



December 17, 2015

Dear Dr. Jones,

I address the concerns you identified in your Memo of December 15, 2015.

Let me begin by stating that my intent has always been to stand with my Muslim neighbors out of my love for Jesus and the love I believe He has for the rest of the world.

It is because of my love for Jesus that I have affirmed wholeheartedly the Wheaton College statement of faith all nine years I have been at the College, and I continue to do so.

With Wheaton College I affirm that:

[I] believe in one sovereign God, eternally existing in three persons: the everlasting Father, His only begotten Son, Jesus Christ our Lord, and the Holy Spirit, the giver of life; and [I] believe that God created the Heavens and the earth out of nothing by His spoken word, and for His own glory.

[I] believe that Jesus Christ was conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the Virgin Mary, was true God and true man, existing in one person and without sin; and [I] believe in the resurrection of the crucified body of our Lord, in His ascension into heaven, and in His present life there for us as Lord of all, High Priest, and Advocate.

Furthermore, in continuity with the historic Creeds of the Church, I also affirm that

[I] believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord, and Giver of Life, Who proceeds from the Father, Who with the Father and the Son together is worshipped and glorified, Who spoke by the Prophets;

And I believe in one, holy, catholic, and apostolic Church.

I acknowledge one Baptism for the remission of sins.

I look for the Resurrection of the dead,

And the Life of the age to come.

In your letter you ask me to “clarify how it is that we worship the same God if Muslims cannot affirm that God is the Father of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob; or that God the Father is indeed the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ; or that the Father did not spare his only begotten Son; or that the Father, Son and Holy Spirit coexist as a Trinity in eternal and self-giving love?”

Of course, to respond in depth to each of these points would require the production of, at least, a large volume on systematic and comparative theology, which I am certain I cannot deliver by in the span of a few weeks.

However, let me address what I take to be the core of your concern, and affirm that it is on the basis of this creedal understanding, and out of my deep conviction and formative affection for historic Christianity that I made my statement(s). This is not, to borrow Timothy George's expression, "an easygoing ecumenism that would amalgamate all faiths into a homogenized whole," for that would be both a distortion and a sign of disrespect. On the contrary, because I am a deeply committed Christian who stands firm in the historic faith of the Church that I speak with more nuanced confidence of the God whom we all seek in worship.

I am guided by evangelical theologians like Timothy George, John Stackhouse, Scot McKnight, and Miroslav Volf, as well as the post-Vatican II Roman Catholic tradition, as expressed in both encyclical form (e.g. *Nostra Aetate* 3.1) and Pontifical writings (e.g. John Paul II, "Crossing the Threshold of Hope"). Like them I acknowledge that the statement "we worship the same God" is a simultaneous "yes" and "no" to the question of whether Christians and Muslims (as well as Jews) turn to the same object of worship, namely, the "God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all" (Eph. 4:6).

On the "yes" side, both Christians and Muslims (as well as Jews) confess that God is One (Deut. 6:4). So, yes, Christians and Muslims (and Jews) affirm fully that "that God is the Father of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob" but –borrowing from Stackhouse--"if we insist, as many are insisting in this furore, that God must be understood in terms of the Trinity, with a focus especially on Jesus, or else one really doesn't know God, I respectfully want to ask such Bible believers what they make of Abraham (who is held up as a paradigm of faith *in the New Testament*) and the list of Old Testament saints (who are held up as paradigms of faith *to Christians* in Hebrews 11), precisely none of whom can be seriously understood as holding trinitarian views and some proleptic vision of the identity and career of Jesus Christ."

But I also fully understand that on the simultaneous "no" side, as George notes, while "Christians, like Muslims, affirm the oneness of God...[Christians] understand that oneness not in mathematical terms (as a unit)" but as a *tri-Personal, perichoretic* unity. I understand that Islam (and Judaism) denies the deity of Christ and the Holy Spirit, and leaves no room for the Cross and the Resurrection, but my statement is not a statement on soteriology or trinitarian theology, but one of embodied piety. When I say that "we worship the same God," I am saying what Stackhouse points out, namely that "when pious Muslims pray, they are addressing the One True God, and that God is, simply, God."

Furthermore, it is *on the basis* of our very statement of faith that "We believe that God directly created Adam and Eve, the historical parents of the entire human race; and that they were created in His own image, distinct from all other living creatures, and in a state of original

righteousness,” that I am compelled to address all human beings as my “brothers and sisters.” For nine years I have signed a statement of faith which avers that all human beings originate from the same parents and bear the unalterable *imago Dei* – though no specific reference is made in the statement as to the *process* of that historic, original creation. Yes, when we Christians speak of *our* unity *in* and *as* the body of Christ, of course *our* unity stems from our identification with Christ. But my statement is *not* a statement of ecclesiology or baptismal regeneration or identification with Christ. It is simply and clearly a statement on the *imago Dei*, and a reflection of my African-American cultural heritage. It should not be misconstrued as anything different.

So, yes, when I call “fellow humans who happen to be Muslims [or Jews or atheists] my brothers and sisters” I am standing in full agreement with the Wheaton College statement of faith, identifying each person as an image-bearer of God.

You also ask me to speak of my understanding of the Eucharist. You and I are not in disagreement in our understanding of the Lord’s Table. Of course we are both well aware of the multiple understandings of the Eucharist in the Christian tradition. To speak of a singular understanding of the Eucharist (also among Evangelical Protestants) would be overly simplistic and potentially insulting to the variegated traditions represented even at Wheaton College, let alone the breadth of the Christian Tradition. Whether simply memorial, symbolic, or metabolic, the Eucharist is first and foremost “the *Lord’s Table*”—Christ invites us to His table. Yet, it is not singularly an incurvated reflection of one’s piety but also an invitation to challenge societal *status quo*, an overturning of world order (e.g. 1 Cor. 11). As the very invitation to the Lord’s Table reminds us: “Christ our Lord invites to his table all who love him, who earnestly repent of their sin and seek to live in peace with one another.” The Lord’s Table is the very locus and source of reconciliation within the ecclesial community and a persistent invitation to those outside of the *ecclesia*. This is my understanding, and the lived Eucharistic tradition into which I am fed.

As for the “the terminology of ‘the virgin birth (or Immaculate Conception depending on your persuasion),’” perhaps the reduction of the sentence results in the confusion. The complete sentence is: “Whether or not you find this position, one held for centuries by countless Christians (church fathers, saints, and regular Christian folk like me), to be valid, I trust that we can peacefully disagree on theological points and affirm others like the Triune God (albeit there are differences here as well--Athanasian Creed, anyone?), the virgin birth (or Immaculate Conception depending on your persuasion), and the Resurrection.” Clearly, what I am attempting is an enumeration of doctrines on which Christians have had long discussions and disagreements over the ages. Yes, I do know and appreciate the (generational) difference between the virgin birth and the Roman Catholic doctrine of the Immaculate Conception.

As I have always maintained in our numerous conversations, in the nine years I have been at Wheaton College I have articulated and also embodied my love and support for the vision and

mission of the College and its statement of faith. I want to continue living into reconciliation, manifesting how God's kingdom may be enacted at and through Wheaton College.

I have addressed the core of your concerns and I anticipate your response.

Sincerely,

Larycia A. Hawkins

Cc: Leah Anderson, Chair, PIR
Dorothy Chappell, Dean
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