A WORLD OF INEQUALITIES

CHRISTIAN AND MUSLIM PERSPECTIVES

LUCINDA MOSHER, Editor
PREVIOUSLY PUBLISHED RECORDS OF BUILDING BRIDGES SEMINARS


Bearing the Word: Prophecy in Biblical and Qur'anic Perspective, Michael Ipgrave, editor (London: Church House, 2005)


Justice and Rights: Christian and Muslim Perspectives, Michael Ipgrave, editor (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2009)


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Introduction

“We agree that ‘inequality’ is rampant in our world; we agree less so as to whether there should be ‘equality.’” So spoke a Building Bridges Seminar veteran as this project’s examination of Christian and Muslim perspectives on “a world of inequalities” got under way. Founded in 2002 as an initiative of the archbishop of Canterbury and under the stewardship of Georgetown University since 2012, the Building Bridges Seminar is believed to be the longest-running dialogue of Christian and Muslim scholar-practitioners. Meetings have been held in both Muslim- and Christian-majority locales—among them, Qatar, Singapore, Italy, and the United Kingdom. This book presents the proceedings of the seventeenth Building Bridges Seminar, convened June 18–22, 2018, in Sarajevo, Bosnia-Herzegovina. Chaired by Daniel A. Madigan, SJ, the Jeanette W. and Otto J. Ruesch Family Associate Professor in Georgetown’s Department of Theology, most sessions took place in Sarajevo’s Gazi Husrev-bey Library. In fact, in 2005, Sarajevo had provided the venue for the fourth seminar. It has been remarked many times since that the city itself—its physical location and history—bore palpably and uniquely on the seminar’s conversations.1 Longtime participants in this project were delighted to be back. The Building Bridges Seminar is always an exercise in extending theological hospitality to each other as Christian and Muslim scholars. In 2018 this was only enhanced by the warmth of the Bosnian welcome.

Under this project’s auspices, a conversation circle comprising some thirty scholars is created annually (by invitation only) for the purpose of deep dialogical study of texts—scriptural and otherwise. In constructing the circle, balance is always the goal. Thus, Christians and Muslims are always nearly equal number, with women well represented in both cohorts. While most Christian participants have been Anglican or Roman Catholic, Orthodox and Protestants have also been included. Similarly, while most Muslim participants have been Sunni,
Shi’a have always taken part. The material to be read, analyzed, and commented upon is chosen to provoke deep discussion of a carefully framed, multilayered theme, such as revelation, prophethood, prayer, human destiny, forgiveness, power, or—as in 2018—inequality.

As an ongoing dialogue, the Building Bridges Seminar’s goals are to gain better understanding of each other’s tradition, to wrestle with theological complexities, and to improve the quality of our disagreements. Its structure facilitates this by conducting almost all of its work in closed session, by organizing the participants into four discussion groups (usually composed of eight individuals) that remain consistent throughout the meeting, and by opening and closing each day with a robust plenary conversation. Over the years it has become customary to offer a public session featuring overviews of the topic at hand. Each day thereafter, morning and afternoon plenaries feature brief lectures exegeting or otherwise introducing texts to be subjected to close reading and discussion in the ninety-minute “small-group” session to come. Hour-long evening plenaries are for reflection and synthesis. The purpose of the present volume is to bring together material for further study or for use in the reader’s own dialogical endeavors.2

Thus, part 1, “Overviews,” offers a pair of essays: “Unjust Inequality as a Challenge for Contemporary Islam” by Ovamir Anjum and “The Challenges of a World of Inequalities for Christians Today,” by David Hollenbach, SJ, originally presented as lectures at the public forum that opened the 2018 meeting. Given the complexity of inequality as an overarching topic, the first full day of the seminar was dedicated to taking stock. Six sessions featured a speaker presenting on one aspect of the reality of global inequality. These brief lectures were crafted to open up the issue of the ways in which our religions often collude in the maintenance and perpetuation of these inequalities in our religious structures, offering readings of our scriptures that justify and give a religious patina to various kinds of division, exclusion, and domination that have their origins not in God’s desire for us but in the human will to power. In this volume’s part 2, “Muslims and Christians Facing the Reality of Inequality,” the reader will find six essays: “Gender and Islam: Obstacles and Possibilities” by Samia Huq; “The Problem of Race in Christianity” by Elizabeth Phillips; “Nationality and Ethnicity in West Africa: An Economic and Religious Perspective on Inequalities” by François Pazisnewende Kaboré, SJ; “Islam and the Challenge of Sociopolitical Equality: The Contribution of Religious Creed” by Sherman A. Jackson; “Caste and Social Class in the Christian and Islamic Communities of South Asia” by Sunil Caleb; and “Slavery: Source of Theological Tension” by Jonathan Brown.

“The Building Bridges Seminar is deliberately centered on texts and theology, with an admirable scholarly tone and tenor,” explained one participant in the 2018 convening. “This focus on texts highlights common themes that can link different communities. It also brings out the complexities around interpretations of both words and ideas that were set down in very different eras, however divinely inspired.” In Sarajevo, the second and third full seminar days were devoted
to giving close attention to a selection of passages from the Bible and the Qurʾān that offer a vision of human living beyond inequality as well as to scripture passages that at least some people in each tradition believe require adherents to perpetuate inequalities. Four scholars who had been instrumental in choosing this material provided exegetical overviews. Thus, in this volume’s part 3, “Inequality, the Bible, and the Christian Tradition,” we have essays by Leslie J. Hoppe, OFM (“Inequality in the Old Testament”), and Christopher M. Hays (“For All of You Are One in Christ Jesus? The New Testament Witnesses on Ethnic, Economic, Social, Religious, Racial, and Gender Inequality”) plus sets of Old Testament and New Testament texts; in part 4, “Inequality, the Qurʾān, and Hadith,” are two essays by Abdullah Saeed—“Racial, Religious, and Gender Equality: Reflections on Qurʾānic Texts” and “Economic Equality and Inequality: An Introduction to Selected Qurʾānic Texts”—plus sets of Qurʾān verses and hadiths aimed at encouraging dialogue about gender, ethnic, and religious inequality, on the one hand, and economic inequality, on the other.

Plenary and small-group work on the morning of the 2018 seminar’s final day focused on the possibilities for and the obstacles to a common ethic of equality, the topic of the present volume’s part 5. In anticipation, several complex questions had been posed: Do fundamental theological differences preclude a shared ethic? Does error have rights? Is one vision of human society as good as another? Might there be kinds of inequality that are acceptable, even necessary? The creative reflections that launched discussion of these issues during plenary and small-group sessions appear here in essay form: “Three Strands Leading to the Edge: Considering the Possibility of a Common Ethic of Equality” by C. Rosalee Veloso Ewell and “Muslim-Christian Bridges: Toward a Shared Theology of Human Development?” by Azza Karam. Completing this book is “Considering Inequalities as Scholars of Faith: Reflections on Bridge-Building in Sarajevo,” an essay by the seminar’s rapporteur, meant to enable the reader to “overhear” some of the various levels of conversation during the seventeenth convening.

Our purpose in providing exegetical essays and collections of texts for study organized as the seminar itself took them up is to encourage others to consider these same topics and questions—either as individuals, as students in a university course, or as members of an ongoing dialogue, which, as its name implies, requires time, patience, and ongoing commitment. Readers may wish to undertake further exploration of topics central to this book. While a lengthy list of suggestions for supplemental reading could quite easily be developed for each of those categories, we have limited our recommendations here to just five titles: Walter Scheidel, *The Great Leveler: Violence and the History of Inequality from the Stone Age to the Twenty-First Century* (Princeton University Press, 2017); Anthony B. Atkinson, *Inequality: What Can Be Done?* (Harvard University Press, 2015); Mahmoud El-Gamal, *Islamic Finance: Law, Economics, and Practice* (Cambridge University Press, 2006); Glenn C. Loury,
Introduction


In the main text of this volume, diacritics have been kept to a minimum. Dates are “CE” unless otherwise noted. Gratitude is owed to many publishers for permission to use the material excerpted in this volume. All are credited in due course. Unless otherwise noted, Qurʾan quotations are according to M. A. S. Abdel Haleem, trans., The Qurʾan: English Translation and Parallel Arabic Text (Oxford University Press, 2010, used by permission; all rights reserved); Bible passages are from the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible, copyright 1989 by the Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the USA (used by permission; all rights reserved). Deep appreciation is extended to Georgetown University president John J. DeGioia for his ongoing support of the Building Bridges Seminar. As has been the case for many years, the Seminar’s academic director, David Marshall (World Council of Churches), and its chair, Daniel Madigan (Georgetown University), were instrumental in setting the 2018 theme, organizing the roster of scholars, and—in careful conversation with those designated as presenters—choosing the texts to be studied. Others with strategic roles in the 2018 gathering include Lucinda Mosher (Hartford Seminary), the Seminar’s rapporteur; Samuel Wagner, who, as director of dialogue and Catholic identity in the Office of the President, provided logistical support; Samedin Kadić, a graduate student at the University of Sarajevo, Bosnia-Herzegovina, who assisted with note taking during all sessions; and Georgetown University’s Berkley Center for Religion, Peace, and World Affairs—which also provides an ongoing base of operations and online presence for the Seminar and has made the publication of this book possible. Finally, gratitude is extended to Al Bertrand and the staff of Georgetown University Press for their patient assistance with this project.

Notes


2. With few exceptions, the essays herein are substantial revisions—or even replacements—of the original seminar presentations.
PART ONE

Overviews
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I have been asked to offer as a Muslim a diagnosis of the challenge of the many inequalities that afflict our world. I shall, therefore, reflect on the challenges and paradoxes rather than attempting to articulate cures. Let me begin by stating that Muslims have often failed to uphold the teachings of justice and compassion to which God has called us through the teachings of his beloved Prophet Muhammad, upon him be peace and blessings. God sent the Prophet as nothing but “Rahma to all the worlds.” One of my students taught me that Rahma is not fully captured by its common English translation, mercy, as the latter connotes primarily forgiveness for the guilty; a better alternative is compassion, which emphasizes the concern for the weak. As a community of God called to compassion and justice, we have a long way to go. It goes without saying that Muslim states in the world today suffer from most grievous injustices, many of which are self-inflicted. My relevant claim here is that these injustices are inflicted and sustained not in spite of the normative culture but as a result of it; these normative cultures, diverse as they may be, are in varying degrees informed by Islamic tradition.

Equally evident, however, is the fact that as economically peripheral peoples of the world, the biggest sin of Muslims as a whole appears to be weakness. From colonialism to neoliberalism, foreign forces have contributed to the destruction of traditional Muslim institutions, which has wrought incalculable damage to the Muslims’ ability to confront the tremendously rapid economic and social transformations that have ensued—and those transformations have left them with a deeply defensive posture of fearful conservatism rather than having encouraged a principled critique of and engagement with them. But this material and structural analysis offers only a partial explanation to us believers, to whom God can do all things if we keep our promise to Him; therefore, we see all problems ultimately in moral terms as part of our faith. Yet often this recognition of our own
failure turns into spiritualized fatalism and abdication of responsibility—which, I believe, can be averted through a critical appraisal of the problem at hand.

Let me proceed by sharing a couple of profound paradoxes of our time that should concern any thinking about religion and inequality. First, there is the obvious paradox of religion and inequality in the modern world—one that is not unique to Islam. The data show, and it does not take too much imagination to heuristically confirm, what the opening line of a recent volume on the subject declaims: "Religion is one of the strongest and most persistent correlates of social and economic inequalities."

Research in Western Christianity (and Indian Hinduism, for instance) shows the rise in religiosity as neoliberalism increases inequality. Although I am not aware of research focusing on Muslim-majority countries, I suspect that the conclusions would be comparable. This phenomenon is explained either through the relative power theory (the rich support religion for a number of reasons, and their support for it attracts the poor; religion may also contribute by deflating pressures for redistribution) or the less-favored deprivation theory (religion provides comfort to the economically disadvantaged). An alternative explanation may be that the success of the modern state as the agency of redistribution and management leads to decline in the role of religion in small, modernized, homogeneous societies. This dovetails well with the notion many anthropologists have posited: that the modern state is a secular and secularizing agent. Regardless, it seems clear that religious intelligentsia have much to worry about: whereas our normative teachings call for renunciation and otherworldliness that should presumably mitigate inequalities, their effective impact in the modern world may be quite the opposite.

The second paradox is the curious relationship between the Left liberal demand for total and uncompromising equality in exactly the same age and encouraged by the same forces of neoliberalism that have generated some of the greatest inequalities and injustices of our time and have resurrected the radical right.

A third paradox is one of defining justice, as Muslims are often called to hurry up and imitate before the next wave of conceptual transformation and a new set of definitions hits. Injustice or unjust inequality, no doubt, is at the heart of some of the key issues the world is facing today—crises where Muslims are in the eye of the storm. As victims as well as perpetrators, Muslims are violently confronted with the question of justice. Yet a settlement of what constitutes justice remains elusive, as modern aspirations are deeply chimerical. How radically these definitions and aspirations change from one decade to the next in our age of accelerated change can be appreciated if we trace the transformation of justice debates over the last couple of decades: from the equality versus freedom debate of the Cold War to the near triumph of individualism and capitalism in the neoliberal age, when the crucial questions become those of personal sexual choice, gender pronouns, and gender pay gap. These changing norms are not primarily the result of some nefarious conspiracy. Nevertheless, in this drama, the Anglo-American economic and political swings have been inordinately influential in
deciding for the global cosmopolitan culture what justice ought to mean and what kind of inequalities are worth opposing and which ones are inevitable, tolerable, even desirable. More precisely, even as the notion of justice has in the modern period been equated to the notion of equality, still the progressive liberals possess no moral criterion to differentiate between tolerable and intolerable inequalities, thus letting the market force and brute power to silently draw lines in the sand. Like hierarchy, equality comes with costs. The rise of liberal democratic equality has been accompanied by if not facilitated by modern individualism and has greatly eroded familial and communal forms of life— institutions our religious traditions consider crucial for righteous life. The resurrection of the new Far Right to prominence across the West indicates the anemic state of these institutions.

Justice and Mercy

Allow me now to turn to the Islamic scripture. The Qur’an call us to be just—first and foremost—in the most intimate sense, even against ourselves and our kith and kin:

O you who believe! Be staunch in justice, witnesses for God, even though it be against yourselves or [your] parents or [your] kindred, whether [the case be of] a rich man or a poor man, for God is nearer unto both [them ye are]. So follow not passion lest you lapse [from truth] and if you lapse or fall away, then lo! God is ever informed of what ye do. (Q. 4:135)²

Elsewhere, a similar verse emphasizes justice even against your enemy, and not just any enemy but your religious persecutor. “And let not your hatred of a folk who [once] stopped your going to the holy sanctuary seduce you to transgress” (Q. 4:135)³

But justice is still second to the virtue that we are most frequently reminded of in the Qur’an: that of rahma, mercy and compassion. The Qur’an has God saying, “My mercy encompasses all things” (Q. 7:156). A Prophetic tradition has it, “When God created the heavens and the earth, he wrote his slogan on His throne, ‘My mercy has overwhelmed my wrath.’” In contrast to justice (al-adl) and fairness or equal distribution (al-qist), plain equality is a concept that does not find direct expression in the Qur’an—nor is it a cardinal virtue in an unqualified sense.

Nobility in Piety and Faith Alone

A basic equality of all humans as humans can be deduced from a number of teachings, such as the verse:
O people! Lo! We have created you from a male and a female, and have made you nations and tribes that ye may know one another. Lo! the noblest of you, in the sight of God, is the most pious. Lo! God is All-Knowing, Aware. (Q. 49:13)

Here the import is to reject inequality based in race, tribe, and lineage generally. Yet, even here, a criterion for inequality is posited—namely, *taqwa*: nobility is not absent, but it comes from piety, being mindful of God, and fear of God.4

**Gender In/equality**

Men and women are, according to the Qur’an, allies and partners of each other, *awliya‘*: It posits no difference in their religious status, aspirations, and virtues, and it strongly suggests equality in these respects.

Lo! For Muslim men and Muslim women, for believing men and believing women, for devout men and devout women, for truthful men and truthful women, for perseverant men and perseverant women, for men who devoutly humble themselves and women who devoutly humble themselves, for men who give in charity and women who give in charity, for men who fast and women who fast, for men who guard their chastity and women who guard their chastity, and for men who praise God abundantly and women who praise God abundantly: for them has God prepared forgiveness and great reward. (Q. 33:35)

The Qur’an also conspicuously notes that in the story of creation, both Adam and Eve ate of the tree and both were forgiven; the Qur’an goes out of its way to use a dual verbal form to emphasize this point (Q. 20:121). Yet some hadith accounts seem to give a different bent to this story and reproduce the biblical narrative. One hadith also suggests, at least in an apparent sense, that women are deficient in religion and intellect.5

When discussing the marital institution, however, the Qur’an unequivocally declares that “they [women] have rights similar to those [of men] over them, and men are a degree above them” (Q. 2:228), and “men have authority over women, owing to what they spend on them, and owing to God’s grace to some over others” (Q. 4:34). The same verse allows men to discipline their disobedient wives by warning, abandoning them in beds, and even striking them; the hadith reports express the Prophet’s dislike of striking and qualify that permission by prohibiting the striking of face or striking so hard that it leaves a mark. The Qur’an also limits polygamy to four wives, if a man can be just among them; if he cannot, then only one. The women’s share in inheritance, in itself a radical move—as women had been often deemed property rather than property owners—is
nonetheless half that of men in most classes of heirs. The Qur’an also deems one man’s testimony equivalent to that of two women in certain cases (Q. 2:282).

The juristic tradition received this Qur’anic model more or less faithfully; yet its attempt to formalize and standardize sometimes accentuated the inequality more than what scripture allowed—and on occasion in obvious contradiction to the prophetic teachings. Careful readers of the Qur’an even in the premodern period found this problematic. For instance, Ibn Taymiyya, a particularly close and independent reader of the Qur’an and hadith, argued that women were religious equals of men, that the hadith suggesting deficiency of women was in fact a reference to the particular issue that menstruating women may not pray or fast (the Prophet was using this fact only rhetorically, perhaps to encourage them to be more generous than men), and that their testimony was deemed half only in the special case of certain transactions conducted outside the court. Yet certain obvious differences were undeniable: all prophets, the Qur’an declared, had been men. Some in later tradition did balance that by observing that no women had ever been tyrants or hadith fabricators.

A remarkable verse in the Qur’an, just before 4:34, anticipates the reaction one might have in response to the inequality that is later posited:

And wish not the thing in which God has made some of you excel others. Unto men a share from that which they have earned, and unto women a share from that which they have earned. But ask God of His bounty. Lo! God is ever Knower of all things. (Q. 4:32)

In contrast to these verses that establish a social hierarchy along with spiritual equality, most other Qur’anic verses concerning women are dedicated to warning men against abusing the authority they are given in matters of marriage, divorce, custody, and female children.

**Wealth Inequality and Mitigative Measures**

Unlike gender inequality at the social level, which is carefully justified and regulated, economic inequality is treated as undesirable but to an extent unavoidable. Moreover, a number of means are devised to mitigate it. Inequality in wealth is tolerated only as a natural result of divinely ordained diversity of human circumstances. God gives some more than others, but only to test them, and vehemently denies any superiority on that basis. As earlier prophets had been, the Prophet Muhammad is warned never to let the poverty of his devout early followers be a cause for looking down on them or passing over them in favor of the affluent. Among the believers, the disparity must be mitigated through charity and alms and other means such as most strident prohibition of usury. The inheritance laws of the Qur’an similarly function to distribute the wealth such that it
normally becomes split up and redistributed from one generation to the next. These staples of Islamic law were intended to and did in fact historically militate against accumulation of wealth under normal conditions and hence prevented excessive accumulation, a condition that was to be crucial in the later rise of modern capitalism.

Yet, if one posits the human invention of private property as the foundation of all later inequality and even capitalism, as leftist historians often do, then that foundation is remarkably preserved in the Qurʾan: the right to own and freely engage in trade is unequivocally preserved, and theft is severely punished. Islamic law thus created a strong free market and private property, which engendered worldwide trade networks spanning in particular the Indian Ocean world yet prevented the rise of modern predatory capitalism.

**Inequality in Status: Slavery**

The Qurʾan offers no justification, unlike in the previous two cases, for slavery, although its tolerance of slavery is comparable to the tolerance of poverty. Slaves are spoken of nearly always in the context of freeing them as expiation of a number of sins. The Prophet required that enslaved people be treated kindly; that one must feed and clothe them from the same kinds of things one consumed and wore oneself; even commanded that, if one hits a slave, the expiation is to free him or her; and discouraged people from calling them ʿabīd (the common term for slaves, which underscores total subservience and lack of claim against the master, reserved now properly for God-human relationship alone) but rather to call them mamluk (owned). Free Muslims and protected non-Muslims (dhimmi or mustaʾmin) could not be enslaved, and enslaving a free person was deemed a major sin. Slaves, the Prophet said, are your brothers, whom God has placed under your authority. Yet there was no general prohibition of owning slaves, and slavery continued in the Muslim lands until its abolition in the modern period.

In summary, two observations can be made about the Qurʾanic responses to these various kinds of inequality. First, in the five categories of inequality that I have mentioned in a deliberate order, we can note a gradation: faith (inequality is imperative, accentuated), gender (legally mandated but mitigated), property and status (tolerated but highly mitigated), and race/ethnicity/tribe (categorically rejected).

Second, in responding to nearly all types of inequality within the community of the faithful, gender, wealth, and status, the Qurʾanic response follows a pattern. The baseline of the Qurʾan seems to be to accept the form of life that had emerged in nearly all major civilizations and the Near East in particular over millennia. This included ascriptive and social institutions: family, clan, tribe, private property, and patriarchy were adopted in a more or less modified form. Depending on one’s focus, one may emphasize one or the other, but both elements
of acceptance and modification are undeniable: there was neither a radical rejection nor a total acceptance.

Finally, in all these dimensions, it is Islamic law (sharia) that emerged as the site of management and mitigation of hierarchy and inequality.

Inequality as a Concept

Note that I have qualified the kind of inequality maintained in Islamic law as hierarchical inequality. This suggests the question: What other kinds may I be presupposing, and how might we better understand this loaded concept? At a very rudimentary level, we can identify three kinds of inequality:

1. **Hierarchical inequality** serves a social function and is justified by the normative order; it is here that the tensions between Islam and the liberal discourse on human rights lie, which I shall accept as the point of reference dominant in our time.

2. The prohibition against might is right inequality—that is, against accepted legal norms; for example, when certain groups are above the law—happens to be an area of overall agreement between the two traditions.

3. **Outcome inequality** is seen as a necessary result of liberty in classical liberalism and its contemporary republican version. But in both Left liberalism and Islam, it is seen as the object of mitigative action. The site and nature of these actions differ: Left liberalism functions largely through the secular redistributive state in a top-down fashion; Islam functions largely through family, community, and religious law in a bottom-up fashion.

Another underlying (one could say metaphysical) difference between Islamic scriptural and liberal prescriptions and aspirations while mitigating inequality is in their respective attitude toward nature: the natural order is seen as divine, and the Qur’an requires respecting it, whereas contemporary Left liberalism demands the intervention of states, court decisions, and technology to mitigate the natural differences. This is evident in economic as well as gender inequality.

Unable to offer a satisfactory history or genealogy of the concept of inequality here, I only broach some important questions that must be kept in mind when confronting scripture or tradition with this challenge. What are the origins of the fact of inequality, and, relatedly, what are the origins of inequality as a problem to be overcome? First, in nature and human society, inequality is the norm. Whether it is the prides of lions, packs of wolves, or gangs of primates, the struggle for dominance is part of the animal kingdom; among humans, similarly, no civilized society has survived without hierarchy. Even the precious few human groups that the anthropologists first thought lacked social hierarchy—such as primitive tribes of the Andamanese in the Indian Ocean or the Sudanese
Nuer—live as clans with hierarchy of gender and age. The remarkable idea of the equality of all humans can be credited in the known history to the Abrahamic tradition, in which God made life sacred and human beings special. Ironically, then, Christians and Muslims are gathered today to address a problem that is entirely the creation of their belief in God. However, in its secularized popular form, it appears as a self-evident belief in no need for a justification. Yet if it is not God who created us as special and equal, there is nothing in nature that indicates that we are either special or equal to each other in any way. The Qur'an says,

For that cause We decreed for the Children of Israel that whoever kills a human being for other than manslaughter or corruption in the earth, it shall be as if he had killed all humankind, and whoever saves the life of one, it shall be as if he had saved the life of all humankind. (Q. 5:32)

Political equality of the free, propertied males was thought to be the invention of the Greeks, although it has been now shown that that qualified kind of equality was not strange to the Mesopotamian civilizations to the east. To not wander too far afield, I wish to stress that equality of humans at the abstract, spiritual level is a relatively rare concept in human history, one whose metaphysical roots lie in Abrahamic monotheism.

Second, the concern for sociopolitical equality in its current form as being among the highest moral goods is a distinctively modern, in particular, liberal concern, and is difficult to imagine without the prior rise and establishment of a few fundamental beliefs—one being individualism and another being secularism—because such a conception requires discounting the settling of scores and righting of wrongs in an afterlife as well as any religious fatalism. In other words, liberalism had to disavow or deny its religious roots in order to arrive at the current form of individual equality as a good in need neither of justification nor of balancing with other, potentially more important goods.

We would also have to ask how it is that modern liberal political and economic systems have produced and entrenched such tremendous inequality in the world. Might there be something profoundly questionable about the Pollyanna-ish demand for equality at the expense of all other goods, and might the concept of equality itself need rethinking? Such an inquiry would have to confront the fact that different moral traditions respond to different classes of inequality differently, as Catholic philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre’s classic *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* reminds us. Such an inquiry would have to confront the kinds of questions Lila Abu-Lughod does in her book *Do Muslim Women Need Saving?* when she demonstrates the colonialist and imperialist underpinnings of even the seemingly most well-meaning liberal demands for gender equality in Muslim countries.
Islamic history has had its own complex history of toying with radical egalitarianism. The early Islamic egalitarians, the Kharijites, violently sought equality at a political and religious level, and their anarchism and violence led to their extinction and predictably cooled the ardor for their ideas among the Muslim mainstream. Another early movement that did succeed, the Abbasids, was fueled largely by the non-Arabs desire for equality with the Arab Muslims. Both of these movements for relative equality were violent, like the French Revolution; equality is a powerful idea that has often unleashed carnage. The American Revolution, with its noble, self-evident truth that “all men are created equal” and are possessed of certain inalienable rights—those of life, liberty, and pursuit of happiness—while successful in avoiding the immediate carnage, was in fact part of a colonial project enabled by mass killings and perhaps the worst kind of enslavement in recent history, and one that sought to protect the propertied class of men. We may cautiously venture, therefore, that no instance of the demand or granting of equality has been innocent, and none has been total.

**Modern Muslim Responses**

Muslims confronted by the challenge of the modern emphasis on human equality respond in various ways. Progressivists, on the whole, reject the traditional answers. I propose to divide their approach into two kinds. Soft progressivists (some may call them reformists) reinterpret the scriptural texts to arrive at more or less liberal solutions and, in the process, recruit classical tradition without being bound by it. Their critics see them as quietly accepting the prevailing Left liberal norms as self-evident, as “the end of history,” and their method as starting with the desired results and reverse-engineering their way to the scriptural texts and interpretive methodologies.

Hard progressivists, in contrast, reject parts of the scripture explicitly, using different strategies. Some reject Medinan suras that spoke of laws and norms in favor of Meccan suras that generally emphasized beliefs and ethics. Others abstract general principles, such as monotheism and justice, and argue that these require the rejection of the particular teachings of the Qur’an and the hadith. The attempts that can be characterized as hard progressivist can be seen as early as the nineteenth century, but they have generally struggled with philosophical grounding as well as cultural authority. They assume the universal existence of a standard strong enough to oppose and replace scripture and tradition, yet in a rapidly changing world of epistemic anarchy, they are left with no authoritative foundations on which to build their critique and to decide which inequalities to reject and which to accept, or on what ground to prioritize between competing values, such as survival, identity, solidarity, good order, freedom, and God. Thus theoretically challenged, they often turn to social activism or help from Western power institutions, which leaves them heavily reliant on current trends and exposed to charges of insincerity and worse.
The traditionalists—namely, those who take Islamic discursive tradition as largely probative and authoritative—are a camp too large and internally diverse to adequately characterize through a single hermeneutic. They have often rejected the absolute imperative of equality and have reformulated it as the question of equity and justice, not equality. Some adopt a theology of antimodernity; others embrace obscurantism (that is, sanctification of tradition and unwillingness to systematically reevaluate it); and yet others, fideism.

Even though my own sympathies lie in the traditionalist camp, as I see in it seeds of the most compelling scriptural and moral reasoning, traditionalists have yet to offer a widely persuasive account of old and new structural injustices—let alone inequalities. Part of the reason, I suppose, is that the premodern tradition saw injustice as primarily an individual sin or its accumulated result. The social and political institutions of premodern Islam had been largely those of the agrarian empires that gradually evolved in the region over millennia, and medieval jurisprudence largely took them for granted. In contrast to the rapid structural ruptures introduced by modern revolutions, the development of large-scale associations of bureaucracy, professional military, and business corporation has introduced enormous forms of power. Modern injustices and inequalities imminent in such structures, therefore, cannot easily be arrested through premodern traditional ethics.

On the one hand, as Alasdair MacIntyre powerfully observes, modern secular ideologies have produced no epistemic or ethical consensus, making our ethical language as well as aspirations little more than hangovers from an earlier age. So while there are no compelling reasons for why we ought to seek equality or justice or virtue if there is no God, we continue to speak as if we ought to. This is why reinvigorating tradition may be the only viable alternative for ethical thinking and practices. On the other hand, traditionalism can be an escape from responsibility. To Muslims, this imposes the enormous challenge of sifting through competing strands of tradition as well as varying accounts of modernity, reconciling the will of God as revealed in scripture with that as revealed in history and contemporary moral dilemmas.

Looking Ahead

If inequality in itself is not an absolute injustice or one that is exorable, we must focus our attention to kinds of inequalities that are unjust and that are curable. The vast majority of gratuitous suffering that humans inflict on others is of this kind.

Among the kinds of injustices that can no longer be mitigated—yet they invite reflection on God’s infinite wisdom, even anticipation of miraculous redemption—is environmental degradation. Over the last two centuries, all the fruits of industrialization—the phenomenon that is singlehandedly responsible for the coming apocalypse—have been reaped by the Atlantic world. Yet its
most devastating consequences are being visited upon those poor who barely ever enjoyed a bite of that apple, who have been at the receiving end of colonialism and imperialism, and whose carbon footprint is invisible among the giants. Yet, if you look at the map, the areas with the least carbon footprint are also the first ones to be rendered uninhabitable by global warming and flooding and rising sea levels. These include nearly a billion people in low-lying coastal areas of Pakistan, Egypt, Indonesia, Bangladesh, India, and the like. God has put the fate of most densely populated areas of Muslim majorities in the hands of those who have consumed the oceans and scorched the earth. Yet they deny not only their guilt but that there has been a murder of God’s green earth.

I will now mention some of the ways in which deep and unjust inequalities have been tolerated or celebrated for “Islamic reasons,” and where Islamic critiques of inequality have either been unavailable or successfully suppressed. Rather than list any recommendations, I want to point out some tough paradoxes that suppress what I believe to be the true Islamic egalitarian spirit.

The Muslim moneyed class has welcomed neoliberalism, and the religious establishment has gladly embraced a Muslim version of the prosperity gospel. One pundit has even argued that the only way to keep Muslim youth from falling prey to terrorism is to turn them into capitalists. The imperative of even minimal justice and dignity is rudely confronted by the desire for survival or containment and, among the faithful, for power to preach and missionize. Let me offer a few examples.

Modern Turkey is a neoliberal miracle that has used pious wealth to bolster an Islamist democracy to push back against half a century of despotic secular chauvinism. Turkey has also taken a new role as the only power speaking for the masses of oppressed Muslims across the Muslim world. Even before the current wave of political suppression, leftist critics had pointed out the growing inequality in the country, along with the corruption of morals brought by new wealth. Thoughtful Muslims find themselves torn between Islamic objections to neoliberalism and the growing potential for inequality and the empowerment of a strong (if not the only Muslim) ally in places like Palestine, Myanmar, and elsewhere.

In a similar vein, the Saudi Arabian oil wealth has long been interpreted as a sign of divine favor for the “true monotheists,” the Wahhabis, where a culture of puritan piety long concealed the deep-seated and largely unjust inequalities between men and women, between tribals and nontribals, between various tribes and regions, and between Gulf citizens and the rest of the Muslims. Religious piety served effectively as cover for a culture that was becoming deeply bigoted by any interpretation of Islamic standards. My parents’ generation of Pakistani expatriates felt extremely loyal and grateful to the Saudis; they prayed for the kings for building such stupendous facilities around the two holy mosques. It is easy to demonize the illiberal Saudi policies, so I will avoid scoring cheap shots, but I cannot help mentioning that as a high school student in Saudi Arabia myself,
I often wondered why even the enlightened Saudi preachers rarely spoke of the problems of injustice against foreigners and other such elephants in the room. Finally, let us consider the somber fact that the most ardent opposition to social and political justice today comes from a group of clerics associated with the Muslim states in the Saudi-UAE-Egypt camp that has been formed against the 2011 Arab uprisings for dignity and justice, and from the very same ulama who wrote strongly worded condemnations of ISIS. “Justice,” “accountability,” and “rights” are dangerous words in much of the Middle East; their only advocate is the small alliance of countries led by Turkey.

These dilemmas call for a renewed and thorough reevaluation of Islamic tradition with an eye for justice as a first-order commitment and without losing sight of the complex hegemonic structures that function precisely by imposing their own definitions of justice.

Notes


2. Here and throughout this chapter, Qur’an quotations are according to Marmaduke Pickthall, The Meaning of the Glorious Qur’an: An Explanatory Translation (London: Knopf, 1930), modified slightly.

3. Al-Bukhari #3194, Muslim #2751. Translation mine.

4. This inequality of piety may have only a highly qualified social or political consequence, as the Qur’an emphasizes, “Do not claim your purity, only God knows who is pure” (Q. 53:32, translation mine). The Prophet’s teaching that “Piety is in the heart” makes a similar point. So does his own practice of behaving as an equal of his companions—as in the famous incident when he accidentally prodded a soldier while straightening the rows in a battle; when the soldier demanded retribution, the Prophet immediately offered it, and the soldier took the opportunity to kiss the Prophet’s abdomen for blessing. Those who have knowledge, similarly, are to be given mild preference in terms of social ordering but only inasmuch as it facilitates learning—one verse instructs believers to give room to senior companions “who have been given knowledge” so they may sit next to the Prophet and learn.

The real inequality pertains to the knowledge of God. The Qur’an is emphatic that the pious and the impious, those who know God and respond to God’s message and those who do not, those who see God’s signs and those who do not, are unequal; to neglect that inequality is most loathsome. Apart from this normative dichotomy, there is divinely ordained hierarchy: even the prophets are unequal in status, for God places some above others, even though all equally true (Q. 2:253).

5. Bukhari #304. Translation mine.

6. One recent study concludes, for instance, that the Hanafi jurisprudence settled on prohibiting or discouraging women from attending mosques against an explicit hadith that prohibited men from preventing women from mosques, and even when challenged, the


The Challenges of a World of Inequalities for Christians Today

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This essay highlights several aspects of the Christian tradition that are relevant in efforts to respond to the inequalities present in the world today. Although what is said here highlights questions that seem important for interreligious dialogue concerning equality, the essay deals exclusively with Christian approaches. It leaves the consideration of Islamic approaches to other authors. Because the author is Roman Catholic, the essay gives particular, though not exclusive, attention to approaches to equality by the Catholic community. These Catholic approaches, of course, have analogies in other Christian communities. What is said here is neither a full history nor a systematic overview of the Christian stance toward equality and inequality. Rather, the essay provides one possible starting point for Christian contributions to interfaith dialogue about responses to the inequalities of the world today.

The essay has five parts. First, it sketches some of the inequalities in today’s social life, particularly in the economic domain. Second, it presents some important theological and philosophical reasons why Christians affirm the basic equality of all persons. Third, it notes how the moral standard of justice can help specify when strict equality is required and when certain forms of inequality may be acceptable. Fourth, a brief discussion of Christian stances on the issues of slavery and the religious freedom of those who are not Christian suggests that Christians must acknowledge that their faith community has in the past supported forms of inequality that most people regard as morally objectionable today. Finally, it considers the issue of how a religious tradition can change and develop. Such development in fact enabled Christianity, especially Catholicism, to move from a stance of opposition to human rights and democracy to a position of leadership in the promotion of equal human rights and democracy today. This shift raises the question of what new developments in the stance of believers
toward contemporary inequalities may be required today. It is hoped that the dialogue of this conference can produce some helpful answers to that question.

Inequality Today

Several forms of inequality mark our world today. Among these are the inequalities in the distribution of income and wealth. We cannot, of course, measure human well-being simply in dollars, euros, dinars, or convertible marks. Income and wealth are means, not ends. If these means are pursued for their own sakes, this can distort the quest for higher values, such as greater care for one’s fellow humans, support for a sustainable environment, and the deepening of one’s relation to God. Nevertheless, money very often helps people obtain goods that are valuable in themselves, such as health, longevity, and education. A lack of income or wealth is today preventing many people from attaining the health or education they need to live with basic human dignity. Inequalities in the distribution of income or wealth are among the sources of severe human deprivation. Distorted distributions of these goods can impede the moral and spiritual growth of those it affects. It is useful, therefore, to begin our discussion of the inequalities that mar the world today with some facts about inequalities of income and wealth.

There has been an encouraging decline in the worldwide number of poor people over recent decades. Recent figures from the World Bank tell us that the number of extremely poor people—those living on less than $1.90 per day—declined from 1.89 billion people in 1990 to 735 million in 2015. This is a decline in extreme poverty from 35.9 percent of the world’s population in 1990 to 10 percent in 2015. This is surely genuine progress. It shows that attaining the United Nations’ Sustainable Development Goal of ending extreme poverty in our time is a realistic hope. Nevertheless, far too many people continue to face severe deprivation, and poverty has declined in some regions of the world much more than in others. Severe poverty is greatest today in sub-Saharan Africa, where 389 million people, or 41 percent of the African population, are poor. This means there are more severely poor people in sub-Saharan Africa than in all other regions of the world combined. This is a significant change from 1990, when half of the world’s poor were living in East Asia and the Pacific, while today only 9.3 percent of the global poor live in that region.

Inequality of income and wealth is one of the causes of continuing poverty. By conventional economic measurements, the inequality among all the people of the world, no matter where they live, has been declining. However, several forms of inequality are moving in opposite directions. The inequality between countries has been declining while the inequalities within most countries has been increasing, again by conventional measures. For example, in 2016 the top 10 percent of earners in Europe took home 37 percent of Europe’s total income; in China, 41 percent; in Russia, about 46 percent; in the United States and Canada, 47 percent;
in sub-Saharan Africa, Brazil, and India, around 55 percent. The Middle East is the world’s most unequal region, where the top 10 percent of earners gained 61 percent of national income.

Not all is well in the United States and Canada, however. Since 1980, inequality has been increasing rapidly in North America, especially in the United States. The United States and Western Europe are on different tracks. In 1980 in both regions, the people in the top 1 percent income bracket took home about 10 percent of the total income of their country. By 2016 the top 1 percent group in Western Europe increased its share only slightly, to 12 percent of the total, while in the United States the share of the top 1 percent shot up to 20 percent of the country’s total income. In the same time period the share of national income going to the bottom 50 percent in the United States declined from 20 to 13 percent. In addition, Nobel Prize–winning economist Angus Deaton concludes from recent data that an unexpectedly large number of people in the United States live in extreme poverty today. At the $1.90 per day used by the World Bank to measure extreme poverty, there are 3.2 million extremely poor persons in the United States and 3.3 million in all other high-income countries combined. If this measure of extreme poverty is adjusted to reflect needs for warm clothing and housing in the United States, Deaton estimates that there are 5.3 million extremely poor people in the United States. The severity of their poverty accounts for the fact that in the US regions of the Mississippi Delta and Appalachia, life expectancy is lower than in Bangladesh and Vietnam.

Whether one is poor is clearly influenced by race, class, and gender. Racial inequality has a significant impact on the well-being of Black Americans—both within the United States and in comparison to some parts of the developing world. Amartya Sen notes that Black Americans are notably poorer than white Americans. Black men live to about age sixty-seven while white men live to eighty-three; Black women live to age seventy-eight while their white sisters live to age ninety. Surprisingly, both Black men and women in the United States have shorter lives than do all people in India’s Kerala state, and Black men in the United States do not live as long as men in China.

Class inequalities are also important. In the United States today, class, as measured by the level of education attained, influences survival in a significant way. Economists Anne Case and Angus Deaton have shown that white US citizens with no more than secondary level education have declining lifespans and increased mortality due to drug and alcohol abuse and rising suicide rates. Many of these people have given up hope because of the barriers to well-being their lack of education creates. They end up living in ways that cause them to succumb to what Case and Deaton call “deaths of despair.”

Sen has also shown that gender inequalities have a significant influence on who is poor and even on who survives in the world today. He vividly illustrates the inequalities between men and women through his discussion of “missing women,” women who have perished because they are not treated equally to men.
Drawing on biologically determinable predictions of male and female birth rates and on ordinary survival rates in regions where gender equality seems present, Sen concludes that there are about 100 million fewer women alive today than would have been predicted in the absence of female disadvantages. These millions of women are “missing” chiefly because of the neglect of female nutrition and health, especially in childhood. In South and East Asia, many young girls receive less food and less health care than their brothers, so their survival rates are lower and their lives are shorter.8

It could be argued, of course, that the central concern in the economic sphere from a religious and ethical point of view should be the well-being of each person, not inequality as such. Such well-being requires meeting the basic needs, respecting the central freedoms, and protecting the supportive relationships, including their relation with God, that persons need to live with dignity. This might suggest that the issue of inequality is a distraction from the more basic task of overcoming poverty, oppression, isolation, or other conditions that make attaining more important values difficult. Indeed, it has occasionally been argued that concern with inequality is a sign that one has succumbed to the vice of envy.9 Some data on recent economic trends, however, suggest that this worry is quite misdirected. A growing body of research shows that reducing inequalities and overcoming poverty go hand in hand. Reducing inequalities in income and wealth contributes to economic growth, helps reduce poverty, and enables more people to attain stronger education and fuller human development.10 High inequality undermines sustained economic growth, which in turn makes it more difficult to reduce poverty. In addition, higher initial levels of inequality make it more difficult for poor people to share the benefits that economic growth can bring. A rising tide often does not raise all boats; the poor are frequently left out. Inequalities in income have particularly bad effects on the availability of goods such as education, health care, and social protection. Low levels of education, health care, and social protection are among the defining elements of poverty, and they prevent people from contributing to society in ways that both promote growth and enable people to share the benefits of growth. Thus, there can be a vicious circle in which inequality, poverty, and low growth are reinforcing phenomena.

These considerations lead us to consider the values that should shape our response to the inequalities of our world today. Religious traditions play important roles in shaping these values. We now turn to a consideration of the contributions Christianity can make to overcoming these inequalities.

Basic Equality in Christian Tradition

The Christian tradition is strongly supportive of the equality of all persons. The first book of the Bible, Genesis, affirms that “God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them” (Gen.
Inequality as a Challenge for Christianity

1: 27). Thus, every human being possesses a sacredness and dignity that requires respect and social support. There are, of course, differences in human capacities and different levels of merit and achievement among people. But no person lacks the sacredness of being created in the image and likeness of God. Human beings have a worth that deserves to be treated with the kind of reverence shown to that which is holy. In the thirteenth century, Thomas Aquinas expressed this biblical perspective in a way that has notable parallels to Immanuel Kant's eighteenth-century affirmation that persons are ends in themselves. Aquinas wrote that of all the creatures in the universe, only humans are "governed by divine providence for their own sakes." Creation in the image of God confers on each person what can be called basic equality—a worth or dignity that demands equal respect despite secondary differences in talents or levels of achievement. On the most basic or fundamental level, all persons are deserving of the respect and care required for them to live in accord with the dignity God has given them. Since God has given this worth to all persons equally, all persons are equal in this basic way, no matter what other differences there may be among them.

This basic equality is also supported by the Christian conviction that each person is called to an eternal destiny with God, a destiny that goes beyond historical and earthly realities and that has transcendent significance. The transcendent worth of persons as images of God is reinforced by this vocation to union with God, a union they can attain with the help of God's grace. Christianity also draws on the further belief that, despite failures and sin, God offers humans redemption and re-creation in Christ. The grace of redemption is offered to all because of God's love for them, and this love gives them a worth that transcends even the sacredness of being created in God's own image. It is not surprising, therefore, that the Second Vatican Council taught that a commitment to defend the equal human dignity of all persons flows from the gospel itself and from the heart of Christian faith.

These explicitly religious bases for Christian support for basic equality are reinforced by the way many branches of Christianity also support equality by drawing on more secular, philosophical reflection. The Catholic tradition, for example, holds that human dignity can be recognized by all human beings and makes claims on all, both Christian and non-Christian. This is in line with Catholicism's long-standing, natural law--based conviction that ethical responsibilities can be grasped by human reason and by philosophical reflection on what it is to be human. Thus, in addition to its explicitly theological grounding for human dignity, the Catholic tradition recognizes that there are secular warrants for its affirmation of human dignity and basic equality. For example, the Second Vatican Council (1962–65) not only invoked the theological theme of creation in the image of God as the basis of dignity but the Council also argued that this dignity can be seen in the transcendent power of the human mind. Through their intellects, human beings transcend the material universe. The mind's capacity for wisdom gives humans a worth that reflects the presence of God's wisdom within them.
For the Council, human dignity is also manifest in the capacity of the human conscience to search for moral truth and to adhere to it when it has been found. The Council called conscience the deepest core and sanctuary of a person. Thus, it affirmed that obedience to the dictates of conscience “is the very dignity of the human person.” The Council further held that dignity is evident in the excellence of human liberty. Freedom is “an exceptional sign of the divine image within the human person.” The dignity of freedom requires that persons act with free choice and that they seek to direct their freedom through knowledge of the true good. These three secular warrants for human dignity—the transcendence of the mind, the sacredness of conscience, and the excellence of liberty—are all manifestations of the likeness of human beings to God. At the same time, because the transcendent orientation of intellect, conscience, and liberty is rationally knowable through reflection on experience, appreciation of the reality of human dignity has a certain autonomy from the explicitly religious and doctrinal beliefs of Christianity. This opens the way for Christians to work together with those who are not Christian in the effort to promote greater respect for equal human dignity.

Although all persons are equal on this most basic level, it is clear that not all persons can or should be treated identically in all domains of activity. Equal regard does not require identical treatment, whether equality is considered from a Christian theological standpoint or from a secular philosophical point of view. Therefore, we need to clarify when basic equality requires treating people the same way and when it calls for treating them differently. The question of when equal treatment is required and when differential treatment is acceptable is frequently a matter of justice. It will therefore be helpful to consider what the norm of justice calls for in Christian response to today’s inequalities.

**Equality and Justice**

Christian thinkers have long recognized that there is a close relation between equality and the moral standard of justice. Thomas Aquinas, for example, observed that justice “denotes a kind of equality.” Following Aristotle, Aquinas distinguished two types of equality. The first he called arithmetic equality, in which the shares of the good being distributed are numerically or arithmetically equal. Arithmetic equality exists when a pie is divided into identical size pieces and each person at the table is given one slice. Aquinas does not hold that justice requires arithmetically equal shares for everyone in all areas of life. For example, neither Aquinas nor most others in the Christian tradition would argue that justice requires that everybody’s income should be of the same amount. However, many Christians do hold that this kind of strict arithmetic equality is required by justice in other spheres of life. For example, “one person, one vote” is a form of arithmetical equality that was strongly advocated by the Christians who resisted
apartheid in South Africa and who advocated that no one should be excluded from voting because of their race, ethnicity, or gender. Democratic societies hold that this kind of strict, numerical equality among all citizens in their voting is necessary for political participation to be just.

Aquinas, again following Aristotle, called a second type of equality proportional. As Aquinas put it, there should be a proportion between the thing being distributed and the person to whom it is distributed. In Aristotle’s words, “The ratio between the shares will be the same as that between the persons. If the persons are not equal the shares will not be equal.” A maxim that illustrates this kind of proportional equality calls for “equal pay for equal work.” The pay should correspond to the amount or difficulty of the labor undertaken. If one person works twice as many hours at the same job as another does, the first person’s pay should be double that of the second, thus maintaining an equality in the proportion between wage and work for the two. Similarly, one could maintain that a person’s share of some other good should be proportional to need. For example, Catholic social thought and a number of other ethical traditions hold that every person’s access to basic health care should be proportionate to that person’s need for such care when society has the resources to meet these needs. Still other goods, such as praise for one’s achievements or punishment for one’s crimes, should be proportionate to what one has actually done.

The key question, of course, is what standards of proportionality should determine what justice requires in a particular situation. Michael Walzer persuasively argues that the criterion of proportionality will be different for different kinds of goods. For a democracy, justice in the distribution of votes in the election of government officials should be governed by arithmetic equality. On the other hand, sentences handed down in criminal court should be proportioned to the severity of the crime committed, not to the size of the payment the defendant is willing to offer the judge as a bribe. Justice in the courtroom should not be for sale. Similarly, although the wages paid to a worker should be proportional to the hours worked and the contribution made by the work done, the justice of income and wages cannot be measured solely by the agreement the worker has made in accepting a certain wage. If a worker has no alternative but to accept the wage offered, the need for at least some income can lead to what Walzer has called an “exchange born of desperation.” Workers should not be driven by desperation to accept a wage so low that is does not even enable them to live with basic human dignity. Similarly, justice in the distribution of health care ought to be proportional to need, not to the ability to pay for care. Health care is not simply a commodity to be bought and sold in the market; it can be a matter of life or death.

The question of what standard of proportionality should be invoked in determining what is just thus becomes very important. The standard of proportionality that one relies on will determine whether one sees an inequality as either just or unjust in many domains.
Regrettable Inequalities in Christian Tradition

Despite strong support for the basic equality of all persons, Christian tradition has sometimes supported inequalities that many see as objectionable today. To illustrate the need for humility in our approach to what basic equality requires today, it will be useful to note several forms of inequality seen as legitimate in past periods of the Christian tradition that are recognized to be seriously unjust today. Seminal writings of John T. Noonan, a distinguished historian of Christian and especially Catholic moral thought, provide useful reminders of past Christian support for inequalities that Christians now see as moral deviations. Noonan indicates the nature of the problem by sketching how the Christian tradition has changed its moral teachings on several questions related to inequality. These include slavery and the denial of religious freedom to those who are not Christian.

On slavery Noonan is blunt: “Once upon a time, certainly as late as 1860, the church taught that it was no sin for a Catholic to own another human being.” The belief was that enslaved people should be treated humanely; manumission was regarded as good. However, from St. Paul through St. Augustine, Henry de Bracton, and Juan de Lugo down to the American bishop Francis Kenrick in 1841, many of the practices associated with chattel slavery went unchallenged by ecclesiastical authority. More recently, however, “all that has changed. . . . In the light of the teachings of modern popes and the Second Vatican Council on the dignity of the human person, it is morally unthinkable that one person be allowed to buy, sell, hypothecate, or lease another or dispose of that person’s children.”

It should be noted that Pope John Paul II reiterates this condemnation of slavery, citing the Second Vatican Council. The pope, however, made no mention of the eighteen centuries during which slavery was tolerated if not endorsed by the Church. The reality of slavery was seen as compatible with the creation of all in the image of God. This was because the equality called for was judged to be a proportional equality. People could have their freedom limited in proportion to certain qualities, such as being members of “lesser races” with lesser capacities for freedom, or having been legitimately defeated in war.

Equality of the proportional type was also invoked to justify limitations on religious freedom. One’s right to religious freedom was seen as proportional to the truth of one’s religious belief. In Noonan’s words, “Once upon a time, no later than the time of St. Augustine, it was considered virtuous for bishops to invoke imperial force to compel heretics to return to the Church.” For a period of more than 1,200 years, “the vast institutional apparatus of the Church was put at the service of detecting heretics, who, if they persevered in their heresy or relapsed into it, would be executed at the stake. Hand in glove, Church and State collaborated in the terror by which heretics were purged.” As late as 1832, for example, Pope Gregory XVI declared that the right to freedom of conscience is an “insanity” (dileramentum). Gradually, however, the religious wars in post-Reformation
Europe and, definitively, the persecution of Jews, Christians, and others by fascist and communist regimes in the twentieth century led to a shift in this teaching.

Dramatic change on this issue is evident if one juxtaposes Gregory XVI’s condemnation of freedom of conscience with the Second Vatican Council’s declaration that “the right to religious freedom has its foundation in the very dignity of the human person, as this dignity is known through the revealed word of God and by reason itself.” Indeed, Vatican II linked its support for human rights with the very core of Christian faith when it declared that “by virtue of the gospel committed to it, the Church proclaims the rights of the human person.” The basic equality of all persons, and the fact that freedom of belief is now seen as an essential dimension of human dignity, replaces the idea that freedom should be proportioned to the truth of one’s beliefs. Indeed, Pope John Paul II saw religious freedom as the “foundation” of all human rights. Regrettably, the fact that the Church had denied the fullness of the right to religious freedom through much of its history, in both solemn teaching and institutional practice, was passed over in silence by John Paul II.

Noonan’s account of these dramatic shifts provides a sobering perspective on some aspects of the Christian understanding of the meaning of equality that we cannot accept today. The historical Christian responses to slavery and religious freedom call us to reflect on whether further shifts in our approach to inequality may be called for today, both in Christianity and in other religious-moral traditions as well.

**Development of Tradition and Equality Today**

These dramatic shifts raise the question of the conditions and limits of legitimate change in a religious tradition, both within Christianity and perhaps in Islam also. Noonan addresses this issue with the help of ideas he draws from John Henry Newman’s influential *Essay on Development of Christian Doctrine*. For Newman, in a living tradition, the process of “tradition-ing” is not simply a matter of citing and applying classic texts and authorities from the past. These texts and authorities must certainly be central in any tradition that expects to remain intact. Thus, Newman proposed “conservative action upon its past” as one of the criteria that distinguish authentic developments of the Christian tradition from corruptions of it. But he held that a living tradition is also marked by its power to assimilate ideas originally discovered elsewhere. In Newman’s words, ideas about human existence “are not placed in a void, but in the crowded world, and make way for themselves by interpenetration, and develop by absorption.”

Hence, living traditions can learn what fidelity to their own identity requires not only by looking to texts and examples from the past but also by attending to new experiences and to the ideas they learn from encounter with those who are
different from themselves. It was in this way that Catholicism learned that its conviction that persons are created in God’s image requires the abolition of slavery and a new commitment to the religious freedom of all persons. New experiences and encounters with other traditions helped Catholic thinkers recognize that the biblical and doctrinal belief that all persons possess an equal dignity as images of God means they must be granted full equality in all their fundamental rights. These new experiences and encounters led to the recognition that the gospel itself implies that persons have equal rights to religious freedom and rights not to be discriminated against because of religion, race, nationality, ethnicity, or gender. Equal dignity before God was thus seen to require equal human rights in social, political, and economic life.

The examples of slavery and of past limits on religious freedom show that religious communities and their traditions can have negative effects on basic human equality. Vatican II was well aware of the ways that faith communities, including Catholicism, have engaged in behavior that has led some to see religion as a threat to human well-being, including the equality needed to sustain such well-being. The Council acknowledged that this behavior has sometimes led to a distorted picture of religion and indeed of God.34

Fortunately, public activity by religious communities also has very positive results in the advancement of equality. Religious leaders such as Mohandas Gandhi, Martin Luther King Jr., the Dalai Lama, Pope John Paul II, and Archbishop Desmond Tutu have played significant roles in the pursuit of peace, justice, and greater respect for human equality. Since we have taken note of some ways that Catholic Christianity has limited and threatened human equality in the past, it will be helpful to conclude by noting some ways that the Christian tradition has made important contributions to the equal dignity of all persons in recent years.

The Catholic community’s contributions to the protection of human rights and the promotion of democratic equality have been particularly notable. There is substantial evidence that the post-Vatican II Catholic Church has become one of the strongest worldwide forces for the protection of equal human dignity, human rights, and democracy.35 Catholicism has played an important role in the global advance of democracy since the Council concluded in 1965, beginning with Portugal and Spain in the late 1960s, in numerous countries in Latin America as well as the Philippines and South Korea in the 1970s and 1980s, and through the role played by the Church in Poland, which contributed to the collapse of the Soviet Union in the late 1980s and early 1990s. It can be argued, therefore, that since Vatican II the Roman Catholic Church has become one of the most effective global bodies contributing to the advancement of democracy. Between the years 1972 and 2009, seventy-eight countries around the world experienced substantial democratization. Monica Duffy Toft, Daniel Philpott, and Timothy Shah have carefully studied the role of religion in these democratic transitions. They conclude that the Catholic community played a role in advancing
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democracy in thirty-six of the seventy-eight countries that made substantial democratic advances during this period, and it was a leader in the democratization of twenty-two of these countries. Other religious communities also contributed to the advancement of democracy in some regions. Islam was a leader in support of democracy in India, Indonesia, and Kuwait; Hinduism was a leader in India; Orthodoxy, in Serbia; and Protestantism played a leading role in several African countries as well as in South Korea and Romania. Catholicism’s contribution, however, was particularly strong.

The move of Catholicism from its more traditional alignment with authoritarian modes of political organization to support for democratic equality was certainly dramatic, perhaps even revolutionary. There seems little doubt that the shift of the Catholic stance from a tendency to support authoritarian government to a quite unambiguous commitment to democracy can be attributed to the innovations of Second Vatican Council, and especially to Vatican II’s strong support for human rights, including the right to religious freedom. This shift was brought about by recognition of the dangers of authoritarian regimes such as Nazism and Stalinism in the several decades before the Council. These dangers threatened the Church’s own freedom, so the deep Catholic tradition of commitment to the freedom of the Church itself led the bishops at Vatican II to recognize that the right to religious freedom was in continuity with important dimensions of Catholic tradition. At the same time, the broad range of the violations of human dignity by Adolf Hitler and Joseph Stalin showed that more than the Church’s own well-being and freedom was a stake. The experience of the multiple kinds of abuse by authoritarian rule led Pope John XXIII, in his 1963 encyclical *Pacem in terris*, to strongly support the equal human rights for all persons, including the equal right to religious freedom. When Vatican II followed the lead of *Pacem in terris* in its endorsement of the full range of human rights articulated by the United Nations, the Council moved the Church to the forefront of the struggle for equal human rights and democratic equality.

We can conclude with a necessarily brief word on the Christian tradition’s stance on the economic implications of basic equality today. Once again, the Christian tradition does not hold that a flat arithmetic equality in income or wealth is required by the gospel. However, when inequalities lead to the severe deprivation of those at the bottom, both love of neighbor and the common humanity of all requires challenging such inequalities. The Second Vatican Council affirmed that God wants all people “to live together in one family” as brothers and sisters. Both Christian revelation and secular reason indicate that persons are interdependent and can survive and thrive only with one another’s assistance. Thus, we are called to a life that is shared with each another, not divided by inequalities that exclude many from the resources God has created for all. This interdependence is achieved in intimate communities such as families, in larger communities such as the nation, and globally in the human family as a whole. As St. Paul taught, “From one single stock [God] . . . created the whole human race so that they could occupy
the entire earth” (Acts 17:26). All men and women have a common origin; all have a common destiny; all are linked together in interdependence on the one earth. Thus, inequalities that create deep divisions in the human community, leaving many millions desperately poor, go against both God’s plan for humanity and the very meaning of our common humanity. Indeed, Pope Francis has called such inequalities “the root of social ills.” He argues that addressing these ills will require rejection of “the absolute autonomy of markets and financial speculation” and overcoming ”the structural causes of inequality.”

In light of these teachings and the long tradition on which they are based, the Christian community is challenged to work vigorously to overcome the economic inequalities that wound our world today. When such work is effective, it will both help overcome poverty and strengthen the common good that should be shared among all. On the other hand, when divisions deepen and inequalities grow, the weakest members of society suffer most. In fact, many among the very poor have their lives cut short. Pope Francis is very blunt in his description of the inequalities that mark the world today. In his words, “Just as the commandment ‘Thou shalt not kill’ sets a clear limit in order to safeguard the value of human life, today we also have to say ‘thou shalt not’ to an economy of exclusion and inequality. Such an economy kills.” Indeed, Pope Francis sees poverty as a sad result of inequalities that exclude far too many people from their rightful share in the goods God has created for the benefit of all.

In a similar way, the US Catholic Bishops see the exclusion of the poor as radically unjust. The US bishops have written that “basic justice demands the establishment of minimum levels of participation in the life of the human community for all persons” (emphasis theirs). Negatively put, the US bishops see “the ultimate injustice” in activities that lead to a person or group being “treated actively or abandoned passively as if they were nonmembers of the human race.” Inclusion based on equality, therefore, is a mark of justice in society, while exclusion due to inequality is an injustice that mars society deeply.

Conclusion

It is clear from this overview that the Christian tradition supports a strong commitment to the basic equality that requires respect for the dignity of all. It also calls for resistance to those forms of inequality that so divide the human community that some people are deprived of what is required for them to live with basic dignity. Basic human equality should override differences among persons when these differences prevent people from obtaining their most basic needs, restrict their freedoms without justification, or exclude them from essential social relationships. The Christian community has not always lived up to what the central thrust of its tradition requires, and the Christian tradition has not always affirmed what was later discovered to be essential to Christian
life. The Christian tradition on equality and inequality remains a living tradition today. We can expect, therefore, that the Christian tradition will continue to develop new insights into what equality requires. Let us hope that the dialogue among the participants in this conference will contribute to this development.

Notes


15. Vatican Council II, Gaudium et spes, no. 41.
17. On the relation between Christian love as equal regard and forms of love that call for different treatment, see Gene Outka, Agape: An Ethical Analysis (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1972), esp. chap. 1 and 8.
19. Aquinas, II–II, q. 61, arts. 1 and 2.
20. Aquinas, II–II, q. 58, art. 10.
23. Walzer, 100ff. The same position is affirmed in the tradition of Catholic social thought. See Pope Leo XIII’s 1891 encyclical, Rerum Novarum, no. 34, in O’Brien and Shannon, Catholic Social Thought, 31–32.
24. For a classic argument that not all goods ought to be for sale on the market, see Arthur M. Okun, Equality and Efficiency: The Big Tradeoff (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution, 1975). Drawing on Okun, Walzer develops this in greater depth in Spheres of Justice.
30. Vatican Council II, Gaudium et spes, no. 41.
31. Pope John Paul II, Veritatis splendor, encyclical issued August 6, 1993, no. 31, http://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_06081993_veritatis-splendor.html. There is, unfortunately, ambiguity in John Paul II’s discussion of religious freedom. Most of the time it is interpreted in a way that is compatible with Vatican II’s statement that this right “continues to exist even in those who do not live up to their obligation of seeking the truth and adhering to it”—that is, the right exists for believers and unbelievers alike. See Dignitatis humanae, no. 2. At other times he suggests that religious freedom means the right to hold the truth, as when the
pope says, “In a certain sense, the source and synthesis of these rights [all human rights] is religious freedom, understood as the right to live in the truth of one’s faith and in conformity with one’s transcendent dignity as a person.” Centesimus annus, no. 47. I think the ambiguity here is a studied one. I have discussed it in relation to the clear positions of Vatican II and of John Courtney Murray in my “Freedom and Truth: Religious Liberty as Immunity and Empowerment,” in John Courtney Murray and the Growth of Tradition, ed. J. Leon Hooper and Todd Whitmore (Kansas City, MO: Sheed and Ward, 1996), 129–48.

34. Vatican Council II, Gaudium et spes, no. 19.
41. Pope Francis, no. 53.
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As stated in the introduction to this volume, when the Building Bridges Seminar convenes, its goals are always to gain better understanding of each other’s tradition, to wrestle with theological complexities, and to improve the quality of our disagreements. The Seminar’s structure facilitates this by conducting most of its work in closed session and by insisting that, in reporting on seminar conversations, the “Chatham House Rule” be observed: remarks by participants are quoted or paraphrased without attribution. In 2018 achieving those goals was enabled by the city of Sarajevo itself: its warm welcome; its determination to make history lessons visible; and its coffee-shop culture’s provision of additional venues for conversation beyond our shared meals, our plenaries, and our small-group sessions. One newcomer to the Seminar said that “small group discussion was the highlight of my experience in Sarajevo,” speaking as well for many colleagues. “Our small-group time allowed the assigned Biblical and Quranic texts to ground our discussions closer to our religious experience and traditions.” For every convening, four discussion circles are established and remain consistent throughout the week. Each day is opened and closed with a robust plenary conversation. However, because the topics and concerns of plenary and small groups often provide fodder for discussions over meals, the line between formal and informal seminar exchanges may be blurry.

With all of this in mind, the purpose of this chapter is to convey a sense of the seventeenth seminar’s many conversations—the topics of which ranged from economic theories (including Islamic finance) to new forms of social enterprise (such as “impact investing”), theology of work, charity, scriptural mandates to care for widows and orphans, religious freedom, the village as the norm, the importance of listening to the oppressed and attending to their priorities, and more. We shall concentrate on six: hermeneutics, election, slavery, the
possibility of a common ethic, the metaphor of “the edge,” and the metaphor of “the bridge.”

**Hermeneutics**

While the overarching theme of Building Bridges 2018 was “a world of inequalities,” most participants felt the need to begin their small-group work by giving some attention to the nature and status of Christian and Muslim sacred texts—how believers understand, experience, struggle with, navigate, and reinterpret them. “Hermeneutics is essential to both Christians and Muslims,” one Christian noted. “Both communities need ‘hermeneutical protections.’ But what exactly are we protecting? Surely the Word of God needs no protecting!” Perhaps the Word of God does need protecting, mused another Christian. “Our focus on texts is a risky one. We are listeners for the Word. The Word cannot be limited to the text. The risk is to think that the Word of God has been heard once for all.” In a similar vein, one Muslim reminded his colleagues that “scripture will not translate itself into reality. Only we do that! But we must not do it on a whim. We need a hermeneutic that does not take us out of the conversation.” Toward the end of the seminar, one small group considered the extent to which philosophical principles rather than hermeneutical principles were brought to bear in order to reinterpret. Justice and equality are subjective, someone noted. What does it mean to treat people equally? How do we come up with a definition of equality that does not penalize some and privilege others? Are we in fact in a position to talk about a common vision? How might we solidify a common commitment? Thus the need for hermeneutics.

“For me as a Christian, it was illuminating to revisit familiar biblical texts in this context—to share my own interpretational struggles; to discuss the meaning of the Abrahamic blessing in Genesis 12 or the call to take care of ‘the poor and the alien’ in Leviticus 19,” reported a first-timer at the Building Bridges Seminar. He continued,

Wrestling with themes of exclusivity and inclusivity before and with Muslim scholars stretched my own thinking about what we read out of—and sometimes, into—our sacred texts, as well as what we bring to them. At various moments, intrareligious disagreements within our group showed us how complicated this practice of scripture reasoning is—and caused me to also reflect on my own intrareligious engagements with Christian colleagues. While as scholars we have the theological, historical, and exegetical tools to unpack the meaning of our scriptures, yet there’s still the reality of internal disagreements and external cultural (or even religiopolitical) pressures that may highjack how texts are used for dominating agendas.
The Building Bridges Seminar’s small-group method allows for a safe space for enriching dialogue. Yet, at times, we still had uncomfortable confrontations. Those moments helped us to take note of our own blind spots or surprised us with interpretations and insights that cause us to review—and even revise—our perspective on the theme of inequality.

“Texts and their authoritative readings are an inheritance that we have received after extensive processes of commission, omission, and the reading-lenses of commentary,” asserted one of the Muslim scholars:

Those texts and lenses were undoubtedly compiled and used as vehicles of social control, including through exclusive claims to universal creedal validity. Putting on my economist lens, I can agree with Adam Smith that a free market for religion provides for a greater variety of religious flavors catering to different preferences, and thus enhance religiosity (and per-chance morality). However, as his overtly less religious friend David Hume had already argued, religious competition erodes the credibility of each religious narrative for its adherents, and thus invites demonization of other narratives to retain and gain market share (and thus social control). Such is the checkered, but mostly dark, history of Christianity and Islam, which has shaped our texts and how we read them. Building horizontal-social bridges between the two faith communities thus requires either demolishing some vertical-temporal bridges with our traditions, or at least some ingenious reconstruction thereof.

Closely related to methods and principles of scriptural interpretation is the matter of authority—a topic to which all four small groups moved quickly during the first round of study. One group asked, who gets to define what is moral? Many of the initial presentations had offered binary choices. Left uncomfortable as a result, one group raised awareness of the need for a “third way.” Another group noted how often the consideration of one moral issue results in the need to bring in other moral issues. They offered “prudence” as a means of evaluation and prioritization. “Prudence is a moral strategy,” one Christian asserted. “It is not antithetical to morality. The term has been corrupted by modern politics; but classically, it was related to wisdom.”

From hermeneutics, apologetics is but a small step—and throughout the week, noted a Muslim scholar, “both Muslim and Christian apologetics were on full display.” This was particularly evident during close reading of scripture relating to the issue of gender inequality. In the end, he says, “we reached no conclusions, and failed to fortify any temporal bridges to tradition. Rather, we were merely content with having pointed out that some verses were non-discriminatory, and (at best) agreeing to disagree on how to read the other verses today.”
Election

Close reading of Genesis 12:1–4, in which God says to Abram, “I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you,” inspired two groups to talk at length about inequality’s relation to divine election. The term has various interpretations among Christians, one participant explained. “A supersessionist would say that the election of Abraham is superseded by Christ. Roman Catholics and mainline Protestants have explicitly rejected supersessionism, speaking rather of parallel elections—parallel covenants between God and humanity.” In the Bible, one Christian noted, divine election often turns expectation on its head. “In so many biblical examples, we see God choosing the unlikely.” In another group, discussion of the question of election was linked to the notion of being children of God and, from there, to matters of charity and service to humanity—but also to the need for balance between power and dependency.

A Muslim noted that prophets were “elected.” His group examined Islamic notions of election in light of Q. 2:47 (“Children of Israel, remember how I blessed you and favoured you over other people”) and Q. 28:5 (“But We wished to favour those who were oppressed in that land, to make them leaders, the ones to survive”). A Christian wondered about the place of such verses in the Muslim imagination regarding the land. Several Muslims noted that, whereas Christians may see election as unconditional, the Qur’an speaks of conditional election. As one explained, “election is not ‘determined’; rather, it is earned and can be lost.”

Slavery

For one of the Christians new to the Building Bridges Seminar, a striking feature of plenary and small-group discussions was the proximity of political interpretations. The recurring themes around slavery were a case in point. We were grappling with the historic (and contemporary) realities of unequal class and status versus core principles about the equality of all human beings in both theology and broad ethical understandings that underpin human rights. So, what does it all mean when gender inequalities are raw and immediate? What does it mean when labor standards and realities are not far removed from slavery? We were left perhaps more challenged to confront the issues around inequality that are, at the level of reality, one of the contemporary world’s most urgent and complex ethical and practical challenges.

Indeed, while each “inequality” generated lively discussions during the seminar, the topic of slavery was most provocative. “How did God allow it ever?” The question was raised repeatedly by Muslims and Christians alike. A Muslim asked,
“What are we to do with the fact that the Prophet did not condemn something we now consider reprehensible?” Here followed a complex intrareligious exchange.

In summarizing his experience of the conversations around the topic of slavery, one Muslim had this to say:

On the issue of social class, all participants were happy to express their antipathy to the existence of a permanent underclass, including in the extreme form of slavery. The usual mix of apologetics ensued (“but the traditions also encouraged freeing slaves,” “true freedom is of the spirit,” and the like). However, the most shocking moments in the seminar for me took the form of attempts to forge an apologetic narrative on slavery that compared some modern forms of economic subordination (including of salaried employees) to the historical abomination of human slavery. Pragmatic apologetics were perfectly familiar and understandable in this regard (slavery was a fact of life, production technologies were limited, and so on), suggesting that various degrees of tolerance or benign neglect for the institution of slavery by revered religious figures was understandable as a matter of economic necessity. What I found disturbing was the extension of apologetics discourse almost to the point of defending the historical institution, beyond the necessary historical evil characterization. For me, this was evidence of a vertical-temporal bridge that must be demolished: reverence for the texts and the past to the point of questioning our true moral stance as educated modern human beings.

Woven into the seminar’s examination of the topic of slavery was the consideration of its interconnection with other inequalities, such as race and class (or caste). Particular attention was given to the impact of gender on slavery—the additional layers of consequences when the slave is a woman. From these conversations emerged the theme of freedom. A Christian noted the centrality of that concept to the New Testament, where it is theologically complicated. How is freedom to be defined? A Muslim emphasized the need to be clearer about the kind of freedom we are talking about. That point was well received. “Freedom: Christian and Muslim Perspectives” would be the theme of Building Bridges 2019.

The Possibility of a Common Ethic

Stimulating consideration of the possibilities for and the obstacles to a common ethic of equality were complex questions such as, Do fundamental theological differences preclude a shared ethic? Does error have rights? Is one vision of human society as good as another? Might there be kinds of inequality that are acceptable, even necessary? If there be a common ethic, who gets to set its terms?
Who gets to say what interpretation is valid? One small group concluded that a common ethic is impossible without intrareligious work first. Furthermore, if we are to be truly helpful to the poor, we must hear their priorities. When we look from too far up, we miss our actual priority.

Another group determined that, rather than picking up on distinctions negatively, Christians and Muslims are trying to understand one another. “There is a common ethic,” one participant insisted; “but what can we do to prevent calamities? How can we show that a bridge for others exists, especially when public media try to destroy such bridges?” We may have to settle for ethical commitment, someone suggested.

A Christian noted that just before United Nations Climate Change Conference (Paris, December 2015) several forceful, faith-based statements were issued. Among them were Laudato si’ from the Vatican; Hindu Declaration on Climate Change from the Bhumi Project at the Oxford Centre for Hindu Studies was another, as was the international Islamic Declaration on Climate Change; and the pan-Buddhist statement, The Time to Act Is Now: A Buddhist Declaration on Climate Change.3 “These are concrete examples of convergence,” he asserted. This led to an in-depth consideration of “common ethic” versus “common commitment” versus convergence. “Coming up with a common ethic is too constric-
tive,” said one Muslim. “It would be better ‘to get to know one another’—as Q. 49:13 suggests; that is a better project. If convergence happens naturally, that would be interesting. The possibilities for it are many.”

In weighing the difference between cooperation and establishment of a common ethic, someone recalled points made by Azza Karam in her lecture, about the effectiveness of the influence of religious actors.4 “Religious actors can indeed shift attitudes,” she had stressed; however, she had also underscored the consequences of instrumentalization of faith-based engagement for state gain rather than common good: containing violent extremism becomes all the more difficult. Religion and freedom of belief may continue to be defended—but only in certain parts of the world; rather than enjoying mutual theological hospitality, we find ourselves assaulted by religious discord. With all of this in mind, a Christian asserted that the question of fundamental, theological shared ethic will start with a life-giving, life-affirmi-
ing God. “The hermeneutical principle of life-giving God means that to be on the side of the oppressed is to be on the side of God,” he said. A colleague concurred that that God is never pleased with oppression of the vulnerable, adding that scriptural laws may stand firm—but application of the same law will differ according to context.

In assessing cooperation versus competition, one group wondered, What leads to improvement? Another group discussed the spectrum between “giving up everything” (as suggested in the gospels) versus the consolidation of resources (as recommended in Acts) versus the notion of “balance” (advocated in Corinthians). Group members wondered how each of these approaches actually works out in life. In any case, one member summarized, “all three norms suggest a community
of radical interdependence." Indeed, a Muslim noted, "religion tries to mitigate
the bad effects of society’s inequalities. This has happened over and over again in
history. We need to consider how to understand our religions, not as revolutionary,
but as mitigating forces."

The Metaphor of the Edge

In her presentation on possibilities for and obstacles to a common ethic of equal-
ity,” Rosalee Velloso Ewell had made much of the phenomenon of “the edge
effect." The edge is life-giving, she had stressed; it enables a certain kind of life.
Aware of this, we need to learn to live at the edge and to practice patience at both
the micro and macro levels. Her point: the Building Bridges Seminar is a kind of
edge. He seminar colleagues latched on to this notion readily, proclaiming this
metaphor’s importance and developing it at length.

“Our focus on the ‘edge’ calls to mind the definition and role of translators,”
one woman noted. “Especially in a war zone, their occupation puts them at grave
risk—as they have no choice but to straddle boundaries. Immigrants and refu-
gees provide another example of living on the edge.” Others responded with calls
for understanding—both of the individual situation and what is happening at a
global scale. One of the Muslims cataloged “a few hard facts” so that the seminar
might hear “what lived inequality might sound like.”

Later another Muslim acknowledged that the seminar had thus “poignantly
been made aware of the plenitude of problems—and we’re supposed to do some-
thing about it.” Missing from the discussion, he suggested, had been a consid-
eration of “the economy of moral outrage, the need to prioritize what we are enraged
about. We can’t just be outraged at everything!” Furthermore, he pointed out,
“inequalities contradict each other. Fixing one will create another.” Moreover,
“there is a hierarchy of inequalities.” Indeed, another had observed how “many
inequalities are our norms.” Yet, a Christian insisted, “We are not talking about a
zero-sum game. There are indeed levels of suffering; but there is also a super-
abundant God. No individual can address all of these inequalities adequately, but
a community might.”

“In the Next World,” another Christian noted, “we are all equal. So, why is
This World so unequal? We need to be termites and moles undermining corrupt
societal structures, creating just, inclusive communities in their place.” A Mus-
lim concurred, suggesting that, as an alternative to the status quo, we make more
effort to take care of those close to us—that we “reconstitute relationships at the
local level.” Relatedly, a Christian urged, “Let’s disentangle ‘markets’ from ‘cap-
itlism.’ Small and mid-sized enterprises work quite well. Practice often works
better than theory. Small and mid-sized enterprises ask: How do I build a fantas-
tic product? How do I build a happy community? In the current system, alterna-
tives already exist.”
For one Muslim, this discussion of the “edge” called to mind historian Richard Bulliet’s assertion that the history of Islam is best considered from the edge rather than from the center “because, in truth, the edge ultimately creates the center.” A Christian found the notion of the “edge” appealing because the edge “is a creative place.” From the vantage points both of economics and theological hospitality, “What we think at the macro level can’t happen unless there is change at the micro level,” he stressed. “The edge phenomenon is part of both Christianity and Islam,” he continued. Both traditions began on the edge and became corrupted as they moved away from it. “Both traditions have been instrumentalized to preserve the status quo.” He wondered, “What would it take for us to learn together? To be creative together in the edge?”

The Metaphor of the Bridge

Unsurprisingly, given the Seminar’s name—plus the fact that the Miljacka River, which divides the city of Sarajevo, is spanned multiple times—the “bridge” metaphor was a recurrent theme during the 2018 discussions. Speaking to this reality of multiple bridges, one Muslim pointed out that dilemmas may indeed have more than two sides: “Part of the function of a bridge is to cross over liminal space. Therefore, we build a bridge from edge to center.” During the closing plenary, it was suggested that bridge-builders stand, of necessity, at the edges of their respective traditions—but with nonetheless solid footings therein, building bridges toward one another. One Christian put it this way:

Ivo Andric, a Nobel Prize winner from Bosnia and Herzegovina, wrote that bridges are worthy of our attention, because they show the place where humankind encountered an obstacle and did not stop before it, but overcame and bridged it the way humankind could, according to understanding, taste, and circumstances. All bridges, according to Andric, must overcome and bridge something: disorder, death, or the lack of meaning. For everything is a transition, he continued, a bridge whose ends fade away into the infinity and toward which all earthly bridges are nothing but mere playthings, pale symbols. And all our hopes are on the other side. The very essence of this Seminar is found in this basic human, academic, religious desire to overcome the obstacle encountered.

Perhaps, another Christian suggested, we are standing together in front of an obstacle, ready to go beyond it together.

The agenda for this seminar had been especially ambitious, given the number of topics explored: inequality on the basis of gender, race, nationality/ethnicity, religious identity, caste/class, or slavery as well as discrepancies of income and wealth. Yet, even after many hours of close reading and well-focused discussion,
one of the Christian participants was moved to call for further interrogation of the very concepts of equality and inequality. “We must go back to core principles,” she asserted. In evaluating his own experience of the seminar, one Muslim noted,

The common characteristic of all participants was expertise in bridge-building in a particular sense: everyone at the workshop seemed to be committed in their own thought and personal conduct to bridging the gulf between their religious traditions and modern lives. The focus on reading together English translations of some selected canonical texts (Biblical and Qur’anic) provided multiple opportunities to learn from others’ experiences in building vertical-time bridges in their own traditions and personal lives, and, in the process, to give birth to friendships that fortify and extend existing horizontal-social bridges between the two communities of faith.

Notes

1. This essay is informed primarily by notes taken throughout the convening by members of the Building Bridges Seminar staff and assisting scribes. The lengthy quotations are excerpts from postseminar reflection pieces submitted by several attendees during the summer of 2018. In keeping with our observance of the Chatham Rule, these contributors are not named; however, we are most grateful for their carefully considered input.
2. It has become the custom of the Seminar’s leadership to spend part of the closing plenary brainstorming possible themes for the next convening. The actual choice of theme is announced some months later.
4. See Karam’s essay in this volume.
5. See Ewell’s essay in this volume.
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</table>
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