

## Dancing with Others

Lance D. Laird

**I stood tense on the dance floor, a straight guy in a gay bar in Seattle, trying to feel the beat of the country-western music. “It’s a two-step,” he said, “1-and-2, 1-and-2, 1-and-2; just follow me.” “I’m rhythmically challenged,” I laughed, to excuse my hesitation. As he whirled me around the room, with the muscular grace of a ballet dancer, it was both exhilarating and unnerving. “I bet this makes you feel uncomfortable,” he said. I was trying to get the steps right, to avoid tripping or stepping on his toes; more grateful for his amazing agility as the lead than uncomfortable in this formal embrace with another man.**

“Keep the tension between you,” dance instructors would say to me, “hold the frame.” My wife is quite an elegant ballroom dancer. I frequently struggle with the fear of public humiliation to be able to dance with her. In the past decade, I have co-taught college religion courses with dancers and experimented with improvisational movement. This awkward, stumbling journey to free myself from my head, and to be present in my dancing body, mirrors the larger journey of “holding the frame” and “keeping the tension” in my dance as a Baptist Christian with Muslim partners. For many in my extended biological and faith families, Muslims

are no less dangerous than gay men as dance partners. And this “dancing with Others” has changed the way I dance alone and with my Christian partners.

The eldest son of two ministers—one ordained; the other, female—I grew up in a large Southern Baptist church in Atlanta, Georgia where we divided the world into saved and the unsaved, lost and found. Foreign missionaries were my culture heroes, their slide shows and sermons whetting my appetite for adventure in exotic places, wrestling with demonic forces and ignorance of the gospel. In my church training, I imbibed the conquest narrative of “Bold Mission Thrust,” an effort to “Win Our World” with the gospel of Jesus’ saving power—by the turn of the new millennium. I set out to save my Methodist, Presbyterian, and Catholic friends who were not really Christian yet, “like me.”

I was a teenager of the Cold War era, awed and fascinated by the “evil Empire,” “the Russians,” and the anti-Christian forces behind the “Iron Curtain”—in other words, by “the Others.” Muslims crossed my radar screen in 1979. Black-clad students in Teheran burned effigies of Jimmy Carter, that Baptist advocate for human rights and decency from my home state! “Terrorists” had taken hostages in the US Embassy and had overthrown “our friend, the Shah of Iran.” The anger, vengeance, and fear of this new force of violence and disorder were palpable around me. When I “represented” Iran at a state “high-school model UN” conference, we staged a violent takeover with the PLO!

In order to serve God-and-country, I accepted a Navy scholarship to the University of Virginia to study international relations. I wanted to be a fighter pilot, “shoot Russians out of the sky,” and then work for the State Department to keep the “Others” in check. A clear path, a calling—or so I thought. I studied Russian, physics, naval weaponry, and atheist philosophy my first year. I had a freshman “faith crisis” for a few weeks, then re-accepted Jesus and returned to the evangelical para-church organizations with zeal, ready to lead the fight.

The first shy encounter with those across the dance floor came when our fast frigate docked in Manama, Bahrain. As we left the ship, the commanding officer warned us to avoid talking with people, because they were “Arabs, Muslims and potential PLO operatives” (then labeled the leading terrorist organization of the 1980s). Partly because I had issues with authority, and partly because it was my first trip alone outside the US, I talked to people anyway. And they were friendly, hospitable, fascinating. I peered into a mosque to see if people were making bombs (my hunch), and a guy tapped me on the shoulder and asked if he could help.

Startled, I stammered, “Yeah, uh, what are they doing in there?”

He explained that they were praying.

“To whom?” I asked, summoning up my Sunday school images of pagan idol worshippers.

“To God,” he replied, matter-of-factly.

Not to be outsmarted, I asked, “To which God?” as some are false, you know, like the missionary slides of Hindu “gods.”

“To the only God, the same one you do!”

Humbled by my own ignorance, intrigued by the humanity and generosity of the encounter, afraid of this whole other world, I needed to know. An Islamic history course exposed me to whole civilizations missing from my high school history books. I learned about the rapid expansion of Islam in contemporary Europe, Africa, and even North America in the past half-century. My response was, “Oh my God, they’re taking over the world! And they need Jesus. Here am I, Lord, send me!”

If I was going to be a missionary, I needed to know more about whatever made the lost not only lost but also “hostile” to the “gospel.” I took my first religious studies course in Islam, taught by a Shi`ite scholar from Tanzania who had studied in Iran. I found him both attractive and frightening. I thought he

would be my first convert, so I waltzed into his office regularly.

Aziz Sachedina was one of the most humble, loving, and devout men I had ever known. He prayed five times a day, often making me wait outside his office while he did so. I informed him that he would go to hell if he didn’t believe in Jesus Christ as the Son of God. He told me that God had some special work to do in me. One day, as I sat in my white Navy uniform beside his desk, launching another evangelistic assault on his faith, he looked at me square in the face and said, “Go home, Lance. You have not prayed today, and you need to read your Bible. Then come talk to me.” He knew me, and I was scared. An uncomfortable dance unfolded.

I took every class that Sachedina taught. He helped me discern that I needed to get out of ROTC, and I finally declared a major in religious studies, with a Middle East studies minor. And this professor’s consistent openness and concern for me—that I read my Bible and pray, that I remember God and find God’s will for my life—these violated my stereotypes and scared me to death! I condemned him repeatedly to hell for over two years, and he would usually say, “Lance, I love Jesus more than you think I do. And I’m not sure you know Jesus as well as you think you do.” I was offended, and motivated!

This gentle, graceful, and firm response to my awkward jabs sent me full into the battle. I signed on for a summer mission experience in Cairo with an evangelical agency whose slogan was, “Muslims, it’s their turn!” I was inspired by the radical discipleship of raise-your-own-support missionaries who risked their lives as undercover evangelists behind “the enemy’s” (Satan’s) lines in the Muslim world. Armed with a quick training in the script of “why Islam is wrong, and why the Christian gospel (our version) is right,” we went out two-by-two on the streets of Cairo.

After Egyptian students politely listened to my script for a couple weeks and denied recognizing the “Islam” I was talking about, I got frustrated. I started asking questions about what they meant by “submit to God’s will.” I said less

and listened more. After four hours of listening to one young man's struggle with the demands of his family, his education, his culture, and his honest questions about how to live his faith, he asked, "what do you believe?"

Dancing to his music, he had given me new vocabulary and new questions for talking about and wrestling with my own faith. I had doubts, too, even though I wasn't supposed to. I had no idea why, though I spoke of God's love in Christ as the essence of Christianity, Christians had launched Crusades and colonial conquests throughout the Mediterranean world. I knew little about the history of Christianity in the Middle East, only that it was different and inadequate for salvation.

I returned from the summer changed, with new questions and perspectives on my own life and "tradition." My senior thesis on "the problem of sin in Islam and Christianity" wrestled with the issue of how Muslims could agree that sins were a major human problem, and still reject the need for a "redeemer." I began to see my narrow theological assumptions from someone else's perspective; to realize that how you define the problems of human experience makes a big difference in where you search for solutions. The dance floor began to fill with Muslims, with Catholic and Orthodox Christians, as well as the unfamiliar gods, gurus, buddhas, and shamans I could not yet recognize.

A decade ago, I sat in a living room of a Palestinian imam in Bethlehem, with several local teachers of Qur'an and shari`ah. For several hours, they questioned me about the Trinity, incarnation, salvation, and the reliability of scripture in Christian tradition. They aired stereotyped notions of Christian doctrine and practice, learned from polemical da`wah manuals for sharing Islam with Christians. I tried hard to shift the vocabulary and the debate, to see how our different understandings of God might illumine each others' lives and traditions. They found me strange and "unorthodox," but we shared more than a meal and much laughter. Ten years before this encounter, a young missionary in Cairo, I was converted—not to

Islam, but to Muslims, and to the necessity of dialogue for the working out of my own faith.

I had wanted to do a masters degree in Islamic studies directly after college. My mentor told me, "No. I will not write your recommendation." I protested, and he replied, "You will never understand my tradition until you understand yours better than you do now." So he recommended me for study at a Southern Baptist seminary. I used to joke that everyone else in seminary was sent by God, but I was sent by a Muslim. Actually, what I mean is that God guided me through the wisdom of a Muslim friend.

I set out to know how Christians throughout church history had responded to Islam, whether Christians had ever loved God in such amazing ways as the Sufi "friends of God" I had encountered in my studies. My dance with Islam opened up a whole new world of Christian devotion, the world of ascetics, of love and light mysticism, of Christian spiritual discipline, of Orthodox and Catholic liturgies, and the uniting of body and soul in incarnational worship. I practiced my own faith differently, in partnership and in dialogue with a range of Christian brothers and sisters whom I had previously dismissed as "less than Christian."

Encountering Muslims changed my view of politics. I was raised in a profoundly apolitical Southern Baptist tradition. We spoke of the "Lordship of Christ," by which we meant discerning God's will for your life and making moral choices to reject alcohol, sex, lying, cheating, stealing, and dancing. We wanted individuals to "get saved" and to do good (nice) things for other people. When I encountered the Qur'an and the life of Muhammad, I saw a passion for justice, prophetic condemnations of unfair market practices, tribal feuds, and of the unjust treatment of widows, orphans, and the poor. The Prophet Muhammad's vocation was not merely to save souls but to remind people of God and God's plan for how they ought to live in the world. He strove to transform the ways people operated in the economic, political, and social system of seventh century Arabia. And as I reread the Christian gospels, there was Jesus,

acting like a prophet and talking economics and politics!

Uncomfortable with the cultural and theological sameness of seminarians raised in the Southeastern US, with homogeneous experiences of church, I spent my third year in Switzerland at an international Baptist seminary. There I found Baptists dancing with Italian communists, Brazilian liberation theologians, Burmese and Naga political dissidents, German political and feminist theologians, Australians fighting apartheid in South Africa and reconciling with the stolen generation at home.

Reading Muslim feminists' writings opened me to receive the feminist critiques of the Bible and Christian tradition that I encountered in seminary. To practice God's justice and Christ's Lordship is to struggle to make the whole social order reflect the will of God, not just in terms of personal morality, but in terms of structures that nurture full humanity for all people. Christians and Muslims, throughout our histories, have tended to accept and bless whatever social order and power structure is currently regnant. US Christians can vote for candidates who represent "moral values" of opposition to abortion and gay marriage, and leave in place the social and economic structures that foster poverty, inadequate health care and education, and an ideology of militarism and domination. US Christian support for invasion, colonization, extermination, and the violation of human rights is not new; it's just repackaged today. And many Muslims remember that.

After seminary, my newfound interest in liberation theology and social justice, and my yearning to return to the study of Islam, landed me in the interfaith relations office of the Presbyterian Church (USA), just as the 1991 "Gulf War" confrontation was heating up. My responsibilities included visiting Muslim and Arab leaders throughout the country to discuss the effects of this war on their communities, to explore how the church could help. We produced resources and initiated programs to educate Presbyterian pastors about their Arab and Muslim neighbors, in order to defuse the hatred,

discrimination, and isolation produced by the rhetoric and practice of war.

This experience began to knit together those earlier "callings" from God. I saw an opportunity to understand the meaning of doing everyday theology on the ground in the struggle of Palestinian Christians and Muslims to defuse and resist military occupation. In a circuitous way, I felt God (contra the commanding officer) calling me to enter into intimate dialogue with "Arabs, Muslims, and potential PLO operatives."

I found a new way of seeing religious traditions in relationship to each other. People, myself included, make choices to read, do, believe certain parts of their tradition more than other parts—under different conditions and at different times in their lives. Contrary to Latin American, South African, and American black theologians' reading of the Exodus story to show a liberating God in solidarity with the oppressed, many Palestinian Christians found this and Joshua's conquest narrative being used as theological justification for their dispossession. They had to make different choices. I figured that the presence of Muslims, with whom Palestinian Christians have lived for centuries, and with whom they share the experience of occupation, may shape those choices. What is it that happens in the relationship "between" religious communities and individuals? I found in these spaces of "interreligion," as scholar Steven Wasserstrom calls them, a sharing of symbols and stories across boundaries. Muslims could borrow the story of Jesus' crucifixion to describe their own oppression; Christians borrowed the Muslim language of martyrdom to make sense of the loss of Christian youth in the intifadah; Christians and Muslims venerated two saints, the Christian Saint George and the Muslim Khidr, as one figure, who heals, protects, even fights off the enemy. The complexity of these borrowings, the contexts in which people shared them, and the relationships they expressed—these fascinated me. Witnessing this Palestinian folk dance further liberated my understanding of what being and becoming Christian means. Our bodies feel the music around us, and they

improvise new dances with traditional forms and flights of invention.

When I finished my doctoral work in comparative religion at Harvard Divinity School, a bastion of traditional scholarship, I began teaching at the alternative Evergreen State College in Olympia, Washington; with no grades, no majors, no departments—free range education! I was privileged to team-teach with faculty in several fields, to engage students in interdisciplinary exploration of important questions, to explore with my community the political and personal struggles in which we lived. I realized that my soul had been starved by the years of intellectual discipline to analyze and critique, that my training in religion was still very much focused on “essential texts and doctrines,” and that my emotional and physical life had atrophied.

A friend invited me to a “play group” for adults, introducing me to improvisational movement, storytelling, and song; and there was no “right way” to do it. I knew somewhere deep inside that I needed to explore this embodied spirit. My last two years at the college, I taught in interdisciplinary programs with a dancer and an animator (on ritual, gesture, and movement), and a dancer and psychologist (on body, mind, soul). My colleagues in dance showed me how students can “know” with their bodies what they may not “know” in their essays. One of my most satisfying teaching experiences was watching students dance their own choreographed versions of an “illness narrative” they had collected through ethnographic interviews with relatives.

When my wife was called to pastor a small Baptist church in Boston, we moved our family back east. I found temporary work doing medical anthropology research on Muslim communities in Boston. I remembered how my

ethnographic work on Muslim organizations in New England had added life to the textual and theological investigations of my graduate work. I found that the regular exposure to ordinary believers—still figuring out their path, or trying to convert me, or creating innovative responses to the needs of immigrants, prisoners, the plight of Muslims abroad and the poor at home—compelled me to question, not only Islamic studies scholarship, but also my own faith. It had been the dance with Muslims, without knowing I was dancing, that kept much of my spirit alive. And dancing is more fun when you do not realize you are dancing—then you are just living.

So this is my vocation. In so many ways, it is this dance with others—of another race (like my adopted children), of another language, of another religion, of another country, of another sexual orientation—that has given life and breath to my journey of faith. I know my own tradition, for good and ill, through the witness of these “others.” I struggle with who should be “leading” in more formal encounters, with how much to improvise. But it is the mutual witness of partners in this very human dance through suffering and sadness, joy and liberation that keeps me swinging, shaping, hanging, and thrusting in the arms of a dancing God.

**Lance Laird** received his BA in religious studies with a focus on Islam from the University of Virginia in 1986. He studied Christian theology at Baptist seminaries in Kentucky and Switzerland, earning an MDiv in 1989. Dr. Laird completed his ThD in comparative religion at the Harvard Divinity School in 1998. Dr. Laird's main research focus has been religion and nationalism as well as Islamic identities in the US. Dr. Laird has also worked with the Presbyterian Church (USA) and the Church Council of Greater Seattle on interfaith dialogue and research efforts as well as with the Pluralism Project at Harvard University. He lives in Jamaica Plain with his wife and three children

