

## MUSLIM-CHRISTIAN DIALOGUE

Topic:	Can Christians Accept Muhammad as a Genuine Prophet and the Qur'an as God's Word?
Convener & Moderator:	Richard Penaskovic, Auburn University
Panelists:	Marianne Farina, Dominican School at Graduate Theological Union Amir Hussain, Loyola Marymount University Robert D. Crane, The Abraham Foundation: A Global Center for Peace Through Compassionate Justice

Since the theme of the 2010 CTSA Conference as a whole revolved around prophecy, the bulk of the presentations and the discussion dealt with the question, "Can Christians Accept Muhammad as a Genuine Prophet? rather than "Is the Qur'an God's Word?" Writing as a Muslim, Amir Hussain answered both questions with a simple Yes." Writing as a scholar of Islam and comparative theology teaching in a department of theological studies in a Catholic university, his answer became more sophisticated and complex. Hussain's presentation used the work of Wilfred Cantwell Smith to explore both questions. In 1963, Smith delivered the Taylor Lectures at Yale Divinity School (his first public appearance in the field of theology) on the first half of this question, "Is the Qur'an the word of God?" Hussain began with Wilfred C. Smith's question, and included not just the revelation of the Qur'an, but the prophethood of Muhammad. Hussain discussed both the "yes" and the "no" answers to both questions, and then attempted to justify his own "yes" answer as a comparative theologian.

Marianne Farina spoke about Muslims and Christians: Discovery and Discernment in the Spirit. "What say ye of Muhammad?" is one of the oldest questions Muslims have asked Christians and other religious communities. Throughout the ages some, like the ninth century, Assyrian patriarch, Timothy (d. 823), have answered the question stating that Muhammad "walked in the way of the prophets." Though traditionally this answer has been understood as a prudential response, it more importantly reflects the connection of Muhammad to Qur'anic revelation. Tracing key efforts to "read," i.e., hear/listen and recite/understand) the sacred texts of Islam by Christians and Christian texts by Muslims, Marianne explored the ways these approaches exemplify what she elsewhere has called the "participative reading" of our traditions. These events/assemblies are in themselves prophetic sign-acts of God's continual presence among us. In light of these sessions, she claimed that Christians could view Muhammad as a prophet similar to descriptions in the Hebrew Scriptures of leaders and sages who led people to faith in the One God. As Church documents on interreligious dialogue speak of esteem for Muhammad, Farina also suggested that Muhammad's mission might be understood as a charism to draw people to a greater realization of the immediacy, comprehensiveness, and timelessness of God's providence in creation.

Robert D. Crane, a Muslim, asked whether Christians, (or anyone else), can accept Muhammad (or anyone else) as a prophet depends on one's definition of

prophecy. One can sublimate the answer by addressing the many different levels and purposes of prophecy, always remembering that all words and symbols in religious discourse must be handled with the care and skepticism needed for working with taming rattlesnakes. One purpose of prophecy is to call believers in every religion to an epistemological awareness of God as the ultimate ontological being and therefore as the axiological source and ultimate authority for morality. In this sense the ultimate purpose of prophecy and prophets is to provide guidance in understanding the will of God as the source of justice and as the creator of ethics or the natural law, understood as what we, humans, can know of the divine law using our reason.

If this is accepted as a broad, encompassing definition of prophecy, the question then arises “what is the “prophetic” role within a dialogue of the world religions? The Islamic answer to this question developed over the course of many centuries and is known by the technical phrase the *maqasid al shari’ah* or “the higher goals and objectives of Islamic law.” This set of universal purposes and irreducible norms of human responsibilities and corresponding human rights may be known generically as the Common Word.

In the lively discussion period that followed, the participants realized that addressing the question whether Muhammad counts as a genuine prophet or not, depends on one’s particular definition of a prophet. Robert Crane asked” Should we understand a prophet as a person who feels fiercely, that is, as a scream in the night?” It was also suggested that in dealing with the theme of the session, “Is Muhammad a genuine prophet and is the Qur’an the word of God?” researchers might want to consult Christian Troll’s recent book, *Dialogue and Difference: Clarity in Christian-Muslim Relations*. The Moderator thanked the panelists for their fine work and the audience for their questions. He also challenged those in attendance to continue the interest group on the Muslim-Christian Dialogue in future CTSA conventions.

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