

**Beyond Christ,
For Christ's Sake:
The Promise of
Muslim-Christian Dialogue**

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Two years ago, Timothy Radcliffe, OP, on receiving an honorary doctorate at the Angelicum in Rome, gave a brilliant lecture on Truth. During the talk he told a story about a hot-air balloonist, who ran out of air and wound up in a tree. Hanging there helplessly, he suddenly saw two clerical types walking below and shouted, “Can you help me? Where am I?” One of the clerical types looked up and replied, “You’re in a tree!” At this the balloonist said, “You must be Dominicans!” “Yes,” they said, “how did you know?” “Well,” replied the man in the tree, “what you say is absolutely true – but utterly useless!”

I think that’s a risk we Dominicans run every time we open our mouths. For some of us, however, the results were not useless but, quite literally, incendiary.

I came across a reference recently in one of Kenneth Cragg’s latest books, about a sixteenth-century visionary Dominican for whom I felt immediate sympathy. “Among reformed sectaries in the West, often ignored by historians, there were,” Cragg writes, “intriguing ventures into the puzzle of competing faiths. In central Europe and the Balkans... thinkers such as Jacob Paleologus (circa 1530-1585)... took their revolt against clerical rule into overtures of mind toward Islam, moved by the providential problem of its domain in Europe but also probing into its potentially mutual ground with Christianity.” Paleologus returned to Europe to pursue his vision of “an inter-faith church of spiritual Semites” in which he conceived of Jews, Gentile Christians, and Turks as “three branches of the people of God,” insofar as they conformed to “the inner world.” He saw the first as being such by race, the second by faith, and the third by their monotheism, their occupancy of Christian lands, and their acknowledgement of “the prophet’s office of Christ.” These were, indeed, radical ideas in the context of that time –

ideas for which Paleologus, as a discredited Dominican, paid with his life, suffering execution in Rome.¹

Perhaps he was born too soon. Based on some recent official comments, he just might have received a more sympathetic hearing in Rome in 2006. Cardinal Paul Poupard, the President of the Pontifical Council for Culture and the Council for Interreligious Dialogue, speaking at the World Summit of Representatives of the Great Religions, in Moscow, July 3-5, 2006, said this: "...Religions are open houses which can teach and practice dialogue, respect for the difference and the dignity of the whole person, the love of the truth, awareness of belonging to the one great family of peoples wanted by God and called to live under his watch in shared love."²

The Fact of Pluralism

Much has happened to change people's perceptions and attitudes of others: instant, worldwide communication; immigration from the East and South into the North; the clash of values in France between head scarf-wearing Muslim students and a government committed to the idea of a secularist *laïcité*; the western European press reprinting offensive Danish cartoons of the Prophet Muhammad in defense of free speech; our own awareness that there are people in Afghanistan, Iraq, and Iran who think differently from us. There has been such a great shift that, in Europe alone, a city like Amsterdam now has a population that is almost half non-Dutch. Even 30 years ago, there were more Muslims in Great Britain than there were Methodists. Those who were once called the "others" are not only at the doorstep, but, in many cases, have become part of the family.

¹ *The Arab Christian, A History in the Middle East* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1991) 131.

² www.evangelizatio.org/portale/adgentes/pcpc_en040706.

Many people today, like Paleologus in the sixteenth-century, struggle with the challenge of these “open houses” of pluralism. Unlike him, the only penalty they suffer is the possibility of being swamped, wading through the theological flood of books and articles on the problems, the familiar paradigms, and the future possibilities in a theology of religions. This paper is no more than an introduction into the literature, with which you might be more familiar than I. Here, I confess to being something of a magpie: when I see something shiny I pick it up and use it. But I hope that these shiny things I share with you might be of some help in finding a path through the waters.

I should also confess at the outset that while a lot of what I say comes from reading the literature, it is grounded rather more in 40 years of living in Pakistan. My debt to Pakistan is immense, a debt to the small but vibrant Christian community, discriminated against and victimized, but all the more faithful for that. I am grateful to my Muslim friends: men – and especially women from whom I learned to see another face of God. I am convinced that had I not lived there for so many years, I would, today, have absolutely nothing to say.

What then is there to say about, “Beyond Christ, for Christ’s Sake” and about “the Promise of Dialogue?”

The simplest answer as to why the question arises at all lies in the very fact of pluralism. In Asia, which saw the birth of Christianity and most of the world religions, Christians form less than two percent of the population. That’s enough to start us rethinking what mission is all about! Some writers have tried to understand the great mass of people who are not Christian by using the paradigm of “exclusion” (salvation is confined to Christianity), “inclusion” (salvation occurs throughout the world but is always the work of Christ), or even “pluriformity” (the

great world faiths are different and independently authentic contexts of salvation/liberation).³

There are problems with this threefold classification. The most obvious is that it tries to fit everything into the univocal Christian concept of “salvation.” It has, accordingly, been much criticized as being too much *a priori*, dealing only with what can be said theologically about the fact of religious pluralism from an exclusively Christian viewpoint, but not dealing *a posteriori* with actual religious communities or with what they teach or how they live.

One such critic, Ian Markham, sees the underlying problem with the paradigm in “the conflation of three matters: 1. the conditions for salvation; 2. whether the major world religions are all worshipping the same God; and 3. the truth about the human situation.”⁴ He argues that the traditional paradigm emphasizes the first (salvation), is confused about the second (worshipping the same God), and with regard to the third (the truth about the human situation), links truth questions with soteriology.

The real problem is one of perspective, like that of the traveler who comes upon a river, sees a man lazing under a tree on the other side, shouts over to him and asks, “How can I get across to the other side?” The man looks up and shouts back, “You *are* on the other side!” An exclusivist position, on which the debate concentrates, judges everything from its side of the river. It

³ Cf. Gavin D’Costa, *Theology and Religious Pluralism* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1986); Alan Race, *Christians and Religious Pluralism* (London: SCM Press, 1983); and Paul Knitter, *No Other Name, A Critical Survey of Christian Attitudes Toward the World Religions* (Quezon City: Claretian Publications, 1985.)

⁴ Ian Markham, “Creating Options: Shattering the Exclusivist, Inclusivist and Pluralist Paradigm,” *New Blackfriars*, January 1993, 33-41, *passim*.

implies that salvation depends either on the primacy of *belief* in the Incarnation, or *experience* of Jesus as Savior. Markham would stress rather the importance of *actions* (having difficulty with an emphasis on beliefs as elitist, as culturally conditioned), and thinks that most people find beliefs less important than actions. But experience too can be elitist. You can, he suggests, have a religious sensitivity without the religious experience. And it would, in any case, be unjust to make salvation dependent on experience, which is also culturally conditioned in terms of the religious framework of one's own culture. The alternative he proposes is *action* or "orthopraxis over orthodoxy," and – this is where he is helpful – he defines salvation as "a turn from self-centeredness to other-centeredness." The realization of love and compassion in your life is the act of being saved; it is the cultivation of a loving attitude expressed in actions. It is a disposition of openness to others,⁵ and a readiness for the unexpected – unlike the advice a mother gave to her daughter on learning to drive: "Never go anywhere for the first time!"

Scrapping the paradigm of the threefold classification seems to me something necessary and good, and its replacement by "the disposition of openness to others," essential, not only in order to understand "others," but in order to realize that without them we will never come to an understanding of who we are – or who God is. Jesus' unqualified acceptance of others brought him to an awareness of who he was and what he was called to do.

"The Land of Unlikeness"

We are becoming more aware of the "other" from all points of view. Though the evidence seems contrary, I do believe we are beginning to take difference seriously. The existence of the

⁵ Ibid.

“other” can no longer be peripheral to our faith; it is, instead, an integral part of it. Making sense out of this is the task of theologians.

Having spent a lifetime trying to understand it, Danish physicist Niels Bohr found that “the opposite of one profound truth may well be another profound truth.” And I remember being enchanted on reading that the poet, Robert Lowell, when stuck for rhyme or meter, discovered he could achieve just what he wanted to say by simply adding the word “not.” There is something inviting but disconcerting about this theological journey on the frontiers. The frontiers are unlike any place we have been before, and for that reason, are risky.

He is the Way, writes the poet, Auden, *Follow Him / through the Land of Unlikeness; / You will see rare beasts / and have unique adventures.*⁶ We are challenged, as Christians, to a new self-understanding posed by life in the “Land of Unlikeness.”

One county in the “Land of Unlikeness” is that of interreligious dialogue, which, as David Tracy observed some years ago, is “a crucial issue which will transform all Christian theology in the long run... We are fast approaching the day when it will not be possible to attempt a Christian systematic theology except in serious conversation with the other great ways.”⁷

What should characterize the dialogue most of all, as Karl Rahner wrote, is the awareness that “the divinely intended dream [of salvation] for the individual meets him *within the concrete religion of his actual existential milieu and historical contingency*,

⁶ W.H. Auden, *Christmas Oratorio: For the time Being*, cited by Tom Breidenthal in “A Table in the Wilderness,” web.princeton.edu/sites/chapel, 5 March 2006.

⁷ *Dialogue with the Other* (Louvain: Louvain Theological and Pastoral Monographs 1; Peeters Press, 1990) xi.

*according to God's will and forbearance (which so intermingle that they are no longer clearly separable)."*⁸ Rahner echoes the late Charles Journet's definition of the theologian's task as "taking away anything that would diminish the mystery." These seem essential conditions if we are to go "Beyond Christ, for Christ's Sake."

When the philosopher, Jacques Derrida, died two years ago, one who knew him well wrote that in "the last decade of his life he became preoccupied with religion and that it is in this area that his contribution might well be most significant for our time. He understood that religion is impossible without uncertainty. God can never be known or adequately represented by imperfect human beings... Yet we live in an age when major conflicts are shaped by people who claim to know, for certain, that God is on their side. Derrida reminded us that religion does not always give clear meaning, purpose, and certainty by providing secure foundations. To the contrary, the great religious traditions are profoundly disturbing because they call certainty and security into question. Belief not tempered by doubt poses a moral danger. Fortunately, he also taught us that the alternative to blind belief is not simply unbelief but a different kind of belief – one that embraces uncertainty and enables us to respect others whom we do not understand."⁹

The *Qur'an* itself addresses this question: "... to every one of you have we appointed a different law and way of life. And if God had so willed, He could surely have made you all one single community: but [He willed it otherwise] in order to test you." (5.48). St. Paul is less gentle with the Corinthians: "Do you really think that you are the source of the word of God? Or that you are the only people to whom it has come?" (1 Cor 14.36). In a

⁸ Quoted by Eugene Hillman, "Evangelization in a Wider Context," *Journal of Ecumenical Studies*, Vol 12, 1975, 6.

⁹ Mark C. Taylor, "What Derrida Really Meant," *New York Times*, 14 October 2004.

recent talk in Rome, the American Jesuit, Michael Buckley, addressed the same point. For Aquinas, Buckley said, the idea of “a religion” would have made no sense. Aquinas regarded religion not as a set of beliefs and practices, but as a moral virtue, “by which one gives God what is due to God, and lives in appropriate relation to God.”¹⁰ The point seems to be that this virtue of religion is universal, even if people and cultures have different ways of cultivating it and, as a moral virtue, is all about relating to God and to one another.

In a complex world, then, wisdom is in knowing what we don’t know so that we can keep the future open. Or, as Emily Dickinson wrote, “We both believe and disbelieve a hundred times an hour, which keeps believing *nimble*.” What a wonderful expression that is!

Keeping Belief Nimble

“Keeping belief nimble” is also a good hermeneutic in a world filled with complex particulars. Rahner once said that we must act our way into new ways of thinking, and not think our way into new ways of acting. Many theologians today believe that, instead of starting from a preset theological paradigm, it is better to build a theology of dialogue on the basis of an actual interreligious encounter, thus acting our way into a new way of thinking. They speak of “theologies in conversation” (Michael Barnes, SJ), or “theology in dialogue” (Jacques Dupuis, SJ), or “interpenetration” (R. Pannikar).

One thing is certain: an open, dialogical attitude can be developed only through an actual experience of dialogue. This is something implicit in official documents of the Catholic Church. These do not discuss at length the theological status of

¹⁰ John Allen, “The Word from Rome,” 18 March 2005, www.nationalcatholicreporter.org/word.

non-Christian religions, but give just some practical guidelines on how to enter into dialogue on the levels of daily life, work, thought and spirituality.¹¹

Entering into dialogue is a true adventure from which one emerges with a new way of seeing. I read recently of a thirteenth-century English Dominican, David of Ashby, who spent 15 years at the Persian court of the second Khan, Hulegu, the son of Genghis Khan. He was also translator for the Mongol ambassadors at the Fourteenth Ecumenical Council at Lyons in 1274, sent by Abaka, the son of Hulegu.¹² Dialogue is a “unique adventure” where participants, like David of Ashby before them, are changed by the experience and become bridges (translators) between worlds.

A study published in June by the Washington-based Pew Global Attitudes Project found that “a great divide” separates the worldviews of Muslims and westerners, but it also suggests that European Muslims, who held the most tolerant views, could be a bridge between the two groups.¹³ It is the experience of living among others that makes this so and that suggests possibilities for the future. I was at a meeting once when a French Dominican simplified “mission” by saying, “We need to be fully here, and fully somewhere else.”

Translators need, first of all, to get “across the river,” to learn a new language: a new way of speaking about God, about Jesus, about the Church and her mission. I can’t believe, for example,

¹¹ Cf. Giuseppe Scattolin MCCJ, “Spirituality in Interreligious Dialogue: Challenge and Promise,” www.sedos.org.

¹² James Chambers, *The Devil’s Horsemen: The Mongol Invasion of Europe* (Edison NJ: Castle Books, 2003), 159-160.

¹³ Published 23 June 2006 by the Inter Press Service, www.commondreams.org/cgi-bin/print.cgi?file=/headlines06/0623-04.htm.

that David of Ashby's view on any of these, after 15 or 20 years among the Mongols, remained the same, unchanged from the first day he arrived in Persia! We do not know – but if he did not change, then he was a pretty poor translator.

One whose view has evolved, after years of study and conversations, is the French Dominican, Claude Geffré, OP. After a consideration of the “enigma” of Islam, he insists that “it is precisely the challenge of religious pluralism that invites us to return to the heart of the Christian paradox as the religion of the *Incarnation* and the religion of *the kenosis of God*.” Christianity he describes as “a religion of otherness.”¹⁴ The task is to go to the heart of the difference of the “other” to discover, with new eyes, one's own difference.

Christianity as “a religion of otherness” means that it is always open and other-centered, that it takes its identity and its mission from others. That it is founded on the paradox of the “Incarnation” means that it has to take the reality of difference seriously. And “the kenosis of God” suggests a methodology for doing this.

We are talking about a methodology for our own “emptying” too. The emergence of a new identity can be both liberating and painful. Aquinas links the beatitude of mourning with those who seek the truth. There is mourning and grieving in leaving a truth that “worked,” comforted and gave meaning, for a new truth, untried and uncomfortable. There is considerable discomfort in responding to the truth of *many* possibilities, instead of subscribing to *one* all-encompassing truth. But this is the familiar exodus from the slavery of Egypt, through the desert, looking back in longing for the “leeks and onions and flesh-pots of Egypt,” into a land of promise and into freedom.

¹⁴ “The Theological Foundations of Dialogue,” *Focus*, Vol 22, No 1, 2002, 15-40.

Erik Borgman reminds us of what is involved in this journey of many possibilities: "...Openness to what other religious traditions have to say is inherent to a religion which does not propagate a strict identity but rather wants to lure people towards 'the venture of non-identity.' It invites men and women, like Jesus, to become the 'icon of the invisible God' (Col 1.15), not by accepting its preaching and the proclamation of him as the ultimate and complete truth, but by reflecting him in their own history and bringing it together with those from elsewhere who do the same thing... Before it can be a theology of God's presence, Christian theology is a theology of the lack of God. It is precisely in the pain of this lack that God's presence and nearness is revealed."¹⁵

What sustains us on the journey, as it did the Israelites, is God's promise that he "will be for us who he is," and whom we will discover only as we follow, and seek to know God's will.

A novelist is often described by his willingness to take the familiar and make it strange; this – as you can see – is even truer of the theologian, whose task is, at all costs, to defend the mystery against familiarity, its worst enemy. The over-familiar, for St. Thomas, does not produce faith, but only boredom.¹⁶

"The Kingdom of Anxiety"

He is the Truth, writes Auden, *Seek him in the Kingdom of Anxiety. / You will come to a great city / that has expected you for years.*¹⁷

¹⁵ "Conclusion: The Self-Emptying Nearness of the Liberating God: Contours of a Christian Theology of Other Forms of Faith," *Concilium*, 2003, Number 4, 129.

¹⁶ Josef Pieper, *The Silence of St Thomas* (South Bend, IN: St Augustine's Press, 1999), 24.

¹⁷ Auden, loc. cit.

To follow Jesus into the “Kingdom of Anxiety” means turning our backs on every false boundary that separates us from God, and from other people. It means “stripping ourselves so completely of every defense against God’s truth and God’s judgment that we end up being completely open to God... It means relocating ourselves in an abode that is completely open to the stranger, [that] always provides us with glimpses of the vast open space... that surrounds us on every side.”¹⁸

Being completely open, engaging with all the “complex particulars,” is essential for the acknowledgment and acceptance of difference. Indeed, it is fear of complexity that leads “true believers” to barricade themselves against any other truth breaking in from the world that surrounds them on every side. “Somehow or other,” writes Archbishop Rowan Williams, “we all have to undergo a fairly fundamental conversion from seeing revealed truths as a possession to be guarded to seeing it as a place to inhabit; not our bit of territory that needs protection, but the whole world renewed. We shall not proclaim Christ effectively if we are constantly revisiting what makes us anxious rather than what makes us grateful.”¹⁹

It is from living in a different culture for over half my life – although my age now has something to do with it – that I find myself a little less “anxious” and better equipped to deal with particulars and inconsistencies, and I am more content living within the mystery of incompleteness. I think there are times in our lives when we realize God is not who we thought he was. Such a moment is captured beautifully by the poet, Denise

¹⁸ Breidenthal, loc. cit

¹⁹ *The Christian Priest Today*, reference unavailable.

Levertov: *How confidently the desires / of God are spoken of! / Perhaps God wants / something quite different. / Or nothing, nothing at all.*²⁰

There was a rather bizarre moment during the 1995 general chapter of the Dominicans when there was heated debate on whether or not we can really know the God whom we preach. Unfortunately I was moderator of the session and lost control of it! Most threatened by the possibility that we might not know what we were talking about were a young Spanish missionary in Taiwan and an old Hungarian, who had spent years in a factory under the Communists. One can understand their perspective but their fear of loss of certainty need not constrict our theology.

Muslims and Christians might get along better if each remembered the God neither one knows. For the Muslim, God is transcendent and above comprehension: “No vision can grasp him, but his grasp is over all vision. He is above all comprehension, yet is acquainted with all things” (Qur’an 6.103). The Qur’an does not reveal God, but God’s will or law for all creation. This is similar to Aquinas’s teaching that God is incomprehensible to us precisely because he is creator of all that is and outside the order of all beings. We can know something about God from his effects, but all we can safely affirm is what God is not: *prout in se est, neque paganus neque catholicus cognoscit* (*Summa Theologiae* I, Q 13, a 10, ad 5). Thomas’s great work was written for beginners, but he “did not wish to withhold this basic thought of ‘negative’ theology even from the beginner. And in the *Quaestiones Disputatae*, [it] is even said: *Hoc est ultimum cognitionis humanae de Deo; quod sciat se Deum nescire*, this is the ultimate in human knowledge of God: to know that we do not know him.”²¹

²⁰ “The Tide,” *The Stream and the Sapphire*, (NY: New Directions Press, 1997) 25.

²¹ Josef Pieper, *op cit*, 37.

Foundational is the passage in *Exodus*, when Moses asks Yahweh to show him his glory. Yahweh said “I will make all my glory pass before you... but my face you shall not see.” He then places Moses in a cleft of the rock to shield him with his hand until he has passed. Then Yahweh says, “I shall take my hand away and you will see my back; but my face will not be seen” (33.18-23). Faith is not about seeing; it is about following. And all we ever see is God’s back.

We can only affirm what God is not, for we are, as Aquinas wrote, “joined to God as to the unknown” (*ST I, Q 12, a 13, ad 1*). And in the second century Justin Martyr declared that, “No one can give a name to God, who is too great for words, if anyone dares to say that it is possible to do so, that person must be suffering from an incurable madness.” All we will ever see is God’s back.

The poet, R.S. Thomas, marveled at this elusiveness: *Such a fast God: leaving just as we arrive.*

Yet even when Muslim and Christian confess their inability to know God, both profess very often to know exactly what God wants. Remembering the mystery is a good corrective to bad behavior – as one very wise Muslim scholar reminded TV listeners after 9/11: “If you limit God, you create God.” There are today signs pointing to a disturbing new climate of intolerance. “What happens,” asks the columnist, James Carroll, “when religious zeal is joined to absolute certitude? What happens when power is invoked to reinforce preaching? What happens when those who disagree with prevailing answers to life’s great questions are, for that very reason, defined as lesser beings. Is doubt part and parcel of rational inquiry, or not? Is ambiguity essential to human knowing, or not? If the ground on which one stands while thinking, and the time within which one

pursues a thought to its conclusion are both in flux, as suggested by the insights of Albert Einstein, why is 'relativity' to be taken as wicked?"²²

So much depends on how one handles complexity. There is a story about a young disciple who came to the wise elder and asked him, "Can you help me find enlightenment?" The wise man replied, "Of course. You just give me all your certainties, and I will give you back confusion."

But this "confusion" is the moment of conversion, in the sense of an opening of the eyes, of a revelation experience. Coming to a new self-awareness, midst the confusion, is to change – but it is always others who open our eyes and reveal to us who we are. Part of this self-awareness is the realization that if Muslims, and others, can reveal to us our true selves, then we must commit ourselves not just to dialogue as something we do, but to dialogue as a way of living. This is an insight into our very way of being in this religiously pluralist world and it somehow enters into the definition of who we are as Christians. This seeking "in the Kingdom of Anxiety," will bring us, as Auden says, "to a great city that has expected you for years." We emerge with a new and truer identity.

Beyond Christ

The encounter with believers who are not Christian offers a possibility, not just of seeing ourselves in a new way, but of seeing Jesus in a new way. It gives new meaning to the *Letter to the Hebrews*' description of him as "the pioneer," way out in front of us, and on whom we are to "keep [our] eyes fixed" (12.2), and to Paul's saying that Jesus is in us as mystery and hope and promise of completion (Col 1.27). Jesus is alive in our world, is

²² *Boston Globe*, 17 May 2005, www.commondreams.org.

being completed in our world, is coming-to-be in our world. This is echoed in some Sufi traditions, where Jesus is referred to as “the traveler,” or “the one on the path.”

This all suggests life and movement – and a Jesus who is elusive, never caught-up-with, beckoning us further into the journey, not toward certainty, but deeper into faith and mystery and, as St. Paul says, “hope of glory” and completion (Col 1.27).

We are to follow the Christ who is not behind us but in front of us – for this is what “beyond Christ” means. We are behind the Christ who is making us ready for the new ways of God.

It is the others we meet on our journey who invite us to move from an understanding of the Church’s mission as “a program for action” to “a waiting on God.” Not doing what we think should be done, but trying to understand, with others, what God’s plans are. It is an invitation to share in God’s great adventure and God’s loving embrace of the world. This new awareness of who we are compels us to cooperate with other believers so that God’s purposes may be revealed.

We have some models from history to help us. In the thirteenth century there was created “by Christian, Muslim, and Jewish forces the near-miracle of a tolerant humanism on the basis of current traditions at the court of Emperor Frederick II in [the Kingdom of] Sicily.”²³ Frederick was extremely well-educated, endlessly curious, spoke many languages, including Arabic, was a half-hearted crusader, and was known to his contemporaries as *stupor mundi*, “the wonder of the world.” His Kingdom of Sicily included Naples and Count Landulf of Aquino was one of his most loyal vassals. I have often wondered if growing up in

²³ Paul Tillich, *Christianity and the Encounter of the World Religions* (NY: Columbia University Press, 1964) 40.

this multi-cultural society somehow influenced Aquinas's own remarkable openness to other traditions.

Entertaining Elephants

In Pakistan, almost every farmer will speak of “my wife, my village, my land, my children, my buffalo – and my enemy,” to describe who he is. The one who is different, and often dangerous, is part of his identity. This can, of course, take over, and result in a paranoid society. But the truth is that the other *does* enter into our self-definition, and *does* determine how we act. The other comes to us in different guises: guest, friend, stranger, sometimes enemy (and all linked etymologically!). Each meeting is important because in each is – in the thought of the philosopher, Emmanuel Levinas – the ethical challenge to embrace responsibility and, “by being for others, to be oneself.”²⁴

This carries with it risk, daring and surprise. Ancient Persian wisdom advises: “Do not welcome elephant trainers into your tent unless you are prepared to entertain elephants!”

The scriptural criterion for good action, according to the Books of the Law and the message of the prophets was always dependent on how the orphan, the widow and the stranger were treated. Thus, in *deuteronomy*: “The Lord your God... is not partial. He executes justice for the fatherless and the widow, and

²⁴ For Emmanuel Levinas, “being in relationship” is much more basic than simply “being.” Levinas is fond of quoting the novice, Aloysha Karamazov, in Dostoevsky’s novel: “We are all responsible for everyone else – but I am more responsible than all the others.” This is a thought that can, as one commentator said, “make us tremble,” for we are then endlessly obligated to the other, responsible for the other, and the *good* (in the form of fraternity and discourse) takes precedence over the *true*. To be oneself is to be for others. Cf “Introduction,” *The Levinas Reader*, ed. by Sean Hand (Oxford UK & Cambridge USA: Blackwell, 1996), *passim*.

loves the sojourner, giving him food and clothing. Love the stranger, therefore, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt” (10.17-19). Leviticus is even more specific: “When a stranger sojourns with you in the land, you shall do him no wrong. The stranger who sojourns with you shall be to you as the native among you, and you shall love him as yourself; for you were strangers in the land of Egypt” (19.33-34). And Exodus gives as the reason for not oppressing the stranger, this: “You know the heart of the stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt” (23.9).

Just as the appeal in the book of Exodus (about knowing the heart of the stranger) is to a shared human experience as providing common ground for relationship, so is Paul’s vision of strangers becoming community rooted in the experience of what God did in Jesus: “In Christ, God was *making friends with the world*... and entrust[ed] to us the task of *making friends*” (2 Cor 5.19). This is why he entreats the Romans to “practice hospitality” (12.13). But to be “hospitable,” to welcome them as guests, strangers have to be looked at as “like us” in needs, experiences and expectations. “It was not sufficient that strangers be vulnerable; hosts had to identify with their experiences of vulnerability and suffering before they welcomed them.”²⁵ Perhaps linked to this obligation to hospitality is the awareness of our own culpability as part of a social system that produces strangers, displaced and vulnerable.²⁶

²⁵ Christine D. Pohl, *Making Room, Recovering Hospitality as a Christian Tradition* (Grand Rapids MI & Cambridge UK: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1999) 97.

²⁶ Cf. Walter Brueggemann, “Welcoming the Stranger,” *Interpretation and Obedience* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991) 290-310.

The Promise of Dialogue

One commentator on the horrific events of September 11, 2001, saw them as a failure of imagination: had the terrorists been able to imagine themselves as passengers on those planes, they would never have done as they did. It is useful to think about what causes a failure of imagination. Timothy Radcliffe, in an address at Yale University in 1996, saw the university as a place “where one learned to talk to strangers.” He quotes the poet William Blake to expose what he believes to be one of the blocks to communication: “May God keep us / from single vision...”

Singleness of vision led to the September attacks, it was responsible in 1996 for the brutal murders of the seven Trappist monks and the assassination of Bishop Pierre Claverie in Algeria, and periodic attacks on churches in Pakistan, on churches and mosques in Indonesia in the years following. It is responsible now for the bloodshed in Lebanon, Gaza and Israel. Singleness of vision is a characteristic of all religious fundamentalisms, whether Muslim or Christian – and singleness of vision is also embraced by the present US administration in its “war on terror.”

“The more the US mobilizes for war, the more ordinary Americans must be persuaded to reduce their view of the world to good versus evil, western liberalism versus Islamic terrorism, or, most primarily, ‘us versus them.’ Nuance, balance, and any sense of reciprocity must cease. Learning to see the world from varying points of view must be eliminated so that only one view will predominate. Anyone who questions it must be denounced for siding with the terrorists and cut off from the community of faith.”²⁷

²⁷ Daniel Lazare, “America’s Patriot Games,” <http://MondeDiplo.com/2002/08/11america>.

There is a huge difference between imagination and delusion. There is a story from Central Asia about Mullah Nasiruddin, whom a friend came across one night in the middle of the road, under a bright shining moon. Mullah was on his hands and knees. The friend asked, “Mullah, what are you doing?” “I’m looking for my key,” said Mullah. “I’ll help you,” said the friend, and he too got down on his hands and knees and began looking through the dust. After an hour searching, the friend said, “Mullah, where did you lose it?” “Over there, by the door,” said Nasiruddin. “Then, why don’t you look over there?” said the friend. “Don’t be stupid,” said Mullah, “there’s more light here!”

The moral, of course, is that ideal conditions are never there in the search for keys or anything else. Maybe a laboratory with controlled experiments might yield results that could be trusted, but life is much messier and less predictable. And attempts to impose order result in totalitarian violence and the obliteration of individual differences by ethnic cleansing. To break the cycle of violence and vengeance, the scriptural remedy is uncompromisingly clear: “Love your enemies” (*Mt 5.43*), “Extend hospitality to strangers” (*Rom 12.13*).

The prophet Isaiah (*58.6-8*) says we are all “kin,” of one flesh and blood, and perhaps never more than now. You have probably heard that it can be statistically established that any one of us, at any given time, is only “six lengths away” from any other person: the pope, the president of the US, the queen of England, a peasant in Thailand – because we all know someone who knows someone who knows someone else. Human networking is fascinating but it only makes what is happening now all the more painful and difficult to understand. We have to search for meaning together, for without acknowledging our

kinship with those who are different, we will remain with but half an answer.

We are presented today with a disturbing reality. Otherness, the simple fact of being different in some way – Muslim or migrant – has come to be defined as in and of itself evil. Miroslav Volf is a native Croatian, who, in his “theological exploration of identity, otherness, and reconciliation,”²⁸ writes from his own experience of teaching in Croatia during the war. He contends that if the healing word of the Gospel is to be heard today, theology must find ways of speaking that address the hatred of the other. He proposes the idea of *embrace* as a theological response to the problem of *exclusion*. Increasingly we see that exclusion has become the primary sin, skewing our perceptions of reality and causing us to react out of fear and anger to all those who are not within our ever-narrowing circle.

In light of this, Christians must learn that salvation comes, not only as we are reconciled to God, and not only as we “learn to live with one another,” but as we take the dangerous and costly step of opening ourselves to the other – in Volf’s words – “of enfolding him or her in the same embrace with which we have been enfolded by God”: opening our arms to the world in the same way Jesus stretched out his arms on the cross.

This is not easy, but, as St. John Chrysostom reminds us, it is necessary: “It might be possible,” he writes, “for a person to love without risking danger – but this is not the case with us!” Jesus calls us “friends,” tells us to “befriend” and “love one another,” (Jn 15.14-17) in a risky and dangerous embrace which mirrors his own. The poet Auden’s words written on the eve of World War II (“September 1, 1939”) are as true now as they

²⁸ *Exclusion and Embrace* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996).

were then: “Hunger allows no choice / To the citizen or the police / We must love one another or die.”

Only then can Cardinal Poupard’s dream of religions as “open houses” that “can teach and practice dialogue” become a description of reality. When there is “respect for the difference and dignity of the whole person, the love of the truth,” and “the awareness of belonging to the one great family of peoples wanted by God and called to live under his watch in shared love” – only then can the dream become reality.

This is the task and the Promised Land described by the poet:

He is the Way.
Follow Him
through the Land of Unlikeness;
You will see rare beasts,
and have unique adventures.

He is the Truth.
Seek Him
in the Kingdom of Anxiety.
You will come to a great city
that has expected you for years.

[He is the Life.
Love Him
in the World of the Flesh;
and at your marriage
all its occasions shall dance for joy.]²⁹

²⁹ Op.cit.

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