

Some Aspects of Christian Theologizing in Relation to Islam

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In my remarks I will be concentrating on the theological aspects of Christian self-understanding and Muslim-Christian encounter in pluralist—principally Western—situations. Much of this will have broader application, but it is important, I think, to note the particularities of situations rather than to propose a one-size-fits-all approach. I acknowledge that a theological dialogue, even if it were to yield some increased measure of understanding of our differences, will not resolve the issues that lead to tension and conflict between Muslims and Christians. Nonetheless, to speak of Christian self-understanding without including theology seems to me impossible. This is particularly important in a Western situation, where there is a tendency, or perhaps a temptation, to think of Muslims principally in terms of social and political categories without recognizing their religious commitments.

Another Religion?

In the Middle East (though not always in other Muslim-majority environments, like Pakistan, for example) Christians have a strong awareness of Islam as being not an exotic “other religion” but as being a post-Christian and quite novel reading of the Judeo-Christian tradition. The dialogue is therefore qualitatively different from what it tends to be in more pluralist situations, especially in the West.

It is important to understand that our theological dialogue is not simply the polite study of the exotic beliefs and customs, some of them strangely familiar, of a foreign people—as it might be, for example, with Hindus, Buddhists or Jains. Rather that dialogue is a sometimes quite lively disagreement about how to “read” and understand the history of God’s engagement with humanity from the creation of Adam and Eve, through Noah, Abraham, Isaac, Ishmael, David, Solomon, right up to Jesus and beyond—a history we both, along with the Jews, see as our own.

This is the question of whether and to what extent it is correct to approach

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Islam as another religion. Islam did not, indeed does not, present itself as a new religion, but rather as the re-establishment of the original religion that has existed from the beginning, and of which Judaism and Christianity are examples—even if Islam holds that they have needed to be purified of certain extraneous elements. Islam could be seen as a reform movement within the Judeo-Christian world of its time, a movement that proposes a substantial re-reading of the Abrahamic, Mosaic, Christian tradition that had developed in biblical and post-biblical literature and practice. For believing Muslims, it is not simply a human reform movement, but God's reform—first as a restoration of what Arab religion had disfigured of Abrahamic cult, and second as a warning to Christians and Jews that their grasp of and adherence to the revelation God had given them was seriously lacking.

Precisely because of this, the faith of Muslims has a very particular claim on the theological attention of both Christians and Jews. Most Jews have come to accept gracefully the idea that Christianity, with its radically alternative reading of the biblical tradition and the figure of Jesus of Nazareth, is not going to fade away. So too we Christians may have to accommodate ourselves to the idea not only that Islam as a religion is not going to fade away, but that it will remain a lively challenger of our reading of the Jesus event, and will call us to an ever clearer expression of our faith.

Categories of Discourse

In the pluralist situation of many Western countries it is quite common to make the various religions fit into a kind of standard schema with pre-determined categories: founder, scripture, leadership, symbols, feasts, dress, laws and practices, food and fasting, ceremonies, ideals etc. In terms of Islam and Christianity, this leads to a category mistake which parallels Qur'an and Gospel, Jesus and Muhammad. It is important to understand the correct parallels in order to recognize the specificity of each tradition. I propose the notion of the Word (*not* in the first place scripture) as the common term around which we can build an understanding of our specificities.

It is essential in order to understand the relationship of the Abrahamic traditions that we get our categories right. The most important common belief our traditions share is that the Word of God has been spoken in our world—the eternal divine word that is of the very essence of God. One might say that the thing that distinguishes our three traditions from each other is where we believe we can hear most definitively that Word of God. This has often led to a competition over the relative value of each other's prophets and scriptures, but this is a category mistake and leads to a theological dead end.

For a Jew, the Word of God has been spoken in a privileged way at Sinai, and thus in the Torah, understood not only as the Five Books of Moses, but as the whole edifice of rabbinic reflection and study right up until our own day.

For a Muslim, God has spoken His word in Arabic in the Qur'an—and indeed in other languages in earlier scriptures. For Christians, on the other hand, God's word is spoken not primarily in words but, as John says in his prologue, in the *flesh*—in 'body language' as it were.² The words of scripture, then, are not simply the words of God, but words written by the believing community inspired by the Spirit in order to put us in touch with the capital-w Word that they had experienced in the flesh. As John puts it at the beginning of his first letter, what he is writing is "about the Word of life," and that Word was able not just to be heard but touched and seen (1John 1:1). For Christians, Scripture is not simply revelation itself as it is for a Muslim. It is in the first place the *witness to* revelation, and then is revelation in a derivative sense.

Although Muslims may see Jesus and the Gospel as being parallel to Muhammad and the Qur'an, Christians do not see things this way. We need to avoid being drawn into a discourse of Prophets and Books which ultimately leads us into a theological dead-end. What Jesus is for the Christian, the Qur'an (*not* Muhammad) is for Muslims. What Muhammad is for Muslims (the human channel through which the Word of God entered the world), Mary could be said to be for Christians.³ Of course, that Mary role does not exhaust the reality of who Muhammad is for Muslims. He is also a Moses figure, as the leader of the community and its lawgiver. He is like Constantine in having united religious and political authority in his own person.

Getting these categories wrong leads many into proposing a kind of trade-off: "I would be prepared to lower my claims about Jesus to something nearer your claims for Muhammad, if you would just lower your claims about the Qur'an and treat it the way we treat the gospels." This trade-off might be thought of as a 'lowered' Christology⁴ in exchange for a 'lowered' Qur'an-ology, or what we could call a Jesus-Seminar approach to Christ in return for a trenchantly historical-critical approach to the Qur'an. This is what Hans Küng sometimes seems to be hoping for, or even demanding, when he deals with Muslims—something to restore some balance to the schema of prophets and scriptures outlined above.⁵

² I have dealt with this in more detail in "People of the Word: Reading John's Prologue with a Muslim." *Review and Expositor* 104.1 (Winter 2007): 81–95.

³ See Daniel A. Madigan, "Mary and Muhammad: Bearers of the Word" *Australasian Catholic Record* 80 (2003) 417-427. For a Muslim view of this idea, see Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *Ideals and Realities of Islam* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1966; Second edition Unwin Paperbacks, 1979) 43.

⁴ I am certainly not alone in thinking that a distinction between so-called 'high' and 'low' Christologies has been overdrawn and is ultimately unhelpful. I use this shorthand here without intending to affirm that simplistic schema.

⁵ See, for example, Hans Küng, *Christianity and the World Religions* (London: Fount, 1987) 33-36, 122-130.

Muslims as Theological Interlocutors

Western and Asian theologies, for all the pluralism of their contexts, have not, by and large, taken Islam as a significant interlocutor in the way Eastern churches have, though even there not a great deal of progress has been made since the first couple of centuries of Arabic theological writing. In the West, although there has been recent growth in comparative theology and theology of religions, our discourse is still substantially carried on with an eye to those who do not believe, rather than those who believe differently. Thus there is a need to recognize the increasing presence of Muslims in our theological (and catechetical) contexts and to take seriously the long-standing Islamic critique of Christianity. I say this not in order to suggest that we should let go of the key elements of the Christian *kerygma* in order to develop a lowest-common-denominator theology that any monotheist believer at all could subscribe to. No, rather it is to recognize that we have yet to find a way to express these central elements in a way that is convincing or even understandable to a fifth of the world's population.

My own experience of teaching Christian theology to Muslims over the last decade, for the most part in the West, has convinced me that taking seriously their questions and perplexities leads us, by God's grace, deeper into the particularity of our faith. It has convinced me, furthermore, that it is possible to make some progress in finding new expressions of our faith which are accessible to Muslims but nonetheless faithful to Christian tradition.

The Two Big Ones

It is essential for Christian self-understanding to recover the centrality of the Incarnation and Trinity, but at the same time to find more fruitful ways of expressing them for a Muslim audience. Given what I have already pointed out about the parallel between Jesus and the Qur'ân—and this was underlined yesterday by Charles Amjad Ali—it seems to me that a robustly Johannine, high-descending, Logos-Christology is, perhaps contrary to expectation, a more promising point of departure for a theology responsive to Islam, than are the low-ascending Christologies often adopted as being most appropriate to interfaith engagement.

Low-ascending Christologies have the tendency to confirm Muslims in their belief that what Christians are up to is the elevation of a merely human messenger to the divine plane where he has no place. Interestingly, the Islamic theological tradition in its reflection on the Qur'ân as the Word of God had to grapple with a number of issues that quite parallel those that emerged in the Christological controversies of the early centuries of our own tradition. These became issues precisely because the Muslim community professed that what might seem to others a merely human text was actually a divine revelation, which, to use a Qur'anic as well as Johannine turn of phrase, had come down

from heaven, sent by God. Questions about the relationship of God's Word to God's self, about the relationship between the obviously human and historically conditioned elements of the text and its divinity, about the eternity or otherwise of this word – all these exercised the theologians of both our traditions.

High-descending Logos christologies are not in vogue at the moment, and it may be that the encounter with Muslim faith and the need to “give an account of the hope that is in us” may help us recover some more recently discounted aspects of our core tradition.

All of this involves Muslims coming to recognize that some of their own theological positions appear settled not because they reached a point of equilibrium but only because the exploration of them was cut short due to a growing sense of the futility of speculative theology and its methods. If we can share with Muslims our own theological perplexities—those that led us to the authoritative definitions, and those that still keep us exploring those definitions centuries later—they sometimes come to see that we are “in the same boat” theologically. That is, we are both in a position of having to account for the series of questions and apparent contradictions that arise from the shared basic affirmation that the eternal and transcendent God has spoken a word—God's own Word—in and to our world. They come to realize that for both of us the appropriate response to the Word we perceive has been given us by God is not a sceptical analysis but the obedience of faith.

A satisfactory Logos-Christology gives us a first opening into a more accessible theology of the Trinity because Muslim theology has already settled on an expression about God's Word (*kalâm* in Arabic) to the effect that it is an essential attribute of God, which although it is not simply identical with God, is nothing other than divine. In the classic Arabic formulation, *la 'aynuhu wa-la ghayruhu*. That is a paradox which to my mind is almost identical to the one John leaves us with in the very first verse of his Gospel.⁶ However, our approach to Trinitarian questions will begin from the experience of the economy of the trinity rather than from speculation about the internal life of the immanent trinity.

Muslim belief in the ongoing and immediate divine creativity in the world provides a basis for reflecting with them on our belief in the Spirit. For both our traditions God is absolutely transcendent and therefore distinct from creation, and yet at the same time God recreating and sustaining the world at every moment, since the world is incapable of guaranteeing and maintaining its own existence.

Much has been written in recent decades—though perhaps not yet

⁶ See “People of the Word,” 81–95; and also “Gottes Botschaft an die Welt: Christen und Muslime, Jesus und der Koran.” *Communio* 32.1 (2003): 100–12. A slightly enlarged English version will appear as “God's Word to the World: Jesus and the Qur'an, Incarnation and Recitation.” In Terence Merrigan and Frederik Glorieux (eds.), *Godhead here in hiding: Incarnation and the history of human suffering*. Leuven: Peeters, forthcoming.

enough—about the difficulties raised by the term “person” in our Trinitarian proclamations, and this deserves much more study.⁷ Since in the West we have been engaged in a largely internal theological conversation for so many centuries in this area, we have not benefited from a careful listening to the Muslim critique of or even simply their puzzlement at our Trinitarian language. I have found in teaching mixed groups, that the questions the Muslim students are prepared to voice also perplex the Christian students, though they are hesitant to express them. It seems to me therefore that the effort required to develop a theology responsive to Muslims will have also in this area a benefit for the Christian community itself.

Generic Religion

In the Western pluralist context that finds itself having to systematize a range of traditions, religions tend to be reduced to varying schemes of rituals and actions to be carried out, and of prohibitions to be observed in order to keep oneself on the right side of God. Therefore, traditions tend to be compared on the basis of their ethical standards and ritual observances. In this case the specificity of Christianity tends to get lost altogether. The God who takes the initiative in justifying us, that is in putting us in right relationship with Him; the God who bears the full force of our refusal and who pays the price of making himself vulnerable—even physically vulnerable—to our rejection is lost behind the mask of that object of cult and enforcer of ethics that is the generic god of generic religion. The God who so loves us as to enter into the depths of our humanity and suffer the injustices and indignities to which all flesh is subject; the God who can bid us peace and raise in blessing a hand that still bears the wounds we helped inflict by our betrayals, denials and abandonment; this God risks being lost in the shuffle of generic religion, where the “name above all other names” becomes simply a brand name, a trade mark—a catchy label for a product otherwise indistinguishable from the dozens of its competitors.

Christian self-understanding can be immeasurably enriched in the encounter with this tradition that bears in its very foundation a critique of our faith. Yet we would be wrong to set up the contrast between us too sharply. Just as Christians are able to lose sight of the uniqueness of the Gospel, others are able to catch sight of it.⁸ The Word and the Spirit are at their saving work everywhere and we are called to bear witness to them wherever they are active. Experience teaches us that there are indeed Muslims who, not in spite of

⁷ See, for example, Karl Rahner, “The Oneness and Threefoldness of God in Discussion with Islam,” in *Theological Investigations, Volume XVIII: God and Revelation* (New York, NY: Crossroads, 1978): 105-121, particularly 110-114. Also Nicholas Lash, *Believing Three Ways in One God: a reading of the Apostle’s Creed* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1993), 30-33.

⁸ I deal with this issue at greater length in “Yahya bin Zakariya, Giovanni Battista e il Culmine della Profezia.” In Giuseppe Palummieri (ed.), *Un profeta e tre religioni: Giovanni Battista nei Monoteismi*. Trapani: Il Pozzo di Giacobe, 2008.

their Islam but because of it, are oriented with us to the Reign of God, who, though not explicitly, are *de facto* configured to Christ, whether in their patient suffering of injustice, in their loving and forgiving, in their gracious generosity, in their humble service, or in their obedience to God.