

Divine Hospitality



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A Christian–Muslim Conversation

Fadi Daou and Nayla Tabbara

Translated by Alan J. Amos



**World Council
of Churches**
Publications

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FOREWORD

Clare Amos

One of the joys and privileges for me over recent years while working in the field of interreligious engagement at the World Council of Churches has been to get to know – just a little – the two co-authors of this book, Fadi Daou and Nayla Tabbara. I will not forget hearing Fadi speak powerfully at a conference held in Beirut in 2012, presenting, in quite demanding terms, a challenge to his fellow co-religionists in the Middle East to engage with society in the region in ways that would help lead to the transformation of their nations. Nor will I forget Nayla's exquisite – that is not too strong a word – talks offered at the Bossey interreligious summer school in 2016 in which she married together a profound exploration of the theme of migration in classical Islamic sources with reflection on the implications for our world today.

That combination of scholarship, the deep rootedness of both Nayla and Fadi in their respective faiths, a willingness to look at tradition through fresh eyes and discover new insights, and an awareness of the responsibility of theology to speak into contemporary realities is also what marks out this book, which is both short and substantial. Hospitality, the theme around which the book revolves, is not an optional extra but is an image has been fundamental to the lived experience of the Middle East for many centuries, in spite of the

current painful actualities of the region. Hospitality fully understood is something which changes not only those who receive it, but also those who do the offering. Divine hospitality, a theme which takes as its scriptural starting point the welcome offered by Abraham and Sarah to mysterious strangers, recounted in a story which has caught the theological and symbolic imagination of Muslims, Christians, and Jews, is what drives this book. This is so both in terms of the book's fundamental vision – of a God whose very nature demands that we expand our openness toward the other – and in terms of the methodology Fadi and Nayla have employed, which is a dialogical conversation between the two of them. Responding chapter by chapter to each other, they tread a path in which new insights are discovered.

During my years of working at the World Council of Churches, I am glad that my colleagues and I have been supported in our aim to ensure that our work of practical interreligious engagement and cooperation is underpinned by serious theological exploration of the resources that our religious tradition offers for dialogue, and the treasures that we can bring to the tent and table of meeting. We are indeed committed to practical projects and concrete outcomes for our work. But I also believe that unless accompanied by a theological seriousness which digs deep into our own faith, the work of interreligious dialogue and cooperation can fall into an undermining trap of shallowness and superficiality. So I cherish this book, in which its authors make clear their own dedication to such theological seriousness.

The work was originally published in French, then in Arabic and German, and I am glad and honoured that Fadi, Nayla, and the Adyan Foundation consented to allow the World Council of Churches to produce a translation into English, which will help this significant theological writing reach an Anglophone audience. I am grateful to Alan Amos for undertaking the translation into English as an expression of his own dedication to work for mutual understanding between Muslims and Christians in Lebanon and the Middle East. In one sense, the book needs no further validation than its own excellence. However, those of us who have had the privilege to visit the Adyan Foundation

in Beirut, of which Nayla and Fadi are co-founders and its Institute of Citizenship and Diversity Management, rightly cannot help but read this book in the light of our knowledge of this ground-breaking venture. Adyan works with Christians and Muslims, especially young Christians and Muslims, in Lebanon and other Arab countries, on a variety of important projects that are intended to foster a spirit of unity in diversity in that country and that will act in turn as beacons for other parts of the world. The committed work of Fadi and Nayla in together building up the Adyan Foundation as an example of interreligious hospitality can be considered a practical outcome and expression of the spirit which shines so strongly through the pages of this book.

—Clare Amos

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PREFACE

It is a paradox that at a time of renewal for Christian theology and the emergence of Muslim thinking which is modern and open to question from other cultures and religions, a good number of Christians and Muslims should be ruled by feelings of mistrust, even mutual hostility. “Man makes an enemy of what he is ignorant of,” said Imam Ali. But mutual incomprehension is not the only reason for these negative feelings. Communal memories are laden with the conflicts and political tensions of the centuries, which are both real and symbolic factors causing alienation. To that may be added the fear and mistrust brought about by the current situation in some Muslim majority countries, where the problem of violent fundamentalism does not appear to be decreasing. And we cannot ignore the undermining of the credibility of Western society and its institutions in the eyes of many Muslims by the politics of rampant injustice. We refer above all to the Palestinian problem, but also to support given by the West to despotic and corrupt regimes that are incapable of responding to demands for justice and dignity for all, coming particularly from the new generations making use of the internet and social media.

Neither mutual encounter, nor the discovery of “the other,” nor critical theology is able to deal with this problem, which has so many different ramifications. Theology, however, still retains its responsibility to offer a discourse and a reflection faithful to the principles of the faith of the two religions concerning the relationship of each with the other. Theology and religious discourse cannot be held solely responsible for intercommunal problems, yet they are not always innocent of promoting a cultural environment hostile to “otherness,” particularly to the religious other.

In fact, when religious experience expresses itself primarily in terms of communal identity, faith is relegated to secondary importance, as are also the spiritual and moral values which accompany it. In such circumstances, sectarian views that draw upon religion and community identity may multiply, to the detriment of engagement with society and with others in the light of the faith. Whether you are a believer or not seems to become almost insignificant if it is a matter of defending your own community or your own religious identity. In such a situation, people are motivated by those fears, prejudices, and stereotypes which are commonly found in attitudes toward the other. This disassociation between religious belonging and faith engagement puts theology face to face with challenges to its credibility and authenticity. Believers should not be so blinded by fear that they cannot see what their own faith requires of them, including the need for a true understanding of the other. And yet at the same time, openness toward the other and the experience of encounter must not lose the spirit of critical awareness and the desire for true justice.

While theology in itself is unable to resolve the problems of Muslim–Christian relations, it remains nevertheless indispensable in guiding believers in their thinking and attitude toward those of other faiths, and in enabling true faithfulness to the will of God. Theology must not lose hope and abandon its role of critical watchfulness by colluding with human deviations of all kinds, despite the limits of its power and influence upon the political scene. And so this book hopes to offer to its readers – Christians, Muslims, and others – a clear presentation of the question of religious difference, seen from a faith perspective. In other words, our objective is to show what the Christian and Muslim faiths teach with regard to religious “otherness” and to indicate the relationship which may link the believer of another religion to God.

The following reflection is not therefore a discourse developed with the other faith always in mind, in a way that could risk a watering down of truth with the aim of securing greater sympathy and mutual acceptance. Instead, it represents a systematic theological attempt

to put believers in touch with the deepest truth of their own faith. Often, in fact, the ignorance which most harms interreligious relations is ignorance of our own faith, rather than of the faith of the other. The challenge this book brings to the believer is to be willing to approach the other, not equipped with a rigid religious identity like a kind of breastplate, but with the conviction that the spiritual message the other holds is not foreign to God's plan, and that this may also be understood from the perspective of the believer's own faith.

Each one gains by discovering the theology of the other and of other religions, in Islam as in Christianity. What do the Qur'an and Muslim theology say about Christians and others? What view does the Christian have, based on his or her faith in Jesus Christ, of Muslims and of all non-Christians? What are the biblical and Qur'anic foundations for such thinking, and what are the spiritual, ethical, and practical consequences? It is to these kinds of questions that we have attempted to provide clear and well-argued responses throughout this book.

The decision to do this together has allowed us to develop a new responsive approach which we call "theologies in dialogue." In fact, this work is not a theological dialogue, where each presents straightforwardly their point of view concerning the other on the basis of their own theories and concepts and then eventually agrees to enter into the discussion of ideas. Our approach permits us, rather, to respond to the questions of the other through recourse to the inner religious tradition of our questioner. We are thus able to direct the reflection toward a shared understanding and a shared responsibility with regard to the sincerity and authenticity of spiritual experiences, and the coherence and goodness of the divine will. It is a method entirely different from one governed by polemic and apologetic on the one hand, or by compromise and syncretism on the other. We are aware of the exceptional nature of this method, and convinced of its fruitfulness. It requires the integration of the other and their questioning into the field of reflection, even the field of faith, belonging to each of the two parties to the dialogue. Instead of thinking of the other as an adversary when we encounter irreconcilable differences, the partner in dialogue is thought

of as a companion on the way. For, when all is said and done, the fundamental mission of the theology of religions is to be concerned not with difference in identity but with the unity of the divine plan for the whole of creation.

This book therefore contains two theologies, the one Christian and the other Muslim. We recognize and accept the irreducible divergence in viewpoint between Christianity and Islam, in the sense that each one of these two religions lays claim to a universal interpretation of the whole of reality and of the relation between God and humanity. As a result, there is an irreconcilable divergence between the two religions, which we must respect. This does not however prevent us addressing each of the two theologies and examining them concerning the significance of the other and of religious difference.

In fact, despite their claims to universality, neither Christian nor Muslim theologies represent a closed and static system. To the extent that they seek to interpret and to transmit the truth, the two theologies are necessarily dynamic and conditioned as much by human intelligence as by their historical and cultural circumstances. This permits us to take our reflection forward, while avoiding the temptation of an absolutism which turns religion into a static image, denying reality. We recognize also the personal and contextual aspect of our reflection, even while we are addressing fundamental problems concerning both theologies.

For the theologian, the specialist in religious studies, for the student, and for the believer and every reader interested by the problem of interreligious relations and the theology of religious pluralism in Christianity and Islam, this book is aimed to be a guide, not toward final answers, but toward a way of thinking of the other, in greater faithfulness to one's own true self. For some, this reading will not be possible without a certain change of thinking and outlook. Others may be amazed at the generosity and flexibility of theological reflection, whether Christian or Muslim. Perhaps yet others may be shocked to discover the gap between those views given prominence in the media, and in society – even among leaders of thought and opinion – and the

complexity, richness, and potentiality of theology in the field of plurality and of interreligious relations. Finally, we hope that for all our readers, this book will be a star which shines brightly enough to show that the darkness of obscurantism, fanaticism and terrorism can never defeat the light of truth and goodness, which we can see reflected in the faces of so many Christian and Muslim witnesses.

It is with joy that we dedicate this work, the fruit of a shared journey of research, to all our readers. We think especially of those who are seeking a deeper understanding of their faith in the light of religious diversity and the need for a shared human responsibility for our world. We hope that this book will encourage further research and publications in this field.

We wish also to thank all those who have so carefully contributed to revising our text, who have brought us greater clarity through their questions and have offered us constructive advice, particularly Mgr Guy-Paul Noujaim, Professor Adel Theodore Khoury, Professor Radwan As-Sayyid, and Professor Pierre Lory, as well as Mgr Jean-Marc Aveline, author of the foreword to the French edition of our book.

Our gratitude also is due to the Institute of Missiology – Misso (Aachen) for contributing to the financing of the research on this subject; Les Éditions Paulistes, who have published the Arabic version of the book; and l'Institut catholique de la Méditerranée for their collaboration in producing the French edition. And we are grateful to Alan Amos for his careful and insightful translation of the text into English.

—Nayla Tabbara and Fadi Daou