

COMMUNION OF SAINTS IN CHRISTIAN-MUSLIM DIALOGUE

- Topic: Communion of Saints in Christian-Muslim Dialogue
 Convener: Marianne Farina, Dominican School of Philosophy and Theology
 Moderator: David Burrell, Uganda Martyrs University, Nkozi, Uganda
 Presenters: Maura Hearden, DeSales University
 Albertus Bagus Laksana, Boston College
 Respondent: Erik Rangstrom, Boston College

Catholic and Muslim doctrines concerning the nature and function of sainthood differ. However, popular devotional practices might disclose ways these differences, which reveal greater complexity within any given tradition, might hold promise for a deeper understanding among believers. This session explored these possibilities specifically looking at the role of Mary and the practice of pilgrimage to sacred saints shrines in both Catholic and Muslim faith traditions.

Maura Hearden's paper, "Marian Dimensions of Muslim-Christian Dialogue" explored the 1968 account of an alleged appearance of the Blessed Virgin Mary to more than a quarter of a million people in Zeitoun, Egypt. The effect among Egyptian Muslims and Christians included increased piety and radically decreased interreligious tensions as people gathered "peacefully, often absorbed in the prayers of their respective traditions." Evidently, Mary's appearance reminded witnesses of certain principles already held within each tradition that led to peaceful, respectful cohabitation. In light of this history, Hearden maintained that Mary could serve as a patron for Christian-Muslim dialogue insofar as participants' conscious reflection on each tradition's already accepted Marian principles encourages a respectful, fruitful exchange. Hearden provided examples of the way in which, despite very different theological and Mariological presuppositions, Marian studies by Hans Urs Von Balthasar and Aliah Schleifer each support such behaviors. Although Hearden's presentation was limited to comments about principles encouraging constructive conduct, she acknowledged that a comparison of each tradition's "Mariology" could also serve as a hermeneutical tool with which to explore a variety of theological issues.

Albertus Bagus Laksana offered his paper, "All the Saints in One Spirit: Toward a Muslim-Catholic Understanding of *Communio Sanctorum*." Recent theological explorations, such as those of Elizabeth Johnson, are insights for reinterpreting the Catholic doctrine of *communio sanctorum*. Laksana suggested that these ideas, when viewed through a pneumatological framework, could promote a more integral, egalitarian, and cosmic understanding of the doctrine. Drawing on his own fieldwork, especially regarding pilgrimage, and anthropological studies, Laksana showed how a discussion of belief in, and practice of, venerating holy men and women or of saints, shares much in common, but also reveals important distinctions of "how the spirit concretely works in the depth of every human person, the human community, and the whole cosmos . . ." Islam describes saints (*wali*) as those who have proximity to God and share in spiritual mastery, an authority critical to sustaining common life among Muslim. Catholics

believe that saints are paradigmatic figures, who as friends of God are friends of the faithful. Through such friendship, believers deepen their communion with God. Laksana suggests that Catholics might learn from Muslims about the "authority" of saints, who share the fruits of the Holy Spirit for the life of the community. In this way, dialogues about the saints promote creative ways for Muslims and Catholics to interpret the "communion of saints," while also renewing the understanding of sainthood within respective traditions.

Erik Ranstrom responded noting that Hearden's and Laksana's proposal expound on the "universal work of the Holy Spirit in creation, cultures, and in religions." He suggested that the Vatican II document, *Lumen Gentium*, and Paul VI's encyclical *Ecclesiam Suam*, were important lenses through which to engage their proposals. He wondered whether the document, which recognizes the work of the Holy Spirit among religions and cultures, might offer a helpful critique to Hearden and Laksana's suggestions.

Ranstrom asked if the use of the Marian apparition at Zeitoun as foundational to this Marian dialogue is reminiscent of hegemonic strategies. The apparition itself, he argued is purely Christian mariology. Furthermore, Ranstrom noted, Hearden's understanding of dialogue appears too active. *Lumen Gentium* shows concern, he pointed out, for ways we might "offend" others from different religions, which calls for primacy of listening in our exchanges. He asked if the accounts of assumed common phenomena in Egypt cognizant of, as stated in *Ecclesiam Suam*, that the religious other "has a story with God prior to any missionary activity" and if so, how might this impact a theology of dialogue? In a related vein, Ranstrom suggested that Laksana's examples of shared saint veneration between Christians and Muslims could benefit conversations about exclusive and inclusive theologies of sanctity among religions.

In response to Ranstrom's critique, Hearden and Laksana, highlighted ways their theses can foster judicious dialogues. David Burrell directed further discussion with the session's participants. What emerged were experiences of interreligious dialogues that often exhibit areas of difference more than similarity, and this marks progress in comparative theological projects.

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