

Washington as a Site of Muslim-Christian Encounter

Rev. Richard J. Jones

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Summary

Washington is a different place, depending on whether people come to it from the Islamic world, from European-American territory, or from the African-American minority. Washington affords multiple inducements to Christian-Muslim dialogue. National, state, and local governments, responding to growing multiethnic and multireligious populations, are learning to respond to the newer religious groups, particularly Muslims. Local universities, colleges, and think tanks contribute to transmitting received religious traditions, grappling with new knowledge, and revising our identities. Worshipping congregations, Christian as well as Muslim, work at conserving traditions, adapting traditions, and reaching beyond their walls in service. Theological schools add the element of applying learning to immediate personal decision-making. The Washington area also presents challenges to dialogue: people are busy, majority Christians and minority Muslims, despite common challenges from secularism and social ills, have differing agendas. The Certificate in Muslim-Christian Studies offers a disciplined preparation for leadership across this borderland.

I. Approaching Washington

Approaching from the Islamic world

When Muslims encounter Christians in Washington, D.C. at the beginning of the 21st Christian century, this place of meeting may have a different feel from other times and places where encounter has occurred. Unlike Cairo, Damascus, or Cordoba, Washington is not a historic site of past Islamic glory. Unlike Paris, London, or Moscow, Washington is not the seat of an overtly declared former empire over non-Western societies – provided you are willing to overlook the fifty years of Americans attempt governing Mindanao in the Philippines! Unlike Thailand, India, East Africa, West Africa, the Caucasus, and Bosnia, Washington is not a place where Muslims currently find themselves contending – even at war – with the Hindu, Buddhist, or Christian majority in their own population.

Of course Washington does not belong to the Dar al-Islam, where Islamic law is the law of the land. I know of no Muslim activist who would be ready to color our metropolitan area on his world map with a peaceful and satisfying solid green. As recently as this morning the *Washington Post* reported a skirmish in the Virginia House of Delegates in which the Speaker had to resist protests from some Delegates because he invited Imam Johari Abdul-Malik from Fairfax County to offer the opening prayer at today's legislative session.

Yet Washington is not the Dar al-Harb where Islam must fight to exist. The *Muslim Link* newspaper lists fifty-four Islamic Centers on its Masjid Locator page; the website of the Islamic Circle of North America lists four additional local mosques.¹ Our area may not deserve a deep Islamic green on the map, but neither does it warrant being colored a hostile pale yellow.

I suggest that North America as a whole, and the Washington area in particular, deserve to be colored on the Islamic map at least as light green, as Dar es Salaam, as a place where the Islamic community succeeds in living out the way of the Prophet Muhammad largely unmolested. I hope that before this evening is over Dr. Zainab Alwani will correct me if I am mistaken, but my impression is that Washington today is a fairly peaceful place to live as a Muslim.

Of course we all know of Islamic revolutionary groups based elsewhere in the world who locate aggressive designs against true Islamic government in Foggy Bottom; 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue, N. W.; Langley, Virginia; or in a pentagonal building in Arlington on the bank of the Potomac. We also know from police reports and judicial trials that some young recruits for international revolutionary Islamic groups have come from northern Virginia. I nevertheless wonder whether even Osama bin Laden -- or Imam Anwar al-Awlaki, who was our neighbor seven years ago here in Virginia and now is a target of American bombing reprisals in Yemen -- I wonder whether even these revolutionary leaders would deny that Muslims living, working, and praying in Washington find themselves in a generally safe place.

Approaching from European-American territory

Turning now from Muslim immigrants to Americans of European descent and Christian convictions, how do they experience Washington as a place to encounter Muslims? Being a Christian born and baptized in the District of Columbia, I will allow myself to speak for this group. We find Washington to be a city that gently educates us into awareness of a living and diverse Muslim community. When I was growing up in Northwest Washington I saw construction begun on the Islamic Center on Massachusetts Avenue. However, I never met a Muslim. If in the 1950s there were any Muslims among my classmates at John Eaton Elementary School, I was unaware of them. At St. Alban's School for Boys, I knew my fellow student Mehdi Ali as a Pakistani diplomat's son, not as a Muslim. In my white neighborhood of Cleveland Park, I was unaware of the existence of black Muslims.

Not so my children, growing up thirty years later in Toronto, Canada, and in Alexandria, Virginia. My son was taught world history at St. Stephen's and St. Agnes School by an ardent American convert to Islam, Mr. Abdul Malik. Among my daughter's close friends was Tami Rauf, daughter in a strictly observant Muslim family. My son and daughter's generation has tasted falafel and Afghan bread, recognize halal food stores and Friday crowds at mosques, and are aware of Muslims fasting during Ramadan. To my eye and ear, local broadcasters and publications like *Washingtonian* magazine and the

Washington Post emphasize messages of religious tolerance and the celebration of ethnic diversity much more strongly than any messages of suspicion or alarm regarding Islam. (I hope Dr. Alwani will tell us if my rosy perceptions differ sharply from hers.)

Of course, there is a vast and variegated lot more to the United States of America than just what you encounter in Washington. Professor Akbar Ahmed of American University, a former ambassador for Pakistan, has made this point after his 2008 project interviewing and making a documentary entitled *Journey into America* about Muslim communities across the United States. Muslims in some locations may be less well established, less ethnically diverse, and less well regarded than in the Washington area. If we keep our focus this evening local, I will affirm that the cityscape of Washington offers exposure and remedial education for any Americans of European descent and Christian convictions who have never visited a Muslim-majority country or had personal acquaintance in school with Muslims. This city invites learning about Islam.

Approaching from the African-American minority population

I mentioned my growing up in the white highlands of Cleveland Park. One winter's day in 1970 I climbed to the observation floor of the Washington Monument and watched white and amber streetlights come on at dusk. I recognized the downtown pattern of spokes and squares. I saw my home landmark Washington Cathedral on the ridgetop. Moving to the east window, I stood amazed as grid after grid of lights revealed Southeast Washington, then Northeast Washington, and then Anacostia – unknown lands! Most of the residents of those neighborhoods were of African-American descent. They had been there since before the federal district was carved out of the Free State of Maryland. Their population swelled during the American civil War as a place where former slaves settled, and it swelled again as a site for jobs during the First and Second World Wars. Coming down from the Washington Monument, I requested placement as a seminarian at the Church of the Atonement on East Capitol Street. At the age of twenty-eight I belatedly came to know middle- and upper-class black Christian Washingtonians.

After a further delay of three decades serving the church in other parts of the world, I finally last month made my first visit to Washington's oldest mosque, guided by our student Ms. Taalibah Hassan. This mosque was originally organized in the 1930's by Elijah Muhammad and local followers under the name Muhammad's Holy Temple of Islam No. 4 – following temples organized in Chicago, Milwaukee, and Detroit. The present mosque building, dedicated in 1960 and mother to a flock of subsequent mosques, continues in active use on Fourth Street, N. W. at New Jersey Avenue. This section of Fourth Street was renamed by City Council in 1992 as "Islamic Way".

When African-American citizens of Washington look at their home city, and when members of the African-American minority population nationwide come to live in this city, they can observe a city where African-American voters are the majority in the District of Columbia and Prince George's County, Maryland. For eighty years American Muslims in Washington have worked towards the same goals as black churches: mobilize

the public not only in elections but also in support of children, families, and the alleviation of illiteracy, homelessness, drug abuse, disease and crime.. Prior to the death of Elijah Muhammad in 1975 Muslims pursued these goals through creating Muslim-owned businesses and adopting names and dress which rejected control by the dominant white society. Black nationalism still prevailed during the brief months of 1963 when Malcolm X, minister of Harlem's Temple No. 7 and editor of the national newspaper *Muhammad Speaks*, took on interim responsibility for Washington's Temple No. 4. Malcolm X's tenure in Washington came just prior to his break with Elijah Muhammad, his pilgrimage to Mecca, and his second conversion – to non-racial, Sunni Islam.²

I see Washington as a place where native-born African-American Muslims have now been established for three generations and take their place between the vastly more populous black Christian congregations and the newer mosques led and better financed by more recent Muslim immigrant groups. Any Muslim-Christian dialogue in Washington must acknowledge the distinctive identity of this segment of the Muslim population – African-American but not Christian, Muslim but not new Americans.

We all come to Washington by our own routes. A Washington address is strategic and chosen by some, incidental and simply given to others, and for still others a circumstance they may feel they must explain and justify. To the extent that Washington is for us more than a billing address and an airport, the meaning of Washington to us as home is part of what we bring when we as Muslims encounter Christians, and we as Christians encounter Muslim neighbors. Was it the Speaker of the U. S. House of Representatives, Tip O'Neill of Massachusetts, who said, "All politics is local"? I suggest that, no matter how many conferences we attend and international links we cherish, the important Christian-Muslim encounters are local. Significant encounters are the ones where you have to show up tomorrow and be responsible for what you said or did tonight.

II. Inducements to dialogue in the Washington area

Governments

Eight days ago at Washington National Cathedral, Canon John Peterson told two dozen Sunni, Shi'a, Anglican, and Roman Catholic theologians that his cathedral, visible on the highest elevation in the District of Columbia, was a good place for an international peace-seeking meeting because of the Cathedral's "symbolic and convening power."

If a cathedral can ascribe to itself symbolic and convening power, how much more may the governments whose seat is in the capital city of a powerful nation, and the adjacent counties of Maryland and Virginia which house the skilled civil servants, military personnel, and private contractors who plan and execute so much of the national government's work?

Unlike the ring of suburbs around Paris which belong to a North African immigrant

population now in its third generation, and in contrast with pockets of Turkish working-class immigrants in major German cities, or South Asian working-class immigrant neighborhoods in British cities, here in the Washington area most immigrants from Muslim-majority countries seem to have commanded salaries and status permitting them to take up residence across a broad geographic space. I know where to find a miniature Saigon in Arlington County, Virginia, but I do not know where to find little Baghdad, or little Mogadishu, or little Kabul, or little Teheran. The scattered residential pattern of immigrant Muslims requires school districts and county-wide agencies, with resources larger than those of a single local school, to address the concerns of Muslim parents about such matters as halal food on lunch menus, coed social activities, and student dress. Local governments have of course given much attention to accommodating the large Spanish-speaking minority. I am told that in Prince William County, Virginia, after English and Spanish, the languages most frequently spoken in the homes of public school students are Farsi and Arabic.³

The opening of curriculum and the social life of schools, first to the African-American heritage and then to the Hispanic heritage of its students, has prepared educational and law-enforcement authorities and employers to expect to make some accommodation to residents whose cultural heritage is in the Islamic world. Public-school curriculums in our area are now acknowledging the importance of non-Christian religions, including Islam, through the content of courses in world history. Private schools, including church schools, have added world religions to their curriculum, whether in response to the plurality of religions represented by families able to pay, or because these schools' leadership perceives that understanding other religions is crucial in today's world.

Whether issues are the local ones such as curriculum, deportment, and prayer in public schools or national ones such as immigration policy or criminal justice and investigations, government in the Washington area has grown accustomed in recent decades to hearing from not only Christian and Jewish advocacy groups, but also from Hindu, Islamic, and other religious voices. The Washington offices of the Islamic Society of North America, the Council on American-Islamic Relations, and the Islamic Circle of North America have all become skilled at media and government relations. The publicized *iftar* fast-breaking meals first held in the White House during the Clinton Administration have become much appreciated by non-Muslims. The only place where I have met in person my own United States Representative and my own county Councilors has been at *iftar* at Dar al Hijra mosque in Fairfax County, Virginia. When elected officials find it worth their while to sup and greet voters at local mosques, it seems safe to conclude that the Islamic community has achieved public recognition.

Universities, Colleges, and Think Tanks

The Washington area is home to numerous universities. The older ones were Christian in their origin. Georgetown was founded by the Society of Jesus before the national government moved from Philadelphia to the bucolic District of Columbia on the Potomac. American University, George Washington University, and the Catholic

University of America represent initiatives by Methodists, Baptists, and Roman Catholics respectively in the late nineteenth century to establish influence in the capital of a rising power. Maryland's public university was located in the Washington suburb of College Park. To meet the continuing education needs of Washington's workforce, a new generation of universities has been created over the last fifty years. These include the Nobel-prize-bristling George Mason University in Fairfax, Virginia; satellite units of universities headquartered elsewhere, such as the Johns Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies; and multisite public community colleges and private business schools sprinkled across the metropolitan educational marketplace.

Alongside these teaching institutions stand numerous research institutions, including the Brookings Institution, Carnegie Endowment, Rand Corporation, and specialized institutes for the study of everything from the Middle East and Asia to public health, Byzantine history, and cryptography. This concentration of expert knowledge bearing on the objective study of Islam is formidable. In addition, I know of two think tanks committed to the study of Islam by and for believers. One is the International Institute of Islamic Thought, located in Herndon, Virginia and recent donor of the new chair in Islamic studies at George Mason University. The other is the Heritage Trust, funder for two decades of the Graduate School of Islamic Studies in Leesburg and Herndon, Virginia, and now the generous funder of this Al-Alwani Chair in Muslim-Christian Studies in the Washington Theological Consortium.

By the late 1990s, departments of religious studies, Arabic language, and Islamic studies were sufficiently strong in Washington-area universities for a joint Ph.D. program in Islamic Studies to be proposed. This effort reportedly foundered on the predictable issue of which university would confer the degree. One response to the attacks of 2001 on U.S. targets, however, has been to intensify research and teaching in these fields. Employment of Muslim scholars in many of these institutions, and temporarily heightened interest among a new generation of students, become one more inducement to Muslim-Christian encounter. For Muslim students at local universities, current tensions have reinforced the value of Muslim Student Associations for mutual support.

Worshipping congregations

To speak of Muslim Student Associations on local campuses brings us around to Muslim and Christian worshipping congregations located in residential neighborhoods across our area.

[A map posted on the website of the Islamic Circle of North America gives you an idea of their locations, from Hagerstown, Annapolis, and Baltimore, Maryland south to Fredericksburg in Virginia. This picture does not undertake to show Muslim prayer circles which meet in homes, study groups in offices, or Friday congregations meeting on U.S. Military installations or rented church halls]

In the Washington area, as across the United States and Canada, mosque organization

keeps evolving. My own visits have been very limited: to the Islamic Center on Embassy Row; to two strong mosques in Fairfax County, Dar al Hijra near Seven Corners and Adams Center near Dulles Airport; and to Masjid Muhammad on 4th Street N. W. in Washington. Unless Washington area mosques differ from those across the United States surveyed by the sociologist Ihsan Bagby in 2001, one would expect to meet more imams with advanced degrees from overseas Islamic universities than from an American university. One would expect to find some mosques, particularly African-American mosques, centered on a strong imam. Predominantly immigrant mosques tend to have a board which makes the decisions and expects its imam to confine himself chiefly to leading prayers and teaching Qur'an in. Bagby reports: "Unpaid volunteers clearly run the vast majority of American mosques. This reflects the dual reality that African-American mosques do not have paid imams, and immigrant mosques do not give their paid imams major leadership responsibilities."⁴ It is my own impression that smaller mosques are comprised of a single dominant ethnicity, while the larger mosques are multiethnic.

Worshipping congregations serve to sustain faith and to inculcate faith in the next generation. Congregations conserve and transmit traditions. At the same time, congregations are places where traditions are tested, debated, and sometimes stretched or adapted. Whether women shall serve on the board, teach, and share the same prayer space as men are some of the more publicized current questions. Deeper debates concern what loyalty and financial commitment Muslims should give to a local mosque, how much involvement Muslims desire in public schools and political life, and how they think about their life in America in relation to the wellbeing and success of the Islamic community in a foreign homeland, and worldwide.

Some of these worshipping congregations choose to offer themselves as sites for interreligious dialogue. I have two vivid memories of the way Washington-area mosques intensified efforts to explain themselves to their non-Muslim neighbors after September 11, 2001. At Dar al Hijra mosque, in the immediate aftermath, I saw members of the congregation mobilized as security guards and inspecting cars at the gate to deter acts of reprisal. Then on the following Saturdays Dar al Hijra mounted a series of open houses to welcome neighbors, offer gifts, and provide information about Islam and about the programs of the mosque.

My second memory is of married students of Virginia Seminary living in the Braddock-Lee Apartments. Over the years they had become familiar with the sight of the parking lot of Fairlington Methodist Church filling up at midday on Fridays with taxicabs, as Muslims arrived for Juma prayers. With absolutely no guidance from me, acting out of their own concern for Muslim neighbors, these Christian students delivered a letter to the Muslim congregation assuring them that they understood Islam to be a way of peace and did not associate their praying neighbors with the self-appointed suicidal perpetrators of holy war.

Non-Muslims will naturally have most contact with those mosques which have decided to go beyond liturgical prayer and Islamic education to involve themselves in community

service, outreach to non-Muslim congregations and the media, and political involvement. These mosques constitute a strong inducement to Christian-Muslim, as well as Christian-Muslim-Jewish, conversation in Washington. Many Christian and Jewish congregations across Washington have shown themselves eager to talk. Face-to-face is the best posture for conversation. But behind the friendly face always stands a complex and sometimes conflicted community.

Individual congregations who find themselves, by planning or by accident, engaging in conversation with congregations of another religious tradition do not have to grope along a dark and unmarked path. National organizations like B'nai B'rith, the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the USA, the United States Council for Catholic Bishops, and the Islamic Society of North America constantly proffer guidance. Clergy appointed to address issue of unity among Christians in our local judicatories now often accept additional responsibility for disseminating advice on interreligious issues. For twenty-five years our area has been served by an organization which self-consciously brings together representatives from a dozen religious traditions, including Muslims, Christians, and Mormons, to hear annual glorious samples of each other's public music and in small circles to answer individually and personally the question, "What is it I love about being a Muslim(or a Christian, or a Mormon, et cetera)?" This Interfaith Conference of Metropolitan Washington is directed by Clark Lobenstine -- who is reported in the *Washington Post* to be accompanying Imam Johari to the Virginia House of Delegates today. Worshipping congregations in the Washington area who are ready for contact with congregations of another religious tradition do not lack for encouragement.

The role of theological education institutions

The Washington area enjoys one more resource favoring Muslim-Christian encounters – in addition to congregations aware theirs is not the only way, intellectuals who study religions, and governments alert to religious diversity among the governed.

This additional resource is the theological schools which abound in the Baltimore-Washington-Richmond area, and particularly in Washington. The sixteen institutions who currently collaborate in the Washington Theological Consortium represent only a part of the whole number of area schools which educate people for teaching, administering, leading worship, and caring for member of religious communities, from their births through their adult years to their deaths. These sixteen institutions represent distinct schools of thought and different disciplines within their common Christian tradition. For forty years these schools have believe that, for Christians, postgraduate theological study is best done in a pan-Christian, ecumenical setting. Most member institutions believe that a recovery of visible unity is essential to the mission of the one Church. Christians remember that Jesus, in the garden of Gethsemane outside Jerusalem on the night he was betrayed to suffering and death for the benefit of all humanity, prayed for his disciples: "As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us, so that the world may know that you have sent me and loved them even as you have loved me."⁵

The mission of the Church which began with the apostles after Jesus's resurrection and became a worldwide movement in the 19th century, is closely related to the Christian ecumenical movement of the 20th century. Churches in places like China, India, Africa, and the Middle East came to recognize that a divided, competitive, mutually contradicting witness was a scandal before God and a source of confusion among non-Christian onlookers. Hence the movement continuing into our day to recover the visible unity of the Church. Member institutions of the Washington Theological Consortium usually require each degree candidate to take at least one course outside the seminary or college where he or she is registered. Thus students rub shoulders with others whose Christian beliefs and practices differ to some degree from their own.

More recently, Christian theologians like the Swiss Roman Catholic Hans Küng have taken the next step and urged that beyond engaging with separated fellow Christians there must come an effort by Christians to engage with other religions of the world. Why? One major goal to make peace, by seeking out commonalities, assessing apparent differences, and considering how far our different expressions of truth, right, and devotion may agree in substance even if not in form.

The Canadian liberal Protestant Wilfred C. Smith devoted a lifetime of study of the history of religions and emerged with the thesis that at bottom our shared experiences of faith are more important than the contrasting content of our beliefs.

The Lebanese Orthodox thinker Georges Khodr taught that the Holy Spirit of God is at work baptizing God-fearing people whom the visible Church will never baptize.

These theologians' challenge to go beyond Christian unity into a wider field helped the Board of the Washington Theological Consortium decide to welcome over the past ten years associate members including Washington National Cathedral, which describes itself as a house of prayer for all people, and the Shalem Institute for Spiritual Formation, which teaches techniques of meditation and prayer derived from other traditions in addition to Christian. More recently, two affiliate members have been added: the Interfaith Conference of Metropolitan Washington, which encourages public solidarity in moments of religious-tinged social conflict and collaboration in daily endeavors like neighborhood food banks. Most important for our purposes is the courageous affiliation of the Graduate School of Islamic and Social Sciences with the Washington Theological Consortium.

What inducements to dialogue do theological schools add which are not already at work in governments, universities, research centers, and congregations? They offer stable institutional resources of learned persons equipped for interreligious dialogue. They also offer safe and comfortable settings where such conversations can be pursued. For example, James Wiseman, a Benedictine monk who teaches Christian theology and religious studies at Catholic University was instrumental in sustaining for ten years a dialogue between Roman Catholic monks and Tibetan Buddhist monks, exploring fundamental ideas such as the emptying of the self.

More specifically, seminaries are seedbeds for pastors. Graduates expect to spend their lives nurturing faith and guiding communities of faith in their relations with bodies of different-believing neighbors, and with American society at large. While Christian seminaries may devote intense effort, for example, to mastering Biblical interpretation, and students in the Graduate School of Islamic and Social Sciences or the IIIT may devote intense effort to interpreting the Traditions of the Prophet, neither group can ever be content with purely intellectual mastery. They must practice what they preach. They care about how their fellow believers and fellow citizens live out their beliefs. They care about outcomes in personal faith. Government or a university research may produce important knowledge about how religious communities behave now or have behaved in the past. Seminary graduates, rabbis, and mosque directors go beyond such historical knowledge or psychological understanding. They ask, “So what?” They ask, “How does God want us – me and my people – to live our lives now?” Religious leaders have to take responsibility for the still unwritten chapters in the life of their community of believers, in a nation of other-believing and unbelieving fellow-citizens. Pastors feel the urgency of coming to some tenable posture for responding to religiously mixed marriages, the right combining or right separating of our bearing witness and our rendering service to neighbors in need, and right response to the demands of the state for conformity to human laws.

The seminaries and similar schools currently forming leaders in the Washington area assume that the heart as well as the brain will be engaged in any Christian-Muslim dialogue. Calculation has to share the podium with love.

III. Challenges to Dialogue in the Washington area

Who has time?

Perhaps the greatest obstacle to worthwhile Muslim-Christian dialogue here in Washington is the difficulty of finding time for conversation. Within institutions with a common purpose, conversation may get scheduled under such names as strategic planning, policy review, or retreat. Between independent communities, however, each with its own rhythm of life, getting together seems to require either some shared external pressure, such as an outbreak of anti-Muslim graffiti or a dramatic judicial trial, or more irenically a calendrical coinciding of feasts, as when Ramadan, Passover, and Easter overlap. Just as traffic moves fast on Washington highways but is also subject to annoying slowdowns, so the busyness of all our lives demands ingenuity and patience from the would-be traffic engineer of interreligious conversation.

The life work of new Americans is not identical to that of longer-established Americans

The busy lives of people who are long-rooted in their religious tradition and their place of

residence have a different trajectory from the lives of believers who are the first or second generation to embrace a religious tradition different from that of their ancestors, or who have settled in a society as newcomers. Immigrants and converts have work to do defining their new identity, establishing patterns of life, and realigning their public loyalties. Quickly the next generation is demanding from them answers as to how they, the young, are to live in the faith of their parents and in friendship with agemates who believe differently. Eboo Patel last fall described growing up honoring his Indian Muslim immigrant parents in Chicago, mastering the rites and knowledge of their tradition by day. By night with his friends he was living on hamburgers, milkshakes, and the music of MTV. Patel's life work is integration. Muslims who are relative newcomers either to their tradition or to Washington must labor to demonstrate both relevance in the face of secularism and legitimacy in the face of majority-expected patterns of dress, diet, and civic duty

Christians who enjoy the status of a historic majority have a simpler kind of work cut out for them. Material wealth and escapist drugs beckon in Washington. Communications and data-processing technology give an illusion of effortless mastery. The glorification of choice as supreme good leaves all commitments apparently open to doubt. Much of the work demanded of Christian leaders in the Washington area is to contrast the secular view of the world, which Christians themselves adopt during a large part of our waking hours, with the view of the world as God's creation, which we profess ritually and recall explicitly in moments of distress or life change.

Both of us ask, "What is the shape of the good society, the society pleasing to God?" Both of us look to render a future accounting for the shape we have imposed on our society, both by individual acts and by our behavior in groups. As we work our way through our shared and different tasks, we meet in many settings. We meet at hearings of zoning boards and school boards. We meet as we respond to immigration and security rules of the national government under which we jointly live. We meet in the raising of our children to be members of a society where ethnic and religious boundaries are permeable. Some call all these encounters the dialogue of life.

I am pleased that the Washington Theological Consortium has chosen to name Muslim-Christian dialogue as something that not only happens, but something we can help to happen better. Any student who seeks our Certificate in Muslim-Christian Studies will begin by gaining a fundamental exposure to the beliefs, practices, and religious experiences of the other tradition. The student will learn how the universe looks and how it is possible to be human while holding some fundamental assumptions which differ from one's own.

The student will explore the practical issues that Muslims and Christian alike face in America, and to which we do not make identical responses: birth, marriage, forgiveness, illness, death, and inheritance. The student will look at relations between believers and their leaders in church and in mosque, and relations between church or mosque and society at large.

Before completing the Certificate, the student will look at means of dealing with social conflicts when religions are one element in that conflict.

I do not believe the motivation for Muslims and for Christians has to be identical for their dialogues to be of value. Christians may approach with mixed motives, but somewhere deep down will be the remembered commandment from God, received by Moses and reinforced by Jesus of Nazareth and his apostles, that we should love our neighbors as ourselves. The value of that human neighbor is established for us when we affirm that human nature was esteemed by God as a vehicle and medium which he in his ineffable power could take on in the person of Jesus, fully human and fully God, in order to rescue and restore that human nature.

Islamic motivation will not be rooted in Incarnation faith, but it may well be rooted in the quranic injunction to honor all God's prophets and the people who have listened to these prophets' guidance, and so to extend the territory in which Islam can flourish.

IV. What outcomes can we hope for from Christian-Muslim studies carried out in institutions where faith is honored?

We hope to become more articulate about our deepest values. A frequent report from my students' interreligious encounters is that they not only have come to understand the practices of neighbors they had not grasped or appreciated before. They also emerge with a clearer grasp of some of their own deepest commitments. Sometimes they modify their own ideas or practices.

I offer my own experience. Every time I observe Muslims engaged in liturgical prayer, I am struck by the filling up of the lines. Behind the leader, the first line forms. Whoever arrives third stands shoulder to shoulder with the second. Muslims do not sit for *salat* with their intimates. They align their chests as the Prophet commanded and become intimate with God and whoever also prays. My own posture when attending Christian public prayer has been affected – as my wife and children can attest, sometimes to their embarrassment. I head for the empty pews in front, trying to fill up the ranks of the seemingly reluctant Christian believers.

After studying Islamic views of prophethood and prophetic success, I have come to realize how important to my own understanding of God and of the fact of suffering in this world is God's wager in the Incarnation. One result of this deepened appreciation of the mystery and tremendousness of God's act of Incarnation is that I have shifted from a motionless posture at the recitation of the words of the Nicene Creed about Jesus the Christ, "by the power of the Holy Spirit he became incarnate from the Virgin Mary and became man".⁶ I have adopted an ancient Christian practice that was heretofore not my own. I now bow my head before this unfathomable gift from God.

What kind of neighbor might we hope to be after engaging for a while in this effort of Christian-Muslim dialogue? We may hope to become more flexible in our responses. We

may discover the wisdom of different responses to the serious, the zealous, to the overeager, to the open, and to the reserved. We may hope to address past offenses and hurts, even if we cannot remove their residues. We will hope to understand when a helping hand is wanted and when it is not. And then, having spoken the truth in love, we must be content to leave the outcome to God. God is the All-Hearer, the All-Seer, the Opener, the Finisher.

What more can we aspire to?

¹ *The Muslim Link* (MD, VA, and DC Metropolitan Area Bi-Weekly Newspaper), Feb. 26-Mar. 11, 2010, p. 27; [www.icna.org/2010/01/on March 11](http://www.icna.org/2010/01/on_March_11), 2010

² "Malcolm X." *Encyclopædia Britannica Online.*, 2010. Web. 10 Mar. 2010 <<http://0-search.eb.com.librarycatalog.vts.edu/eb/article-905>>; Amir N. Muhammad, *the History of Masjid Muhammad the Early Muslims in the Washington, DC Area* (Washington: FreeMan Publications, 2009), p. 17; interview with Saleem Abdul-Mateen, March 4, 2010.

³ For data on language and ethnicity in the population of metropolitan Washington, see the website of the Metropolitan Washington Council of Governments www.mwcog.org

⁴ Ihsan Bagby, "Imams and Mosque Organizations in the United States", in Philippa Sgtrum, ed., *Muslims in the United States: Identity, Influence, Innovation* (Washington: Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, 2005), p.26.

⁵ The Gospel according to John, chapter 17, verse 21, *The New Oxford Annotated Bible* (New York: Oxford, 1991).

⁶ *The Book of Common Prayer* (New York: Church Publishing, 1979), page 358.