Introduction

Growing Globalization and the Challenges
of Religious Plurality

In many ways, globalization has become one of the distinctive characteristics of the early twenty-first century. "The astonishing technological developments of the twentieth century, especially in transportation and communication, heightened our sense of the world as 'one place,' smaller and more intimately interrelated than before."[1] Talk about our "shrinking planet" has become the focus of numerous recent books and articles.[2] Increasing mobility and instant access to worldwide information have enabled more and more people from a myriad of cultures and worldviews to be confronted with the prospect of learning to live, work, and play alongside one another.[3]

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1. Netland, *Encountering*, 80.

2. A good place to start looking at some of the aspects of globalization is Held et al., *Global Transformations*. Granted, the term itself is quite contested and controversial, but it does capture the growing awareness that human beings and societies are increasingly interdependent in a variety of ways. For a broader look at some of the religious aspects of globalization, see Vasquez and Marquardt, *Globalizing the Sacred*. While concerned primarily with case studies in the Americas, its principles and themes have good transferability to other cultural and religious contexts.

3. The issue of globalization is complex and multifaceted, encompassing not merely technological aspects of human life, but economic, political, social, cultural, ethical, biological, ecological, educational, religious, and a host of other aspects each deserving a thorough analysis in the light of numerous rapid changes taking place in our world today. The focus here is primarily on the ramifications of this globalization with respect to its religious aspects, particularly aspects of Christian-Muslim dialogue.

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These challenges have produced a growing consciousness of the sociological reality of religious plurality. In Wilfred Cantwell Smith's words,

> The religious life of mankind from now on, if it is to be lived at all, will be lived in a context of religious pluralism.
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> This is true for all of us: not only for 'mankind' in general on an abstract level, but for you and me as individual persons. No longer are people of other persuasions peripheral or distant, the idle curiosities of travelers' tales. The more alert we are, and the more involved in life, the more we are finding that they are our neighbors, our colleagues, our competitors, our fellows. Confucians and Hindus, Buddhists and Muslims, are with us not only in the United Nations, but down the street.[4]

In short, religious plurality can no longer be reasonably ignored in to-day's increasingly global society.

Current Challenges in Islam

Recent international events, especially those surrounding September 11, 2001, have catapulted Islam and the importance and nature of inter-faith relations into the intercontinental spotlight.[5] Significant concerns have arisen over the nature of Islam, not only as a religion of peace, but also as an important resource in the growing worldwide need for societies that are religiously plural, free, and just.

Beyond the theoretical challenges are the practical trials of im-migration. The cultural push for Islamic foreigners to assimilate into new and different ways of living often results in a crisis of faith and/or identity. Because the relationship between cultural identity and religious faith in Islam is extremely intimate and complex, there is a significant debate over the relationship culture and religious faith have with one another, as well as how much identity is linked with cultural

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4. Smith, *Faiths*, 11.

5. In addition to the more recent events surrounding 9/11, including the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, Noor ("Victory," 320) notes that "[other recent] events such as the Satanic Verses controversy, the Gulf War of 1990–1, the military coup in Algeria after the elections of 1992, and the Bosnian crisis . . ." have also been vitally formative, not only for Muslim identity and attitudes, but also for non-Muslim perceptions of Islam as well.

and religious forms.[6] In the real world, the connections and distinctions between faith and culture are frequently unclear, and not always overtly recognized, appreciated, or agreed upon in the process of "enculturation."

In contemporary Islam this question is especially acute since many Muslims believe that authentic Islamic faith must be overtly coupled with Islamic law (*Sharī'ah*) enforced within an Islamic state.[7] *Sharī'ah* tends to be quite detailed and closely related to the cultural forms in which it is codified and enforced. For example, the call for feminine modesty is variously expressed in different Islamic societies and cultures. In Singapore (where I live and teach), devout Malaysian Muslim women cover their heads in public, but can show their faces. In addition, these head-coverings come in a beautiful array of colors that reveal tremendous creativity and variety. In contrast, the pre-9/11 Taliban in Afghanistan required women to wear all-black *burqas* showing only the eyes. The point here is not to question such practices, but only to highlight the fact that the link between the principle of modesty and its particular expressions is too often confused.[8] Thus, historically conditioned cultural forms of expressing modesty can become absolutized into universal, timeless, and cross-cultural standards of righteousness and godliness. Thus, according to Tariq Ramadan, "it is assumed that Muslims are by definition 'not capable of integration' into secularized societies because their religion prevents them from accepting modern demarcations between the categories [of sacred and secular] we have mentioned."[9] But *Sharī'ah* is still "the work of human intellect."[10] While the texts do contain certain timeless religious absolutes, "In the wider area of human and social affairs . . . everything is permitted except that

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6. For a helpful survey on some of these debates, as well as a postmodern view of culture as it relates to religion in general and Christianity in particular, see Tanner, *Theories*. I do not agree with much of what she says, but she does an excellent job of pointing out the numerous challenges of strictly separating religion and culture. Also helpful in this regard from an evangelical perspective is Dyrness, *Earth Is God's*.

7. When pertinent, I will refer to Arabic terms throughout. For a helpful glossary of important Arabic terms see Anderson, *Islam*, 259–70.

8. This is not strictly a Muslim problem, of course. Not far from where I grew up in Chicago, Christian Bill Gotthard was holding seminars suggesting women could only be godly if they wore dresses or skirts below the knee.

9. Ramadan, *Western Muslims*, 34.

10. Ibid.

which is explicitly forbidden by a text. . . . Thus, the scope for the exercise of reason and creativity is huge, . . . and people have complete discretion to experiment, progress, and reform as long as they avoid what is forbidden."[11] The temporal practice of these principles is necessarily relative to the concrete contexts in which they are lived out. But this is often forgotten in the cultural conversations taking place today.

To illustrate, at a joint Muslim-Christian conference discussing the issue of Islamic law in 1993, the difficulties faced by transplanted Muslims was highlighted by Jørgen Nielsen. He noted, "participation in a highly structured system [like that of Western Europe] which has been developed over centuries tends to be difficult for those who come in late with a different experience."[12] In short, the myriad of cultural adjustments that all foreigners face when moving into a very different society also thrusts Muslim immigrants into those challenges related to cross-cultural assimilation and adjustment. But there is more to this problem than mere enculturation. Nielsen also points out that the inevitable discomfort and clash of traditions, religious and cultural, "tends to centre on *Sharī'ah*. In Western eyes, the Islamic state is one which implements barbaric punishments, persecutes non-Muslim minorities and suppresses women. In Muslim eyes, the West is atheistic, promiscuous, corrupt and—worst of all—anti-Islamic."[13] Thus, many Muslims see the pluralistic West as not merely different, but hostile to religion in general and Islam in particular. This has resulted in a popular perception among many Muslims that Western plurality inevitably compromises the traditional Islamic ideal of living under governmentally (i.e., *publicly*) imposed and enforced *Sharī'ah* law. Due to the perceived comprehensive and uncompromising nature of Islamic faith, it is difficult for many to envision plurality where other religious and legal systems might be significantly compatible with a more conservative, authentic, and explicitly public expression of Islam. Thus, especially concerning second-generation Muslim youth in non-Islamic contexts, Marcia Hermansen observes, "we are passing through a transitional and critical period in the history of the Muslim community" with re-

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11. Ibid., 35. This is akin to what Kurzman ("Liberal Islam," 14) calls the "silent mode" of understanding *Sharī'ah*'s applications in variable contexts.

12. Cited in Sperber, *Christians and Muslims*, 203.

13. Ibid.

spect to their long-term identity.[14] Ramadan succinctly summarizes the issues by stating that for Muslims living in the pluralistic context, "three questions are fundamental and urgently demand precise answers if we are to build a future for ourselves . . . : *Where are we? Who are we?* and finally, *In what way do we want to belong?*"[15] I might add to this list a fourth concern: *How do we want to relate and respond to those who are different from and disagree with us?*

Global Trends of Growing Secularization

Islam is being used here to illustrate the challenge *every* religious person and community faces when encountering foreign cultures and religions. In our pluralistic world, the question of how people of different religious views can and should respond and relate to each other is not easily answered. Fortunately, many within these religious communities are seeking to build deeper understandings of the other and find ways to engender more significant cooperation. This is especially important in light of two disturbing and interrelated trends.

The first is the increasing "secularization" of nations and cultures in both the East and West. Muslim scholar Abdulaziz Sachedina describes it this way: "The secular culture tends toward a negative characterization of anything religious as soon as it crosses the boundary from the private to the public sphere."[16] Thus, religion's influence has been increasingly marginalized. Sachedina calls this secularist push to exile religious impact to the margins of public life "the 'disestablishment' proposition," which "privatizes religion, banishing it from a secularized public arena . . ."[17]

This leads to a second trend, where some religious communities, feeling the need to assert the universal character of their belief system, are attracted to reactionary responses that move them "toward militan-

14. Hermansen, "'Identity' Islam," 318.

15. Ramadan, *Western Muslims*, 63. Granted, Ramadan is primarily concerned here with Muslims attempting to be authentically Muslim and *Western* (especially in Europe), but the principles he lays out are useful for people of other religions to consider and apply as they seek to make sense of the relationship between their religious faith and cultural identity.

16. Sachedina, *Islamic Roots*, 3.

17. Ibid.

cy, aggression, and separatism."[18] Secularists use such responses to bolster their claims that religion is dangerous and should remain a purely private affair. Ironically, the vast majority of religious people agree such radical zeal is morally misguided and corrupts the true nature of religious belief. In fact, religious values, when appropriately inculcated and practiced, serve as rich repositories for societal stability and harmony between peoples of highly diverse cultural and religious backgrounds. That is to say, "The religious culture, on the contrary, holds that religious values are a valuable resource in combating social and political injustices."[19]

In light of these disturbing trends, Christians and Muslims have sensed a profound urgency to pursue mutual dialogue to provide immediate and long-term solutions to the growing problem of violence against others in the name of organized religion. Instrumental in this process has been the World Council of Churches' attempt to engage Islamic thinkers in a process of respectful ongoing dialogue. In addition, there have been many local attempts (formal and informal) to participate in interreligious interaction.

Two Important Responses to Religious Plurality

To provide more focused attention to this vitally needed conversation in our religiously plural world, we will look closely at two of the more recent and important contributors to this ongoing engagement. They are Christian systematic theologian Wolfhart Pannenberg, and Muslim ethicist and religious scholar Abdulaziz Sachedina. To understand their significance and qualifications with respect to the task of addressing Christian and Muslim responses to religious plurality, a brief profile of both thinkers is provided below.

Wolfhart Pannenberg

German Lutheran theologian Wolfhart Pannenberg has authored numerous books and articles spanning an impressive forty-year academic

18. Ibid.
19. Ibid.

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career that included posts in Europe and the US. In particular, what many have called the magnum opus of his career, his three-volume *Systematic Theology*, is having an increasingly significant influence on the Christian community worldwide. Its comprehensive scope, creative and insightful interaction with biblical and extra-biblical resources, coupled with its coherence and tight integration have compelled some of the greatest theological minds of our day to mine (and sometimes malign) its depth of riches. Pannenberg's ongoing passionate interest in the nature and importance of other religions has caused him to write on many aspects of religious plurality and its impact on the church and our future world. Concerning this he states, "Catholic theology is today trying to do justice to the fact that the Christian religion exists as one religion among many. . . . If Protestant theology also does not once again face this fact openly and without dogmatic restrictions, then general critiques of the phenomenon of religion will inevitably further undermine the credibility of the Christian message as well."[20] Thus, for Pannenberg, a concern for a theology of religions is inherent to the credibility and truth of Christianity as one faith among many others.

Closely related to Pannenberg's notion of truth and its comprehensive nature, he sees the unfolding history of all religions as the means by which God reveals himself and his purposes for all creation. Thus, interfaith dialogue is not merely *missional*, it is *theologically essential* for a truer and more comprehensive understanding of God's character and plans. Pannenberg is particularly suited to participate in interfaith dialogue since he desires to see the other as truly other rather than trying to make the other into an inclusive subset of his own religion. In addition, because he sees truth as public, comprehensive, and coherent, his views closely mirror certain Islamic notions of truth and religion, making him an ideal discussion partner on important topics like the nature of God, humanity, divine revelation, other religions, and free and just societies.

Ironically, despite his overt recognition of its importance, Pannenberg never fully provides a separate systematic treatment of a theology of religions. I will initiate that project, bringing together a variety of Pannenbergian resources to give a more systematic look at such

20. Pannenberg, "History of Religions," 67.

a theology. I will then utilize those Christian resources to interactively converse with Muslim scholar Abdulaziz Sachedina.

Abdulaziz Sachedina

Abdulaziz Sachedina obtained his academic degrees in India (BA in Muslim Studies, Aligarh Muslim University), Iran (BA in Persian Language and Literature, Ferdowsi University) and Canada (MA and PhD in Islamic and Middle Eastern Studies, University of Toronto). Fluent in seven different languages,[21] he has taught at numerous institutions throughout his academic career and is currently a professor of ethics and religious studies at the University of Virginia. He has also produced an impressive array of books and publications on many topics pertinent to Muslims, especially concerning Islamic jurisprudence, ethics, and social justice. Sachedina is important to this dialogue because he is one of the few Muslim scholars writing in any comprehensive way about religious plurality and the possibility for Muslims, on the basis of their own internal spiritual resources, to create democratic, pluralistic, and tolerant societies.

In his recent landmark book, *The Islamic Roots of Democratic Pluralism*, Sachedina makes the controversial claim that authoritative Muslim resources actually provide the basis for a free democratic society that is not free from religion (as in secularism), but freely religious (as in religious plurality). He claims human beings are created with a universal primordial nature (*fitra*) that enables them to understand and pursue upright moral goals and ideals. Thus, the best way to create tolerant and moral societies is to pursue an ongoing dialogue and exchange of rational and ethical ideas with all people. Suppression of alternative viewpoints leads not to righteousness, but an impoverished and narrow understanding of the universal scope and purposes of God for all mankind. Because it is pre-revelatory, the *fitra* is not dependent on overt knowledge of or adherence to the Qur'an. The Qur'an is supplemental and helpful in the process, but all human beings have an innate moral sensibility enabling them to structure a universal society

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21. These include Gujarati (his native tongue), Swahili, Persian, Arabic, Urdu, Hindi, and English.

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built around godly ideals and purposes without the need for special divine revelation.

For Sachedina, Islam as an institutional religion and the human need to be in submission to God through morally upright living must also be clarified. Islam became an institutional religion over time, but the principle need for humanity remains: to submit to God's perfect will and do what is right. Thus, one is islamic (lowercase *i*) not on the basis of affiliation with institutional Islam (capital *I*). Rather, one is islamic by virtue of living a life that demonstrates the exercise of one's innate moral freedom to *submit oneself* to the plan and purpose of the one true God. A holy life is characterized by serving God, no matter what religion one is formally affiliated with. In this way, Sachedina redefines crucial terms to point toward more inclusive Islamic meanings obscured by time and convention.

In the end, Sachedina makes the potentially surprising claim that, rightly understood within its historical context, the Qur'an actually affirms a religiously diverse and publicly moral society wherein God ordains the presence of competing alternative perspectives.

Sachedina has written courageously on these topics, and currently stands under the shadow of critiques from more traditionally-oriented Muslim leaders for his claim that universal, conservative, and Qur'anic Islam brings many resources for the creation of peaceful, plural, and moral societies.[22]

Purpose and Preview

This book aims to bring these two religious representatives into a more direct and systematic conversation with one another. Through such a dialogue, resources within Christianity and Islam for a truly plural society will be discovered and implemented. This will be a society where the goal is not mere toleration, but something more important—genu-

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22. Placed under a fatwa in 1998 by Ayatollah Ali Sistani of Najaf, Iraq, which was intended to prevent him from teaching or lecturing on the subject of Islam, it is significant when he notes (in *Role of Islam*, 9n3), "It is not an easy task for any conscientious Muslim intellectual in the Muslim world or in the West to undertake this critical task [of reassessing the foundations of traditional Islamic beliefs and practices] without endangering his/her life."

ine mutual engagement. As Omid Safi reminds us, there is a higher hope and goal:

> [T]he root of the term "tolerance" comes from medieval toxicology and pharmacology, marking how much poison a body could "tolerate" before it would succumb to death. Is this the best that we can do? Is our task to figure out how many "others" . . . we can *tolerate* before it really kills us? Is this the most sublime height of pluralism that we can aspire to? I don't want to "tolerate" my fellow human beings, but rather to engage them at the deepest level of what makes us human, through both our phenomenal commonality and our dazzling cultural differences.[23]

Because of my own religious background and loyalties, this will be pursued with distinctively Christian emphases and concerns. Hopefully an expanded and truer vision of Christianity will emerge through a fair and sincere dialogue with the Islamic other. This will be achieved through an analysis and comparison of relevant scholarly works. Chapter 1 will briefly survey and categorize Christian and Muslim reactions to religious plurality before looking more closely at the current state of Christian-Muslim dialogue in chapter 2. Chapters 3 and 4 will then lay out the respective theologies of religions of Pannenberg and Sachedina. In chapter 5 a critical interaction with these views from an evangelical perspective will be provided along with an interactive "conversation" of comparison and contrast. In chapter 6 I offer perspectives on how and where Christian-Muslim dialogue might move forward. Special attention will be paid to the importance of allowing dialogue to proceed without any undue prior ideological demands on participants, and conditions that will help make Christian-Muslim dialogue more fruitful will be explored. After this, political aspects of dialogue and societal formation will be examined to encourage more democratically free, morally just, and religiously plural human communities. Chapter 7 will explore some of the distinctly Christian and trinitarian aspects of God and his nature, along with the significant potential these have for creating fruitful interactive dialogues with Muslims.[24] Chapter 8

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23. Safi, "Introduction," 24.

24. Given the centrality of the Islamic doctrine of God's absolute oneness (*tawhīd*), this claim may initially seem strange. How such a concept will be laid out as both an invitation and a challenge to past, present, and future Christian and Islamic theology will be further explained in chapter 7.

will wrap up by giving additional recommendations for how Christian-Muslim dialogue might continue. It will also lay out important areas still requiring significant interfaith interactions between Christians and Muslims.

Defining Key Concepts

Before going any further, key terms need advanced explanation and clarification. These are "theology of religion," "theology of religions," "religious pluralism(s)," and "religious plurality."

Confusion over the difference between a theology of religion and a theology of religion*s* is common. "Theology of religion" refers to the broader and more abstract concept of religion in general.[25] From a Christian perspective, it is a broadly descriptive and explicatory project sociologists and anthropologists have carried out that understands religion as a universal, cross-cultural, and trans-temporal phenomenon. In the words of Jacques Dupuis, "The [Christian] theology of religion asks what religion is and seeks, in the light of Christian faith, to interpret the universal religious experience of humankind; it further studies the relationship between revelation and faith, faith and religion, and faith and salvation."[26]

As beneficial as this pursuit is, the primary concern here is with a related but different project, namely the concern to look at a theology of religions—in the plural. Theology of religions focuses upon particular religions as they actually exist and are practiced in our world today rather than a general concept of religion. As Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen states, "Theology of religions is that discipline of theological studies which attempts to account theologically for the meaning and value of other religions. Christian theology of religions attempts to think theologically about what it means for Christians to live with people of other faiths and about the relationship of Christianity to other religions."[27] Thus, particular religions and even regions (e.g., Asian or African the-

25. In many ways, this is a continuation of the project initiated by Friedrich Schleiermacher. In his attempt to describe religion in general rather than a particular religion, he claimed (in *On Religion*, 106) that "the essence of the religious emotions consists in the feeling of an absolute dependence."

26. Dupuis, *Theology of Pluralism*, 7.

27. Kärkkäinen, *Introduction*, 20.

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ologies of religions) can become the concern of a Christian theology of religions. But as Kärkkäinen goes on to point out, what theology of religions is concerned about need not be—perhaps even should not be—limited to Christianity alone. Thus, "In principle—even though not much work has yet been done—there could be theology of religions from the perspective of other religions, such as a Buddhist or Hindu theology of religions. The goal of these theologies would be to reflect on the meaning of other religions in relation to its own convictions and underlying foundations."[28] Accordingly, the hope here is to follow this principle by describing, developing, and synthesizing Pannenberg's Christian theology of religions alongside Sachedina's Islamic theology of religions.

In literature on theology of religion and theology of religions, it has been customary to call the sociological reality of having many religious adherents living in close proximity to one another "religious pluralism." More recently, theology of religions has associated the term "religious pluralism" with the ideology of John Hick and others like him, who claim that that religious differences observed in our world today are merely variable phenomenal human expressions of responses to the one noumenal God (or more recently in his thought, the *Real*). As Bernard Adeney observes, "*Pluralism* used to refer to the fact that one society contains multiple religions. Recently it has come to be used as a normative term for a particular theology of religions,"[29] namely, the pluralist perspective. Here, all major world religions are roughly equal in their salvific ability to move a believer from more self-centered ways of living toward more other-centered or God/Reality-centered forms.[30] Since Hick's view has been popularized, there has been a tremendous proliferation of these types of perspectives that are quite distinct. Consequently, those who promote them are often referred to as "religious pluralists." Due to this proliferation, it is now more helpful to speak of "religious pluralism*s*" rather than the more general term "religious pluralism." To avoid any confusion with Hick and other pluralists, the term "religious plurality" is used to refer to the sociological reality of the presence of many major religious views (usually in close proxim-

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28. Ibid., 21.
29. Adeney, *Strange Virtues*, 178.
30. Hick's views will be looked at more closely in chapter 1.

ity) without necessarily evaluating this situation in any theological or philosophical manner.

With a few of these basic terms defined and clarified, we can now survey ways Christians and Muslims have recently responded to religious plurality beginning in chapter 1.