Islamic wisdom: What Christians can learn

by John Wright
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After focusing early in his life on topics in analytic philosophy and religion, David Burrell, C.S.C., turned to studying comparative issues in Judaism, Christianity and Islam. He is the author of Knowing the Unknowable God: Ibn-Sina, Maimonides, Aquinas *(University of Notre Dame Press, 1986) and* Freedom and Creation in Three Traditions *(Notre Dame, 1993). He has also authored two translations of the works of the great medieval Islamic theologian Abu Muhammad al-Ghazali:* Al-Ghazali on the Ninety-Nine Beautiful Names of God *(Islamic Texts Society, 1993) and* Al-Ghazali on Faith in Divine Unity and Trust in Divine Providence *(Fons Vitae, 2001).*

A priest in the Congregation of the Holy Cross, Burrell is a professor at Notre Dame and has directed the university's Jerusalem program, housed at the Tantur Ecumenical Institute. We talked to him about current characterizations of Islam and about his own interfaith experiences.

It has become common to speak of a "clash of civilizations" between Islam and the West. Is there such a clash? If so, how should Christians respond to it?

The standoff between Europe and the Ottoman Empire from 1492—when Europeans gained access to two continents to exploit and so turned their back on a long war of attrition with Islam, which commenced in the time of the Crusades—to 1799, when Napoleon landed in Alexandria, certainly continued a "clash of civilizations." The clash was exacerbated by the fall of the two great imperial polities of Islam: Ottoman and Moghul.

Europe's refusal at the end of World War I to grant independence to the Arab regions that had assisted it in dismantling the Ottoman polity, together with Lord Balfour's support of a "Jewish national home" in Palestine, nipped Arab aspirations in the bud. The resulting resentment against "the West" has fueled aggressive Islamist

strategies.

The clash will continue if we continue to stiff-arm countries like Iran or do things like block the entrance of Muslim scholar Tariq Ramadan to the U.S., despite his being cleared by U.S. and Swiss security agencies. But the clash need not continue. We could attempt to understand this history and offer support to those who continue, despite this history, to want to work with us.

What do you make of Pope Benedict's Regensburg address in which he suggested that Islam struggles with the relationship between faith and reason—a point he illustrated by citing the views of a 14th-century Byzantine emperor?

The talk was poorly constructed and ill-conceived. No one tries to demonstrate a recondite thesis with a scrambled example, and that is what Benedict did. Poor composition, one would tell a student. Yet because we know the pope to be intelligent, all kinds of theories are advanced to explain why he did such a dumb thing. He should have admitted to a gaffe.

You've stressed in your own writings that Christian-Jewish-Muslim conversation is not a new idea—it was already a key dimension of Christian intellectual life in the Middle Ages. Can you give some examples of this?

Thomas Aquinas is a model for Jewish, Christian and Muslim relationships. Most Aquinas scholarship derives from northern Europe, but he was a Mediterranean. He lived in Naples, where Arabic translations were commissioned. Land travel was impossible. The crusaders came through that region, which allowed for cultural exchange. He drew deeply on the Islamic scholar Avicenna.

Aquinas was also beholden to the Jewish scholar Maimonides, a Sephardic Jew who was forced out of Cordoba by Muslims who were resisting the Spanish Reconquista (the Muslims were al-Qaeda types). Aquinas's Summa Theologiae, a classic synthesis of Christian theology, is actually an interfaith and intercultural achievement. Maimonides wrote the Guide to the Perplexed to show Jews that they should study philosophy to deepen their faith—which was Aquinas's goal also—and Aquinas read the Guide as soon as it was translated.

Can you point to a specific way that Islam and Judaism can illuminate Christian theology?

Take the doctrine of creation, for example. Islamic belief revolves around an understanding of creation. Redemption is found in the giving of the Qur'an. The analogue for the Holy Spirit in Islam is accepting the Qur'an, living by it and building a community based on it. Muslims lack the drama of redemption that Christians have.

Christians' neglect of the doctrine of creation is evident in the Nicene Creed. The creed treats redemption extensively but makes creation seem like nothing but a stage-setting for redemption. This kind of separation between nature and grace can turn into a kind of paganism, for if grace is a gift, what then is nature? Something that is just given? That would be Aristotle's view. He presumed that the world always existed. The notion of a single Creator was simply off the page for him.

When I first wrote about Aquinas I totally missed the centrality of creation in his thought, even though I worked on his names for God. After I began learning about Islam, I looked back and saw that Christians can't understand the process of redemption if we skip over creation. If you believe in a single Creator (as Judaism and Islam do), you have a chance to see your life as a vocation, rather than as a career in which everything you do is simply on your own initiative. With a free Creator, creation is a free gift.

I also learned from medieval figures like Maimonides and Al-Ghazali that if you view the world as a series of necessary emanations, which is how it was viewed by Plotinus, then there's no possibility of God giving the Torah or God calling Muhammad or Jesus. A free creation means that you have the possibility of a free God initiating redemption.

One common strategy for rectifying Christians' neglect of creation is to right the wrong by neglecting redemption! I learned from Muslims to return to the patristic mode of theology and see theology as working within an ellipse, not a circle. Creation and redemption are both foci for theology—not as though only one or the other matters, but so that we talk about each.

Many people, when they hear references to creation, think immediately about fights over evolution.

Our God is big enough to use chance as a second cause. The argument for "intelligent design" is anthropomorphic to the nth degree. Of course creation is suffused with divine wisdom; otherwise scientists wouldn't hope to understand it. We

know from scripture that God's wisdom is as "high as the heavens are above the earth"—so nature won't be intelligible on the surface of things. The "intelligent design" movement is right to look for God as part of our exploration of the world, but wrong to do so without philosophy.

How has living among Muslims changed your work?

I knew nothing about Islam before I went to Bangladesh to teach for a semester. In that country, when you say that you can meet someone for lunch the next day, you always include Insha'allah, "God willing." In that phrase, and in the five times a day when you're alerted to pray, you are reminded that all our life is in God's hands.

I was also struck by how children are taught to recite the names of God in canonical order. This is a down-to-earth practice, which doesn't say what these names mean, but nourishes faith in the divine unity and trust in divine provision. Faith, tawhid, and trust, tawakkul, are the foundation of the community.

Islam picks up where the rabbis and Aquinas left off—you say what you can about God, but you can't say much. How do you know you have it right? Faith is one-third of the battle, trust is two-thirds—you test whether God is one. There is no agent but God; once you believe in a free creation, God is primary.

The desert is a great place to test trust, and the Sufis have a story about how in the desert you need three things: a needle and thread, a bucket, and a coil of rope. You need the needle and thread lest your tunic split and your backside be exposed. You need the bucket and rope because God will provide water—but not necessarily on the surface.

I found in Bangladesh that people's Qur'ans were translated into Bengali, which I didn't speak. So I had them recite the first line. Some of the words they didn't know. These were the Arabic words—the ones the interpreter refused even to try to translate out of Arabic. So we started with those words, and slowly worked our way through the Qur'an that way.

Eventually I moved to Jerusalem to learn Hebrew, as a stepping-stone on the way to learning Arabic. I prayed the office in Hebrew, and took Arabic in Hebrew at Hebrew University. Later I studied Arabic in Cairo. I had to, or else the Qur'an would've remained a closed book. How can you understand Christianity without being able to read the New Testament?

I also learned about creation when I first went to Jerusalem in 1975 and made a deep connection with the rhythms of Shabbat. Traffic slows in the evening, people take flowers home, the evening is devoted to ceremony and rest. Kids play, parents talk. God created the universe ordered but imperfect, and we have to perfect it. But once a week we stop perfecting it, lest we think we made it. The deeply communal gift of Sabbath is about creation. If I don't mark the Sabbath on Sundays, I forget to thank the Lord for the week.

Christians immediately think of enormous difficulties in finding common ground with Islam on an issue like the Tri-unity of God or the divinity of Jesus.

They forget that it took four centuries for Christians to get straight on Jesus because of the Shema—the belief that there is one God. Christians forget our Jewish roots. The way forward is to remind folks first of our Jewish roots and then to proceed to conversation with Islam. If you really understand Judaism you can see that its stepchild is Islam, and studying Islam allows you to see that Judaism is its close relative in emphasizing the oneness of God.

The philosopher C. S. Pierce taught me that conversations need to happen in threes. Bipolar relationships can get stuck. Why else do we have marriage counselors? You need a third party.

Is the church in the Middle East shaped by these conversations?

The church in the Middle East, pressed between Islam and Judaism, has much to teach the church elsewhere. While many say the future of the church is in its growth and power in the global South, the church's dwindling power and influence in the Middle East and Europe is more exemplary.

We need to see the theological potential of Palestinian Christians, who are a very small minority in the Middle East. Communities like that can animate a republic without letting it get stuck in culture wars. You can see the importance of interfaith relationships in neighborhoods. The way Muslims in the U.S. are trying to raise children in a permissive society can help their Catholic neighbors who are trying to do the same.

John Howard Yoder and Stanley Hauerwas taught me to be anti-Constantinian. But what is it to be a minority in the land where Jesus lived? It's humiliating that

Christianity didn’t “conquer” there, but finds itself squeezed between two majorities (one of which thinks of itself still as a minority). But this is an opportunity—the church can show Western Europe how to be a faithful minority.

I love the work of Palestinian theologian Naim Ateek, though it is clearly imported from Latin America, rather than being indigenous. A powerless ruin of a church can produce fantastic people—witness the Mennonites. The only way to be Christian is to understand that you need a community nourishing friendships to learn to follow Jesus, because all the external signs won’t point you in that direction. Before John Howard Yoder was disciplined by his Mennonite church, the committee met with him 35 times! It reminds me of Oscar Wilde’s saying that socialism is a good idea, but there aren’t enough evenings in the week for it. What were the Mennonites doing? Reinventing the sacrament of reconciliation. In reinventing it, they invested the sacrament with their entire selves.

In an age of terrorism, interfaith conversations seem more difficult than ever.

We need to let the optimism of America be transformed into hope. I was on my bike once when I came upon a Palestinian friend whose car had a flat tire. He was talking on his cell phone, trying to get a tow truck. I said, “Let’s fix it.” He looked at me, astonished: he had never fixed a flat tire himself.

That attitude of going ahead to try to fix things is a sign of the greatness of America. It’s also part of why the U.S. is in Baghdad—our strength is also our weakness. American optimism about fixing the world can ride roughshod over other people. Hope, as opposed to optimism, says: we are inadequate, and we have to trust in the presence of Jesus.

How did you become interested in ecumenism and interreligious dialogue?

My father was a Scottish Presbyterian, and my mother’s grandfather was a convert to Roman Catholicism from the United Church of Christ via the Oxford Movement, so we were an ecumenical household. My dad didn’t go to church because it preached against mixed marriages. But he cooked brunch after mass, and we would invite friends over. The Eucharist continued around Sunday brunch prepared by my Protestant father.

I learned from Christian ecumenists that once you start building bridges you keep building. A voyage into another communion, done properly as searching for truth (not securing it), will result in mutual illumination. You're given the riches of understanding your own faith as you try to understand others'. You find God there too, going ahead of you, as Sebastian Moore teaches in The Crucified Jesus Is No Stranger.

Christians need one another desperately, though not to erase our differences; these can be helpful, and God is beyond conceptualization anyway. But we need strength to walk in a world that marginalizes us. If this world doesn't marginalize us, things are even worse. Late capitalism eats out Christianity's guts from the inside. It's far more dangerous to the faith than Marxism, which just tried to dominate it.

I learned from my teacher Bernard Lonergan that there is a sharp division between theology students who need certitude and those who search for understanding. The first is a psychological need. The second is more properly Christian. The creed adopted at Chalcedon, for example, is a set of answers, but you have to come to understand the questions. The way to understand ourselves in fidelity to the early church is to look at what the great theologians were saying as they asked questions. As you follow the questions, you learn how to do theology—through apprenticeship to the masters.

What are some places where interreligious exchange is making for peace today?

Christian Peacemaker Teams—Mennonite-inspired but home to various Christians as well as Jews—give their witness in Hebron and At-Tuwani, in the face of extremist Jewish settlers who constantly interrupt the life and livelihood of resident Palestinians. The Communauté de Jérusalem in Paris celebrates evening prayer in a church across the Seine from Notre Dame each evening, hosting a diverse congregation seeking ways to learn to pray. The Comunità di Sant'Egidio does the same in the Trastevere section of Rome, where a young Turkish journalist told me he frequently participates. By employing the "liturgy of the hours," these groups finesse issues bedeviling eucharistic participation in a very mixed congregation. Yehuda Stolov gathers Jews, Christians and Muslims together in small communities throughout Israel, often in the Galilee, to learn to reflect and pray together (see www.interfaith-encounter.org). Prayer is increasingly relevant as people begin to realize how public forums are dominated by stereotypes. A common experience is

that stereotypes evaporate once we meet someone.

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