



at San Diego State when I taught there and even the Theology Department at Loyola University Chicago is

the position from which Muslims will interact. This rhetorical model highlights a different set of issues from Diana Eck's contextual categories of dialogues as parliamentary, institutional, theological, dialogue in community/life, spiritual dialogue, or dialogue in silence (internal),<sup>1</sup> though it is at the same time not incompatible with that formulation.

I note that here I am exclusively analyzing contexts in which Muslim participants represent the minority and those who are assumed to be unfamiliar and less known, if not the oppressed and misunderstood.<sup>2</sup> This element of being the "unfamiliar" may not always be the case in actuality, since the fact of living in America does not mean that Muslim participants in dialogue have made any particular effort to learn about the other religions. Still, minority status

contemporary literature in philosophy and cultural criticism in which this term is used. Speech act theory, the seminal work of J. L. Austin, *How to Use Language*, in particular, is a major source about the performative.<sup>4</sup> The relationships between words, actions, and the contexts in which utterances are made are central components of this theory. According to Austin, the performative element of speech is the effect that it has on the hearer, but this effectiveness occurs in a broader context than the explicit content of the words uttered. Utterances themselves may be illocutionary or perlocutionary. Illocutionary utterances are those that “when saying, do what they say, and do it in the moment of that saying,” hence amounting to deeds.<sup>5</sup> Perlocutionary utterances lead to certain effects that are not the same as the speech act itself.

The distinctive aspect of such performative utterances is that they do not merely name, they also perform what they are naming and represent it at the same time. Further, as one scholar of religion and ritual theory notes, the concept of performance enables analysts to overcome the mind-body dichotomy,<sup>6</sup> since the effect of such speech act arises from conventional elements beyond the words themselves and includes the embodied context in which they are uttered. A key issue of performativity developed in subsequent discussions is the acknowledgement of the role played by power. It has even been claimed that “one who speaks the performative effectively is understood to operate according to uncontested power,”<sup>7</sup> for “performativity requires a power to effect or enact what it names.”<sup>8</sup> Performative utterances, according to Austin, succeed if the authority of the speaker is assumed. His now famous examples of such utterances are usually ones of ceremony or legal ritual, such as a marriage contract being recognized as official when performed in the correct and expected context.

In the case of religious dialogue, this example led me to reflect on how Muslim roles in such dialogues are often tied to claiming the authority to represent Islam. This seems to be on the one hand a move toward self-empowerment, which is made simultaneously with a defensiveness born of feeling disempowered as a minority representative in the Western context, or with a sense of contesting what the presenter feels are general non-Muslim misperceptions about Islam. This is significant if we imagine the Christian participants as being unlikely, at least initially, to be overly concerned that their position or theology may be misunderstood. This, in turn, lessens the need for a performative quality in their contributions.

I think that the role of Muslims in performing interfaith dialogue brings out certain aspects discussed in the theory of performative utterances — for example, the claim to authority arising from convention and ritual, the failures or disjunctions of performance, and the possibility of subversion.

**P**e . . . **L** . . . **C** . . . **e** **e** **C** . . . **e**









I have some personal reactions to this incident. The fact that it was a panel in a classroom may have encouraged the students to exercise critical thought. Had it been a homily in the mosque by a bearded shaykh, no one would have posed such questions. The authoritarianism of our Muslim religious spaces encourages hierarchical performances — not only in interfaith dialogues but in our practices — such as the ritual of returning to a mosque where we know the Friday the sermon is going to be objectionable.

**Performance**

Even the Council of Islamic Organizations interfaith fast-breaking dinner (*Ifa*) was more of a performance than a dialogue. The performance was initiated by Muslims doing something — breaking their fast. After the call to sunset prayer (*agh ib adha*), the Muslim women rushed upstairs — it's a big place, so imagine more than 150 women — and began to pray. I was painfully aware of the Christian female guests coming upstairs and awkwardly watching us pray; no one had been delegated to explain to them what was going on. Should they watch, join in, stay in the back, etc.? I felt ashamed and awkward.

In summary, I think our Muslim penchant for performance in dialogue arises from both internal and external factors. The non-Muslim majority expects us to be exotic — to look different and to act differently. Islam is after all orthopraxic and performance is usually safe as it maintains authority, control, and hierarchy.

We need to reconsider, however, whether performance is a genuine and effective mode of dialogue with non-Muslims and of enacting our own experience as Muslims. In some ways it has a defensive quality of asserting our difference and reinforcing our otherness. It also perpetuates canons of authority within the Muslim community by masking individuality. At the same time, the examples that I have given indicate that on occasion the embodied context of interfaith dialogue can become an unpredictable space that challenges the conventions of Muslim performance in unexpected ways, thereby opening the way to new understandings and interpretations.

**Endnotes**

1. Charles Kimball, *Seeing Things as They Are: A Faithful Christian-Muslim Dialogue* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1991), 87.
2. C. M. Naim, "Some Thoughts on Christian Muslim Dialogues," *A Big Issue for Everyone: Faith and Politics* (Karachi: City Press, 1999), 188–9.
3. C. M. Naim, 189.
4. J. L. Austin, *How to Do Things with Words* 2d ed. (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1975).

5. Judith Butler *Excitable Subject: A Politics of the Performative* (New York: Routledge, 1997), 3.
6. Catherine Bell, "Performance" in Mark C. Taylor (ed.) *Critical Theory and Religious Studies* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 206.
7. Butler