

Review Essay

Advancing Muslim-Christian Dialogue Today

Books Reviewed: Philip Jenkins, *God's Continent: Christianity, Islam, and Europe's Religious Crisis*. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2007; Jane Idleman Smith, *Muslims, Christians, and the Challenge of Interfaith Dialogue*. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2007; Irfan A. Omar, ed., *A Muslim View of Christianity: Essays on Dialogue by Mahmoud Ayoub*. Maryknoll, New York: Orbis, 2007.

Not surprisingly, the Archbishop of Canterbury's recent comments about integrating more of Shari`ah law within the United Kingdom's legal system raised a firestorm of protest in Britain and in many parts of the world. Yet for twenty-five years already, Britain's Muslims have been using Shari`ah law in community arbitration; by simply adding elements of Islamic jurisprudence in family matters, Muslims would be able to settle most divorce cases through arbitration, thus freeing up already congested divorce courts. Why is this suggestion so outrageous?

The only explanation for the deluge of complaints has to do with the super-charged and dangerously polarized socio-cultural and religious atmosphere of the "West" in the 2000s. Besides 9/11, other events have contributed to the ratcheting-up of Muslim-European tension: the Danish cartoon saga; the assassination of Dutch filmmaker Theo Van Gogh; the London bombings; the "Fitna" film; and, most recently, the tendentious DVD distributed to nearly 30 million American households in swing states during the presidential campaign, "Obsession: Radical Islam's War Against the West." With right-wing politicians determined to raise the specter of "Islamofascism," any mention of including aspects of the Shari`ah in "enlightened" secular legal structures is enough to give some people fits of panic.

Yet this is the context in which we must insert the three books under review, each of which examines a particular aspect of today's vastly complex Muslim-Christian relationship. Philip Jenkins marshals his consider-

able historical skill to deconstruct the shrill cries of alarm announcing the impending advent of “Eurabia,” noting that Muslims are now less than five percent of Europe’s total population. And even with Turkey joining the European Union (EU) (perhaps), the percentage of European Muslims in 2050 will probably not exceed one-fifth and, for the most part, might be rather well assimilated by then.

Jane Smith, a veteran of Muslim-Christian dialogue on several continents, offers an evaluation of that dialogue in the United States today. Her latest book is part survey of who is talking to whom, part analysis of what impedes the dialogue process, and part prescription of which modes of dialogue seem to work best in which contexts. Finally, thanks to the wise editing hand of Irfan A. Omar, we now have access to sixteen previously published (but now mostly out of reach) essays by Temple University scholar and long-time dialogue partner Mahmoud Ayoub. Due to the range and depth of Muslim-Christian topics Ayoub treats here, this book is all the more pertinent and necessary in today’s context.

I begin with the highly prolific Jenkins (thirteen major titles already in the 2000s) and his third book of a trilogy: *God’s Continent*. Having documented the phenomenal growth and diversity of Christianity in the “global south,” Jenkins, turning his attention to Europe, adds this subtitle: *Christianity, Islam, and Europe’s Religious Crisis*. In this last installment, readers will be pleasantly surprised to find that the lion’s share of the book deals exclusively with various aspects of Muslim life in Europe and, I might add, with impressive dexterity and depth.

After sifting through some of the current media-propagated myths about a moribund church with a plummeting birth rate and a massive influx of Muslim immigrants with high birth rates, Jenkins looks at the actual population statistics and examines the underlying assumptions behind the political fear-mongering. True, the highest percentages of Muslims in France, the Netherlands, and Germany could reach 25 percent in a couple of generations. But just as European Protestants who had fled to the New World trembled at the thought of mass Catholic immigration (yes, they have now reached the 25 percent mark!), so the great cultural and ethnic varieties of Catholics have been comfortably assimilated, with even one of them becoming president. With time as well, Muslim immigrant communities will see their birth rates decline, as is already happening in many Muslim nations.

Concerning the European church (chapters 2 through 4), there is no denying that the institutional churches, whether Catholic or Protestant, are

experiencing a profound crisis, if plummeting church attendance is any reliable indication. At the same time, many Europeans still identify themselves as Christian, parishes continue to function with greater lay involvement (more than compensating for the lack of clergy), and pilgrimages to holy places have actually mushroomed of late. Beyond that, millions of fervently Christian immigrants from Africa, the Caribbean, and Asia have infused a new religious fervor into the European landscape.

In chapter 5, "The Moor's Return," Jenkins offers some historical background to Europe's experience with Islam: the long story of military conflict and political oppression on both sides. Now, of course, in the postcolonial era, we witness "the empires coming home," that is, European nations in the second half of the last century turning to their former colonies for the labor their booming economies desperately craved. Hence, "[a] map of Muslim Europe today represents a ghost of the industrial scene of fifty years ago" (p. 111). Decades later, it is clear that these "temporary workers," including many Muslim asylum seekers from conflict-ridden areas, have settled permanently. Surprisingly, the greatest concentrations of Muslims are not in western Europe, but rather in the Balkans and Russia.

With a dizzying set of sources in several languages at hand, Jenkins sets out to educate his readers about European Muslims. First, he dispels the clichés about Wahhabism and begins to describe the kaleidoscope of cultures, ethnicities, and religious currents, from the Indian Deobandi movement to various Sufi brotherhoods, and from the Ahmadiyahs to the zealous Tablighi Jama'at. But just because European Muslims since the 1970s have "become more orthodox, more conscious of pan-Islamic identities and causes" (p. 127), this does not mean that this "new universalized or globalized Islam" (Olivier Roy) will be the only ideology to compete for the youths' loyalty; so will the surrounding society's secularizing pressures. True, the Left's collapse in eastern Europe around 1989 left a void filled largely with an ideological version of Islam vulnerable to the influences of outside forces. Nevertheless, such reformist voices as those of Tariq Ramadan and others are also impacting these youths in the direction of an engaged, self-consciously European Islam.

Although Jenkins does devote a whole chapter to the landscape of jihadist organizations in Europe (chapter 9: "Ultras"), it is merely an elegant summary of what one can read elsewhere. More noteworthy is his preceding chapter, "Revolutions at Home," in which he places western stereotypes about Muslim family values in the context of many other past immigrant stories: "[w]hatever the religious context, issues of gender and family often prove divisive during eras of mass migration" (p. 180). Village and farm sex-

ual mores suffer when transplanted to an urban setting. This is also where Jenkins begins a discussion about multiculturalism, which he develops more fully in his last two chapters (“Transforming Europe” and “Transforming Faith”). After all, issues swirling around forced marriages, rape, honor killings, and female circumcision touch at the heart of cultural practices that, while having little or no religious affiliation, have everything to do with the rapid transition from a traditional, conservative, and patriarchal culture to a secularized, urban one.

The greater presence of Islam in Europe has also triggered a reaction on the part of other faiths. Besides the ugly racism and anti-immigration stances of many ultra-Right parties, there has been an undeniable “rediscovery of ‘Christian values,’” writes Jenkins. While some clergy in Britain would be ready to displace St. George as England’s patron saint because it is offensive to Muslims, a 2006 report by “the normally very liberal Church of England challenged the whole multifaith concept and the ‘privileging’ of Islam” (p. 262). As the EU comes to grips with Europe’s changing religious landscape, concludes Jenkins, Europeans will experience a bumpy ride, to be sure. At the same time,

[b]oth Islam and Christianity will change radically in coming decades, through the experience of living in Europe’s social and cultural environment but also from the fact of living side by side and having to interact with each other in a multifaith setting. (p. 260)

This is precisely the theme of Smith’s *Muslims, Christians, and the Challenge of Interfaith Dialogue* – but now on American soil. Gone is the breathtaking multi-disciplinary panorama of religious analysis and abundance of notes and references of all kinds in Jenkins’ volume. Rather, Smith’s book (about half the length) is a helpful and concise introduction, for the novice and specialist alike, to the current state of Muslim-Christian dialogue in the United States. The index is particularly useful, as are the six pages of end-notes. The bibliography (five pages) contains just the books or scholars referred to in the text – hence the word *introduction*.

Smith begins with three vignettes, presenting an array of dialogical situations to be alluded to in other parts of the book. The first two are hypothetical: a local ecumenical council brings together a pastor and an imam and a few members of their congregations for a meeting at a local library; and a group of African Americans, both Muslim and Christian, meet for the first time in a church to see where they might go with an initiative that was really not their own. The third vignette recounts an actual experience of a Catholic-Muslim dialogue group that, after several initial get-to-know-you

sessions, led to solid friendships on both sides and later spun off a series of events designed to allow the “other” to experience some aspects of their own ritual observance.

As a background to Muslim-Christian understanding, in her second chapter Smith provides an eighteen-page summary of the two communities’ past engagements, deftly touching on all of the high points of the troubled relationship, from conquests to the Crusades, and from colonialism to continued neocolonial forms of western hegemony. Special emphasis is placed on the scars left by Christian missionaries, still visible even as they are brought by Muslim immigrants to this country as a collective memory of bitterness and misunderstanding. Smith’s third chapter introduces American Islam, which, alongside the variegated experiences and cultural shades of immigrant populations that came to this country in several waves, cannot be fully understood without its African-American heritage or the recent developments among Muslim women, including both their greater religious involvement and their proliferating organizations.

In all of these topics, Smith displays her strength both as an Islamicist who has specialized for decades in American Islam and as a long-term teacher/participant in Muslim-Christian dialogue at Hartford Seminary (and now at Georgetown University). So it is from both intimate and broad experience that she distills, in chapter 4, various models of dialogue: the persuasion model, which tends to give way to dialogues in the classroom; theological exchanges and discussions about ethics; sharing rituals, spirituality, and, what is turning out to be most popular among young people, the “cooperative model for addressing pragmatic concerns.”

Yet dialogue efforts often get shipwrecked (chapter 5). Among the most dangerous rocks on which a group can run aground, Smith writes, are those of American Christians’ ignorance of international issues, the uneven positions of power on either side, and the problem of representation (who speaks for whom?). A particularly helpful example of what she calls “when windows are mirrors” is what happened when she invited Jewish and Muslim participants in her group for a Maundy Thursday service at her church. What she thought was a “window” into a ritual reenacting the Last Supper turned out to be a “mirror,” that is, it reflected Jewish assumptions back to them that they were being held accountable for Christ’s death, and Muslims felt that they were intruding upon a ritual commemorating an event that had never taken place.

The next two chapters, “Pluralistic Imperative” from Christian and then Muslim perspectives, may be Smith’s best contribution to the topic of dia-

logue in the United States today. Her working hypothesis is this: although pluralism on the socio-political level is a given, can theologians on both sides find a way to affirm a pluralist theology that recognizes in the other another God-given path to salvation? The assumption, which she never states outright, is that this would make the dialogue far more successful. True, “[t]he position of theological exclusivism is held by a majority of the world’s Christians” (p. 103). Yet this is also the case with Muslims. So she documents a spectrum of Protestant theologies on this issue, from the exclusivism of evangelicals to the pluralism of such liberals as John Hick and John Cobb. Then on the Catholic side, she laments the recent Catholic tendency to reign in the more liberal interpretations of salvation exemplified in the works of Karl Rahner and Hans Küng.

On the Muslim side, she remarks that most writers use *pluralism* in the political sense of common citizenship for people of all faiths (e.g., Sulayman Nyang or Muqtedar Khan) or in the ethical sense of social justice (e.g., Amina Wadud or Farid Esack). On the other hand, Abdulaziz Sachedina does address the theological issue head-on: for him the Qur’anic concept of *fitrah* includes a monotheistic moral compass that translates into divine guidance for Jews and Christians.

Smith concludes with a call to seize the moment, as the momentum since 9/11 portends a growing rapprochement between the two faith communities. Since then, indeed, the publication of the “Common Word” document in October 2007 addressed to Christian leaders and now signed by hundreds of international Muslim leaders and scholars, as well as the “Yale Statement,” published as a full-page ad in the *New York Times* as a response mostly by evangelicals (also signed by Archbishop of Canterbury Rowan Williams and others), seem to substantiate the hope expressed in her book.

Mahmoud Ayoub’s *A Muslim View of Christianity* is certainly offered with the same concerns in mind. First, some general comments about its content are in order. Ayoub and Irfan Omar (his editor) have selected sixteen out of a total of twenty-five essays of Ayoub’s written on this topic over the years. Though much overlap in terms of concepts and Qur’anic passages discussed can be observed, the book’s four sections are arranged judiciously: (a) “The Need for Dialogue” (including a look at the Qur’an and hadith, the history of conflict between the two faiths, and goals and obstacles in Muslim-Christian dialogue); (b) “Critical Theological and Juridical Issues” (holiness, martyrdom, redemption, and *dhimmitude*); (c) “Christological Issues” (Ayoub’s signal contribution: a sympathetic Islamic

evaluation of Jesus as “God’s word,” “son of God,” Jesus in Shi`i and Sufi literature, and Jesus as the “word of truth” in light of the crucifixion); and (d) “Muslim-Christian Dialogue in the Modern World” (contemporary exegetical issues, Muslim apologetics and polemics vis-à-vis Christians, and Pope John Paul II on Islam). This hope was further buoyed by the recent Catholic-Muslim forum at the Vatican, attended by almost thirty participants on each side. The consensus seemed to be mostly positive, with Muslims inviting their counterparts for a renewed dialogue in 2010, this time in a Muslim country.

As can be seen, the topics are far too numerous to be commented on here. I will simply signal two issues raised by Ayoub that I consider crucial in today’s atmosphere of dialogue. Both themes loom large in his “Introduction” (pp. 1-6) and beautifully summarize the consistent passion of this scholar, a man of faith and a religious bridge-builder. The first one crops up in nearly every essay: “The Qur’an accepts with approval both religious pluralism and diversity” (p. 3). That this is the “theological pluralism” Smith was promoting is certain: “I am convinced that neither the Qur’an nor Muhammad demanded that Jews and Christians abandon their faiths for Islam in return for peace and harmony with Muslims.” (p. 3) Besides affirming the truth contained in the Torah and the Injil, the Qur’an seems to hold out hope for other faiths as well, as long as they enjoin belief in the One God and the Last Day and uphold righteous living. These perennial truths are also “the universal and primordial *islām* to which the Qur’an came to call all humankind” (p. 3).

The sad side to this affirmation is that “neither Muslims nor Jews nor Christians have so far heeded this Qur’anic summons” (p. 4). Yet this is the only basis upon which a sincere dialogue among the People of the Book can take place. As an example, Ayoub combs through decades of documents written by Pope John Paul II and concludes that over time he became more conservative in his approach. Toward the end, he was dividing humanity into two camps, “Christians and those who do not know Christ” (p. 242), and hence, the central role of mission changed. For Ayoub, this position is antithetical to dialogue “because this doctrine leaves no room for a genuine fellowship of faith, which must be the ultimate goal of interreligious dialogue” (p. 242). Put otherwise, “meaningful dialogue is possible only on the basis of religious and cultural pluralism” (p. 242).

The second theme, central to Ayoub’s nearly five decades of engaged dialogue, is “Islamic christology,” that is, his efforts to breathe new life into some of the Qur’anic statements about Isa ibn Maryam by deliberately set-

ting aside centuries of *tafsīr* often tarnished by the acidity of Muslim-Christian polemics. He does this by pointing to the role of Jesus in Shi`i theology and spirituality. This Jesus is prophet, ascetic sage, and mystic. In one translated text, Ayoub presents Jesus, Allah's servant, as being addressed by God in a series of *Uad#h quds#* found in al-Kulayni's collection (pp. 139-43). In another Shi`i hadith collection, we hear Jesus the sage teaching mainly from the Sermon on the Mount (pp. 143-51).

Ayoub, known for his own scholarly work on Muslim *tafsīr* collections, engages in Qur'anic commentary in his own right. In his substantial essay on the crucifixion (chapter 13), he argues that the long *tafsīr* tradition of substitution is untenable and that the Qur'anic phrase *shubbiha lahum* (4:157) should be translated as "rather it was made only to appear so to them" (p. 159). Thus for him, an Islamic christology based upon a composite reading of the Qur'an may deny the divinity of Christ and his "expiatory sacrifice"; yet it "denies neither the actual death of Christ nor his general redemptive role in human history" (p. 159). As a Christian theologian and an Islamiscist myself, I have to say that Ayoub goes a long way in this essay to illustrate what he means by a dialogue seeking "a fellowship of faith."

Irreconcilable differences will likely remain this side of heaven, but perhaps some of the mystery will be pierced through the hard work and love of believers on both sides, wrestling together with the yet unexplored implications of their texts. Is this part of the dialogue of pluralism required of us Muslims and Christians in the twenty-first century? Undoubtedly it is. Yet regardless of how we choose to interpret "pluralism," we have no choice but to move forward. And in doing so, we cannot ignore Ayoub's pioneering work.

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