In Cairo, I sat in on a scriptural reasoning group with Christians and Muslims

Moving beyond amicable consensus to productive discomfort

by David A. Hoekema in the December 29, 2021 issue

(Left to right) David Hoekema, Hany al-Halawany, and Sheikh Shaher in Cairo. (Photo courtesy of the author)

Early in 2020, before international travel became impossible, my wife and I visited friends who work on interfaith relations and theological education in Egypt. While there we had an unexpected opportunity to sit down with a group of Muslims and Christians for intensive study of our sacred scriptures.

Around the turn of the century, the practice of “scriptural reasoning” or “textual reasoning” was being promoted by theological students and faculty in North America and Europe. David Ford, Peter Ochs, C. C. Pecknold, and others built a tradition that continues in small groups and academic conferences around the world. In the West the initiative began with Jewish-Christian dialogue, later reaching out to include Islam as well. In the contexts in which I became familiar with it—from the reports of

colleagues who worked in Bangladesh, during a visit to Oman, and then in Egypt, none of which has a significant Jewish presence—it is a Muslim-Christian collaborative venture.

While staying in Cairo we were invited to serve as hosts for a group that has gathered every month or two for a few years. It's coordinated by Naji Umran, a Canadian pastor in the Christian Reformed Church in North America who has served in Egypt for the past 10 years, and his Muslim colleague Hany al-Halawany, a lawyer and interfaith activist. We had been offered the use of a spacious apartment by American church educators Steve and Frankie Wunderink while they were away, a welcoming space for our conversation. Hoping we could emulate the warm hospitality we encountered in every Egyptian home and office we visited, we explored all the fruit shops and bakeries of Abaseya, our bustling central Cairo neighborhood, and laid a table with tropical fruits and Middle Eastern pastries.

Along with the two American visitors and the two organizers, the group that gathered included a Christian pastor and two sheikhs (synonymous with "imam" but more commonly used in Egypt). A few more had been expected, but the vagaries of Cairo traffic kept them from joining us. Issaq Saad is a Presbyterian pastor and a member of the interfaith council of the Synod of the Nile. Sheikh Shaher serves as a cleric and teacher at Al-Azhar Mosque and its affiliated university, world-renowned centers of Islamic life and learning. Sheikh Mohammed Hegazy leads a mosque in Qalyub, just north of Cairo.

There has been a significant Christian presence in Egypt since the time of the apostles, and today Christians make up about 10 percent of the population in an overwhelmingly Muslim nation. Among Christians, 90 percent are Copt.

We met in a place that has seen religious violence in recent years, directed specifically at Christians. Coptic churches in Cairo, Alexandria, and Tanta were bombed by Islamists in 2016 and 2017, and a Christian village and a group of pilgrims suffered deadly attacks in Upper Egypt in 2018. The work of Christian missionaries and pastors in Egypt is extraordinarily difficult, requiring endless reserves of patience and tact.

But the darkest recent period of interfaith relations—the time from the 2011 revolution through the Morsi regime of 2012–2013, when Muslim Brotherhood attacks on Christians were frequent and appeared to have the government's tacit

approval—had the unexpected and indirect effect of promoting more dialogue and toleration. Several Muslim academics and laypeople we met told us that many Egyptian Muslims recoiled from the violence of Islamists. *This is not the religion we believe in!* they said. Muslims and Christians have lived together in Egypt for 2,000 years, and many Muslims are committed to rebuilding better relations.

The study group reflects this desire. On the evening that my wife and I hosted the group, Shaher arrived half an hour earlier than the others. When the call to prayer was heard from nearby minarets, he took the opportunity to say his prayers in our living room. Mohammed arrived a little later and said, “You should ask Sheikh Shaher to recite the Qur’an for you—he chants the text so beautifully!”

After the others arrived, we moved into our more formal dialogue, following a prescribed order that the group had set when it began to meet. First we drew straws to determine whether we would begin with Islamic or Christian scriptures. The lot fell to the Qur’an, so—also as agreed from the beginning—one of the Christian participants was invited to open with a prayer for our gathering.

We began with Qur’anic texts about God’s command to help the poor and vulnerable. After all had read the texts, either in English or in Arabic, there was a designated time for the Christians to put questions to their Muslim colleagues and then for the latter, having made note of all the questions, to respond. Last came a period of general discussion. Our conversation was conducted in English, with occasional pauses to translate unfamiliar terms to or from Arabic.

After about an hour and a half, the order was reversed. We all read selected biblical texts; Muslim participants asked questions. The discussion was sometimes digressive, sometimes difficult, always thoughtful and respectful. Frequently our attention was directed to nuances lying below the surface of the text.

We read surah 107 of the Qur’an, for example, which links worship of God to compassion for the poor: “Have you considered him who denies the Judgment? It is he who drives away the orphan, who enjoins not the feeding of the poor. Woe to those who pray, but who are negligent in prayer; who dissemble, and withhold liberality.”

“This passage teaches us that anyone who faithfully offers the prayers five times a day but does not help the poor is condemned by God,” said Shaher. Added Mohammed: “God expects us to help others without expecting any reward and

without expecting their thanks.” If you remind the recipient of your charity or your help, he said, you annul the value of your action.

“When you share what you have despite having very little,” said Shaher, “God rewards you doubly. But if you give something that you do not need or value, your charity means nothing. You must give to others what you love most!” Surah 90, added Mohammed, teaches us that helping others in need is what binds society together. The passage he cited sets out “two highways” that God has placed before us and calls on us to follow the “steep” path: “The freeing of a slave, or feeding, in time of famine, an orphan near in kin, or a poor man, dirt-poor.”

“This was the first advice that the Prophet gave to his followers in Medina,” Shaher added, “spread peace, and feed the hungry.” The two sheikhs related the story of the caliph Umar, who, knowing he was on the threshold of death, wanted nothing more than a final meal of fish, which his cook prepared for him. But when a poor man came to him asking for food, the caliph gave away his dinner, keeping nothing for himself. That is what it means to obey God, they said.

Is it true, Umran asked out of genuine curiosity, that in Islamic teaching, good deeds done in Mecca are a thousand times more worthy than those done elsewhere? This teaching applies only to prayers, explained Shaher. They are more meritorious if we are able to pray in Mecca or Jerusalem, because these are the holiest places for Islam. But then are the prayers of the wealthy who can afford to travel of more value than those of the poor? Naji pressed him. Not at all, Shaher replied. If a poor person cannot make a pilgrimage, he can earn God’s favor by praying early and meditating often.

I was familiar with many texts in the Qur’an from past reading and teaching. But I did not know these texts in particular, nor had I ever engaged in such a focused interfaith exercise in scriptural interpretation.

We read the Qur’an, and the Christians asked questions. Then we switched roles.

The differences between the two sacred texts pose challenges. The Qur’an is organized by the length of its chapters, not by genre or chronology, and its moral injunctions seldom arise from an identified context, as with Israel in exile or churches in doctrinal conflict. We had chosen to focus on passages dealing with obedience in daily life, not matters of theology. The many modes of writing in the Bible—poetry, history, prophecy, and more—can be confusing to Muslims, whose

sacred book is in the voice of God from beginning to end. Muslims honor the Bible, both Old and New Testament, as containing a record of the history of God's people, but they reject many aspects of its theology as a reflection of later false teachings.

Our Islamic interlocutors emphasized repeatedly that a life of prayer and a life of service to others are inseparable. Pauline Christianity insists that we are saved by faith, not by anything that we do, and like many Christians, I have wondered whether faith has the same role in Islam. Our conversation helped clarify this for me. *Islam means submission*, and submission to God includes both affirming the sovereignty and unity of God and obeying God's precepts in the holy book. Every chapter of the Qur'an begins by praising God the merciful and compassionate, and hence to have faith in God is to act out of mercy and compassion.

Turning next to biblical texts, we all took a few minutes to read two passages from the Gospel of Matthew. In Matthew 6:1–6, part of the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus tells his followers they must not seek recognition for their prayers or their alms. In 25:31–46, he tells the righteous that whatever they have done for "the least of my brothers and sisters" they have done for him.

Protocol specified that Islamic participants would first pose their questions, and then Christian colleagues would answer, but this time the discussion moved quickly into a lively back and forth dialogue. All of us noted the many similarities in the teachings of the two holy books: we must care for the poor, out of love and not desire for recognition. In Islamic teaching, Mohammed commented, "giving alms during Ramadan and making the hajj must be public, but all of your other giving should be secret."

Shaher raised several questions about details in the language of the Gospel narratives, especially the second, which opens with a reference to "the Son of man" returning in glory. Translating for himself from his Arabic New Testament, he asked,"Who is the son of human who comes in glory?" Saad explained that "Son of man," in the most common translation, is a title given to Jesus, and he suggested further: "Because Matthew is writing his Gospel for Jewish readers, he avoids calling Jesus the Son of God, as he is often called elsewhere. Matthew also writes about the kingdom of heaven rather than the kingdom of God."

Another element of the Gospel story was troubling Shaher. "Who are the righteous ones, the 'sheep' who will enter the kingdom blessed by God? Who are the people of

God in this story?”

Naji replied, “We can’t give a simple answer. It is not for us to decide. Some people claim to be God’s people but are not, and others who do not call themselves righteous obey God faithfully. That is what the story is teaching us.”

Shaher pressed his question further: “Does this story teach that only Christians can please God and enter God’s kingdom? Not Muslims or anyone else?”

“That is a question we cannot answer,” I said. “Only God knows our hearts. As Christians we believe God has shown us the way through Jesus, but Jesus himself said, ‘I have other sheep that are not of this fold.’ For us to say that only Christians can enter the kingdom would be to pretend that we are God.”

It was a fascinating opportunity to engage in a dialogue between adherents of two religions, each of them often seen as narrowly exclusive, acknowledging both our agreements and our disagreements. On the duty to do justice and love mercy the holy books converge. But on the membership of the community of the faithful they diverge. For Christians Jesus is the Savior of the world. Can we count faithful Muslims as part of God’s people when, honoring Jesus as God’s prophet, they reject his divinity and deny his resurrection? Islam acknowledges Jews and Christians as fellow “people of the book,” but it also condemns their error if they fail to accept God’s final word to humankind through his last prophet Muhammad.

Shaher’s questions—and his suspicion that Christians see Muslims as infidels—surely arose in part from the ignorance and prejudice that he has encountered among too many Christians. But perhaps he also had in mind the theme that colors the narratives of the life of Mary and Jesus in the Qur’an: that they were faithful followers of the true religion and that their lives and teachings were distorted by later Christian polemicists. In surah 3, for example, Jesus tells his disciples:

> “I shall reveal to you what you shall eat and what you store in your homes. In this assuredly is a sign for you, if you are true believers.” . . . When Jesus detected unbelief from them, he said: “Who are my supporters on the path to God?” The apostles replied, “We are the supporters of God and believe in God. Witness that we are Muslims.”

If the Qur’an implicitly draws the boundaries of God’s people to include the followers of Jesus, then cannot Christians welcome Muslims as faithful sheep, not unfaithful goats, in the kingdom?

The conversation had gone far beyond the point where many interfaith conversations end—with amicable consensus on some commonalities in morality and theology—to a point where we were becoming uncomfortable. Both Christianity and Islam claim to uphold revealed truth. If they differ, can both be true? Both communities seek to convert others; does this entail that those who do not convert are not saved but lost? Was Shaher right to read in Matthew’s Gospel a condemnation of all who reject Jesus as Messiah? Is his holy book justified in describing Jesus’ disciples as Muslims who lived long before the Prophet?

I had never before engaged in such a focused interfaith exercise in interpretation.

We did not arrive at answers to these difficult questions. But we were committed to engaging with each other’s scripture and with each other, and the conversation continued. For my wife and me it was just one fascinating and revealing conversation, but for the other participants it was one of many, bringing religious leaders together and forming relationships in which they both support and challenge each other. In an environment as religiously and politically polarized as Egypt is today, this is an important achievement.

Before we could get too serious, Mohammed lightened the mood with his comment: “You see, Shaher wants to memorize the Gospels, so that he can recite them in his mosque!” But Shaher protested, “It is much more difficult to memorize the Bible than the Qur’an! Our book has about 6,200 verses, but in the Bible there are more than 31,000.”

The conversation had continued for more than three hours. Before departing participants discussed possible themes for the next set of readings, which would be selected and circulated later. Since it had been a Christian who opened the session with prayer, Mohammed agreed to offer a closing prayer—in English, in deference to the two American visitors who speak no Arabic.

The work of Naji Umran and Hany al-Halawany in convening a group of pastors and sheikhs to study and interpret sacred texts together is a bright point of light in the frequently dark landscape of Middle Eastern religious life. It was an honor to be invited to join the conversation, one that could provide a template for dialogue

across deep religious differences in many other contexts.

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