

Christian-Muslim Dialogue: A Review of Six Post-Vatican II, Church-Related Documents

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I. Introduction

Twenty years ago, during the period between the second and third sessions of the Second Vatican Council, two panels of experts were given the task of drafting texts on Islam to be included in the evolving documents on the church and on ecumenism. The material, discussed early in the third session, was incorporated into a new "Declaration on the Relation of the Church to Non-Christian Religions," which was essentially completed in November, 1964, and definitively approved in October, 1965. *Nostra aetate's* remarks about Islam seem quite reserved and polite in retrospect, but, given the prior history of Roman Catholic attitudes toward-or simple inattentiveness to-Islam, the texts on Islam were quite remarkable and even revolutionary.

A great deal of action and reflection on relations between Christians and Muslims has occurred during these two decades, especially among Christians at the ecclesiastical level or with church sponsorship of one sort or another. In May, 1964, Pope Paul VI established the Vatican Secretariat for Non-Christians, with a special department on Islam. Two years after sponsoring landmark meetings between Muslims and Christians in Cartigny, Switzerland (1969), the World Council of Churches established its "Sub-unit for Dialogue with People of Living Faiths and Ideologies." In 1977 the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the U.S.A. formed a Task Force on Christian-Muslim Relations, with headquarters at the Hartford (CT) Seminary.

Christian interest in the possibilities of and need for dialogue between Christians and Muslims has grown steadily since Vatican II, and a number of important church-related documents have appeared since 1969. An overview of six such works is presented here in the hope of bringing to light some of their major themes and emphases. Because the writings I have selected vary in many ways, they are not simply comparable. It is possible, nevertheless, to discern in them thinking about Islam that various church groups have been engaged in lately.

The documents I have chosen are listed here chronologically, in order of publication: The Vatican Secretariat's *Guidelines for a Dialogue between Muslims and Christians*¹ (hereafter VS 1); *A New Threshold: Guidelines for the Churches in their Relations with Muslim Communities*,² from the British Council of Churches (hereafter, BCC); the World Council of Churches' *Christians Meeting Muslims: "WCC Papers on Ten Years of Christian-Muslim Dialogue"*³ (hereafter, WCC); *The Muslim-Christian Dialogue of the Last Ten Years*⁴, published by Pro Mundi Vita, "an international information and research center under Catholic auspices" (hereafter, PMV); *Orientations pour un dialogue entre Chretiens et Musulmans*,⁵ from the Vatican Secretariat (hereafter, VS 2); and *Christian-Muslim Relations. An Introduction for Christians in the United States of America*,⁶ sponsored by the N.C.C.C.U.S.A. Task Force (hereafter NCC).

What follows is a summary of the documents, based on a consideration of four facets of the material: (1) the shape of the documents-their purpose, scope, and method; (2) background information on the participants in the dialogue (especially Muslim), from the point of view of amount and importance, type, level, and organization of information; (3) various approaches to dialogue itself-its history, theoretical foundations or presuppositions, actual practice, and

prospects or suggestions for the future; and (4) a somewhat lengthier recapitulation of the principal religious and moral/social themes in dialogue.

II. The Shape of the Documents. Purpose, Scope, Method

Beginning with the most specific and the narrowest in scope and proceeding to the more general and broader treatments, one discovers considerable variety among the documents. WCC offers an anthology of fourteen relatively brief "reflections, statements, memoranda of ten years of Christian-Muslim dialogue," plus an introduction. The collection is intended to help the reader "pause for a moment and look back at the problems faced and the results achieved,"⁷ Nine of the items (if one includes the introduction, "Present and Future Patterns of Christian-Muslim Dialogue") deal specifically with Christian-Muslim interaction; four others contain reflections and suggestions from a solely Christian perspective regarding the concept and conduct of dialogue itself; and two report on meetings attended by members of traditions other than Christianity and Islam, as well as by Christians and Muslims. Of the nine pieces in the first category, six report on actual Christian-Muslim conversations, and three are unilateral Christian reflections about the nature of Christian-Muslim dialogue, its presuppositions, implications, etc. In general, WCC's material is highly positive in tone. The book offers no serious overall evaluation of the reports and is not intended to be a critical analysis of the discussions.

PMV's *Muslim-Christian Dialogue of the Last Ten Years* written by Maurice Borrmans, covers a time span equal to that of WCC, but PMV begins and ends slightly later. The middle twelve pages (of fifty-two) summarize the proceedings of some fifteen Muslim-Christian meetings held between 1969 and 1978. Though its scope is comparable to that of WCC, PMV's purpose and method are very different. Borrmans begins with a short identification of "Muslims today", and a sketch of the histories of Islam and of Christian-Muslim relations through the centuries. He then establishes a clearly Roman Catholic context and perspective, referring to Vatican II as containing the "new charter of Muslim-Christian dialogue," and suggesting that the Vatican Secretariat's 1969 *Guidelines* is a fuller articulation of that charter. More importantly, PMV attempts a critical analysis, a "rough balance-sheet of this decade of encounters and colloquia, in order to evaluate successes and failures, strengths and weaknesses."⁸ The largest single segment of PMV is given over to posing some hard questions and making some suggestions as to which specific issues need further attention. Borrmans sounds hopeful but is quite frank in his criticisms. Some of the PMV material reappears (evidently verbatim in some cases, insofar as that can be ascertained by comparing the English of PMV with the French of VS 2) in Borrmans' 1981 writing of the newer Vatican *Guidelines* to be discussed below.

Two documents move beyond a consideration of the more "official" or formally organized type of interaction. BCC and NCC present their materials in response to the actual and growing need for Muslims and Christians living side by side to understand each other.

BCC was inspired by the increasing number of people in Ireland and Great Britain from non-Christian traditions. "The largest group of these are Muslims, and their strongly expressed resolve to affirm their separate religious and cultural identity poses questions both to Christians and to those institutions in our society which have grown out of our Christian heritage."⁹ BCC's forty pages are devoted to three main areas of concern: information about Muslims, theological issues (the most important single section), and practical problems and suggestions.

NCC attempts to do, on a larger scale, for Americans what BCC seeks to do for British churches. NCC's author, R. Marston Speight, acknowledges that "the image projected by Islam upon the imagination of the average American is one of an intolerant, legalistic and fatalistic religion practiced by backward, ferocious and scheming people." As a growing but as yet not fully recognized religious minority, "Muslims have become the neighbors and fellow citizens of Christians in the United States." Hoping to "provide background for Christian-Muslim rapprochement" and to suggest ways of avoiding the growth of bigotry-but without judging Islam in terms of Christian beliefs-the author refers to himself as a "sympathetic observer who tries to

understand that religion as Muslims do, that is, insofar as it is possible for a non-Muslim to grasp it."¹⁰ Nearly half of NCC is given to reducing prejudices and stereotypes by providing three chapters of background on the origin and history, religious practices, and present shape of Islam as a global phenomenon. Another thirty-two of its eighty-five pages discuss the history of Muslim-Christian relations and key theological issues especially related to the intersection of the two traditions. The remainder of NCC contains practical suggestions and information.

The Vatican Secretariat has sponsored two relatively lengthy documents, VS 1 in 1969, and VS 2 in 1981, the latter a substantial-almost total-rewriting of its forerunner. These are the broadest in scope of all six documents. Their stated purpose is more general, and their method is more theoretical than practical. Evident facts of cultural, ideological, and religious pluralism, in the face of which simple tolerance and mere coexistence are no longer sufficient to maintain peace in the world, form the point of departure of both Vatican writings. They affirm the absolute necessity of dialogue, but caution that their goal is not to "fix definite formulae for such a dialogue, but rather define the spirit in which it should take place."¹¹ In general, the purpose of any dialogue is to "stimulate those taking part not to remain inert in the positions they have adopted, but to help all concerned to find a way to become better people in themselves and to improve their relations with one another..."¹² In the words of VS 2, "true dialogue involves the bold venture of individuals who wish to be enriched by their differences, to share their common values, and to respond as individuals to the calls the Lord addresses to each one most intimately."¹³

VS 1 and VS 2 take the need for specifically Muslim-Christian dialogue to be virtually self-evident; it must be seen as an essential dimension of life wherever believers of both traditions "live, work love, suffer, and die" together.¹⁴ Given that need, however, both documents emphasize the further need to focus on Islam as a religious faith, as a "progress towards God and final realization of human potentialities. Muslim-Christian dialogue must be kept from deserting the spiritual level in favor of the temporal, for "One will never really get to know any Muslim ... until one has discovered" in that person the religious values for which he or she lives¹⁵.

Both VS 1 and VS 2 are constructed in six chapters. Borrmans has kept many of VS 1's topic-headings, especially in the last three chapters. There he has retained both the order of chapters and, on the whole, the order of topics within them, but he has transformed VS 2 into a genuinely new approach by changing the overall emphasis and tone, rearranging the order of the first three chapters adding a good deal of totally new material, and especially by addressing each topic from a slightly different angle and filling out the discussion with new illustrations and more extensive documentation from Vatican II and from both Muslim and Christian Scriptures. All things considered, VS 2 is a significant improvement on its predecessor, even though the former is in some ways more academic and seems to presuppose more background information about Islam. A slightly more detailed comparison of the two documents will emerge in subsequent sections of this article. For now, one example will suggest their difference: Whereas VS 1 begins with "The Attitude of a Christian Taking Part in Dialogue," followed by two chapters containing background on Islam as a religion and as a contemporary global phenomenon, VS 2 begins by introducing *both* parties to the dialogue as one finds them now, then describes attitudes required of both sides, and finally sets forth the Islamic religious values with which Christians need to be better acquainted.

III. The Use of Background Information

A second set of evaluative criteria can be found in the various ways the six documents use, or even omit, "factual" information about the participants in the dialogue-particularly about Muslims. Information usage follows directly, of course, from a given document's purpose, scope, and method. Here I have tried to take into consideration the amount and type of information (for example, historical, religious/devotional, explicitly theological, social/ethnic); organization (for example, use of Muslim or Christian categories in speaking of religious matters; use of geographical, political, moral frames of reference, etc.); and level of complexity or sophistication (for example, previous knowledge taken for granted, use of skeletal outline format, more

analytical treatment, and interpretation geared to highlighting concepts and attitudes rather than simple statement of “beliefs and practices”).

WCC is the least “informative” of the documents, understandably, for its purpose is to report on discussions among Muslims and Christians presumed to possess ahead of time the requisite familiarity with the crucial issues on their meeting agenda. Paradoxically, a Muslim would learn far more about Christianity from the collected papers than a Christian would about Islam. The reports summarize directly more explicitly Christian than Islamic matters. On the whole, one can get some sense of attitudes of both Muslim and Christian participants toward dialogue, world community, religious freedom, the need to face shared social problems, and so forth. The single most discussed, religious issue is that of mission; some key features of that discussion will appear in the fifth section of this article.

PMV’s background survey provides some more-or-less predictable fundamentals about Islam. Data about Christianity includes only information about the history of its encounters with Islam, beginning with the seventh century. The focus is on the need to appreciate Islam’s “twofold design for temporal civilization and spiritual adventure” in contrast to the way the “Church has given up its dreams of Christendom in order to be at the exclusive service of the Gospel,¹⁶ and on problems arising from the resultant differences in attitudes toward religious minorities (depending on which is the dominant tradition in a given place).

BCC gives a very sketchy summary of Islamic religious tenets, of Islam’s geographical spread and ethnic diversity, and of the principal subgroups within the larger community of Muslims. Following that is a similarly skeletal outline of Christian-Muslim interaction century by century, with a short inventory of “the main factors which must be considered in any assessment of relationships between the two religions in this modern age.”¹⁷ Further information occurs under the heading of theological issues related to the eventual development of a “theology of religions.”

Of all the documents, it is NCC that gives the most extensive treatment of historical, religious/devotional, and ethnogeographical background on Muslims. It includes, as do PMV and BCC, a historical survey of Muslim-Christian relations, but it has a somewhat heavier emphasis on attitudinal and moral issues immediately pertinent to its discussion of dialogue itself. NCC’s informational chapters are excellent. The first of them summarizes historical origins and developments under the headings of “A People: The Arabs,” “A Man: The Prophet Muhammad,” and “A Book: The Quran,” with some important correctives to still-prevalent stereotypes about the early spread of Islam. Religious and devotional practice is treated under the two classic Islamic categories of duties of worship and duties of human relationships. The author has succeeded in making the expected mention of “The Five Pillars” come to life even for the jaded professional Islamicist. A chapter on contemporary Islam gives a very helpful four-page segment on “Islamic resurgence in the modern world.” This situates the need for Christians to understand Islam in a context that is immediate and concrete, and it short-circuits the all too common tendency to regard Muslims as oil merchants who must be humored if the “Western” driver wants to stay on the road.

VS 1 and VS 2 both contain similar kinds of background information, but as suggested above, VS 2’s rearrangement of the opening chapters gives it a significantly different overall tone and approach. Both of the Vatican documents differ “pedagogically” from PMV, WCC, and NCC in type and level of information as well as in organization. First, whereas PMV and NCC begin with historical data about Islam and then move to more specifically religious topics (with which BCC begins) and finally go on to identify who and where Muslims are today, VS 1 and VS 2 present historical data only incidentally or by way of illustration. Second, neither VS 1 nor VS 2 is as concerned as any of the other documents with the particulars of Christian-Muslim interaction through the centuries. Third, information about Islamic religious values occurs in VS 1 especially, and to a slightly lesser extent in VS 2, from the perspective of the Christian’s encounter with those values. For example, VS 1 addresses briefly the questions of how a Christian ought to speak about and read the Qur’an.

Fourth, both Vatican documents eventually get around to providing a picture of Islamic religious values that takes into account the major topics contained in NCC, but the perspective is different, particularly in VS 2. For example, NCC's second chapter and, to some degree, VS 1's second chapter present information under headings that tend to "objectify" and focus on what Muslims believe and do. VS 2's third chapter has succeeded in capturing an authentic sense of attitudes, aspirations, and ideals, rather than listing the contents of a creedal statement. Where NCC talks of "Belief in Prophets," and VS 1 of "The Message of the Prophets," VS 2 explores the Muslim desire for "Imitation of a Prophetic Model." Fifth, treatment of who and where Muslims are now varies considerably. In BCC, NCC and VS 1, surveys of Muslim unity and diversity appear *after* sections on religious themes, while VS 2 and PMV (both written by Borrmans) begin by presenting the people of Islam as one finds them today. VS 2 identifies Muslims as "interlocutors" in the dialogue and prefaces its description of the contemporary Muslim community with a brief acknowledgement of the other interlocutors, the Christian churches. This is the only mention of specific details from the history of Christian-Muslim interaction to be found in either VS 1 or VS 2, and it is largely a summary of PMV.¹⁸

Finally, I find NCC the most successful in presenting an overall objective summary of Islam as a historical religious tradition that has now achieved truly international and global stature, while VS 2 succeeds most admirably in focusing the reader's attention on the essential humanity and ideals of Muslims.

IV. Approaches to Dialogue

Several of the documents make a special point of attempting to draw material for reflection from the history of Muslim interaction—alternately described as encounter, hostile or friendly, or as a deliberate attempt at true dialogue. According to NCC, one "overall feature that has marked the encounter of Islam and Christianity through the centuries has been that of alternating ascendancy and descendancy,"¹⁹ that is, the dominance of one or the other as a civilizing force especially in the Mediterranean area. Speight spotlights several key controversies of long standing, and points to a new and growing spirit of conciliation that is itself, however, not without its own historic precedents. History reveals two areas of religious concern, the doctrinal and the moral, that contain potential for both unity and division. NCC outlines briefly a "new approach" in which doctrinal difficulties "should be met frankly and then bypassed." Two steps are needed: careful listening, and a willingness to cease insisting that the "other become like ourselves."²⁰ Moral issues need to be subjected to the "right kind of mutual moral critique," in such a way that one's moral choices can be "tested by the ethical insights of the other." Unifying factors are likewise related to "common elements in our beliefs" and to "our common situation in the modern world."²¹ Once the areas of disagreement have been met frankly and bypassed, dialogue can begin to "capitalize on our similarities." NCC then suggests an analysis of common themes in Christian and Muslim prayer as one example of accentuating the positive.

PMV, VS 1, and VS 2 all take their cue from a key text in *Nostra aetate*: "Over the centuries many quarrels and dissensions have arisen between Christians and Muslims. This Sacred Council now pleads with all to forget the past, and urges that a sincere effort be made to achieve mutual understanding, for the benefit of all..."²² PMV adds to that text a comment that very well sums up the tenor of the three Catholic documents in this regard. Once it had acknowledged past enmities the Council chose not to go into a detailed "pronouncement as to their cause, expressions, or consequences." What was sought was a mutual understanding that leads to a change of mind and heart that brings freedom from prejudices and, above all, "joint action to safeguard and foster social and global values which are closely allied to faith and religion: justice, peace, and freedom."²³

All three Catholic writing allude liberally to the Qur'anic injunction to believers to "vie with one another in good deeds." In its further elaboration of what is needed for the spirit of dialogue, PMV describes three virtues that are quite similar to those recommended in NCC: "knowing how to

keep silent, how to listen, how to be moderate.” The first involves putting aside preconceived ideas, allowing the others to be what they are and what they want to be. The second means the capacity to wait for a “moment of grace,” when the other unveils his or her secret “dreams of sanctity.” Moderation demands that one put aside the arrogance of “striking declarations, blunt assertions, and long-winded conclusions,” ever mindful that “people live in the current of history, amid what is provisional, and in sin.”²⁴ Given the historical record, this will take “one or two generations of persistent effort on either side to get rid of prejudices, renew attitudes, and deepen spiritualities.”²⁵

VS 1 and VS 2 both devote two full chapters to picking up where Vatican II leaves off. VS 1 entitles its first chapter “The Attitude of a Christian Taking Part in Dialogue” and its fourth, “How to Prepare for Dialogue.” VS 2’s parallel chapters, two and four, are entitled, “The Occasions and Paths of Dialogue” and “Bearing in Mind Present Obstacles.” Chapter one of VS 1 and chap. 2 of VS 2 overlap to some extent in choice of topics discussed, but VS 1 is slanted almost exclusively toward what is incumbent on the Christian partner in dialogue. The latter begins with two “general conditions” of dialogue: dialogue involves relationships among persons, not comparison of systems, and is therefore concerned more with today’s problems than with those of the past; second, Christians must be willing to “belong psychologically” to the world of Muslims—that is, have some genuine cultural appreciation for it. VS 1 then discusses four “attitudes to be adopted in practice” in relationships at any level of interaction: authentic friendship, accepting the Muslim as he/she wishes to be known, serious preparatory study, and willingness to learn from one another. The third section of the chapter describes four attitudes associated explicitly with religious interaction: frank statement of one’s Christian position, making clear that one is a Christian, renewing knowledge of one’s own faith, and a new understanding of what Muslims consider true and holy. VS 1 then moves into a fuller coverage of these last Islamic values in chap. 2.

VS 2’s expanded and thoroughly refashioned approach to “Occasions and Paths” (chap. 2) contains four sections, after a short introduction that reiterates the conviction that dialogue is “constitutive of the person.” “Places and Times” points out some of the primary sociocultural contexts in which Christians and Muslims can expect to meet each other—work, schools, etc. A second section suggests four “Ways and Means,” which are the more “general attitudes” of VS 1 but refocused so it is clear that both Christians and Muslims need to adopt them. They include: welcoming one another, understanding one another, living and sharing with one another, and the willingness to dare and risk. A short section on Christian attitudes on the faith of others advises, “It is in this spirit of welcoming, understanding and sharing that the Christian is called by the Church to consider and ponder the mystery of the religious search as it is expressed and embodied in the great historical religions.” It is a thoroughly positive approach based on a belief in the “unfathomable mystery of the religious choices of individuals.”²⁶ “Believers in Dialogue,” finally, must cultivate four essential attitudes: dialoguing in the presence of God and under God’s impulse, becoming demanding witnesses for one another, attempting the impossible, and settling for the provisional and incomplete.

The topics explored in “How to Prepare for Dialogue” (VS 1) and “Bearing in Mind Present Obstacles” (VS 2) are almost exactly parallel, but VS 2 has rearranged some of the topics in the second section, made the issues in the third section more specific, and added a fourth section, “Not Forgetting the Obstacles that Remain.” Both chapters begin with the need to acknowledge and move beyond past injustices. The two central sections of each recall the most common Christian stereotypes of the Islamic faith as well as prevalent Muslim views about Christianity. Among the former are suspicions that Islam is fatalistic, legalistic, lacking in moral standards, fanatical, static, and obscurantist, and a religion of fear. Widespread Muslim beliefs about Christianity include, for example, that Christians have altered their Scriptures so as not to have to face the more demanding truth of the authentic word of God; that the doctrines of Jesus’ divinity, the redemption, and the Trinity are either simply unacceptable or redundant; that Christian monotheism is not of the purest; that the church is nothing but a temporal power; and that Christians have not been faithful to the message of Jesus.

These are some of the very difficulties NCC suggests we must meet frankly and bypass. VS 2 agrees altogether; however, while it is on the subject of divisive elements, it is at pains to recall that some obstacles cannot be made to vanish or be forgotten except at the price of a “false irenicism.” Practical difficulties are, for example, directly tied to such matters as the prohibition of certain foods for Muslims, the feasibility of mixed marriages, inappropriate proselytism, and the treatment of religious minorities. In its conclusion VS 2 envisions four levels of dialogue: of the heart, where partners share as brothers and sisters; of daily life, where they together promote human values with God as the guarantor; of speech that is at once about God and humanity; and of silence, so that God can speak directly to the heart of each person.²⁷

It is more difficult to characterize WCC’s stance since the document is a collection and is not representative of a clearly unified position. WCC is in some ways at the opposite end of the spectrum from VS 1 and VS 2, to the extent that WCC is given wholly to summarizing actual meetings, while the Vatican papers are almost entirely theoretical. Nevertheless, WCC does make some important statements on the past, present, and future of dialogue. Dialogue between Christians and Muslims is necessary because of the common historical roots of the two religions, the attitude of “selfcriticism” they share, and the increasing intermingling of Muslim and Christian populations.²⁸ Through dialogue both parties can “honour together our conscious dependence upon God in a world that often seems to deny’ God. In other words, one may speak of a motive beyond that of a sense of interdependence. Dialogue holds the hope of “some convergence” short of having to settle for the least common denominator, and must be conducted according to three principles: frank witness, mutual respect, and religious freedom.²⁹ Lest it be reduced to an exercise in comparative religion, dialogue must maintain a highly personal dimension. From the perspective of authentic dialogue, conversion takes on a new meaning as “a growing mutual awareness of the presence of God in an encounter in which each becomes responsible for the other and where both seek openness in witness before God.”³⁰ And there are further theological foundations for this dialogue. Both parties have received an ethical mandate from a loving and loved All-Merciful God. Both have been given creation and the power that it entails as a trust. Acknowledging their shared spiritual affinity with Abraham, Muslims and Christians can own their divergences as well, for both traditions agree that there can be no compulsion in religion.³¹

An apt conclusion to this section is a statement produced at a 1976 meeting held in Tripoli. Although it does not appear in WCC, PMV quotes it as the “charter for Muslim-Christian dialogue today”:

-to learn the lessons taught by history in order to retain the fruitful experiences and to avoid the errors of the past;

-to see to it that each side comes to know the other as it wants to be known: revision of textbooks, utilization of the mass media, increase in the number of professorships in Islam and Christianity, and cooperation between them.

-to be fair enough, on either side, to guarantee to all religious minorities all the rights and obligations the majority enjoys;

-to recognize each religion’s “duty of apostolate” and the authentic witness each must give, while respecting human liberty-which involves condemnation of any kind of proselytism;

-to define more clearly the exact scope and methods of dialogue.³²

Several of our documents also go into some detail on the most practical ways of providing and/or recognizing concrete circumstances suitable for ongoing dialogue, such as seminars, socials, and joint neighborhood projects, to name only a few. Interested readers are directed especially to NCC’s and BCC’s last chapters.

V. Themes in Dialogue

As the foregoing section has made clear, the nature of dialogue itself is one of the predominant themes in dialogue. In addition, all six documents eventually come around to dealing with what VS 2 calls the “triple perspective of all authentic dialogue,” namely, issues relating to the wonders of the universe, human dignity, and the grandeur of God.³³ The differences among the documents have to do largely with emphasis, points of departure, and organization.

Taken together, they present a broad spectrum of approaches, ranging from simply reporting actual themes taken up in past organized dialogue sessions (WCC), through a restatement of those themes along with critical analysis and commentary and sketchy suggestions as to topics that need to be addressed in the future (PMV), a selective and more in-depth look at several central themes (NCC), and the more sweeping and theoretical treatment of virtually all the major themes listed in PMC and WCC (VS 1 and VS 2), to a small-scale attempt to situate the central issues in a still broader systematic context-not less than a proposal for a “theology of religions” (BCC).

In its summary of deliberations of past colloquia, PMV suggests that their themes “fall easily into two categories-specifically religious topics or action programmes realizable more or less immediately.”³⁴ The former include agreements on belief in one, subsistent Creator who has spoken through prophets and who will bring history to its fulfillment, and disagreements on such central tenets as the meaning and mission of Muhammad and Jesus and the respective roles of *da’wah* and mission in Islam and Christianity. The latter have to do with possible collaboration in articulating how faith relates to science and technology, to cultural and economic problems, and with the clear need to come to terms with the “different designs Islam and Christianity have for organizing and inspiring society.”³⁵ As for the future of dialogue on specifically religious topics, PMV recommends an emphasis on convergence of attitude about the mystery of God (to be taken up, perhaps, in colloquia devoted to the “Names of God,” connections between faith and reason, and the “vision of God” in the two traditions). Human dignity could be studied with a focus on its scriptural sources, its exemplification in heroes and saints such as Abraham, and the concept of sanctity itself. Talk about Muhammad and Jesus, the Qur’an, and the various Christian “mysteries” mentioned earlier will remain very touchy for some time to come. Meanwhile, concerted action “in the service of life, justice, freedom, peace, brotherhood” will have to face such issues as contraception and abortion; suffering death and euthanasia; war, racism, and materialism-to mention only the most obvious.³⁶

WCC is likewise helpful in providing an inventory of important topics. Since its papers are all brief, none treats a single issue in great detail (with one exception; see following paragraph). Some of the reports seem a bit more confident than PMV about the potential for fruitful discussion around major theological differences,³⁷ but most of WCC proposes questions that need to be addressed. One of the reports suggests further study of four issues, in the belief that “theological and spiritual renewal can prepare us for social renewal.” First, achievement of a wider vision of world community as interracial, intercultural, and international, for example, would involve Muslims and Christians together in seeking justice for the Palestinians. Second, reconsideration of notions of revelation “may help us to be more faithful to our own tradition as well as being more appreciative and coherent with our neighbour.” Third, a variety of political and cultural contexts must be seen as viable possibilities for interaction-that is, not merely either a secular state or a religious state. Fourth, since dialogue is listening to God as well as to one another, the “spiritual basis and eschatological dimension of worship and prayer” must be seen as essential to dialogue. In other words, Muslims and Christians need to talk about how they relate their spiritual lives to demands for “justice, brotherhood, and human dignity.”³⁸

WCC’s report on a 1976 “Planning Meeting for Next Steps in Christian-Muslim Dialogue” constitutes the most detailed single scheme of its kind to be found in any of the six documents. A section on preparation for dialogue outlines several goals and several types of behavior to be avoided, such as the preceding section of this article brought up. Three further sections speak of:

“living in dialogue,” including education, family life, worship, and prayer; sociopolitical issues—especially faith and politics in both traditions, social justice, and development—all with specific application to trouble areas in the Middle East, developing nations, and situations where Muslims and Christians find themselves in political tension; and theology and dialogue, with a focus on four areas: revelation; interreligious attitudes; faith, science, technology, and the future of humanity; and Christian mission and Islamic *da’wah*.³⁹ This last item is a recurrent theme in WCC. Perhaps more than any other issue, it renders dialogue absolutely critical even as it makes it more sensitive.

Much hard feeling remains among both traditions as a result of past practice of mission and *da’wah*; debate over what positions ought to be adopted in the present is quite heated; and there is strong consensus that this topic cannot be sidestepped in the future. One of WCC’s papers discusses only this question and explains why misunderstandings and barriers to communication have developed around it. At least from the Muslim point of view, negative effects of the “arrival of the Christian missionaries in the company of European colonizers” are still very much in evidence. WCC contains a report on a 1976 “Consultation of Christians and Muslims Concerning Christian Mission and Islamic *Da’wah*,” to which it has prefixed the editorial remarks published in a collection of all the papers from the Consultation. The Muslim co-editor makes four important points: First, Islam was misrepresented and portrayed in such a way as to discredit it and its adherents. Second, Christian missionaries often took advantage of the sick, the poor, and the immature by offering education, financial help, and medical treatment, often acting “as an organic part of colonialism and cultural imperialism.” Third, Islam was often subverted in favor of “nationalism, secularism, modernism, socialism, even communism.” Fourth, Christians have often considered Muslims political rivals, and the former sometimes appear more zealous for the de-Islamization of the Islamic world than they are troubled by the de-Christianization of the Christian world.⁴⁰ Ibis Muslim’s Christian counterpart presented neither a rebuttal nor a similar critique of Islam. The Consultation’s joint “official” statement acknowledges that there may in some instances be good reason for continued Muslim suspicion of Christian intentions.⁴¹

In its chapter on “Theological Perspectives in Christian-Muslim Relations,” NCC examines in greater detail some of the questions only hinted at in PMV and WCC. Speight has selected six tightly interconnected themes (in addition to the theme of dialogue itself, to which he turns briefly at the conclusion of the chapter): Islam’s view of other religions, Christianity’s view of other religions, absolute truth as a guiding concept, mission and conversion viewed from both perspectives, religious liberty, and the nature of the Christian mission. After calling attention to several of the positions mentioned in VS 1 and VS 2’s sections on Muslim beliefs about Christianity (see the sixth paragraph of section IV, above), NCC offers an excellent summary of the Qur’an’s view of religious pluralism: God wants people to “outdo one another in good deeds,” and the Scripture seems to assume that all religious communities are ultimately oriented toward God. Speight’s commentary on the Qur’anic text is intriguing.

He [God] saw that for the sake of humankind’s clear grasp of duty and capacity to judge between truth and error, a diversity of religions would serve better than uniformity. However, there is no need in the diversity for theological rivalry among the religions, since the question of ultimate truth is not at stake ... [it is] a contest out of which all will emerge winners.⁴²

Controversy has, nonetheless, developed and is an undeniable feature of Muslim-Christian relations.

However, Christianity, NCC notes, has no satisfactory explanation for religious pluralism. It suggests that we move beyond the three commonly expressed approaches to the question—that other religions are merely human and therefore enemies (does not allow for dialogue at all), or are alternate paths to God (a view that surrenders too much and denies uniqueness), or are true and good but incomplete (too imperious in seeking to subordinate all to Christianity). Recognizing that no rational solution is readily available, the Christian must fall back on his or her Christian identity by confessing that “God has met us in Jesus Christ.” Christians must admit to having no

monopoly on truth and must seek to “discern in Islam that which reflects sympathetically what we know of God’s revelation to humankind,” while bearing in patience the fact of divergences.⁴³ This naturally raises the issue of relativism. Speight advises that Muslims and Christians stay with their respective “points of contact with Truth,” in the awareness that these are not Truth itself, and that “the Truth to which they expose themselves is greater than their grasp of it.”⁴⁴

On mission and conversion NCC points out that Islam’s apparent flexibility toward Christianity is, however, more theoretical than practiced, (Islam considers Christianity a divinely revealed religion, whereas the converse is not the case.) In practice, both traditions are highly exclusivist. Speight proposes as a solution a new understanding of the concept of conversion as essentially a change in one’s relationship to God, without explicit reference to confessional allegiance. For the Christian, to insist that there is no possibility of a relationship to God apart from Christianity is to take a presumptuous step beyond affirming the revelation Christians have received. “We cannot,” says Speight, “be certain of the existence of other ways to God, nor can we deny the existence of such ways. We can hope for such; we can infer from the character of God that they exist; but finally, Christian faith is founded on only one certainty: Jesus Christ is the way to God.”⁴⁵ NCC finds “ample scope for interfaith cooperation: in an understanding of conversion as above all a turning to God that results in, “among other things a commitment to maintain and enhance the well-being of the human family.”⁴⁶

NCC suggests that American Christians keep in mind three things about the key matter of religious liberty. First, Christians may seem to be more tolerant than Muslims toward members who depart from their ranks, but what appears to be tolerance may actually be indifference resulting from the “disintegration of the Christian communal life during the last two centuries or more.” Second, the idea of complete freedom of religion is a nonbiblical concept. It is the result of an extreme form of individualism that sets the individual in potential conflict with the community. Third, individualism is not as common elsewhere as it is in the U.S.A.; where Islam is a majority presence, religious liberty means protecting the community against divisive forces such as unbelief or erosive ideologies. That said, the problem of how religious minorities are treated remains serious. “How can the full dignity of minorities be assured without encroaching upon the freedom of the majority to be itself full?”⁴⁷

Finally, NCC makes three points about how a deeper understanding of Islam can clarify the Christian’s idea of mission. First, mission involves all Christians in a loving approach toward others in the name of Christ. Second, mission is not for the purpose of planting an ideology, but “to explore... the scope of similarity and to bear the burden of separation from others, in the hope that, by the power of God, the separation might be overcome.”⁴⁸ Third, the mission to “all nations” is to make disciples not of the church, but of Jesus Christ; the living Christ must not be confused with cultural baggage or with social, political, economic, and theological values. The key is to personalize the interreligious encounter by “manifesting the power of a transforming friendship with the Living Christ.”⁴⁹

Moral and religious themes occupy two chapters each in VS 1 and VS 2. Each document’s fifth chapter treats shared human projects. In its “Perspectives for Muslim-Christian Dialogue,” VS 1 discusses two major developmental issues, those relating to the human personality of the individual and those relating to a more brotherly-sisterly society. Pressures of modern society on the individual, models of the family in Christianity and Islam, and the interaction for cultures viewed as expressions of the “social personality” of nations are the main topics. In a short reflection on how dialogue can lead to truly sister-brotherly attention to the world’s most pressing problems, VS 1 focuses on economic and social development and the interaction of diverse peoples. The document cautions that these matters are to be addressed always within an explicitly religious context and with reference to an Absolute.⁵⁰

Once again, VS 2 takes a fresh look at the material, referring more frequently than VS 1 to both the Qur’an and Vatican II (especially *Gaudium et spes*). A chapter on “Requisite Human Collaboration” speaks of the need for people of good will to respond together, united in message

and action, to the most blatant inequities many suffer. The chapter's four sections recall explicitly the "triple perspective of dialogue." The first section describes the "fulfillment of the world" as a call for a new creation through discovery of new relationships between humanity and nature. The second and third sections, the lengthiest of the four, analyze needs for "The Service of Humanity" and "Stewardship in the (Earthly) City."

The former of the two examines the two traditions' views on the source of human dignity, inquiring how the two might respond to the dignity of life (all that has to do with embodiment), of the spirit (seeing all education, culture, and science as an intervention of the Spirit of God), of conscience (objective norms of morality), and of freedom (with adequate education and guarantees). That section concludes the Beatitudes call Christians to collaborate with Muslims in serving the marginal, oppressed, aged, infirm, poor, strangers, and all who are deprived of rights. The third section attempts to propose ways of laboring together in pluralistic societies. Five urgent challenges present themselves: preservation of the dignity of marriage and family, maintaining progress in the arts and culture in forming a world that is at once humane and technological, insuring economic and a social balance that avoids the excesses of both collectivism and capitalism, guaranteeing human rights through harmony of political communities, and establishment of community of nations and international peace by repudiating all forms of violence.

VS 2 places all these themes in a solidly religious context in its final section on "The Human Imitation of Divine Action." For Christians this is a question of embodying the ideal of Jesus Christ; for Muslims, of living out the divine qualities of knowledge, justice, and mercy. In both instances there must be a kind of "exchange of attributes."⁵¹

More properly theological themes appear in the final chapter of VS 1 and VS 2. What the earlier document calls "The Spirituality of a Christian Taking Part in Dialogue" the later entitles "Possible Religious Convergences." For both Vatican documents, the key concept is that of an "open spirituality" that allows one to marvel at the work of the Spirit in other religious traditions. An "Ecumenism of the People of the Book" (VS 1) is made possible only if one is converted from a static spirituality, in which one is a prisoner of extrinsic certitudes and values, to a dynamic spirituality which recasts those same values and certitudes into a passionate search for the traces of God's word among human beings.

Both documents then elaborate on their chosen themes so as to highlight aspects of convergence between Islam and Christianity. The wording of subheadings is strongly suggestive of differences in tone and emphasis in the two works, with those of VS 1 hinting at parallel concepts and those of VS 2 at more direct convergence; for example, "The Great God and the God of Love" (VS 1) and "The Mystery of God" (VS 2), "The Book and the Word of God" and "The Gift of the Word," "Prophets and the Prophetic Mission" and "The Role of Prophets," "Community and Church" and "The Presence of Communities," a sixth "station along the mystical journey of meeting and sharing," entitled "The Paths of Holiness." In all but the section on prayer, VS 2 makes considerably greater use of Qur'anic and Biblical texts.⁵²

Perhaps the most theologically ambitious of the documents, especially given its brevity and the size of its intended readership, is BCC. Its opening statement gives only a tiny clue as to what will follow:

The blunt fact is that the Churches in Britain are ill-prepared to discuss the theological questions raised by the existence of other faiths, simply because they have hitherto paid little attention to them. Christian theology has been written by and large, and even within the universities, as if other faiths had nothing to teach them about the relationship of God with his world. It will take some years for the theologians and governing bodies of our Churches to adjust to the realities and perspectives of the pluralist society which Britain, in common with the rest of the world, is rapidly becoming.⁵³

Author David Brown's observations are clearly applicable to churches all over the globe, which is all the more reason for him to make his rather bold proposal for a "theology of religions."

BCC's approach consists of five main elements: First, an authentic response to the "unique act of God in Christ" makes Christians responsible for witnessing to that mystery, in full awareness that their affirmation of it "is different, in its essential inner meaning, from Muslim statements about God."⁵⁴ The second has to do with Christians' responses to other religions and to Islam in particular. Authentic responses to the presence and action of God can be discerned across the whole spectrum of religious belief and practice. Christians must strive to interpret the Islamic experience in light of that. They can find a model for such an interpretation in their own recognition of the Hebrew Bible; here is a precedent for Christian relationship with a religious tradition that does not accept Christian faith as a whole. At the very least, the Christian can in no way presume to limit the action of the Holy Spirit. To sum up the second point: "It is possible, while using Christian categories, to accept that there is, and always has been, a living relationship between God and the peoples of Islam, which has been grounded in part, though not fully, in what they have learnt of him as they' practiced their our religion."⁵⁵ Third, it is important to take account of factors that unite Muslims and Christians (common humanity, citizenship, religious heritage-many of the items discussed in VS 1 and VS 2, for example) as well as those that divide (social problems and theological differences).

In the fourth element, Brown stresses the need to develop a "theology of religions" on the basis of two principles of interpretation. The first principle is an "inclusivist" interpretation of God's revelation in Christ that underscores its "relevance to everything else in the universe." Human unity under divine kingship, the universality of Jesus' ministry, the patterns of early Christian encounters with "the nations," and the New Jerusalem's openness to receive all people are but a few Biblical incitements to an inclusive view. The second principle, a variation on the first, is an inclusivist or universalist view of Christ. Whereas the idea of Christ as Savior tends to be exclusive, "Christ the Word" and "Christ the Second Adam" are inclusivist interpretations of Jesus' divinity and humanity, respectively.⁵⁶

Fifth, Christians live in "the modern Antioch," and their task is, finally, to cross a new threshold, as the early Christians did more than once, toward an "understanding of other faiths in relation to the purposes of God." Three new insights will emerge: (1) that "God is to the universe as our Lord was to his contemporaries in Palestine," which will lead to the "writing of new 'theologies of religions,' to stand between the present expositions of natural and of revealed theology, and the revision also of biblical theology in inclusive rather than exclusive terms"; (2) that Christians will regard with greater humility the human dimensions of ecclesiastical institutions and customs; and (3) that what is unique of Christianity will emerge with new clarity.⁵⁷

VI. Conclusions

Since the documents described here are so varied, it is difficult to make an across-the-board evaluation of them. One might, however, suggest as a touchstone the deceptively simple question, "To what extent does a particular document truly advance the cause of Christian-Muslim dialogue?" I propose five specific ways of assessing the degree to which the six documents contribute to that cause.

First is the question of effectiveness in persuading readers that Christians and Muslims *must* dialogue. Judged by this standard, none of the works sounds so urgent an alarm as to rouse more than a few who are not already convinced of the need. All in some way presuppose an awareness of the necessity of dialogue and depend for their efficacy on the conviction of the already-convinced. None of the six is quite a match for the almost diametrically opposed approach of a work such as L. Sumrall's *Where Was God When Pagan Religions Began?* with its chapter on "Islam: Worshipping the Wrong God."⁵⁸ What is lacking in all the documents is a way of "reaching the unecumenized" and of persuading even those amenable in principle to Christian ecumenism that Christian-Muslim dialogue is critical to the broader ecumenical engagement of

Christians with non-Christians. A focus on the issue of secularization and the ways in which Christians and Muslims respond could provide a starting point.⁵⁹

Several of the documents can, nevertheless, be quite useful as tools in the hands of those who are already conscious of a pressing need. Judged by the second standard, educative value, NCC will prove the most helpful. Soon to be more readily available and specifically written for an American public, NCC is highly recommended for schools, adult education, and church study groups. Used with some imagination by a sensitive leader or teacher, the book will go a long way toward raising American awareness.

Potential for stimulating in-depth reflection, the third touchstone will be found preeminently in VS 2. Even when its translation into English (now in progress, I am told) becomes available, VS 2 will pose no little challenge to its reader. It is a highly sensitive and beautifully conceived work which is rather “heady” in some ways, but on the whole it is well anchored in genuine human concerns. The kind of reflections VS 2 can facilitate will require and presuppose the educative potential of a book such as NCC. Finally, VS 2 is actually a product of over a dozen years’ work, refining and polishing as it does the initial offerings of VS 1.

Fourth, stimulus to action is an important criterion. Here again it is NCC that is most successful and practical. Its careful suggestions cover a wide range of activities that can bring Christians and Muslims together, as well as a variety of situations in which Christian tact and considerations toward the needs of Muslims will produce far more immediate results than any organized “official” dialogue can hope for.

Finally comes the matter of hard-headed realism about the possibilities of Muslim-Christian dialogue. Only PMV begins to address this issue directly enough, and its caveat is worth quoting here at length:

There is too much ready talk about wider ecumenism with the People of the Book, in the mistaken idea that Muslims and Christians are intent on unity and common truths after the manner of Catholic-Protestant-Orthodox ecumenism. This only does harm, because the aims and methods of Muslims and Christians are thus confused with the brotherly and evangelical exchange between various Christian communities. While dialogue should be marked by the same ecumenical spirit, based on respect, understanding and reconciliation in prayer, the difference between [interreligious] dialogue and ecumenism needs pointing out. Muslims and Christians together will never envisage any kind of reunion or unification. Though together able to honour God and proclaim the dignity of man, they know that, for all, Jesus Christ remains the “sign of contradiction” and therefore of absolute difference. The Muslim-Christian dialogue can never be equated with ecumenism. The very word “dialogue” is ambiguous: some people prefer to use the word “encounter.” It would seem, however, that over the last ten years Muslims and Christians have got used to “dialogue” in a vague sense, a sense which they can make richer as progress is made in their exchanges within the framework of “holy rivalry” proposed by the Koran to the People of the Book.⁶⁰

Closely connected with the need for Christian realism is another matter hinted at in PMV but otherwise not approached in the six documents. It is the evident fact that there are surely as many Muslims as there are Christians who have given no thought to, much less actively desire, dialogue. Muslim-Christian dialogue is simply not “popular” in any sense of the word. As mentioned earlier, NCC and VS 2 are especially good on a general sense of Muslim views of Christianity. However, in the final analysis, realism in dialogue requires that one acknowledge, without losing enthusiasm for dialogue, that not everyone is willing to listen. With that we have returned full-circle to the first criterion.