Introduction to this Issue

In our age the most dramatic growth among the religious faiths of the world has been Muslim. Christian leaders and theologians attentive to this global phenomenon have recognized the need to develop adequate models for conceptualizing the relations between Christianity and Islam. Few will deny that the need is urgent in a world the vast majority of whose inhabitants adhere to either of these two faiths. Religious convictions have historically been at least one cause of violent conflict. Mutual understanding and dialogue, as well as practical collaboration between Christians and Muslims are increasingly seen as indispensable to the promotion of justice and order within and between the nations of the world. Some will even go so far as to claim that the survival of our world depends on the peaceful coexistence between these two faiths.

The theme of this issue of *Reformed Review* is Muslim-Christian relations. It is significant that the appearance of the four essays contained in this volume coincides with the beginning of discussions among the members of the RCA's Commission on Christian Unity (COCU) about interfaith dialogue. The COCU has been deliberating on the subject of whether to expand its ecumenical mandate to include relations with other religions. Its members have observed that many RCA congregations are located in communities in which religious pluralism is increasing. As Michael Bos, one of our authors, remarks: "we do not live in a religiously segregated world, and our work and social lives are intertwined with those of people belonging to many faiths." There is a need for educational resources to help these congregations gain a deeper understanding of their co-religionists, the majority of whom are and will be Muslim.

We are persuaded that a serious and thoughtful engagement with the content of the essays we are presenting here will deepen the church's understanding of issues central to Christian-Muslim relations. The authors work out their own answers to hard questions that have long vexed thoughtful Christians. How can Christians proclaim and live the gospel of Jesus Christ without thereby devaluing Muslim views and possibly incurring the hostility of people who embrace those views? How far is it possible or even necessary to overcome the exclusivity that often seems to accompany a firm commitment to Jesus Christ? What dangers does this exclusivity pose, to Christians themselves as well as to Muslims? How can Christians participate in dialogue and cooperation with Muslims while maintaining their own theological integrity on the one hand and respecting that of their partners on the other?

Each of our authors in his own way has given theologically informed responses to these and other questions. Michael Bos proposes a missional ecclesiology that

transcends an "either-or" approach according to which evangelism on the one hand and dialogue and cooperation on the other are seen as mutually exclusive. According to Bos, "missional is a broad concept that does not restrict God's saving concern to personal salvation alone. It encompasses the fullness of God's concern for the renewal of creation and the establishment of the kingdom. It is from this broader sense… that [Christians] are called to confront… anything that diminishes the value of another human being." From this perspective, Christians not only can but ought to collaborate with Muslims or any group to confront pressing social problems as an expression of their loyalty to the kingdom of God that Jesus both proclaimed and embodied.

F. Peter Ford provides a full and substantive study of the history of Muslim-Christian relations in Ethiopia, a history marked more by conflict than concord. But Ford's essay is not only descriptive. In a final section he prescribes a number of strategies that Ethiopian Christians and Muslims should pursue to facilitate harmonious relations between the two faith communities. Ford's historical analysis of the religious life of Ethiopia reveals a comprehensive awareness of how various social, political, and economic forces have contributed to the tensions that exist between Muslims and Christians there. His proposals for the resolution of those tensions can be seen to flesh out many of the theological convictions that inform the paradigm for Christian missions that Bos elaborates.

Lewis Scudder offers a close and intriguing reading of select passages from the *Qur'ân* that deal with the origins of human beings. More precisely, he shows what the *Qur'ân* has to say about the moral fragility of human beings. The object of this reading is to dispel the misconception common among Christians that Islam does not have a theologically adequate doctrine of "sin." By an instructive analysis of several conceptually rich Arabic terms used in the *Qur'ân* to characterize the fallibility of human beings, Scudder provides suggestive points of access for Christian-Muslim dialogue on fundamental questions of theological anthropology.

John Hubers concludes our issue with a fascinating account of the place of Islam in the Christian apocalyptic imagination. The apocalyptic vision is one in which God is seen to vindicate the cause of the elect people in a final and decisive intervention that results in the destruction of their enemies. Muslims have played the role of "enemy" in the Christian apocalyptic imagination during those times when they have been feared as a political and military threat. Huber's essay ends abruptly but perhaps appropriately. The violent consummation of history in the apocalyptic imagination is a stark antithesis to the peaceful relations between Muslims and Christians that our authors envision.

—Christopher Dorn