

5-2016

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Recommended Citation

Meadows, Julie (2016) "A Quaker Approach to Interreligious Dialogue: Michael Birkel's Qur'an in Conversation," *Quaker Religious Thought*: Vol. 126 , Article 5.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.georgefox.edu/qrt/vol126/iss1/5>

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A QUAKER APPROACH TO INTERRELIGIOUS DIALOGUE: MICHAEL BIRKEL'S *QUR'AN IN CONVERSATION*¹

JULIE MEADOWS

In September the Upstate of South Carolina, where I live, made the national news with its vehement resistance to plans for resettling refugees in the area. The idea of bringing Muslims to Spartanburg provoked anger mixed with fear. “The United States,” one woman said, is “a Judeo-Christian nation...We are not a Muslim nation, and those two things cannot coexist.” It’s a line I’m hearing a lot, and one spoken with great conviction: Islam and Christianity cannot coexist. Is this certainty coming from the news, or from the pulpits? Fearful of violence, convinced that there is no way to peacefully coexist, the people in this (Christian) community came together to make clear that (Muslim) strangers are not welcome here. Ironically, or perhaps tragically, the refugees being resettled in Spartanburg in the face of this angry opposition are Christians.²

I am a social ethicist, not a scholar of interfaith or interreligious dialogue. But I am convinced that our attempts to improve interreligious relations involve crucial and urgent issues of justice. Michael Birkel’s response to the constant misrepresentation of Muslims in the American context, *Qur’an in Conversation*, is an inspired and inspiring act of peacemaking. The book directly opposes common misconceptions—Muslims are Middle Eastern, Muslims are violent, Muslims cannot become American and don’t want to—by introducing the reader to a diverse group of North American Islamic scholars and religious leaders. Directly aimed at challenging injustice, this book is a clear and powerful example of Quaker witness.

Qur’an in Conversation carefully and quite intentionally models a recognizably Quaker approach to interreligious dialogue, enacting a set of claims in its structure and content. The book, like the contributions of its scholars, is “informative...and also beautiful”(2). Michael Birkel’s choice to live out, rather than explicate, his own commitment to interfaith dialogue makes this book compelling, and

unusual. Birkel chooses not to speak in his own voice about Islam—he is “not qualified” to do so, he says. Modeling a humility that respects the mysteries of a faith that is not his own, Birkel asks his readers to do likewise. Members of the dominant Christian tradition are not invited to play ‘host’ to Muslims. In a purposeful reversal of the frequently used metaphor of hospitality, Birkel positions himself as a “guest in the house of another’s faith,” and invites his readers to see what that might be like.

For Christian readers who may approach their own sacred text with less thoughtfulness and care than the contributors to this book, one impact of this experience is to be gently but powerfully called to account. Or, as Birkel more gently puts it, “To witness faithful Muslims engage their Scripture with energy, self-honesty, intellectual vitality, and love can inspire others to do the same with their foundational texts.” (235) Birkel seeks to reassure us that, as guests, we are safe: we can appreciate another faith without losing our own. (3) Birkel’s ability to see listening as an appropriate action to take in the face of injustice has allowed him to elicit a diverse and beautiful group of comments on passages of the Qur’an. As a humble “guest in the house” of the Muslim faith in America, he witnesses to a reality too often overshadowed by sensationalist news stories—the thoughtful voices of male and female Muslim scholars in North America.

Astonishing in its breadth, clarity, and power, *Qur’an in Conversation* is a beautiful book. It manages to convey the hope and the serious hard work and the beauty of the life of faith. The speakers talk with ease about the beauty of the text and the spiritual and mystical dimensions of their relationships to it. The book communicates, profoundly and remarkably, a sense of the sacredness of the Qur’an. *Qur’an in Conversation* is also a *strange* book—strange, in particular, for academia, which cannot be said to encourage humility. It’s strange for an academic text in the field of religion, in which we are trained to mask our deep concerns and passions with the language of “interests,” and in which intellectual work and faith commitments are still widely considered to be at odds with each other, from both sides of the trenches of this supposed deep divide. These strange things: the author as listening presence, and the interfaith conversation as *both* intellectually serious and explicitly personal, are important and intentional components of this book. But this book is not just beautiful and strange. As I read its closing chapters I saw that this is also a *fierce* book. In its rich diversity of voices, it calls insistently for a faith enacted in justice-creating work in the world.

As Birkel notes in his introduction, the contributions of the 25 scholars who comprise the book are “informative...and also beautiful. They bear witness to how their Scripture comes to life even as it gives life to believers” (2). While there is a long tradition of suspicion of beauty in academia (and at times, also in Quakerism) this book seems to argue that beauty is a wholly appropriate dimension of the study of sacred texts—and also that the appreciation of beauty might be an appropriate, and maybe even central, part of appreciating a faith other than one’s own. Many things are beautiful here, from specific passages in the Qur’an to the deep love that Muslims feel for Muhammad (234). The ‘text’ here is never presented as independent of its relationship to faithful readers of it. We encounter it always as sacred, and always as lived, and as influencing how these scholars live.

The book populates the imagination of the reader with North American Muslim scholars. To say that there are Muslims here “already” is very different from being invited to come to know some of them, at least a little bit. For a book to be able to do this is no small feat. It is only possible because the scholars discuss not only their chosen texts but also the role of those texts in their lives. They share with us their appreciation for the Qur’an’s beauty. They share with us their love for it. They open themselves up not only as scholars and religious leaders but as human beings and practitioners of their faith. This is testimony of an intimate kind; it indicates both vulnerability and courage. It is no small gift; we are guests in a house of humbling generosity.

The very nature of the conversation here helps to suggest that certain kinds of responses are more appropriate than others. While religious texts can easily invite endless assertions and counter-assertions and critiques of assertions regarding their proper interpretation, a kind of competition for what Parker Palmer describes as the knowledge of mastery, Birkel’s conversation partners invite us into that other kind of knowledge, the knowledge of love.³ As this book makes evident, this knowledge is no less serious, no less intellectual. It calls us to respond to it with resonances from our own deep commitments.

Finally, the book enacts a specific kind of learning about a text. It reminds me of my own experience in seminary of studying the Bible. While learning Greek was fascinating (and learning historical critical methods was slightly less so), what lingers with me are the conversations I had with fellow students, when they explained how a specific passage was meaningful to them in their lives. I can’t think about my friend

Elizabeth, for example, without remembering the Biblical story of the meeting of Elizabeth and Mary, and the baby leaping in the womb, and how this image captured my friend's understanding of and deep calling to the work of teaching. This is the difference between reading a text and reading one's life through it, something that early Quakers practiced to an extensive degree.

This is a beautiful book, and I have tried to show that its beauty is wholly serious and crucial to its aims. It might prompt us to inquire, for example, what's possible in books about sacred texts that exclude considerations of beauty, or how those of us who teach might look for ways to include beauty as a dimension of religion. The more I read this book, the more I was also intrigued by just what a strange book it is. The first strange thing I noticed, as someone who knows Michael, was the complete absence of the word "Quaker." Michael is a "well-known Western scholar" according to the book jacket, but his specific interests are unspecified. Even more intriguing was Michael's choice to present the conversations as monologues, with only brief introductions in his own voice. His presence in the book is a gentle one, almost, but not quite, hidden. The contrast between it and the standard scholarly monograph is quite glaring. This book is daring in its rebelliousness against the norms of the discipline, which tend to enforce the notion that conversation is a lesser form of intellectual pursuit than is individual performance.

And yet this is not an edited volume either, not simply a collection of essays that respond to a common prompt. It's clear in reading this book that it's deeply influenced by the presence of its somewhat elusive author. There is an intimacy and a sense of connection in the chapters that make evident that these are written not to some abstract reader but to a very present and real "someone." At times the authors note that they are making new discoveries as they articulate their thoughts to Michael (74). It doesn't seem accidental that the resonances and echoes Birkel elicits are ones that are so carefully cultivated in his own life and work. When Birkel writes that Fareeha Khan "chose to speak not from her expertise in Islamic law but rather from her profoundly personal experience of spiritual practice," (109) I could not help but suspect that she might not have made this choice if her conversation partner had been less clearly also a person with a profoundly personal experience of spiritual practice. We do not speak so readily of the things that are "dear to our hearts" (110) with just anyone; as academics we are trained largely not to speak of the things

that are dear to our hearts at all. Soon afterward, when Birkel writes that “the room itself resonated with the power of the Qur’an” (116) during his conversation with Imam Hassan Al-Qazwini, it’s clear that Birkel, too, is engaging these conversations from the heart. And like Michael, the conversations within the book are deeply ethical, filled with hope and generosity.

Birkel’s invitation to us as readers to think of ourselves as guests in the house of another faith is in keeping with this approach. While choices not to claim authority about Islam are framed by Birkel in terms of his habitual modesty, I think that they are also careful negotiations of the dynamics of insider/outsider dialogue. Birkel makes a few gentle, but deeply serious, suggestions about what might be required of us as guests. To really appreciate another faith, he intimates, requires a deep grounding in one’s own, a preparation that makes possible an experience of “resonances” and “echoes” between the host faith and one’s own experiences (14). This idea of “resonances” is an admirably delicate one: it is not a kind of claiming as one’s own or making the same, but an awakening of one’s own experience in response to the shared experience of another. The book performs this kind of hospitality, an invitation not only to learn about another faith but to feel the ways that it resonates in one’s own experience. Of course, resonance is a good metaphor for another reason: to detect resonances, one has to be attentive, to listen carefully. This is a very different model of dialogue from one that imagines a kind of one-for-one exchange between people of differing faiths. Both humility and deep listening are crucial components of being a guest in the house of another faith.

Birkel and his group of Muslim scholars have been generous indeed. But this is more than a book that offers us gifts; it’s a book that we need. It’s a book that aims to do justice. In the midst of all its beauty and gentleness and strangeness, it is a fierce book. In response to the much-reported increasing polarization of American politics, there has been a rash of calls for conversation, sometimes claiming that our lack of dialogue with people whose opinions differ from our own is a more serious problem than the substance of any of our disagreements. The real problem, according to this point of view, is not that we disagree on issues, but that we have ceased to be willing to discuss these issues civilly with one another. At times these calls can seem to elevate conversation so much that it threatens to become an end in itself. But in a world where people are suffering, and where

we have some ability to respond to that suffering, conversation can't become our final aim.

Qur'an in Conversation is not a conversation for its own sake; it's not an elevation of process over content. It is not a neutral engagement. Its promptings are gentle, but insistent. It calls us to be able to answer the question, "What is the purpose of your life" (149). It testifies to a loving God who is deeply invested in our well-being, a God who is "ardently anxious for you" (112). And it declares, in multiple forms and with multiple voices, male and female, young and old, the "essential unity of the life of piety and the external commitment to justice" (206). It calls us, as guests in the house of this faith, to remember our own faith's call to "responsibility, justice, and kindness" (230). In its witness, *Qur'an in Conversation* does justice to missed and misrepresented people of faith, and calls us, its readers, to our own beautiful, strange, and fierce acts of faithfulness.

ENDNOTES

1. This is an edited version of a talk presented to a joint session of the Interreligious and Interfaith Studies Group and the Quaker Studies Group at the American Academy of Religion Annual Meeting (AAR), Atlanta, GA, November 22, 2015
2. Richard Fausset, "Refugee Crisis in Syria Raises Fears in South Carolina," NYT, Sept. 25, 2015
3. Parker Palmer, *To Know as We Are Known: Education as a Spiritual Journey*. (San Francisco, Harper & Row, 1993), 8.