ISLAM AND CHRISTIAN THEOLOGIANS

Once upon a time an itinerant grammarian came to a body of water and enlisted the services of a boatman to ferry him across. As they made their way, the grammarian asked the boatman, "Do you know the science of grammar?" The humble boatman thought for a moment and admitted somewhat dejectedly that he did not. Not much later, a growing storm began to imperil the small vessel. Said the boatman to the grammarian, "Do you know the science of swimming?"

On the eve of the new millennium too much of our theological activity remains shockingly intramural. Instead of allowing an inherent energy to launch us into the larger reality of global religiosity, we insist on protecting our theology from the threat of contamination. If we continue to resist serious engagement with other theological traditions, and that of Islam in particular, our theology may prove as useful as grammar in a typhoon. But what would swimming look like in theological terms? In the words of Robert Neville, "One of the most important tasks of theology today is to develop strategies for determining how to enter into the meaning system of another tradition, not merely as a temporary member of that tradition, but in such a way as to see how they bear upon one another."[1]

I propose to approach this vast subject by describing the "Three M's" of Muslim-Christian theological engagement: Models (or methods from the past); Method (or a model for future experimentation); and Motives.

I. MODELS: FROM JOHN OF DAMASCUS TO KENNETH CRAGG

Four historical models represent broadly how Christian theologians have accounted for the Church's relationship to Islamic thought. The four are the apologetical, the scholastic, the Christian-inclusivist, and the dialogical.

The Apologetical Model: Defining Islam in Relation to Christianity

The apologetical model we find well represented in the work of John of Damascus (ca. 655-750), whose family served the Umayyad caliph in the administration of the newly proclaimed Islamic capital of Damascus. Daniel Sahas observes that, "Studying John of Damascus as a real person, living and reasoning with his own people and with the Muslim settlers in his home city . . . discloses one of the most serious originators of the Muslim-Christian dialogue.

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[1]Robert Cummings Neville, *Behind the Masks of God: An Essay Toward Comparative Theology* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1991) 166.

. . . [This study allows one to] trace the origins of some of the grossest misunderstandings which have shaped the attitude of one religion toward the other."[2]

The decree of the Iconoclastic Synod of 754, ironically, condemned John not only for his iconolatry, but for being "Saracen-minded" (*sarrakenophroni*), slapping him with a total of four anathemas. The epithet had also been applied to a number of famous iconoclasts, such as Leo III—in whose case the characterization is more readily understandable, since Leo seemed to be acting in sympathy with the iconoclastic preferences of the caliph Yazid II. But why did the synod label John a Saracen sympathizer? Evidently because its constituents regarded John's background as tainted by his living among Muslims. John's grandfather, already a high official in the Byzantine administration of the province of Syria, had been involved in negotiating the surrender of Damascus (to General Khalid ibn al-Walid and his army in 636). He extracted promises of security for all the inhabitants of Damascus except, apparently, for the nonindigenous representatives of Byzantium! The citizens of Damascus were not sorry to see the end of Byzantine rule.

John's father later inherited the position; John himself rose high in the Umayyad administration, serving as secretary—chief advisor, according to one interpretation—to the caliph 'Abd al-Malik (684–705), the man who commissioned the Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem. A celebrated legend tells how the emperor Leo III, angered by John's resistance to his iconoclastic policies, contrived to raise the caliph's suspicions against John. According to that story, the plot worked; John was ousted and headed for the monastery of St. Sabas near Jerusalem. It seems likely, however, that John actually left of his own accord, although 'Abd al-Malik's immediate successors were increasingly hostile to Christians.[3]

Part of John's major theological work, *The Fount of Knowledge*, is a section entitled "On Heresies," one portion of which is dedicated to that of the Ishmaelites. Most of the hundred heresies merit only a few lines, but the segment on Islam takes up four and a half Migne columns.[4] On balance, John of Damascus offers an example of as positive an approach to Islam as any apologist or polemicist has produced. He did, one cannot deny, condemn Islam on theological grounds; he regarded Islam as a Christian heresy chiefly because of its denial of central doctrines of redemption and the divinity of Christ. But at no time does

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[2]Daniel J. Sahas, *John of Damascus on Islam: The Heresy of the Ishmaelites* (Leiden: Brill, 1972) xiii.

[3]For comparison between John and Aquinas, see Deno John Geanakoplos, *Byzantine East and Latin West: Two Worlds of Christendom in Middle ages and Renaissance* (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1966) 22-25.

[4]Translation in John W. Voorhis, "John of Damascus on the Moslem Heresy," *Muslim World* 24 (1934) 391-98; see also Paul Khoury, "Jean Damascene et l'Islam," *Proche Orient Chretien* 7 (1957) 44-63; 8 (1958) 313-39. Outline of document's contents in Sahas *John of Damascus*, 94-95.

John distort Muslim theological positions; on the contrary he shows a remarkably thorough knowledge of Islamic sources and intellectual developments of his time. John seems intent on informing his Christian readers about Islamic beliefs and practice, and has no desire to inflame them against their Muslim neighbors. "What distinguishes John as a Christian interlocutor in the Muslim-Christian dialogue is that he was motivated to refute Islam as primarily a theological heresy and as a 'false' religious tradition, whereas later Byzantine writers were involved in anti-Muslim polemics which, more often than not, had political dimensions and support."[5] A major problem with John's contribution as a model remains his characterization of Islam as a heresy, only in its relation to Christianity; in Daniel Sahas' words, "it is an essay on Islam, in a book of Christian heresies. In this simple fact lies its significance and its weakness!"[6]

The Scholastic model: Come, Let Me Reason for Us

Our second model is the Scholastic, with Thomas Aquinas as its prime exponent. Thomas presents two faces with respect to his views of Islam. The first, largely in the *Summa Contra Gentiles*, seems to articulate what many before him and since have felt and too often said publicly. He does not shrink from hurling his share of vituperation at Muslims, and especially at Muhammad.[7] Here it is most uncharacteristic of Aquinas that he relies on hearsay or unreliable tertiary sources in his characterization, not of Islamic thought, but of the venality of Muhammad and the credulity of his followers. The false prophet seduced the gullible with promises of carnal pleasure, filled their minds with naive fabrications, and forbade them to read the Christian scriptures lest they show him up for a liar. What truth Muhammad did purvey amounted to little more than what any reasonable mind might attain.

It is puzzling that Thomas says such things even though he was clearly aware that Muslims were monotheists who believed their prophet had brought a scripture in many ways similar in content to those of Christianity and Judaism. He knew further that Muslims believe that their scripture and prophet abrogate all previous dispensations, and that Muhammad never claimed proof through miracles. Thomas also knew how Muslims regarded Christian beliefs in the Incarnation, Redemption, Eucharist, and Trinity. He may have had access to John of Damascus' work, and probably learned much about Islam from Peter the Venerable's *Summa of the Entirety of the Saracen Heresy*, some of whose weaknesses Thomas merely reproduces.[8] Aquinas more than likely had met few

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[5]Sahas, *John of Damascus*, 128-29. See also on these matters, Sahas, "The Seventh Century in Byzantine-Muslim Relations: Characteristics and Forces," *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations* 2 (1991) 3-22.

[6]Sahas, *John of Damascus*, 95

[7]See for example A. Pegis, ed. and trans., *On the Truth of the Catholic Faith*, 3 vols. (New York: Doubleday, 1955) 1:73-74.

[8]See James Kritzeck, *Peter the Venerable and Islam* (Princeton: Princeton University

if any Muslims, and his membership in the mutual denigration society to which so many Muslims and Christians have belonged over the centuries is a testimony to the insidious corrosive power of popular bigotry and fear of the other in every age. We can scarcely claim to have advanced very far beyond that.[9]

On the other hand we find Thomas evidently persuaded that a number of Islamdom's greatest intellectuals called for a more refined response. In the theological *Summa* he maintains a posture of professional decorum in his assessment of important positions of Muslim intellectuals of note, such as Ghazali (Algazel), Ibn Sina (Avicenna), and Ibn Rushd (Averroes). To them he says in effect, I take you seriously as contributors to human thought; I believe I understand what you are saying; and I think you are asking many of the right questions. But you have gone too far in some respects and not far enough in others.

Aquinas responded notably to the well-known conclusions of the great philosophical theologians on such crucial cosmological matters as the creation of the world, but the theme most relevant here is that of the status and function of prophetic revelation. An excellent study of the topic surveys the questions of the *Secunda secundae* on Prophecy with a view to assessing the influence of Muslim thought (and that of Maimonides specifically among Jewish scholars). The study categorizes Aquinas' conclusions as either largely borrowed, borrowed and partly refuted, profoundly influenced, influenced to a lesser but still measurable degree, and independent. The author, J. M. Casciaro, observes that about two thirds of Thomas' material relates directly or indirectly to earlier speculations of Muslims and Jews. Quantitatively speaking, more than half of Aquinas' texts on this subject find important correspondences in Islamic and Rabbinic literature, much in the form of opinions shared by Maimonides and one or more of the Muslim thinkers.[10]

Thomas shared Peter the Venerable's quest for a rational basis on which to engage Muslims in discussion. Indeed the conviction that Muslims were after all worth talking to on those grounds elevates both Peter and Thomas well above most of their contemporaries. (The intriguing case of Francis of Assisi is another remarkable exception, but for very different reasons.) Thomas remained steadfast in his belief that the purpose of discussion was to persuade people of the truth of Christianity, and to that extent his approach shares much with the apologetical

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Press, 1964). For more of Peter's texts, see *Petrus Venerabilis: Schriften zum Islam*, ed. and trans. Reinhold Glei (Altenberge: Corpus Islamo-Christianum Verlag, 1985).

[9]James Waltz, "Muhammad and the Muslims in Thomas Aquinas," *Muslim World* 56 (April 1976) 81-95.

[10]There is much more extensive direct citation in Thomas' earlier works concerning the theme, e.g., *De Veritate* and *Summa Contra Gentiles*. J. M. Casciaro, *El Diálogo Teológico de Santo Tomas con Musulmanes y Judios: El Tema de la Profecía y la Revelación* (Madrid: Instituto Francisco Suarez, 1969).

model; but Thomas goes a step further in the seriousness with which he takes his adversaries' positions.[11]

The Christian-Inclusivist Model: Can't We All Get Along?

In the Post-Vatican II era, Hans Kung has been working out what one might call a Christian-inclusivist model. Kung's basic assumption is that a plurality of religious systems is an undeniable and probably permanent fact. We must find a way of getting along, but without attempting to homogenize, lest anyone recoil at the thought of compromising absolute truth claims. His method involves comparison of formal doctrinal categories, with Christianity as the norm and standard. But whereas the apologist and the scholastic were responding to an Islamic impulse that had come toward them, Kung has taken a step toward Islam.

Kung places the theological encounter with Islam within the context of Christian engagement with several non-Christian traditions. He enlists the help of scholars, none adherents of any of those traditions, to lay out the theological frameworks in each instance. Noted German expert on Islamic theological sources Josef van Ess provides the "Islamic Perspectives," to which Kung offers as "A Christian Response" his rendition of the Christian perspective.

The discussion is divided into four segments: prophecy and revelation as represented in Islamic views of Muhammad and the Qur'an; a treatment of Sunni and Shi'i views of history as an approach to issues of state and law; images of

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[11]A sample of research available on this general topic: George C. Anawati and S. de Beaurecueil, "Une preuve de l'existence de Dieu chez Ghazali et s. Thomas d'Aquin," *Melanges d'Institut Dominicaine d'Etudes Orientales* (1956) 207-14; David Burrell, *Knowing the Unknowable God: Ibn Sina, Maimonides, Aquinas* (Notre Dame: Notre Dame Press, 1986); and D. Burrell and B. McGinn, eds., *God and Creation: An Ecumenical Symposium* (Notre Dame: Notre Dame Press, 1990); J. G. Flynn, "St. Thomas Aquinas' Use of the Arab Philosophers on the Nature of God," *Al-Mushir* Rawalpindi 16 (1974) 278-86; idem, "St. Thomas and Averroes on the Knowledge of God," *Abr Nahrain* 18 (1978–1979) 19-32; idem, "St. Thomas and Averroes on the Nature and Attributes of God," *Abr Nahrain* 15 (1974–1975) 39-49; idem, "St. Thomas and Avicenna on the Nature of God," *Abr Nahrain* 14 (1973-74) 53-65; Louis Gardet, "La Connaissance que Thomas d'Aquin put avoir du monde islamique" in *Aquinas and the Problems of His Time*, ed. G. Verbeke and D. Verhelst (Leuven: University of Leuven, 1976) 139-49; idem, *Regards Chretiens sur l'Islam* (Paris: Desclee de Brouwer, 1986), esp. 115-62 on Thomas and the Muslims; Salvador Gomez Nogales, "Los Arabes en la Vida y en la Doctrina de Sto. Tomas" in *Tomasso d'Aquino nel suo settimo centenario* (Naples: Edizione Domenicane Italiane, 1975) 1:334-40; idem, "Santo Tomas y los arabes: Bibliografia," *Miscelanea Comillas* 63 (1975) 205-50; Alfred Guillaume, "Christian and Muslim Theology as Represented by Al-Shahrastani and St. Thomas Aquinas," *Bulletin of the Schools of Oriental and African Studies* 13 (1950) 551-80; J. Lohmann, "Saint Thomas et les Arabes," *Rev. Philos. Louvain.* 74 (4e ser, 21, 1976) 30-44; and another eight articles in *Tomasso d'Aquino nel suo settimo centenario* (Naples: Edizione Domenicane Italiane, 1975) 261-360.

God and humanity, and a discussion of mysticism; and Jesus in the Qur'an as a starting point for a treatment of Islam's attitudes to other religious traditions. Van Ess' exposition is excellent and highly informative. In each instance, Kung frames the issues in decidedly Christian terms, asking in effect whether a Christian can approve of Islam's interpretations of revelation, salvation, and prophethood. He asks such questions as whether Islam is a way of salvation, whether Muhammad was a prophet, whether the Qur'an is the Word of God—all as though a Christian should be in a position to answer them objectively. As for Kung's methodological assumptions: apart from the use of Christian doctrine as the standard of truth, there lurks in the background the implicit canonization of Renaissance and Enlightenment as uniquely and definitively formative of an intelligent approach to religious matters. It has become a truism to say that the Islamic world has yet to experience either of these baptismal realities.[12]

To his enormous credit, Kung articulates as clearly as any Christian scholar to date what is really at stake here, and he then goes a step beyond that. His statement about the prophethood of Muhammad exemplifies his position: "the New Testament doesn't bid us reject in advance Muhammad's claim to be a true prophet *after* Jesus and in basic agreement with him. Naturally, the relationship between Jesus the Messiah and Muhammad the Prophet has yet to be explained in detail. Still, the simple recognition of Muhammad's title of 'prophet' would have momentous consequences, especially for the message he proclaimed, which is written down in the Qur'an."[13] In the final analysis, Kung has walked to the edge of what Paul Knitter has aptly dubbed his "theological Rubicon"—to take the frightful step of crossing over (to borrow John Dunne's phrase from *The Way of All the Earth*[14]) toward the shores of genuine pluralism might place him in the company of theologically unsavory characters.[15]

The Dialogical Model: Intertheology and Theological Cross-Reference

Anglican Bishop Kenneth Cragg, whom many consider the unofficial dean of church-affiliated Islamicists, has ventured midway across the theological Rubicon. He uses the metaphor of language translation to describe what he calls "intertheology"—one must learn to translate accurately by conceptual, rather than verbal, equivalence. Cragg takes the best in Kung's approach and puts it at the service of serious theological dialogue. Referring to the plurality of truth claims represented by the various traditions, he says, "Theology's first task . . . is to interrogate this diversity of self-legitimation, its own and that of others, and seek

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[12]Hans Kung, *Christianity and the World's Religions: Paths of Dialogue with Islam, Hinduism, and Buddhism* (Garden City NY: Doubleday, 1986) 3-132.

[13]Ibid., 28.

[14]John S. Dunne, *The Way of All the Earth: An Invitation to Cross Over to the Great Eastern Religions* (New York: Macmillan, 1972).

[15]Paul Knitter, "Hans Kung's Theological Rubicon," in *Universal Theology of Religion*, ed. Swidler, 224-30.

what might establish between us the sort of *bona fide* relationship which does not exempt its own credentials from engagement with the other. Otherwise, the closed-shop nature of what, in most religions, purports to be of universal relevance, will persist and harden. In practice we concede the givenness, the thereness, of other faiths in the world scene and their immense liabilities for society and the future. How then do we do so theologically?"[16] Cragg's model strives for more genuine mutuality than does Kung's. Where Kung still seems largely to be reacting to Islamic claims by comparing doctrinal concepts one for one, Cragg seeks broader concepts within which both parties can comfortably identify their respective doctrines.

Where can one find important theological cross-references with Islam? Cragg offers two modes of association, the one by more or less direct analogy and the other by subtle indirection. The more direct kind of cross-reference builds on functional parallels in the two traditions. For example, Cragg suggests that the shared Muslim and Christian celebration of God's greatness makes them both "theologies of Magnificat," rooted deeply in the formative experiences of their foundational figures. Here one must first look for parallels, not between Jesus and Muhammad, but between Mary and Muhammad. Mary's conviction that God's "mercy is upon those who stand in reverent awe" of God Muhammad also affirmed in almost the same terms. Like Mary, Muhammad experienced and proclaimed the grandeur of God, marvelled at the mystery of God's ongoing involvement in human affairs, and revelled in the profusion of divine largesse. Recalling the root Semitic affinity between the words for mercy and womb, Cragg suggests further cross-reference in attitudes toward the mystery of birth. Numerous Qur'anic texts celebrate the divine fertility as manifest in countless natural revelatory "signs on the horizons." All fecundity, the Qur'an insists, both reminds humankind of God's mercy and instills a profound awe.[17]

A more complex mode of cross-reference finds connection less in evident parallels than in issues on which Islam and Christianity appear to agree on some point, making mutually acceptable assertions, but for very different reasons. Cragg builds his intertheology on less obvious grounds in his discovery of intriguing Christological crossovers. Qur'an 4:172, "The Messiah would never shrink from being servant of God," calls to mind Paul's startling affirmation of Jesus' refusal to avoid servanthood by claiming a son's privilege (Phil 2:6-8). To the Islamic way of thinking, the issue is precisely the other way around: a servant would never claim to be a son. For Christians, only a Son can render the ultimate and necessary service, namely redemption; for Muslims, service of God rules out the higher honor of filiation. Cragg notes that theological relations are characterized by such cross-connections over a wide range of issues. "The contra-

[16]K. Cragg, *The Christ and the Faiths* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1986) 10.
[17]Ibid., 29-47.

Christian animus of Islam has Christian criteria, just as there are, one might truly say, Islamic reasons for continuing Christian!"[18]

Pursuing this oblique line of argument, Cragg chooses to be carried along on the current of God's transcendence rather than to risk the treacherous undertow of Trinity and Incarnation. The interconnection via God's transcendence goes like this. Both traditions affirm the divine sovereignty, even as both insist on God's responsibility for, and hence relationality with, creation and humanity through a covenant. Both teach the centrality of humanity's willing acknowledgement of God's sovereignty in grateful surrender, which by definition cannot be coerced. The God of Islam, like the God of Christianity, "has been willing to incur the most heinous of all repudiations, namely that his creatures may refuse His Lordship. We cannot make sense of *Shirk* and also see divine sovereignty as at all costs immunised from human rejection. Nor can we see that sovereignty as so unsure as to create, not creatures, but automata, not men but only nonvolitional subjects."[19] But it is at the point of the possibility of human denial of God's transcendence that Islam and Christianity part company. For Christians that possibility requires the Redemption; for Muslims it calls for a new prophetic dispensation.

II. METHOD: WORLD THEOLOGY AS A MODEL FOR THE FUTURE

Unfortunately, none of these models has worked very well, all things considered; for they all ultimately take their stand on grounds already acceptable only, or largely, to Christians. But what else is one to do? Would it not be disingenuous at best to suggest yet one more time that we strive for greater objectivity? Perhaps not. What we desperately need is a way to step momentarily outside of our theological structures, not to consign them to the Waring blender of relativism, but to see ourselves on an equal footing with all other believing human beings. "Ah—I knew it!" the skeptic may respond; "another humanist masquerading as a Christian!" Not quite. I am not suggesting that Christians give up a single syllable of our most cherished beliefs, or even that we admit publicly that interaction among faith communities and cultural forces has always effected some change, however glacial, in doctrinal expression, and will surely continue to do so. We need a way to cool our theologically fevered brows, to calm our fears of compromise or even assimilation, and to deal with the specter of threat and challenge that Islam particularly raises for so many Christians. We need a way to come together in an open field where at least for a time what matters is neither winning nor proving, nor even negotiating, but merely standing together.

Several creative thinkers have recently described such a mechanism under the name World Theology. World Theology seeks, as does the Scholastic model,

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[18]Kenneth Cragg, "Legacies and Hopes in Muslim/Christian Theology," *Islamochristiana* 3 (1977) 1-10, example from 2-3.
    [19]Ibid., 4

to establish criteria from outside a given theological tradition; but unlike the scholastic model, the criteria it proposes are theological rather than philosophical. Unlike any of the earlier models, World Theology neither defines Islam or any other tradition explicitly in terms of Christian doctrine, nor attempts to measure it against the standard of Christian truth. Its basic assumption is that it is possible to discern a common underlying thread in all human religiosity without denying that all major religious traditions are indeed different. In their recent book *A World Theology: The Central Spiritual Reality of Humankind*, Ross Reat and Edmund Perry attempt to "construct a valid *theological theory* on the basis of factual information amassed by scholars of *religious studies*." They define the desired result as "religious thought that is informed by the faiths of all human-kind but dominated by no one of them."[20]

World Theology examines the varying ways adherents of five major religious traditions give symbolic expression to their experience of the central spiritual reality or ultimate referent, which is characterized by three essential qualities: undeniability, desirability, and elusiveness. The authors analyze four types of symbolic expression in each tradition. Intellectual symbolism uses evidence and argument to persuade the mind as to the being and importance of the tradition's ultimate referent. Moral symbolism seeks to move individuals to make choices consistent with the ultimate referent by laying out the consequences of various courses of behavior. Mythological symbolism employs images of the sublime and powerful, fostering awe by its appeal to the imagination. Finally, spiritual symbolism seeks to elicit commitment to the ultimate referent by showing how a relationship to that reality is essential to individual existence.

With respect to Islam their analysis goes this way: Reat and Perry begin by reading the widespread popular and usually negative characterizations of Islam as exclusivist, literalist, and predeterministic as "points of entry for our examina-tion of Islam's ultimate referent under the headings of undeniability, desirability, and elusiveness."[21] As spiritual symbolism, Islam's exclusivism is an "appeal for personal consent to the inevitability of living with reference to an ultimate spiri-tual reality"[22] that will brook no denial, and an assertion of Islam's inclusiveness of all humankind in the divine plan. As moral symbolism, the Qur'an's insistent condemnation of all misguided vanity and aimless wandering similarly under-scores God's undeniability: God alone is the arbiter of morality, while rational ethics represents little more than an "indeterminate groping toward the good, doomed ultimately to falter short of its goal."[23] The Qur'an's frequent creation and eschatological imagery emphasizes God's undeniability as sovereign master

[20]N. Ross Reat and Edmund F. Perry, *A World Theology: The Central Spiritual Reali-ty of Humankind* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991) 313 and frontispiece.

[21]Ibid., 266; see also Wilfred Cantwell Smith, *Towards a World Theology: Faith and the Comparative History of Religion* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1981).

[22]Reat and Perry, *World Theology*, 266.

[23]Ibid., 275.

in narrative and heavily didactic mythological symbolism. Cosmological imagery in the Scripture, along with the doctrines of the inimitability of the Qur'an and the unlettered character of the Prophet, and the possibility of achieving a kind of unshakable certitude, all constitute intellectual symbolism of God's undeniability.

While many outsiders regard a perceived propensity to literalism among Muslims as a largely negative attribute, Reat and Perry interpret that perceived quality as a result of the Islamic sense of God's desirability. The Qur'an's imagery of the deity is unabashedly anthropomorphic; but Islamic theology has from the start both repudiated any tendency to think that God is at all like human beings, and condemned all attempts to reduce the scriptural imagery to mere metaphor. Given that curious combination, it seems clear that Islamic literalism is neither simply naive nor to be taken as a literal truth claim. "Evocative depiction" of God and of the eschaton serves to express mythologically "the desirability of the ultimately real by attempting to devalue the material reality that is so immediately appealing to the thoughtless."[24] That mythological symbolism in turn underscores the spiritual symbolism of the desirability of meeting, being with, and being accepted by God, the Beloved of so much splendid mystical poetry and the goal of life's journey as symbolized in the Ka'ba in Makka. In its refusal to accord to human reason the power to arrive unaided at the ultimate truth, and in its consequent insistence that human beings wait entirely on God's good pleasure, mainstream Islamic thought reinforces intellectually the concept of infinite possibility as an aspect of the divine desirability. From the perspective of moral symbolism, Islam underscores the importance of desire to conform to God's will, rather than fear of punishment or hope of reward, as the only worthy ethical motivation.

Finally, Reat and Perry reorient a third prevailing stereotype of Muslims in a positive direction. What so many non-Muslims regard as simplistic fatalism Reat and Perry interpret as a positive clue to Muslims' sense of the ultimate reality as elusive. Theologians have elaborated some of the most amazing intellectual symbolism for affirming God's sky-blue freedom and absolute control, even at the risk of portraying a virtually despotic deity. Their statements are about who God is rather than about what human beings are not. In other words, "The Islamic doctrine of predetermination expresses the elusiveness of Allah as radical inaccessibility to human striving alone."[25] God is elusive not out of spite or coquettishness, but because elusiveness follows logically from absolute freedom. As a corollary, the moral symbolism of elusiveness is that no human being can guarantee salvation by mere good behavior. Islam's mystical tradition expresses perhaps most effectively the spiritual aspect of the divine elusiveness in the poetry of unrequited love. But however frustrating the incomparably unworthy one's quest for the incomparably lovely, the seeker must

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[24]Ibid., 289.
[25]Ibid., 302.

never forsake the discipline of striving. Finally, Reat and Perry discern mythological expressions of the divine elusiveness in the very absence of explicit iconography of the deity, and in the paucity of expressly metaphorical descriptions of God in the Qur'an.

Reat and Perry have made here a worthwhile beginning toward what Robert Cummings Neville considers the task of theology in our time, "to develop interpretants that allow us to see how the symbols, concepts, gestures, and other meaningful signs of religious practice do indeed represent divinity in some important respect or fail to do so."[26]

III. MOTIVES: FIVE PROOFS FOR THE NEED OF THEOLOGICAL DIALOGUE

First, there is the Argument from Practical Necessity: Muslims live right down the street, they have kids in the local school, they pay taxes, they vote, and they lobby. Sooner or later, even theologians will have to begin doing the theological equivalent of what citizens will have begun to do in their everyday lives, namely, account for the ever more imposing and undeniable fact of Islam in our world. From a pastoral point of view, we will need a theologically coherent way of explaining to the parishoners the relationship of Christians to their increasingly visible non-Christian neighbors, an explanation that affirms our common humanity in every possible way.

For those not persuaded by practical considerations, there is the Argument from Authority. Here is a story that wraps an A to Z around our collection of M's and illustrates the mandate from the highest authority. Abraham, the paragon of hospitality, used to put off eating breakfast each morning until some hungry traveller should wander by and accept his invitation. One day a very old man became Abraham's guest. As they were preparing to eat, Abraham said a blessing, but he noticed the old man's lips mouthed a different prayer—that of a fire-worshipper. Abraham immediately rescinded his invitation and drove the man away, saying, "I will not share my food with one who prays thus." God looked down with some irritation and chided the patriarch: "I have given this man life and sus-

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[26]Neville, *Behind the Masks*, 12. Two other programmatic comments worth noting are from 9: "The contemporary problem in theology is to construct a concept of divinity that functions to organize the multitude of concepts, symbols, images, and referring practices so that the questions of agreement, disagreement, and truth can be formulated"; and 163: "Any attempt to limit the drive toward a worldwide community of inquirers to which any theological enterprise ought to be responsible makes theology uncritical and hence untheological. The development of theology in our time is thus part of larger forces that may well transform our economic and military world society into a somewhat richer world culture. Put negatively, the failure of the drive toward world theology is but one of the many demons pushing the accident of world society toward total conflagration."

tenance for a hundred years; could you not be hospitable to him for one hour?" Abraham ran after the old Zoroastrian and brought him back home.

Bringing the argument back home as well, the Christian cannot fail to notice that Jesus talked to the Samaritan woman. The scene does not work well as a model, since Jesus is clearly the teacher and dominant in the conversation. His Hegelian method, however, bears further investigation, with its obvious allusion to thesis (Jerusalem), antithesis (Gerizim), and synthesis (Spirit and Truth). The problem with the argument from authority is that down the road from Jacob's well we find that, while Vatican II says some form of dialogue is desirable, it stops far short of suggesting genuine theological encounter. The Council's failure even to pronounce the name of Muhammad says volumes. On the other hand, the Council's statement that "the Church rejects nothing that is true and holy" in other religious traditions strongly suggests a kind of theological cross-reference centered on the notion of holiness. Jesus spoke of worshipping in spirit and truth; if the mention of truth merely raises the specter of absolutist claims all over again, the mention of spirit at least leaves open the possibility of further mutual Christian-Muslim appreciation of what our respective traditions regard as the theory and practice of sanctity.

The Argument from Intellectual Integrity suggests that one might take up the challenge of encountering Islam "because it's there." In its degraded form, the Argument from Idle Curiosity, this motive might easily allow one to slide back into the apologetical mode and thus foster competition. At the very least, the argument goes, there is no need to worry about being somehow tainted by the contact in any case. One need only recall Paul's observation about meat offered to idols, namely that one can eat it with impunity because it has in effect been offered to nothing and is therefore undefiling.

When we come to the Aesthetic Argument, we are getting closer to the heart and humanity of the matter. Some of the most deeply consoling experiences of my twenty year encounter with the sources of Islamic tradition have turned on the apprehension of stunning beauty in verbal and visual expression, as well as in thought and feeling. Some of the most glorious and moving intimations of divinity both in itself and in relation to humanity have come from the tongues and pens of Muslim religious scholars and theologians. Theology has become for most of us a science of words, of texts, of ideas. But there exists, in addition, a parallel universe, that of the visual arts, with its silent articulation of profoundest truth in both the Christian and Islamic traditions. The aesthetic argument finally comes down to this: once one has had a taste of the exquisite beauty and charm of the Islamic theological tradition, one can hardly imagine not engaging it further.[27]

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[27]See Kenneth Cragg, "The Art of Theology: Islamic and Christian Reflections," in *Islam: Past Influence and Present Challenge*, ed. Alford T. Welch and Pierre Cachia (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1979) 276-95, for stimulating comments on this topic.

Finally, the American philosopher Charles Saunders Peirce had a favorite proof for the existence of God that he called the Neglected Argument. I borrow his argument and adapt it to the notion of an unassailable reason for engaging Islamic religious thought seriously and openmindedly. Peirce argues that if God exists and in divine benevolence willed religion to be a supreme good, and therefore one that could be proven so, then "one would expect that there would be some Argument for His reality that should be obvious to all minds . . . that should earnestly strive to find the truth of the matter; and further, that this Argument should present its conclusion, not as a proposition of metaphysical theology, but in a form directly applicable to the conduct of life." It takes a "certain agreeable occupation of mind" which Peirce calls "Pure Play"; whether of aesthetic contemplation or distant castle building, or of considering some wonder of the universe, Pure Play begins with "Musement." "Impression soon passes into attentive observation, observation into musing, musing into a lively give and take of communion between self and self."[28]

In the story of the boatman and the grammarian, the Neglected Argument makes its point just as it becomes clear that there comes a time for swimming. In relation to the need for a serious theological encounter with the Islamic tradition, the Neglected Argument says simply and finally, it is time. It urges us beyond our convenient categories and comfortable ways of thinking, as illustrated in this story. Once upon a time, a mystic sat down with a grammarian. (But of course, some of my best friends are grammarians.) Said the grammarian, "A word can be only one of three things: a noun, a verb, or a particle." In shock the mystic tore his garment and exclaimed, "Alas! I have tossed to the breeze twenty years of struggle and quest, for I have held out hope that there might indeed be some other possibility. But now you have dashed my hope." In fact, the mystic had already found that much sought word, and he was only trying to goad the grammarian.[29]

The Neglected Argument lives in the actual experience and example of persons we have known, and I now introduce you to one such person. Richard McCarthy was a comfortable old shoe of a Jesuit who knew the science of grammar. Muslim listeners used to swell the otherwise Christian audiences where he preached in Baghdad, because they had heard he spoke splendid Arabic, a tongue whose speakers prize for its sounds as highly as its substance. Richard dedicated most of his adult life to the study and interpretation of several major Islamic theologians, laboring painstakingly over critical editions and translations. Exiled from Iraq in the late sixties, Richard joined the faculty of Oxford

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[28]Charles S. Peirce, "A Neglected Argument for the Reality of God," in Philip Wiener, ed., *Values in a Universe of Choice* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1958) 358-79, quoting from 359, 360, 361.

[29]A. J. Arberry, trans., *Discourses of Rumi* (New York: Samuel Weiser, 1972) 165.

University. When ill health forced him to retire from that work he moved to Cambridge, Massachussetts, where he continued his translation.

Richard would howl at the very idea of mentioning his name in the same sentence with mysticism. But for all his grammatical proficiency and precision, Dick also knew that other word. It was that openness to a dimension beyond the syntactical that allowed Richard to engage in Musement, and that in turn led to his lifelong fascination with a Muslim theologian and mystic named Abu Hamid al-Ghazali. Both men spent many years living and working in Baghdad. The crowning work of Ghazali's life was a four-volume compendium entitled *The Revivification of the Sciences of the Faith,* and it was Richard's hope that he might one day produce a complete translation of it. Although he did not live to finish that, Richard did have the pleasure of seeing in print his translation of several of Ghazali's shorter works. Toward the end of its introduction, Richard wrote of Ghazali's *magnum opus,* the *Ihya,* or Revivification: "To sum it all up, I have . . . found, and I believe others can find, in the words and example of Ghazali a true *ihya'* [quickening, revivification, bringing back to life, causing to live]—an *ihya'* from the dark, dead coldness of atheism, or, more accurately, 'without-Godness'; an *ihya'* from enervating, debilitating, and crippling sinfulness; an *ihya'* from lifeless and spiritless intellectualism; an *ihya'* from the tepidity and listlessness and uncaring of social and moral mediocrity."[30]

Richard McCarthy was by almost any standard theologically conservative and cautious to a fault; nevertheless, the last words he ever published sum up admirably how he embodied the Neglected Argument, the Humble Argument for the necessity and possibility of bold theological dialogue. "Someday," he wrote, "be it close or distant, I hope to sit down with Ghazali in a quiet corner of heaven. We shall have many things to talk about, if indeed in heaven one can be 'distracted' from the Vision of God. I shall want to thank him—him and so many others of his coreligionists."[31] When Richard set out across the sea of Islamic thought, a region scarcely mentioned on Christian seafaring charts, he expected to reach the far shore eventually. But the journey was riskier than he had imagined. Somewhere out in the deep, with swells mounting, he took some swimming lessons from his old friend al-Ghazali, the mystical boatman; now the two are doing a leisurely backstroke in the ocean of infinite Mercy some people call God. "C'mon in," they call out, "the water's fine."

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[30]Richard McCarthy, *Freedom and Fulfillment* (Boston: Twayne, 1980) lix.
[31]Ibid.