

# Muslims, Christians and the Common Good

Colleagues,

Prolegomena.

1. Marie's heart surgery yesterday, MitraClip repair of the mitral valve, has changed that valve's regurgitation—so the Meister of the surgical team told us in the post-op conference room—from “severe” to “trace.” Family theology has moved to doxology.
2. Karl Boehmke sends me this: “Ed, If you find a free spot on Thursday Theology pages, please consider including a PS to the effect that my book on Forgiveness, graciously reviewed by Marie several weeks ago [ThTh 614. March 18], is now available at website [www.ForgivenessPossible.com](http://www.ForgivenessPossible.com).”
3. I did not succeed in getting a review of A Daytstar Reader (mentioned last week) ready for today. Instead, I pass on another review just finished on assignment from the editor of MISSIOLOGY, the journal of the American Society of Missiology. It won't appear there until much later this year. As I've sometimes done in the past, I also send it off to you. Here it is.

Peace and Joy!

Ed Schroeder

---

**Building a Better Bridge: Muslims, Christians, and the Common Good.**

**Edited by Michael Ipgrave**  
**Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press**  
**2008. ix, 190 pp., paper. \$24.95**  
**Reviewed by Edward H. Schroeder.**

The iconic photo on the cover of this paperback is the whole story. The Old Bridge in Mostar (Bosnia-Herzegovina), built 5 centuries ago under orders from Suleiman the Magnificent, once crossed the Neretva River uniting the Muslim side with the Christian side of that city. To be more precise: Bosniac Muslims, Serbian Orthodox and Croatian Roman Catholics. The Mostar bridge was blown away in the ethnic (ethnic-cleansing?) wars of the 1990s. The bridge has been restored. Can the people on both sides ever be one again? No, not in religion—no one is proposing that—but in pursuit of the common good, of living together in a civil society? And not just in Mostar, nor just the former Yugoslavia, but around the planet? That is the question.

Sixteen theologians—from both ends of the “bridge”—speak to that search for the common good in societies where Muslims and Christians have no choice but to live together.

“Building a Better Bridge” is a record of the 4th Building Bridges seminar held in Sarajevo (2005) as a part of the annual symposium on Muslim-Christian relations cosponsored by Georgetown University (Washington, DC) and the Archbishop of Canterbury. This volume presents the texts of the public lectures with regional presentations on issues of citizenship, religious believing and belonging, and the relationship between government and religion, both from the current challenges in Bosnia-Herzegovina and from three other volatile contexts: Britain, Malaysia, and West Africa.

Not only is bridging the Christian-Muslim gap itself frightfully

complex, but on either side of the bridge there are denominational differences—both among Muslims and among Christians—that have not yet been bridged ever since they arose. For example, the common good spelled out in John Langan’s crisp chapter on Roman Catholic theology seems quite different from the common good in the Orthodox view articulated by Bogdan Lubartić. When these two are placed alongside Tariq Ramadan’s “Islamic View of the Collective,” one’s first response could almost be: we’re dealing here with three (!) different religions. But . . . but . . . at this seminar the speakers were not only making their statements, but also talking with each other. Would that we had the script of those conversations when they were away from the mike.

The Sarajevo Seminar addressed three topics:

1. Believers and Citizens. “How do we approach the civic sphere as believers in particular faiths and as citizens of mixed societies; what makes us who we are; and how do our religious and secular allegiances relate to one another?”
2. Seeking the Common Good. “What is it in our religions that motivates us to seek the common good; how do we accommodate our commitment to divinely mandated values with acknowledgment of human disagreement; and how can this be expressed in models of governance and justice?”
3. Caring Together for the World We Share. “How are we to respond to the current disorder of our world in light of the vision of divine purpose that we have received; what resources do our traditions have to equip us in our economic and ecological crisis; and how can we pass on to our endangered and contested planet the prophetic challenge of peace and justice that our scriptures convey?”

Editor Michael Ipgrave (Archdeacon of Southwark, Church of England) provides superb introductions to each of the three major sections and some of his own reflections. "These are questions whose importance is only exceeded by their immensity and complexity; the record that [this book provides] does not, of course, claim to provide definitive answers, but it does include insights and reflections that should be of benefit to Christians, Muslims, and everyone committed to seeking the common good for our societies" (p.2).

Most poignant for me, yes, right onto kerygmatic, were the final two chapters, one from a Christian voice and the other from a Muslim one.

Ellen Davis (Duke University) in "Speaking to the Heart" (153-160) offers a high-volume plea for us to care for the earth. Drawing on Brueggemann's work with Isaiah and Jeremiah—canonical for both Muslims and Christians—she seeks to open our eyes and ears to the "devastating loss" enveloping planet earth. To do so she reprises those prophets in seeking to restore the "tragic imagination" to counter the epidemic that "we are not astonished at what we hear and see" happening to the earth right in front of our face.

"The prophets aim to restore 'the tragic imagination,' which, paradoxically, is essential to the health and ultimately the survival of a community, precisely because it is the faculty whereby we reckon with devastating loss." And then shifting to Wendell Berry's voice, it is "the tragic imagination that, through communal form or ceremony, permits great loss to be recognized, suffered, and borne, and that makes possible some sort of consolation and renewal . . . the return of the beloved community, or to the possibility of one" (158).

Aref Ali Nayed's "Islam and the Environment" (161-167) begins

with a jeremiad. "One of the most devastating factors that has led to the lack of a theology of the environment in Islam is that we have adopted the modern way of looking at things as mere things." "Once you assume the 'thingliness' of the environment, you have already lost the necessary presupposition: you cannot produce a Muslim theology of the environment if you look at things as mere things." And then he proceeds to harvest the Qur'an for an antidote. It lies in two key Arabic terms, "ayat" and "rahma." "Ayat" is the sign-quality of things, their character as pointers, signaling the Allah-connection of all that exists. "Rahma" calls us to see the entire world "manifesting divine compassion," to acknowledge the gift-quality of every thing in creation.

These two Ur-Islamic pillars for a theology of creation have faded away. "When we only see things in themselves as things, we are basically looking at the door as a wall; we are not opening the door to go farther." He concludes: "If we can recover the sense of the environment as a set of 'ayat,' . . . marvelous activities of God springing from his 'rahma,' then we can rehabilitate an Islamic theology that will help us out of the crisis we face." (167)

Question: Isn't Nayed already at the middle of the reconstructed Mostar bridge with his Qur'anic theology of creation—possibly already more than half-way over to the Christian side? Is a Christian theology of creation any less grounded in these two very fundamental convictions about the "things" of this world? They are both signals from God and gifts of God.

Even though Lutherans weren't present in these conversations—there are some up in Slovenia, but not in Sarajevo, so far as I know—they could have joined in at this very point with two axioms from Luther's own theology of creation: 1) The entire created world is "larvae dei," i.e.,

“masks” behind which is God. 2) “Alles ist Gabe.” Everything that exists is a gift.

With two congruent theologies of creation as “common good” on the Mostar bridge, what might not all come from that? Where hope is hard to find on the worldwide Muslim-Christian screen, Nayed—and Davis too—are talking the same language—maybe even saying the same thing! That is indeed hopeful. If/when we can add to that conversation Luther’s theology of God’s work of the left hand, and of God’s assigning every human being—Muslim or Christian or whatever—to be working for, and on, the common good, that could only make conversation even more hopeful.