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# PRAYER

## Christian and Muslim Perspectives

A record of the tenth Building Bridges Seminar  
Convened by the Archbishop of Canterbury  
Georgetown University School of Foreign Service in Qatar  
May 17–19, 2011

*Edited by* DAVID MARSHALL  
and LUCINDA MOSHER

Georgetown University Press  
Washington, DC

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Building Bridges Seminar (10th : 2011 : Qatar)

Prayer : Christian and Muslim perspectives : a record of the tenth Building Bridges Seminar, convened by the Archbishop of Canterbury, Georgetown University School of Foreign Service in Qatar 17–19 May 2011 / edited by David Marshall and Lucinda Mosher.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

SBN 978-1-58901-677-4 (pbk. : alk. paper)

1. Islam—Relations—Christianity—Congresses. 2. Christianity and other religions—Islam—Congresses. 3. Prayer—Christianity—Congresses. 4. Prayer—Islam—Congresses. I. Marshall, David. II. Mosher, Lucinda. III. Title. BP172.B834 2011 248.3'2—dc23

2012049969

© This book is printed on acid-free paper meeting the requirements of the American National Standard for Permanence in Paper for Printed Library Materials.

15 14 13 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 First printing

Printed in the United States of America

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churches or pray privately from books, there are impatient outbursts of thanksgiving or supplication, there is quiet reflection and even casual "chat." There seems to be no "formula" for prayer except that every case is a seeking of the face of God.

I was an adult when I came to faith. I was agnostic until, in my early twenties, God touched my heart. I did not immediately become a Christian, but one thing was evident—now I was speaking with God. This is what Augustine says (to God) after his full embrace of Christianity—"now I was speaking to you." This was possible because Saint Augustine now believed God had spoken and was speaking to him—not in heard words of successive syllables from the sky but in his heart, by other people (his mother), and above all through scripture. Foundational to my understanding of the practice of prayer (prayer life) is that I am speaking to God because God has spoken to me (and to all of us if we listen).

Prayer like this is not always planned but wells up from my belief that God is not far away from each one of us but very, very close. For this reason I find it helpful to speak of a "prayer life" for it is an orientation of being and a set of practices, some of them physical.

It is important to *know* we are close to God, even if at times we do not *feel* this. Some people are aware of the presence of God almost all the time when they pray, others very rarely, but God's presence does not depend on our emotions. We can know God is with us, faithfully, always and everywhere. We can pray when we are distracted and distressed. We should not be afraid to ask God for anything.

Many Catholics and Anglicans use books of morning and evening prayer for private devotions. These bring together formal prayers, scripture reading (determined by a shared calendar of readings), psalms, and times for personal reflection, praise, and entreaty. You can say these prayers with a group or by yourself, but whenever you do you are also joining the prayers of Christians around the world.

I learned an important lesson about prayer while my husband's elderly aunt was living with us—she died in our home last year at the age of ninety-nine and a half. A lifelong and devout Anglican, in her last years with eyesight and energy failing, she very much appreciated being read the Evening Prayer. Long after she had ceased to be able to speak in a normal way, whether from weakness or other infirmity, she would join in as we reached the Lord's Prayer and other familiar prayers in the service. Her body was habituated to the prayer. Even with mind failing, her life of prayer continued—her body and spirit could still pray.

### Michael Welker

Doxology, lament, petition, and thanksgiving are the basic elements of prayer. Doxology—the glorification of God—however, does not necessarily come in a jubilant and joyful tone. In prayer, doxology can, so to speak, remain latent, silent, whereas even the strongest lament in prayer includes—or rather is surrounded by—a doxology that can come in the form of counterfactual trust or desperate hope. Thus, prayer covers all the way, from faithful trust to desperate cries.

In prayer we encounter the living God in all his mystery and richness, God our Creator who wants to sustain, to rescue, to save, to elevate, and to ennoble us in our creaturely frailty, helplessness, lostness, misery, and futility. We encounter God, our redeemer, who wants to reveal to us not only his own love and glory but also our dignity, kindness, and strength. In prayer we open our hearts and souls, reach out and call not only for God but also for our own full existence and being. In prayer we get the chance to become familiar with God and with our own depths. We distinguish mere wishes and unrealistic expectations from our true life keeping up with God, following God's pace, as Dietrich Bonhoeffer put it.

In prayer we connect utter modesty and the utmost hope. The Lord's Prayer offers us a model of a prayer truly directed to God—not to a heaven of dreams and illusions. This prayer is doxological from beginning to end: "hallowed be thy name, thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven . . . thine is the kingdom, and the power and the glory." In a modest way it prays for our basic sustenance: "Give us today our daily bread." It is aware of the abyss of our endangerment, our self-endangerment, and our needs: "forgive us our trespasses . . . do not lead us into temptation, deliver us from evil." Finally, it also acknowledges our own power and dignity: to love and to forgive one another. On this level we encounter God face to face: "forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us." On this level we can also challenge God in the midst of creaturely suffering and in our inability to understand his ways.

### Rowan Williams

The idea that the Christian praying is somehow entering into an activity already going on has for many years been crucial to me in thinking about prayer. The New Testament speaks about the Spirit giving us the kind of words, the kind of voice, that Jesus uses in his relation with God the Father.