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

FAITHFUL IS SUCCESSFUL

NOTES TO THE DRIVEN PILGRIM

2014

outskirtspress
DENVER, COLORADO

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

I stand in relation to Others (as Miroslav Volf emphasizes), then I will repeatedly come to see the content of my faith in a new light, and relate to it in new ways, as I continue to interact with Muslims. One salient example of this in my own spiritual growth has been my study of Islamic hermeneutics. As I developed a critical eye for the kinds of self-serving interpretations of Scripture that some Islamic hermeneutical theories seemed designed to legitimate, I became more and more conscious of my own tendency toward self-gratification in my reading of the Bible, and of my own church's tendency to squeeze the Bible into a Reformed theological system. I do not despair of the Holy Spirit's ability to convict believers of such self-deception, nor have I given up Reformed theology as a powerful lens for understanding Scripture, but I do find myself chastened and humbled—still confident but less self-confident—in the convictions that I bring to my interactions with Muslims. One thing we always share with Others is our sinfulness, and if interacting with fallen Others makes us more conscious of our own fallenness, that makes us better Christians, not weaker ones.

Structuring my first seminar paper at Emory as an explicit exercise in obedience to Christ was something of a risk. Not that I feared exposing my faith; I feared I was being tacky and preachy about it. To my delight, however, the sociologist who read my paper loved it. He took it as a genuine engagement with the methodological issues raised in the methods seminar, and with the many faculty who had participated in the course—every one of whom figured somewhere in the paper. Apparently, I was speaking a language that was at once explicitly Christian and meaningful to my secular academic colleagues.

I later submitted that essay as a writing sample along with my application for a Harvey Fellowship, a graduate stipend offered by a Christian family foundation that aims to mark, equip and encourage graduate students at premier universities to actively integrate their faith and vocation as leaders in occupations where Christians are underrepresented. In my case, the Fellowship did just that. Even as I filled out the lengthy application, I solidified my commitment to pursuing my own vision and doing my own thing in the academy. I would continue to let my more secular colleagues shape and even direct my intellectual journey, but I knew where I was coming from, and I now had a pretty good idea of where I was going. There would be no turning back.

3. Listening to Muslims

Articulating moral and methodological principles at an abstract level is one thing. Figuring out what they might entail for the daily work of scholarship took me a little longer. It began in that same first-year seminar at Emory, when a Hebrew Bible student inadvertently set my research agenda by asking me one day "How do Muslims study the Bible?" All I knew to answer was that they usually don't, because they regard it as an unreliable record of what the prophets Moses, David, and Jesus actually taught. I realized at once, however, that this could not be the whole story. Surely many Muslims throughout history had found all kinds of things to say about the Bible, and if I was studying Islam for the purpose of enhancing my ability to converse with Muslims, what better way than to study Muslim perspectives on my own Scripture?

I began to dig, and discovered some forgotten century–old scholarship on Islamic versions of "the Psalms of David." It took another decade, however, before I finally published an analysis of that tradition of rewritten Psalms manuscripts, because in the meantime my advisor redirected me. He suggested that before I try to understand Muslim interpretations of the Bible, I ought perhaps to get a handle on how Muslims interpret the Qur'an. My dissertation, accordingly, was on early Islamic hermeneutical theories.

Studying Western and Islamic hermeneutical theories comparatively raised again quite forcefully the problem of how human beings understand each other. For one thing, I could not find any classical Islamic discourse that addressed the questions of modern Western hermeneutics in any depth. As I sat through lecture after lecture on the interpretation of imperative verbs or plural nouns, during a semester studying traditional legal theory in Morocco, I began to despair of finding anything but the most simplistic grammatical analysis of language and meaning. My frustration mounted. Why should it take an hour and a half to explain that "horses" refers to an entire class of beings, whereas "a horse" refers to just one individual from that class? If I was to avoid joining a long tradition of condescending Western scholarship on the simple-mindedness of Islamic religious thought, I had assume that it was I, not my teacher, who was missing something.

I was; but to find out what I was missing, I had to deconstruct my conception of hermeneutics. On the surface, Muslim legal theorists and modern Western theorists of language and interpretation appeared to be talking about entirely different things, and it took several years of picking sentence

by sentence through arcane arguments before I was able to express Western questions about language and meaning in classical Islamic terms, and vice versa. Gradually I became convinced that Muslim interpreters of the Qur'an and Western philosophers were both up against the same vexing problem that I had encountered earlier in my study of critical theory: humans are astonishingly adept at interpreting texts, data, and people to suit their own agendas, and hermeneutical theories tend to mask or legitimate such self-serving forms of understanding.

This was not just an observation about how Muslims interpret scripture; it also called into question my own attempts to understand Muslims. Was I just forcing Islamic legal theorists to answer my modern Western hermeneutical questions, manipulating them into the conversation partners that my scholarly and moral objectives required? How could I be sure that I was really understanding them, and getting to know them rather than just myself? I found a way out of this skepticism thanks to Ludwig Wittgenstein and the cross of Christ. I encountered Wittgenstein's later writings in my college philosophy classes, and then again at Emory through the formative experience of reading Anthony Thiselton's New Horizons in Hermeneutics. Wittgenstein convinced me that if we are able to know when human communication is succeeding, and when we are understanding one another, this is not because of any stable or universal linguistic structures, but only because verbal communication takes place within the larger context of lived interaction. We know when language is being used and understood correctly because we live and interact with others in ways that are not merely verbal but also practical and concrete, and we have common expectations and make shared

judgments about when this interaction is successful and when it fails. Buying a house, for instance, is a highly symbolic affair that hinges on signed pieces of paper covered with words and numbers. The reason we all agree that this symbolic interaction has succeeded is that when I move into my new house, the previous residents, who the day before would have fought me tooth and nail to keep me out, put up no resistance to my invading their home. Those signed pieces of paper—or, more precisely, the rule–governed rituals of signing them—have dramatic practical effects because they are part of a very practical and concrete game that we all agree to play. The practical success of lived human interaction is what gives cash value to the paper money of language, and reassures us that communication is actually taking place.

Given my commitment to human relationships, I appreciated Wittgenstein's appeal to the lived interaction within which verbal communication takes place. Understanding does not happen simply at the level of ideas conveyed by words; it is a product of interactions that are physical as well as verbal, and if physical interaction succeeds in generating concrete physical or economic goods, then surely verbal communication is succeeding by at least one very important measure. Nevertheless, I had been learning to be skeptical of practical success. Both critical theory and Reformed theology reminded me that I always measure success in relation to my own needs and aims. I do not want to judge how well I understand people by how successfully I am able to manipulate them into serving my own ends! Jesus' Sermon on the Mount, and its perfect expression in Jesus' glorification on the cross, suggested a different criterion: perhaps I know that I am really coming to understand another person in the way love

demands when I experience the suffering that results from failed communication. I may not be able to trust the occasional aha! moments when I feel I am successfully engaging a text or a human being; but when I despair of making sense of another person, and throw up my hands in frustration as I did during those lectures in Morocco, then at least I can be sure that I am not understanding, and that I need to revise the categories and presuppositions with which I am attempting to interpret. Perhaps that failure is what tells me I am really listening. If I were just pursuing my own agenda, and making my interlocutor fit into a mold that allows me, the scholar, to fit him or her into my own theories, I would not find my agenda frustrated; but when I recognize that I have failed to understand, this tells me that I have allowed my own agenda to be disrupted by the hard reality of the differences between me and the Muslims I am studying. I may never become convinced that I have fully understood them; indeed that hope would be chimerical. I can know, however, through the indubitably recognizable and painful experience of failed communication, that I am at least on a path away from distorted and self-serving understanding, and toward a greater engagement with who my Muslim neighbor really is. The practical interaction that accompanies verbal communication can be an indication of understanding—not of its success, but of its failure, which is the crucial moment in the process of coming to understand through sacrificial listening.

Does this theory of sacrificial listening, in which the frustration or even pain of failed communication is the sole sure sign that I am sacrificing my own cherished pre-understandings and coming to understand and love my neighbor herself, hold potential for those outside of religious studies or even outside

the academy? Perhaps. It may provide a cautionary metaphor for the relationship between an artist and his subject, or a scientist and her data: a relationship in which the drive for a coherent, successful outcome that fits into our prior understanding of the world continually tempts us to impose our own wills on that which we paint, perform, or analyze. Artists, scientists, business leaders, and even politicians may need to ponder Christ's call to love the world, our neighbors, and even our opponents by letting them speak to us, show us we have misunderstood, and even transform our identities. At the very least, the image of sacrificial listening can prod us all to be more cognizant of how profoundly our disciplines are shaped by our natural human preference for expressing ourselves rather than listening to others.

4. A Pedagogy of Sacrificial Listening

It was one thing to try out my hesitant and stammering theories on the exceptionally patient, supportive, and open-minded faculty at Emory. It may be decades, I fear, before I am able to articulate this approach to religious studies in a way that will resonate more broadly in the secular academy. I realized how far I had to go as soon as I began to look for a job. My vision was highly abstract, idiosyncratic, and explicitly Christian—a losing combination in a fifteen-minute interview with a suspicious search committee intent on detecting any sign that I might not fit their mold. I mailed so many job applications that I must have sorely taxed the patience of the professors who wrote my recommendation letters. In two years on the market I was invited to dozens of first interviews, and eventually learned to communicate clearly enough to get invited to many campus interviews as well, but the final call

never came. To my surprise, Christian schools were some of the hardest nuts to crack: either I was not quite Reformed enough for them, or too evangelical, or I failed to convince them of my very genuine passion for teaching. There was no question, though, of my being anything less than transparent. That commitment had already been made. I would be hired as the scholar and teacher I felt God was calling me to be, or not at all.

That commitment was sustained by the encouragement and community of the Harvey Fellowship, which marks me and haunts all my vocational choices to this day. During my Harvey Fellowship Summer Institute, a seminar on the integration of faith and vocation that I attended just before my second foray into the job market, I seized upon a phrase that has both comforted and emboldened me from that time forward: "I already have tenure in God's calling on my life." A university job might be a useful setting for carrying out that calling, but neither my security nor my vocation depends upon it. The countless committees that have read my job applications, interviewed me, held me up to their own yardsticks, reviewed my scanty publications and mixed teaching evaluations, and tried to make sense of my methodological pronouncements, have had no authority over my part in God's manifestation of his Kingdom. At times I have wondered whether it would be more strategic to avoid mentioning the religious basis of my pedagogical and scholarly goals. At times, no doubt, I have in fact contrived to avoid mentioning my faith. But I do not want to be hired, or tenured, as a shadow of myself. I want to be for my colleagues a genuine example of a whole person, whose scholarship and teaching are part and parcel of an embodied, relational, and redeemed life. I cannot be that if I am not

transparent. To hedge my bets or hide my cards would not be to secure my vocation, but to abandon it.

In retrospect, of course, I am thankful for the many rejection letters I received. God had not called me to a Christian college, or even to a secular teaching college. All those interviewers who said, to my dismay, that they thought me better suited to a research university, were right. I was unable to recognize that at the time, or to know that God had a better academic job in store for me. Indeed, it was not until I had actually given up hope of getting an academic job at all, and had accepted as from God's hand the prospect of an alternative career such as government service, that I was suddenly offered a last-minute temporary teaching post at the University of South Carolina. There, and later at the University of Oklahoma, in environments that were nominally secular but pervaded by the heritage of liberal Protestantism, I was given surprising freedom to pursue my own vision through trial and error in the classroom.

Indeed it is only in the classroom that I have so far been able to articulate and implement systematically the implications of my faith for my work. My goal of human relationship drove me to focus all my courses on the reading of primary texts: I wanted my students to learn to interpret and understand Muslims for themselves. Primary texts, however, are harder to digest, and often far less entertaining, than a good secondary textbook. I was painfully aware of my students' weariness as I dragged them through the details of a medieval argument for the created nature of the Qur'an, or the rules for purification before prayer. I loved poring over those arguments myself, and combing through them for clues about the tacit

assumptions and values of their Muslim authors. Studying the texts in preparation for each class was like getting to know a perplexing but fascinating new friend. When I arrived in class, however, and tried to share that sense of discovery with my students, I felt that it had become as dry as dust, and my students often agreed. Eventually I discovered why: it was not the conclusions of my study that really captivated me, but the process of interpretation itself.

This discovery led me to try something that seemed to me quite radical: instead of writing out in advance the insights I wanted to convey to students, I wrote out the questions I would ask them about the readings, and left the conclusions in their hands. I tried to limit my role to asking questions, structuring discussion around their observations and interpretations, and taking notes so that I could write up our conclusions and post them online after class. I had never seen anyone attempt such a reversal—writing the lecture, in effect, after the class. But my philosophy of religious studies seemed to require it. If the purpose of religious studies was to learn to listen to Muslims, and ultimately to come to know and love them, then I needed to let my students do that for themselves. Furthermore, if teaching, like scholarship, is first and foremost a form of human relationship, then it too needs to be characterized by sacrificial listening. My own theory demanded that I listen to my students, discern their categories and questions, and make their concerns my own, just as I had learned to care about the theological struggles of Muslim intellectuals.

Putting this pedagogy into practice was nerve–wracking. I lost much of my control, not only over the conclusions we reached, but also over the success of the class. If students

were not well prepared, or did not have the tenacity to bear with a tedious theological treatise, the class was a miserable failure, and there was precious little I could do about it. The sense of competence that had sustained me perhaps too much during graduate school was gone. Student evaluations fluctuated from euphoric to dismal from one semester to the next. But I was finally doing something that made sense to me. I was helping students to construct their own understandings of Muslims, through their own careful listening to Muslim voices. I might often fail. Indeed, I found that I had to give up the desire for success as a teacher, and be willing to risk failure, so that my students could succeed as students. Most universities and teaching consultants stress the quality of teaching, but I suspect that this language sends us down the wrong path. It now seems to me necessary, though exceedingly difficult, to pry my mind away from trying to be a good teacher and focus on helping my students to be good students. Teaching is not about me. In fact, it is not really about my students either. According to my theory of religious studies, the whole point of teaching is to take the focus off both teacher and student, and listen, as attentively and sacrificially as we can, to the Muslim authors we are reading.

I now refer to this teaching method as "a pedagogy of sacrificial listening." As I tell students at the beginning of each term, I don't want them to come away with "talking knowledge"—the ability to say intelligent things about Islam. I want them to gain "listening knowledge"—the ability to hear what Muslims are saying, interpret it in terms of their own mental, moral, and religious categories, and then listen again until their interpretations start to break down and they are forced to modify their categories and try again. This is, by its nature, a

frustrating process. We love clarity, so we are quick to pigeonhole people based on our first impressions. We are happiest if we can keep people in the boxes we construct for them, interpreting everything they do and say to fit our prior impressions of them, whether those be positive or negative. Sacrificial listening means committing to get to know people for who they are, not who we want them to be, and that means constantly questioning our interpretations, so that we spend most of the semester in unsettled confusion. As I tell every class on day one, this kind of study requires moral commitment, because it will not always be fun or even interesting. Nor would I want it to be, even if I had the rhetorical skills to make it entertaining. If the Gospel is true, then teaching and learning, like scholarship, art, and perhaps even business, are fundamentally about redemptive suffering.

5. Conclusion

As I reflect today on the present state of my pedagogy and research, I see above all the need to let them be shaped by the agendas of three groups of Others. One group of Others whom I face every day are my students, and I am slowly learning to let their questions and interests shape the questions I ask in class. I now begin each semester spending at least two class sessions trying to discern and articulate what concerns and presuppositions the students are bringing with them. They are often not at all the concerns that most engage my mind, and sometimes I wonder how we can possibly use a semester of reading Islamic theological texts to address their presentist concerns about media stereotypes or "the Islamic threat." But if scholarship is a relationship that requires sacrificing my own agendas so that I can discern those of the

people I study and thus enter into a genuine conversation with them, then teaching is also a relationship, and it will require sacrificing my own intellectual proclivities so that the conversation in the classroom can genuinely include not just me and the Muslim authors, but the students as well. That is what the cross of Christ means for me today in my teaching.

A second group of Others is the secular academy, of which I am a full member, but within which I have marked out a decidedly Christian space. I do not believe that my Christian presuppositions and concerns make my work irrelevant to non-Christian scholars. My moral concerns about the possibility of human communication and the ethics of human relationship are shared by numerous scholars in many disciplines, from critical theorists to the many old-fashioned liberal Protestants and humanists who still constitute a majority in the field of religious studies. What distinguishes me from most of them is that I seek the answer to these dilemmas not in an academic elite's ability to prescribe and manage the relationships between religious people so that no one's rights are violated, but precisely in giving up our rights and interests, and in letting our relationship with the Other be shaped by the interests and objectives of that Other. Everyone but the starkest skeptic or the most unabashed egoist aspires to understanding, but I believe it can only be found through a self-sacrificial model of scholarship as listening. The language of sacrifice is rooted in my Christian faith—in the Parable of the Good Samaritan, the Sermon on the Mount, and the Cross of Christ—and though that language may be unique in some ways, it resonates with many of the concerns and hopes of non-Christians as well. My challenge now is to take that language of sacrificial listening and translate it into terms that will make sense to others in

my field and perhaps beyond it. That will require years of new study, reading non-Christian thinkers like Emmanuel Levinas who have wrestled with similar issues, and allowing those thinkers to reshape the way I express and even the way I conceptualize what the Gospel has to offer by way of hope and methodology for the secular academy.

My third group of Others are today's Muslim intellectuals. A defining moment in my relationship with this far-flung and diverse community was a comment I received on a graduate seminar paper on Ibn Taymiyya's theory of Islamic politics. My professor, a prominent Muslim scholar of constitutional law deeply concerned with human rights and the reformation of Islamic law, asked how my purely historical study could help him in his efforts to change Islamic law today. I had not set out to help Muslim intellectuals in their endeavors; indeed that would have been viewed by many of my teachers as a betrayal of scholarly objectivity. But my professor's comment confronted me with the fact that Muslims are not just the thinkers I study, they are my academic colleagues. My scholarship should and does contribute to their thinking as much as it does to my more secular colleagues; indeed I have an even greater responsibility to them, if I want my scholarship to be a form of relationship rather than an attempt at objective analysis engaged in from some supposedly higher plane of academic discourse. Learning to listen to my Muslim neighbors is all very noble, but listening by itself does not constitute a relationship; that requires a conversation, to which I must be willing to contribute my own insights with integrity and transparency.

My professor's question prompted me to see even my most nitty-gritty historical scholarship in a new light: it is not the

end result of my attempt to understand, but just one moment in an ongoing conversation, not only with other historians of Islamic thought, but also with living Muslims. What their response will be to my most recent book I hardly dare to think. It is historical, but it is not without provocative language and implications that challenge traditional ways of imagining Islamic law. I would not have made its critical implications so explicit in the conclusion if engaging contemporary Muslim intellectuals were not one of my main goals. Such a thoughtful challenge can be a perfectly legitimate part of a healthy human relationship; it may even be a sign of just how carefully I have listened to Muslim scholars. But if it leads only to alienation, it will have failed. I cannot force my Muslim interlocutors into a relationship; but if relationship is my goal, then I must be willing to leave a closed door behind and knock at another one. If my scholarship is to be an exercise in sacrificial listening for the sake of human relationships characterized by integrity and an ongoing process of coming to understand Others, then I must be willing to refine, revise, or even give up some of the conclusions that I reached with such conviction in my book on the formation of Islamic hermeneutics. I must remember that the purpose of that book is just to enable one further step in a life-long conversation. If continuing that conversation requires changing the nature of the questions I ask, renegotiating the conceptual vocabulary with which I answer them, or even discovering that I was just plain wrong, then holding onto the conclusions I labored so hard to produce would be the kind of scholarship that only serves to protect the scholar's own sense of identity and self-righteousness. If my identity and righteousness are found in Christ, and in his self-sacrificial act of taking on a particular human identity and then giving up that life to the violence of

those he came to serve, then my own intellect will have to be reshaped and renegotiated through my interactions with Muslims. That, rather than any fixed and preformulated way of thinking about Islam or hermeneutics, is what will make my knowledge of Muslims truly Christian. Indeed, a willingness to sacrifice our own most precious conclusions may be a necessary trait of all truly Christian scholarship.

Such scholarship cannot but be a painful process. Scholarship that is characterized by genuine listening, and by a process of coming to understand other human beings, may be momentarily exhilarating and satisfying, but it must be enduringly difficult. How could one pursue such a path without the hope of the Gospel, which turns suffering itself into abiding joy? It is not in our nature. I do not see how my secular colleagues could do it. Indeed I do not see how I can do it. But God transforms and empowers us in mysterious ways—not least of which is the communion of other redeemed sinners like those represented in this book, who are striving to glimpse God's glory in the various vocational struggles to which they are called.