Conservatives and Dialogue: Why it is Essential to get Conservatives Excited About the Liberal Project?

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Allow me to offer two axioms that capture a key dilemma around interfaith relations: first, anyone who is interested or participates in interfaith dialogue does not need interfaith dialogue. Second, anyone who is opposed adamantly to interfaith dialogue desperately needs interfaith dialogue.

The first of these two axioms draws attention to the interfaith hobby. Interfaith organizations abound. Every city and town in the western world has an interfaith group. These enthusiasts have created a multitude of organizations. The oldest is probably the International Association for Religious Freedom (which can trace a history back to 1900). Then, to list just a sample, we have the International Council for Christians and Jews (which has its roots in the United States back in 1924), World Fellowship of Faiths (a Chicago based creation from 1924), the World Conference for Peace through Religion (which started in 1928), the World Congress of Faiths (which can be dated from 1936), Temple of Understanding (started in the United States in 1960), the World Interfaith Association (derived from the UN in 1963), World Thanksgiving (a US Interfaith version of Thanksgiving Day which developed in 1976), the Interfaith Foundation (organized by the Duke of Edinburgh, Prince Hussain of Jordan, and Evelyn Rothschild in the 1980s) and the Interfaith Network of the United Kingdom (which emerged from the WCF in 1987). These organizations attract people who love encountering the other.

I have participated in countless interfaith meetings. Despite the ostensible differences, there is much that is shared. In North America, they are almost all Democrat voting, New York Times reading, pro-progressive causes, liberals. They are all committed to non-violence and the quest to find peaceful means to resolve conflicts. They are delightful people. They are not a threat to world peace. For those of us who believe that interfaith dialogue can play some constructive role in bringing out better relations between the different religions and therefore contribute – to put it grandly – to world peace, those involved in interfaith dialogue do not need it.

The second axiom is grounded in the rhetoric of countless persons of faith who flirt with potentially explosive distorted views of the others. Even though the Protocols of Zion (a text outlining the Jewish plans for control of the world) has been proved to be a production of the Russian Imperial family, it continues to be read and believed by Christians and Muslims. Franklin Graham described Islam as a ‘very wicked and evil religion’; Jerry Vines (a prominent Southern Baptist) described Mohammed as a ‘demon-possessed pedophile’; and Don Richardson, the Christian missionary, believes that if Mohammed was ‘alive today, he would support Osama bin Laden.’ The hatred being unleashed against Islam by Jerry Falwell, Franklin Graham, and Pat Robertson creates a cultural setting where it is extremely difficult for Muslims. Those who are anti-Semitic and suffer from Islamaphobia simply do know Jews and Muslims. They have not read their texts with any care: they do not understand the other.

One feature of our historic moment is that we have a vast and elaborate interfaith industry, but those who need to engage constructively with the other are not participating. In this lecture, I want to suggest that we now need to move into the third dialogue phase. This phase is already underway. It contrasts markedly with the first two: the first one shaped Christianity in an intrinsic way and is best seen in the work of some of the great theologians of our tradition. Phase two emerged out of the ecumenical movement and dominated the latter part of the 20th century. This phase was characterized by ‘liberal’ Christians, who wanted to create an environment for the affirmation of the other, which involved certain fundamental theological shifts. It was this ‘liberal’ movement, which generated the first of my two axioms. Now phase three is confronting the second of the two axioms. This is where we find ‘tradition-specific’ reasons for extending the interfaith dialogue to conservatives of all traditions.
Before I proceed any further, I need to explain what I mean by interfaith dialogue. In this lecture, it
describes the attempt to engage constructively with other faith traditions. The word dialogue comes from
dia meaning ‘through’ and logos meaning ‘words’. From this, we can see that the word has nothing to do
with ‘two’, there can be numerous participants in a dialogue. Furthermore it does necessary need to
involve conversation. One can and should quite properly talk of dialogue with texts. Although there are
numerous benefits in encountering another person (learning their story is the most effective way of
overcoming prejudice and misunderstanding), it is not necessary for a person to actually meet members of
different faith traditions. Historically, for the vast majority of people, the dialogue involved a constructive
engagement with various texts.

It might be objected at the outset that the division of Christian history’s interaction with other faith
traditions into three is manifestly over-simplistic. It would be more accurate to divide the history in many
overlapping phases. Let me concede that there are other legitimate ways of dividing our interfaith past.
This particular structure, however, builds on a widespread assumption that there are only two (from
monologue to dialogue – see Swidler) or from an intolerant pre-modern Christian phase to a liberal
tolerant dialogical phase in the 20th century. The structure I am proposing is a challenge to this popular
duality by insisting the pre-modern is more interesting, the second phase is a disaster, and the third is the
future.

One further preliminary might be helpful. In this lecture, the work of Alasdair MacIntyre is an important
influence. His critique of modernity is an important aspect of my critique of phase two.

**The First phase**

The first phase starts with the New Testament and continues right up into the 20th century. It consists in
the – often unacknowledged – borrowing and engagement from non-Christian sources. As Paul in 1
Corinthians 15 struggled with the Hellenistic arguments against the resurrection of Jesus, so he imparted
certain assumptions that continue to shape Christianity. As Augustine of Hippo found faith through the
writings of the neo-Platonists, he entrenched in the Christian tradition a timeless, immutable God, which
contrasts markedly with the more dynamic God of the Hebrew Bible. In the thirteenth century, St.
Thomas Aquinas was trained in the Augustinian Platonic tradition, but then created a fresh synthesis by
linking the traditional account with an Aristotelian worldview, largely learnt from certain Muslim
thinkers. David Burrell has made this a major theme of his work. He writes:

[B]y the twelfth century a Jewish thinker of Mosaic stature, Moses Maimonides, immersed in the culture
of the Islamicate, adapted the stringent criticisms of his Muslim predecessor, al-Ghazali, had made of
Islamic “philosophers”, to defend the free creation of the universe by one God, in the face of alternatives
inspired by Plotinus. Thomas Aquinas adopted the signal philosophical work of the one whom he called
“Rabbi Moses,” The Guide of the Perplexed, to advance his project of expounding Christian revelation by
using the philosophies of Aristotle and Plato which he encountered through the writings of Ibn Sina
(Avicenna). Thus, the task of articulating the free creation of the universe, and thereby showing how
human inquiry began in wonder can peak there as well, became the fruit of an unwitting but immensely
fruitful collaboration among Jewish, Christian, and Muslim scholars, on the strength of initiatives taken
by Islamic thinkers.

The truth, then, about the Christian tradition is that many of the greatest theologians have always been
willing to engage with the truth wherever it is to be found. Aquinas was deliberate: as Burrell notes his
sources explicitly includes Rabbi Moses, let alone his enormous debt to that other ‘pagan’ Aristotle.

Recognizing the ways in which Christianity has been influenced by non-Christian sources is an important
corrective to the popular picture of our Christian past. It is not true to see our past as one of unrelenting
conflict. Repeatedly one finds the view that prior to the 20th century, there was nothing except anti-
Semitic attacks, Crusades, and Inquisitions. This is not true. There is a ‘textual’ dialogue going on for
centuries.
Granted this dialogue had its limitations. It was often ‘unacknowledged’. Augustine turned Plato into a person who would have been a Christian (if he had been born at the right time). In addition, Aquinas managed to both engage constructively with Islam and still write: “He (Mohammed) seduced the people by promises of carnal pleasure to which the concupiscence of the flesh urges us. His teaching also contained precepts that were in conformity with his promises, and he gave free rein to carnal pleasure. In all this, as is not unexpected; he was obeyed by carnal men. As for proofs of the truth of his doctrine, he brought forward only such as could be grasped by the natural ability of anyone with a very modest wisdom. Indeed, the truths that he taught he mingled with many fables and with doctrines of the greatest falsity.

He did not bring forth any signs produced in a supernatural way, which alone fittingly gives witness to divine inspiration; for a visible action that can be only divine reveals an invisibly inspired teacher of truth. On the Contrary, Mohammed said that he was sent in the power of his arms - which are signs not lacking even to robbers and tyrants. What is more, no wise men, men trained in things divine and human, believed in him from the beginning (1). Those who believed in him were brutal men and desert wanderers, utterly ignorant of all divine teaching, through whose numbers Mohammed forced others to become his follower's by the violence of his arms. Nor do divine pronouncements on part of preceding prophets offer him any witness. On the contrary, he perverts almost all the testimony of the Old and the New Testaments by making them into a fabrication of his own, as can be seen by anyone who examines his law. It was, therefore, a shrewd decision on his part to forbid his followers to read the Old and New Testaments, lest these books convict him of falsity. It is thus clear that those who place faith in his words believe foolishly."

It is also true that this period was marked by outbursts of violence. We have always had, and probably always will, people who are strongly opposed to interfaith. The logic of intolerance is strong. It was difficult to see why truth should tolerate error. Historically, traditions advocated toleration when they were in a minority, but the moment they had power, toleration became harder to justify.

However, the truth about many traditions is that they are already meshed together through this first phase of interfaith dialogue. Christianity does not simply owe a great debt to Judaism (after all, we inherited their scripture) but also to Islam, Platonism, and Secularism.

The Second phase

Most commentators date the start of the interfaith movement with the World’s Parliament of Religions. It opened in Chicago on September 11 (just a coincidence I am sure) 1893. It anticipates the shape of the second phase very clearly. First, Christians dominated the conference. Representatives in the Christian tradition delivered 78% of the 194 papers. Although evangelicals and Roman Catholics were represented, those most comfortable with the proceedings were non-evangelical Protestants. Braybrooke observes, ‘It is not surprising that some evangelical Christians viewed the Parliament with alarm. Those who took part tended to love the sinner and hate the sin. They affirmed their brotherly feeling for the Asians, but condemned other religions as they did not offer salvation.’ The non-Christian traditions who engaged most constructively with the parliament were the Hindus and the Buddhists. Indeed Swami Vivekananda (1863-1902) cultivated a significant following as a result of his various presentations. The tradition which was least prominent was Islam. Mohammed Alexander Russell Webb was the major representative. He refused to concede an inch: Islam will become the universal religion, he explained to the delegates. Right at the outset the interfaith movement was going to be led by liberal Christians, who were happy to surrender the particularities of their tradition, and would find Islam the hardest tradition to accommodate.

The interfaith and ecumenical movements overlapped in many ways. At the beginning of the century the ecumenical impulse was stronger. The motivation for ecumenical dialogue was mission. With the ‘mission field’ opening up, the Churches came together to think through how to do this effectively. But herein there was a delicious irony, as Christians accommodated their distinctive theologies to work together, certain theologians wanted to extend the process to interfaith.
Given this underlying dynamic in ecumenism, it was not surprising that there was a similar dynamic in interfaith. As Christian churches compromised their beliefs about baptism (over the arguments between infant and believers’ baptism), so it was expected that Christians and Muslims should make equivalent compromises.

Christians, more than any other religion, started to do this work with gusto. Hard texts in the Bible were explained away or even simply denounced; mission was redefined as ‘serving’; the Incarnation was reduced to a ‘myth’; and in the work of John Hick, the triune God was replaced with a ‘Real’ about which we know absolutely nothing.

John Hick’s pluralist hypothesis was the nadir of this phase. Let us give Hick due credit: he does think through with some rigor the implications for Christianity the claim that all religious traditions are potentially equally effective for salvation. The heart of the pluralist hypothesis is a single reality that is accessed and partially revealed in all the major religions of the world. Now what is the reality like? Hick’s initial writings suggested a ‘theistic pluralism’ – a single God, who was loving and good, was underpinning all the major faith traditions. But later, he recognized that ‘theistic pluralism’ could not accommodate Buddhism. Buddhism takes innumerable different forms, but there are significant strands that hardly talk about “God” at all. God hardly figures in the four Noble Truths, which are the central teaching of the Buddha. So in Hick’s Gifford Lectures, published as An Interpretation of Religion, Hick argues for a ‘Real’, which no tradition can describe or claim to know exactly. In this way, the significance of Nirvana in Buddhism can be accommodated in the experience of the Real.

So we are left with the following picture: the Real is the objective sense of the transcendent, which is interpreted differently in each culture. For Hindus living in India, they might call the transcendent ‘Krishna’, while Muslims in Turkey talk of ‘Allah’, and Christians in North America call it ‘Christ’. Hick acknowledges his debt to the Kantian distinction between the noumenal and the phenomenal. The noumenal is knowledge of the divine as ‘it is in itself’. The phenomenal is knowledge of the divine as ‘it appears to mind.’ The noumenal is inaccessible. All we know is that each culture is interpreting an ‘objective’ experience of the Real in its own language and concepts. We cannot claim that any particular culture is more or less right, because none of us can transcend our own culture and find out exactly what the Real really is like.

The problems with Hick’s pluralist hypothesis are well known and widely discussed. Four major problems had been identified. First, for most scholars, his hypothesis requires that each tradition deny (or at least radically reinterpret) the distinctive truth claims of each tradition. For Hick, any distinctive doctrine that conflicts with the pluralist hypothesis has to be rejected. So, for example, Muslims are mistaken to claim that the Qur’an is the final and definitive revelation from God as are Christians when they claim that Jesus is the incarnation of God. These doctrines, as traditionally understood, are incompatible with the pluralist hypothesis. For if the Qur’an is true, then the Qur’anic worldview is truer than the alternatives and, in particular, polytheists and Trinitarian Christians are mistaken. In response to this objection, Perry Schmidt-Leukel (in a delightfully provocative piece of writing) wants to insist that the doctrine of the Incarnation as formulated at Chalcedon is compatible with a pluralist theology of religions. At the heart of Schmidt-Leukel’s argument is that claim that the Chalcedonian emphasis on the true humanity of Jesus makes a unique incarnation very implausible. Instead Chalcedon ‘can help us both to accept the divine immanence or presence in and through other mediators, but, equally so, to remain aware that those other mediators and media share in themselves a truly human nature, with all its limitations!’

For Schmidt-Leukel we need some points of connection between the divine and the human, and Chalcedon’s talk of a ‘double-nature’ shows how this is possible, thereby providing a structure that can ‘interpret the mediators and savior figures of other religious traditions.’ Schmidt-Leukel’s ingenious argument uses Chalcedon to provide a pluralist theory of divine interaction with humanity. However, the theological purpose of the doctrine of the Incarnation (or come to that the Qur’an) is to provide an authoritative disclosure of the divine: it is a revelation that tells us what God is like. It is the content of the
revelation that poses a problem for the pluralist. Christians know that God loves to the point of the total giving of Godself because we learn that from Jesus: Muslims know about the unity of God and the total inappropriateness of association because it is disclosed in the Qur'an. To have a general theory of how the divine might interact with humanity does not overcome the fact that the various religions of the world give different accounts of what the divine is like.

The second difficulty with Hick’s hypothesis is that it is self-contradictory. He denies the possibility of providing a transcendent description and then provides one. His model claims that ultimately all the major religions of the world can be salvific. They are equally valid. Even though every orthodox believer in every major religious tradition would disagree with the claim of cosmic equality, Hick has a vantage point that enables him to see that they are all mistaken. So he does describe the way things ‘really are’: the very fact he claims that all religions are valid and yet simultaneously mistaken is a transcendent claim.

Third, Hick’s hypothesis is tantamount to ethical agnosticism. Hick’s accommodation of all this diversity has left us knowing nothing about the nature of the ‘Real’. Is the Real personal or non-personal? We do not know. We do not even know whether God is good or bad? This is the ideology of modernity operating here. As Gavin D’Costa puts it: ‘Hick’s ‘pluralism’ masks the advocation of liberal modernity’s ‘god’ in this case a form of ethical agnosticism. If ethical agnostics were to suggest that the conflict between religions would be best dealt with by everyone becoming an ethical agnostic, not only would this fail to deal with plurality, in so much as it fails to take plurality seriously, it would also fail to take religious cultures seriously by dissolving them into instrumental mythical configurations best understood within modernity’s mastercode. D’Costa is right: Hick solves the challenge of religious diversity by asking us all to become ethical agnostics.

The fourth and final difficulty is in the content of dialogue. One does not embark on dialogue to learn about theology or spirituality in a way that might change one’s view or (better still) one’s relationship with God. Given Hick’s epistemology, one shares ‘cultural pictures’. To reduce the dialogue to a study of anthropology is a very attenuated view of dialogue.

Increasingly, this second phase was dominated by this problematic framework. The interfaith dialogue movement searched out equally skeptical Muslims, Jews, Buddhists, and Hindus. It became liberals talking to liberals. At some point during a typical heart warming dialogue, the liberals in each tradition would turn on their absent co-religionists and condemn their ‘unthinking conservative theology’. The truth about this phase is that ‘semi-secular’ Christians would search for the liberals in the other traditions and celebrate their progressive commitments.

One practical problem in this phase was finding the dialogue partners. Although there are secularized Muslims and Jews, who are happy to dialogue, the majority has not been influenced to the same extent by the Enlightenment. When a traditional Jew or Muslim found themselves in the middle of these dialogues, they were puzzled by the lack of integrity and the lack of practice. In respect to integrity, the concept of being a Christian but denying the Virgin Birth of Jesus is very puzzling to a Muslim. The Qur’an is clear: Jesus was born of a Virgin. One cannot disagree with the literal Word of God. However, Christians have no problem in disagreeing with the Nicean creed. Muslims do not understand how a Christian can still call him or herself Christian when they disagree with the official beliefs. Although I am sure one can be a Christian and find the Virgin Birth problematic, in the dialogue setting it was difficult to explain. With practices, anyone involved in a dialogue is very aware of how demanding Islam is. An observant Muslim who prays five times a day will spend an hour a day (provided you do not rush them) in the presence of God. Lots of mainline progressive Christians have stopped spending time with God. The hour on a Sunday morning is often the only conscious time (I don’t count walking through the park or praying in the car on a morning commute).

In this second phase the motives for dialogue are very contrasting. For Jews and Muslims, the reason to dialogue is to challenge prejudice. Jews are constantly seeking to persuade Christians that there is no
reason for anti-Semitism. And Muslims, especially in the West, are tired of Islamaphobia and, in recent years, the perception that all Muslims are terrorists. For Christians, interfaith dialogue was the next stage in the evolution of Christianity. Now Christians would move away from their particularist and exclusivist views of God and celebrate an affirmation of the global sensitivity to a God who doesn’t judge and doesn’t demand anything.

Lest I be misunderstood, I do recognize that these ‘liberal Christians’ have played a valuable role in raising the interfaith issue. However, they leave most believing Christians behind and bemuse the observant Muslims and Jews that they encounter. As a sociological fact, most believers are not going to emulate the moves that Christians have made and arrive at a secularized, undemanding version of their faith.

The Third Phase

Even during the 20th century, there was an alternative to the dominant protestant interest in interfaith. The Roman Catholic Church after Vatican II approached interfaith in a very different way. In a variety of institutional dialogues, the Church allowed herself to encounter the other with the goal of mutual understanding and shaping. As we enter the 21st century, we find Evangelicals and Muslims involved in the dialogue. Now herein lies the hope for the world: we need those most suspicious of the other to participate in the dialogue. Dialogue in this third phase is best understood by looking at four key words tolerant, inclusivist, strategic, and creative. We shall now look at these four words in turn.

We start with the category of tolerance. Tolerance, as Perry Schmidt-Leukel, is often misunderstood. Christians who enjoy the company of Muslims, Buddhists, and Hindus are not tolerant. They enjoy diversity. When the concept of toleration emerged with the Enlightenment, it involved the permission or allowance of that which one strongly dislikes or disapproves of. Now Perry Schmidt-Leukel argues, in a way that is characteristic of phase two, that we should move beyond tolerance to a ‘deep and far-reaching approval and appreciation of each other.’ For those of us sympathetic to the third phase, the original meaning of toleration needs to be recovered. There are plenty of evangelicals who have to tolerate the teaching of Islam in Christian schools or have to tolerate the gay couple moving into their neighborhood. Allowing that which one disapproves is both difficult and important. Toleration is both acceptable and important to cultivate in the third phase. It is preferable to violence and will inevitably involve informal association with the other.

The second key word is inclusivist. Within the theology of other religions debate, the vast majority of contributors to the third phase will be the Inclusivists. Perry Schmidt-Leukel has made a strong argument for the value and logical legitimacy of the traditional taxonomy of ‘pluralism, inclusivism, and exclusivism’. So working with his definition, inclusivism can be defined as ‘the option that salvific knowledge of a transcendent reality is mediated by more than one religion, but only one of them mediates it in a uniquely superior way.’ Sociologically, inclusivism wins the day because it combines an explanation for the other with a commitment to the centrality of one’s own tradition. The majority of traditions have inclusivist devices within them: Muslims talk of the ‘People of the Book’, Jews use the ‘Noahcide Laws’, and the Bhagavad Gita promises that all worship to other gods is really worship of Krishna.

Now given my second axiom, it is important that exclusivists are recognized as important. However, there is a need for the dialogue movement to stop the endless contrast between dialogue and mission. Two people, deeply committed to converting the other, can learn a great deal from the other. It is a basic human impulse to convert: I have views on Iraq, George W. Bush, the English cricket team, and Scotch whisky. I am more than happy to share my views and would be pleased if some of you agreed with me. However, I wouldn’t want everyone to agree with me. The world would become dreadfully dull. John Stuart Mill in On Liberty was right when he pointed out that there is an intrinsic value in surrounding yourself with differing views. The contrasting view might be right or at least might raise an objection that leads one to be closer to the truth. So as a committed Christian, I would not want my Jewish or Muslims
friends to convert. I need their alternative witness. The other reason why in the third phase we worry less
about conversion is that we now know after centuries of missionary activity that the vast majority of
people do not convert. One’s faith discourse is too deep: it is a connection with friends, family, and
immediate community. Only a small number of people convert (people who are not deeply committed to a
tradition). We need to move to a situation where passionate dialogue, where one side seeks to convert the
other, is permitted. And we need to recognize that the small number of converts across traditions should
be tolerated. Meanwhile the exclusivists will come to the dialogue because they have to live with the large
total numbers of Muslims, Hindus, and Secularists (to name just three traditions which are going to continue),
which do not convert to Christianity. We need to find those most opposed to the dialogue and invite them
in.

Nevertheless, the keyword is ‘inclusivist’. Inclusivism explains why one identifies with a particular
tradition, yet provides some internal constructive device why others disagree. People of faith commit to a
tradition because they believe it is truer than the others. The fact of disagreement is puzzling and requires
explanation. The key difference between the exclusivist and the inclusivist is that the exclusivist
explanation is uncharitable (and implausible), while the inclusivist is more charitable and therefore more
plausible. So it is the Inclusivist theology which creates the most appropriate framework. The other great
advantage of inclusivism is that it links dialogue with a realist concept of truth. Unlike pluralists,
inclusivists believe that their tradition is true. Dialogue is part of the ‘truth business’. One embarks on the
conversation to learn from the other. The third phase is marked by a commitment to moving closer to
truth.

The third key word is strategic. It is mainly on the ethics front, strategic alliances are emerging. The
political right has taken the lead here. Richard John Neuhaus of ‘The Institute of Religion and Public
Life’ took the lead in creating the Evangelical and Roman Catholic alliance which was so significant in
the election of George W. Bush. Despite his own deep misgivings about Islam, he is willing to reach out
in his campaign for traditional marriage. And he was widely criticized for the link with Islamic Society of
North America. Neuhaus writes in response: Coalitions are almost always a dicey business. They are task-
specific, as it is said, meaning that you work together with individuals and organizations that are joined
by that specific task but disagree on much else. I am on the advisory board of Alliance for Marriage
(AFM), a prime mover in defending marriage from same-sex agitations. . . . We should work, here and
abroad, to cultivate connections with Muslims who evidence an interest in supporting the peaceful and
democratic directions that are in our mutual interest. Again, AFM is a task-specific coalition and ISNA is
supportive of that task. I know I have deep disagreements with ISNA religiously and also, I expect,
politically, especially with respect to the politics of the Middle East. But those are for another day and
another forum. The task at hand is the defense of marriage. Toward that end, and until somebody comes
up with compelling reasons that persuade me to the contrary, I welcome the help of the Islamic Society of
North America.

This third phase is creating significant coalitions. Neuhaus has fundamental disagreements with Muslims
yet believes that alliances for the sake of a shared cause are wholly legitimate. Comparable alliances are
being formed on the left. It was an interfaith alliance in Connecticut in 2006 over the evil of torture,
which attracted a wide range of churches, including Evangelical and Catholic, along with Muslims and
Jews.

The fourth key word is creative. Ironically, the second phase lost some of the creativity of the first. Where
Aquinas managed to denigrate in a wicked way Islam, he also managed to learn and be shaped by the
tradition. We need to move away from denigration and build on the creative theological learning.

Comparative theology started in the second phase. For some comparative theologians, the task is
primarily showing how culturally similar are the different religions. Robert Neville, for example, has
formulated an account of myth and culture that explains how the religious symbols operate. This is a
phase two approach to comparative theology. Others, however, admit a certain starting point and seek to
formulate an account of faith that takes seriously the insights from other traditions. The quest is a truer
account of God and God’s relations with the world. The masterful four volume ‘systematic theology’ written by Keith Ward is not built on a pluralist theology. For Ward, conversation with other faith traditions shapes his description of how best God should be understood. He then commends this alternative because he believes it to be more coherent and make more sense of the data than the alternatives.

However, the primary creative work is not at the level of comparative theology. The third phase needs creative work within traditions. Hick’s pluralist hypothesis was an attempt to provide a global basis for good relations between religions. The third phase sees that attempt as very misguided. Instead what is needed is a tradition-constituted account of religious diversity. What we need to encourage are theologians who seek out of the authentic center of their religious traditions and provides a justification for religious cooperation and dialogue. As a Christian, I don’t mind being told that my tradition is mistaken, that I am likely to spend time in hell, and that I am very misguided. All I ask is that we find ways of living in peace, learning to coexist, and perhaps, hopefully, allow me to learn of God from the other. To meet the challenge of the second axiom, we need the conservatives to justify co-existence and dialogue. The reasons will be internal to that tradition; they will only persuade their fellow conservatives.

I am pleased to report that this work has already started. Over the last four years, I have been studying the work of the Turkish Muslim thinker Bediuzzaman Said Nursi. I shall now conclude this lecture by exploring the thought of Bediuzzaman Said Nursi as a Muslim model of phase three interfaith activity.

A Phase Three Case Study: Bediuzzaman Said Nursi

One good example of a phase three case study for interfaith dialogue is the writings of Bediuzzaman Said Nursi. The world of Bediuzzaman (which means Wonder of the Age) Said Nursi (1873-1960) is one that moved from the concluding years of the Caliphate and Ottoman Empire, through the tragedy of the First World War, to the emergence of the Republic of Turkey in 1923 with an initial strong commitment to aggressive secularism. His major conversations partners were the West (which he saw as both ‘secular’ and ‘Christian’) and the many different forms of Islam. Primarily because of Nursi’s situation, Judaism only gets passing references. I shall show the achievement of the Risale-i Nur (the Treatise of Light) was to set an approach to Islam which is both committed to the truth of that tradition, yet simultaneously, committed to interfaith dialogue.

There are three features of Nursi’s position that I wish to examine. These are as follows:

First, Said Nursi is committed to the truth of Islam and the importance of persuading others of that truth.

Second, Nursi finds in his tradition several reasons why it is important to commit to constructive co-existence with other faith traditions.

Third, Nursi believes that the resort to violence by Muslims against non-Muslims demonstrates a lack of self-confidence in Islam. Self-confident Muslims who are strong in their faith do not need to resort to violence.

Turning then to the first feature. Islam, for Nursi, is not just a cultural religious option. Instead Islam is the final, definitive, and most elegant description of the nature of God and expectations that God has for humanity. Said Nursi believes that there are compelling rational arguments for the truth of Islam. There is pervading his writings this constant sense that anyone reading the Qur’an cannot escape acknowledging the divine origin of the text. Indeed the impact of the Qur’an is so great on the reader, that Nursi uses a reductio ad absurdum argument to defend its divine origins. After noting how the ‘common people’ cannot help but admit that the Qur’an is totally different from any other book, he explains: ‘The Qur’an, then, is of a degree either above all of them or below all of them. To be below them is impossible, and no enemy nor the Devil even could accept it. In which case, the Qur’an is above all other
books, and is therefore a miracle. Therefore, the Qur’an is the Word of the Creator of the universe. Because there is no point between the two; it is impossible and precluded that there should be.’

So, unlike John Hick, Said Nursi starts with a strong commitment to his tradition. Nursi believes that Islam is true. It is not simply true for him, but for the entire world. We do not find anywhere in Nursi’s voluminous writings the suggestion that there are many ‘truths’ about God and the Qur’an is just one such ‘truth’. There is no postmodern cultural relativism in the Risale-i Nur.

Now this ‘tradition-constituted’ starting point (to use an expression taken from the work of Alasdair MacIntyre) has one major advantage over the liberal approach of John Hick. The advantage is this: the vast majority of Muslims in the world start in the same place. The commitment to diversity, conversation, and toleration cannot start from semi-unbelief, but needs to be grounded in the particularities of the faith tradition. We need the ‘orthodox’ believers in each tradition to commit to toleration. Hick’s approach will only appeal to those who are already liberal and semi-detached from their tradition. Said Nursi’s approach is much more hopeful.

We turn now to the second feature of Said Nursi’s position on interfaith dialogue. This is his recognition that there are many positive reasons, explicitly grounded in the tradition, that encourage a positive attitude to co-existence with non-Muslims. Now given this feature alone could be a substantial paper in its own right, I shall simply confine myself to a small number of illustrations. One major illustration of this feature is Nursi’s celebration of the importance of love. So this passage from the Damascus Sermon sets the tone well: ‘What I am certain of from my experience of social life and have learnt from my life-time of study is the following: the thing most worthy of love is love, and that most deserving of enmity is enmity. That is, love and loving, which renders man’s social life secure and lead to happiness are most worthy of love and being loved. Enmity and hostility are ugly and damaging, have overturned man’s social life, and more than anything deserve loathing and enmity and to be shunned.’

Now for Nursi, this very basic commitment to love does entail a commitment to peaceful coexistence with others.

Furthermore we find in Said Nursi’s writings, a strong commitment to love, coupled with an equally strong commitment to respecting the liberty of the other. These two dispositions should shape the Muslim relationships with non-Muslims. Although he believes it is important to explain to the Christian about the truth of Islam, he recognizes that at the end of the age there will be many sincere and good Christians who have not converted to Islam. Said Nursi’s beliefs about eschatology are a safeguard to a continuing Christian population now. Although he would love to see all Christians convert to Islam, he recognizes both sociologically and, more importantly, theologically this will not happen. Christians and Jews have roles at the end of the age: for reasons already identified, Muslims have a duty to protect Christian and Jewish communities in the present. Although a Christian and a Jew might not like the theology, the social and political consequences of this theology are good.

Now of course there are more challenging texts in the Qur’an, for example, the verse that seems to prohibit the taking of Jews and Christians as friends (5:51). Said Nursi is interesting here: he concedes the validity of the text, yet insists that it is not a blanket prohibition. Instead it is confined to moments when Jews and Christians are a threat to a Muslim. Nursi explains thus: ‘A mighty religious revolution occurred in the time of the Prophet, and because all the people’s minds revolved around religion, love and hatred were concentrated on that point and they loved or hated accordingly. For this reason, love for non-Muslims inferred dissembling. But now ... what preoccupies people’s minds are progress and this world... In any event most of them are not so bound to their religions. In which case, our being friendly to them springs from our admiration for their civilization and progress, and our borrowing these. Such friendship is certainly not included in the Qur’anic prohibition.’

In other words, friendship is possible when the goals are constructive and appropriate. Said Nursi recognized throughout his life the importance of good relations with the people of the book.
The net result is a set of arguments, firmly grounded in the Qur’an and hadith, which require Muslims to have positive and constructive relations with non-Muslims. These arguments are not intended for the non-Muslims; they assume the truth of the Islamic worldview. But the outcome is that we have a strong Islamic argument for diversity, conversation, and peaceful co-existence with the other.

This leads to the third feature. For Said Nursi, the resort to inter-religious violence reflects a lack of confidence in the truth of Islam. For Nursi, only the weak resort to violence. For Islam is sufficiently strong that good arguments can bring about victory. Sukran Vahide in her biography of Nursi explains his position thus: ‘The way of the Risale-i Nur was peaceful jihad or ‘jihad of the word’ (mânevî jihad) in the struggle against aggressive atheism and irreligion. By working solely for the spread and strengthening of belief, it was to work also for the preservation of internal order and peace and stability in society in the face of the moral and spiritual destruction of communism and the forces of irreligion which aimed to destabilize society and create anarchy, and to form “a barrier” against them.’

In other words, Nursi is committed to handling disagreement with peaceful means not because he shares a western skepticism about the truth of religion, but because of the truth of religion. Nursi wants an Islamic renewal; he wants Muslims to realize the power of their tradition. And in so doing, he believes that the power of argument and reason is sufficient to hold those who already belong and attract others who are seeking God. He calls this a mānevî jihad, which is a ‘jihad of the word’ or a ‘non-physical jihad’. One of the reasons why the jihad can be non-physical is because he is confident that God will bring about the necessary victory through such a peaceful witness that uses arguments rather than violence. The God Said Nursi believes in can work wonders with the sincere effort of faithful Muslims.

So when it comes to secularist and followers of other traditions, Nursi calls for non-violent witness to the beauty and coherence of Islam. Within Islam, Nursi insists that it is an obligation on all faithful Muslims to stand united. So he writes: ‘Practice the brotherhood, love and cooperation insistently enjoined by hundreds of Qur’anic verses and traditions of the Prophet! Establish with all of you powers a union with your fellows and brothers in religion that is stronger than the union of the worldly! . . .Do not say to yourself, “Instead of spending my valuable time on such petty matters, let me spend it on more valuable things such as the invocation of God and meditation.” For precisely what you imagine to be a matter of slight importance in this moral jihad may in fact be very great.’

Once again there is an interesting argument embedded in this text. However tempting it might be to evade disagreements and squabbles in the Islamic community by an act of piety, Nursi insists that it would be wrong to do so. Living in amongst these arguments is the religious duty, for we do not know what the implications of the disagreement signify for the ‘moral jihad’.

Nursi accepts the reality of pluralism (i.e. that there are many religious traditions) and the inevitability of disagreement both within and outside the Islamic community. However, his response is not to call for a ‘recognition that Islam is just one truth amongst many’ (the strategy of John Hick), but to call for a deeper faith more committed to its distinctive claims and beliefs. For Nursi, part of the renewal he wants amongst Muslims is a greater self-confidence in the arguments for the Islamic faith that enables Muslims to enjoy the pluralist world. Like a much-loved child at home, one can venture into the world unafraid of difference and diversity because one is secure in one’s own identity.

Linked to the idea that a committed Muslim is one that can enjoy engaging with other traditions because of the power of their arguments, one final comment should be added under this heading. Nursi had plenty of secular critics who were ready to argue that committed Muslims made bad citizens. Again Nursi turns this argument around: instead of sharing the secular assumption that citizenship requires uncommitted religious people, he insists that properly committed Muslims will make model citizens. They are not a threat to the political order; they need not be committed to overthrow of the government. So in the Damascus Sermon he explains: ‘What we want now is the awakening and attention of believers, for the effect of public attention is undeniable. The aim of the Union and its purpose is to uphold the Word of God, and its way is to wage the ‘greater jihad’ with one’s own soul, and to guide others. Ninety-nine per
At every point, Nursi handles the challenge of diversity and disagreement not by resorting to the epistemological uncertainty that has shaped many western apologetics for pluralism, but by insisting on a deeper love of God and a greater understanding of the Qur’an. For Nursi, a faith commitment is the best way of handling diversity not semi-agnosticism.

**Conclusion**
In this lecture I have argued that Christians are moving into the third phase. We are moving beyond the protestant, secularized version of interfaith dialogue into one where the committed are starting to participate. This is a hopeful development. At long last those who most need to dialogue are starting to get involved. It is important that the academy does its part to facilitate this third phase.

**Footnote**

Said Nursi, *The Damascus Sermon, First Addendum, Third Part*, p. 84