Muslims in the Performative Mode: A Reflection on Muslim-Christian Dialogue

Marcia Hermansen
Loyola University
Chicago, Illinois

As an American Muslim, I am the embodiment of dialogue, yet at the same time, my identity can complicate such discussion. In the American context, the role of a Euro-American convert to Islam may be confusing — am I a failure or a success of such interactions? As a liberal Muslim, I don't look Muslim enough to fulfill the requirements of certain dialogue partners, who expect their female interlocutor to cover her head and to have an Arabic-sounding name, or be visibly "Other" or different in some striking way. Theologically, I am a pluralist, and some exclusivists find me far less interesting as a dialogue partner because of this.

As an observer rather than a participant, I have far more often witnessed encounters initiated by Muslims. As a presenter, however, I have probably participated in a greater number of dialogues initiated by American or Christian institutions. The lines sometimes become blurred because I may be invited to participate as a scholar of Islam or as a practicing Muslim, or both.

With increased exposure to one another, the complexity of our dialogue increases. Some imagine the dialogue partner to be some sort of essential Muslim or Christian; the reality is that within each tradition there are liberals and conservatives, Democrats and Republicans, fundamentalists and post-modernists, and even mystics, not to mention other factors that impact discussion, such as gender, race, social location and so on.

I believe that the contexts in which we as individuals operate often determine those we will encounter in our everyday "dialogues of life." For example, the assumption of the academic environment in which I normally operate is secular humanism. Dialogue was *not* occurring in Religious Studies

at San Diego State when I taught there and even the Theology Department at Loyola University Chicago is *not* a seminary. Dialogue on college campuses is the purview of ministry centers and seminaries, not the academic mission of the universities themselves.

There is an impression among many Muslims that American universities, especially the prestigious ones, have tried to avoid teaching Islam in a way that treats the faith dimension, or even other aspects of the religious tradition, as central. The devout Muslims are in the medical and engineering schools, not in the humanities and social science faculties. To be fair, most Muslim students are still channeled by their families and intellectual formation at home and by their communities into the professions, rather than the interpretive disciplines. As I already indicated, the expectation that Religious Studies and even Theology departments have as a mission the inculcation of faith or the promotion of dialogue is also misplaced. This misconception is unfortunately not only found among the religious public, but often in other areas of the university where the study of religion is misunderstood as being a confessional or even apologetic project.

I recall participating in a panel before an audience of university chaplains, Jewish and Christian (but not Muslim) that featured professors from the "Abrahamic" traditions who were to reflect on negotiating our religious identities in the classroom. I explained that aside from the academic objectives of the course, I want my Muslim students in my "Islam" class to develop mature faith and the ability to reflect critically. The chaplains didn't much like my response. They idealize the palpable piety of many Muslim students and want them to remain "unspoiled," because on their campuses, it's the Muslim students who remain "believers," who pray, who believe in Adam and Eve, etc.

At my university, a Jesuit institution, the Ministry Center organized a number of "intentional" dialogical events that were successful exchanges — a panel on grieving, for example, and another on the idea of vocation, which were sharings across and from within respective traditions. These events, however, attracted very little interest on campus, although the participants enjoyed themselves immensely. I would characterize such events as "structured" conversations, and I'm wondering if religiously unmarked or less strongly marked space facilitates such conversational dialogues.

That idea led me to reflect on a more general theme for this essay of the rhetoric of inter-religious dialogue, especially with respect to patterns of Muslim participation. Initially, I came up with three modes of Muslim-Christian dialogue: conversational dialogues, didactic dialogues, and performative dialogues. This classification, which I do not claim is exhaustive, highlights the position of participants within broader structures of power, authority and culture. It also seems to me that Muslim-initiated dialogue tends to fall primarily into the latter two categories. And exotic identity tend to structure

the position from which Muslims will interact. This rhetorical model highlights a different set of issues from Diana Eck's contextual categories of dialogues as parliamentary, institutional, theological, dialogue in community/life, spiritual dialogue, or dialogue in silence (internal),[1] though it is at the same time not incompatible with that formulation.

I note that here I am exclusively analyzing contexts in which Muslim participants represent the minority and those who are assumed to be unfamiliar and less known, if not the oppressed and misunderstood.[2] This element of being the "unfamiliar" may not always be the case in actuality, since the fact of living in America does not mean that Muslim participants in dialogue have made any particular effort to learn about the other religions. Still, minority status

In the interest of brevity, I will primarily focus on the concept of the "performative" mode adopted by Muslims and why so many dialogues initiated by Muslims take place in this genre. Conversational dialogues structured around shared issues such as life cycle commemorations, grieving, etc. attempt to explore diverse practices reflecting common human experiences, provoking knowledge of and empathy with the other. In another model of conversation, these interfaith dialogues continue over an extended period, with participants first getting to know each other as individuals and gradually building trust and rapport with one another. Only once this is established can more specific elements of religious difference be engaged. In dialogue that is more doctrinal, say, the comparative discussion of the concept of God, the situation is likely to be more tense, apologetic and even competitive. Here the rhetoric may on occasion be didactic — teaching about one's own faith position — and often less personal — not what "I" believe about God, but rather what Islam or Christianity teaches. Comparative information may be provided, but in most cases, defining difference ultimately prevails over seeking similarities.

C. M. Naim, reflecting on dialogue between Muslims and Christians, expresses his dissatisfaction with this sort of event, noting,

> The inordinate emphasis on the scriptural and the juristic and a simultaneous neglect of the experiential produced dialogues in which the salvific aspects, the mysteries of religious experience and other such matters got mostly left out. The two faiths [Christianity and Islam] became two ideologies, of which one seemed to control all history while the other appeared to have no agency at all — one stood for a body of aggressors, the other for a cohort of victims.[3]

Dialogue in the Performative Mode

After finding the performative element of certain dialogues initiated by Muslims to be resonant with my own experience, I reviewed some of the

contemporary literature in philosophy and cultural criticism in which this term is used. Speech act theory, the seminal work of J. L. Austin, *Doing Things with Words*, in particular, is a major source about the performative.[4] The relationships between words, actions, and the contexts in which utterances are made are central components of this theory. According to Austin, the performative element of speech is the effect that it has on the hearer, but this effectiveness occurs in a broader context than the explicit content of the words uttered. Utterances themselves may be illocutionary or perlocutionary. Illocutionary utterances are those that "when saying, do what they say, and do it in the moment of that saying," hence amounting to deeds.[5] Perlocutionary utterances lead to certain effects that are not the same as the speech act itself.

The distinctive aspect of such performative utterances is that they do not merely name, they also perform what they are naming and represent it at the same time. Further, as one scholar of religion and ritual theory notes, the concept of performance enables analysts to overcome the mind-body dichotomy,[6] since the effect of such speech act arises from conventional elements beyond the words themselves and includes the embodied context in which they are uttered. A key issue of performativity developed in subsequent discussions is the acknowledgement of the role played by power. It has even been claimed that "one who speaks the performative effectively is understood to operate according to uncontested power,"[7] for "performativity requires a power to effect or enact what it names."[8] Performative utterances, according to Austin, succeed if the authority of the speaker is assumed. His now famous examples of such utterances are usually ones of ceremony or legal ritual, such as a marriage contract being recognized as official when performed in the correct and expected context.

In the case of religious dialogue, this example led me to reflect on how Muslim roles in such dialogues are often tied to claiming the authority to represent Islam. This seems to be on the one hand a move toward self-empowerment, which is made simultaneously with a defensiveness born of feeling disempowered as a minority representative in the Western context, or with a sense of contesting what the presenter feels are general non-Muslim misperceptions about Islam. This is significant if we imagine the Christian participants as being unlikely, at least initially, to be overly concerned that their position or theology may be misunderstood. This, in turn, lessens the need for a performative quality in their contributions.

I think that the role of Muslims in performing interfaith dialogue brings out certain aspects discussed in the theory of performative utterances — for example, the claim to authority arising from convention and ritual, the failures or disjunctions of performance, and the possibility of subversion.

Performing Islam on College Campuses

At the Hartford Seminary gathering that inspired this article, I was specifically asked by Jane Smith to focus on dialogue and Muslim youth cultures in America. She asked me to so focus because of an article I had contributed to the volume *Progressive Muslims: On Justice, Gender and Pluralism* entitled "Putting the Genie back in the Bottle: 'Identity Islam' and Muslim Youth Cultures in North America."

In this article I consider the issue that youth in the immigrant Muslim community in Chicago (and I know the problem is wider) have become increasingly intolerant. I cite as evidence what I term "hyper-religiosity": for example, behavior indicating no interest in other students or non-Muslims generally, professing a simplistic "dumbed-down" approach to Islam, exhibiting rigid fundamentalist attitudes, "playing" at being Muslim by strictly enforcing gender segregation at campus events, and so on. I attribute this development to a confluence of factors, among them the "movement" Islam arising from the still-prevailing conservative influences in organizations such as ISNA, combined with the emergence of a "Muslim pride" response (encouraged by such groups) to alienation and other effects of racism in the surrounding culture. In addition, their lack of grounding in any particular Muslim culture has led to hostility among conservative American Muslim youth toward many traditional manifestations of culture such as art, music or Sufism. This is usually coupled with the assertion of a dry, rule based 'pure Islam,' and within certain groups, especially among South Asian youth, the emergence of what I term an "imagined-Madrasa mentality."[9] In the conclusion of the "Genie" piece, I suggest strategies for encouraging these young people to participate in more interaction based dialogue on college campuses — connecting them with their non-Muslim peers based on shared activist issues, such as the anti-war movement, students against sweatshops, etc.

C. M. Naim observes that Christians often fail to scrutinize repeated Muslim claims that what makes Islam unique is that it is a totality, a complete system that covers every aspect of human life. This element, very common in conservative Muslim discourse, troubles Naim because of its explicit and implicit encouragement of a totalizing and even totalitarian view of 'true' Islam that doctrinally and socially endorses a non-ecumenical attitude to intra-Muslim difference.[10]

Islam Awareness Week on Campus

A series of typical activities offered by Muslim Student Associations during Islam Awareness Week on college campuses across America seem to me to be examples of performative dialogues. I think the accent on performance emerges both from the minority status of most Muslim students and from

Islam's orthopraxic nature.[11] Also, in a performance, one creates and transforms an imaginary space, and therefore non-verbal elements such as costume and gesture function as much to persuade as do actual verbal utterances. In addition, one's visible identity and actions warrant the acceptance of the claims to Islamic authority that are made through the performance.[12]

Garbi Schmidt, a Danish sociologist of religion, writes about the Muslim student events she attended in Chicago in the 1990s. After describing the context of MSA lectures and especially the events of the annual Islamic Awareness Week, she discusses a rhetoric of performance and "correction" pervading most events in terms of their dialogue with "the Other," the non-Muslim institution and its members. But the "Others" — fellow students, teachers in this case — were more than an audience. They were a means to Islamic interpretation. Interpretations of the role of women, political issues, scientific investigations, and media presentations all pointed to powerful topics and opinion formers within the United States. Though this at times included an "apologetic pitfall," it also included a means for collective empowerment. By attacking majority authorities (scientists, politicians, journalists) and arguing to formulate more correct views, Muslims appealed for social recognition. By "correcting" the errors of the "Other," they were convinced (and tried to convince) that although they socially were in the minority, the knowledge they represented was intellectually superior.[13]

I see this brand of "correcting" as a combination of the Islamization of knowledge mode of the 1980s with the youthful quest for identity. The Islamization of knowledge, a project inspired by the activist scholar Ismail Faruqi, among others, was an attempt to critique the foundational assumptions of Western sciences, physical and social, from an Islamic perspective. This Muslim nativism, if you will, aimed at reclaiming the integrity and authenticity of an Islamic perspective of knowledge.[14]

I think the emphasis on performance in dialogue among Muslims in America is partly due to their need not only to assert some sort of authority over an imagined Muslim space but to claim both the authority and the space. This partly reflects how oppressed a minority tends to feel and also their need to assert a claim to a position. Other groups within the broader minority also, may feel oppressed, those whose claim to authority may be rejected or marginized, such as women, non-Sunnis, women without *hijab*, and so on, for as noted, many Islamist expressions of this authority are at the same time totalizing and exclusionary in nature.

I would like to offer a reflection on one common genre of "performance" that I have seen enacted during Islam Awareness Week: the panel by new American converts to Islam. At one such event that I attended, college-aged

converts, often Muslim for less than a year, performed their Muslim identity for an audience of largely Indo-Pakistani Muslim youth. I found the dynamic of the presenter/audience disturbing. In his work on authority, Lincoln notes the impact of the asymmetry of the authoritative speaker and the audience.[15] In this case, the presenters were usually young converted Americans of various racial and ethnic backgrounds, white, black, or Latino. Hence, there was at the same time an implicit celebration of the selection of Islam by the "privileged" American, criticism of the converts' previous religious and cultural activities and, for the MSA student audience, the comfort of the superiority of having the born with Muslim knowledge and identity. The performance of conversion seemed inspired by the genre of the Malcolm X book and movie, which in turn echoes testimonial traditions from Christian revivalism.[16] But how would this performance play to others on campus? Why would outsiders come to watch in the first place? What was the group's expectation in terms of audience response?

In one intriguing example of Islamization offered at a convert panel, a young African American woman explained how she had been drawn to Islam through being part of a gang, the Vice Lords, who used Islamic symbols, for example, chanting the Islamic profession of faith "la ilaha illa allah" before they would beat somebody up. I can only briefly indicate how this example brings to light a fascinating issue of ordinary language and convention, subverted in the new context of conversion and interfaith encounter. The use of "Islam-speak" or peppering one's conversation or presentation with pious formulae is a common feature of Muslim performance. It is a demarcator of Muslim discourse and a means to Islamizing English, the common-ground language to which Muslim immigrants participating in dialogue must accommodate and often the only language of Muslim students raised in the United States. The use of the *shahada* in this example both establishes the common ground of a shared ritual utterance but also evidences its subvertion through its association with a non-Islamic ritual. However, this ritual of anger and hostility at the same time resonates with the idea of Islam as a symbol of rebellion and minority identification.

On another occasion, a conservative Christian student came to the campus IAW panel to focus on women converts. During the question period, he read a selection of disturbingly misogynistic (and Islamically unreliable) hadith available from Internet sites such as "Answering Islam," in particular, a report states that "the majority of the inhabitants of hell will be women." He then asked the recent female converts what they thought of this. The young Mexican American convert's answers were "I ask my husband" or "I ask a shaykh" and "I don't know anything," which seemed to reinforce rather than counter the claim that Islam is a woman unfriendly religion.

A few of the MSA students proffered interpretations that might blunt the misogyny of the texts, and ultimately it was asserted that this was not the purpose of the panel and we should move back to the testimonial mode. I have to say the students handled the situation well. Though they couldn't satisfactorily answer the challenges, they remained courteous and all spoke with the Christian interrogator after the session very politely. Apparently, the same young man came to an MSA bake sale later that year, where he apologized for his actions and made a $5 donation.

I imagine the ramifications of this incident will be that there will be no more convert panels on our campus. It was as if MSA students had not realized that such panels were highly provocative and not welcoming to non-Muslims. The dynamic nature of the encounter probably raised awareness to some degree, but not in the way the organizers had intended.

In what sense is this dialogue? I think asking this question is important because we realize that in America most dialogues are initiated by non-Muslims and their institutions. However, Islamic Awareness Week activities are examples of Muslims trying to represent themselves to non-Muslims. I note that such Muslim initiated performances tend to be more one-sided; one element is clearly in control. There still remains transformative potential, but performance plays with cultural expectations — if the performers and audience have different expectations, things can go awry. And in such performances, are the presenters representing themselves, or wearing masks?

I think there is something troubling about the performative mode of dialogue — it does tend to be hierarchical and exclusionary. In fact, there is an ongoing discussion among Muslim Student Association leadership even at the national level. Questions asked include Who is IAW for? and Should IAW be preaching to the choir?[17]

On some college campuses, MSA events and lectures have a certain caché. Tickets to the Ramadan dinner sell out quickly. This fascinates me — is this difference in attitude due to a difference in ACT scores, or to differences in levels of sophistication or class background of those attending these institutions, or is it how Muslim students present these events to the broader community?

At another Islam Awareness Week event on our campus during the same season, a pious young Muslim woman presented a talk on various women mentioned in the Qurʾān as role models as part of a panel on women in Islam. Some forty Muslim students attended and perhaps five non-Muslims. The speaker told the story of Asiya, Pharoah's wife, as a model of a woman who is abused, beaten and finally killed by her husband but who all the while held onto her faith. In the question period, one of our female Muslim students asked, Is the lesson that we should stay in abusive marriages?

I have some personal reactions to this incident. The fact that it was a panel in a classroom may have encouraged the students to exercise critical thought. Had it been a homily in the mosque by a bearded shaykh, no one would have posed such questions. The authoritarianism of our Muslim religious spaces encourages hierarchical performances — not only in interfaith dialogues but in our practices — such as the ritual of returning to a mosque where we know the Friday the sermon is going to be objectionable.

Performing in the Community

Even the Council of Islamic Organizations interfaith fast-breaking dinner (*Iftar*) was more of a performance than a dialogue. The performance was initiated by Muslims doing something — breaking their fast. After the call to sunset prayer (*maghrib adhan*), the Muslim women rushed upstairs — it's a big place, so imagine more than 150 women — and began to pray. I was painfully aware of the Christian female guests coming upstairs and awkwardly watching us pray; no one had been delegated to explain to them what was going on. Should they watch, join in, stay in the back, etc.? I felt ashamed and awkward.

In summary, I think our Muslim penchant for performance in dialogue arises from both internal and external factors. The non-Muslim majority expects us to be exotic — to look different and to act differently. Islam is after all orthopraxic and performance is usually safe as it maintains authority, control, and hierarchy.

We need to reconsider, however, whether performance is a genuine and effective mode of dialogue with non-Muslims and of enacting our own experience as Muslims. In some ways it has a defensive quality of asserting our difference and reinforcing our otherness. It also perpetuates canons of authority within the Muslim community by masking individuality. At the same time, the examples that I have given indicate that on occasion the embodied context of interfaith dialogue can become an unpredictable space that challenges the conventions of Muslim performance in unexpected ways, thereby opening the way to new understandings and interpretations.

Endnotes

1. Charles Kimball, *Striving Together: a way forward in Christian-Muslim relations* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1991), 87.
2. C. M. Naim, "Some Thoughts on Christian Muslim Dialogues' *in Ambiguities of Heritage: Fictions and Polemics* (Karachi: City Press, 1999), 188–9.
3. C. M. Naim, 189.
4. J. L. Austin, *How to Do things with Words* 2d ed. (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1975).

5. Judith Butler *Excitable Speech: A Politics of the Performative* (New York: Routledge, 1997), 3.

6. Catherine Bell, “Performance” in Mark C. Taylor (ed.) *Critical Terms for Religious Studies* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 206.

7. Butler *Excitable Speech*, 49.

8. Ibid.

9. Marcia Hermansen, “How to Put the Genie back in the Bottle: Identity Islam and Muslim Youth Cultures in the United States”, in Omid Safi (ed.) *Progressive Muslims: On Pluralism, Gender, and Justice* (Oxford: Oneworld Publications, 2003), 303–319.

10. C. M. Naim, 189–90.

11. The term “orthopraxic” in this context was apparently coined by Wilfred Cantwell Smith, *Modern Islam in India* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1957), 20.

12. As discussed in Bruce Lincoln, *Authority: Construction and Corrosion* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 5.

13. Garbi Schmidt, *American Medina: a study of the Sunni Muslim Immigrant Communities in Chicago* (Lund, Sweden: Dept. of History of Religions, University of Lund, 1998), 167.

14. For an analysis and critique see, Leif Stenberg, *The Islamization of Science: Four Muslim Positions Developing an Islamic Modernity* (Lund Studies in History of Religions, No. 6) (Coronet Books: New York), 1996.

15. Bruce Lincoln, *Authority*, 4.

16. J. Wood (Ed.) *Malcolm X: In our own image* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1992).

17. For example, presentations by the MSA leadership at an Islamic Society of North American conference several years ago emphasized that the purpose of IAW was, in fact, outreach to non-Muslims on campus.