

Dialogue Hard? A Response to Robert A. Hunt on “Muslims, Modernity, and the Prospects of Christian-Muslim Dialogue,” by Benjamin B. DeVan

I am grateful to Robert A. Hunt for his thoughtful paper and to the *Journal of Interreligious Dialogue* for inviting me to respond. Hunt raises many issues which resonate with me regarding freedom of religious conviction and expression, interreligious dialogue, cooperation, and egalitarianism.

First, I applaud Hunt for engaging those he designates as “mystical” and “principled” Muslims, who in other taxonomies hold some affinity with Progressives, Reformers, Reformists, Liberal Muslims, Modernist Muslims, and others. I especially admire Emory University’s A.A. An-Na’im, who Hunt cites. An-Na’im, following his mentor Mahmoud Muhammad Taha, emphasizes Qur’anic principles gleaned from Meccan era Surahs supporting interreligious cooperation, caring for the poor and vulnerable, and mystical or theological meditations on God and God’s attributes. Some time ago An-Na’im proposed:

Unless the basis of modern Islamic law is shifted away from those texts of the Qur’an and Sunna of the Medina stage, which constituted the foundations of...Shari’a, there is no way of avoiding drastic and serious violation of universal standards of human rights...As stated and explained in relation to constitutionalism, criminal justice, and international law, the traditional techniques of reform within the framework of Shar’ia are inadequate for achieving the necessary degree of reform. To achieve that degree...we must be able to set aside clear and definite texts of the Qur’an and Sunna of the Medina stage as having served their transitional purpose and implement those texts of the Meccan stage which...are now the only way to proceed (An-Na’im 1998, 234).

In my Master of Theology thesis, “Is Religious Diversity Embraceable by Evangelical Christians and Orthodox Muslims?” (DeVan, 2010), the writings of “principled” Muslims like An-Na’im were immeasurably valuable for developing a shared Evangelical-Muslim narrative incorporating empathy, recognition of common humanity, mutual theological sharpening, tolerance, cooperation, a dynamic and open marketplace of ideas, integrity in wrestling with seemingly irreconcilable differences, and love.

Nevertheless, Christian interaction and dialogue with Hunt’s “transnational” Muslims may sometimes be worthwhile even when “transnationals” wish to convince Christians to convert to Islam. Some Christians will expect equal or equivalent opportunities to persuade and proselytize Muslims, and any variation of second class or “dhimmi” status for non-Muslims (via some “transnational” Muslim versions of an “emerging divinely approved order”) must be repudiated both now and for the future.

However, Christian dialogue with “transnational” Muslims can be specifically beneficial for humanizing each other, minimizing miscommunication based dissension, clarifying positions, managing and enriching relationships, and uncovering constructive commonalities. Difficult or challenging dialogue also induces theological and exegetical refining. Dekker and Medearis (2008, 2010), Rosenberg (2009), and Siljander (2008), for instance, demonstrate rewarding interactions with some “transnational” Muslims by building on Jesus and Jesus’ teachings as a prophet and Messiah for both Christians and Muslims.

Non-Muslims and “principled” Muslims who dialogue hard with “transnational” Muslims may also influence some of their interlocutors to adopt alternate understandings of the Qur’an, concurrently encouraging more meaningful modes of interreligious and intercultural coexistence and cooperation. Dialogue with “transnational” Muslims offers occasions to elaborate on “principled” Muslim, Christian, or other perspectives nudging “transnationals” to re-conceive or revise their approaches for an “emerging divine order” by considering, for example, the “Kingdom of God” proclaimed by Jesus in the Gospels (Injil/Injeel in Islam). Tawfik Hamid (Rosenberg 2009), Ed Husain (2007), and Daveed Gartenstein-Ross (2007) are just three potential case studies from varied backgrounds who were once “transnational” Muslims that later articulated more “principled” perceptions of faith within Islam or Christianity.

Second, dialogue with “transnational” Muslims fosters gender equity. Enablers or purveyors of misogyny will appeal to the Qur’an by asserting that contact with women can defile men (Surah 4:43), that the Qur’an names no female angels (cf. 4:117, 43:15-19, 53:27), that legal convictions of rape require four male witnesses (24:13), that women’s testimony is worth half a man’s (2:282, 24:6-9), that men receive double inheritance, and merit multiple other privileges or priority within the family simply because they are male (cf. 2:221-2:228, 4:3, 4:7-12, 4:24, 4:34, 4:129, 4:176, 24:31, 60:10, 66:4-6).

But knowledgeable egalitarians can convey the full force of Qur’anic and other foundations for women’s rights and dignity by way of dialogue. This is not limited only to “spiritual” equality inferred from the Qur’an’s presenting men and women as created from a single soul and bearing religious duties and responsibilities (4:1, 4:124, 7:189, 39:6, 57:12, cf. 3:195, 4:124, 7:19-27, 16:97, 33:35, 43:70, 57:12, 58:11, 96:1). It also includes the seeds for economic and political gender parity via select gender-equal legal and criminal penalties (cf. 5:38, 24:2-4, even though the explicit punishments are questionable in other contexts), and the right of both women and men to own property (4:7, 4:32, but cf. 3:195, 33:32-33).

Moreover, “principled” Muslims and others may prick the consciences of Muslim misogynists by showing how the Qur’an speaks favorably of wives and mothers (16:72, 25:74, 30:20-21, 33:6, 42:11, 51:59), that men are enjoined to treat women kindly (4:3, 4:19, cf. 2:233), that husbands and wives should seek to live in tranquility, intimacy, and as protectors of each other (2:187, 9:171, 30:21); that a woman should not be held in marriage against her will (cf. 4:19, 4:35, 4:128), that men must provide for their divorced wives, children, and (if possible) widows (2:233, 2:240, 2:241); that reconciliation is preferable to divorce (4:35), that women and men may both remarry and enjoy conjugal rights (cf. 2:232, 2:235), that male and female infanticide is condemned (81:7-14 cf. 16:57-59, 17:31), and that honor is due to both parents (4:1, 6:151, 17:23, 31:14, 46:15). “Principled” Muslims will undoubtedly discern additional materials from the Qur’an and other sources to extend and inform healthy, egalitarian gender relations. Fatima Mernissi (1987), Asma Barlas (2002), and Kecia Ali (2006) are particularly prescient.

Finally, Hunt recounts that many Muslims believe, “Islam itself gathers all the wisdom of all revelations of God.” Hunt concurrently calls for subsequent exploration of, *“religious narratives in the hope of finding a shared story that allows not merely religious tolerance, but real cooperation in the project of creating a shared society and world.”*

The Bible, which Hunt mentions briefly, is one indispensable resource for such a story. Medearis (2008, 141-142) for example, reports how Muslims, Christians and other Lebanese Members of Parliament together studied the life, example, and teachings of Jesus through the Gospel of Luke. Muslims can arguably recognize the New Testament with Christians, and the Tanakh or Old Testament with Jews and Christians as Holy Scripture. Instead of banning or aspersing the Bible, Muslims can affirm with Christian

theologian Miroslav Volf in *Allah: A Christian Response*, “(If) the Bible contains the authentic *content* of God’s self-revelation to Abraham, Moses, the prophets and Jesus...then (we) have a significantly overlapping and therefore common Scripture” (2011 , 88, cf. 87-89). I also sensed similar sympathetic sentiments from Muslim students at the historically black university where I taught, including at least one Muslim student who confidently defended the Bible as “the word of God.”

Beyond contemporary anecdotes, historic Muslim luminaries like Al-Ghazali, Al-Razi, Al-Tabari, Ibn Kathir, Ibn Khaldun, Sayyid Ahmad Khan, and Muhammad Abduh all acclaim Jewish and Christian Scriptures as divinely revealed and divinely preserved texts along with the Qur’an (see documentation by Accad 2003; Moucarray 2001, 25-79; Saeed 2002; and Zahniser 2008; cf. Zebiri 1997, 14).

Muslim disparaging of the Bible—as opposed to rejecting false representations or interpretations of the Bible—might not even have emerged until 1,000 AD/CE. The Qur’an repeatedly affirms and confirms preceding Jewish and Christian scriptures (2:62, 2:83-87, 2:89, 2:91, 2:97, 2:136, 2:140, 3:2-3:3, 3:50, 3:81, 3:84, 3:119, 4:47, 4:136, 4:163, 5:46-47, 5:66, 5:68-69, 6:91-92, 6:154, 10:37, 10:94, 16:43, 17:55, 19:30, 21:7, 21:105, 35:51, 42:3, 57:27, and 61:6). Obscuring or neglecting the Bible violates the spirit of Surah 2:140, “Who does greater evil than he who conceals a testimony received from God” (Arberry 1955)? Surah 10:94 likewise directs, “If thou (Muhammad) art in doubt concerning that which We reveal unto thee, then question those who read the Scripture (that was) before thee” (Pickthall 1930).

I appreciate Hunt’s article and the *Journal of Interreligious Dialogue* for inviting me to ponder and contribute to these salient topics. I look forward to further fruitful conversation.

Benjamin B. DeVan has taught religion, philosophy, and African American literature at North Carolina Central University, Peace College, and a January term mini-course at MIT titled, “Religion: Bringing the World Together, or Tearing the World Apart?” He completed his MA in Counseling at Asbury Theological Seminary, his MDiv at Duke University, a ThM at Harvard in World Religions with a thesis on Evangelical Christians and Muslims, and is now a doctoral candidate at the University of Durham writing a dissertation on the New Atheism.

References

Accad, Martin. “The Gospel in the Muslim Discourse of the Ninth to the Fourteenth Centuries.” *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations* 14:1. 2003.

Ali, Kecia. *Sexual Ethics & Islam: Feminist Reflections on Qur’an, Hadith, and Jurisprudence*. Oxford: Oneworld. 2006.

An-Na’im, Abdullahi A. “*Shari’a* and Basic Human Rights Concerns.” *Liberal Islam: A Sourcebook*. Edited by Charles Kurzman. New York: Oxford University Press. 1998.

Arberry, Arthur J. *The Koran Interpreted*. New York: George Allen, and Unwin Ltd. Available online at <http://al-quran.info>. 1955.

Barlas, Asma. *Believing Women in Islam: Unreading Patriarchal Interpretations of the Qur’an*. Austin: University of Texas Press. 2002.

Dekker, Ted and Medearis, Carl. *Tea with Hezbollah: Sitting at the Enemies’ Table, Our Journey through the Middle East*. New York: Doubleday. 2010.

DeVan, Benjamin, B. "Is Religious Diversity Embraceable by Evangelical Christians and Orthodox Muslims?" Harvard University Divinity School Master of Theology (Th.M.) Thesis. 2010.

Gartenstein-Ross, Daveed. *My Year inside Radical Islam: A Memoir*. New York: Penguin. 2007.

Husain, Ed. *The Islamist: Why I Became an Islamic Fundamentalist, What I Saw Inside, and Why I Left*. London: Penguin. 2007.

Medearis, Carl. *Muslims, Christians, and Jesus: Gaining Understanding and Building Relationships*. Bloomington: Bethany House Publishers. 2008.

Mernissi, Fatima. *The Veil and the Male Elite: Feminist Interpretation of Women's Rights in Islam*. Translated by Mary Jo Lakeland. 1991. New York: Basic Books. 1987.

Moucarry, Chawkat, G. *Faith to Faith: Christianity and Islam in Dialogue*. Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press. Published in America as *The Prophet and the Messiah: An Arab Christian's Perspective on Islam and Christianity*. Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press. 2001.

Pickthall, Marmaduke. *The Meaning of the Glorious Qur'an*. New York: A.A. Knopf. 1930. Available online at <http://al-quran.info>.

Rosenberg, Joel C. *Inside the Revolution: How the Followers of Jihad, Jefferson and Jesus Are Battling to Dominate the Middle East and Transform the World*. Carol Stream: Tyndale House. 2009.

Saeed, Abdullah. "The Charge of Distortion of Jewish and Christian Scriptures: Tension Between the Popular Muslim View and the Qur'anic/Tafsir View." *The Muslim World* 92:3-4. 2002.

Siljander, Mark. *A Deadly Misunderstanding: A Congressman's Quest to Bridge the Muslim-Christian Divide*. New York: HarperOne. 2008.

Volf, Miroslav. *Allah: A Christian Response*. New York: HarperCollins. 2011.

Zahniser, A.H. Mathias. *The Mission and Death of Jesus in Islam and Christianity (Faith Meets Faith Series)*. Maryknoll: Orbis Books. 2008.

Zebiri, Kate. *Christians and Muslims Face to Face*. Oxford: Oneworld. 1997.