Building the Bridge: 
Evangelicals and Muslims Together 

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It is a great honor for me to be invited to speak to you this evening. I care deeply about the kind of in-depth dialogue that you folks are engaged in at this conference, and I am honored by the very fact that you would ask me to add some of my own thoughts to the discussion. I have to be clear at the outset, though, about something that I hope you know already: that when it comes to the in-depth understanding of the subject matter of this conference, I am at best an amateur among experts. But I do care deeply about relationships between evangelicals and Muslims. And the fact that the title of this conference refers to the larger context of “religion in the public square” gives me a little bit of encouragement, since I have devoted much energy to thinking about, and contributing to, the broader dialogue about religion and public life.

And there can be no doubt that relations between evangelicals and Muslims is an important topic of public commentary these days. Indeed, the relationship between our two faith communities has been much in the news lately. We are all aware, I’m sure, of the widely reported recent comment by a well-known evangelical leader, that Islam is “an evil religion.” Nor is that an isolated opinion. Indeed, a phone survey conducted recently of 1000 Protestant leaders revealed that the vast majority of them agreed with the “evil religion” assessment. The minority of leaders who dissented tended to come from mainline Protestantism rather than the evangelical camp. ¹

I think that I can safely say that the evangelicals who are present at this conference—myself included—do not subscribe to the “evil religion” viewpoint. I certainly firmly oppose that assessment. We want to engage in friendly dialogue with folks in the Muslim community. The image employed in convening this gathering—“Bridges of Faith”—captures nicely what we genuinely hope for. We want to help build a bridge between Muslims and evangelicals, a meeting point where we can form friendships, build trust, and talk with each other about matters that are for each of our communities issues of eternal importance.

¹ “Protestant pastors view Islam with suspicion,” http://www.lifeway.com/article/?id=170229&rss=20100501
At the very least it is important for us to understand each other. Too often the relationships between our two faith communities have been dominated by caricatures and stereotypes. We have often assumed we know what the other side believes, without ever asking each other if we have it right.

We evangelical Christians have to do much better than we have in the past. We typically have not been good at dialogue. Many evangelicals have assumed that to engage in friendly give-and-take exchange with people with whom we have important disagreements is a concession to relativism, a serious compromising of our core convictions. But the truth is that God himself has issued the mandate for dialogue. The author of the Epistle to the Hebrews puts it in a straightforward way: we are, the writer says, to “pursue peace with everyone” so that we can display that “holiness without which no one will see the Lord” (Hebrews 12:14). I like the older translation of that passage, which tells us that we are to “strive” to live at peace with everyone. The Apostle Peter commends a similar pattern when he urges us to “honor everyone” (I Peter 2: 17), and to be sure that, when we are expressing our deepest convictions to other people, we do so “with gentleness and reverence” (I Peter 3: 15), the kind of gentleness and reverence that we Christians have experienced by the love of the God who so loved us—even when we were yet sinners living in rebellion against him—that he sent the Savior to Calvary on our behalf.

Again, though, this gentleness and reverence does not come easy. It certainly cannot mean compromising our deepest convictions. Rather, it requires that we draw upon those convictions in our dialogic efforts. The challenge, then, is to cultivate a spiritual outlook that is fed by those strong convictions. This is no simple feat. It requires hard spiritual work.

I personally get some inspiration for getting at the nature of this spiritual work from a story told by one of my favorite spiritual writers, Saint Therese of Lisieux. Therese was born in 1873, to a devout Catholic family in France, and she gained special permission in her teenage years to join a convent as a cloistered Carmelite nun. She only lived to age twenty-four, but during those brief years in the convent she wrote a spiritual journal that has become a religious classic.
Here is a favorite passage of mine, where she describes having to deal spiritually with an especially disagreeable member of her religious community:

[O]ne of the nuns managed to irritate me whatever she did or said. The devil was mixed up in it, for it was certainly he who made me see so many disagreeable traits in her. As I did not want to give way to my natural dislike of her, I told myself that charity should not only be a matter of feeling but should show itself in deeds. So I set myself to do for this sister just what I should have done for someone I loved most dearly. Every time I met her, I prayed for her and offered God all her virtues and her merits. I was sure this would greatly delight Jesus, for every artist likes to have his works praised and the divine Artist of souls is pleased when we do not halt outside the exterior of the sanctuary where He has chosen to dwell but go inside and admire its beauty.2

I find Saint Therese’s image of the Divine Artist to be especially helpful. For Christians, striving to experience our solidarity with other human beings—especially those with whom we are inclined to differ on important matters—is a process something like an exercise in art appreciation. To some of people, art appreciation, in the straightforward sense of learning to appreciate works of art, comes rather naturally. But for others of us—for most of us, I suspect—it is something we need to work hard at cultivating. (I have special reasons for confessing my lack of proper cultivation in this area. My wife is trained as an art historian, and our son says that this means that his father has sat waiting on the steps of some of the great art museums of the world!)

Developing the spiritual sensitivities necessary for treating others with gentleness and reverence is a lot like learning art appreciation. And we know that in the aesthetic realm the reason why the requisite sensitivities do not come easily for most of us is due in part to the fact that we have not studied the subject enough. Often we don’t even know what to look for—or at—in trying to understand and appreciate a work of art. Our

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conversations together, then, as we seek to bridge the divide between our faith communities requires a kind of spiritual contemplation, a focusing on each other as the special handiwork of the Divine Artist, worthy of our mutual gentleness and reverence.

And indeed, in spite of the antagonism that often characterizes our relationships with each other, we do have much in common—much to see in each other by way of art appreciation.

Which brings me to the “Pillars of Islam” and how they can be seen as having parallels in evangelical thought and practice. Obviously, we have to think of “parallels” here in a somewhat loose manner. There certainly is no one-to-one correspondence. But beneath the surface of the specifics, there is a kinship of sorts between our two faith communities.

In a recent column published in the magazine, The New Republic, Leon Wieseltier criticized President Obama for the kind of language the president uses when he discusses Islam. Wieseltier makes no secret of his own commitment to a secularist outlook when he refers to “Obama’s creepy habit of addressing Muslims in religious terms.” What Mr. Obama’s rhetoric fails to recognize, says Wieseltier, is that the main conflict relating to Islam these days is not one between the Muslim religion and the rest of society. Rather it is the battle within Islam, between those who focus exclusively on religious categories and those who are working toward the “secularization” of Muslim life. And Wieseltier is not subtle in telling us which segment of contemporary Islam he finds “creepy.”

I have to say bluntly here that Mr. Wieseltier would also find me and many of my fellow evangelicals to be creepy. Like Muslims of deep conviction, we oppose much that is associated with the idea of “secularization” in the mind of someone like Leon Wieseltier. Note, though, that I say that we resist much associated with that idea. But we do not resist everything. It is important, many of us are convinced, to distinguish between secular-ization and secular-ism. There are key elements of the process of secularization that we can affirm. The founders of the system of government in the United States, for example, rightly opposed—in our view—“an established religion,” by which they meant the granting of a special privileged status to one among many religious denominations. This has led to a climate of religious freedom that allows us to flourish as evangelical

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Christians in an environment in which we can live out our faith, including propagating our faith through non-coercive evangelization.

This secular-ization, however, becomes secular-ism when people want to consign religion to a purely “private” realm, one where religious beliefs and values have no legitimate place in dealing with public matters. Thus, the legitimate advocacy of “the separation of church and state” is transformed into the misguided insistence on the separation of religion and public life. And here is where many of us as evangelicals want to join our Muslim friends in protesting that kind of confusion.

Ian Buruma recognizes this commonality in his recent book, *Taming the Gods: Religion and Democracy on Three Continents*. In discussing the hostility that many in Europe worry about in experiencing the growth of Muslim communities in their midst, he sees that opposition as having much to do with the way in which the Muslim presence is seen as a significant force for resisting the secularization of life in the West. And then he makes special mention of evangelicalism: the evangelical movement in North America, he says, has much in common on this score with Muslims in Europe.4

The fact of commonalities may not be all that obvious at first glance. But as I have reflected on the “Pillars of Islam” as a list of Muslim distinctives, I have been impressed by the ways in which they point us to the possibilities for finding the bridge between us. In referring to these “Pillars” here, I do not intend to treat each of these “pillars” in any detail—others at this conference are doing that with much greater wisdom than I can offer. But I do see the Pillars as embodying basic spiritual and theological emphases—underlying themes or motifs—that, properly understood, sit well with evangelicals.

The search for commonalities between religious perspectives can be a confusing business. As Bishop Stephen Neill, a British missionary-theologian who labored for several decades in India, pointed out in his discussion of interfaith topics, the “comparative method” approach to the study of religions easily goes wrong when it tries to treat “all religions as commensurables”—that is, as capable of being reduced to underlying tenets that the various religions hold in common. For example, when scholars

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take the idea of the deity and lay various conceptions side by side, they are often ignoring the fact that they are abstracting those ideas from other ideas with which they are interconnected, thus detaching the ideas in question, as Neill puts it, “from the living experiences which have given rise to them. In so doing, Neill says, “we rob them of their life,” thus ignoring “the living fabric of the religion from which the idea has been somewhat violently dissevered.”

That warning is well taken. Even so, however, there are some reasons why the comparative method works better with reference to Islam and evangelical Christianity than it does in other comparative efforts. For one thing, the shared profession of faith in the God of Abraham is a legitimate starting point for us. Furthermore, we have somewhat similar understandings of the nature of the human person and of the present human condition. We each believe, for example, that we human beings, if left on our own, cannot find the path to eternal blessedness. We need a revelation from God, a God who in turn must redirect our wills toward himself, providing us with those commandments—those prescriptions for righteousness that we could never come up with on our own—that show us the way in which we must walk if we are to be directed toward our eternal destinies.

There is another factor, however, that is especially important for our focus here on our respective roles in public life. The factor is this: our religious beliefs are for each of our communities matters of deep conviction. And each of our communities worries much about the ways in which many of the dominant patterns of the larger culture—especially the larger culture of the West—pose a serious threat to the maintenance of these deep convictions.

The huge challenge that we evangelicals face in this regard, then, is how do we live out our faith in a pluralistic society in which we acknowledge the rights of our fellow citizens—people whose values, beliefs and lifestyles we often strongly disagree with—to acknowledge nonetheless their rights enjoy the same freedoms that we claim for ourselves? And this is a topic about which Muslims and evangelicals have much to discuss together, since we both operate with equally strong convictions that we bring with

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us into the public arena—those deeply held beliefs that in good part go against the grain of the dominant cultures of the West.

But it isn’t just a matter of having convictions. It is the nature of those convictions—their content. And certainly the first Muslim Pillar—the belief in God’s Oneness and the finality of what Muslims believe has been revealed by that God to the Prophet Muhammad—that Pillar points to an emphasis that is foundational to both of our communities. Some of you may know that I have been intensely involved, over the past dozen years or so, in co-directing an ongoing dialogue between evangelicals and Mormons. A basic Mormon teaching to which we have given much attention in that dialogue is the doctrine that “God and man are of the same species.”

That kind of talk is deeply offensive theologically to both Muslims and evangelicals—and also to Jews. In our Abrahamic tradition, God is viewed as the Wholly Other. There is an unbridgeable ontological gap between Creator and creature. God is God, and we are not—nor will we ever become God.

Nor is this a mere piece of abstract metaphysics for us. The God who is Wholly Other is the One who alone is worthy of worship. And that God has revealed himself to us: the Transcendent One has spoken, which means that we are not without guidance regarding the basic issues of time and eternity. We also each believe that the revealed will of this God, furthermore, speaks to us in our totality, the wholeness of our lives. This means that we cannot segregate off some area of human existence as if it was not under the rule of the Almighty. Each of our communities believes that all human beings live, to use an old Christian theological term, coram deo—“before the face of God.” Like it or not, no human being can escape the divine Presence.

It is this shared coram deo conviction that also requires a sense of our own finitude, or own awareness of the need for humility. God’s ways are above our ways, and his mysteries are beyond finding-out by the likes of us. The Apostle Paul models this sense of humility in the divine Presence as he draws to the conclusion of his difficult discussion, in the eleventh chapter of his Epistle to the Romans, of the relationship between the followers of Jesus and the Jewish people. Ultimately, all he seems capable of doing is breaking out into a hymn, one that Christians would do well to repeat regularly:
O the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgements and how inscrutable his ways!
‘For who has known the mind of the Lord?
Or who has been his counsellor?’
‘Or who has given a gift to him,
to receive a gift in return?’
For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be the glory for ever. Amen. (Romans 11: 33-36)

That first Pillar of Islam, then, points to a reality that is important for all of us. And within the Muslim context there is an obvious coherence between that first Pillar and the others. The belief in the one true God who has provided us with a clear and supremely authoritative revelation—for Muslims, through the prophet Muhammad, for Christians in Scriptures that point us to the Christ who alone can save—has a clear practical corollary in the call to life of constant prayer, as well as to reaching out to the needy and in the practice of those spiritual disciplines that cultivate the patterns of holiness in our lives.

We evangelicals have no direct parallel to the pilgrimage obligation in Islam. Travels to our “Holy Land” of the Middle East may be inspirational and instructive for Christians, but it has nothing like and obligatory character. And the Jihad concept may also seem, on first glance, to have no direct parallel in the Christian life. But understood as a willingness actively to promote the faith—even when that brings us into conflict with others—does have resonance with evangelicals. We sense a strong obligation to be faithful to the cause of the Gospel, no matter the cost.

It is precisely here, though, that we need to talk honestly with each other. We evangelicals have often acted as if there are only two options in understanding our role in public life. Either we think we have to withdraw from any active concern for public life, consigning ourselves to surviving spiritually on the margins of culture, or we decide to call on our Christian troops to try to take it over, attempting to enforce “Christian” laws and practices. I don’t see either of these options as acceptable. I am convinced that we have to explore a third option: one that recognizes that we are living, to use a good Mennonite phrase, “in the time of God’s patience.”

The advice that the Prophet Jeremiah gave in ancient times to the newly exiled people of Israel has application to our Christian presence in contemporary societies. The Israelites suddenly found themselves in what they experienced as a hostile spiritual
environment. They no longer had a temple in which to worship, and they found
themselves in a culture where the laws and practices were far removed from what they
had known in Jerusalem. Amidst their confusion about how they were to live as a people
obedient to God in this setting, the Prophet Jeremiah comes to them with a word from the
Lord. You are to build houses and reside in them, he says, and to plant gardens for food
to eat. You are also to marry off your sons and daughters so that they may “multiply” in
the land. And then this: “But seek the welfare/shalom of the city where I have sent you
into exile, and pray to the Lord on its behalf, for in its welfare/shalom you will find your
welfare/shalom” (Jeremiah 29: 4-8).

The command to them was to “seek the shalom,” the salaam, of the place where
they were living as exiles. And again, Christians need to see that as a command for us
today. It is not our job to change the world, but to respond to opportunities, in
cooperation with others, in the places where God has located us, actively to accomplish
some good things in this stage of history, in the knowledge that it is only when Christ
returns that all things will be made new.

We evangelicals need to be in dialogue with our Muslim friends about how we
can seek to accomplish some of these good things together in our present cultural
contexts. It is good also to talk about our shared discontent with much that is going on in
those cultural contexts. In this conversation we can fully expect to learn from each other.
And among other things that we have to talk about, it is important to share our
testimonies about what each of us sees as the kind of spiritual resources that we can draw
upon for cultivating for the patience and hope that can sustain us in the here-and-now.
And in all of that, may we also find the ways to encourage our respective communities to
treat each other with gentleness and reverence. Thank you, and God bless you all!

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