On This Rock I Will Build My Church: An Examination of the Foundations of Faith in Dialogue

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Introduction

Christians and Muslims have been in dialogue with each other since the mid-seventh century, when Christians encountered Muslims not only as a military force, but as representatives of a distinct religious ideology. Yet despite fourteen centuries of dialogue, it appears that little progress has been made, and these interactions tend to be fraught with hostility and condemnation on both sides. Mahmoud Ayoub, a scholar in Muslim-Christian relations and inter-religious dialogue at Hartford Seminary, notes that Christianity and Islam both claim universality for all people, meaning that neither Christianity nor Islam are limited to specific tribes or nations; rather, their messages are intended for all of humanity. This presents both a significant opportunity and a near-impossible roadblock: two major religions both claim to be universal and to have God's final message of salvation, but they contain incompatible doctrines.[1] In this paper, I examine the foundation of the arguments – the implicit premises – used by the interlocutors in several Christian-Muslim dialogues from the seventh century to today, to determine the role of the structure of these arguments in the impasse in Muslim-Christian dialogue. I then propose a way around this impasse through ex-

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[1] Mahmoud Ayoub, "Christian-Muslim Dialogue: Goals and Obstacles," *The Muslim World* 94, no. 3 (2004): 314–315.

ploration of relationship, and apply those findings to the contemporary Christian dialogue with the New Atheism.

Review of the Issues in Christian-Muslim Dialogue

Though many polemical and apologetical texts exist from the seventh century to the present day, the texts chosen for review in this paper were selected primarily because of the availability of both the original arguments (whether Christian or Muslim) and various responses to them by interlocutors representing the other religion. Furthermore, while many accounts of Christian-Muslim dialogues do exist, such as the eighth century Miaphysite *Disputation of John and the Emir*, many were excluded from discussion here because they are likely fictionalized accounts intended for catechesis rather than accurate documentation of actual dialogue.[2]

Paul of Antioch's *Letter to a Muslim Friend*, a Chalcedonian Christian letter dating from the first half of the thirteenth century, provides insight into several of the main issues debated. In this text, he describes the reasons of a Byzantine Christian for remaining Christian rather than converting to Islam: the notion that Muhammad was sent only to the Arabs; that Islam provides nothing new since it simply reiterates an existing esteem for Christ, Mary, and the Gospel; that Christian Trinitarian and Christological doctrines are defensible; and that Christianity is the perfection of religion due to its emphasis on both justice and grace. Throughout this text, extensive references to the Qur'an are made in an attempt to validate the Christian arguments to Muslim interlocutors.[3] A century later, in 1316 CE, an anonymous letter known as *The Letter from the People of Cyprus* was sent to Muslim representatives. This letter's structure is based on the *Letter to a Muslim Friend*, addressing the same issues with the same stra-

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[2] Michael Philip Penn, *When Christians First Met Muslims: A Sourcebook of the Earliest Syriac Writings on Islam* (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2015), 200–201.

[3] Sydney H. Griffith, "Paul of Antioch," in *The Orthodox Church in the Arab World, 700–1700: An Anthology of Sources*, ed. S. Noble and A. Trieger (DeKalb, IL: Northern Illinois University Press, 2015), 220–233.

tegies.[4] Two Muslim replies to this letter are also extant, and provide useful information about the effectiveness of the Christian arguments against conversion to Islam.

The first of these replies, by Muslim scholar Ibn Taymiyyah and dated the same year, invalidates the use of the Qur'an to support Christian arguments. Since he is responding to a Christian claim that the Prophet Muhammad is a liar, Ibn Taymiyyah argues that the Qur'an must therefore also be seen by Christians as unreliable; thus, it is impossible for Christians to rely on the Qur'an as a basis for argument with Muslims.[5] The second of these replies, made in 1321 by Muhammad b. Abi Talib al-Dimaqshi, is more wide-ranging and includes defences of several Muslim beliefs, including Muhammad's prophethood, which he claims is supported in Christian scripture and history. He includes grammatical arguments aimed at proving the universal nature of the Qur'an, which he believes is foreshadowed in the Bible.[6]

Another text reviewed for this paper was the *Letter of [Gregory Palamas] Which, as Captive, He Sent from Asia to His Church*, written in 1354. It is thus roughly contemporary with the letters described above. Though it is not technically a letter and response because Gregory Palamas wrote the entirety of the text, it describes a dialogue he had with several of his Ottoman Muslim captors.[7] This dialogue covered a broad range of theological questions, including the typical questions of the nature of the Trinity and the Incarnation, though it also includes topics like circumcision, Christ's miracles, and free will.[8]

Given that all of the letters listed above are from the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, some six to seven hundred years after the birth of Islam, two more texts representing Christian and Muslim arguments in an earlier era were also reviewed for this paper. *The First* Risalah *on the Holy Trinity*,

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[4] Charles Tieszen, *A Textual History of Christian-Muslim Relations: Seventh-Fifteenth Centuries* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2015), 182.
[5] Ibid., 195.
[6] Ibid., 200, 205.
[7] Ibid., 206.
[8] Ibid., 213.