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THE KAABA AND JACOB'S PILLOW

A Discussion on Christian-Islamic Relations with Fr. Daniel Byantoro

We received a number of comments last year when our Summer 2001 issue of *Road to Emmaus* featuring Fr. Daniel Byantoro (a former Moslem) and his Indonesian Orthodox Mission reached many of our subscribers' mailboxes on the week of September 11th. Now, a year later, we've invited Fr. Daniel back to tell us more about the Moslem mind and traditions, Christian-Moslem relations, and his own attempts to reach out to Moslems in his homeland and abroad.

The Spread of Islam and its Impact on Christianity

ROAD TO EMMAUS: Fr. Daniel, we are very grateful to have you back again. In one of your recent lectures you said that the beginnings of the Arab people was a historical mistake because Abraham didn't wait for God's promise to send him a son by Sarah, but had Ishmael, whom Moslems look to as the father of their race. How do we reconcile this with the fact that we are all children of God? In a certain sense, aren't all races a mistake, or rather, not part of the original plan for man before the Fall? If Adam and Eve hadn't sinned, perhaps we wouldn't have been divided into races at all, certainly not into many languages as after the tower of Babel.

FR. DANIEL: What I meant by a historical mistake is not the Arabs as such, but Islam, because they claim they are the rightful heirs of Abraham's covenant, while God, in fact promised the covenant to Isaac. This promise was given to Abraham long before Hagar was in sight. Hagar came later and Ishmael was the fruit of Abraham's impatience to wait for the fulfillment of God's promise. So, I'm not talking about the Arab people as such, but about Islam's claim of truth. Islam came into being because of the disobedience of Abraham.

Opposite: *The English Coronation Chair with the Stone of Scone (Jacob's Pillow) beneath.*



Perhaps God allowed this to happen because Ishmael was also the son of Abraham. God did not treat Isaac and Ishmael differently in terms of their descendents, but in terms of the promise of the covenant. It is clearly stated in the Bible that the inheritance, the covenant, was Isaac's. That was what I meant. The mistake is not the Arabs themselves, but the truth-claim made by Islam.

RTE: After September 11, people in the West have awakened to the spread of Islam and the threat of terrorism. An interesting historical counterpoint to this are the remarks of several Greek saints, particularly St. Cosmas of Aitolia who said that the Turkish-Moslem occupation of Greece saved Orthodoxy, because otherwise the Greeks would have been absorbed by political and cultural pressure from the West. Just at the moment when Christians looked the most oppressed, and culture and religious traditions seemed to be most endangered, the saints say that Greece was quite securely in God's hand and that He was preserving Orthodoxy in an unseen way.

FR. DANIEL: I believe that in many ways Islam has been used by God to protect Orthodoxy from the delusion of the West. You see it in the Old Testament too, when God used the Babylonians to take the Hebrews into captivity. They were purified from idolatry through suffering, and after the exile the Hebrews became staunch defenders of monotheism. I see the same thing happening with Islam. In a way I think Islam is a critique of Christianity.

RTE: I've heard it described as God's scourge. How do you see it as a critique?

FR. DANIEL: When we look clearly into Islamic teaching, we see monotheism in one of its finest forms. My Islamic background helped me to see the oneness of God very clearly. I make a clear distinction between the communion with the saints and the worship of God. This is something that simple Orthodox people may not so readily distinguish, especially when you talk about prayer to the saints. To Moslem ears that is blasphemy. You do not pray to the saints, you are asking the prayers of the saints. We and they pray to God. In my mind, the word "prayer" conjures up the worship of God.

RTE: Yes, perhaps "praying to the saints" is not the right wording. We Orthodox see ourselves and the saints as part of a family, in which we ask older and more experienced brothers and sisters who have already passed on to pray with us.

FR. DANIEL: Yes. And the misuse of that is wrong. For instance, when you have a village woman in Greece who only prays to one favorite saint, who is fixated on the saint rather than worshipping God in the way that the Church teaches. That is one of the criticisms of the Koran. In these ways the Koran can be a critique of Christianity.

In that way there has been a kind of dynamic relationship between the Orthodox Church and Islam, in spite of the animosity between the two. At the deepest core there is a connection.

RTE: Yes, and the centuries of historical connections are fascinating. Five centuries of Turkish occupation of Greece left a trail of stories in the Greek Orthodox holy places about Moslems who had gone there to pray, who had their prayers answered and were healed. Afterwards, they often donated lampadas, fountains, paid for frescoing churches, and sometimes even converted to Christianity. Some of the sultans rebuilt monasteries, and Ali Pasha, the notorious tyrant of Ioannina, not only built his Christian wife a monastery, but she also used his money to help rebuild Konstamonitou Monastery on Mt. Athos.

I also remember that when St. Cosmas traveled around Greece on missionary journeys, he always went to the local Turkish authorities to ask permission to preach, which was never denied. In fact, the Moslems would often come to listen and even ask for his blessing. He was finally killed on the orders of the Albanian Kurt Pasha (who later repented), but one has to remember that earlier this same Moslem ruler had built St. Cosmas a movable podium to preach from on his journeys. So, in Greece, at least, there is this strange intertwining of Moslems and Christians.

FR. DANIEL: I think that at the deepest level Islam is a form of Orthodoxy without Christ. There are similarities in our worship, in our ways of thinking, such as our common respect for the Virgin Mary and the early Christian tradition of the Seven Sleepers of Ephesus, which is also in the Koran. On the deepest level, there is something that binds us together. The animosity between us is caused by the misunderstanding of Islam about the Holy Trinity and the nativity of Christ, and by their denial of Christ's crucifixion.¹

So this is where we see the family resemblance between Islam and Orthodoxy, and this fierce fight between the Moslems and the Christians is

¹ Moslems deny that Jesus Christ was the Son of God, that God Himself incarnated and was later crucified, died and resurrected.

because the family members are all trying to claim the same inheritance. This is a fight between the grandchildren of the same grandfather, all insisting that they are the legal heirs. If there were two inheritances there would be no fight. This is why in our Christian consciousness we cannot be separated from Moslems. We will always have to deal with them, and they with us.

RTE: Yes, even with the very anti-Turkish sentiments of the Greeks, there is a feeling of our being bound together below the surface, like feuding cousins... much more so than with other Christians who were also colonial occupiers of Greece. You rarely hear of a Protestant coming to pray at an Orthodox church, but throughout the last five-hundred years of Greek history, many Moslems who lived with or near Orthodox people, came frequently to Greek shrines, and embraced whatever truth they were able to recognize.

FR. DANIEL: This is because the Protestants have lost their family roots, whereas Orthodoxy and Islam both keep their awareness of the continuation of history. This makes for a very dialectical relationship between Islam and Orthodoxy. It is like cousins. You see that you resemble each other, but you are also different.

RTE: What exactly do you mean by a dialectical relationship?

FR. DANIEL: It is a relationship in which both affirm the family, but at the same time oppose each other on very profound grounds.

RTE: Although many of us have attempted to read about Islam, it is difficult to understand it from books. We've read about Mohammed's life, Islamic cultures and history, jihad and aggression, we all saw the terrorist attacks in New York and Washington, D.C. on television and mourned the tragedy, but many of our personal encounters with real Moslems, both in America and Europe, or in years past on pilgrimage to the Holy Land, are with hospitable, family-oriented people. This is a dichotomy that is difficult to resolve in real life.

FR. DANIEL: Of course, for the common people there is a great emphasis on hospitality in Islam and respect for your neighbor, but there is also a political message in Islam and politically-inclined people will use that for their own ends.

RTE: Do you believe it is primarily politicians who are stirring things up?

FR. DANIEL: It is also the people who are convinced that they have to do jihad as a religious duty. Percentage-wise, they are not many, perhaps less than ten percent of all Moslems, but their numbers are strong enough to shake up the world.

RTE: Do you think America was right in their military intervention in Afghanistan and surrounding countries? Many people suspect that there were secondary interests involved, like access to oil.

FR. DANIEL: Those political details I don't know about, but I think that the crushing of the Taliban, or whoever is behind the terrorists, has to be done or it will disturb the whole world. But you are right, it has to be distinguished that we are not fighting against the Moslem nations as such. We cannot afford to do that.

As Christians we need to be more open, to study Islam and to bridge their misunderstanding of our beliefs, because in Islamic thinking we are denying the oneness of God with our doctrine of the divinity of Jesus Christ and the Holy Trinity. We also need to have genuine love for the Moslems we come into contact with. Only with love is there a real opening to explain anything.

RTE: In your travels have you met many Americans or Europeans who have converted to Islam?

FR. DANIEL: So far, I have not met any white Americans who have become Moslem out of philosophical conviction. The Moslems I meet are immigrants or students studying here from Moslem countries. Even if Americans or Europeans become Moslem, I am not sure it is very serious – more of the modern idea of shopping for religion. Even among the American blacks, their idea is often founded on the old "Nation of Islam" idea, which is not really Islam at all.

RTE: It is more of a political statement than a religious belief?

FR. DANIEL: Yes, they are more interested in elevating color than in actual worship. It is a reaction to their history of suffering here.

RTE: Do you see more of an understanding of the spread of Islam after the events of last year?

FR. DANIEL: I've heard mixed messages. Some people were very frightened after the attacks, and when I began to talk about Islam they just became quiet. This is an illogical fear. Others try to say that the terrorist attacks were just a freak accident by some fanatics. The problem, though, is that jihad is in the Koran and people who are so inclined can always take those verses and act on them.

RTE: The danger is that just as a huge wave of patriotism swept over America after the attacks, if we bomb Islamic countries in return, many of that 90% majority of peace-loving Moslems are going to feel that it is an attack upon Islam as a whole, and people who had never thought of jihad are going to be calling for war.

FR. DANIEL: Yes.

RTE: What would you say to those Christians who are still nervous after the September 11 attacks?

FR. DANIEL: Be rational. All over the world many things like this are happening, this is the nature of the world. In order for you not to have this irrational fear you must come back to your roots, you must search for Christ and claim your heritage. Try to be loving to the Moslems. Help them to understand what Christianity is, and who Jesus Christ is.

The Kaaba, Mohammed's Revelation and Pilgrimage to Mecca

RTE: Some of the most prominent images of Islam in the news are photos of massive crowds of pilgrims praying around the Kaaba in Mecca. I know that the Kaaba is the physical focus of all Islamic prayer, as the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem is for Orthodox Christians, and that Moslems pray facing Mecca and the Kaaba. Would you explain what the Kaaba itself is?

FR. DANIEL: The word Kaaba, means "a cube." The Moslem believes that the Kaaba was the first shrine to God anywhere in the world and was first built from stone by Adam. Then, it was destroyed by the flood of Noah and rebuilt by Abraham. When Ishmael died, his descendants forgot the worship of God,

so they erected idols around the Kaaba until Mohammed came and purified the holy place to the One God again. This is the Moslem understanding.

RTE: Is the Kaaba solid or hollow inside?

FR. DANIEL: Hollow, it is like a house. There is a door through which you can enter. Any pilgrim can go in if he is allowed to by the authorities. There is nothing inside, it is empty. In the 17th century, interestingly, there were reports that there were some icons inside, and I recently heard a second-hand report that the icons are still there.

RTE: Icons! Why are there icons in the holiest structure in Islam? Islam is iconoclastic.

FR. DANIEL: Before the rise of Islam, the pagan Arabs had a great yearly bazaar, called the "Bazaar of Al-Ukaz." People from all over Arabia and nearby countries would come to celebrate around the Kaaba. They did this to honor the gods of the Kaaba, because the Kaaba housed many idols, the foremost of which was the god Hubal. (Also famous among them were the so-called "daughters" of Allah, namely: Al-Lat, Al-Mannat, Al-Uzza, although Muhammad denied vigorously that Allah had any daughter or son.)

This celebration in Mecca drew not only pagans, but also middle-eastern Christian monks, bishops and evangelists. One of the greatest events was the famous Arabic "poetry" competition, and many of these Christians composed Christian poems to compete with the pagans. They also used this occasion to preach the Gospel to the Arabs. In their competitions with the pagans, who had statues of idols, the Christians displayed icons of the Lord and the Mother of God, hoping that the pagans would become interested in Christianity. These were all in the Kaaba.

When Muhammad conquered Mecca without bloodshed, he commanded that all the idols be destroyed and the Kaaba dedicated to "Allah" alone. During the rampage of destruction, Muhammad saw his troops about to smash the icons, but he stopped them, putting himself between the upraised arms of his followers and the icons. He forbade their destruction, saying that these two icons must not be destroyed because they are pictures of God's prophet and his mother. So they were saved from destruction. As I said, there are reports that the icons are still there in the Kaaba, but I have never seen them personally. This is as much as I know.

RtE: Fascinating. So the Kaaba had religious significance even before the coming of Islam?

FR. DANIEL: The culture of the Middle Ages included the worship of stones. It was a common feature of middle-eastern culture, and before Islam there were many kaabas, not just in Mecca, but also in Saana, the ancient capital of Yemen. There were even portable kaabas. So, of course, from a historical point of view, this kaaba was a justification for Islam, but, in fact, there were many kaabas before Islam. It was a common symbol even in the Old Testament. Do you remember when Jacob fled to the wilderness and he anointed the stone and said, "This is the House of God."

it to Scotland, where it is now on display in the Royal Museum in Edinburgh Castle.

FR. DANIEL: Really! I didn't know.

RTE: Yes. Do Moslems view the Kaaba as we would a church?

FR. DANIEL: No, it is a symbol of unity that is dedicated to God.

RTE: But is it considered to be sacred?

FR. DANIEL: Yes, the Moslems kiss it, they reverence it, they press cloths to it and take them home as blessings. There are many strange stories from



RTE: The stone he used as a pillow?

FR. DANIEL: Yes.

RTE: Interesting. And that too was a kaaba? Did you know that there is a continuation to that story? That same stone is believed to have been taken to Egypt by Jacob's sons, and from there it was carried to Spain. When Simon Brech, the son of the Spanish king, invaded Ireland in about 700 B.C., he took the stone with him. It was placed on the holy hill of Tara as the Stone of Destiny and Irish kings were crowned on it for over a thousand years. In the 5th century A.D. it was taken to Scotland, and later, King Edward I of England seized it and placed it under the English coronation throne in Westminster Cathedral. In 1996 the English government returned

pilgrims who went there and came back home, who saw and heard things. Some of these experiences may have been given to these souls by God, but we really can't say if they are from God or from demons. Even in the Kaaba there are odd things – like the jinns.

RTE: Do you believe that jinns are demons? Many westerners think that the word jinn is simply the Islamic equivalent of "angel".

FR. DANIEL: Yes, they are demons. In the Moslem tradition jinns are spirit-beings who appear as angels in the sense that they are immaterial, but they are like human beings in the sense that they can be male or female, they can be married. There are different races, like our human races, and these are what come into western stories as genies. Jinns can live in trees, in stones,

in houses, in rivers, in empty buildings. The Moslem jinns can live in the house, even in the mosque, and sometimes people say that the jinns pray with them. Moslems also believe there are Christian jinns.

RTE: Do you think the “angel” that entered into Mohammed when he received his revelation was a real being or imaginary?

FR. DANIEL: I think it was real because it was completely unexpected. He had not been thinking along these lines. Of course, although the Koran calls it the Angel Gabriel, it wasn't the same Angel Gabriel that appeared to the Virgin Mary because if it had been he wouldn't have made a mistake describing the Christian belief in the Trinity.

RTE: Would you go so far as to say it was a demon distorting the truth?

FR. DANIEL: I think so.

RTE: On the other hand, there is sincere piety among the pilgrims to Mecca. I've known Moslems on whom the pilgrimage made a profound impression and who lived very charitable lives afterwards. What do you think happens to Moslem souls on pilgrimage?

FR. DANIEL: I believe that with so many millions of people in Mecca, with the great mass of human souls gathered together and worshipping God as they know Him, that a great energy is generated from so many people praying and it creates a kind of mystical feeling.

RTE: Do you believe that God sends down grace on these pilgrims for their pious intent, even though the belief is wrong?

FR. DANIEL: I believe there is a general grace of God to all people. The Bible says, “He shines his sun on the righteous and unrighteous.” This is not salvational grace, but grace that helps to remind people of their connection to God. Everyone is created in the image and likeness of God and there is a natural affinity between the human spirit and God. Even if their belief is not true, I think that if people truly reach for God, His general grace can descend.

RTE: So, how should we be with our Moslem neighbors?

FR. DANIEL: We have to witness to them. This is our duty. But first of all, it

has to be a witness of life, living together and showing love. Only after we have become friends can we share with them. Let them share their faith with us, and we can share ours in turn. Conversion is not by force, it is from conviction, but before that conviction can come we have to build bridges of understanding and say, “That is not what we believe. You have misunderstood.” Christianity is the religion that is most misunderstood by Moslems.

RTE: On a community level, there are more and more Moslem immigrants in western Europe and in America, and naturally they want to build mosques, schools, etc. In your lectures you've been talking about the danger of the spread of Islam. Should local Christians just say, “No, we don't want a mosque here.”?

FR. DANIEL: I think it should be up to the discretion of the local people. Although the Moslems wanting to build the mosque may be very peace-loving people, who knows what will come out of it later?

RTE: Many Americans would say that preventing it is an infringement of their religious rights.

FR. DANIEL: That is because you have the idea of the separation of church and state, and that is alright, but in Islamic ideology the religion and state are one, and when the number of Moslems increase they may start looking for political power. But these attitudes are different from country to country and people to people. Moslems are very different in different countries.

RTE: Yes, I have a friend from southern Albania near Tirana, who told me that after the fall of communism there was no disharmony between Christians and Moslems until Arab outsiders came in and began creating division.

FR. DANIEL: Yes, but I am afraid that this peaceful attitude may be something of the past. Many new Moslem immigrants in Europe and America are eager to Islamicize these countries, to spread Islam through teaching and modern communication technology, and there are many Islamic countries that support this. I think it is very important for Christians to wake up and return to their roots, to be serious about their faith, and to try to share that faith with Moslems. This is the greatest defense against Islam.

Fr. Daniel's Indonesian Mission

RTE: Can we talk now about your country? How many Orthodox Christians are there in Indonesia?

FR. DANIEL: About two thousand. The majority have converted from Islam, some from Buddhism, Hinduism and other Christian denominations. We have ten churches and ten priests.

RTE: Do you have any stories of conversions you can tell us?

FR. DANIEL: One of my parishioners was a notary public who was diagnosed with a cancerous tumor. She was actually a Protestant whom I had first converted to Christianity from Islam when I was an evangelical Protestant pastor. Doctors told her that the infected tumor had to be removed and she was very upset.

I knew nothing of her illness, but one day as I was doing the Sixth Hour, I felt that I should go to her house. I went, but she said nothing. The next day, I had the same feeling, and went back. This time she asked me, "In your church do you have prayers like ours?" I said, "Oh yes, we have prayer seven times a day." The third day, I again had the urge to visit her, and this time she asked, "Do you have prayers for the sick in your church?" I said, "Yes." and she began to cry.

I asked her what was wrong and she told me that she had cancer and if the tumor was not immediately removed, it would be very dangerous for her. She asked if I could pray for her. I said, "Of course." So, I asked her to kneel down and with another priest I said the prayer for the sick over her. Afterwards I asked her, "How do you feel?" She said, "My fear is gone." I said, "OK, then tomorrow we will pray again. I came the next morning, prayed over her again, and anointed her, and said, "How do you feel now?" She said, "Where the tumor is, I felt pain as if I was being cut with a knife." The next day she told me that the tumor had disappeared in the night in a gush of blood. She went to the doctor and he said that it was a miracle.

After her healing she became Orthodox, but she didn't want to be baptized in Indonesia, so she and her husband came to the U.S. with me and we baptized her in Fr. Gordon Walker's church in Tennessee. Her husband was

also an Indonesian Protestant, but he didn't want to become Orthodox. Later, we went together to San Francisco, to the relics of Archbishop John Maximovich. Her husband didn't know anything about him, of course, but we went into the church and after we venerated the relics, I left him alone there to talk to God. He was fascinated because he is a medical doctor and couldn't believe his eyes, that the relics were still intact.

He stayed there for a long time while I waited outside with his wife. Finally he came out, sweat running down his face and said, "Father, I want to be baptized tomorrow." I said, "What happened?" He said, "It was so strange, Father, I didn't believe in things like this, but I was praying to the Lord Jesus Christ to show me... I had three questions, and each time I asked, Archbishop John's hand came out of the icon and blessed me." So, he was baptized the next day.

RTE: Wonderful.

Fr. Daniel, in one of your lectures, you spoke of Indonesian Orthodox fasting being more rigorous than the actual typikon. For instance, you don't eat anything until sundown on Wednesdays and Fridays to show the Moslems that you are serious and not just playing with the idea of fasting.² Are there other traditions that you have adapted to make Orthodoxy more accessible?

FR. DANIEL: Yes. In our prayers we divide the services and hours into seven periods of prayer (the Moslems have five.) Even when they are working in the office or at a business, our people ask permission to pray at the time of prayer. The sixth hour being noon, they come out and pray just as the Moslems do. The difference is that while the Moslems face west, the Christians face east.

RTE: So the Christians are allowed to pray publicly although the country is 98% Moslem?

FR. DANIEL: In the offices – yes, because you do not disturb other people, you are just doing your own thing. We pray in a way that is similar to the Moslems; prostrations to the ground (although we do more than they do) using the prayer rug, and so on. We have longer services than the Moslems because of the psalm readings during the Hours.

² During the Moslem fast of Ramadan, nothing is eaten until after sundown each day.

RTE: In the Islamic tradition, what is the significance of the prayer rug? Does it have some kind of spiritual symbolism or is it just to keep your clothes from getting dusty?

FR. DANIEL: No, no, it's not spiritual, just for your clothes. I use a prayer rug at home, even in America.

RTE: What other cultural bridges do you use to help Moslems understand Orthodoxy?

FR. DANIEL: We Indonesians do the prayers of the hours using the Antiochean typikon, which is in Arabic, the same language that Moslems

FR. DANIEL: Yes, and that is from Psalm 26. "I will wash my hands in innocence: so I will compass thine altar, O Lord... I have loved the habitation of thy house and the place where thine honor dwells." You see, "... I will compass Thy altar O Lord," so that means on foot, and we wash our feet to prepare ourselves to "compass the altar" in prayer. We also don't wear shoes in church, and our women cover their heads and both men and women often wear traditional clothing.

RTE: In Indonesia, is the persecution of Christians so open that people will harass or threaten you on the street?

FR. DANIEL: Not really. It depends on where you are. Indonesian people,



pray in. Because we divide the Hours into seven short services, we pray often during the day. Sometimes Moslems come in and, hearing the Arabic, think that we are a mosque. (*Laughs*) But they are quickly confused and ask, "Why are you facing east, west is the other way?"

RTE: Do most Indonesian Moslems speak Arabic?

FR. DANIEL: They don't speak it, but they can read Arabic because they read the Koran. The Koran is only read in Arabic. We do our Orthodox services, some in Indonesian, some in Arabic. We also wash our face before prayers, the way the priest does before liturgy, the prayer of ablutions.

RTE: Do you also wash your feet as the Moslems do?

although they are changing now, are not a violent people. Southeast Asians in general are very pacific. They are not Middle-Easterners with volatile emotions. The great majority of Indonesians are not at all violent; there are only a few fanatics who have started all this trouble. Also, in Indonesia it is different from area to area. If you are on the island of Java, for example, people are much more tolerant than on some of the other islands.

RTE: Yes. We hear terrible things in the news, and of course, not knowing your day-to-day life, it is difficult for us to gauge how bad things are.

FR. DANIEL: I have to be fair. There are good, peace-loving Moslems and there are also fanatics who bomb churches and kill Christians.

RTE: Have you ever had Moslems in Indonesia defend your right to freely practice Christianity?

FR. DANIEL: Yes, there are some who try to help us. But not in the government, the government is afraid. At their best, Moslems respect the Christians and in some ways even protect them, but at the worst they are completely against us. In the Koran some of the verses speak highly of Christians, while other verses reject them, and this is a reflection of what happened in history.

RTE: Of course, throughout history we Christians have sometimes acted honorably towards Moslems and other times abominably. Perhaps if we'd been better Christians there wouldn't be any Islam today.

FR. DANIEL: Yes.

RTE: Another question – in photographs of Moslems at prayer, you always see men in the mosques, but almost never women. Are women allowed to pray in the mosque?

FR. DANIEL: Actually women are not obliged to go to the mosque. They can, but it is not an obligation, and if they do go there will be a partition to separate the men and the women, or the women will stand in the back.

RTE: This division in prayer also exists in many Orthodox monastery churches, and even in some city churches in traditional Orthodox countries. It's rather easy to be distracted, particularly if you are young.

FR. DANIEL: Yes, that is why in Indonesia we have the women on the left side and the men on the right. We like it like this.

RTE: A few years ago I read an interesting book called *In Search of Islamic Feminism* by an American professor of women's studies. In her travels through Islamic countries she found a surprising number of women in government positions, heads of ministries, judges, etc....they may have even worn traditional clothing and veils, but they seemed to have many more social opportunities than we commonly think.

It was also interesting because she kept asking these women about feminism and women's political rights, and they invariably answered, "You don't understand, your foundation is wrong. In everything we do, our first

duty is to God, our family and to other people. We are not pursuing individual rights." The author didn't ever really understand this (although she reported it faithfully) and kept hoping to find pockets of western-type feminism. She spoke to women in five different Moslem countries, and in almost every case they told her, "You must love God first. This is the basis of all society." I remember thinking, "That could be a Russian Orthodox woman speaking."

FR. DANIEL: Yes, also, it is different for Moslem women from country to country. Our current president of Indonesia is a Moslem woman, and many of the rulers in the past were queens who ruled autonomously.

RTE: Isn't that unusual for an Islamic society? In the West, we only hear about the oppression of Islamic women.

FR. DANIEL: It depends. Islam is not a monolithic culture; there is more than one way of looking at things. There are some very patriarchal and fanatic nations that say, "No, women cannot be leaders, they must stay at home." They take that interpretation from the tradition that a woman cannot be an *imam*, a religious leader, and they transfer religious practice into political custom, saying that women cannot hold public office. In Saudi Arabia particularly, it leans towards this, but in other countries, no. Each Moslem country and people is different.

Also, in the Koran, the man is considered to be the head, but there are specific references to the rights of both men and women, so there is a dignity given to both.

RTE: Yes, it sounds rather like Byzantium. There was the whole theological background of the man being the head, but at the same time there were ruling empresses. An empress who gained her throne by marrying an emperor didn't automatically become empress as part of her marriage vows, but was crowned and anointed as empress before the marriage – it wasn't just an honorary title that went along with her wifely status. Many empresses ruled alone either as the rightful heir of a deceased emperor, or as regent on behalf of a young son after the death of her husband, or by popular acclaim, and they did so with the support of both church and state.

FR. DANIEL: Yes, there are many similarities between Islamic culture and Orthodox culture. It is easier for us to understand Islam through Orthodox

eyes because while we, like the Moslems, don't believe that a woman can become a priest, women are active in almost all other fields of life. As in Islam, we Orthodox have some people with very conservative views (not always traditional), some liberal and eager to change things, and lots of people in the middle.

RTE: This is a more personal note. Although I know that some of your immediate family has become Orthodox, how do you relate to your Moslem relatives?

FR. DANIEL: With the Moslem family members, we don't talk about religion. We are just there as family. Some of them are very kind – after all, I'm their cousin, their nephew. Strangely, after I converted to Christianity, some of my relatives who had not been so before, became very strong Moslems. It was as if they were trying to defend themselves. They went on pilgrimage to Mecca, they became hadji, they were more active than before. With them there is a wall. Some of them rejected me for a long time, but now I am again accepted as part of the family. When you have two different religions in the family you don't talk about it, you just try to tolerate each other. It is too difficult and emotional to talk, as the Moslem thinks that Christianity is the opposite of Islam and we are only out to convert them.

RTE: Of course they are right. We would like them to have the fullness of what we've found, but judging what I've seen of foreign Christian missionaries coming to Russia, too often their experience of Christianity is of Christians who aren't interested in them as people, but only as possible converts.

FR. DANIEL: As prospects.

RTE: Yes. As potential members of the church, not as souls who need to be comforted and loved.

FR. DANIEL: That's right. You have to respect the humanity of people, in spite of the fact that they have a wrong religion.

RTE: And also respect the free will that God gave them.

FR. DANIEL: Yes. In Romans 2:14-15, St. Paul says that there is a law of nature in each human being, that is, a law of conscience, and each human being will be judged according to that law of conscience. So, if they live up

to what their conscience dictates, God will be just. Also, in Luke 12:47-48, the servant who knows the will of the master and doesn't do it will be punished more severely than the servant who doesn't know the will of the master but does things worthy of punishment. He will be punished less. People will be judged according to the knowledge they have of the truth.

We have to believe that if there is any truth at all in a religion, that truth must come from God, because God Himself is Truth. We have to be fair in judging other religions. The devil said, "You are the Son of God..." Even if it is the devil speaking truth we have to accept it although we don't have to accept him.

RTE: I've heard some Orthodox say that Moslems and Christians don't worship the same God. I understand the Moslem misconception of the doctrine of the Holy Trinity, but I can't believe that if they sincerely pray to God, as much as they know Him, that He will not hear them. He Himself allowed them to be born into an Islamic family and country.

FR. DANIEL: That is why, as I mentioned before, we have to understand the difference between general grace that acts as a natural or general revelation and supernatural grace, which is a supernatural or special revelation in Jesus Christ. This common general grace is given equally to every human being, no matter who he is. So, if you say that the Hindu god or the Buddhist god, or the Moslem god is different from the Christian God, then you are saying there are many gods and you have become a polytheist without knowing it.

The God of the Hindus, Moslems, and Christians is only one God because He is the only Creator of everything and everyone. The problem is that their conception of God is wrong. But even if their system of belief is demonic, if the purity of their heart is directed towards God, He will see that. The same rain, the same sunshine is given to everyone, and God will answer their prayers in one way or another. We are not talking about salvation here, we are talking about God's Providence.

I speak out against Islam from experience – from conviction, not from fanaticism. I've read the Koran thousands of times, I've read the Bhagavagita, the Vedas, the Buddhist scriptures, I've read everything – because if there are truths there, they must be from God. I've found many truths in all the non-Christian scriptures, in spite of the great amount of trash you find along with them.

RTE: What would you say about sincere people of other faiths, such as Buddhist monks, for example, who are often very impressive in their depth of kindness and outward virtue?

FR. DANIEL: That is because they are made in the image and likeness of God. This is our commonality. They use natural grace, which works through their strong wills to subdue the base inclinations. The difference between Buddhist monks and Christian monks is that we are aided by supernatural grace.

Natural grace does not lead you to deification, where a human soul is closely united to God. Only divine grace through Jesus Christ does this. Natural grace can look very good, even saintly, but it can also lead you into contact with the demonic world because your spirit is still basically dead. In trying to mix this unredeemed fallen state of the soul with the fact that we are made in the image and likeness of God you may attain some human perfection, but it will not lead you to heaven. I believe, though, that no matter what religion you are born into, if you search for truth you will find Christ. ✚