The Future of the Christian-Muslim Past: Reflecting with Charles Taylor on Interreligious Relations

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David Thomas has spent his scholarly career analysing ancient texts bearing on the seminal unfolding of Christian-Muslim mutual understanding (or sometimes the lack of it). It would be odd were he never to have felt tempted to question the value of such an endeavour, faced, as he will have been, by the imperative to project ‘impact’ in the real world. If, as Donald Allchin avers, we ‘live at a moment when our ways of thinking, acting and feeling are changing so rapidly that there is a tendency to believe that only what is turned towards the future can be of real importance’1 then why bother with the past encounter of two religious communities, especially when it has been so much less happy than that which we hope awaits future generations? Why devote hours to poring over forgotten manuscripts instead of engaging in dialogue in the present? The answer is, however, that, if you believe that the past is somehow given in the here and now, and, furthermore, that the future can only grow out of the resources currently available, then the meticulous investigation of the Christian-Muslim past, far from being an eccentric displacement activity, is an absolute pre-condition for the promotion of healthy relations between the two religions. In this paper, I turn to the work of a celebrated scholar who has given his life to excavating the multi-layered sediment of the past all around us, the Canadian political philosopher, Charles Taylor, so as to better navigate the treacherous waters of an uncertain future. His A Secular Age (2007) has, in the seven years since its publication, attracted the attention of many Christian intellectuals anxious to contest some of the more banal explanations of how religion works in the modern world.2 He does not, of course, directly touch

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on Christian-Muslim relations, and, indeed, leaves Islam almost entirely out of his account of the progress of occidental civilisation. Yet, there are fruitful exchanges to be had between Muslims and Christians in the West exploring his ideas, exchanges which could help all sides to go beyond facile stereotypes and polemics. I will address four themes, all related in one way or another to the genesis and nature of ‘modernity’, so frequently the unacknowledged third partner in any conversation between adherents of the two religions.

**Islam and the Genealogy of Modernity**

The colonial takeover of Muslim territories by western powers (notably Britain, France, the Netherlands and Russia) left Muslims with a crisis of cognitive dissonance centred on the question: how could the arrow of history which had clearly been pointing towards the slow but sure establishment of Islam as the religion of the world have been so suddenly and unexpectedly reversed? How could Islam’s destiny have been so cruelly disrupted? This crisis provoked diverse responses, including a call for a theoretical understanding of what occidental modernity meant, where it came from, and how, if at all, it could be appropriated by Muslims. One aspect of modernity was of particular fascination and is of on-going moment in Christian-Muslim relations today: whatever it was, it had grown up in Christian lands, hence it was to be appraised alongside the religion of the ‘people of the Gospel’ who must have played some role in its coming into being. The coupling was both unavoidable and fateful.

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