tame them to serve the vision of the prophetic mission at Makka? The shift is slight but significant, I think, because it puts the focus more on his battle with the powers than on any attempt to impose a vision. Madina then could be seen not as the only and complete model for reconstructing Muslim hegemony, but as the first notable attempt to discipline the powers. And because Muhammad was a Prophet of God, he was able to accomplish this to a significant degree and in a way that did not allow the powers and principalities to turn around and co-opt his vision for their own purposes, something that threatened not long after he died. The record shows that those who followed soon faced the temptation of co-opting religion for their own purposes, and that some allowed, even engaged the powers that be to use and abuse the holy vision, not serve it. There were, after all, only four rightly guided caliphs and even they had difficulties.

The point is this, that if Madina can be seen as a brilliant, noble attempt to harness and tame the powers of this world to serve the purposes of God, then the whole picture changes dramatically. This came home to me during a conversation we had with Hasan Turabi some years ago in the Sudan. In the course of a discussion on the dynamics of minority/majority relations, we suggested he invite world religious leaders to a conference where each would bring to the table their own best wisdom on this issue, and that Muslims would do the same. Our suggestion was partly in jest but also as a challenge to his strong contention, displayed in signs hung on every wall, that "Islam is the solution." To assert that Islam provides the only

solution, we said, would probably provoke all the world's religions to respond in kind. Indeed, it appears to many of us, we said, that the West's close association with Christianity is already provoking such a response. Can Christianity, cloaked in Western garb, provide the answer to all the world's needs? As one proposal among many, however, the insights of Muslims, along with those of Christians, Jews, Hindus, Buddhists and others, would be held in high regard given Islam's long history of relating to the "People of the Book."

In this case Christians and others would be invited by Muslims to study with them a vision for society in which justice, righteousness and freedom are evident, where widows and orphans are cared for, the rich held responsible for the wellbeing of all, where the poor and elderly are not forgotten, the integrity of creation is honored, and honesty and fairness are made the hallmarks of a people's character. The challenge before all would be to see whether there is anything like such a shared vision and, to the extent there is, to discover if it's possible to work together, to help each other harness, temper, discipline and tame the powers of this world to serve such a shared, common vision.²

Christians in particular might be open to this challenge since it's clear from our own history that we have failed miserably again and again in our praxis of the Gospel, often by allowing the powers that be to use our faith and practice for their own nefarious purposes. Since there is no model for political rule given in the life of Jesus nor in the New Testament, Christians throughout history have had to devise various and sundry ways of relating their faith to the powers of this world, at times as adversaries, at times as allies. Before the Edict of Milan in 313 AD Christians were targets for persecution and severe restrictions, not unlike Muhammad and his followers in Makka. This early history is replete with stories of subjugation and tyranny and of the bold stand many Christians made in the face of harsh persecution as they sought to serve the vision of their Lord. And they watched as all this changed when Constantine decided that if he couldn't beat them, he would join them, and so co-opted the Church as an ally and then proceeded to use it for his own purposes in so far as possible. The rationale, of course, was to defend and propagate the faith and to keep it strong, yet we know from history how difficult it is to do that in ways that keep alive and central the vision and purpose for faith. Under subsequent Kings and Monarchs we have become heirs to a long sordid history of Christians fighting Christians, of demeaning and persecuting Jews, of vilifying

² The UN Declaration on Human Rights is a good example of this. So is the Global Ethic document formulated for and by the 1993 Parliament of the World's Religions. Another is a conference on Re-imagining Politics & Society at the Millennium, Creating a Caring, Ethical & Sustainable World, sponsored by The Foundation for Ethics and Meaning on May 18-20, 2000 at Riverside Church, NYC. The description reads: Join us in challenging the dominant ethos of cynicism, materialism, and greed with an emerging vision of meaningful connection and social responsibility. The corrupting influence of big money, the intensely partisan spirit, the lack of any meaningful mainstream response to frenzied globalization, and the failure to address seriously the long-term environmental health of the planet - all reveal an increasing emptiness of spirit at the center of political power that cries out for meaningful change and renewal at the grassroots level. Help shape the context for mainstream election-year political discourse by joining those working for a more caring world.

Muhammad and viewing Muslims as enemies of God or as people given to terrorism.³ It is a history about which many in the Church feel ill at ease and for which some are ready to repent.⁴

Muslims too may be challenged by this to review their own history and to see whether and how political leaders may have used Islam or still use it to serve their own purposes and how this can be corrected. One thinks, for example, of the Umayyid Dynasty, often accused by later Muslims of usurping political power and using religion for its own purposes, though they did so under the guise of defending and protecting the faith. Muslims may also want to examine whether the way they viewed and described Christians⁵ was always accurate and fair or whether a ‘crusader image’ excessively colored perceptions and consequent actions.

The point is this. Both Christians and Muslims have a long sordid history of trying to impose their hegemony, their creed, their tradition over the other and of doing so through the use of military, economic and political force, often at the expense of betraying the very vision they were intended to serve. And to the extent that Muslims today insist on reestablishing the Madinan model as the only one and Christians on a Constantinian model, and Jews on the Davidic one, we can expect confrontations, clashes and incessant wars. Each, of course, will claim to be defending and protecting its own faith and doing so for the sake of its people, but it is a course of action most likely to turn the thesis of Samuel Huntington into a self-fulfilling prophecy.⁶ There will emerge a clash of civilizations. How different it could be if each community were to see these historic events not as final models to be implemented, or visions to be imposed, but as notable and noble historic attempts to tame the powers to serve a larger heavenly vision. Seen in this way, as important constitutive parts of a continuing struggle, the scene would be set for a much more fruitful and non-confrontational encounter. In such a setting each would recognize that in today’s world, no one religion can possibly succeed in solving all the problems. They are too many and too overwhelming. Instead, each community would be invited, challenged, to offer its own best wisdom and share its own experiences in the common struggle for a more just and peaceful order. Fears could then be allayed and hopes inspired because what all are working for is in the best interest of everyone, not just of some to the exclusion of others. Many religious bodies are already attempting to say this through their own documents.⁷ The greatest shift such a setting would inspire is the move from a mentality of defending one’s faith, which sounds noble even if it brings out the worst in us, to that of serving it [the difference is dramatic], from a posture of defensiveness to one of noble service.

³ For a litany of such views see Norman Daniel’s book Islam and the West: The Making of an Image. Edinburgh, University Press, 1980.

⁴ The late Pope John Paul II is a good example of wanting to beg the forgiveness of all those wronged in the past by the Catholic Church.

⁵ One thinks here of Ibn Taymiyya’s writing on “The Question of the Churches” as one example of a rather jaundiced view of how Muslims should treat Christians living under their dominion. *Islamochristiana* 22 (1996)53-78.

⁶ Huntington’s article, published in ? Foreign Affairs magazine, makes the case that

⁷ For example, the Presbyterians in their statement on religious persecution have the following three principles: 1) “Include all forms of religious persecution, wherever they are found...2) Place religious

It may sound hopelessly naïve to think such a shift is possible, given the propensity of humans to take up arms in the defense of many causes, especially those they think serve their purpose, religious or otherwise. Yet the appeal to service may strike a deep chord in all the faithful. And it may do so because it invites each to step back and to kneel with the other in the presence of God, and to discover anew, or perhaps for the first time, how in that sacred act, that hallowed space, that kneeling, non-confrontational posture, each of us, in our own way, is asking God to bring us from where we are to where we ought to be. In the defensive mood it's easy to assume we are where God wants us to be, in the service seeking mode we all know better.⁸

Recently an old friend of mine⁹ wrote an article titled, “A Reformation for Denominations: The Future of the Church”. I found the whole article instructive but two observations stand out in particular. First, that in today's world, when religious institutions need to face the big question of whether they can master dynamic continuity while sailing on stormy seas of change, doing the right thing may be more effective than doing things right. Second, that as we move forward we need to “transfer the core of our beliefs and values into new wineskins, seeking to preserve the best of our proud heritage” while looking humbly to the future. The framework for his remarks was envisioning the church of tomorrow, but I find it a helpful concept for thinking about interfaith relations as well. Given our sordid past, one we all need to own and for which repentance is long overdue, and the fact that we are sailing together on these stormy seas of change, what would it require, what would have to happen for us honestly to ask the question, together, given our present context: what is the right thing for us to do? How many old skins would have to be abandoned, how many ancient traditions revisited and perhaps re-formed to make even asking this question possible? And weren't these old laws, our hallowed traditions that we cling to with such rightness, stiffness sometimes, initially offered so that right things might actually be done?¹⁰

I have found it true that when we get beyond headlines into the heartlines, as happened so often round our living room table with my Muslim guests from Indonesia, when we actually meet and talk together, and sometimes pray together, it becomes much clearer that we ought to do the right thing, for the sake of each other, and that often, as we explore what that might be, what it might mean, we discover that what each has to offer complements what the other already holds dear. What will it take to move us beyond the barriers of headlines to heartlines?¹¹

persecution in its appropriate context alongside other basic human rights...3) Avoid any automatic or politically-motivated imposition of economic sanctions as a means of stopping religious persecution...”

⁸ There is a beautiful story coming from the Midrash? which says that on the day when all the nations of the earth are gathered in Jerusalem, space is terribly crowded, but when they bow down to pray, there is abundant room for all.

⁹ Printed in *Perspective: A Journal of Reformed Thought*, January, 1998 ?.

¹⁰ Bishop Krister Stendahl at a faculty meeting at LSTC once asked why we always put theology ahead of ethics when we list the two together. He challenged us to think what it might mean to see ethics as the *causes belle* for the way we do theology. There are instances in history, he said, when moral outrage has profoundly influenced, and rightly so, the shape of our theology.

¹¹ Mitri Rabib recently told of being on a plane from Tel Aviv to Berlin and sitting next to a woman whom he thought might be Jewish but wasn't sure. Their brief exchanges, ever so discreet and aloof, did not reveal the identity of the other. But then the plane struck severe turbulence and instinctively the woman

Pope John the Twenty Third once commented that we can never go back, we can only go forward. It's a truism, to be sure, but if heeded offers great promise. The past, to be sure, must and will always inform the future, but wouldn't it be better, since forward is our only viable option, to proceed, when possible, together with all the attendant challenges than for any one to try to recapture the past if doing so entails the desolation of the others? Aren't the visions of our religious leaders large enough to include the "other" in their embrace? Aren't they significant enough to warrant our service and not just our defense? We need, I believe, serious dialogue on these issues.

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reached out to grasp Mitri's hand. In that time of turbulence, he said, we found each other and lively conversation ensued.