

# Introduction

The goal of the following chapters is to address the question: how can Christians committed to the classical Christian tradition (Evangelicals and Catholics) address the issues raised by contemporary Islam? The goal, we emphasize, is not Christian-Muslim dialogue—as worthy as that goal certainly is. Along with and even prior to such dialogue Christians need to ask themselves how their Scriptures and traditions might bear on such dialogue. Do the divisions among Christians (Catholic and Evangelical) fracture the classical Christian tradition in ways that undercut “Christian”-Muslim dialogue before it starts? Or does that classical tradition provide resources for thinking out and working out their own divisions in ways that will ready them for authentic conversation with Muslim brothers and sisters in Christ? And what does this tradition have to teach us about what Christians can and must learn from Muslims about their own traditions?

The essays are organized as a movement from the historical through the contemporary. Historically we begin prior to the modern era, prior to the Reformation, and even prior to the medieval Crusades. Instead we begin with the Muslim-Christian engagement prior to the first millennium, when Islam’s Qur’an had emerged and Christians were emerging from their battles at the first ecumenical councils. We do this not because we think that these other eras of Muslim-Christian engagement and non-engagement are unimportant (although many Western historians nowadays seem to think that “the Crusades” have been more important for Christians than for Muslims until recently).<sup>1</sup> Instead we wager that these earliest encounters can help us attend to issues that we have thus far not noticed.

Sidney Griffith guides us in a journey on the way early Christian theologians from diverse and sometimes competing traditions articulated the doctrine of the triune God in conversation with the Islamic Qur’an,

1. “The simple fact is that the crusades were virtually unknown in the Muslim world even a century ago.” Thomas F. Madden, *The New Concise History of the Crusades* (Oxford: Rowan & Littlefield, 2006) 217.

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learning from Islamic traditions even as they disagreed about the unity and trinity of God. Sandra Keating focuses on a single Christian Arabic theologian for whom Muslims as well as Christians are participants in God's ongoing pedagogy in Christ and the Spirit. Mark Swanson concentrates the concerns of Griffith and Keating on the question of whether early Christian arguments for true religion are evasions of authentic accounts for the hope that is in us, rather than "apologetic portfolios" with crucial lessons for us today.

These historical theologians provide a context in which to read Christians with contemporary philosophical and pastoral interests. David Burrell reminds us that Christian engagement of Islam is inseparable from our engagement with Judaism—and that these Abrahamic faiths share the mystery of the free Creator-creature relation, even as they differ on the eternal Torah, the Word made flesh, or the Qur'anic word made Arabic as the patterns for the Creator-creature relation. Rick Love explores the stereotypical rivalry between peacemakers and evangelists and then constructs a biblical theology of "peacemaking and respectful witness," particularly as a guide for Christians working with Muslims in concrete situations in Nigeria or Central Java today. Nelly van Doorn-Harder seeks for new grassroots interfaith engagements, and describes how concrete initiatives taken by Indonesian Muslims and Christians can provide models to take us beyond the theological and political impasses.

We are trying to suggest one way these diverse essays share a common agenda rather than trying to summarize essays readers can assess for themselves. The agenda is clearly unfinished, and we invite readers to discern the similarities as well as differences in the agenda proposed. The essays were originally presented at a 2008 Conference on Christian Theology and Islam sponsored by the Center for Catholic and Evangelical theology. The center has been sponsoring such conferences since its founding in 1991 by Robert Jenson and Carl Braaten. Our goal is not only to sponsor timely gatherings on Catholic and Evangelical theology but also to bring together pastors and academics, biblical exegetes and homilists, historians and theologians interested in faithfulness to the gospel of Jesus Christ throughout the churches. We are delighted that these essays are among the first in the Pro Ecclesia Series.

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