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Issues of Theology and Practice

It is important to know which questions and issues are fundamental to mutual understanding and which are not. The preceding chapters have raised questions and identified issues; all are important, but some are more fundamental than others. This chapter will explore those questions of theology and practice which are crucial to an understanding of Islam, Muslim people, and Christian–Muslim relationships. No attempt will be made to provide a full or nuanced discussion of each question or to point out all the subquestions each issue spawns. The hope is that readers will discover and pursue these as they search for solutions to the fundamental problems.

In conducting this search Christians should be in constant and intimate conversation with Muslims. This conversation should be based upon a self-giving acceptance of the other person. It is a conversation carried on in humility and trust. From this kind of association, Christians will not only know more about Muslims and Islam, they will come to know some Muslims personally, as friends and fellow believers in God. Personal knowledge of people of another faith community, cooperative effort, trust, and respect will facilitate over the years ahead the discovery of answers to those problems that continue to disrupt efforts for peace and justice in the world. Such efforts also require constant return to the roots of one's own faith in an effort to discover on an even

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deeper level the meaning of Christian scripture and tradition.

Issues for Christian Theological Reflection

In the relations between Christian and Muslim, Christians must address several theological issues that have emerged as a result of continuing associations with Muslims over the centuries. These theological matters are complex and often emotional for Christians because they lie so close to the essentials of the Christian faith. In thinking about these questions, readers should also be aware that theological issues are never defended or discussed apart from the social, political, and economic convictions of each believer. Theology is not just a matter of scripture and creeds. Theological positions are also a response to the world, which makes them important. The world shapes the ways in which the Bible and the traditions of the church are interpreted. The implications of this awareness are very clear in the discussions of the theological issues and questions in Christian–Muslim relations.

The Question of Truth

As one studies differing religious beliefs, one learns that every religious tradition claims in various ways to be the only true religion. This gives rise to what scholars call "conflicting truth claims." Within the Christian tradition, this claim for truth is often justified in part by the biblical verse, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father, but by me" (John 14:6). This verse lends itself to the attitude, "I have the truth. You don't. Therefore, you need what I have." When this attitude is embedded in a culture that considers itself superior to every other culture, the claim for truth becomes an exclusive claim. It produces attitudes of superiority and condescension toward those who are not so blessed. The question is whether this claim for truth in Christ is an exclusive claim. Does it mean that no other religion has truth about God? Are other religions able to witness to justice and righteousness?

The concern about truth can be put another way. Do Christians and Muslims worship the same God? The Islamic answer to this question is "Yes," because the Qur'an has revealed it to be so. The answer of the Christian church has been more ambiguous. The canon of the Bible was closed several hundred years before the Qur'an and does not mention Islam. The eighth-century church father John of Damascus said yes. Since medieval times, the greater portion of the church has said no. The fundamental issue can be put in this way: If people worship the same God, then are not both ultimately witnesses to the same source of truth? If such is the case, is the Christian claim that God is known only through Christ seriously challenged? In that challenge Christian feelings of superiority and exclusiveness are undercut. Any Christian interested in interfaith relations must accept this challenge and fashion a response.

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Yes

The Question of Revelation

What people believe about God is directly related to what they understand to be revelation. In Christianity and Islam, God's self-revealing word is the form and substance of revelation. For Muslims, that word is the Qur'an; for Christians, Jesus Christ. Both, then, have by an act of faith committed themselves to particular understandings of revelation that differ from each other in both form and content. This difference is a fundamental issue in Christian–Muslim relations. The question about God is applicable to the two channels of revelation. Does the particularity of God's truth in one channel in itself rule out the possibility of God's truth being present in the other? For Muslims the answer, based specifically upon the Qur'an, is that the revelation given by God to Christians through Jesus (and by God to the Jews through Moses) is authentic, even though the record of such revelation has been distorted and corrupted by those to whom the revelation was entrusted. For Christians, the answer is more difficult. Jesus, who preceded the prophet Muhammad by some six hundred years, does not refer to Islam. For Christ, the authenticity of revelation was demonstrated in faithfulness to God's com-

mands, not in abstract theological discussion. Where revelation encourages genuine faithfulness to God, its authenticity and truth must be acknowledged.

The commitment that Christians and Muslims each give to their own understanding of God's revelation is more than a question of truth or the validity of propositions. It is a question of obedience, loyalty, and faithfulness that give meaning and purpose to all of life. How one pursues issues of peace and justice (and many other matters) is directly related to one's understanding of what revelation requires. Take, for example, the matter of salvation. For Christians, salvation is the grace of God mediated through Jesus Christ. This salvation is what makes human life whole and complete. The Islamic concept of salvation stresses that the realization of a just and orderly communal and personal life is possible through obedience to the injunctions God has given in the Qur'an. In both cases, revelation is deeply involved with the way in which Christians and Muslims structure their societies. Does the existence of differing understandings of revelation mean that religious communities are forever alienated from one another? Is there within each understanding of revelation a similarity of truth sufficient to overcome alienation and to enable separate religious communities to make common cause in the pursuit of peace and justice and of faithfulness to God?

The Question of Mission

Theological discussion can become vexing because one question presupposes and leads to another. What Christians say about the revelation of God in Jesus has immediate implications for what is said about mission. Christians and Muslims both are obligated to witness to God's Lordship over the created world. This witness, if it is faithful to what God requires, invites others to walk in the same path. For Muslims, this witness is called *da'wah;* for Christians, the proclamation of the gospel or evangelism. Neither can avoid this witness and still be faithful. But if both revelations are from God, then is not the Christian imperative to witness to the salvation in Christ seriously diminished? What then becomes of mis-

sion? This is the theological aspect of the question of mission.

Another perspective is more practical but has theological implications. This side of the question requires sensitive listening to some complaints about the Christian missionary movement. As noted in chapter 4, a number of national Christian churches have objected to the proselytization of their members by Western missionaries, an activity facilitated by the economic resources available to the missionary but not to the traditional churches. The observations of Muslims move in other directions. They object to the disparaging and often untruthful way in which some missionaries have spoken about Islam and about Muslim people to weaken the faith of Muslims, making them more open to conversion. Some Muslims appreciate the educational and medical institutions operated by Western missionaries. They object, however, to the use of these institutions to attract Muslims into situations from which they cannot escape Christian preaching without losing the help they desperately need. Such proselytizing activity, they feel, is a form of compulsion. Finally, they see the presence of Western missionaries in their lands as a continuation of the colonial period, during which Muslims were ruled over and discriminated against by Western colonial powers. (Many Hindus and Buddhists would register the same objections.)

The person seeking understanding must investigate the ramifications of such criticisms. At stake is the meaning, motive, and conduct of mission. If the concern of Muslims to be faithful to God contains religious truth, then why do they need the Christian gospel? What are the motivations for mission? If the criticisms of the missionary movement are valid, does that mean that Christian mission should be terminated? Is there another way in which mission should be conducted? How is it possible to be faithful to Christ without falling into the arrogant superiority that has marred Christian–Muslim relations in the past? No solution will be reached easily.

The Question of Ecumenism

As interfaith contacts increase in the future, the meaning of ecumenism may also expand. In the past, to be ecumenical was

to be concerned about the "unity of the church within the body of Christ." Today Jewish organizations and, in some few cases, Muslim organizations have been welcomed to full participation in local and regional ecumenical programs in the United States. Such associations suggest that Christians must consider the possibility that ecumenism should mean the "unity of humanity under God." If so, the practical significance of such a different theological understanding must be explored.

Issues for Christians and Muslims Together

The emphasis so far has been upon the questions and issues that Christians need to reflect upon with other Christians. There are many other concerns that Christians should discuss with Muslims. These concerns are common to both communities, although this commonality often goes unrecognized. Through such discussion Muslims and Christians will be less likely to assume that all of their problems are caused by the other. Christ's injunction to take the log out of one's own eye before trying to remove the sliver in the eye of another is much to the point here. What follows is an attempt to address the Christians' responsibility in the discussion.

The Question of Religious Identity

The first group of issues relates to the question of religious identity. Christians ask what it means to be a Christian in the world today and Muslims ask what it means to be a Muslim in the world today. The answer will inevitably be more than dogma. It will be shaped by ethnicity, national citizenship, culture, family roots, social mores, ethical standards, and economic status. The search for identity means for many Muslims the desire to have a national state in which the Shari'ah is normative. Adherence to this body of law, they believe, gives the community its identity as a Muslim community in contrast to the increasing Westernization that many Muslim countries are experiencing. Today many Muslims question the secularism and immorality of the West because they see these forces as threats to their identity.

Christians are, of course, raising the same kinds of questions from their own point of view.

The Question of Secular Ideologies and Mores

A second set of issues and questions focuses on the response of religious people to secular ideologies and mores as religious communities relate to the societies in which they live. Traditional societies feel the impact of Western culture and civilization upon the values they hold dear. Their appropriation of technology brings with it some aspects they perceive as threatening to their communal well-being and religious life. From the point of view of many Muslims and Christians in the Third World, the impact of Western technology and culture upon their societies has created many problems. For example, the introduction of modern medical practice has produced a population explosion in the Third World. As a result, Third World governments and communities are struggling to deal with the effect that increasing population has upon their economies, educational programs, political structures, and social values. Because Islam seeks to integrate all aspects of society, Muslim communities set many of these problems in a religious context.

Another example is the impact of secular scientific thought and technology upon traditional ways of understanding and interpreting life. In spite of the humanistic elements in modern thought and technology, it has often dehumanized people and values in the Third World. Technology makes people cogs in an industrial machine controlled by the technocrats of the West, along with their Third World counterparts. The Muslim response is often an attempt to prevent such dehumanization. Some in the West wrongly interpret this attempt as a rejection of advanced technology.

In the struggle to create modern societies, Muslims are not content to accept without criticism and alteration the Western ideologies of Marxist socialism or democratic capitalism. Rather, these ideologies are often viewed as extremes, with the Islamic alternative falling somewhere in the middle. The Islamic society addresses the same human needs and aspirations but seeks to avoid the oppressive excesses. In the totality of

their lives, Muslims must first be faithful to God, because Islam is a total way of life. They believe that if this Islamic principle is upheld, they will be able to participate in the modern world in a way that incorporates the best of that world, rejects the worst, and is still genuinely Islamic. Such a vision helps Muslims to deal with social change within their own societies.

As these societies adapt to the Western world, the values advertised by television and movies, the widespread sale and use of pornographic literature, the extensive use of alcohol and drugs, and the tolerance of sexual license are seen by Muslims as threatening the social relationships and values that Islam enjoins. Muslims do not understand why these characteristics seem to have the tacit support of most Christians in the West. They also feel that Christian support of secular governments and the concept of separation of church and state contribute to the social ills manifest in Western society today.

The challenge of secularism is for Muslims more than a matter of social values and mores. It is a question of God's Lordship over the world. To the Muslim ear, Western ideologies seem to be saying that life can be lived without God. Science and technology can provide all that life requires. God is unnecessary because all human values and goals can be defined on the basis of individualistic hedonism. Social cohesion and cooperation can be achieved by an appeal to enlightened self-interest. As people for whom faithfulness to God is the central religious obligation, Muslims are understandably cautious about accepting such Western ideas.

Christians defend the secular character of the West as providing, in spite of its evils, freedom of opportunity and expression and freedom for life and faith not found elsewhere. Nevertheless they, like Muslims, are confronted also with the problems that secularism produces. The struggle with secularism is a common one. Christians and Muslims ought to be joined in working at it.

The Question of Social Justice and Human Rights

Many issues relating to social justice and human rights emerge from the long history of association between Christians

and Muslims and from the events transpiring in the world today. Because the ethical positions taken by Islam and Christianity are, for the most part, similar, it was possible for representatives of both communities in 1948 to sign the United Nations' Declaration of Human Rights. Yet this document often stands in tension with what many believers feel that God commands them to do, especially when their lives are aggravated by violence, oppression, and violations of human rights inflicted by nations claiming to support the declaration. A major need is for Christians, Muslims, and Jews to determine a workable definition of human rights. As yet there is no process by which this understanding can be developed and implemented. Each religion offers a God-given set of social values and standards of conduct that claims the total obedience of its members. What happens, however, when the standards and values of one religion come in conflict with those of another? That is the subject of the following examples of situations involving differences in understanding of human rights. These examples demonstrate that in order to achieve peace and justice in a pluralistic society, there must be a process for dealing with differences.

Minority Rights

One specific issue is the concern for the rights and responsibilities of minority groups. Christians in the United States should be the first to admit that they have a poor record with respect to treatment of minority groups. The persistence of racism in the Christian church is evidence of this. In addition to racism, one must add the problems of anti-Arab, anti-Muslim, and anti-Islamic prejudices. These prejudices derive not only from the past history of Christian–Muslim relations but also from current slanted media presentations, the political rhetoric of national leaders, and the interpretations of Islam and the Muslim world found in many publications, including some Christian literature. Muslim citizens of the United States, while appreciating the freedom and opportunity afforded them, also ponder what their future might be in view of increasing prejudice and actions associated with it.

The other side of the coin is seen in the response of Christian churches in lands where Muslims call for the establishment of an Islamic state under the guidance of the Shari'ah. If Muslim governments implement this law, Christians fear they will be relegated to the status of *dhimmi,* or "protected people," the status provided by the Shari'ah for minority groups in a Muslim society. Even though under this provision the well-being of a Christian community would be guaranteed by the Muslim majority, Christian communities, as *dhimmi,* would not enjoy full citizenship as defined by United Nations standards. From both the Christian and Muslim perspectives, the rights of minorities is a crucial issue.

Freedom to Choose One's Religion

A second issue pertaining to human rights and social justice has to do with the right to choose one's religion. For Christians, the right to believe or not believe, as one chooses, without being compelled by any force or inducement (apart from the integrity of the religious message itself), is a basic human right. Islam maintains that in religion there can be no coercion (Surah 2:256). In practice, however, the right to choose has become confused and morally ambiguous. Both communities have at times sought to make converts by offering inducements, material as well as spiritual, and occasionally by force. Muslims claim that Christian missionaries use medical and educational institutions as inducements. These become a form of coercion because such offerings take advantage of the needs of people. Many Christians see the Islamic law against apostasy as a limitation upon the freedom of Muslims to choose their religion or to change it.*

The right to choose one's religious belief is, for both Christians and Muslims, closely associated with the obligation to witness to one's faith. Christians, therefore, engage in mission

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*This law permits, after appropriate steps have been taken to give the apostate from Islam an opportunity to recant, the killing of the apostate. There is very little evidence that this law is normative throughout the whole Muslim world today. Rather, Muslims who convert to another religion are more likely to face social ostracism and be disinherited.

and Muslims in *da'wah*. Problems arise when religious communities fail to relate the obligation to witness to the right to choose. When this happens, one community may view as threatening the witness of another community within its midst. A majority community may deny the minority community full freedom to practice its religion. A community may seek in the name of God to restrict the freedom of its own members in such a way that their right to choose is denied. For these reasons and others, the right to choose one's religion, while affirmed in theory, still needs interpretation and discussion as far as religious practice is concerned.

The Rights of Women

The rights of women are an important concern with respect to social justice. Muslim and Christian women understand these rights differently. Today, many Muslim women feel that the status provided for them in Islam is superior to that enjoyed by women in the West. Conversely, many Western women feel that Muslim women are not granted their just due. In both communities, religious traditions, usually nurtured by men, have defined for women a role that is subservient to men. The pathways to liberation are therefore different for Christians and Muslims.

The rights of women are also associated with the role of the traditional family unit. Within Islam the extended family is viewed as the foundation of a healthy society. Muslim women see that as Western women gain more freedom to move beyond their traditional role, the family unit is weakened and the divorce rate increases. They are not sure that such changes would benefit their societies or increase their rights. Many Christians are concerned with the difficulties facing single-parent families that lack supporting communities. The breakdown of extended families has great significance for the future of congregations and communities as traditional structures disappear. Christians and Muslims, whether they like it or not, must address the rights of women as a matter of social justice.

Human Rights in the Middle East

To address issues related to social justice in a way that is meaningful to Muslims, Christians must at some point also discuss with Muslims the Middle East situation. Perhaps no one issue has done more harm to Muslim understanding and appreciation of the United States, no one issue has contributed more to the reaffirmation of Islamic identity, and no one issue affects Christian–Muslim relations more than the Palestinian–Israeli conflict. For Arab Muslims and Christians the displacement of the Palestinian people from their own land and the continuing violations of the human rights of the Palestinian people constitute an injustice that must be redressed. Arab Muslims and Christians believe that Christians in the United States are, through their government, giving support to unjust causes. They see this injustice emanating from Israel in partnership with the United States. The Israelis see their actions as sanctioned by their claim that God has given the land of Palestine to Jews and consequently by the right of Israel to exist as a Jewish homeland. Rather than becoming polarized around these issues, Christians in the United States need to understand both sides and work for justice with all parties in the Middle East.

In this discussion an attempt has been made to identify fundamental questions and issues. In addition, the place of religious teaching in public education; the rights of Muslims and Jews incarcerated in U.S. penal institutions; the American prejudice against Muslims, Arabs, and Jews; religious family law versus the secular family; and the need of Muslims and Arabs for protection against acts of violence should also be articulated. Many other concerns will surface as these basic problems are explored. The summary made in this chapter may help Christians to see that many of the issues confronting Muslims are not only religious but also human rights issues. Cooperative approaches and programs will provide the best answers and solutions. On the basis of this new understanding, there are specific directions that Christians can take which will invite constructive solutions. These directions will be outlined in the next chapter.