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Christian-Muslim encounter: Studying the theological di- mension dialogically

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Encounter. It can mean "coming across or stumbling upon something unexpected;" it can also mean "coming across or stumbling upon something hostile." Therefore, it is a provocative word to include in the title of a course—especially a course on Christianity and Islam. Students come to such a course with awareness of present and

past antagonisms between Christians and Muslims. My hope is that they have chosen to study with me because they wish, not to antagonize each other further, but to have more positive and fruitful understanding of each for the sake of the world we have no choice but to share. Therefore, dialogue theory and method is a core element *Christian-Muslim Encounter*, a course I have taught at Hartford Seminary for several years. The encounter between Christians and Muslims is often taught as a history course. In such a course, the students will investigate Christian-Muslim interaction in various geographic, political, and economic contexts, century after century.⁰¹ As I see it, when teaching about encounters between Christians and Muslims, the historical element is never absent. Chronology, however, need not be the primary driver of a syllabus for a course on Christian-Muslim encounter. Comparative scripture courses such as "Major Themes in the Bible and the Qur'an" are a case in point: the course outline might feature class sessions on a series of topics such as God, the human being, nature, prophethood and revelation, evil, eschatology, and the believing community. With all of this in mind, my course is called *Christian-Muslim Encounter: The Theological Dimension*. In designing it, I have moved away from the decidedly history-of-religions paradigm, but do not ignore the historical dimension. I draw upon more

01. Hugh Goddard's *A History of Christian-Muslim Relations* (New Amsterdam Books, 2000) is an excellent textbook for such approach.

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themes and sources than is typical in a comparative scriptures approach, thus bringing it solidly into the arena of comparative theology. This essay will discuss the pedagogical issues I face and the dialogical methods I employ in a graduate-level course dedicated to studying the complexity of Christian and Muslim theological interpretation of each other—and of themselves in light of the other—in various times and contexts.

My context

Before I say more about method, a word about my context is in order. Hartford Seminary is an independent graduate school. That is, it is not a branch of a university. Having been founded in 1834 as a school for the training of Protestant Christian ministers, its purpose is now broader. Currently, its mission is “to serve God by preparing leaders, students, scholars and religious institutions to understand and live faithfully in today’s multi-faith and pluralistic world; by teaching, research, informing the public and engaging persons in dialogue; by affirming the particularities of faith and social context while openly exploring differences and commonalities.” Hartford Seminary has taught about Islam and Christian-Muslim relations since 1893; its scholarly journal, *The Muslim World*, has subscribers in sixty-five countries.⁰¹ Since the 1990s, its full-time faculty has included Muslims. Our student body is quite international; and, uniquely for United States

01. *The Muslim World* was founded in 1911; it has been sponsored by Hartford Seminary since 1938.

theological schools, nearly forty percent of our student body is Muslim.

Method

In teaching *Christian-Muslim Encounter: The Theological Dimension*, I take seriously what Professor Francis X. Clooney means by *comparative theology*.⁰² As Clooney defines it, comparative theology is an endeavor which brings together theological concerns rooted in a particular tradition and “actual study of another tradition.”⁰³ He presumes that the student has a commitment to a particular religion, has studied his or her own religion deeply, and now is willing to learn “from” (rather than merely “about”) another tradition. He insists that it is possible for such a student to remain “intelligently faithful” to his or her own religion while going outside that religion in the search for new insights. Such a student is willing to study another religion with an open mind, trying to learn what adherents of that tradition treasure about it and why. Fresh insights resulting from such an approach will have been shaped both by the student’s own religion *and* this other religion about which he or she is learning.⁰⁴

With all of this in mind, my goal when teaching *Christian-Muslim Encounter* my students is that they increase in what Eboo Patel has termed

02. Francis X. Clooney, a Jesuit scholar of Hinduism, is a member of the faculty of Harvard Divinity School (USA) and director of its Center for the Study of World Religions

03. Francis X. Clooney, S. J., *Comparative Theology: Deep Learning Across Religious Borders* (Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), 10.

04. Clooney, 11.

“appreciative knowledge” about the religions being studied—in this case, Christianity and Islam.⁰¹ When one gains appreciative knowledge, Patel explains, one finds things that are admirable about a religion not one’s own, then becomes able to explain these things to other people. In times and places where the “other” is too often presented in negative terms, the sharing of appreciative knowledge can have an important counter-balancing effect.

For any graduate course, reading a number of books, articles, and primary source materials is required or recommended. Such is the case for *Christian-Muslim Encounter*. Heading the list of required books is *Islam and Christianity: Theological Themes in Comparative Perspective* by John Renard, a respected scholar of Islam.⁰² Not only is this a comprehensive, thus quite useful, volume with which to undergird a course on Christian-Muslim encounter, it is published in e-book as well as print format. Therefore, it is readily available, no matter where in the world my students may be as they prepare. It is from the organizational principle of this foundational textbook that the basic outline for this course is derived.

01. Cultivation of “appreciative knowledge” is a theme throughout Eboo Patel’s recent book, *Sacred Ground: Pluralism, Prejudice, and the Promise of America* (Boston, Massachusetts: Beacon Press, 2012).

02. John Renard, *Islam and Christianity: Theological Themes in Comparative Perspective* (Berkeley, California: University of California Press, 2011). Renard earned his Ph.D. at Harvard University. He has been a member of the Faculty of Theological Studies at Saint Louis University (St Louis, Missouri, USA) since 1978.

Even if one is teaching in a situation where assigning Renard’s book would be impractical, it is still worthwhile to consider using his outline. My students, Muslim and Christian alike, have applauded Renard’s approach. While this book is challenging for readers of English as a second or third language, my students are nevertheless impressed by the fact that Renard gives them sufficient evidence in support of the points he makes, without overwhelming them with names and details. They tell me that they appreciate his broad definition of theological concerns. Core doctrines are topics for comparative theological exploration; this is not surprising. However, so also are the sacred texts, other significant literature of each religion, institutions, art, and architecture, modes of textual interpretation, and means of analyzing human experience of the numinous. Rather than working through a list of doctrines in order to compare them point for point, Renard stresses the distinction between formal and functional comparison at every turn. For example, the Bible and the Qur’an may be compared formally—as two books. But a comparison can be made between the Qur’an’s function for Muslims and the function of Jesus (or even Mary) for Christians—and often, a *functional* comparison is more enlightening. For Renard, theological themes can be sorted into four categories of concern: (1) Historical, (2) Creedal, (3) Institutional, and (4) Ethical and Spiritual. I organize my classroom time with my students according to these categories.

History of theology; theology of history

Our work in the Historical category begins with a reminder that the geographic range and histories of these two religions are vast. I cite Jamal Elias's cogent assertion that Islam is

...the majority religion in countries as diverse as Morocco in the west and Indonesia in the east, and from Senegal in the south to Kazakhstan in the north. In each of these countries Islam is practiced in a distinct way...It is therefore possible to speak of numerous "fault-lines" of identity along which one can differentiate Muslims, these being lines of language, ethnicity, race, nationhood, gender, attitudes toward the modern world, experience with colonialism, age, economic status, social status, sectarian identity, and so on. Any statement about Muslim beliefs that claims to be universal ends up being disproved by exceptions somewhere in the Muslim world.⁰¹

I then assert that Christians—and in fact Christian-Muslim relations—are affected by the same "fault-lines." Thus the students are prepared for an overview of the present internal diversity of the worldwide Christian and Muslim communities.

During the "Historical" unit, we must include a brief introduction to (or review of) the basic structure and contents of the Bible and the Qur'an. We receive a succinct account of history of scriptural interpretation by Christians and Muslims, noting particularly that

01. Jamal Elias, *Islam* (London: Routledge, 1999), 15.

in both Christianity and Islam we find a range of exegetical methods and that, historically, both religion-communities have acknowledged of that there are several levels of meaning in scripture.

During this unit, we also learn about our respective theologies of history. We consider the relationship of community to sacred sources and founding figures in the early years of each religion, and the emergence of a "quasi-canonical" origins-narrative for each. Having already noted the internal diversity of 21st-century worldwide Islam, this is a good moment to learn something about how a Shi'ah telling of the story of the early history of Islam (which features a series of infallible Imams) contrasts with the Sunni master narrative (which features Four Rightly Guided Caliphs). Likewise, we can at least note that an account of Christian history from Orthodox, Catholic, and various Protestant points of view will feature different points of emphasis.

The development and spread of Christianity and Islam, and the related theme of authentic membership in the believing community, is next to occupy our attention. On the Christian side, this touches on matters of ecclesiology (what is meant by "church"), the practices of Baptism and Holy Communion as markers of membership, and the emergence of the need for creeds. The Muslim side raises matters of servanthood and essential characteristics of believers. We learn about the Amman Message—a recent pan-Muslim effort to provide an authoritative answer to

the question, “Who is a Muslim?”⁰¹ Issues of missionary activity and conversion, and the similarity between apocalyptic ideas in Islam and Christianity. It is at this point that it is quite helpful to gain a clearer understanding of the Christians whom Muslims encountered during the early centuries of Islam. Here, an exceedingly helpful resource is Sidney Griffith’s masterful study, *The Church in the Shadow of the Mosque*, a masterful study of Christian cultural and intellectual life amid Muslims, from the time of the prophet Muhammad to the time of the Crusades and the mid-thirteenth-century Mongol conquest of the Middle East.⁰²

The Creedal Category

The Creedal category of study begins with narrative theology—which considers the role of stories as earlier summaries of core beliefs. Students study the variety of literary strategies and devices employed in the New Testament Gospels. They learn about *kerygma*—preaching that summarizes the meaning of Jesus’ ministry, death, and resurrection. They take note of the difference in the degree and role played by narrative in the Qur’an as compared to its presence and role in the Bible, as well as the difference in Medinan and Meccan Qur’anic narratives.

As a next step, post-scriptural narrative material is considered. On the Christian side, this may include some discussion of apocryphal writings

01. See <http://www.ammanmessage.com/>.

02. Sidney H. Griffith, *The Church in the Shadow of the Mosque: Christians and Muslims in the World of Islam*. Princeton University Press, 2008.

or somewhat later literature such as Christian literature like Gregory of Nyssa’s *Life of Moses*, or even Dante’s *Divine Comedy*. At this point, however, most attention will be given to the Muslim side, and most of that attention to the content and development of the Hadith—narrative literature which has no direct parallel in Christian theological literature.

We are ready, then to consider the development of formal statements of faith as vehicles for conveying correct belief and (sometimes equally importantly) condemning erroneous belief. It is here that we learn about the construction and use by Christians of the Apostles’ Creed, the Athanasian Creed, and the Nicene Creed. We take note of Qur’anic creedal verses such as 4:136; 2:285; 2:136; and 3:84. We study the Hadith of Gabriel as both an example of narrative theology and a useful synopsis of the basics of Islam; and tenth-century scholarly summaries of theological positions (*Fikh Akbar I*, for example) as guides to correct belief. As we look at each tradition’s development of theology as an academic discipline, we take note of the most influential thinkers, the major schools of thought which emerged, and what fundamental themes were addressed.

The Institutional Category

A theologically grounded community, Renard explains, will eventually develop structures of authority and governance locally and beyond. Therefore, study of the Christian-Muslim theological encounter includes study of the development of Christian and Muslim in-

stitutions. In this unit of the course, we seek better understanding of Muslim Shariah and fiqh—and the limits faced when comparing Shariah or fiqh to Christian canon law. We consider political theologies—that is, the various means of understanding the relationship between the seen and the unseen, between the earthly and the heavenly, between this world and the next.

At this point, I may introduce an outline, developed by Mary Jo Weaver and David Brakke, of four ways groups of Christians cope with modernity: (1) physical or cultural withdrawal, resisting the attractions of the modern world by avoiding contact with it; (2) the attempt to dominate society (politically or financially) with their particular understanding of Christian life, seeking to stamp out religious diversity as they do; (3) the preference for adapting to society—either as social liberals or as biblical conservatives; and (4) nonconforming—for example, by nonviolent resistance to war or by maintenance of a radically simple lifestyle.⁰¹

In a similar vein, I offer David Lochhead's four categories of attitudes toward religious difference: Isolation, Hostility, Competition, and Partnership.⁰² According to Lochhead's paradigm, a community embracing an ideology of isolation defines reality and truth for itself, seeing communities who don't

01. Mary Jo Weaver and David Brakke, *Introduction to Christianity*, 4th edition (Belmont, California: Wadsworth Cengage, 2009), Chapters 10 and 11, particularly.

02. David Lochhead, *The Dialogical Imperative: A Christian Reflection on Interfaith Encounter* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis, 1988).

share its beliefs as ignorant, misled, and deluded. For those whose ideology is hostility, adherents of other belief-systems are a threat to all that it regards as sacred. The ideology of competition acknowledges that two religion-communities have similarities, but stresses the differences and places strict limits on cooperation. The ideology of partnership emphasizes the essential unity of religion-communities, thus encourages working together. With these two sets of categories in mind, we can discuss Christian and Muslim examples of each and the scriptural bases by which these attitudes and behaviors are justified.

The *Institutional* unit of study includes the theo-political—that is, many complex interrelationships during the history of both Christianity and Islam between “theology and politics, spiritual and temporal authority, faith community and civil spheres,” as Renard puts it.⁰³ Here also we may discuss the phenomenon of “intentional religious communities” in each religion: Christian communities of monks and nuns, on the one hand; Sufi circles, on the other.

In addition, it is during the Institutional unit that we learn about the rise of higher education (Christian universities; Muslim madrasas). Here we also consider the theological dimensions of developments in religious architecture (as each community saw fit to house its institutions more purposefully, extensively, and elaborately).

The Category of Ethics and Spirituality

The fourth unit, *Ethics and Spirituality*

03. Renard, 135.

tuality, recapitulates many themes and methods of inquiry from the previous three. Here, a survey of the development of Christian and Islamic moral theory necessarily raises questions regarding divine versus human agency as it draws upon previous discussions of scripture, religious law, and sacred biography—and considers the degree to which each religion drew upon philosophical principles in the process. A discussion of social responsibility from Christian and Muslim points of view touches on a range of matters—among them, stewardship of creation, the place of forgiveness, and the mandate for kindness toward others.

Discussion of morality leads naturally to consideration of resources for nurturing of spiritual discipline and the devotional life. Here our concerns are the times and methods of reading of scripture for personal inspiration; Jesus and Muhammad as spiritual models for Christians and Muslims respectively; hagiographic traditions in each religion; and similarities and divergences in the content and use of praise, supplication, and intercession. Closely related is the study of some of the great supplication literature of Christianity and Islam, theological themes of devotional literature, and perhaps an expanded discussion of mysticism—the ground for which having been laid in the early mention of the rise of Sufi circles as an institutional development. Returning to the notion of narrative theology, we might now consider great Christian and Muslim allegorical literature, such as John Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress* or

Farid al-Din Attar's *Conference of the Birds*, with their themes of journey and the progress of the soul.

Teaching Dialogically

As she recounted some instances of hostile Christian-Muslim encounter, one of my students asserted that, “if Christians and Muslims are to approach one another differently, a model of mediation may be useful. The initial stage is meant to build rapport by having each group explain itself while the other listens and reflects on what was said with appreciation. Giving respect and honor to the other without requiring it in return mollifies resistance. Eventually, this creates a trusting environment, which then takes the two parties into new territory. They are now willing to explore together avenues toward a common goal and recognize their need for each other in this exploration.” My student was describing *dialogue*.

Each time I have offered *Christian-Muslim Encounter: The Theological Dimension*, the schedule has called for five day-long sessions—either with several weeks between meetings or as a one-week intensive. When class meetings are so few and so long, I find it effective to balance lectures with discussions—in plenary (sometimes student-led) and in multi-religious groups of three to five persons. Thus, small-group discussions are, by design, interfaith exercises. My goal is that these discussions be occasions for *dialogue*—and true dialogue is a quite specific genre of discourse.

The term “dialogue” comes from Greek words meaning “talking some-

thing through.” Social scientists such as Daniel Yankelovich use it as a technical term for a transformative conversation using specific strategies for the purpose of strengthening relationships or solving problems.⁰¹ Dialogue is dialectical; it is reciprocal. That is, the participants ask and reply to questions. Its goal is improved clarity on the matter at hand, rather than winning an argument (as would be the case in a debate). Because it is an encounter of different beliefs (and different disbeliefs, for that matter), dialogue participants agree to practice courtesy and forbearance. Questions will be asked open-heartedly, in a tone that invites the answerer to clarify rather than to defend. Answers will be received with a genuine desire to understand rather than to rebut. Thus true dialogue requires time and patience.

For this dialogical component of my course on *Christian-Muslim Encounter*, I make use of the repository of materials generated by the Building Bridges Seminar—itsself a dialogue of Christian and Muslim scholars instituted by the Archbishop of Canterbury in 2002.⁰² The seminar is convened annually, alternating between Christian-majority and Muslim-majority venues, for the sharing of formal presentations and intense discussion of assigned texts (most often from the Bible and the Qur’an) on a predetermined theme. Rowan Williams has called the Building Bridges

01. Daniel Yankelovich, *The Magic of Dialogue: Transforming Conflict into Cooperation* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1999).

02. For Building Bridges Seminar resources, see: http://berkleycenter.georgetown.edu/resources/networks/building_bridges.

Seminar methodology “dialogue that is fundamentally oriented towards getting to know one another’s hearts.” The Building Bridges Seminar has emphasized the dialogical study of scripture, because, as Williams explains, “what actually changes things and moves us forward is watching somebody else engaging at depth with their own sacred texts and with their own tradition”.⁰³

My students are expected to read about, thus to be somewhat familiar with, the Building Bridges Seminar before our course begins.⁰⁴ In class, I remind them that, according to Building Bridges methodology, a pair of scholars (one Christian, one Muslim) present a lecture on a major aspect of the seminar’s theme. Short exegetical lectures may also be given on the specific scripture passages to be engaged in small group discussion. Once the participants have adjourned to their pre-assigned groups of six or eight, a moment of silence is observed. The moderator (or another group member) reads the text aloud. Each person is then invited to mention a word or phrase that caught his or her attention. Difficult as it is to do so, participants

03. From my transcript of remarks made by Rowan Williams at the opening of the Eleventh Building Bridges Seminar, London, 2012.

04. Typically, this has been my essay on the first five years of the Building Bridges Seminar, available at <http://repository.berkleycenter.georgetown.edu/Mosher-Building-Bridges-Article.pdf>. My essay, “A Decade of Appreciative Conversation: The Building Bridges Seminar under Rowan Williams,” is included in David Marshall and Lucinda Mosher, editors, *Death Resurrection, and Human Destiny* (Georgetown University Press, forthcoming 2014); it is this essay which I will assign in the future.

are asked to resist explaining the reason for their choice until everyone has spoken. Based on this opening round of observations, the moderator will propose a beginning-point for more analytical discussion. Clarifying statements and questions ensue. The conversation may stay closely focused on the text, or go in some other direction—as the group sees fit. The moderator’s task is to be certain that every person has opportunity to contribute to the discussion, and that the values of reciprocity and forbearance are sustained.

With all of this in mind, my students spend significant portions of time (at last one hour per session) conversing in small, religiously mixed groups, using the Building Bridges discussion method and materials. For each unit, we may read and discuss a pair of scholarly essays. For example, during the *Theology of History* unit, we might consider Tom Wright’s “On the Road to Emmaus” and Vincent Cornell’s “Listening to God through the Qur’an;”⁰¹ or Mahmoud Ayoub’s “Isa and Jesus” and Daniel Madigan’s “Jesus and Muhammad.”⁰² During the *Creedal* unit, we might read “Revelation in Christ”

01. Wright and Cornell essays appear in Michael Ipgrave, editor, *Scriptures In Dialogue: Christians and Muslims studying the Bible and the Qur’an together* (London: Church House Publishing, 2004)—now available for free download as a PDF: <http://repository.berkeleycenter.georgetown.edu/04IgraveScripturesinDialogue.pdf>.

02. The Ayoub and Madigan essays appear in Michael Ipgrave, editor, *Bearing the Word: Prophecy in Biblical and Qur’anic Perspective* (London: Church House Publishing, 2005)—now available for free download as a PDF at: <http://repository.berkeleycenter.georgetown.edu/05IgraveBearingtheWord.pdf>.

by John Langan and “Revelation in the Qur’an” by Asma Afsaruddin.⁰³ During the *Institutional* unit, essays on “The Ruler and the Ruled in Islam: A Brief Analysis of the Sources” by Mohammad Hashim Kamali, and “Biblical Perspectives on Divine Justice and Political Authority” by Ellen Davis yield much discussion.⁰⁴ During the *Ethical/Spiritual* unit, two essays on caring for our shared world—Rowan Williams on “Christianity, Islam and the Challenge of Poverty,” and Timothy J. Winter on “Poverty and the Charism of Ishmael”—are also provocative.⁰⁵

Interesting as it is to discuss these

03. The Langan and Afsaruddin essays appear in David Marshall, editor, *Communicating the Word: Revelation, Translation, and Interpretation in Christianity and Islam* (Washington, District of Columbia: Georgetown University Press, 2011)—now available as a free e-book in Kindle format: http://www.amazon.com/Communicating-Word-Translation-Interpretation-Christianity-ebook/dp/B006LLCPCS/ref=sr_1_1_bnp_1_kin?ie=UTF8&qid=1386008192&sr=8-1&keywords=Communicating+the+Word%3A+Revelation%2C+Translation%2C+and+Interpretation+in+Christianity+and+Islam.

04. The Kamali and Davis essays appear in Michael Ipgrave, editor, *Justice and Rights: Christian and Muslim Perspectives* (Washington, District of Columbia: Georgetown University Press, 2009)—now available for free download as a PDF at <http://repository.berkeleycenter.georgetown.edu/09IgraveJusticeandRights.pdf>.

05. The articles by Williams and Winter (also known as Abdal Hakim Murad) appear in Michael Ipgrave, editor, *Building a Better Bridge: Muslims, Christians, and the Common Good* (Washington, District of Columbia: Georgetown University Press, 2008)—now available for free download as a PDF at <http://repository.berkeleycenter.georgetown.edu/08IgraveBuildingaBetterBridge.pdf>.

pairs of essays in class, worthwhile analysis and comparison can also be achieved through written assignments. I prefer to give priority to group time spent in scripture dialogue. I make this choice because I take seriously Miroslav Volf's suggestion—at Building Bridges 2004—that studying each other's scripture together “brings us to the very heart of who we are as people of faith, and opens up a door of ‘interpretive hospitality’, inviting us to understand better and appreciate more the other in their otherness.”⁰¹ While there are many sources of suggestions for pairings of Bible and Qur'an passages for comparative study—including the professor's own imagination, I prefer to draw upon those combinations used at Building Bridges seminars. My principal reasons are that these pairings have already been discussed by scholars in the context of a larger conversation around a particular theme; thus there is ancillary material from which my students can benefit, and it is readily available if they wish to explore further.

For the first unit (theology of history) we might compare the description and celebration of God the Creator in Psalm 19 and al-Rum 19–30; we might then take up the story of Moses and the mysterious fire in Ta Ha 1–36 and Exodus 3.1–14. We might discuss the contrasting theologies latent in the accounts of the birth of Jesus in Maryam 16–36 and Luke 1.26–38.

For the second unit (creedal devel-

01. Miroslav Volf, “Hospitable Readings: Comments on Scriptures in Dialogue,” in *Bearing the Word*, 1.

opment), we might consider difference in understanding of the “Word of God” in al-‘Imran 1–7 and John 1.1–18. We might also compare the al-Fatiha with the Lord's Prayer (as found in Matthew 6.5–15 and Luke 11.1–13).

For the third unit (institutional matters), we might note the descriptions of the called community in Hebrews 1.1–4, al-Ahzab 40, and al-Ma'ida 3.

For the fourth unit (ethical and spiritual concerns), we might consider Abraham, the righteous man, as described in Romans 4 and al-Baqarah 124–36; and righteous women, as described in al-Ahzab 28–36 and Proverb 31.10–31. We could consider what Paul has to say about the life of devotion in Romans 8, in conversation with teachings on supplication and remembrance of God in al-‘Imran 190–94 and al-‘Ankabut 45. Other interesting possibilities can be gleaned from the tables of contents of the full collection of Building Bridges Seminar books.

Conclusion

In my Hartford Seminary course, *Christian-Muslim Encounter: The Theological Dimension*, we work with four broad categories: theology of history, creedal concerns, institutions, and ethical and spiritual matters. As a result, topics for comparative study arrange themselves—not as a neat list—but intertwined, as in an arabesque. Thus they may be viewed from various angles, through many lenses, and in a range of combinations. This is a rich way to proceed. “Through this course, as practitioners of one religion,” a Muslim explains, “we had a personal oppor-

tunity to see deeply into the faith of the other, and to look at our own faith through the lens of the other.” Many students report that they learn something new about their own religion—or that they learn to explain something about their religion in a new and effective way. They are able to test their understanding of the terminology of the other religion—the goal being to use key terms more appropriately and correctly in the future.

However, much as my students enjoy and recognize the value of lectures and plenary discussions of Christian and Muslim theological topics, it is the dialogical study of scripture in small groups that they find most life-changing. It was in the context of the dialogical study of scripture, one Christian explains, that his knowledge of terminology, beliefs, and practices was expanded by the opportunity to hear about the life stories and daily lives of Muslims—and of Christians from denominations different from his, for that matter! A Muslim noted that “reading comparable passages from the Qur’an and Bible with each other gave us direct access to sacred texts and the ability to share our thoughts about them.” As her Christian classmate put it, “the scripture dialogues proved to build the bridges that I think is what most participants in the class wanted at some level. The practice of reading one another’s scriptures is precisely how we recognize our common need for God’s guidance and assurance.”

Finally, I find it important—even essential—to conclude the course with the

sharing of newly acquired “appreciative knowledge” of the less familiar religion. Because dialogue had been a component of class time throughout, the level of trust necessary for such sharing has been established. New appreciation for the opposite religion arises in our classroom, one student explains, because our classroom dialogical method presents us with an opportunity to set aside the filter of our own religion temporarily, in an attempt to see the world through the lenses of the other religion, in order to understand adherents of that religion from their own perspective. Hard questions can be asked; the answers actually can be heard. One Muslim says that “this course helped expand my sensitivity and appreciation of my Christian neighbor and friend. What I understood from this course and prior knowledge about Islam is the concept of *taqwa* and how Muslims live in the tension between the real and ideal struggling to live ethically. For a Muslim God is the final judge, and no one comes with an outright guarantee of God’s pleasure. One has to strive to seek it by word and deed. From what I learned in class and from the Christians I spent time with was that most true Christians want to do the same. In a nutshell, I found that the true practitioners of both religions love God and wish to reflect that love towards His creation.”

Indeed, dialogue can, as we heard Rowan Williams say, “change things and move us forward.” One student reports that his recent experience of five days of intense interfaith dialogue during *Christian-Muslim Encounter*

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was “an opportunity to create potentially lifelong friendships with individuals with whom I would never have come into contact otherwise. I am grateful for that.” Indeed, in the dialogical classroom, it is quite likely that our students will come to know one another’s hearts.