CHAPTER 32

Textual Authority and Hermeneutical Adventure:
Three 21st Century Dialogue Initiatives*

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Introduction

Christians and Muslims presume, for the most part, that the substance of their respective revelation—the divine message or ‘word’—as recorded in the relevant Holy Text is, by virtue of its origin, absolute, immediate and clear: in short, apodictic. This holds for Christians reading the Holy Bible and Muslims reading or reciting the Holy Qurʾān. God speaks; we listen. God’s word is clear; our hearing of it requires only that we be attentive—except that the once-spoken word is now conveyed via a written medium, even within a tradition that prizes memory and oral recitation. For the most part we ‘hear’ the word of God by virtue of reading, and attending to, its written manifestation. But whereas an assumption of apodicity can yield to presumptions of ‘literal’ readings of scriptural text, the fact remains that such an assumption is itself a hermeneutical act: it is the selected, or assumed, lens of interpretation whereby sense and meaning is made of the words of the text. Manifestly, there are others. The history of both faiths is replete in debates and developments concerning the interpretation of scripture. And the scriptural record, especially the Holy Bible (and also the Holy Qurʾān, although differently in terms of range) contains many different modes of language, from direct statement to poetic allusion, and much else besides. The so-called ‘literalist’ reading of either text is, in reality, an applied hermeneutic that seeks to uphold the authority of scripture by way of presuming one lens of interpretation is not only normative but also exclusive. Such reading is generally identified, at least within the Christian community, as ‘fundamentalist’. And such reading of scripture contends with other readings:

the history of commentary upon the respective scriptural texts of Islam and Christianity testifies to that.

To be sure, Christians and Muslims take their holy texts seriously. The necessity of interpretation that has perforce accompanied the reception and application of sacred text in both Christianity and Islam is a function not of any human limitation to hear and respond to the word of God, but rather it is evidence of the priority of interpretation that a proper reception and application of the text demands. For, as believers, the message of the text is taken seriously. And taking scriptural texts seriously requires these texts to be interpreted in order to be understood aright and appositely apprehended within the life of the believer and the community of faith. And so it is of the essence of revelation to require interpretation: indeed, it could be argued that revelation occurs only within the frame of the interpretive act. This neither downplays nor negates the importance of the revelatory text as such: its authority remains sacrosanct. Thus in both Christianity and Islam it is arguably the case today that predominant views on revelation support the realisation that scriptural texts which convey revelation necessarily require close and careful interpretive reading.

How does this observation impact upon, or otherwise relate to, the issue of Christian-Muslim dialogical engagement?

One avenue of exploration can be found by turning to three significant initiatives in the field of Christian-Muslim relations that have occurred in the first decade of the 21st century of the Common Era. There are two by Christians reaching out and engaging the Muslim world that are of particular interest, and one significant act of Muslims reaching out to Christians. Of the former, the Building Bridges seminar series (hereafter: BBS) was begun in 2002 by the Archbishop of Canterbury, George Carey. Also in 2002 the Theologisches Forum Christentum-Islam (hereafter: TFCI) was initiated by an ecumenical group of young scholars in Germany. If the formation of the BBS took something of a ‘top-down’ approach—for, together with the Archbishop, the Prime Minister of England and a Jordanian Royal were co-hosts—the inception of TFCI was more a ‘bottom-up’ or grassroots-initiated event. Both, however, quickly settled into a regular, more or less annual, conference-style meetings with quality published outcomes. Just five years after these two initiatives were established, in October of 2007, an ‘Open Letter and Call from Muslim Religious Leaders’ was issued to the Christian Church, signed by some 138 Muslim clerics and academics. A Common Word between Us and You is a significant document with respect to Christian-Muslim relations and, indeed, for the wider arena of interfaith engagement with Islam and Muslim peoples. It has sparked a host of responses, including various conferences and publications, from diverse quarters. In this essay I discuss and contrast these three initiatives both with respect to their