

What is Required of a Religious Leader Today?

David F. Ford

***Regius Professor of Divinity, University of Cambridge
Director, Cambridge Inter-Faith Programme***

Lecture at the Institute of Shariah Studies

Muscat, Oman

On Monday 20th April 2009

Resource contributed by the Cambridge Inter-Faith Programme interfaith.cam.ac.uk

It is an honour and a delight to be with you here today in the Institute of Shariah Studies, and to be able to lecture in the Sultan Qaboos Grand Mosque this evening. I deeply appreciate the invitation of HE Shaykh Abdullah bin Mohammed Al Salmi, Minister of Endowments and Religious Affairs, to visit Oman for the first time. I am most grateful to all those who have helped to organise the visit, in particular Michael Bos, whose work here has been so important for Christian-Muslim relations, and Dr. Abdulrahman Al Salmi, editor of the journal *Tolerance*. I also bring a message from His Grace the Archbishop of Canterbury, Dr Rowan Williams. When he was with us in Cambridge three days ago he was delighted to hear of this visit and asked me to give you his warm greetings.

Many Types of Religious Leaders

I understand that many of you who take a degree here will go on to become religious leaders, mostly in this country, but that some of you will go into a range of other careers. I see my title question, 'What is Required of a Religious Leader Today?' applying to both groups. Responsibility for religious leadership is of course carried by those who are called imams, or who have publicly recognised positions as teachers or religious leaders; but that responsibility is also carried by those whose callings are less officially religious. I myself am what Christians call a 'lay person' – I am an ordinary Anglican, a member of the Church of England (I was born into the Irish Anglican Church, called the Church of Ireland). I am not a priest or bishop, and have no official role in the church organisation, but through being a theologian and involved in the church through teaching, contributions to meetings and deliberations at various levels, and service on boards of theological colleges I could be seen as having a leadership role. Yet, just as important, I also see that role being exercised as a professor in the University of Cambridge, together with people of all faiths and none. That can be at least as complicated and theologically demanding as being a church leader.

Likewise, I see Christians, Muslims and other people of faith in God who take responsibility in any sphere of life – business, politics, law, civil service, non-governmental organisations, and so on – as serving God there and so in a sense exercising religious leadership. In other words, religious leadership can be exercised very visibly when focussed explicitly through

the official bodies of a religious community; but it can also be exercised in less obvious ways, distributed across the whole of a society in every walk of life. Both types are important.

Offering a Gift

What can I, as a Christian, say to you who study here and prepare, as Muslims, to take on responsibilities of many sorts? There is a wealth of wisdom that you can learn here within your tradition, and you and your teachers know that far better than I. So I will not try to comment on that, but will take it for granted. My approach will be to think as a Christian about my own understanding of religious leadership today and offer it to you as a gift in order to open a conversation. My approach, of course, has also been influenced by Muslims and others – one of the privileges of being Director of the Cambridge Inter-Faith Programme is that I have had many opportunities to engage with those of other faiths. After this lecture, and perhaps also at another time during my time here in Oman, and even possibly over many years to come, we can have that conversation in order to learn from each other, discussing how our approaches relate to each other, and perhaps even having a respectful dispute. My hope is not so much that we will agree on everything but that we will bring a blessing to each other.

Leadership and Blessing

Blessing is where I want to begin. The more I have thought about leadership the more important blessing has become.

(i) Abraham and Blessing

In the book of Genesis in the Bible there is the story of Abraham (at that time called Abram) being called by God:

‘Now the Lord said to Abram, “Go from your country and your father’s house to the land that I will show you. I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you I will curse; and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.”’ (Genesis 12:1-3)

This is an amazing promise of blessing for ‘all the families of the earth’, and it opens up the horizon of the global common good within which we are called to think and act. Abraham, like many leaders, faces a fundamental challenge to his faith: will he trust in God’s promise and leave his home for ever? For Abraham himself there is the promise that God will bless him and that he himself will be a blessing. This is what I wish to concentrate on for a little while: the leader as one who receives blessing in order to be a blessing and bless others.

(ii) Receiving Blessing

How does a leader receive blessing? Utterly central to this is the relationship with God. The life of faith might be seen as a dynamic, God-centred ecology of blessing. God is the source of all blessing, and then it circulates in all directions: God blesses us and all creation, we bless God, we bless each other, creation blesses God, we bless creation.¹ All this blessing is not just something general and indefinite: each blessing is particular, and each of the Abrahamic traditions is full of specific blessings for particular occasions and uses. To become a leader is to be blessed in particular ways, and each of our traditions has developed procedures through which we try to discern whether particular people are or are not blessed in ways that suit them to bear the responsibilities of leadership. (Perhaps part of our conversation might be about the different modes of discernment through which our traditions choose leaders – this has been one of the most controversial matters among Christians of different churches.)

God is the ultimate source of these blessings, but mostly they come through other people. The journey towards religious leadership usually leads through key relationships, often with parents, friends, spiritual guides and teachers. I wonder what your journeys have been like. I have been deeply impressed by the importance of successions of teachers in Islam – I remember hearing the Grand Mufti of Egypt, Dr Ali Gomaa, talking about the ‘chains’ of which he is a part (which, he emphasised, include several women scholars in earlier periods). One way of looking at a chain is as a lineage of blessings being passed on across the generations. I am sure most of you could tell of people in such chains who have been formative for you and have been a blessing to you. This is what often gives the deepest motivation for taking on religious responsibilities: gratitude for the blessings received from others, kindling the desire in your turn to be a blessing. I would go so far as to say that one requirement of being a religious leader is to be part of such a person-to-person lineage – we cannot be formed only through the internet, through books or even through being taught in classes. In my own church an essential part of every priest’s training is being apprenticed to an older priest in a parish or other setting.

(iii) *Learning to Bless Wisely*

But when we look at those who have been a blessing to us and to others, especially those who have most fully communicated God and God’s purposes through their lives as well as their words, we also see how costly and demanding it can be to be a leader. This evening in the Grand Mosque I will speak of the elements required for Christian theology to be wise and creative today, and all that will be said then is relevant to what is required for Christian leadership. I take it for granted that Christian leaders need to be formed in those four aspects of good theology, and I will be interested to hear how far you think that these coincide with the essential areas in which Muslim leaders should be formed.

So, first, Christian leaders should aim to be wise interpreters of scripture and tradition, understanding how to draw on the treasures of the past. Jesus in the Gospel of Matthew says: ‘Therefore every scribe who has been trained for the kingdom of heaven is like the master of a household who brings out of his treasure what is new and what is old.’ (Matthew 13:52)

Second, therefore, they should also constantly engage in the present with God in prayer and with what is new in our changing world. The past is not to be simply repeated, and God is drawing people towards a future that is very different from the present. So every day there are fresh discernments, judgements and decisions to be made about what in the contemporary world is to be rejected, what is to be welcomed, and what is to be criticised and transformed.

Third, these discernments, judgements and decisions stretch all of a leader’s capacities, and require creative and intelligent thinking, grounded in appreciation of the best available understanding.

Fourth, the leader has to be able to communicate effectively, and so far as possible to listen attentively and to speak and write well.

Those four requirements are not of a sort that can ever be fully met – a leader can always communicate better, think more wisely and creatively, engage more deeply with God and with our world, and understand scripture and tradition more adequately. So more important than having actually achieved them is the dedicated, passionate desire for them, which I name the desire for wisdom. That is the foundation for the most important thing of all: the leader being a blessing in each situation.

I think that 'wise blessing' is a better way to talk about Christian leadership than more secular talk of the exercise of power and authority (from the sphere of politics), or effectiveness in organising and managing (from the sphere of business), both of which are common in some Christian circles today. Indeed, I am not completely happy with the concept of leadership itself, which is probably best understood as a form of responsible and accountable service, inseparable from being a good follower.² 'Wise blessing' does not deny the importance of power, authority or effectiveness, but emphasises their distinctively theological character.

(iv) *Ministry of Blessing*

A great many of the activities of a Christian leader involve blessing. In my own tradition this includes blessing the bread and wine in the central celebration variously called the Eucharist, Mass, Holy Communion or Lord's Supper, and giving blessings after confession of sins and at baptisms, ordinations, weddings, funerals and other occasions. But what I have in mind is far broader than that and not only specific to Christianity. When a community is deliberating over a course of action and the leaders agree to it, this can best be seen as them giving their blessing to it. That is different from having thought it up or being a main supporter of it or being responsible for carrying it out. It is rather the crucial matter of seeking, as the community's recognised representatives, to discern before God a wise course for the community in this matter. Likewise, the withholding of blessing rejects or delays following a particular course. The same is true when individuals seek guidance. Most Christian leaders do not have power to enforce spiritual, ethical or political advice. Their power is better seen as the power to grant or withhold their blessing. It is perhaps in the matter of whether to support particular people, groups and causes in the wider society that these blessings arouse most concern – one thinks of the great importance attached in American elections to the backing of religious leaders.

A great deal in our world, therefore, can be affected by the blessing given by those with religious responsibility. This is evident in shaping their own communities, in guiding individuals, and in their contribution to the wider society. It is also worth remembering what I called the second type of religious leader - the one who is not the public face of his or her community but whose responsibility is exercised in government, business, education or some other sphere of society. For all of them their vocations as leaders might be summed up as centring on questions of whether to bless, who to bless, what to bless, when to bless, how to bless and what content a blessing should have.

So whether their blessings are wise or not is of great importance. Their activity in blessing might at its best be seen as a performance combining all four of the elements of wise and creative theology: it should ring true with wise interpretation of scripture and tradition; it should spring from deep engagement with God and discerning involvement with the contemporary world; it should be informed by wise and imaginative thinking; and it should be communicated as effectively and creatively as possible. Undergirding all this is dedication to the blessing, hallowing and glorifying of God. The leading, embracing petition of the main Christian prayer taught by Jesus is 'Hallowed be your Name'.³

Wise and Creative Inter-Faith Leadership

So, the performance of wise blessing in each situation is what is to be desired and pursued wholeheartedly. I now want to concentrate on a particular situation, the one in which we now are at this moment: Christian-Muslim encounter. When I speak about this in the Grand Mosque yesterday I will sum up the main guidelines for Christian-Muslim relations in a nine-point Muscat Manifesto that states:

Let us aim to:

Love of God and Neighbour

- Love God and each other, and have compassion for all God's creation

A Triple Dynamic

- Go deeper into our own faith, into each other's, and into commitment to the common good

Sources of Wisdom

- Seek wisdom through our own scripture, history and theology, through each other's, and through engagement with the arts, sciences, philosophy, and other sources of wisdom

Engaging with the Modern World

- Beware of assimilating to modernity and beware of rejecting it; seek to heal and transform it

Partnerships of Difference

- Form personal relationships, groups, networks and organisations dedicated to inter-faith conversation, collaboration and education at all levels, from international to local

Creative Communication

- Encourage the best communicators, artists, writers and teachers to spread the message of love of God and neighbour, drawing on the richest sources

An Ecology across Generations

- Cultivate a long-term vision of a habitable world, created and sustained by God for the good of all

Signs of Hope

- Create signs of hope within and between our faiths, inspired by the letter *A Common Word between Us and You* and the responses to it⁴

God and God's Purposes

- Do all this for the sake of God and God's good purposes

I want to develop further a few of those points as they relate especially to your calling as Muslim leaders. The question I will try to answer is: what are the three things I would most strongly recommend that you do in the coming years for Christian-Muslim relations? I look forward to discussing with you soon whether you think these are acceptable suggestions.

Before I name the three, let me return to an event a little later in the story of Abraham.

'King Melchizedek of Salem brought out bread and wine; he was priest of God Most High. He blessed him and said:

"Blessed be Abram by God Most High,

Maker of heaven and earth;

And blessed be God Most High,

Who has delivered your enemies into your hand!" (Genesis 14:18-20)

This shows Abraham receiving hospitality and a blessing from a religious leader of another tradition who acknowledges the Creator God. At the heart of Abrahamic inter-faith relations

is the giving and receiving of blessings, always in the context of blessing the God who is the source of all blessings. Three of these blessings are friendships across traditions, reading our scriptures together, and building inter-faith organisations together.

(i) *Friendship*

I begin with the most personal matter. In studying the Christian ecumenical movement of the twentieth century (of which I will speak further this evening in the Grand Mosque) it is striking how many of the most fruitful developments had at their centre friendships that crossed traditions. I find the same is true in the best inter-faith engagements. It is possible for a faithful Muslim and a faithful Christian to have deep differences over such matters as the naming of God, the divinity of Jesus Christ, the authority of the Bible and the Qur'an, the significance of the Prophet Mohammed, the nature of salvation, and much else, and also to have very different practices regarding, for example, prayer, fasting, holy times, marriage, money, law, and education, yet to be good friends who understand, respect, trust and love each other. Such friendships are an immense blessing, and I am deeply grateful for those Muslim friends who have been given to me.

A friendship is not something that one can plan to make at will, but one can pray for it to be given and be open to it happening. I suggest that each of you pray to be a blessing to those of other faiths and to receive blessings from them, and also that, if it is God's will, you may find one or two friends among those with whom you have exchanged blessings.

(ii) *Scripture*

One of the greatest blessings we have been given is our scriptures, so it is not surprising that one of the main ways we are able to bless each other is by sharing them. In the Grand Mosque yesterday I spoke of how for the past fifteen years the practice of Scriptural Reasoning, which gathers Muslims, Christians and Jews (or sometimes just two of those traditions) to read and discuss their scriptures, has been the single most important element in my inter-faith experience and that of an increasing number of people in various spheres of life.⁵ It is really a matter of common sense that if we want to understand each other more deeply we should study our scriptures together. This has become increasingly recognised in inter-faith engagements, and it has many advantages. Above all, it allows for long term collegiality among the participants, since conversation need never come to an end: the scriptures are endlessly abundant in meaning and there is always a sense that one is just beginning to open up their riches. I have not found anything else that serves so well to sustain ongoing, faith-centred engagement among the Abrahamic traditions.

One of the most important inspirations for joint study of scripture between Muslims and Christians is, as I will discuss this evening, the Muslim letter *A Common Word Between Us and You*.⁶ In particular the statement, signed by the Grand Mufti of Egypt and the Archbishop of Canterbury, that emerged from the October 2008 conference on *A Common Word* in Cambridge University and Lambeth Palace, acts as a blessing on the practice when it says: 'One of the most moving elements of our encounter has been the opportunity to study together passages from our scriptures. We have felt ourselves to have been together before God and this has given us each a greater appreciation for the richness of the other's heritage as well as an awareness of the potential value in being joined by Jewish believers in a journey of mutual discovery and attentiveness to the texts we hold sacred. We wish to repeat the experience of a shared study of scriptural texts as one of the ways in which we can come, concretely, to develop our understanding of how the other understands and lives their own faith. We commend this experience to others.'

I suggest that each of you resolve to engage in shared study of scriptures, as the Grand Mufti

and the Archbishop recommend, if the opportunity arises, and that you also bear this in mind as something you might initiate in the future.

If you do, you may find, as I did, that it is also the way into inter-faith friendships.

(iii) *Organisation*

If one of the great challenges of our century is in relations between Muslims and Christians, then we can be sure that it will not be met successfully without inter-faith organisations. I direct one such organisation in the sphere of education and public understanding, the Cambridge Inter-Faith Programme,⁷ and it is gratifying to see a blossoming of other organisations in these spheres.⁸ Just in the past three weeks I was present in London when a new body was formed, provisionally called the C-1 World Dialogue, co-chaired by the Grand Mufti of Egypt, Dr Ali Gomaa, and the Bishop of London, Rt. Revd Richard Chartres, which it is hoped will be the main coordinator of the Common Word process, involving leaders from the areas of religion, the academy, business, politics, non-governmental organisations, and media. When I spoke with Dr Gomaa and Bishop Chartres about this visit to Oman they both asked that I bring you their warm greetings.

I suggest that each of you consider how you can lend your support and leadership abilities to inter-faith organisations and networks, and if possible be willing to join in founding new ones.

Dangers

Friendships, sharing scriptures and building organisations are among the good possibilities in inter-faith relations, just as blessing wisely is at the heart of good leadership. Yet ‘the corruption of the best is the worst’, and there can be misunderstanding, disappointment and even betrayal in friendships; the scriptures can be used in terrible and violent ways; and organisations can misuse power and fail in their aims. Leadership itself is one of the most dangerous and corruptible roles. It is worth considering how as religious leaders you can guard against the main threats, which I suspect are similar whether you are Muslim or Christian. Here are just three of many possible suggestions that might help in beginning to develop appropriate vigilance regarding leadership.

- Each of our scriptures and traditions has many resources helpful in showing what can go wrong in leadership. Study these, and know the history of the bad examples of leadership as well as the good. In my own Anglican tradition we especially value biographies of leaders by authors who are willing to be critical as well as appreciative.

- Face your fears. Our enemies most often win, not by defeating us, but by dominating our lives with fears. Fear can lead people into horrific attitudes and actions, and above all is hostile to compassion and love. At a recent meeting of the Brookings’ 6th U.S. – Muslim World Forum in Doha, Qatar, Dr Aref Ali Nayed represented the signatories of *A Common Word* in replying to the US CentCom Commander General David Petraeus who expounded the features of a “network of networks” that constituted a “Security Architecture” for the Middle East region. Dr Nayed responded with a proposal for a ‘Compassion Architecture’ aiming to be ‘constructive, mending, and healing’ and not dominated by fear and considerations of security. His basic principle is: ‘Compassion is the condition of possibility of true security.’⁹ You will often be tempted to act more from fear than from compassion, and learning to resist that temptation will transform your leadership. Above all, trust in the blessing of God gives confidence that God will have the last word. Note in the Abraham story that God says: ‘The one who curses you I will curse’ (Genesis 12:3), not: ‘The one who curses you, you are to curse in return.’

· Watch the way you hold your faith. Both the Bible and the Qur'an are full of questioning, the opening up of possibilities, and passionate desires, as well as many assertions and commands. Yet many current forms of both our faiths are dominated by clear, definite and certain assertions and commands that do not allow for the questioning, the range of possibilities, and the overwhelming desire for God and God's future. One of the dangers of being a religious leader is that you come to think you know too much and therefore can have unquestioning certainty. Humility about the limits of our knowledge is built into both our faiths. Judging all our assertions, guidance and commands is the infinite wisdom of God, who has set us in a history where there is much mystery, much that is unknown, and much that is desired in trust and hope without being clear and certain.

Most Important of All

In conclusion, there is the most important matter of all, as has just been affirmed in the final guideline: Do all this for the sake of God and God's good purposes.

I recently spent more than ten years writing a book called 'Christian Wisdom: Desiring God and Learning in Love',¹⁰ and at the end of it I was, of course, much more aware of the narrow limits of my own understanding and wisdom. But studying what the scriptures and Christian thinkers have to teach about wisdom has given me some of their pearls, and I want to conclude with two of them.

The first is the relation of wisdom to cries. In the Bible wisdom cries out to us to make her our leading desire, and in the midst our world's cries of suffering and protest, gratitude and joy, God's wisdom calls us to a discernment of cries and to responding to them with love and compassion in God's name.

And God's name is the supreme pearl. We do it all for the sake of God and God's purposes of wise love and compassion. God is the incomparable reality, whose name is to be hallowed, glorified, praised, adored and loved. As Christians and Muslims we do this very differently, and the deepest and most difficult theological questions are opened up by our worship of God. But at the same time there is opened up the possibility of our deepest engagement with each other for the sake of the God of Abraham. As Melchizedek, out of his very different tradition, said to Abraham: 'Blessed be God Most High!' (Genesis 14:20)¹¹

[1] In the Bible this is especially clear in the book of Psalms.

[2] Jesus said: 'Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all' (Mark 9:35).

[3] The whole prayer according to Matthew's Gospel reads: 'Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name. Your kingdom come. Your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread. And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors. And do not bring us to the time of trial, but rescue us from the evil one' (Matthew 6:9-13).

[4] For more on this document, see note 6.

[5] For further information about Scriptural Reasoning, see the website of the Society for Scriptural Reasoning, <http://etext.lib.virginia.edu/journals/jsrforum/>). For some of the best print resources on Scriptural Reasoning, see Chapter 8 in David F. Ford, *Christian Wisdom. Desiring God and Learning in Love* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), pp. 273-303; David F. Ford and C.C. Pecknold, *The Promise of Scriptural Reasoning* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2006); Peter Ochs, 'Reading Scripture Together in Sight of Our Open Doors' in *The Princeton Seminary Bulletin* 26, no. 1, new series (2005), pp. 36-47; and

Steven Kepnes and Basit Bilal Koshul (eds.), *Studying the 'Other', Understanding the 'Self': Scripture, Reason and the Contemporary Islam-West Encounter* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2007).

[6] The letter *A Common Word between Us and You* was sent in October 2007 by 138 Muslim scholars and leaders to all the Christian churches. I believe it to be the most important inter-faith statement in the past forty years, since the Second Vatican Council. The letter has one big wise idea, the centrality of love and compassion to both Christian and Muslim traditions, and it uses this as a starting point to engage with Christians and with the current global situation. Most striking of all, it draws on the Qur'an and the Bible together. The text of the letter, along with many of the numerous Christian responses to *A Common Word*, can be found at the official website, www.acommonword.com.

[7] The Cambridge Inter-Faith Programme (www.cip.divinity.cam.ac.uk) promotes research and teaching which leads to deeper mutual understanding between the three Abrahamic traditions. It has four principal aims: 1) studying actual encounters between the three traditions, in the past and today; 2) bringing together the world's best current and future scholars working on materials in those traditions, in a way that fosters collaboration; 3) translating the core texts of those traditions for the use of their members in study; and 4) promoting engagement, dialogue and collaboration between the three faiths, and public understanding of them. In the area of public understanding and education CIP's major initiative is the Cambridge Abraham Project, in collaboration with the Coexist Foundation and others, aiming to build in London a major resource relating the three faiths.

[8] Among these are Yale University's Center for Faith and Culture, the Prince Alwaleed Center for Muslim-Christian Understanding at Georgetown University, Al Azhar University, the Tabah Foundation in Abu Dhabi, the Tony Blair Faith Foundation, the Coexist Foundation and Kalam Research and Media.

[9] The relevant passage in his address is: 'The training we truly need is training in compassionate dialogue between all of us, and training in compassionate living amongst each other. The tools and equipment we truly need are tools and equipment of compassionate communication and understanding. The information-sharing we truly need is the honest sharing of, and witnessing to, our loftiest ideals and values, and the cooperative shedding of dark stereotypes and caricatures of others. The infra-structures we truly need to build are infrastructures of public and shared spaces in which we respectfully appreciate and cherish each other just as we stand firmly rooted in our respective traditions.'

The Obama presidency does NOT need more of the same "Security Architecture" inherited from the destructive, divisive, and corrosive years of the Bush presidencies. Rather, it urgently needs a fresh "Compassion Architecture" that is constructive, mending, and healing. Such a Compassion Architecture can only be communal and cooperative, and all religious, spiritual, and philosophical communities, Muslims included, must contribute to it.

Compassion Architecture is built on the theological fact that true 'security' can only come from God's own compassion towards humanity and the compassion of humans towards humans. Compassion is the condition of possibility of true security.'

[10] David F. Ford, *Christian Wisdom: Desiring God and Learning in Love* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

[11] And what about the rest of that verse: '... who has delivered your enemies into your hand'? We need to be aware also of the potentially violent, dangerous aspects of our scriptures, which need to be interpreted always in line with the love and compassion of God. The trust is that God's main way of delivering our enemies into our hands is through making them friends, or at least through bringing about reconciliation, and that this, rather than revenge and violence, is certainly the way we are to follow.

© CAMBRIDGE INTER-FAITH PROGRAMME

Republished with permission

The Matheson Trust