

## ***Wanted: More Than Dialogue—a Response to Robert Hunt’s Essay, “Muslims, Modernity, and the Prospects of Christian-Muslim Dialogue,” by Karen Leslie Hernandez***

Robert Hunt’s essay, “Muslims, Modernity, and the Prospects of Christian-Muslim Dialogue,” is intriguing and interesting. I especially found his ideas surrounding the narrative taxonomies of Islam and the Muslim world important. While I agree that not all, but many Muslims struggle within the modern world and Islamic tradition, I think the Western world puts more of a focus on this issue than is necessary. What I mean by this is that all of us scholars of Islam, theologians, and Professors of religion are constantly aspiring to figure out why parts of the Muslim world are in uproar; why we are witnessing this violence in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century; why this insurgency of religious extremists have surfaced. We have many answers for this—the lasting effects of colonization; the poverty in the Muslim world compared to that of much of the Western world; Western meddling in international affairs; and of course, the oil and other precious resources that are plundered to benefit much of the non-Muslim world.

I am not sure Hunt’s mention of the patriarchal issues that surround Islam is necessary in this particular paper. I agree that there are major issues when it comes to a woman’s place in religious hierarchy. Such statements, as Hunt noted, from the head of the Muslim World League that, “... women do not hold significant positions of world leadership,” and therefore are not welcome to participate in dialogue sessions, only exacerbates an already hot-button topic that needs to be addressed. This, however, is coming from King Abdullah of Saudi Arabia—a leader from a country where Islam and culture are so enmeshed that women cannot drive, nor go anywhere alone, which is not necessarily Islamic in nature, but more cultural. In other Muslim countries, women have these rights. I would like to read more on this topic and in fact I feel that a whole paper could be devoted to empowering Muslim and Christian women to challenge such patriarchal ideologies such as the stance that the Muslim World League takes. Women in multi-faith dialogue are imperative to the success of such dialogue.

While I find it interesting and relevant that Hunt divides Muslims into two narrative categories, that being transnational Muslims and international Muslims, I wonder if Muslims themselves would agree with this idea. From the Muslims I encountered and conversed with from all over the world, I have received the same basic message—they are all proud to be Muslim, faithful to God, faithful to humanity, and faithful to and in creating a peaceful world, not only in the larger world, but within their own personal world as well. Their *jihad*, if you will, is to maintain their humanity, to revere God, and to never harm a single person as long as they live. I often hear Surah 5:32 recited in my conversations: “... whoever kills a soul ... is like one who has killed the whole of mankind; and whoever saves a life is like one who saves the lives of all mankind ...” This is the basic message I received and still receive from my dialogue with Muslims around the world as well as in my own backyard.

I find Hunt’s use of Sayyid Qutb’s writing on *Jahiliyyah* interesting. I also was intrigued but perplexed when he writes that Adam and Eve were the first Muslims. Qutb’s writing stems from not only his experience with the Muslim Brotherhood, but also from the racism he encountered while living here in the United States in the 1950’s. He witnessed the bigotry of white people toward people of color and was horrified by it. He also witnessed the degradation of women while living in the USA by watching the

objectification of American women in their everyday lives, as well as in the American media. From my conversations around the world, I do not think many even know about the concept of *Jahiliyyah*, let alone acknowledge it as part of their narrative or as something they need to recognize in today's modern world. As for Adam and Eve being the first Muslims, I have to respectfully disagree with this statement. As a Christian, I do not consider Adam and Eve the first Christians and I highly doubt that Jews consider Adam and Eve, the first Jews. I would like to posit that all of the Abrahamic faiths acknowledge that Adam and Eve were pivotal in the beginning of our humanity, but the reality is that at that time, God was Father. Adam and Eve, in all their ignorance, were learning and growing as humans in their time here on earth—religion had not been created by humans during their lifetime. With this, they may serve as role models for all of us ethically, yet, pegging them with any religion, I feel, is a bit presumptuous.

I would like to offer a counterpoint to the importance of interreligious, or what I would rather refer to as, multi-faith dialogue. I think any attempt at calling for more dialogue is to be respected and at this time in history, especially with recent events in Norway, dialogue is needed, especially among Christians and Muslims. What I find frustrating with dialogue is that it is just that. Dialogue seeks to understand and to go beyond our own theological discourses and dogmas, yet, most that engage in dialogue are clergy, academics and theologians. People who really need to engage in dialogue, such as people who fall prey to apathy for lack of feeling that they need to be involved, are those that I feel need and must be reached at this time in our very conflicted world. I guess you could say that I am calling for a grassroots movement of religious understanding. The extremists, such as Norway terrorist, Anders Behring Breivik, or even members of Al Qaeda, are beyond the reach of such dialogue, obviously, however, your neighbor and mine—they are not beyond the reach of such important work. In fact, they are in need of dialogue, but more, they are in need of interaction with “the other.” How then can we step out of our comfort zone and interact with those that are different from us? Those that we may even fear? How can we reach and go beyond dialogue?

Having taken part of several multi-faith dialogue groups, I can say with the utmost certainty that at this time in history, we as humans must go beyond just talking about why our religions are different. Speaking as a Christian, simply put, I feel that Christians need to embrace our Muslim brothers and sisters much more and on a regular basis. How? Simply by interacting with them more. Do congregations across the nation have sister mosques? Are there congregations that hold get-togethers with the mosque down the street or monthly dinner meetings with Muslims in the neighborhood? Do Christian communities hold service projects that bring Muslim and Christian teens together to serve the community? These are the next steps to going beyond dialogue as Christians. I believe it is this type of interaction that will make more of a difference than only dialogue, and it is my hope that this kind of interaction and action will eradicate fear and create a sense of coexistence that would stem to all people of all religions.

I continue my counterpoint by acknowledging the importance of Hunt relating Ibn Taymiyyah's work as well as Ibn Wahab's work and that they helped create some of the narrative that is Islam today. In all honestly however, these ancient scholars and theologians of Islam and their theologies rarely come up in conversation with every day Muslims and Christians, but mostly with theologians and scholars of Islam. I am not saying that the work of Taymiyyah and Wahab should be ignored and their work discredited. Yet, if one hasn't studied Taymiyyah's work, or cannot relate that Bin Laden based much of his ideology on Taymiyyah's work (as did Qutb), understanding this framework won't do much in the attempt at opening up new avenues for dialogue. This is not to say that we ignore the obvious differences in our religions and the significance

of the narratives that led to the development of our religions, but more, that we simply acknowledge our humanity within our religious selves. Hunt's piece is for those who are seeking dialogue and a deeper understanding of the religions of the one they are dialoguing with, as is the case with most who partake in dialogue; so, as I stated above, I am not discrediting the value of such dialogue. This kind of intense dialogue that requests the understanding of these concepts such as *Shari'a*, *Jahiliyyah*, as well as the ideologies of scholars such as *Taymiyyah* and *Wahab*, are concepts that many may not want to work on, or make an effort to relate to each other on this kind of level. What I suggest is merely taking that dialogue down to a level that will allow interaction, understanding, and reconciliation among all those who have questions.

Last, I would like to offer that if we are going to cross more boundaries of understanding and grow within our own faith and traditions, then we should focus more on the narratives of today, because it is a fact that stories are an important aspect of our culture. Back in 2006, I found myself in an all men's *Wahhabist* Madrasa in Varanasi, India, called *Jamiah Salafiah*. As a Western woman, it was a privilege to have this opportunity to sit and talk with these young men from all over South Asia. What I found is that their narratives, their stories of why they are Muslim, what they believe as Muslims, what they want to do with their lives as young Muslim men who are in a sect of Islam that many define as a terrorist sect, led me to understand that these young men were anything but terrorists. In fact, every single young man I spoke to condemned terrorism, spoke highly of what they understood of Christianity, and most importantly, these young men were willing to listen to my story as well. They had questions for me; why are you a Christian? What do you believe? How do you carry your faith in your everyday life? What do you want to do with your faith in the world? For three days I interacted with these young men. I watched them go to prayer. I sat surrounded by them on the steps of the school and answered their many inquiries. I laughed with them; sat in silence with them. I learned about their everyday lives. I listened to them recite *Qur'an*. I watched them read the Bible. I grew with these men in their faith for those three days, and they grew in mine. That is a narrative that is today's narrative. Indeed, they may have carried the ideology of Ibn Wahab since they were attending a Wahhabist Madrasa, yet, that isn't what we discussed. This was simply a narrative that gave this interaction meaning and depth for us as human beings trying to understand and relate to each other. This is what I mean when I say we must go beyond dialogue. It is that simple interaction that I still carry with me today. Their words, their lives and their love of life and their hope of being given the opportunity to change the world. It was that one common denominator between us that I found giving, grounded and real.

Hunt's article is incredibly important to the success of deeper dialogue and a greater theological understanding of the religion of Islam for Christians. I agree that Christians need more avenues to seek relational ties with their Muslim brothers and sisters. It is my hope that we can all move beyond dialogue and simply acknowledge each other as humanly as possible, seeking common ground with compassion and humility. It is this place that I believe we can arrive at, as does Hunt when he writes, "...productive dialogue will depend on the participants representing themselves as accurately as is possible and knowing, quite literally, where the others believe they are coming from and where they understand themselves to be going (Hunt 17, 2011)."

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