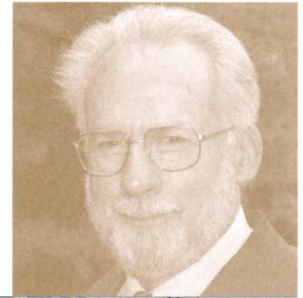


TRUST-BUILDING IN A WORLD OF RELIGIOUS PLURALISM

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FOUR YEARS AGO I WAS INVITED BY THE MUSLIM STUDENTS' ASSOCIATION OF THE UNITED KINGDOM TO ENGAGE IN SIX DIALOGUES WITH A MUSLIM THEOLOGIAN, IMAM SHABIR ALLY. The venues for these three-hour events were the Central London Mosque and five universities. At that time, I was Academic Dean and Professor of Theology at the Lithuania Christian College, in Klaipeda, Lithuania. However, for much of my adult life, I had been engaged in various ways in Christian conversation and witness with Muslims.

The first event convened in the Central London Mosque. The hall was packed. My hosts estimated 400 men – how many women were behind the curtain, we could not ascertain. It was a very intense three-hour encounter as Shabir Ally and I engaged one another on the nature of revelation. He had been schooled in the confrontational, rhetorical style of the late Ahmed Dedat, a South African Muslim polemicist whose writings are read and distributed by Muslims around the world.

The next morning Imam Shabir Ally confided to me, “You presented the gospel last evening with clarity and the whole congregation listened with intense interest. They did not shout you down even when you explained dimensions of the gospel that are very other than Islam! Do you know why you had their respectful attention?” The Imam continued, “The congregation received your presentation because you respect me. If you and I would not have a relationship of mutual respect, you could not share the gospel in the way you did last night.”

Integrity and respect are complementary. These commitments are, however, different than tolerance, which has become a buzz word in Western liberal democracies. Commitments to tolerance are rooted in a values-oriented worldview. Values are relative to each society. Western liberal democracy insists on tolerance toward different values.

However, that is not how Shabir Ally and I approached the Islam and gospel realities that evening. Shabir Ally opened his discourse by confessing that the Qur'an is the criterion of all truth. I confessed that Jesus is Lord. The Imam never said, “The Qur'an is truth from my perspective,” or “the Qur'an is my core value!” Rather, he commenced his presentation with his confession of faith and the evidential reasons for that confession.

We did not talk past each other. We both contributed to the dialogue from the truth-centres that are at the heart of our lives. Although those truth-centres were very different, we both were in full agreement on a core conviction that is alien to the assumptions of Western

liberal democratic societies. Shabir Ally, as a Muslim, and I, as a Christian, both believe that there is universal truth that can be known. We also believe that ultimate truth is revealed truth. We believe that it is urgently necessary to debate, search, question and listen, in order that we can know and commit to the truth, truth that only the Architect and Creator of the universe can reveal. Our dialogue centred on this core question: what has God revealed?” Does he in mercy send his will down to us (Islam), or does he love us so much that he has entered our history suffering with us and because of us (the gospel)?

In that Central London mosque, Shabir Ally and I were debating questions of ultimate truth. We were both aware, and everyone in the mosque knew, that “Jesus is Lord” and “the Qur'an is the criterion of all truth” cannot be equally true. That is why the evening was so exceedingly intense. We knew we were probing the foundations of ultimate truth. We knew that Jesus for the Christian and Qur'an for the Muslim decisively form our respective understandings of the nature of God and the human condition. We knew that this conversation was about ultimate reality and commitments. We questioned and probed the evidence and the practical implications of the truth claims of Islam and the gospel.

Lesslie Newbigin wrote insightfully on the issues truth and pluralist culture that I allude to above; he has also addressed in some depth the truth malaise within Western society.¹ Although within the scientific community, people debate the truth of scientific data and theories related to the natural world, our modern pluralist societies resist conversation or debate about ultimate truth, although we are prepared to discuss values.² This is why Jesus is pushed to the edges of our cultures. He never talked about values, always and only about truth. He always spoke with the imperative of a truth-teller, not a value recommender.³

About a decade ago, there was quite intense confrontation between the Western world and China on human rights. Over that time, about thirty political and professional leaders from Sichuan Province visited the USA, and included the Mennonite/Amish communities of eastern Pennsylvania in their visit. I was invited to address the group on the ways that the Christian faith influences American political culture. I began by saying that church buildings often have a steeple. “The steeple is a sign that God the creator is other than the good creation, but that he has not abandoned us. The steeple is also a sign that God reveals himself to us, and that he

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NOTES

1. Lesslie Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society* (Grand Rapids/London: Eerdmans/SPCK, 1989); *Truth to Tell: The Gospel as Public Truth* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991); *The Gospel as Public Truth: Applying the Gospel in the Modern World* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991). See also Allan Bloom, *The Closing of the American Mind: How Higher Education has Failed Democracy and Impoverished the Souls of Today's Students* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1987).

2. Lesslie Newbigin, *Foolishness to the Greeks: The Gospel and Western Culture* (Grand Rapids/London: Eerdmans/SPCK, 1986).

3. For example, Jesus said, "Simply let your 'Yes' be 'Yes,' and your 'No,' 'No'; anything beyond this comes from the evil one" (Mt 5:37). This was not values talk; it was truth-centred imperative talk.

4. For example, among the Jita of Tanzania, among whom I lived for a year as a teenager, the traditional religion required that all twins be killed. My boyhood respect for the Jita did not require that I tolerate that practice! In fact, the emerging Jita Church confronted the infanticide of twins. Twins were redeemed by the church! In time, one of the first redeemed girl twins became the wife of a pastor.

5. David W Shenk and Linford Stutzman, *Practicing Truth: Confident Witness in our Pluralist World* (Scottsdale: Herald Press, 1999). This book is a compendium of essays on the themes of truth and pluralist culture. The essays explore the theological foundations for the Christian commitment to a confessional and witnessing faith; it also reaffirms the practical dimensions of faith – truth expressed in praxis.

David W Shenk, *Global Gods: Exploring the Role of Religions in Modern Societies* (Scottsdale: Herald Press, 1999), which views the praxis dimensions of truth by exploring the way faith and the religions affect societies. Hans Küng, *On Being a Christian* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1978). Küng suggests that one way for Christians to explore the truth and pluralistic religions issues is to ask, "What do people of other religions consider to be distinctive in the Christian faith?" This book is an exploration of those distinctives.

► speaks to us. What does he reveal, what does he say? He reveals much about himself, but today I will comment on one of the first things God revealed that is recorded in the first sentences of the Bible. God revealed that the first human couple, Adam and Eve, were created in God's own image. That revelation is the foundation of our commitment as Christians to human rights. The person and all humanity are created in God's image, and therefore the dignity and freedom of every person must be respected. As church we try to hold our government accountable to this universal truth: every person on earth is created in God's image, whether in the womb, a child, an adult, or an old person, whether a man or a woman."

My speech was interrupted as the men and women from the Chinese delegation became very animated and began to argue amongst themselves. Obviously, the message was having a profound impact. Gradually, the discussion shifted from a debate about Western versus Chinese values, to a reflection on universal truth.

If all humanity is created in God's image, then the dignity and freedom of the person and all humanity becomes a universal mandate. The implications are astounding and revolutionary, within every society and within every culture. There are signs of truth within everyone and within every culture. If the person is created in God's image, then surely even in our sinfulness that image is not totally eradicated. We are called to relate to people respectfully, whilst also giving witness to the truth that we embrace, but that does mean we should tolerate destructive behaviour.⁴

During our years serving in a church mission assignment in Muslim Somalia, our Muslim companions often commented, "We trust you Mennonites." One reason for this was vulnerability. In Somalia, it was illegal to propagate Christianity, but there was no law against the praxis of loving service,⁵ so when a missionary was slain by a zealous mullah, we continued our educational and medical ministries. Then the government required that Islam be taught by Muslim teachers in the Somalia Mennonite Mission schools. That was a struggle for us, yet in counsel with Muslim friends, the emerging church in Somalia, and our sponsoring church constituency, we came to discernment that we should accept the requirement and we went forward with plans to enlarge our education programs in Somalia, with Muslim teachers teaching a course on Islam in all our schools. That decision was an enormous step forward in trust-building between us and the Muslim society in

which we served and it opened unexpected doors for the hearing and receiving of the gospel.

Some years later, when living in the Muslim area of the city of Nairobi, I helped develop a Bible study course for Muslims known as the People of God. Half of the writing team were believers in Christ who came from Muslim backgrounds. Occasionally, we quoted from the Qur'an, when we felt there was a helpful link between the biblical material and the Qur'anic scriptures. This simple study was a four-year effort, for we were very concerned that the essence of the gospel be communicated as good news within an Islamic worldview.

Then I took the course to a Muslim Imam who often stood on the street corner near our home preaching Islam. Frequently, his sermons critiqued the Church and Christian faith. I told him, "We have developed this course so that Muslims can understand the meaning of the gospel. We have quoted the Qur'an from time to time. This gives us much concern, for we do not want in any way to distort the meaning of the Qur'an. Our question to you as a respected Muslim leader and theologian is whether there is anything in this course that distorts the meaning of Islam or the Qur'an and whether there is anything in the course that is offensive to you."

Two weeks later I returned to the Imam's home. He thanked me for inviting him to critique the course. "No quotes from the Qur'an are used in ways that distort Islam or the meaning of the Qur'an. However, the chapter on the 'fall' of Adam and Eve was most offensive and made me exceedingly chagrined," he said. I therefore invited the Imam to help me write that chapter. Instead of using "fall" language, we wrote of Adam and Eve turning away from God and becoming sinful; we all experience this turning away from God and sinfulness.

As we concluded our hour together, he thanked me for seeking his counsel, and then said, "I still totally disagree with the theology of human sinfulness, but now I can hear what you are saying. This is an excellent course, and I will recommend to Muslims that they take the course for it clearly explains the Christian faith. We Muslims need to know what you believe!" In spite of our theological differences, we had learnt to trust one another. The course has now been or is being translated into some forty languages, by Christian groups around the world, who are committed to communicating the gospel within an Islamic worldview. ■