

AN OPEN LETTER TO AN IRANIAN MUSLIM ON  
THE IMPROBABILITY & NECESSITY OF

CHRISTIAN/MUSLIM DIALOG

Dear \_\_\_\_\_:

2616 6 June 93

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I would speak of "Muslim/Christian Dialog" if you'd've initiated this conversation, but I did--by giving you some Thinksheets of mine touching on your religion. I'm grateful to you for your heartfelt, competent, direct response, & hope you will feel the same toward this reply of mine, which is in your mode, as you said "As this is a matter of faith, I will be straightforward."

Why the open letter? Because I consider your letter, & mine, important enough to share with my regular Thinksheet readers. No breach of confidence, of course, for I do not identify you by name, & none of my readers could recognize you by particulars.

The sections are numbered, as is my custom, for easy reference.

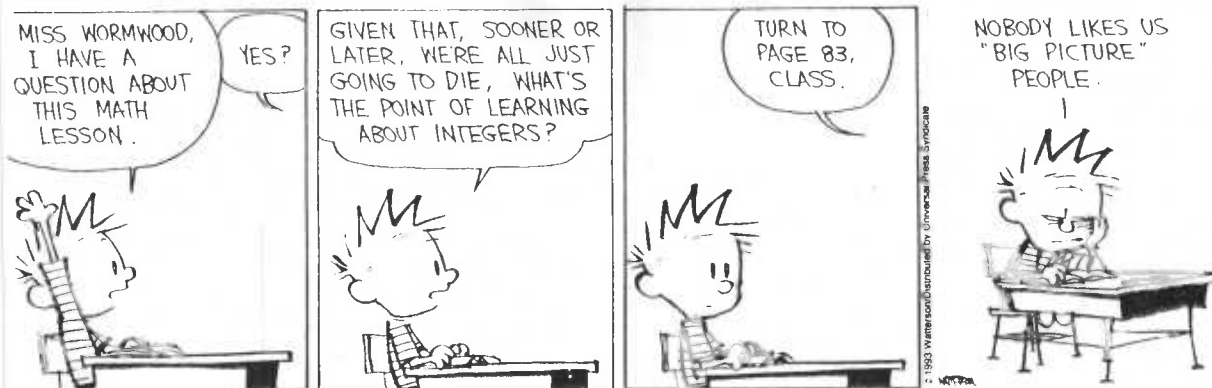
1 Today is the 25th anniversary of the murder of Bobby Kennedy by a Muslim. The best & brightest of the Kennedys, that one was a paragon of humane conscience, civic consciousness, & Christian concern. I cherish a letter from him encouraging me in an activity close to his heart.

We Christians think of you Muslims as violent because that has been our experience of you. (Yes, of course, you Muslims say the same of us Christians.) We Americans think of you Muslims as violent because that has been our experience --so "I was not surprised that Muslims did the World Trade Center bombing," I said in concluding my letter incorporated in #2606, herewith. Muhammad used violence, Jesus didn't; so Christians have a worse conscience about resorting to violence than do Muslims. (Of that Thinksheet, what §2 has to say about the relations of knowledge/ignorance/conviction/prejudice is pertinent to your letter insofar as the latter accuses me, erroneously, of ignorance & prejudice.)

2 In a few months, the centennial of the first World's Parliament of Religions will be celebrated. I've copies of all the original printings of that gathering's papers & can assure you that, taken together, they exhibit the improbability--more than the necessity!--of interfaith dialog. You & I shouldn't get too disturbed if we don't communicate well at the verbal-convictional level, since "getting across" to each other is improbable. We should, however, be disturbed if (1) we don't try, for interfaith dialog is a human-global necessity, or (2) we fail to affirm the "big picture" of our common humanity & the little, intimate picture of mutual affection. Those who take religion with ultimate seriousness, as you & I do, suffer as what Calvin calls "'big picture' people" (3 June 93):

**CALVIN AND HOBBS**

By Bill Watterson



3 Multilevel hermeneutics of sacred writings is universal among literate peoples, so your statement that the Quran can be read at many levels has no significance for interfaith polemics (though you assume it's an Islamic advantage). This was one of the fundamentals I laid down at the U. of Hawaii in teaching "The World's Great Religions" to a class that had in it representatives of all the world's

great religions. Your scriptures, mine, everybody's, in the light of "reader response criticism," function to mirror, Rorschach-like, the stratigraphy of human consciousness. Your wife asked if I'd used commentaries on the Quran. Of course. And on the Bible, the Talmud, the Rig Veda, the Tao te Ching, the Sutras, the.... And I can tell you both that they're all the same as exhibiting the **interpretive levels** religion scholars always & everywhere find in their holy books. The difference comes in the quality of (1) the holy books & (2) the intellectual-spiritual powers of the hermeneuts. It will not surprise you to hear that I claim that both my holy books (the Hebrew-Aramaic-Greek Bible) & my hermeneuts (Christian interpreters of same) are the best. The unavoidable flipside of this, pertinent to our conversation, is that your holy book (The Quran) & hermeneuts (Islamic interpreters through the centuries) are inferior. But of course, *mutatis mutandis*, you feel the same way, as your very long letter shows. (No criticism! I'm grateful for all six single-spaced pages!)

4 A crucial reason for the improbability of interfaith dialog is that each religion forms (the irreligious would say "brainwashes") its children's inner world according to the particular religion's **paradigm** (way of seeing, & living in, the world). That paradigm has a nurturant-defensive-offensive shape. You & I agree that it's deeply tragic when a child grows up without spiritual formation, without soul-food; so we can understand the Russian government's hunt for Christian teachers to teach the Faith in Russia's public schools (ironic contrast to America's public schools!). As for each religion's central shaping story, in each generation the religion's parents & other teachers give the story a version appropriate to (1) defend the religion against pollution & dissolution & (2) make the religion competitive, if it cannot be dominant, in its environment(s). (Every religion uses at least some energy for offense-aggression-missions & welcomes converts.)

Improbability here rises (or descends) to impossibility in the case of **fundamentalists**, who (of whatever religion) believe they've a perfect book from heaven by God "sent down" (as the Quran very frequently says). In my library work at N.Y. Theological Seminary, recently I've read a number of articles on Muslim "liberals," but these always turn out to be liberals on peripheral matters: at its heart, because of its revelation story (eg, Surah 96.1-5), your religion is quintessentially of fundamentalist mentality. What journalists have been calling "Muslim fundamentalism" is real Islam breaking out in jihad against non-Sharia leaders & governments.

You yourself have provided me with an instance of peripheral-liberal thinking. You criticize me for saying that "the revealing angel pinned the Prophet in a cave" & threatened his life if he continued to refuse to "Recite!" But surely you are aware that that account is a strong & steady Islamic tradition. I have not, as you claim, "inserted violence (from your own imagination) into a wonderful, sacred record of revelation." To the contrary, you have excised the violence to clean up the story (or, I generously add, your own instruction in Islam may already have cleaned up the traditon). As for criticizing Muhammad for resisting the command to "Recite!"--far be it from me to do that: would that he had continued to resist, so that the world would not have been afflicted with the claim that not Jesus (as we Christians claim) but Muhammad was the "seal" (closure) of the prophets....which brings me to...

5 The "seal" or closure of prophetic revelation. When in our home I asked you how you felt about your government's persecution, imprisonment, even death of Bahá'is, you shocked me by saying, "But they are infidels." Your religion urges you to coldness toward them because they claim that their founder, Baha Ullah, is what you claim for Muhammad, viz that he's the last, the "seal," of the prophets. The rage you Muslims feel against Bahá'is for this claim is the same as we Christians feel toward you: you claim to replace our "seal" Jesus with your "seal" Muhammad. Bahá'is further irritate you Muslims by claiming to outdo you on important points of Islamic pitching (evangelism): the unity of humanity, world peace, universal education, the equality of men & women....It's all very human to resent a new religion appearing out of the old if you're of the old--as Jews resent

Christians, Christians resent Muslims, Muslims resent Baha'is, Hindus resent Buddhists (& Sikhs & Jains), etc. You repeatedly speak of your religion as "the last world religion," but it is not--though the phrase continues to have high promotional value; it is not even the latest. Baha'ism is world-wide: I've visited temples in two countries....Another matter on Baha'is: you say (p.2) that your country gives political rights to "religious minorities." But for an obvious reason, your list of these empowered minorities does not include the Baha'is.

6 I can't criticize you for presenting your religion in the best light & for "reading" history from your religion's POV (point of view, coign of vantage, angle of vision). Everybody does it. Historiography is (back-looking) revisionistic & (front-looking) programmatic, &--in both directions--propagandistic....I'm not cynical about this. Without this motivation & motifs, "history" would not be written. So it's tiresome & unconvincing, eg, to claim that one's religion is less violent than someone else's religion. Why, then, do we both do it? For one thing, it gives the other guy the opportunity to repent & be humble, though it seldom has that effect, because of the deep ingraining I spoke of in §2. But even when there's no increase in repentance nor improvement in humility, each side may experience some self-transcendence in listening to the other side's affirmations/accusations. And it just may be that the Great God, through our dialog, may call us both (to use a phrase from Jesus) to "come up higher."

7 I honor you for making a vigorous defense of your faith. It reminds me of *Defensor Fidei*, the title Rome gave Henry VIII for his book attacking Luther (of course before Rome attacked Henry for, among other things, agreeing with Luther). It's important that we human beings state our **spiritual identity** to the world, witness to what's deepest in us ("Always be ready to make your defense...an accounting for the hope that is in you," 1 Peter 3.15). Furthermore, taking one's stand with integrity is sometimes prelude to taking one's stand elsewhere, as happened in Henry VIII's case. A social benefit of such solid, thoughtful witness is that it models for others' doing it & motivates them to do it. A society in which people are tongue-tied about the depths condemns itself to live in the shallows. So I'm not just being polite in saying I honor you for your letter-essay-witness to me. From it I learned nothing except that you care deeply about your faith & have thought long & clearly about it. But how worth learning that is! And would that I could effectively encourage more Christians to do likewise!

8 Time for a **demographic** note. When I asked you whether you'd been to Persepolis, no great distance from where you grew up in Iran, you said "No, & I'll not be going." The **Greeks** overran your country 23 cs. ago, & you've not forgiven them yet! But when the Arabs overran your country, you not only forgave them, you adopted their religion. How come?

When the Greeks overran them in Palestine, the Jews succeeded only briefly in throwing off their yoke, then adapted (mainly through the influence of the "Hellenistic Judaism" of Greek-overrun Jewish communities in Egypt) to the Hellenistic modes of thought &, to a lesser extent, of life. This Grecized Judaism became the matrix of Christianity, so early Christian doctrine has a richness & flexibility Arab thought did not have in the formative period of Islam, the Greeks never having conquered Arabia. Thus, to speak in terms of cultural anthropology, it came about that Christians had categories for developing their doctrines (Incarnation, Atonement, Trinity, et al)--categories Muslims did not have, & indeed abhorred.

To sharpen what I'm saying, let's look at Alexander the Great. You don't want to look at him or even at his Persepolis: I want to look at him, & thank God for his spreading the Greek culture, which made my religion possible. To somebody out of play, it may seem crazy that you & I can never be reconciled in our religious differences because of an ancient Greek general, but there it is. "As simple as that," as Ross Perot would say.

This demographic note should give us enough objective distance to have a momentary laugh at our religious difference--momentary, before we return to the utterly serious fact that to each of us the other's religion is blasphemous.

9 You want to make out that your religion has been & is tolerant of mine, but you do not remark (nor would I expect you to) that that tolerance is only for my religion when it's in quiescent mode, ie when it's not true to itself as a missionary religion (as yours is). The truth is that my religion is more tolerant here: Muslim missions have been & are tolerated in Christian lands; Christian missions in Muslim lands, never. But there's little profit for anybody from the game of more-tolerant-than-thou or less-violent-than-thou.

10 On the side of hope, increasing nonreligious (economic, cultural, political) interactions between the Muslim & Christian worlds is pressing the one billion of one to listen to the one billion of the other. I've long been for religious interaction also, & you experienced this in our home: your letter says I "indicated an interest in increasing understanding between Muslims and Christians." But when you read me, you concluded that I am "fundamentally uninformed."

Your reaction is typical. When I reach out to Muslims for honest conversation on religion, I'm rebuffed by being accused of ignorance of Islam. Muslim circular "reasoning" goes like this: Our religion is the final, the natural, the logical religion. If you grant all three, you understand Islam. To the extent that you reject one or more assertions, you are ignorant & need to be informed. The wagons have circled, & I ride the perimeter till I get tired. But the wagon train can't progress in a circle. For a millennium Islam has been culturally dug in against change & is now enraged that history has bypassed it economically, technologically, politically, culturally.

Defenders of Islam claim that this being bypassed &, in the 19th century, overrun by the West, was due to nonreligious factors: Islam is not to blame. I claim that the trouble is religious, due to defects in Islam itself.

But we both know that no present geopolitical force is greater than Muslim **rage**. The West's "policy of containment" vis-a-vis Communism worked. It should not surprise you that when now the West thinks "Islam," what quickly springs to mind is the question, How do we contain Muslim rage which expresses itself in assassinations, bombings, hijackings, subversion of democratic governments --in short, terrorism?

11 To illustrate the above §, a story from my life. On 11 Mar 76, I wrote the Group of Muslim Brothers, Box 2245, Teheran, your country, for "basic books on Islam" to put in the N.Y. Theological Seminary library. I concluded, "I look forward to dialog and joint action when your new center on 96th St. here [NYC] opens!" Toward that dialog, I'd been in several rounds of conversation with Dr. Ali Ardehali of the Bank of Iran. In preparation for writing to you, I re-read everything I had from him, including a 12-p. single-spaced letter in which he (1) praises my extensive knowledge as a religion scholar & (2) claims I am willfully ignorant that Islam is the final, logical, & natural religion. What is so pathetic is that, to use a currently overused phrase, he just doesn't get it. Why couldn't I break through his circled wagons? Because, ironically, he was illogical: he treated as **conclusions** what in logical discourse would be processed as **premises**. He was walking evidence of Islamic **atavism**, an otherwise sophisticated gentleman who, when it came to religion, was simple-minded. Your letter displays that same simple-mindedness, faithful to Islam but not to logic.

A few quotes from Dr. A's long letter: "As Islam is the religion of God and nature, every child is born a Muslim" & stays that way unless somebody goes to messing with his/her final-natural-logical religion. We Muslims appeal to the world to "submit to God and obey logic and the orders of nature and instinct." He tries to disengage (as a Persian?) Islam from the "atavism" of "a millenium of Arab fundamentalism." "True Islam" isn't responsible for the Arab world's "low standard of living, low level of science and technology, and the political immaturities of Moslems." "If the history of Moslem people is full of differences, intrigues, fightings, and corruptions, the reasons were political, economic, and personal rather than religious." "Islam is not responsible for mistakes and malpractices of some groups of its adherents."

The basic simple-mindedness is Quranic. In the index I made to the

Quran over a long period of study, I noted how often the text argues from the belief in creation-by-God to the illogicality & therefore culpability of those who base their thinking elsewhere than on the fact of creation--an illogical "logic" illustrating the collapse of the premise into the conclusion. How sad & dangerous is this simple-mindedness is obvious: (1) Dialog is impossible, for the other person is seen as fighting fact & therefore as both illogical & evil; (2) Viewing the other as evil (as you & your government see Baha'is, eg) easily sanctions violence, for logical-moral-spiritual cleansing of the environment. All monstrously evil systems--eg, Nazism & Stalinism--are simple-minded. Perhaps some day Islam will surrender its simple-mindedness, as the West has in going through Renaissance, Reformation, & Enlightenment. As of now, however, the violence is built into Islamic thinking, on which take the case of....

12 **Salman Rushdie.** Last month your government refused to withdraw its \$2 million offer for his head. In Mafia terminology, Iran "has a contract out on" him. The non-Muslim world cannot fathom such barbarism, & some Muslim apologists have struggled to put the blame off Islam & onto you Persians, but it won't wash: the root of the matter is the simple-minded, inveterate Islamic humorlessness about religion, on which Muslims can't take a joke (as Jews & Christians can take jokes about their religions). Humor relieves us & ours of self-importance & reduces violence in the world. Islam does not have that outlet, so it moves quickly from assumed insult to violence. As for you personally, I doubt that, if given a chance, you would kill S.R., even though your government & (through ayatollahs) your religion enjoins you to do it. In this matter, I think Christianity has had a restraining influence on you.

13 Your letter unwittingly makes clear that you are not aware of your religion's overclaims for itself & slanders against my religion. One reason for this is that when we Christians or Jews make a biblical reference of which there's a Quranic version, you view the biblical passage through Quranic spectacles, then criticize our direct reading of the Bible! I am well aware of the Quran's slant on various Bible passages: you should be aware that we Jews & Christians view those slantings as outrages, pathetic & dangerous distortions. You may special-plead that your Quranic version of a Bible story supercedes the Bible's account, but kindly become aware that to us, that sounds as phoney as Latter Day Saints' special pleading for the Book of Mormon's idiosyncratic readings of Bible passages. Muslims & Mormons are committed to seeing the Bible through their own sectarian eyes, & I've found them equally resistant to dealing with a biblical passage *in itself*. (You berate me for comparing Mormonism & Islam, as though I were insulting the latter; but my comparisons only report on my experience. No offense intended, & I wish none were taken.)

What overclaims? what slanders? I'll mention only one of each:

Slander: The cross is not only visually, but theologically, the heart of the Christian message. But the Quran denies Jesus' crucifixional death. That denial wipes out the Christian religion. Could there be any other slander as great as that?

Overclaim: On p.3 you repeat a pitch-point of Islam, a bit of propaganda on which "lies much of its [Islam's] appeal," viz "Islam is the most inclusive, and therefore, comprehensive, of all Abrahamic religions." That's true only in the trivial sense that Islam is chronologically later. Subtly concealed in the propaganda (though I'm not accusing you personally of subtle concealment) is that Islam "includes" little of Judaism & certainly does not "comprehend" (in either sense) Christianity's rich theology, eg Incarnation & Trinity. It's specious, & worse, to denude the two previous religions & then claim to "include" & "comprehend" them. Look at it from the other side: to Jews, Christianity is an aberration; to Jews & Christians, Islam is an aberration.

Honest dialog includes painful seeing/hearing of how one looks/sounds to the other. Pride & turf defense weigh in on the side of seeing one's religion in the best light & the other's in the worst light. Therefore the "improbability" I speak of in the title of this letter-Thinksheet. Your calling my approach (p.6) "fundamentally wrong-headed" & my "preconceptions about Islam" "unenlightened,"

reveals that when you wrote your letter, you were a poor candidate for dialog between your faith & any other. I write this letter-Thanksheet as a prayer that you will become a better candidate for dialog, which (you rightly say) requires "mutual respect." Mutual respect for one another, ie; respecting one another's religion is no requirement. I do not respect your religion; & to the extent that you are Quranic, you cannot respect mine. Of course we can respect some of the products of each other's civilizations, as of other civilizations.

14 Another point of Islamic propaganda is alleged generosity not only toward Jews & Christians but also toward our religions. As for my religion, scores of times the Quran scorns it for "associating" (the Arab. wd. can be intransitive, the Eng. cannot), ie violating (Islam's notion of) monotheism, as does the Trinity, the centerpiece of Christian theology East & West, Catholic & Protestant. In my direct study of sin in the text of the Quran, I find no sin greater than--perhaps as great as--"association." The Quran does not respect the heart of my religion, so I don't expect Muslims to. Nor can you Muslims, with your view of salvation, respect my Christian conviction that sin requires the grace of atonement by divine intervention (which, on p.6, you reject)....Irony: You say that we Christians subordinate intelligence to will but Muslims put intelligence at a higher level. But Christians have done more to press for education--eg, the Am. U. of Beirut--in the Muslim world than have Muslims (with, of course, the narrow exception, viz centers of Quranic & sharia learning).

15 In §9 I said Christians do not have missionary freedom in "Muslim lands," by which I meant power, not population: a population may be predominantly Muslim but have a non-shari'ah government--in which case Christians may have this freedom (though in non-shari'ah Turkey, we do not). But beyond the evangelism issue, we Christians tend to have shariaphobia because of what actually happens to nations in which imams-mujtahids-ayatullahs come to power. Daily our family prays the Lord's Prayer with its theocratic "Your Kingdom come," but gives thanks that we don't live under a clergy-ridden theocratic state.

Yes, shari'ah is not monolithic in particulars, for Quran-Hadiths-Sunnah-Analogy require *fiqh* (jurisprudence, the science of interpreting the law), & this has led to many schools of interpretation ranging from personal to severe (by "personal," I mean viewing shari'ah as personal obligation to lead a virtuous life, the state merely guaranteeing freedom to behave as one believes one should). The World Council of Churches encourages Christians living under shari'ah not to denounce shari'ah but to "encourage quietly those Muslims who advocate more humane interpretations" (Stuart E. Brown, sec't. for Christian-Muslim relations in the WCC subunit on Dialogue with People of Living Faiths, ONE WORLD, Nov/85, p.5).

Another aspect of shariaphobia is what happens, in a nation that's been under shari'ah, when a non-shari'ah government comes to power or Muslim leaders make concessions to non-Muslim governments. Example #1, Egypt: The assassination of Sadat. Example #2, Palestine: The assassinations of numerous Arab leaders for being "soft on Israel"--so considerable a slaughter that to this day, Palestinian Arab leaders have been unwilling to accept Israel's longstanding offer of autonomy (not, of course, [military] sovereignty: not only the PLO, but the Quran, rejects the legitimacy of Israel's existence: once a Muslim land, always a Muslim land)....

....which leads me to observe that we disagree not only on religion but doubtless also on the accounts we give of history & the views we have about the politics of any place on earth where your religion has come to, lost, or is striving to regain, power. Just one more example, #3, Bosnia: My view is that Christian (Croatian & Serbian) shariaphobia--the fear that Bosnian Muslims would, with neighboring Muslim states, try to form a shari'ah government--was the factor tilting fractured Yugoslavia toward war; & (on this you'll surely disagree with me) that that that fear was & is rational.

16 It sounds dismal! But dialog becomes more possible when we look squarely at the hurdles. I've mentioned a number of them. Here I must add an-



other, viz our two countries' very **different histories**. My country has never been occupied except by us: Native Americans excepted, we've never been militarily overrun & occupied. In 641 AD/CE your country became Arab-occupied territory in a more radical sense than Palestine is now Jewish-occupied territory: more radical, because before the Arabs swept over you, you were virtually Arab-less, but Palestine since the Canaanites has been mainly Jewish in population. I've had no invaders to try to fight off or accept.

Iran has had successive waves of invaders for at least four millenia. When the Arabs swept over you, you decided that since you couldn't lick 'em, you'd join 'em (ie, become Muslims). Your religion is an import by a foreign invader. My religion has always been the majority religion of my country.

Am I putting you down? How stupid that would be! Rather I'm pointing to historical-religious roots of our two very different feeling-worlds, the primary worlds out of which we live & speak (&, if we do, try to dialog).

17 A further hurdle is our essentially limited ability to separate the sin (which we are to hate) from the sinner (whom we are to love, according to Jesus). You say (p.6), "We cannot fault a religion for the failings of those who claim to follow it." But your letter shows you unable to follow your own precept vis-a-vis my religion. The precept is abstract & idealistic, & I share the burden of good will it bears. But my response proves that neither can I obey the precept, belief & behavior being inextricably interlocked. The practical, loving question then is: How can we enter into humanly productive dialog in view of our rejection of each other's religion & the attendant behavior of believers?

You've a deeper reason for wanting to separate your religion from the "failings of those who claim to follow it." You want to defend your religion from the charge of defects, defects which (the charge is) naturally surface in believers' lives. But I do not bear the irrational burden of defending a perfect book, & I am free to admit weaknesses in the Christian religion itself, especially given the Christian doctrine of sin as a pervasive corruption of humanity as well as resistance to the will of God. Having a weaker doctrine of sin, you have more trouble giving rational account of the horrors of history & the mendacities of the here & now....Islam is an easier religion to convert to because it does not require the profound repentance Christianity does. You correlate Judaism with action, Christianity with love, & Islam with knowledge. But your knowledge does not include awareness, & confession, of the intellect-corrupting depths of human evil. That evil includes your religion's arrogant view that humanity can think its way into salvation ("the content or direction of the intelligence...has sacramental efficacy," you quote Fritjof Schuon). It looks good for you to accept Jews & Christians alongside Muslims, but what you really teach is supersessionism: the religion of "knowledge" (logic & nature) will replace all religions of ignorance, including Judaism & Christianity....Not that you yourself personally are arrogant. Quite the contrary. You are a gentle, kind, loving human being. You are (you will only half appreciate this) better than your religion.

18 Dialog requires **self-examination** in both senses of self, the individual self & the communal self, both involving honest-courageous inquiry into one's religion. While dialog usually proceeds from belief to behavior (if it even gets to behavior), self-examination proceeds also from behavior to belief. Take the status of women, eg. What are the actual inner & social (economic, political, religious) conditions of women where my religion is predominant? where yours is? Of course, since beliefs are the roots of action, beliefs keep leaking in when we're trying to isolate behavior for examination. The baby doesn't arrive in this world with instructions attached, & there's no third eye (unless it's the UN's "Universal Declaration of Human Rights," a document Christian in base & origin) for evaluating what's good for women in general. (Most of black Africa believes female circumcision is good for women.) You argue that women are better off under Islam, I argue they're better off under Christianity, & nobody can referee. *Bellum texti*, hurling texts at each other, is not a particularly helpful procedure, though you seem to think it is....You say, anent women, that I "have confused religion and tradition." I must

remonstrate as before: you too neatly, & to your own unfair advantage, separate religion and tradition. Eg, are you being fair when you say (p.4) that "the status of women in Islam (not to be confused with Muslim countries) is...much higher than in Judaism"? (That parenthetical expression is a rhetorical weasel.) I read in the NYT (13 Apr 76, p.1) this: "For the first time, Arab women were allowed to vote in the occupied West Bank, the result of an innovation by the occupying Israeli forces." Putting your statement & that quotation side by side tempts me to cynicism. Your statement is theoretical-bookish; the quotation is existential, about actual Arabs & actual Jews. I know it takes heroic effort for a Muslim to say anything good about Israelis. I expect too much.

After going into considerable detail contrasting the high status of women in your religion with their low status in mine & even lower in Judaism, you protect yourself with this: "Unfortunately, we Muslims have often strayed from the teaching of the Qur'an." Indeed. My Bible opens (Gn.1) with God making men & women equal, & the Christian world is in various stages of working toward this. You & I are each alienated from much of the actuality of his own society: we are brother aliens, each longing for & working toward the better society God wants to give. This fact of our brotherhood is humanly more important than the fact that in religion, we are enemy aliens, alienated from each other in competing religions. As America's Muslim population grows, the competition will become keener. More Muslim propaganda (in the vein of your letter) is crossing my desk, as is Christian propaganda aimed at Muslims (eg, these two new books from Baker: Greg Livingstone, PLANTING CHURCHES IN MUSLIM CITIES: A TEAM APPROACH; and Norman L. Geisler & Abdullah Massihi, ANSWERING ISLAM: THE CRESCENT IN LIGHT OF THE CROSS). Pursuant of Islam's goal, you portray Christianity in unattractive terms in comparison with Islam (as you say I "portray Islam in unattractive terms in comparison with Christianity"--which I do & admit it: you don't admit the reverse, perhaps aren't even aware of it). Much of your portrayal is Quranic, from the Q.'s anti-Christian passages. (The New Testament has no anti-Muslim passages, for the same reason that while the NT has some anti-Jewish passages, the OT has no anti-Christian passages: time. Of course orthodox Muslims claim that since the Quran dropped down from heaven, it cannot reflect earthly cultic competition & therefore can have no anti-Christian passages. But to one who reads the Q. with Christian eyes, that claim is worse than a bad joke... of course the other possibility is that Allah is anti-Christian, which may be worth thinking about.) All of which, to those outside the Abrahamic three-faiths historical flow, seems odd, weird, nonsensical.

19 Finally, to clear some misunderstandings of yours: (1) I am irenic, for truth-respecting dialog: a "hyperirenicist" sacrifices truth to peace....(2) You say the Trinity "is believed by many, if not most, Christians." "All" is far closer to the truth. Those who surrender the Trinity, as have many in the Unitarian-Universalist churches, generally stop calling themselves Christians....(3) You deny that Muslims believe (my words) that "Christians blaspheme in setting Jesus...the Second Person of the Trinity above Mohammad," yet you know that your religion condemns as blasphemers those who "associate." But then you admit that "Christians who claim that Jesus is the Son of God blaspheme," as tritheists. Then you adduce the fact that some Christians take "Son of God" "in a metaphorical sense": among the billion of us, I can tell you, almost none....(4) Do you agree that the expansion of our two religions was more by persuasion than by coercion, as I believe?....(5) Yes, you Muslims got chased out of Spain. But how did you get there in the first place: by persuasion?....(6) You say, "Muslims have only the deepest respect for his [Jesus'] person," so Islam couldn't (as I say) "insult him." Islam insults the Son of God, the Second Person of the Trinity, Jesus Christ. "The culmination of monotheism" (your phrase for Islam as "the ultimate world religion") is the Trinity, not Islam....(7) "No slavery in the Arab world"? Check it out, for one, with Amnesty International....(8) The U.S. Muslim population is, like the Jewish, in proportion to the whole, "near zero." Why is Muslim influence near zero, unlike Jewish influence?....God grant that our dialog deepen understanding & our friendship.