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## Humanity: Texts and Contexts

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Published by Georgetown University Press

Igrave, Michael, et al.

Humanity: Texts and Contexts: Christian and Muslim Perspectives.

Georgetown University Press, 2010.

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# INTRODUCTION

## *Humanity in Context*

*Michael Ipgrave*

THIS VOLUME PROVIDES a record of the papers delivered and the texts discussed at the sixth annual Building Bridges seminar of Christian and Muslim scholars, convened by the Archbishop of Canterbury at the National University of Singapore in December 2007 on the theme “Humanity in Context.”<sup>1</sup> As in previous seminars in the series, an overarching subject of central interest to both Christians and Muslims was addressed by using the resources that each faith had to offer out of its own integrity, and formal and informal dialogue between the participants grew out of the structured presentations that are recorded here. This volume does not attempt to capture the richness and variety of those exchanges, but we hope that the wealth of material presented here will stimulate a like dialogical engagement among and between the book’s readers. If this mirrors the experience of Singapore, that dialogue will often be as intense between Christian and Christian, or Muslim and Muslim, as between those of different faiths.

The first lecture of the seminar appropriately began by quoting Hamlet’s famous exclamation: “What a piece of work is man!” for this seminar took as its starting point the prince’s sense of both awe and puzzlement at what it means to be a human, “the beauty of the world, the paragon of animals,” and at no point did it share his subsequent disillusionment: “And yet, to me, what is this quintessence of dust? Man delights not me.” The theme chosen, “Humanity in context: Christian and Muslim Perspectives on Being Human,” was indeed daunting in its breadth and depth.

Out of the vast possibilities offered for reflection, three questions in particular were singled out for attention: What does it mean to be human? What is the significance of the diversity that is evident among human beings? What are the challenges that humans face in living within the natural world? The seminar sought to focus on theological responses to each of these questions, drawing on the wealth of material found in both Christian and Islamic scriptures and traditions, and recognizing also the way in which all questions relating to humanity have been made both more complex and more urgent through the rapid changes that have affected our societies and our world. In a pattern slightly different to that of earlier seminars, the three major themes of “Being human,” “Living with difference,” and “Guardians of the environment” were all introduced first through individual lectures delivered in the public part of the seminar. More detailed

engagement with six particular dimensions of these themes was then undertaken by closed sessions of the seminars reading and discussing together coupled biblical and Qur'anic texts. What is presented here are edited versions of the three pairs of public lectures together with the twelve sets of scriptural texts and the introductions to those texts provided by the scholars; the Archbishop of Canterbury has also added his own concluding reflections.

The three themes of human identity, human diversity, and human stewardship raise questions of different kinds from one another, yet it became apparent at the seminar that for Christians and Muslims they have two features in common. In the first place, these are issues that believers in both faiths face side by side. The resources that Islam and Christianity have to offer for understanding humanity in context are in many ways quite different from one another, yet it is certain that we are seeking to understand one common humanity, and that one common humanity lives its life in the one common context of a shared earth. While previous Building Bridges seminars have shown how it is possible to model dialogue creatively around issues that are contested between Christians and Muslims, the focus in Singapore was rather on a sense of common purpose in addressing issues that affect us equally and inseparably.

This sense was perhaps enhanced by the fact that, although a considerable part of the seminar was devoted to looking at issues of human diversity, it was agreed that this would not include the issue of religious diversity, touched on in earlier seminars; in this seminar, race, culture, and gender were the indices of difference being addressed. Moreover, for the first time in the seminar series, some Qur'anic texts were introduced by Christian scholars, and some biblical texts were introduced by Muslim scholars. This "cross-reading" of texts can be seen as a sign of the collegiality that is possible when faithful believers who have grown to trust and respect one another meet in openness in the presence of their respective scriptures.

Second, this does not mean that the three themes explored here are in themselves anodyne, or that the dialogue around them would proceed based on an easy consensus. On the contrary, all three, in different ways, raise highly topical and massively controversial issues for both Christians and Muslims, and much of the discussion within the seminar was correspondingly robust.

This is perhaps most obvious in relation to the theme of diversity, where gender issues are among the challenges that most sharply divide Christians of differing views and Muslims of differing views. Although it was not addressed in a structured way, the seminar discussion was also conducted with an awareness of the even more contentious issue of differing attitudes to human sexuality. In relation to the environmental theme of guardianship or stewardship, the urgent argument lies perhaps not so much within either Christianity or Islam as in the relation of faiths to the current ecological crisis: how can either faith establish its credibility in offering hope for a sustainable future through the account that it gives of humanity's place in the world? Underlying that account, of course, is the still more primary question, of who humans are designed to be, or whether their being is not in any sense designed. Both Christians and Muslims recognize that an adequate answer to the question of who we are is the key to knowing how

we should live, and both believe that there can be no adequate answer without reference to a good and purposeful God. For many today, that message is greeted with incredulous rejection even as for others it brings purpose and hope.

## Note

1. Records of previous Building Bridges seminars have been published as follows, all edited by Michael Ipgrave: *The Road Ahead: A Christian–Muslim Dialogue* (London: Church House, 2002); *Scriptures in Dialogue: Christians and Muslims Studying the Bible and the Qur'an Together* (London: Church House, 2004); *Bearing the Word: Prophecy in Biblical and Qur'anic Perspective* (London: Church House, 2005); *Building a Better Bridge: Muslims, Christians, and the Common Good* (Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 2008); and *Justice and Rights: Christian and Muslim Perspectives* (Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 2009). For further information on the Building Bridges seminars, see [http://berkeleycenter.georgetown.edu/networks/building\\_bridges](http://berkeleycenter.georgetown.edu/networks/building_bridges).

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