

NATHAN GRILLS, DAVID E. LEWIS,
S. JOSHUA SWAMIDASS, EDITORS

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Sacrificial Listening: Christians, Muslims, and the Secular University

David R. Vishanoff
University of Oklahoma
U.S.A.

1. Introduction

This is the story of an ivory-tower scholar's quest for a radically Christian metaphor to govern his relationships with the Muslims he studies, his secular academic colleagues, and his students. Starting from the Parable of the Good Samaritan, I articulate a theory of sacrificial listening, and point out some of its implications for scholarship, teaching, cross-cultural and interreligious understanding, critical theory, hermeneutics, objectivity, identity, transparency, and suffering. Interwoven with this conceptual exploration is my personal story of growing faith, reckless commitment, frequent failure, and great reward.

2. Discovering Secular Colleagues

When I decided to pursue graduate study in non-Christian religions, one member of my suburban evangelical church challenged me: “Listen, David, bank tellers don’t train by studying counterfeit money; they handle real bills until they can detect a false one without even looking at it.” How could I explain to this concerned Christian brother that I was not studying Islam for the purpose of detecting falsehood? My goal was to understand Muslim people—not so that I could communicate the words of the Gospel more persuasively, but so that I could know and love Muslims as my neighbors and “as myself.”

It was the scarcity of such a listening spirit in my parents’ missionary circles, and in the Christian high school and college I attended, that prompted me to set aside mathematics and philosophy and dedicate my career to religious studies. In order to get started, I had to propose a course of independent study, because my evangelical Christian college—one of the most highly regarded in the United States—only offered courses on Christianity. How, I puzzled, could a Christian liberal arts education be complete without some attempt to understand one’s religious neighbors? Mainline Christian schools taught world religions as a matter of course, but in my evangelical world non-Christian religions were taught almost exclusively as a part of missiology. That was in the late 1980s. Since September 11, 2001, American Christians have come to take for granted that of course, by all means, we must try to understand Muslims; yet to this day I know of no evangelical institution where the study of Islam can be pursued for its own

sake, with the depth and sustained attention that are possible in the secular academy.

I enrolled, therefore, in the University of Colorado at Boulder, which was regarded in my church as a hotbed of secular liberalism—“the Berkeley of the Rockies.” There I discovered the importance of loving and understanding my secular as well as my religious neighbors. Seven years in private Christian schools had left me with a vague premonition that out there, in the secular world, I would be up against “them.” They would mock my faith, or attempt to corrupt it, and the best I could do would be to stand firm and hope, by dint of argument or charm, to win some over to my side. Mockery I certainly found—of my faith, but not of my person. Although my commitments were known to my professors and fellow students, I frequently had the surreal experience of listening to them chatter derisively about Christians as though their words had not the slightest bearing on anyone in the room. In their minds, Christians were caricatures of absurdity, whereas I was a colleague. They appeared not to notice the incongruity. Perhaps they never will, for the caricature itself has already begun to dissipate in many academic circles, as faithful Christians of all stripes become more and more common and identifiable in the secular academy.

To my surprise, not only did my secular neighbors accept me as an equal, I too began to identify myself with them. The questions that they asked were ones that troubled me also—especially the question of whether the cross-cultural understanding to which I aspired was actually possible. Class after class and reading after reading called into question the possibility of standing in someone else’s shoes and seeing

the world from someone else's perspective. Postmodern philosophers and critical theorists gradually convinced me that my goal of understanding Muslims on their own terms was chimerical and even nonsensical, because my understanding is always constructed from my particular vantage point and shaped by my own motivations and agendas. Some Christians have felt that this basic insight into the constructed nature of all human knowledge undermines the absolute truth of Christian doctrines, but I found that it only deepened my Christian convictions about the depravity of human nature and the grievous effects of the fall upon the way we learn and know. The realization that knowledge of others distorts them in ways that serve the interests of the knower was not the beginning of a postmodern slide into relativism; it was my secular colleagues' recognition of a grievous biblical truth that I had not sufficiently appreciated before.

This affinity between postmodern criticism and Augustinian anthropology is not always readily acknowledged. Even some of the more philosophically inclined members of my church still discount anything bearing the stigma of postmodernism. Most secular academics are likewise loath to countenance the possibility that Christian theology might be a useful resource for critical theory. Yet our shared concern with the self-serving nature of human knowledge presents an opportunity for Christians to serve our secular colleagues by wrestling alongside them with one of their most vexing methodological problems. Some of those colleagues do not believe they need our help, and are quite content to unmask the power dynamics of Christian and colonial discourses without ever turning the lens of critical theory upon themselves. Others, however, realize how self-serving critical theory itself can become, and

of those, a few might be willing to recognize that this failure can be addressed only by a self-emptying and sacrificial kind of love that is beyond the capacity of fallen human nature. We cannot help our colleagues to realize that truth, however, unless we first acknowledge their insights into human nature, and then find ways to articulate Christian teachings using their conceptual vocabulary.

The surprise of finding myself intellectually at home among non-Christian colleagues altered my vocational aspirations. My intent had always been to return to a Christian college after doing my time, and earning my stripes, in the secular academy. My aim was to convince Christians—college students, missionaries, and the Church at large—to face their neighbors in the same confident but other-focused and attentive listening posture that Jesus took toward each person he met. I was beginning to discover, however, that the neighbors I wished to love were not just Muslims; some of them were secular intellectuals, and I seemed to have as much to learn from them as I had to offer. As I looked ahead past the Ph.D., therefore, I reset my course to become a long-term collaborator in the secular academy's discourses about Islam and about the nature of human understanding.

Before my wife, Beth, and I left Colorado, our first child, Rachel, was born—a difficult and deeply moving experience that kept my academic study of human beings tethered to the hard and beautiful reality of lived relationships. While we were expecting our second child, Jonathan, we moved to Atlanta, where I began doctoral work in the marvelously open, stimulating, and collegial environment of Emory University's Graduate Division of Religion. From the outset

I was given the freedom to frame my work there in terms of the model of sacrificial love and listening that was emerging as the guiding motivation for my studies. One of the many professors who participated in my first-semester seminar on method and theory asked the class to read Robert Wuthnow's analysis of how survey participants retold Jesus' parable of the Good Samaritan, and as I pondered that story anew, I realized that it addressed many of the moral and intellectual challenges that beset my project of knowing and loving Muslims. In an attempt to bring my religious motivations into conversation with the class, I decided to write my term paper as a commentary on Luke 10:25-37. The gist of that essay—remembered now through the lens of much subsequent reflection—was roughly as follows.

In answer to his own question about how to inherit eternal life, the legal scholar to whom Jesus addresses the parable begins by citing the command to "love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind." What better introduction to a young scholar's effort to integrate his intellectual pursuits into a whole and undivided life of devotion to God? This command compels me to ask what it might mean to study Islam as an act of love for God. It does not even begin to answer that question, however. All it tells me is that the ultimate purpose of my scholarship cannot be merely to satisfy some human curiosity or desire or even need, nor can its method or its success be judged simply by how well it fulfills such humanistic ends.

The law's second demand is to "love your neighbor as yourself." How can scholarship fulfill that mandate? For the natural

sciences, this imperative appears to demand a concern for human welfare. It does not require Christians to focus exclusively on applied sciences with evident social benefits, but it does seem to call for scholarship that engages other human beings in selfless ways—that supports, encourages, challenges, and serves other scientists or even the broader public, rather than just gratifying the scholar's personal curiosity or ambition. The increasingly interdependent and collaborative nature of scientific research appears in this respect a salutary development that Christians can support, and in which they should set the standard for selflessness. For the social sciences, this command raises forcefully the question of whether it is morally justifiable to regard the people one studies as objects of knowledge, upon whom one looks down from the vantage point of disciplinary expertise, rather than as interlocutors and knowers on a level with oneself. For the humanities, this command suggests a re-centering from the traditional humanistic project of forming and expanding the Self and its own culture, to what we might call the inter-humanistic goal of understanding and serving the Other.

Those of us who inhabit the Western humanistic tradition, and those of us who constitute the Church, have often fallen into the trap of loving our non-Western or non-Christian neighbors not exactly "as ourselves," but "as potentially like ourselves"—as potential converts to Christianity, or as still imperfect mirrors of Western culture, rather than as selves worth knowing and loving for their own sake. For my study of Islam, the command to love my neighbor as myself means that my scholarship must model and promote interpersonal relationships in which the Other is loved for who she is, without regard for whether she fits my hopes or serves my

agenda. That requires a relentless and sacrificial pursuit of understanding, so that the person I love is really the Other and not a projection of myself. At the same time it requires integrity on my part, so that it is really my own self, and not some watered down accommodation of myself to the Other, who knows, engages, and loves the Other. Therefore, I will not judge my scholarship on Islam to be successful because it leads to better predictions of human behavior, more universal generalizations about human nature, or more nuanced classifications of human thought. I will judge it to be successful if and only if, in retrospect, it proves to have embodied and enabled human relationships characterized by love, integrity, and an ongoing process of coming to understand the Other. Only if my scholarship fulfills God's command to love my neighbor as myself can it fulfill the command to love God with my whole heart, soul, strength, and mind.

One drawback of directing my scholarship toward the cultivation of interpersonal relationships is that this may cause me to overlook the way religion operates at the level of groups and institutions. In the essay I wrote for my first-year methods seminar, I acknowledged this pitfall, but went on to argue that interpersonal relationships are an adequate guiding metaphor for scholarship because the moral demands imposed upon us by social structures are reducible, in principle, to the ethics of interpersonal relations. Though I harbored some doubts about this claim, I chose to orient my scholarship around what seemed to me the most fundamental moral demand of all, the duty to love my individual neighbor. Rather than just staking out this position as a personal faith-based assumption, however, I was able to point out that this focus on interpersonal relationships was also very much in sympathy with

some of the secular theorists we had read for the seminar. The ritual theorist Catherine Bell, for example, questioned the longstanding tendency in religious studies to analyze power at the level of structures and institutions, because she felt this obscured or denied the moral agency of individuals. I was not as concerned as she to empower individuals, but my goal of understanding them gave me a similar motivation to attend to the particular ways in which individuals interpret, resist, suffer, negotiate, and recreate the power relations in which they find themselves. My attempt to ground my methodology in a Gospel parable did not cut me off from my secular colleagues; it allowed me to participate with them, from a distinctively Christian perspective, in a shared project and concern.

Jesus' interlocutor finds himself somewhat embarrassed by the high bar he has just set for inheriting eternal life, so he proceeds to inquire just how close to himself a person must be to constitute his neighbor. In its original context in Leviticus 19:18, the command to "love your neighbor as yourself" appears to have in view fellow Israelites, but Jesus' parable shows that the questioner's neighbor is not those in closest proximity to him—the priest and the Levite—but rather the victim, who represents powerlessness and need, and also the Samaritan, who represents social and religious distance. The neighbors whom this parable calls me to love and understand are not those most like myself, but Others, including most especially the outsider, the needy, and the vulnerable. As pointed out repeatedly in the methods seminar, however, the history of Western understanding of Others—especially Others whom we regard as in need of our help—is fraught with moral ambivalence. More often than not, Westerners and Christians have invented inferior Others as mirror images of themselves,

to use in their own reflections on their own identities. Others are especially easy to objectify and use in this way, for merely to call someone an Other is to choose to regard him in light of the distance that separates us, while choosing to overlook the commonalities that make us moral and intellectual peers. Among the readings for our seminar was an essay in which the feminist anthropologist Lila Abu-Lughod attacked the dichotomy between Self and Other, and the use of Others in constructing the Self, as irretrievably implicated in Western colonialism and racism. My commentary on Luke's parable acknowledged the risk of self-serving objectification, but argued that identifying and constructing Muslims as religious Others does not inevitably reduce them to objects of our own mental manipulations. On the contrary, by calling for relationship as the primary response to Otherness, I was putting myself in substantial sympathy with Abu-Lughod's insistence that "we are always part of what we study and we always stand in definite relations to it."¹ The command to love Others "as yourself" provides just the kind of moral challenge that a critical scholar like Abu-Lughod might be able to appreciate: the challenge to love Others as ourselves without assimilating them to ourselves—to know them as independent agents on a level with ourselves and in relation to ourselves, without denying the Otherness that makes us enigmas to one another.

The command to love those different from myself raised for me once again the question of whether it is actually possible to understand someone else's religious experience. Must Others always remain to some degree an enigma to me? One of our seminar readings was a prepublication draft of Paul

¹ Lila Abu-Lughod, "Can There Be a Feminist Ethnography?" *Women and Performance* 5 (1990): 27.

Griffiths' *Religious Reading*, in which he argued that since being religious involves giving an account that seems both comprehensive and unsurpassable, it is impossible for me to experience what it is like to belong to a different religion without first abandoning my own. If this is so—and I am not inclined to dispute it—then how can I hope to ever understand a religious Other as she understands herself? I cannot. At this point, however, defining the ultimate goal of religious studies as the cultivation of a certain kind of interpersonal relationship turns out to be most salutary. For a relationship to be characterized by love, integrity, and an ongoing process of coming to understand, it need not ever achieve full phenomenological understanding of the Other's experience. If the goal of scholarship is just loving human interaction, then scholars have no need to pursue anything more than the kind of knowledge that is necessary for and derived from ordinary human interaction. In a healthy friendship, for example, we do not expect to reach a state of perfected understanding; rather, we expect an ongoing dialectic in which each party forms an understanding of the other sufficient to permit productive interaction, and then repeatedly revises that understanding in response to misunderstandings and breakdowns in the relationship. That our understanding of other human beings always remains tentative and flawed is only a failure if the goal of religious studies is some kind of objective description, classification, explanation, or prediction of religious phenomena; if the goal is ethical human relationships, then understanding need never be final or complete. Indeed, healthy relationships require that understanding remain always subject to revision. My doubts about the impossibility of fully knowing another human being were not overcome by Jesus' parable, but they were put in perspective: since the goal

of scholarship is not knowledge itself, but love, the only kind of knowledge I seek is that which enables love.

The alternative to loving my neighbor is to refuse the imperative of relationship by “passing by on the other side” of the road, as the priest and the Levite did. This has been a temptation for the Western Church, which has often retreated from the challenge of relationship with Muslims into the comfort of imagining Islam as a legalistic or violent antithesis to Christianity. Refusing relationship is also a temptation for scholars of religion who have been trained to look down on the objects of their study from a higher plane of objective or critical distance, rather than engaging them as peers from whom they might actually learn something. Many of us were taught that critical study means adopting a hermeneutic of suspicion: never accepting at face value what religious people tell us about themselves, but always seeking to debunk their myths, explain away their experiences, or unmask the oppression they have clothed with piety. Now, I do not deny that suspicion is sometimes warranted even in a loving relationship. A friend who believes all the self-serving tales we spin about ourselves, and never challenges our motives or our self-understanding, is a poor friend indeed. But scholarly critique, like the incisive questioning of a trusted friend, is not a project one may engage in for one’s own gratification, for the satisfaction of unmasking another’s sin. Criticism cannot be an end in itself. If it constitutes just one moment in an ongoing dialectic, in which the Other is allowed to object and to question my critical analysis, then it may be an act of love even if it meets with resistance and anger. But if it unilaterally cuts off the very relationship it is intended to serve, dismissing the Other’s response as irrelevant to the scholar’s

project, then it is incompatible with God’s command to love my neighbor as myself. If my recent book on the history of Islamic hermeneutical theories leads to an impasse in my attempt to converse with certain Muslim intellectuals, because it suggests that their preferred hermeneutic was invented to let them interpret the Qur’an any way they like, it may still prove in retrospect to have been an important step in a longer-term relationship—but only if my next book takes Muslim responses into account, and reframes my critical probing in such a way that my interlocutors are able to respond.

Rather than passing by on the other side, the Good Samaritan chooses to bind himself to the needy Other in a relationship that is compassionate, costly, and open-ended, bandaging his wounds and pledging his own purse to cover the cost of his continued care. His example demands of me a life-long, open-ended, and selfless commitment to cultivating relationships with my Muslim neighbors through scholarship. It also directs me down specific methodological paths. In my essay, the Good Samaritan’s example led me to affirm several of the developments in the humanities that my professors had affirmed during the methods seminar. First, it led me to assert that historical, textual, and functional analysis of religion should always remain subservient to a semiotic or hermeneutical project like the anthropology of Clifford Geertz, which was oriented toward understanding symbol systems for the ultimate purpose of being able to converse with the people who inhabit them. Second, it led me to affirm an emerging trend in religious studies away from the old focus on the central elements of religious traditions, and toward the boundaries and interactions between them. I have pursued this emphasis in my research on the interpretation of Scriptures across

religious lines, especially Muslim studies of the Bible. The Good Samaritan's model of relationship also sealed my commitment to the new trend in religious studies toward making public the values that guide one's scholarship. If a healthy human relationship is a two-way street, then relating to the people I study means disclosing myself just as much as it means getting to know them.

In concluding his parable, Jesus inverts the question of who is my neighbor. At first my neighbor seems to be the wounded Other who needs my help, but at the end of the parable my neighbor turns out to be the Good Samaritan himself—the Other who reaches out to help the man in need. This proved for me the most uncomfortable section of the parable. I was reaching out to my Muslim neighbors by devoting my career to them, but was I willing that they should reach out to me, help me, teach me, and contribute to God's work in my own life? If human relationships are necessarily reciprocal to some degree, could I expect the relationship between a Christian scholar and his Muslim subjects to remain strictly one-way? And what about my relationship to the secular academy and its discourses: was I here only to save them, or must I allow them to transform me? I had already begun to let that happen by allowing critical theory to shape my understanding of human depravity. About this time I read Miroslav Volf's *Exclusion and Embrace*, in which he argued that one's own identity must always remain open to being reshaped by interactions with Others. Would I allow the thought and voice of the Muslim Others I studied, and of the secular Others with whom I studied, to reshape not only my understanding of Muslims but also my understanding of myself and of my own scholarship? Would that make me less Christian, or more

Christ-like? I have gambled on the latter, following, I hope, the implications of Jesus' parable.

Surely I am not the only Christian to feel that letting my interactions with non-Christians redefine me threatens the sense of security and identity that my faith provides. That, however, is a discomfort I must be willing to accept. If loving my neighbor sacrificially enough to really engage her in conversation means loosening my grip on some cherished part of my own identity, so be it. The Kingdom of God does not depend on my sense of security in my own convictions; it is made visible as I love the one who opposes me, turn the other cheek even in debate, and learn poverty of spirit.

This does not mean that I must give up the content of my convictions. Attempting to understand and love Muslims has never led me to doubt or modify any particular article of Christian belief. On the contrary, the longer I study Muslim writings, the more I grieve at how far they are from the Gospel. I certainly see great logic, beauty, and dignity—as well as human sinfulness—in Islamic thought and life. In many ways Islam seems to me precisely the kind of religious system that I would have come up with myself, if I had been a virtuous and brilliant individual left to my own devices in the context of the late antique Near East. But it is a deeply human construct; it is, if anything, all too familiar. I have never felt it challenge my fallen human nature or my all-too-comfortable view of the world the way the Bible does day after day. Consequently, I have never felt any personal attraction to it.

On the other hand, if my identity as a Christian is constituted not only by the content of Christian belief, but also by how