

**THINKING INTERRELIGIOUSLY WITH MUSLIMS:
“A PRACTICAL, NOT PRIMARILY
A THEORETICAL, MATTER”¹**

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Thank you to our president, Professor Christine Hinze, for her kind introduction, and to Fr. Ott for his benediction and welcome, especially his words about right relationships. Thanks also for the land acknowledgement. I grew up in Canada, blessed to have a number of First Nations teachers, especially from the Anishinaabe, Cree, and Haida. The shirt I am wearing comes from a friend, Haida artist Dorothy Grant. I will say more about it at the end of my remarks. I know that our relationships with First Nations have not always been good, have not always been right. Nevertheless, we work to make them better. At CTSA, I think of Sr. Eva Solomon, C.S.J. and daughter of Anishinaabe elder Art Solomon. Some thirty years ago, she made this medicine wheel for me as a reminder both of the work ahead of us and the resources for that work.

Thanks to Professor Frank Clooney for inviting me to speak with you tonight, and to Mary Jane Ponyik for all of her work as the CTSA Executive Director. Thanks in advance to Dr. Axel Takács for his response. Having had the opportunity of knowing him for a few years, I am privileged to be his opening act. He is one of those extraordinary young scholars that makes me thankful that I am gainfully employed. Thank you, in particular, to the extraordinary comparative theologians who are with us, as well as more generally to all of you who are here tonight. I joined the CTSA in 2009 and have been a member since then. I was last at a convention in 2012 in St. Louis, so it is a joy to be back here with you after a decade away.

I will be talking with you for the next 30 minutes or so. The students at my university tell me that I can keep their interest for about half an hour, so I am hoping you will indulge me with that same time frame. As you have already realized, I will not be reading a paper at you. Scholarly texts rarely make good performative pieces. As someone who lives and works in Los Angeles, I have been able to connect with people in the film and television industries. One of my favorite gigs was working on the three seasons of *The Story of God with Morgan Freeman* on the National Geographic Channel. I was able to shoot an episode with Mr. Freeman in Washington, DC, and before we did that I was talking with one of the producers, and I asked if I

¹ Author’s note: My remarks were delivered as a conversation with the audience, not a scholarly paper to be read silently. My thanks to *Proceedings* editor Professor B. Kevin Brown for allowing me to preserve that version of my plenary address.

would have the opportunity to rehearse with Mr. Freeman. He looked at me with a wry smile that suggested he was thinking something like “oh you poor dear boy,” and just said, “With all due respect, you don’t have the acting chops to run lines with Mr. Freeman. So the two of you will just have a conversation and we’ll film it and see what we can use for the show.” It was a lovely reminder that even though we as professors may have certain theatrical skills that we deploy in our classes, they aren’t anything at the level of A-list, Oscar winning actors. So I will not be reading to you, but talking with you.

In this time with you tonight, I want to tell a story about Catholics and Muslims. I come from a land, Canada, that has a rich tradition of storytellers and songwriters. I will weave some of those lines into my talk with you tonight. I start with the greatest songwriter that my country has produced. No, it’s not Drake, or Justin Bieber, the Weeknd or even the blessed Rabbi Eleazar, also known as Leonard Cohen. After Lenny died in 2016, an old friend got in touch to say that he thought it was Lenny, and not Bob Dylan who should have won the Nobel Prize in literature that year. In the interest of full disclosure, I worship at Lenny’s altar, but he doesn’t hold a candle to Bobby D, either in catalogue or impact. And I had to remind my friend of the misogyny that is at work in the music industry, and that our greatest songwriter is still very much alive and with us, the incomparable Joni Mitchell. Whenever possible, I try to sneak in these lines from “A Case of You”:

... I remember that time you told me
 You said, “Love is touching souls”
 Surely you touched mine
 ‘Cause part of you pours out of me
 In these lines from time to time ...

What is astonishing about Joni’s talent is that she sees herself primarily as a painter, not as a songwriter. So, for example, in this same song, “A Case of You,” she sang about being a lonely painter, living in a box of paints. Music is her side-hustle, and she is the greatest songwriter Canada has even produced. In the demo version of the song, Joni originally sang the last line as “part of you pours out of me, in these black and white designs”, a nod to her artistic work. She then changed it to “in these lines from time to time”. I am teaching a class this summer with a writing flag, and I tell my students that with eight books and some sixty articles to my credit, I feel comfortable in my writing. But I could write for a thousand years and not come up with these lines from Joni. In a sense, I think they summarize my talk about relationships between Catholics and Muslims. We are enmeshed in each other’s lives. After Axel’s response, we can have conversations as should happen in a Catholic or Muslim setting, over something to eat and drink at the reception. I want to thank my university, especially the office of our president, Professor Timothy Law Snyder, for helping to sponsor the reception.

Let me start by telling a bit of my story, talking about myself, not to be a typically self-indulgent Angelino, but to tell an origin story of this particular Muslim, and how I came to think interreligiously. With the number of clergy here at the CTSA, let me begin with a confession. I was born in a Catholic missionary hospital in Pakistan, St. Raphael’s, literally brought into the world at the hands of a nun, Sr. Elizabeth. So I

guess Holy Mother Church eventually brings all of us home to her [said in jest and with a smile]. And I know that Frank has asked all of us to speak as much as we can about the Jesuits and their extraordinary contributions to all things Catholic, especially in this Ignatian Year,² and I promise to do that, but I also need to acknowledge the sisters, and their important works, both practical and theoretical. I grew up working class poor, in the Toronto neighborhood of Parkdale, then as now a landing place for “new Canadians.” That’s me, with my mother and little sister, over fifty years ago; and yes, as a good Muslim boy, I am in fact holding a gun [again, said in jest and with a smile].



Figure 1: The author (r) as a child with his sister and mother.

I came to Loyola Marymount University in 2005, a refugee from the California State University system, and its then-chancellor who proudly proclaimed that the role of the CSU was to “create educated workers for the California workforce.” Since I was more interested in creating educated citizens for the world, a Catholic university rooted in the liberal arts had a great appeal for me. In 2009 I became the first non-Christian tenured in the theology department, and in 2020, for my sins, which are both grievous and many, I became chair, the first Muslim to hold that position. In preparation for that work, I asked one of the Jesuits, Fr. Randy Roche, to give me the *Spiritual Exercises* (see Frank, I am including Jesuits and Ignatian pedagogy as I promised I would do). That was the nineteenth annotation, given over about thirty-five weeks. I needed it to help me with the issues that I knew I would face as chair. But what I did not realize is that it would also deepen my understanding of certain Catholic ideas and practices such as the Incarnation, or the Adoration of the Blessed Sacrament, or the observances of Good Friday. In addition, I was struck by how similar the *Exercises* were to certain Islamic spiritual practices, not simply in the coincidence of spiritual discipline, but some actual practices such as thanks and praise to God. I had great conversations with another Jesuit, Fr. Pat Ryan the McGinley Chair at Fordham, about this—the connections between Ignatian and Muslim spiritual practices.

² The convention took place during an Ignatian Year (May 2021 – July 2022), declared by Jesuit Superior General Arturo Sosa, S.J., to celebrate the five-hundredth anniversary of Ignatius Loyola’s conversion and the four-hundredth anniversary of the canonizations of Ignatius Loyola and Francis Xavier.

So that is the first point I want to make, the extraordinary work the Jesuits in particular and Catholics in general have done on Islam. Done at its best, it involves not just studying something called “Islam,” but living and working with Muslims. I think here of Pat or Fr. Tom Michel who have both lived half of their lives among Muslims, or Fr. Dan Madigan, an extraordinary scholar of the Qur’an who is here with us. Or Christian Krokus, and his marvelous work on Louis Massignon. Or one of my mentors, Jane McAuliffe, who is perhaps the Catholic woman that knows the most about the Qur’an, and has helped both Catholics and Muslims to better understand that text. Or I think of the conference that my Muslim sister, Professor Aysha Hidayatullah, did on Muslim-Catholic dialogue at the University of San Francisco, another Jesuit school, in 2015 that had participants from 23 of the 27 Jesuit schools in the United States. Or the

work of Pim Valkenberg at the Catholic University of America, or Scott Alexander at the Catholic Theological Union. There is also the more general work that Catholics have done on comparative theology, for example that of my retired LMU colleague Fr. James Fredericks. Or John Borelli or Peter Phan, who have done great work at Georgetown University. But I don’t need to go into those details, as they should be known to you here at the CTSA. As should the work on Catholic-Muslim dialogue since *Nostra Aetate*. Or that this work goes back centuries, with for example the Franciscans having in their rule instructions for how they were to live among and with Muslims, since before there was such an order as the Franciscans, the man who would become the blessed St. Francis met with the Muslim sultan in 1219. I think here of my Franciscan friends, the icon writer Br. Robert Lentz, or the academic, Fr. Michael Calabria, at St. Bonaventure who work on the influence of Islam on Franciscan thought. Last year, Br. Robert wrote an icon for me that we had been talking about for a decade, Our Lady of the Qur’an.

The nineteenth chapter of the Qur’an is Surah Maryam, the chapter of Mary. In that chapter, as in the Gospel of Luke, the angel Gabriel



Figure 2: Our Lady of the Qur’an, by Robert Lentz, O.F.M. © 2021. Used with permission

appears to Mary to tell her that she will have a son, even though no man has touched her. When she asks how this is possible, Gabriel replies, “Your Lord says, ‘It is easy for Me, We will make him a sign for humanity and a Mercy from Us’” (Qur’an 19:21). That is one of my favorite Qur’anic titles for Jesus, a sign for humanity and a mercy from God. The chapter goes on to describe Mary giving birth to Jesus under a palm tree, with ripe dates to feed her and her child.

Mary holds her child, Jesus, in the folds of her robe, and I can see in the icon the Qur’anic story of how Mary was once criticized by some in her community who could not accept the virgin birth of Jesus. In the story, Mary points to the child, indicating that he should speak for himself. That is one of the many miracles of Jesus in the Qur’an, that he speaks as an infant: “But they said, ‘How shall we speak to one who is still in the cradle, a little child?’ Jesus said, ‘Behold, I am God’s servant; God has given me the Book and made me a prophet. God has made me blessed, wherever I may be; and God has enjoined me to pray and to give alms so long as I live, and likewise to cherish my mother; God has not made me arrogant or unblessed. Peace be upon me the day I was born, and the day I die, and the day I am raised up alive’” (Qur’an 19:30–35).

In the Islamic tradition, one sees flames around the heads of holy people, similar to halos in Christianity. The Arabic text at the bottom of the icon is from the Qur’an 3:42, another line that might surprise some Christians since it comes not from the Gospel of Luke, but from the Qur’an: “O Mary, surely God has elected you, purified you, and exalted you above the women in all of the worlds.” Mary appears in the Qur’an, to Muslims, as she appears to other people across history and geography. I begin my comparative theology classes with Mary, quoting two simple words, “Our Lady.” I ask the students, what does the “Our” in that title mean? Does she listen to the petitions of *all* of her children, or only those who are Catholic, or an even smaller subset of those who are in the good graces of the Catholic Church? For some three years now, I’ve been trying to get a statue of Our Lady of Guadalupe on our campus, in honor of Our Lady, and in memory of my friend, our brother, the blessed David Sánchez. This is the maquette, done by the sculptor Will Pupa. Every morning, when I speak with Our Lady and offer some



Figure 3: Photograph of the maquette of Our Lady of Guadalupe, by Will Pupa. Used with permission.

incense in her honor (don't get me started on the fact that I have to be careful about when I burn incense for Our Lady, because of the sensitivities of my colleagues who find such rituals to be problematic), I ask that if she wants this on our campus at LMU, that she make it happen. I have my own relationship to Our Lady, with its own origin story. Here I think of another song, "Song of Bernadette," written by Jennifer Warnes and the blessed Leonard Cohen:

... We've been around, we fall, we fly
 We mostly fall, we mostly run
 And every now and then we try
 To mend the damage that we've done
 Tonight, tonight I just can't rest
 I've got this joy inside my breast ...

We are delighted to welcome back with us to the CTSA Professor Rita George-Tvrtković who teaches at Benedictine University and has a marvelous book on how Our Lady has been used by Muslims and Catholics.³ Rita returns today from Rome where she was a consultor for the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue.

In thinking historically, I think also of the many, many connections between Muslim and Catholic thinkers in the medieval world. I was fortunate to do my graduate work at the University of Toronto with people like Jane McAuliffe, or the blessed Norman Daniel, who was working on a revision of his magisterial book, *Islam and the West: The Making of an Image*. Or of the blessed Michael Marmura, who did extraordinary work on Ibn Sina, Avicenna, and showed how Ibn Sina was not only a transmitter of Greek thought, but was one of the key people in rethinking that work in the medieval period. I think of one of our CTSA members and 2009 John Courtney Murray award winner, Fr. David Burrell, who has done amazing work on these connections of medieval thought between Jews, Muslims, and Catholics.

In turn, this makes me think of my master at the University of Toronto, the blessed Wilfred Cantwell Smith, who wrote so eloquently about the unity of humanity. I sing one song, and it is the song of my master, who wrote: "Those who believe in the unity of humankind, and those who believe in the unity of God, should be prepared therefore to discover a unity of humankind's religious history. We are not so prepared, however".⁴

In my classes, I use these lines from Jack Miles' *Religion as we Know It* about the interplay between science and religion told as a marvelous story of two boys playing,

Isaac Newton...wrote famously, and rather poignantly: "I do not know what I may appear to the world; but to myself I seem to have been only a boy playing on the seashore, and diverting myself in now and then finding a smoother pebble or a prettier shell than ordinary, while the great ocean of truth lay all undiscovered before me." ...

³ Rita George-Tvrtković, *Christians, Muslims, and Mary: A History* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 2018).

⁴ Wilfred Cantwell Smith, *Towards a World Theology* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1981), 4.

And I think of religion as a second boy playing with that first boy on the beach but saying to him at a certain point, “This has been fun, but it’s getting dark, the tide is coming in, supper may be almost ready, and I’m going home. The ocean will still be there tomorrow. If you come along, I promise to tell you a story on the way.”⁵

I think of Jack’s words about the work that we do, and the importance of play in that work, alongside of the words of my master, the blessed Wilfred Cantwell Smith. In 1981’s *Towards a World Theology*, he wrote: “To read a statement in a Sanskrit or Arabic text one must know what it says but also what it takes for granted. One must listen to what people leave unsaid, be sensitive to their failures, recognize what they do in terms of what they are trying to do.”⁶ Wilfred continued with words that, read in hindsight, I realize have shaped my work and my thought about thinking interreligiously for over thirty years. He wrote,

Fundamentally, one makes a rather stupid historian if one fails to recognize that other people are in fact human beings like ourselves. This statement seems so obvious, and so innocent, and yet the depth of our academic crisis [and remember, he’s writing this in 1981, when I was still in high school, and the concern in universities was for a certain kind of “scientific” knowledge and something called “objectivity” in the humane sciences] lies in the fact that it is so radical. If one does not see and feel that the people whom one studies are human beings like ourselves—and if as teacher and scholar one does not enable one’s students and one’s readers to see and to feel it—then one has failed as an historian, has failed to arrive at knowledge. If some wish to call this kind of humane knowledge “unscientific” I do not much mind; I would rather be on the right track than orthodox.⁷

In that same text, *Towards a World Theology*, Wilfred gave me the title of this talk, where he imagined a Muslim responding to a Christian theology of comparative religion with the line that, “Piety, for us, is a practical, not primarily a theoretical, matter.”⁸ That is my second point about thinking interreligiously, a focus on what the Church speaks of as the “dialogue of life,” about how we live in the world. We need to pay more attention to that, to what our president, Professor Hinze, will speak about in her CTSA presidential plenary on Sunday, as the “work in our time.”

This November, I become the president of another scholarly society, the American Academy of Religion. I have not made my theme public yet, but I am happy to announce that theme to friends here, with the request that you do not publicize it until it comes out officially from the AAR this fall. This fall, I will have lived for the past

⁵ Jack Miles, *Religion as We Know It: An Origin Story* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2020), 139-140.

⁶ Smith, *Towards a World Theology*, 65.

⁷ Smith, *Towards a World Theology*, 65.

⁸ Smith, *Towards a World Theology*, 134.

25 years in Los Angeles, and will deliver my AAR presidential address in November 2023 in San Antonio. In those cities, as well as in the Southwest more broadly, the dominant language is not English, but Spanish. I don't *habla* well enough to give my address in Spanish, but I want the title to be in Spanish, to reflect what is also the dominant language of the American Catholic Church. The next AAR Presidential theme will be *la obra de nuestras manos*, the work of our hands. I do not mean to graft myself onto the struggle, or claim to be part of La Raza, or anything like that. But I cut my teeth at California State University, Northridge in the late 1990s, one of the key places in Los Angeles for what was then known as Chicano studies, under the guidance of the OG, Professor Rudy Acuña, whose *Occupied America* was one of the first books I read about my new location. I want to acknowledge where I am, and where I work, a Muslim Guadalupano, where Spanish is the dominant language but often is not recognized as such. When I first came up with the title, child that I am of working class, immigrant parents, the only word I knew for work was *trabajo*, but my friends that I discussed it with thought *obra* was the better term. It is in this dialogue of life that most of us do our work.

Wilfred wrote about the problems with some of that work, especially about the fallacy of “discipline”:

Just as the Christian missionary wrote for Christians, so the sociologist has tended to write for sociologists. And this, not as a foible, like his jargon; but on principle. I suggest that there is an intellectual flaw here. The thing is amusingly sectarian: one writes only for those who share certain presuppositions (and whose ritual is certain methodologies). This fallacy is enshrined in the contemporary concept of ‘discipline’, which postulates a particular body of people who esoterically share a certain body of knowledge. It has come to be the case that, both in practice and in theory, academics of the objectivist, as distinct from the humane, sort read (academically) only within their own discipline, accept as authoritative criticism the judgement only of their ‘peers’, by which they mean other members of their group. And so on. This is subjectivity with a vengeance!⁹

A third point here, and I do not mean to be impolite or ungrateful for the opportunities accorded to me either at LMU or the CTSA, is to mention Catholics and Islamophobia. I think here of the important work of the Bridge Initiative at Georgetown University, and the writings of Jordan Duffner. Axel, who has been waiting patiently for his turn, which I promise will come soon, has an outstanding article from earlier this year in *Horizons*, the journal of the College Theology Society, “Undoing and Unsayng Islamophobia: Toward a Restorative and Praxis-Oriented Catholic Theology with Islam.” In that article, he wrote that his work “challenges Catholic theologians of Islam, members of the Catholic hierarchy, and educators at the university, secondary, and parish level, particularly in North America and Europe, to adopt an actively anti-Islamophobic theology that should inform interreligious practice with communities of

⁹ Smith, *Towards a World Theology*, 74.

Muslims; just as it is not enough ‘not to be racist’ to abolish racism (rather one must be actively antiracist), similarly it is not enough ‘not to express anti-Muslim bigotry’ to abolish Islamophobia.”¹⁰

In thinking about a comparative theology of religion, I again go back to Wilfred’s work.

When Muslims have in the past read Western studies of Islamics, they usually have not liked them, to put it mildly. They have resented the arrogance, inherent in those days in most Christian, most secularist and all behaviourist orientations. They have been repelled by the distortions, introduced by externalist viewing. They have been made uncomfortable, by having what were premises turned into objects of scrutiny. None the less, there is at least a grain of truth—and sometimes, much more than a grain—in many of these alien observations.¹¹

You know about this when it is applied to the Catholic tradition. Philip Jenkins has written eloquently in *The New Anti-Catholicism* about anti-Catholic discrimination. You know this history, that two hundred years ago there was a concern for immigrants who came to this country, bringing with them their strange, violent, un-American religion in a language other than English. It was not Islam and Muslims they were talking about, but Catholicism and Catholics. You are all sadly familiar with the anti-Catholic cartoon from Thomas Nast, first published on September 30, 1871, “American River Ganges”.

With all respect, I think of the hateful questions I have gotten when I speak to Christians, unfortunately sometimes in Catholic settings. You, American Catholics, should know better, as you were once us. But now you have become American, and unfortunately sometimes you forget your history. Think of us, American Muslims, as your brothers and sisters. Remember the lines that the master taught us from Matthew’s Gospel, the Parable of the Great Banquet (Mt 25:31-46) applied not only to Christians, but to all of us human beings. Again, I go back to Wilfred, and his lines: “Our solidarity precedes our particularity, and is part of our self-transcendence. The truth of all of us is part of the truth of each of us. It is self-consciously we who differ.”¹² He continued,

A Christian theology of comparative religion is, therefore, not a view from within one tradition or community out upon the others. To conceive it so has been the chief error until now, and is inherently bound to fail, whether the other tradition or community perceived as object be considered critically or charitably. Rather, that theology, if it is to be true, becomes a Christian view (and I stress the adjective) from within all. It postulates that we see ourselves as participants in one community, the human: that the Christians see the Christian

¹⁰ Axel Marc Oaks Takacs, “Undoing and Unsayings Islamophobia: Toward a Restorative and Praxis-Oriented Catholic Theology with Islam,” *Horizons* 48 (2021): 3.

¹¹ Smith, *Towards a World Theology*, 99.

¹² Smith, *Towards a World Theology*, 103.

group and other groups as fellow participants in that one community.¹³

In discussing historiography, he writes,

The clearing away of later ‘accretions’, the exploding and dismissal of accumulated legends, the analysis of everything into the parts out of which it was made up, the tracing back of those parts each to its origin, the search for causes (not for effects): all these constitute the zeal of the historical researcher. It leads to what I have called ‘studying history backwards’, the so-called historical outlook having become one that looks at anything and perceives it in terms of its antecedents; forgetting that in fact time’s arrow points the other way. History is not the past; history is process.”¹⁴

A fourth point in our shared lives is in the training of priests in interfaith and Muslim–Catholic dialogue. We do this at LMU, mostly in our graduate program in Pastoral theology, often with priests from India and Africa. African and Indian Catholics, by their location, are engaged in comparative theology. Priests need to be able to handle the questions that their parishioners pose to them about Islam and Muslims.

My final point about our shared lives is about classroom teaching, what we teach in our Catholic schools. Do we teach about Islam and Muslims with honesty and integrity? Axel will speak about this, about the need to teach interreligiously, and not to tack this on to the end of a course as some kind of footnote. He concluded his *Horizons* article with this magisterial line, and it is with his words that I draw to a close: “A Catholic theology with Islam seeks to be interreligious by bringing these communities together to strive for the impossible: justice in this world.”¹⁵ I mentioned at the beginning that I would say more about my shirt. The shirt that I am wearing has a Haida image of humans, done by my friend, the Haida artist Dorothy Grant. We always need to keep in mind our common humanity, that despite our differences, which may be considerable, we are all human beings who live and work together. Thank you!



Figure 4: The author presenting at the with the shirt bearing the Haida image of humans by the Haida artist, Dorothy Grant.

¹³ Smith, *Towards a World Theology*, 103.

¹⁴ Smith, *Towards a World Theology*, 155.

¹⁵ Takacs, “Undoing and Unsayng Islamophobia,” 47.