Your scripture meets mine: Hospitable readings

by Miroslav Volf in the October 19, 2004 issue

A few months ago I participated in a Building Bridges Seminar, one of the annual encounters between Muslim and Christian theologians sponsored by Lambeth Palace. I was not quite sure what to expect going in. Such dialogues can range from boring to exhilarating. They are boring when both parties repeat predictable lines; they are exhilarating when each, without betraying its own identity, opens itself up to the adventure of encounter with the other. The dialogue in which I took part was exhilarating, and the main reason was the method. It was organized around reading our holy scriptures together, one session a text from the Bible and the other session a text from the Qur'an. There are two advantages to engaging one another by reading together.

First, it brings movement to calcified positions. We might reasonably fear that appealing to scripture could close off further discussion. After all, a community's scripture is its final authority. By appealing to it, interlocutors could easily come to the point where they say to each other, "Our scripture says this and your scripture says that, and that's that!" and be off to the next subject or, more distressingly, go their separate ways. Some would say that instead of discussing scriptural texts, it might be better to discuss our communally significant convictions and practices.

But if we take away the scripture, we have little to say when, after prolonged and strenuous disagreement, our interlocutors tell us, "This is what we think; this is what we do"—except to go the very unhelpful way of accusing them of being either irrational or irresponsible. Put the scripture at the center of the dialogue, and deadlock can be avoided. The disputes are now less about us and our opinions and more about something that has a claim on us and to which we give greater allegiance than we do to our own convictions.

A report from a previous session of the Building Bridges Seminar was titled "Scripture in Dialogue." If we put scripture at the center of the dialogue, we become

not so much agents of a dialogue as instruments of a dialogue whose main protagonists are our respective scriptures. Put differently, the dialogue is then not primarily about us; or rather, it is about us only because it is about our scripture. As long as we hold onto the scripture, we can loosen the grip with which we hold onto our own convictions. We are firmly rooted and yet open to change.

For introducing movement to calcified positions, almost as important as the authority of the scriptures is their immense richness. They are like the surface of the ocean I see from my office window, always the same and yet always changing, depending on light, wind and the tides. Or, if one prefers a more solid metaphor, they are like mountain peaks, solid and immovable and yet always changing as the seasons change, as the sun falls on them from different angles as we circle around them. Such inexhaustibility of the scriptures is a further reason why the dialogue around them can be so fruitful. Given both the authority and the complexity of scripture, a rich and continuing discussion can ensue with the potential to change both parties without threatening their identities as people of this or that holy book.

The second advantage of the “Scripture in Dialogue” method is related to the fact that in the past Christians and Muslims have made war against each other using scripture. We often engaged in interpretive endeavors as self-enclosed entities; we interpreted scripture not just to bolster our own identity in the face of the other but also to put down the other, even to harm the other.

I have come to consider such interpretations of scripture sinful, even when they are formally correct. At the heart of the Christian faith lies a claim that, out of incomprehensible love, our Lord Jesus Christ died for us while we were still God’s enemies, and therefore, as those who are called to imitate Christ, we can and must love all people, even our enemies. When we interpret other communities, whether of friends or enemies, such love demands that we try to see them as they see themselves and to see ourselves as they see us.

When we interpret the scripture, such love demands that we enter sympathetically into others’ efforts to interpret their scripture as well as listen to how they perceive us as readers of our own scripture. In other words, we are called to practice interpretive hospitality—to visit each other’s homes and exchange gifts as we do so. Such hospitality will not necessarily lead to agreement in the interpretation of our respective scriptures. And it will certainly not lead to agreement between our communities, for the simple reason that we hold very distinct—even if

overlapping—texts as authoritative. But such interpretive hospitality will help us better understand our own and others' scripture, and discourage us from interpreting them in opposition to each other.

To practice such hospitable readings of each other's scripture, we do not have to consider them as somehow on the same footing, on a par with God's revelation. We may well consider the scripture of our interlocutors as a revisable prophetic word of God or indeed as nothing more than a powerful and influential human word. Yet even with such stances—stances that a majority of Christians and Muslims espouse—it is possible and fruitful to practice hospitable readings of each other's holy books.

I went away from the Building Bridges Seminar with renewed conviction that in interfaith dialogues—indeed, in all the disputes in which we Christians engage—a wise strategy is to go back to the scripture.