



# 52 CURRENT DIALOGUE

July 2012

**Special Issue: Christian Self-Understanding in the Context of Islam**

---

Editorial	
<b>Clare Amos</b>	<b>2</b>
Introduction	
<b>Rima Barsoum</b>	<b>3</b>
Report of the Intra-Christian Consultation on Christian Self-Understanding in the Context of Islam	<b>5</b>
Living as a Community with Islam: Concerns, Challenges and Promises	
<b>Aram I</b>	<b>20</b>
The Holy Spirit in the World: The Tension of the Particular with the Universal	
<b>Emmanuel Clapsis</b>	<b>29</b>
On Lutheran Theology and Practice in Relation to Islam	
<b>Simone Sinn</b>	<b>42</b>
Some Aspects of Christian Theologizing in Relation to Islam	
<b>Daniel A. Madigan, S.J.</b>	<b>50</b>
A Relational Theology in Dialogue with Islam	
<b>Oddbjørn Leirvik</b>	<b>55</b>
A Theology of Christian-Muslim Relations: An Arab Christian Perspective	
<b>Georges Massouh</b>	<b>60</b>
Historical and Political Context of Christian-Muslim Relations in Pakistan: Challenges to Missiological and Theological Vocation	
<b>Charles Amjad-Ali</b>	<b>63</b>
“Christ is Our Reconciliation” Icon: The Story of Jacob and Esau	
<b>Clare Amos</b>	<b>74</b>

---

ISSN 1814-2230

Current Dialogue can be found on:

[www.oikoumene.org/en/programmes/interreligiousdialogue/current-dialogue/magazine.html](http://www.oikoumene.org/en/programmes/interreligiousdialogue/current-dialogue/magazine.html)

## Editorial

As with the previous (December 2011) issue of *Current Dialogue* the present issue of the journal focuses on one of the intra-Christian consultations held over the last few years, exploring Christian self-understanding in relation to a particular faith – in this case Islam. The Islam consultation, held in October 2008 at Chavannes de Bogis, near Geneva, was, in fact, the first of the series of meetings to explore Christian self-understanding in the context of a specific faith (to be followed by consultations relating to Buddhism in December 2009; Judaism in June 2010; Hinduism in October 2011; Indigenous religions in February 2012). Partly because it was the first in this series a number of the papers at this consultation in relation to Islam also explore wider aspects of Christian interreligious engagement.

October 2008 was exactly a year after the publication by a group of 138 Muslim scholars of the historic document *A Common Word*, which invited Christians to engage with Muslims on the basis of their sacred commitment to ‘Love of God and Love of Neighbour’. This document, and potential Christian response to it, was therefore a theme that surfaced in a number of the papers and discussions which took place at the consultation. The consultation itself was jointly sponsored both by the World Council of Churches and the group which brings together the Christian World Communions (CWC). It was a mark of the importance of the topic, and the widespread interest in it, that had led these two bodies working together – leading both to an extensive group of people present at the consultation, and the potential for the impact of it to be widely disseminated.

It is interesting therefore to now look back at *A Common Word* from the perspective of almost five years on. As well as the intellectual engagement with the document which is still continuing, though perhaps at a lower intensity than in the immediate aftermath of its publication, the premise of the document, that love of God cannot be separated from love of neighbour has undergirded a number of more practical initiatives which have taken place since then. One of these has been the recent high-level Christian-Muslim delegation to Nigeria, jointly organised by the World Council of Churches and the Royal Jordanian Aal al-Bayt Institute, which visited that country in May 2012, seeking to engage with its very difficult realities. We were attempting to model through our visit the importance of Christians and Muslims working together to overcome religious conflict. We are still working through the findings and results of that visit – but we intend that it will result in some practical suggestions to take forward.

In putting together these papers for publication in *Current Dialogue* I want to express my deep gratitude to Rima Barsoum, first for the tremendous amount of work she put in to ensuring the happening of the consultation which generated them, and for her cooperation in enabling these papers to come to press.

Finally, I am grateful to those of you who have made clear their appreciation of the fact that *Current Dialogue* has now resumed publication after an unintended gap. Our plan is to ensure that for the foreseeable future the journal will appear twice a year, in June/July and December/January.

Clare Amos

*Programme Coordinator, Interreligious Dialogue and Cooperation*

---

## Introduction to the Special Edition of Current Dialogue: Christian Self-Understanding in Relation to Islam

Rima Barsoum

One common definition of theology is “faith seeking understanding.” This phrase is especially associated with the writings of St Anselm of Canterbury and St Augustine of Hippo, implying that the knowledge of God presupposes faith, and faith restlessly seeks deeper understanding of God and God’s relation to the world. It was in this spirit of seeking deeper understanding that the ecumenical family has engaged in a series of ecumenical theological consultations over the past few years re-exploring the question of Christian self-understanding, and therefore Christian ministry, in a world of many religions.

Recognizing earlier signposts in exploring this particular question throughout the history of the modern ecumenical movement, the Porto Alegre Assembly of the World Council of Churches (WCC) in 2006 stressed the importance of the issue. Member churches agreed to strengthen their common efforts in the area of interreligious dialogue and cooperation, encouraging theological reflection and practical commitment to dialogue.

Between 2007 and 2008, three key elements converged that helped in putting this process on track – and led to the major milestone of the 2008 WCC consultation on Christian self-understanding in relation to Islam:

1. The unprecedented opportunity and momentum for Christian-Muslim dialogue represented in the invitation of *A Common Word*, addressed to the ecumenical family by a group of 138 Muslim scholars, to engage in joint ethical and theological dialogue for the common good;
2. The *enabling ecumenical platform* established by the joint initiative of the Christian World Communions (CWC), the World Evangelical Alliance (WEA) and the WCC to carry forward the journey of ecumenical theological reflection and interreligious dialogue; and
3. Taking into consideration that the letter of *A Common Word* did not address concrete challenges arising from various contexts, the WCC involvement in accompanying churches in situations of conflict (particularly in Pakistan, Iraq and Sri Lanka) provided *an appropriate framework* for focusing the ecumenical discussion on specific contextual realities of Christian communities living in multi-religious societies, yet experiencing challenges related to their minority status, freedom religion, or being caught up in the middle of conflict.

These three dimensions gave an impetus to taking the process of theological reflection further, at the same time keeping it grounded in the contextual experience of churches living in multi-religious community. Hence, the presentations and discussions during the consultation corresponded to deepening theological conversations in relation to:

- understanding God’s invitation to us to be good neighbours, especially in dialogue with Muslims;
- the importance of doing this ecumenically;
- “living-in-community with Muslims” as the real objective of a frank and serious Christian-Muslim dialogue.

The present issue of *Current Dialogue* contains some of the papers presented at the consultation, a summary report of all other presentations and the Listeners’ Report that sums

up the discussion, offers recommendations and communicates the points of consensus that were achieved during the Consultation on Christian Self-Understanding in Relation to Islam, held in Geneva, 18-20 October 2008.

The process did not end there; it continued with a number of smaller consultations and informal discussions with Christian theologians and experts on dialogue with Islam, which will later on contribute to a wider, and renewed, WCC statement on the Christian Self-Understanding and Religious Plurality, to be presented to the next WCC Assembly in Busan, South Korea, in 2013.

Interreligious relations and theological articulations of faith have often been shaped in response to the context in which communities live and interact; the richness of theological approaches and statements of faith derived from a variety of ecumenical and interreligious contexts has nurtured and sustained the ecumenical family in its continuous theological endeavour as “faith seeking understanding.”

It has been my privilege to contribute to this process until 2010, bringing in my own contextual experience of living with Muslims in the Arab world, at the same time learning from the diversity of experiences within the ecumenical family. I would like to conclude by thanking the WCC team on Interreligious Dialogue and Cooperation and Clare Amos for taking the process of theological reflection further to new levels of elaboration and new areas of exploration, particularly in relation to indigenous religious traditions, and for enabling the publication of this special issue of *Current Dialogue*.

Geneva, May 2012

---

---

**Rima Barsoum** was an organizer of the 2008 consultation and facilitator of the WCC process on Christian self-understanding in relation to Islam between 2007 and 2010.

*She holds an M.Phil. in Interreligious Relations from the University of Birmingham, UK. Specialized in Christian-Muslim relations, her research focused on issues of religion and politics, the role of religion in development, and Christian presence in the Middle East.*

*Between 2007 and 2011 she served as a Programme Executive for Interreligious Dialogue and Cooperation, with responsibility for Christian-Muslim relations, in the World Council of Churches (WCC), Geneva. Earlier, between 2000 and 2004, she served as a programme coordinator for Youth & Globalization and for Christian-Muslim Dialogue in the Middle East Council of Churches (MECC).*

*Rima is currently engaged in a research and study programme at the Graduate Institute of International and Development Studies, Geneva, focusing on international relations and negotiations.*

*(For contact: [Rima.Barsoum@graduateinstitute.ch](mailto:Rima.Barsoum@graduateinstitute.ch))*

---

## **A Report of the Intra-Christian Consultation on Christian Self-Understanding in Relation to Islam**

**Geneva, 18-20 October 2008**

### **Introduction**

In October 2008, an intra-Christian consultation co-sponsored by the Joint Consultative Commission (JCC) of the World Council of Churches (WCC) and Christian World Communions (CWC) explored questions related to Christian self-understanding in relation to religious plurality, with special focus on Christian self-understanding in relation to Islam and Christian-Muslim dialogue.

The two-day consultation, held at the Hotel Chavannes de Bogis near Geneva, was attended by fifty people, including both experts in Christian-Muslim dialogue and Christian leaders who represented the fellowship of WCC member churches, the World Evangelical Alliance (WEA) and a variety of CWCs, including the Roman Catholic Church.

This consultation was facilitated jointly by the WCC Programme on Interreligious Dialogue and Cooperation and the Programme on Church and Ecumenical Relations. The Joint Consultative Commission of the WCC and CWCs appointed a steering group to prepare the consultation. The group included representatives from the Anglican Communion, the Lutheran World Federation, the WEA and the WCC.

### **Ecumenical reflection on dialogue with Islam**

Christian-Muslim relations have been an issue since the historical rise of Islam, more than fourteen centuries ago. The complex history has been characterized in many cases by constructive living together, but sometimes also marked by rivalry or war. Both the practical living together of individuals and communities of

the two faiths, and theological challenges, including both questions of Christian self-identity and self-expression in relation to Islam as well as questions relating to understanding the significance of Islam, have engaged Christians through the centuries. It is clear that the nature of the relationships between the two communities has been reflected also in their mutual theological thinking.

From the beginning of the WCC there has been an awareness of people of other faiths and a continuous ecumenical process of reflection on interreligious relations and their meaning for Christian identity and self-understanding. In 1966 a group of Christian theologians met for the first time in Broumana, Lebanon, to discuss and reflect on relationships with Muslims. A series of Christian-Muslim dialogue encounters began officially in 1969 in Cartigny, Switzerland – two years before a WCC sub-unit for Dialogue with People of Living Faiths and Ideologies (DFI) was established in 1971. Since then, ecumenical reflection among Christians on dialogue with Islam has continued to raise many theological and pastoral questions for WCC member churches. Various member churches and ecumenical partners have set up syllabi/curricula, study centres and commissions for Christian-Muslim relationships to encourage theological and practical commitment to dialogue on the basis of sound knowledge and sensitive understanding of Islam.

Reflection on Christian self-understanding and the theological approach to religious plurality has been on the agenda of the WCC many times, reaching a level of consensus in 1989 and 1990, but in recent

years it has been felt that this difficult and controversial issue needed to be revisited. The Porto Alegre Assembly of the WCC in 2006 brought this issue into focus again when member churches agreed to strengthen their common efforts in the area of interreligious dialogue and cooperation, and engage seriously with ecumenical theological reflection exploring what it means to be a Christian in a world of many religions.

### **The context of the WCC-CWCs consultation**

This renewed focus coincided with new initiatives for dialogue from the Muslim world which have offered significant opportunities for the WCC member churches to deepen their ecumenical Christian theological understanding of dialogue with Islam and to work together in promoting dialogue and cooperation between Christians and Muslims. One such initiative is known as *A Common Word*; in October 2007 over 138 Muslim scholars and leaders authored an open letter entitled *A Common Word* on the need for interfaith understanding and respect between Christians and Muslims, calling for renewed theological exploration in Christian-Muslim relations. The letter was addressed to a wide variety of churches and Christian leaders and generated lively and deep discussions between Christians and Muslims around the world about the “Love of God” and “Love of Neighbour”. This was followed in 2008 and 2009 by the Global Initiative for Dialogue, initiated by the Custodian of the two Holy Mosques, King Abdullah bin Abdul Aziz of Saudi Arabia in Madrid, New York and Geneva, which also introduced new opportunities for deepening and strengthening dialogue and cooperation between Christians and Muslims.

In response to the invitation of *A Common Word*, the World Council of Churches, delegated by its Central Committee in February 2008, initiated an ecumenical process of response which began by producing a commentary entitled “Learning to Explore Love Together”,

whose aim was to assist churches in their reflection on the letter and in sharing their experience of the love of God and love of neighbour in their respective contexts. Several responses to the open letter from churches, councils of churches, CWCs and the WEA have identified some of the theological issues of common concern that Christians and Muslims need to reflect upon together during the years ahead.

The ecumenical process of response was reinforced by the joint initiative of CWCs and the WCC to continue the journey of reflection and dialogue together. The JCC, during its meeting in May 2008, proposed to co-sponsor a consultation that would further explore questions related to Christian self-understanding and self-expression in relation to Islam within the ecumenical family. The consultation would also look at implications for Christian-Muslim dialogue today, underlining the importance for people in both faith communities to learn more about each other and from each other. Rather than producing a written response to the letter by the Muslim scholars, the goal of the consultation was to provide a space for churches and communions of churches to share their initiatives and theological resources for engaging with Muslims, and to identify substantial issues for Christian theology in relation to Christian-Muslim dialogue.

### **The main goals of the consultation**

1. To seek mutual enrichment and commitment by providing space for churches and communions to share their initiatives, perspectives and specific theological resources for engaging with Muslims.
  2. To identify and discuss substantial issues concerning Christian self-understanding in relation to Islam.
  3. To discern how best to respond to a new era in Christian-Muslim dialogue and opportunities for cooperation.
- The goals were reflected practically in a number of *expected outcomes* to be achieved by the end of the consultation:

*Report of the Consultation*

1. List theological issues that are pertinent to Christian self-understanding in relation to Islam and that are best approached ecumenically by Christians.
2. Consider ways for articulating a Christian theological understanding of dialogue with Islam and relationship with Muslims.
3. Propose ways and means to work cooperatively as churches, councils and communions in responding to the new opportunities for Christian-Muslim dialogue.
4. Popularize resources that help churches to deepen their self-understanding and their self-expression in relation to Islam.

**The methodology of the consultation**

The methodology used in the consultation included panel presentations and group discussion in order to encourage dialogue among church representatives and experts. The panel presentations offered the possibility of considering and learning from a variety of Christian theological approaches to Islam, as developed by various Christian traditions, while also taking into account different contextual perspectives for Christian Muslim engagement.

A group of listeners accompanied the presentations and the discussions. Their listening is summed up in a reflective report that can serve as a springboard for ongoing ecumenical cooperation. Although the Listeners' Report was not adopted by the participants as a final statement of the consultation, since it needed further development, it is indicative of where the ecumenical family stands today in relation to this subject.

**The Programme and Presentations of the Consultation**

The two-day programme began on Saturday 18 October 2008, with a keynote address by His Holiness Catholicos Aram I of Cilicia, on "Living as a Community with Muslims: Concerns, Challenges and Promises". The keynote lecture followed

two welcoming speeches by Rev. Dr Robert Welsh on behalf of CWCs, and Rev. Dr Shanta Premawardhana on behalf of the WCC, and introductory remarks by the facilitators of the consultation: Mr Doug Chial and Ms Rima Barsoum.

An ecumenical prayer service on Sunday 19 October, provided a space for a deep spiritual sharing, reflecting on the icon of "Christ is Our Reconciliation" and on the biblical story of Jacob and Esau. The ecumenical service was prepared and led by Mrs Clare Amos and Rev. Simone Sinn.

Four panel presentations, on 19-20 October, dealt with the theme of the consultation from two different perspectives: the confessional and the contextual, though in many cases these two approaches were found to be interwoven. The first two panels explored "Various Christian approaches to Islam" including Orthodox, Catholic, Anglican, Reformed, Lutheran and Evangelical approaches. A third panel on "Contextual approaches to Islam" offered inputs by Christian theologians living in Islamic contexts. A fourth panel presented contextual approaches by theologians living in pluralistic contexts. The panels were followed by group discussion and accompanied by a group of listeners, who presented their reflective report in a plenary session on Monday afternoon, focusing the discussion on substantial issues for Christian theology in relation to Islam and their implications for Christian-Muslim dialogue in the 21st century as they were identified during the consultation.

The programme concluded with a discussion of and comments on the Listeners' Report, an evaluation session, and closing prayer. The participants agreed on the need for further ecumenical exploration of theological issues pertaining to Muslim-Christian dialogue and invited the organizers to facilitate such a process.

### **Presentations and theological inputs**

For a variety of reasons, it has been impossible to include the full text of all the presentations offered at the consultation in this issue of *Current Dialogue*. For those presentations and inputs which are not included in full elsewhere in the issue we therefore give a summary below; in the case of presentations where the full text is included we simply list the presenter, title and reference to the page where the complete presentation can be found.

#### **Keynote lecture**

*His Holiness Catholicos Aram I, head of the Armenian Apostolic Church (See of Cilicia): "Living as a Community with Muslims: Concerns Challenges and Promises"*

In his opening address, Catholicos Aram I identified four interrelated trends associated with the present predicament of Christian - Muslim relations: the ambiguous perception of religion; misconceptions about Islam and Christianity; the collision of values that govern human life and provide the basis for self-understanding; and the narrow self-contained perception of identity that contradicts the proactive self-understanding which is marked by creative openness and dynamic interaction with the Other. His Holiness argued that the prevailing misperceptions, ambiguities, polarizations, tensions and collision, hijacked and sharpened by politico-ideological agendas and geo-political strategies, can be transformed only through a shared life in community. Therefore, "living-in-community must become the real objective of a frank and serious Christian - Muslim dialogue", which deals not with symptoms but with deeply rooted wounds through a careful diagnosis and in the spirit of mutual respect and trust.

He then explained the urgent necessity for community building with Islam, on the basis of equal rights and obligations, as well as full and active participation in all aspects of the life of society, including

decision-making, listing a number of decisive issues and crucial questions that require frank discussion and a comprehensive analysis by Christians and Muslims. Among the most divisive issues to be addressed Catholicos Aram I elaborated on the relationship between faith and reason as a critical area that needs deeper investigation; the response to secularism and how both religions articulate their reactions in different ways; the tension between human rights and Islamic law; and ways in which both religions practice mission, witness and conversion. His Holiness encouraged his audience to think and to "develop a Logos-centred, not church-centred, theology of mission that embraces the Other without jeopardizing the 'otherness' of the Other."

Catholicos Aram continued by re-affirming that "living together in community must take the centre stage of Christian-Muslim dialogue" and that the solid foundation of such a community is laid in a local context where Christians and Muslims can build a shared life that encompasses and transcends differences at the local level, and this can be achieved by: (a) moving from isolation to integration, since unconditional love of neighbour and hospitality towards the stranger are essential features of the two faiths; (b) moving from exclusion to participation, where values interact and identities are integrated to build a community of reconciled diversities; (c) moving from reaction to interaction, when the self-understanding of identity is marked by creative openness and dynamic interaction with the Other: creative interaction of perspectives, concerns, values and expectations that enables us to move towards building a common life.

Catholicos Aram I concluded his lecture by making a few suggestions for the future work of the WCC, and affirmed that religious plurality and Christian self-understanding must remain a major item on the agenda of the ecumenical movement, which needs to be tackled with an interdisciplinary approach and a holistic

perspective. He also emphasized the urgent need for a critical evaluation of Christian-Muslim dialogue today, and called for a more focused agenda of Christian-Muslim dialogue touching upon issues that pertain to the life of people. The full text of the lecture appears in this issue of *Current Dialogue*. See p.20.

### **Panels One and Two: Various Christian approaches to Islam**

*Panel One included presentations from Orthodox, Catholic and Lutheran approaches to Islam, and was moderated by Rev. Dr Setri Nyomi, General Secretary of the World Alliance of Reformed Churches.*

*Panel Two included presentations from Reformed, Anglican and Evangelical approaches to Islam, and was moderated by OKR. Dr Martin Affolderbach, Secretary for Interfaith Relations of the Lutheran Evangelical Church in Germany EKD.*

*The panels sought to respond to the following questions:*

- What is the theological approach of your church/communion toward Islam?
- What are the resources your church/communion has developed about the issue?
- How was this theological approach expressed in the church/ communion's response to *A Common Word*?

### **An Orthodox view**

*The first panellist, Fr Dr Emanuel Clapsis from the Holy Cross Orthodox School of Theology, representing the Ecumenical Patriarchate, presented a paper on Orthodox theology in relation to Islam. See p. 29.*

### **A Catholic view**

*The second panellist, Fr Prof. Maurice Borrmans, representing the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue, presented a detailed reflection on the Roman Catholic Church's response to the Letter of the 138, *A Common Word*. In his elaboration on the Catholic approach to Islam as it was expressed in a number of founding texts of the Second Vatican Council and Papal encyclicals as well as it was practiced by the Church, Fr. Borrmans referred particularly to founding texts such as *Lumen Gentium*, the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, in para 16 "... the plan of salvation also includes those who acknowledge the Creator. In the first place amongst these there are the Mohamedans, who, professing to hold the faith of Abraham, along with us adore the one and merciful God, and to *Nostra Aetate*, the Declaration on the Relation of the Church to non-Christian Religions, that summaries the Catholic church's approach to Islam and Muslims, in para 3: "The Church regards with esteem also the Moslems. They adore the one God, living and subsisting in Himself; merciful and all- powerful, the Creator of heaven and earth, who has spoken to men; they take pains to submit wholeheartedly to even His inscrutable decrees, just as Abraham, with whom the faith of Islam takes pleasure in linking itself, submitted to God. Though they do not acknowledge Jesus as God, they revere Him as a prophet. They also honor Mary, His virgin Mother; at times they even call on her with devotion. In addition, they await the Day of Judgment when God will render their deserts to all those who have been raised up from the dead. Finally, they value the moral life and worship God especially through prayer, almsgiving and fasting." The same text urges Christians and Muslims to "forget the past and to work sincerely for mutual understanding and to preserve as well as to promote together for the benefit of all mankind social justice and moral welfare, as well as peace and freedom."*

*He also quoted other documents, produced by the Pontifical Council for*

Interreligious Dialogue (PCID), on “The Church and other Religions: Dialogue and Mission”, 1984, and “Dialogue and Proclamation”, 1991. He elaborated on the Catholic churches understanding of the *Theology of Religions* as it was presented and adopted in the report of the International Theological Commission (1996) and in the document *Dominus Jesus* by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (2000) on the church and other religions in relation to salvation. Giving special attention to the *Letter of the 138*, Fr. Borrmans highlighted the importance and the significance of the letter, particularly in terms of the consensus that the letter generated among scholars and leaders from different Muslim traditions, and its structure and the way it articulated the two commandments of the love of God and love of neighbour. He found the content of the letter combined innovation with traditional Islamic thinking. He also offered a critical analysis of the letter, and discussed the Catholic responses to it, particularly the response of His Holiness Pope Benedict XVI, and of the Pontifical Institute of Arabic and Islamic Studies (PISAI) as well as the correspondence and projects that followed, between the Vatican and Aal al-Bayt Institute with the signatories of *A Common Word*.

He concluded with few remarks on the theological, ethical and mystical implications of the love of God and Love of neighbour, and on the importance of interreligious dialogue in advancing the work for peace and justice for all humanity.

#### **A Lutheran view**

*The third input to the panel offered some Lutheran perspectives on relations to Islam, presented by Rev. Simone Sinn, representing the Lutheran World Federation. See p.42.*

#### **A Reformed view**

*The Reformed approach to Islam was presented by Rev. Dr Johnson Mbillah, General Adviser of the Program on Christian-Muslim Relations in Africa (PROCMURA), representing the World Alliance of Reformed Churches (WARC).*

In his presentation, Rev. Mbillah observed that Reformed theology, to which WARC adheres, with its roots in the 16th-century Reformation, has developed from generation to generation in such a way that no one theologian can claim to possess all that it takes to form the totality of reformed thought. There are, however, guiding and non-negotiable principles that form the basis upon which most of Reformed theology draws its mandate, these are: the authority of scripture (the Bible), the lordship of Jesus Christ, and the necessity of mission, witnessing to all peoples. Reformed theology in its variety has been described as a “river into which many sources flow and from which many streams originate”. There are, however, common characteristics of Reformed theology which one may find in all the branches that exist in the reformed family – that is made up of congregational, Presbyterian, Reformed, United and Uniting Churches.

In relation to Islam, Rev. Mbillah explained that Reformed theology, through its guiding principles, has laid the foundation for contextual theology; it can transform itself into living theology in a given context – in this case the context of Christianity and Islam. Furthermore, he noted that in the ecumenical age it is difficult to describe any Christian theological approach to Islam as purely Reformed, purely Anglican, Evangelical or even Roman Catholic. There is usually an overlap, and there is no absolute theological position that remains the preserve of one and only tradition.

A clear statement of a Reformed theology is the statement *Ecclesia Reformata, semper reformanda*: “the Reformed Church always to be reformed”, this means that the essence and the

foundation of reform is constantly to turn back to the early church and its belief in Jesus Christ. This must be revisited from time to time to ascertain that theologies are in consonance with that principle. Reformed theology in the context of relationship with Islam and Muslims should uphold the value of human relations as a family, and at the same time recognize that such relationship involves sharing: a give and take. Such give and take involves a presentation of the gospel in word and in everyday living.

### **An Anglican view**

*The Anglican approach to Islam was presented through a dialogue between Mrs Clare Amos and Professor David Thomas, representing the Anglican Communion Office and the Anglican Communion's Network for Interfaith Concerns.*

In the beginning of their presentation the presenters identified three basic sources that Anglicans normally resort to and draw upon while defining self-understanding and their relationship with the Other (in particular Muslims). Those are: scripture (the Bible) taken in its entirety, tradition as represented in the ecumenical councils of the church and reason or the conscience of the faithful. These three sources of authority in terms of Anglican engagement with people of other faiths are expressed in a foundational theological document on the Anglican theology of inter faith relations, *Generous Love*, which was presented at, and commended by, the Lambeth Conference in 2008. *Generous Love* begins with a theological statement, about God as both Trinity and Unity, and it also ends with a theological statement, about the dynamic of "sending and abiding" which is both God's and ours.

Professor Thomas explained that theological thinking within the Anglican Communion, especially the Church of England, has been very much influenced by the experience of relating to people of other faiths in a variety of contexts, and taking seriously the reality of the Other in the reflection of the church. This has

intermeshed well with taking Trinitarian thinking as a fundamental resource. In *Generous Love* the Holy Trinity is the very basis of the understanding of how Christians relate to the Other; their God is characterised as the One who provides and gives new life and as the One who sustains, and that understanding of God as being the One who is and yet the One who sends is the very basis of the document.

Mrs Amos added that the key sentence, towards the end of the document, on the "pressing need to renew our relationships with people of different faiths must be grounded deeply and theologically in our understanding of the reality of God who is Trinity" emphasizes the importance of holding together the theological and practical dimensions of the question, to think theologically as well as thinking socially and practically: "we cannot think about Christian-Muslim engagement without thinking theologically about what is there within our tradition that requires us to have that engagement." Thus, the Anglican understanding of what it means to be a Christian in relation to the Other, which may seem to be an abstract intellectual exploration, is challenged constantly by the engagement with the Other in a very real way. At the same time the engagement with the Other is always challenged by theological thinking on the basis of the three sources of Anglican theology (referred to above). Some people would prefer to place doctrine at the forefront of the attitude toward other faiths, others would prefer to place experience before anything else, and then be challenged by that experience to reflect theologically.

The purpose of *Generous Love* is to ground the experience of inter faith encounter firmly in the heartlands of Christian believing. Its approach rests on the conviction that religious diversity poses challenges to the Church not only at the political and social level, but in the area of theology. The document argues that although these challenges have been

Report of the Consultation

with the people of God from the beginning and throughout history; what is needed for today is to recover readings of the core texts of our faith which speak into our diverse contexts. For many Anglicans a deep engagement with the biblical text is the way through which they like to engage with people of other faiths. For example there is the Scriptural Reasoning method as practiced in the *Building Bridges* process initiated by the Archbishop of Canterbury. This method is based on a patient listening and conversation with the person of another faith, taking seriously both our and their scriptures, in order to understand and to witness; a combination of deep understanding and dedication in trying to see the Other as s/he is, at the same time an awareness of what it is to be a Christian.

At the end of their enriching dialogue the two presenters highlighted "Hospitality" as one of the characteristics of the Anglican engagement with people of other faiths. They also noted that they believed that the dialogical method in which they had chosen to make their presentation expressed something that was significant about Anglican theological methodology.

**An Evangelical view**

*An Evangelical approach to Islam was presented by Professor Thomas Schirrmacher, representing the World Evangelical Alliance (WEA).*

Professor Schirrmacher began his presentation by highlighting the importance of the issue of Christian-Muslim relations for the World Evangelical Alliance (WEA) today, particularly because of the following reasons: (1) these two religions comprise more than half of the world population; (2) almost 89 percent of what is said about religion in media today is related to either Christianity or Islam; (3) there is some violent history behind the two religions which is still remembered, although it is important to say that Christians and Muslims today are not responsible for what happened 500 or 1000 years ago; (4) unlike other religions, Islam's holy book includes many

statements about Christianity and therefore Muslims knowledge about Christianity derives from what they read in the Qur'an, which is not exactly how Christians understand their faith; (5) Islam differs from Christianity when dealing with issues concerned with the relationship between religion, society and state; (6) and last but not least, is the question of Islam-West relations which is on the daily agenda of Christian-Muslim dialogue today. More than 80 percent of WEA members live in the South and do not see Christianity as a Western religion, yet from an Islamic point of view Christianity is seen as a Western religion, and therefore Christianity is sometimes seen as responsible for military or political actions taken by secular western governments.

As a sociologist of religion, Professor Schirrmacher observed that as a result of globalization the number of people changing their religion is increasing rapidly. In comparison to 30 years ago, when the vast majority of the world population never had a real relationship with another religion, today the situation is totally different. This brings a lot of tension to the world and a lot of tension within each community, therefore it is very important not only to observe what is happening, but also to discuss it and try to understand it.

In response to the questions posed to this panel, he presented the WEA approach to Islam as expressed in its letter of response to *A Common Word*, starting the letter with the emphasis on peacemaking based on theological grounds, then moving to the second part "Your call, our call" which represents a typical Evangelical call to seek forgiveness that is only found in Jesus Christ; this call in particular comes in response to the invitation expressed in the Muslim letter which was perceived by WEA as a call to Christians to follow God according to Islam. The third section is on the topic of "love" which emphasizes that "Evangelicals think that theology comes before ethics." Here the WEA's response

*Report of the Consultation*

aims to put love into practice and therefore presents the personal relationship with Muslims as the key to solving many problems that cannot be solved in conferences and meetings, but by how millions of Christians and Muslims live together. Nevertheless, "this love must be deeply grounded in good theology and in Trinitarian theology," which is a unique feature of a Christian theology of love, that "Christian love is not a command given by God but the very essence of God."

Another point emphasized in the WEA response is the issue of religious freedom, about which it argues that "religious freedom always in history has preceded religions coming closer to each other" - giving the example of Catholics and Protestants in Europe, when political freedom came first and both sides stopped using state violence, then afterwards they started to talk with each other. Therefore the issue of religious freedom cannot wait until interfaith relations improve rather it should be addressed first. The last part of the WEA response concerns standing in solidarity with the persecuted church, which is another aspect of the Evangelical tradition. For the WEA, in the light of the discussion on religious freedom and on accepting and loving Muslims, it was important to have a clear statement on what they see as persecution of Christians in some Islamic countries.

Regarding theological resources and tools developed by the WEA on dialogue with Islam, there have been increasing efforts to collect more information and to try to learn more about Islam in different countries, in order also to understand the diversity within Islam. In this area the WEA have also tried to involve more specialists with Arabic language skills, since this is the language of the Qur'an. Professor Schirrmacher highlighted in particular the WEA initiative to establish a series of institutes for Islamic studies that are producing study materials for the churches trying to answer all kinds of related questions. One such institute is the International Institute for Religious

Freedom, where they began extensive research and developed contacts to understand the experience of the Orthodox and Oriental churches who have lived together with Islam for centuries.

He then highlighted four key points that should be considered when summarizing the general approach of the WEA to Islam:

1. Mission and peace can go together, as it is expressed in 1 Peter 3: 15-17, which has become the rationale for WEA to witness and answer every question, including those asked by Muslims, but in gentleness and respect, without violating the human rights of other peoples, and with respect to their beliefs.
2. Witness is always related to the biblical notion of martyrdom and persecution, especially that, according to Professor Schirrmacher, almost 50 percent of WEA members live in areas where they are in danger of persecution. This reality prompts Evangelicals to develop a "theology of persecution" to show that martyrdom and persecution are integral parts of their faith; nevertheless this does not give Evangelicals the right to react using violence against their persecutors, but to trust that they are in God's hand.
3. Personal relationship and hospitality to people of other faiths have been the source of strength of the WEA movement, which, according to Schirrmacher, have led to the conversion of almost of 90 percent of Evangelicals.
4. In the relationship with Muslims it is very important for the WEA to distinguish between the question of witness to the gospel, and the political issues that are handled by governments, especially issues of human rights and religious freedom. For WEA, these are two separate matters. As an example, Professor Schirrmacher stated that persecuted evangelicals should not react to persecution in any violent way; at the same time they are encouraged to use their legal rights as given in the legal system of their countries to stop this persecution.

He concluded his presentation by offering a clarification on behalf of the WEA regarding attempts by some evangelical missionaries to convert members of other churches and expressed readiness to discuss this issue honestly with all churches.

### **Panel Three: Contextual approaches to Islam: Christians in Islamic context**

*Panel three focused on the role of context in articulating theological thinking. Speaking from the experience of Christians living in Muslim majority contexts, it included presentations by Christian theologians from Lebanon, Nigeria and Pakistan, and was moderated by Rev. Dr Herman Shastri, General Secretary of the National Council of Churches in Malaysia.*

#### **An approach from the Middle East**

*The first input was given by Fr. Dr George Massouh, representing the Greek Orthodox Church of Antioch, and the Balamand University in Lebanon. See p.60.*

#### **An approach from Africa**

*The second input was given by Bishop Dr Josiah Atkins Idowu Fearon, representing the Anglican Church in Nigeria and PROCURA.*

At the beginning of his presentation, Bishop Josiah drew the attention of his audience to the fact that Nigeria is one of few countries in the world where both Christianity and Islam have an almost equal number of adherents. "This context is often described by 'Islamicists' and 'missiologists' as a 'flash point'". He therefore tried to give a brief historical background about Nigeria, to describe the context in which Christians and Muslims interact.

Linking the creation of the modern state of Nigeria to the British trade and colonial presence in the nineteenth century, he described the formation of a country of different tribal groups in response to the colonial control imposed by the British. He commented in particular that the British

made no attempt at encouraging unity between these tribal groups by putting in place an arrangement that would allow for the freedom of religion. As a result, at independence Nigeria began with two systems of governance: one for the South and another for the North (where *Shari'a* was practiced) with a modified version for the middle part of the country.

Islam first came to in Nigeria in the 10th century, and from there it spread westward culminating in the emergence of the Sokoto Caliphate. Christianity became known in Nigeria during the 15th and 16th centuries, then formally in the 19th century with the British merchants, through the western part of Nigeria, and from there it advanced northward across the country. The first contact between the two religions within the country was in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and then in 1914 they became the two official religions in Nigeria.

Bishop Josiah then analyzed the relationship between the two religions in three different contexts within Nigeria: (1) where Islam is the dominant religion as in Sokoto state in the North; (2) where Christianity is a dominant religion as in the South, and (3) in the Middle belt states which used to be a battleground between the two. Reflecting on these three contexts, he argued that in many ways the current tensions within Nigeria are more complex than we are often made to believe. Religion is often given as the reason for the crises, though most are often caused by economic and political reasons. "A difference in religion, by itself did not usually cause any tensions but when religious differences were combined with ethnic or geographical differences that difficulties arose." Dividing Nigeria into states in 1967 changed the balance of power between the north and the south. In order to retain the dominance by the northern politicians, religion was brought to the fore, and it began to play a major role in the political and social lives of Nigeria. From then on Muslims began to complain about the dominance of the Christians and demand Islamic law

leading to the implementation of *hudud*<sup>1</sup> aspects which had been expunged by the British. Bishop Josiah wanted to make it clear to his audience that Christians in Nigeria are not against the aspect of *shari'a* that is permitted within the constitution; it is the *hudud* aspect that has created the opposition by the Christians.

In such a multireligious context there is no one single approach to Christian-Muslim relations in Nigeria: however, there are two types of ongoing dialogue methods: (1) the dialogue of life, which takes place through different forms within the country: through daily encounters and organized meetings between the state government and stake holders, as well as through awareness building seminars and workshops about the need for peaceful co-existence and respect for the neighbour. These seminars focus on conflict prevention and resolution, and address religious leaders, students, youth and women; (2) the theological dialogue, which is mainly among Christians and it aims at educating Christians about Islam, the Islamic legal system, the history of Islam and of Christian-Muslim relations in Nigeria with particular focus on the contemporary situation. Sometimes, Muslims also participate in this exercise, which motivates them to educate other Muslims about Christianity and the Christian community of Nigeria.

Bishop Josiah then concluded by listing a number of challenges and prospects for Christian-Muslim relations in Nigeria, primarily the problem of ignorance within both communities, and even among religious leaders, about their own religion and that of their neighbour. Ignorance causes suspicion and easily leads to religious crises, especially when associated with ethnicity and tribalism. In addition, there is a need to give a new orientation to the members of both communities regarding the importance of equal citizenship and equal opportunities. In this respect it is worth mentioning the support by the government of the Nigerian

Interreligious Council at the national as well as state and local government levels.

#### **An approach from Asia**

*The third input was given by Prof. Charles Amjad-Ali from Luther Seminary, representing the Church of Pakistan. He is a founder of the Christian Study Centre in Rawalpindi. See p.63.*

#### **Panel Four: Contextual approaches to Islam: Christians in pluralistic context**

*Panel Four focused on the role of context in articulating theological thinking, speaking from the experience of Christians living in pluralistic contexts – principally Western. It included presentations by Christian theologians from Sweden/Kenya, United States/Australia and Norway, and was moderated by Rev Dr Jørgen S. Sørensen, General Secretary of the Council on International Relations of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Denmark.*

**The first panelist, Dr Anne Kubai, from Uppsala University** – originally from Kenya – has worked for many years with PROCMURA on the issue of Christian-Muslim relations in Africa.

In her presentation Dr. Kubai argued that with the end of the Cold War, there was an urgent need to find a new strategic enemy. Though there were no real rivals or enemies, there was a threat that was perceived to be more dangerous: terrorism, which became synonymous with Islamic fundamentalism. The resources for this war were the well-known mental blocks of prejudices and projections erected in the contemporary “western” imagination over Islam and in Muslim imagination over the “west”. The events of 9/11 not only confirmed these mutual mental images, but also legitimized and energized “the fight against terrorism”. She explained how in the context of the “war on terror”, representations and perceptions of events and situations become crucial; the historical myths are revived and the perception of Islam as violent is globalized. In Africa, she argued, the war on terrorism has adversely impacted on the perception of the Other,

and thus on the already fragile Christian-Muslim relations. Christian-Muslim relations have become of much wider interest; they have been taken beyond the narrow religious factor. Divisions which had been hitherto blurred become more defined, as there is a mutual perception of otherness which is evidently shaped by current global trends. Hence the values of the Other are regarded as threatening or problematic and the end result is mutual distrust, as the communities move on in a troubled relationship.

She commented that in Africa, "Christian scholars have formulated theologies of liberation in response to the struggle of the poor and economically downtrodden; Black theology in response to the experiences of racially oppressed Africans in this continent and the Diaspora; and feminist theology as a resource of the emerging consciousness of women". Similarly, there are resources that can motivate a theology which can sustain an integrated approach to the issue of interreligious relations. However, in Kubai's view, this is not without certain challenges: the gamut of emerging trends and discourses in the Christian churches, not only in Africa, but also in the African Diaspora in Europe. The emphasis on individualism and the appropriation of modernity in Europe by immigrant African Christians introduces a new dynamic in the conundrum.

**The second input was given by Fr. Prof Daniel Madigan SJ, from Georgetown University.**

*Fr. Madigan is a Consultant for the Vatican's Commission for Religious Relations with Muslims. See p.50.*

**The third input was given by Prof. Oddbjørn Leirvik from the University of Oslo – also representing the Church of Norway. See p.55**

### **Plenary Discussion: Substantial Issues for Christian Theology in Relation to Islam – Implications for Christian-Muslim Dialogue in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century**

*Moderated by H.E. Bishop Nareg Amezian, from the Armenian Apostolic Church (Holy See of Cilicia, and a co-moderator of JCC).*

The plenary session included a presentation of the draft of a reflective report that was produced by a group of listeners who accompanied the meeting. Professor David Thomas, the convener of the Listeners Group, presented the report. This was followed by a rich discussion, comments and suggestions from the participants. However, the session could not reach an agreement for adopting the Listeners Report. It was agreed to receive it as a reflective report of the discussion and to add it to the summary report of the consultation.

Although the listeners' report was not adopted by the participants as a final statement of the consultation, since it needed further development, it provided an indication of where the ecumenical family stands today in the process of asking questions and finding answers in relation to the subject matter. It included several recommendations and proposals to be followed up by the organizers.

### **The Listeners Report**

#### **1. A sense of who we (Christians) are in relation to Muslims**

- Our self-understanding as Christians is defined by our relationship with God as Trinity as revealed in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ
- Our traditions help us to perceive the loving God in creating, incarnational, salvific and pneumatological terms
- We are each drawn closer to God through our own communal life and tradition
- Our traditions inspire us to show love for our neighbour as a representative of the presence of

Report of the Consultation

Jesus Christ, regardless of race, religion or gender

- Our Christian self-understandings are challenged and deepened by our relations with Muslims
- As Christians we often find ourselves in a critical relationship with our own traditions, and can also find ourselves growing in commitment to our own traditions
- At various times, Christians have looked on Muslims as Other in different ways: partner, friend, neighbour, stranger, rival, even "enemy", some of these helping dialogue, others hindering it Our relationships with Muslims have been mixed, and have been qualified by mutual respect and cooperation, but also mutual oppression and persecution
- Christians are constantly renewed by the process of dialogue; which helps explain why we welcome the invitation of *A Common Word*
- Christians thrive upon the fertile tension between theological reflection and living in diverse contexts with Muslims

**2. When Christians interact with Muslims, they have drawn upon a variety of resources. In our time, when relations between Christians and Muslims are particularly urgent, these resources require intentional re-formulation**

- We have long recognized the importance of specialists in the study of Islam as Muslims live and present it, and the need to educate leaders and communities in the knowledge of Islam. Learning from the lessons of the past is important for future relations.
- We acknowledge the need for different theological approaches in different contexts
- We recognize the virtue of patient listening, and look on dialogue as an aspect of spirituality. We have

learnt the need for sensitivity in dialogue with Muslims especially in areas of vocabulary, and when referring to key terms such as *mission, witness* and *conversion*.

- We recognize the diversity and richness of attitudes among Christians and know the importance of heeding questions raised by people from different places, circumstances and generations, especially the young.
- We recognize the value of resources from outside our own faith (including Islam) in constructing welcoming and diverse communities.

**3. Steps for further reflection**

Through this consultation we have discerned the need to:

- (1) Encourage our communities to:
  - know Islam better by listening carefully to how Muslims express themselves
  - understand better God's invitation to us to be good neighbours to one another, and to extend this neighbourliness to Muslims.
  - equip ourselves to bear appropriate witness to "the hope that is in us"
- (2) Work together ecumenically to:
  - continue our exploration of such important questions as Trinity and Salvation in relation to Islam, and the relationship between witness, mission, dialogue and living together in right relationship
  - continue network-building within the resources of this consultation body, and we invite our WCC and CWC colleagues actively to explore ways of facilitating this
- (3) Work with Muslims on issues such as:
  - Religion and State, human rights
  - Relationship of religious identity to land or territory
  - Concepts of secularism, pluralism, citizenshipFurther collaboration on such issues as social and economic

Report of the Consultation

- 
- justice, climate change, peace, healing of memories
  - Conversion
  - Use of religious symbols for political ideologies, religiously motivated violence, gender justice and human sexuality
  - What it means to encounter one another
  - How interreligious dialogue contributes to deepening contextual theology

- The common challenge to hand on the legacy of faith to coming generations

Respectfully submitted by Rima Barsoum  
(Programme Executive, *Interreligious Dialogue and Cooperation*)

---

1 *Hudud* means the class of punishments that are fixed for certain crimes which are considered to be "claims of God."

---

## List of Participants of the Consultation

**H.H. Aram I of Cilicia**, Catholicos of Cilicia, Armenian Apostolic Church (Holy See of Cilicia)  
**H.E. Metropolitan Joseph Absi**, Middle East Council of Churches, Greek Catholic (Melkite) Patriarchate of Antioch, Alexandria and Jerusalem  
**Rev. Dr Martin Affolderbach**, Evangelische Kirche in Deutschland  
**H.G. Bishop Nareg Amezian**, Armenian Apostolic Church (Holy See of Cilicia)  
**Rev. James Lagos Alexander**, African Inland Church Sudan  
**Prof. Charles Amjad-Ali**, Church of Pakistan, Luther Seminary, St. Paul  
**Mrs Clare Amos**, The Anglican Communion  
**Ms A. Brenda Anderson**, United Church of Canada  
**Fr Prof. Maurice Borrmans**, Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue  
**Fr Dr Gosbert Byamungu**, Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity  
**Rev. Dr Emmanuel Clapsis**, Ecumenical Patriarchate, Holy Cross Orthodox School of Theology  
**Rev. Peter Colwell**, Churches Together in Britain and Ireland  
**Dr George H. Freeman**, General Secretary World Methodist Council  
**Mr Mark Anthony Gomez**, United Church of Christ in the Philippines  
**Bishop Emeritus Hilario Gomez, Jr**, National Council of Churches in the Philippines, United Church of Christ in the Philippines  
**Archpriest Mikhail Gundyayev**, Moscow Patriarchate  
**Most Rev. Dr Josiah Atkins Idowu-Fearon**, Church of Nigeria (Anglican Communion)  
**Fr Dr Viorel Ionita**, Conference of European Churches  
**Mrs Nancy Irving**, General Secretary Friends World Committee for Consultation  
**Rev. Willem Jansen**, Protestant Church in the Netherlands  
**Dr Kathryn L. Johnson**, Lutheran World Federation  
**Mr Sven Thore Kloster**, Church of Norway  
**Fr George Kourie**, Syrian Orthodox Patriarchate of Antioch and All the East  
**Dr Anne Kubai**, Uppsala University  
**Mr Ron Kubsch**, World Evangelical Alliance  
**Prof. Oddbjørn Leirvik**, Lutheran World Federation, Church of Norway  
**Fr Prof. Daniel A. Madigan**, Roman Catholic Church, Georgetown University  
**Very Rev. Fr Hovakim Manukyan**, Armenian Apostolic Church (Mother See of Holy Etchmiadzin)

*Report of the Consultation*

---

**Fr Dr Georges Massouh**, Greek Orthodox Patriarch of Antioch and All the East, Balamand University

**Rev. Dr Johnson Apenad Mbillah**, World Alliance of Reformed Churches, Programme for Christian-Muslim Relations in Africa (PROCMURA)

**Rev. Bchara Moussa Oghli**, Union of the Armenian Evangelical Churches

**Fr Moussa Wahib Naguib**, Coptic Orthodox Church

**Rev. Dr Zakaria Jusuf Ngelow**, Communion of Churches in Indonesia (PGI)

**Rev. Dr Ishmael Noko**, General Secretary Lutheran World Federation

**Rev. Dr Setri Nyomi**, General Secretary World Alliance of Reformed Churches

**Rev. Victor V. Pillay**, Reformed Ecumenical Council

**Rev. Dr Cecil M. Robeck**, Pentecostal Churches, Fuller Seminary

**Prof. Dr Thomas Schirrmacher**, World Evangelical Alliance

**Mr Richard Seebohm**, Friends World Committee for Consultation

**Rev. Dr Hermen Shastri**, General Secretary, National Council of Churches in Malaysia

**Rev. Simone Sinn**, Lutheran World Federation

**Rev. Dr Jørgen Skov Sørensen**, General Secretary Council on International Relations of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Denmark

**Rev. Prof. David Thomas**, The Anglican Communion, University of Birmingham

**Prof. Dr Hans-Jürgen Van Der Minde**, International Old Catholic Bishops Conference

**Dr Richard L. van Houten**, General Secretary, Reformed Ecumenical Council

**Rev. Dr Douwe Visser**, World Alliance of Reformed Churches

**Rev. Dr Robert K. Welsh**, General Secretary, Disciples Ecumenical Consultative Council (Christian Churches)

**Rev. Dr Andrea Zaki Stephanous**, Evangelical Presbyterian Church of Egypt, Synod of the Nile

**Dr Angeliki Gr. Ziaka**, Church of Greece, Aristotle University of Thessaloniki

### **World Council of Churches Staff**

Ms Rima Barsoum

Mr Douglas L. Chial

Mrs Beth Godfrey

Prof. Dagmar Heller

Mr Georges Lemopoulos

Rev. Jacques Matthey

Mr Michel Nseir

Rev. Dr Shanta Premawardhana

Rev. Dr Martin Robra

---

## **Living as a Community with Islam: Concerns, Challenges and Promises**

**Aram I**

Christians and Muslims have co-existed for centuries in different geopolitical contexts and under changing circumstances. This co-existence has taken multiple shapes, generating coherence and tension, harmony and conflict. A realistic assessment of the present predicament of these relations is imperative. We must go beyond cosmetic approaches and clichés to discern the core issues and emerging challenges.

### **Salient Features of Christian-Muslim Relations**

Looking at the present landscape of Christian-Muslim relations, it is important to identify four inter-related trends.

#### **Ambiguous perception of religion**

In the course of history, religion has frequently been misused, creating division and conflict. Christianity and Islam have not been exempt from this tendency. Some believe that religion has a public role to play, while others feel that it should be a private affair. For some, religion provides the basis for political governance and ideological orientation, while others believe that it has been hijacked by a political agenda; hence, while some people believe that “de-politicization” of religion and “de-religionization” of politics are imperative, others believe that there should be no demarcation line between religion, nation and state. Because of these opposing perceptions, religion has become a source of conflict in societies. The concrete implications of these contradictory images of religion are identifiable in many areas of society life. Referring to this present predicament of religion, Charles Kimball reminds us that “several best-selling books have agreed forcefully that religion is the problem”<sup>1</sup>. In

my view, religion is not the problem. It was made part of the problem. The very vocation of religion as a moral authority is to seek solutions to problems that we face in the world today. In order to fulfill its vocation, the two dimensions of religion, namely, as a God-given truth and as a human response, need to be distinguished. Tension between the “other-worldly” and “this-worldly” manifestations of religion, and the incompatibility between the teachings and practice of religion need to be reconciled. Both absolutizing and relativizing religion may have negative consequences. Can we break these misperceptions and ambiguities and articulate the true image of religion? Christianity and Islam have rich resources to engage in such a process.

#### **Misconceptions about Islam and Christianity**

In spite of the significant growth of Muslim-Christian dialogue and relations, Muslims and Christians continue to misconstrue each other's religion. Generally speaking, Islam is portrayed by the West as a source of hatred, fundamentalism and violence. Deep in the consciousness of many Muslims, Western Christianity is the cause of moral decay, and it is identified with the Crusades, colonialism, and secularism. These memories and images pertaining to Islam and Christianity have generated a crisis of confidence. Furthermore, manipulation of religious symbols, slogans and banners to promote nonreligious agendas has deepened the intolerance. Therefore allegations, stereotypes and prejudices must be seriously addressed, and collective memories must be purified. This is an extremely urgent task facing Christian-Muslim dialogue.

---

### Collision of values

Religion is not only faith in a transcendent reality; it is also a value system that governs human life and provides the basis for self-understanding. Rooted in belief systems, values are perceived as forces of cohesion and integration in societies. They may also become forces of destabilization and tension when used for ideological, nationalistic and political ends. Values carry with them memories and thus condition attitudes and determine relations. Exclusive religious claims lead to exclusive expressions of values, which in turn lead to intolerance.

A number of incidents that have occurred in the last decade in different parts of the world, along with their ensuing reactions and counter reactions, point to a deepening malaise in Christian - Muslim relations: exclusive and reductionist attitudes towards each other provoke tension; values conditioned by extremist religious claims and ideologies expose societies to confrontation; even indirect remarks “in the name of freedom of speech” spark outright rage; and the fear of an “evil other,” whether identified by a name, country or religion, creates distrust and divides people.

What is happening is not in actuality a “clash of civilizations”<sup>2</sup> or “clash of fundamentalisms”<sup>3</sup>. It is a clash of values<sup>4</sup>, deeply rooted in our belief systems and stirred by bitter memories. Differences imprison us in mutual fear unless we transcend them to discover our common eco-center. Bitter memories deepen the divide unless they are healed through a transformative process. Rather than opting to confront each other, we must strive together to pull down the wall of ignorance, arrogance and suspicion. Dialogue should challenge us to accept each other the way we are.

### Self-contained or interactive self-understanding?

Identity is sustained by values and

religious beliefs. Faithfulness to identity implies strong attachment to values and religious beliefs. Globalization has destroyed the fences that used to protect this specific identity and, in its place, has produced its own identity. As a result, we see two contradictory reactions: one is characterized by the defining of one’s self-understanding in opposition to the other; the other, which is proactive, is marked by creative openness and dynamic interaction with the other. The first way of being is labelled today as radicalism or fundamentalism; it rejects the other. The second way of being is labelled as moderate and tolerant; it accepts the other.

These two ways of self-understanding are in collision in many societies. This collision is identifiable both in intrareligious and interreligious contexts. Dogmatic approaches, ossified thinking and frozen attitudes will only enhance alienation. Islam and Christianity are called to redefine their self-understanding, as well as the way they understand each other in a new world context.

A serious and frank Christian–Muslim dialogue cannot ignore these trends and tendencies outlined above. The prevailing misperceptions, ambiguities, polarizations, tensions and collision, hijacked and sharpened by politico-ideological agendas and geopolitical strategies, can be transformed only through a shared life in community (*ayyish-el-moushtarak*). I believe that for both Christians and Muslims, living-in-community must become the real objective of their dialogue. On the way toward this common goal, there are problems and challenges. Neither the “war on terror” nor self-alienation is the right path to follow. We must not deal with symptoms but with deeply rooted wounds, through a careful diagnosis and in the spirit of mutual respect and trust.

---

### **Living Together as Community: A Critical Urgency**

“Dialogue stems from a profound recognition of the mutuality of our common life”<sup>5</sup>. Mutuality builds community and community presupposes and imposes mutuality. Indeed, living together as community is a human necessity. Growing awareness of common interests, concerns and destiny in a globalized world has given an acute urgency to living together. Because of their common roots and a long history of cohabitation, Christians and Muslims have further reasons to share a common life together.

For centuries, Christians and Muslims in the Middle East have lived as co-citizens sharing a common history. Together they have developed Arab nationalism and have fought against Ottoman-Turkish hegemony, Western colonialism and Zionism. Yet they have not been able to transform cohabitation into a wider community. Nation-building has acquired predominance over community building.

In Western societies, Muslim migrants have established their own communities, preserving their own values, religious beliefs, traditions and language. These communities have remained self-contained on the fringes of society life and have not been integrated into the total fabric of society. Integration remains an acute problem in Europe.

Community building with Islam is a great challenge and an urgent necessity. Community building must take place on the basis of equal rights and obligations, as well as full and active participation in all aspects of society life, including decision-making. In this context there are conflictive issues and crucial questions which require frank discussion and a comprehensive scrutiny. Our divergences must be neither concealed nor absolutized, neither ignored nor dramatized. We must spell out converging as well as diverging points and identify concrete areas of tension. These two monotheistic faiths are not monolithic.

Therefore, generalizations must be avoided; contextualization is the right way of assessing and organizing Christian-Muslim dialogue and relations. In my view, these are the most divisive issues to be treated in Christian-Muslim dialogue.

### **Inter-complementarity of faith and reason**

Christianity and Islam recognize the specific place and role of revelation and reason in their belief systems. They have, however, different perspectives as to the inter-connectedness of the cognitive and transcendental dimensions of faith. God’s revelation is perceived by Islam as absolute. Muslims believe that the Qur’an is literally the word of God and as such is immutable. This is not the way many Christians consider the Bible, which contains the revelation of God. Being written by divinely inspired people, the Bible needs interpretation. These quite different perceptions as to the nature and the scope of the infallibility of these two sacred books have concrete implications on almost all aspects of the life and practice of these faiths.

The ethos of Islamic thought, action and life is theological. Islam has even, in a sense, “theologized” reason and has not developed a rationalistic tradition<sup>6</sup>. Rationality is at the heart of the ethos of Christianity. Even spirituality and mysticism have given way to rationality, especially in Western Christianity.

Both rationalization and derationalization of faith are full of dangers. Calling into question the certitude of truth may threaten the foundation of religion. Governing human life by transcendental truth claims may question the credibility and relevance of religion. Reason has a role in the human search for truth. But when reason overwhelms the faith, then reason becomes an instrument of evil. When the imperatives of faith are considered beyond the purview of rational discourse, then faith becomes exposed to

the ambiguities and polarizations of the world.

Christianity and Islam hold that their beliefs are not simply human constructs, but that they have a transcendent source. They believe that reason and faith are partners rather than rivals. Criticizing both “exaggerated rationalism” and “extreme fideism,” the papal encyclical *Fides et Ratio* (2001) has emphasized the necessity of reconciliation between faith and reason. In a recent open letter to the Pope, a group of Muslim scholars stated that “there are two extremes which the Islamic intellectual tradition has generally managed to avoid: one is to make the analytical mind the ultimate arbiter of truth and the other is to deny the power of human understanding to address ultimate questions”<sup>7</sup>. The relation of faith and reason is a critical area of deeper investigation.

#### **Islamic law (Shari’a) and human rights**

Majority-minority relations either in a predominantly Muslim or Christian country raise basic concerns and questions. Islamic society is governed by Islamic law (*Shari’a*), which through rules, laws, values, criteria, ethics, worship and practices outlines the way of life that Muslims are supposed to follow individually and collectively. *Shari’a* also includes a system of jurisprudence (*fiqh*). *Shari’a* is considered by Christians to be a system of governance which creates sociopolitical marginalization and threatens religious freedom. Originally meant to safeguard the rights of Christians in a country of Muslim majority, *dhimmi* too is perceived by Christians as denoting a category of second-class citizenship. Perception and implementation of Islamic law have different connotations and implications in Muslim countries. When *dhimmi* was introduced, the concept of citizenship did not exist. Today, there is a new system of governance based on citizenship. For some Muslims the problem is that citizenship is not applied and respected as ensuring equality

between people belonging to the same country. The discriminatory policies at home of some countries, such as Turkey, contradict their teachings of tolerance abroad<sup>8</sup>. Some Muslim countries are democratic in form but dictatorial in essence and Muslims and Christians are equally affected by it.

According to many Christian scholars, contradiction between *Shari’a* and basic human rights is evident<sup>9</sup>: hence, this matter needs in-depth discussion. There are voices in Islam that emphasize the necessity of accommodating the basic principles of human rights to the Muslim context. For example, the recent open letter of Muslim scholars stressed the importance of “freedom of religion”. This ambiguity and fear need to be addressed by Muslim leaders<sup>10</sup>.

In the West, because they believe that many public laws are incompatible with *Shari’a* law, Muslim communities feel isolated. For Muslims the culture of being a minority is a new reality. Because *Shari’a* is a law to rule Muslims wherever they are a majority, in lands where they are a minority a new understanding of *Shari’a* is necessary. Recently some voices have also raised the question of establishing a special jurisprudence for Muslim communities in order to seek that new understanding. In order to ensure a just basis for a pluralist society as well as to enhance integration and encourage participation in Europe, some believe that plurality of legal systems may be applied within one society having at the same time one basic law for all.

These are complex issues that require ongoing discussion. Reciprocity will significantly help Christians and Muslims to seek consensus on conflictive issues, to reconcile dilemmas and to build community. Our common humanity, common history and destiny will remain mere concepts if they are not supported by the crucial urgency of living together as community. Often religion fails to provide

shared human rights values and hampers participation and integration. Therefore, without jeopardizing the specificity and integrity of religious belief systems, promoting a culture of human rights is a vital necessity and a common responsibility, and must be considered one of foci of Christian-Muslim dialogue<sup>11</sup>.

### Responding to secularism

Christianity and Islam affirm that human life cannot be understood without reference to the Transcendent, but they respond to this common challenge differently. Secularism is generally understood by many Muslims as anti-religious, a source of evil and a rejection of God. Generally Christians avoid making a sharp dichotomy between secularization and Christianity and opt for a critical dialogue. Muslims resist secularism, while Christians resist political Islam as an ideology and a system of governance. Both faiths affirm that governance must be sustained by ethical values.

Islam does not separate temporal power and religious power. According to Islam, temporal authority needs religious legitimacy. For Christians a religious state cannot function democratically in a plural society, and separation of religion from state does not mean separation of religion from society. In the West religion is perceived as a private affair; while in Islam all aspects of human life are conditioned by religion. Western secularism stresses the individualistic understanding of a human being, a view that is challenged by Islam.

The reaction of the Muslim world to secularism has been articulated in different ways: self-isolation to protect religious identity; going-back to the original roots of Islam (radicalism); and the Islamic revival movement. Expressed in different forms, this movement aims to apply *Shari'a* law, develop a socioeconomic and political system based on *Shari'a* law, defend Muslim identity according to Islamic principles and promote Islamic

moral and spiritual values<sup>12</sup>. There are significant differences among Muslims in respect to perception, methodology and implementation of these objectives. For some, progress and modernity are considered to be criteria for being a moderate Muslim. However, openness, shown particularly by some oil-rich Muslim countries, is not appreciated in conservative circles. There is also a growing trend in Islam to be receptive to modernity, but with an Islamic core.

In the West, the aggressive growth of secularism and uncritical openness to secular values have generated among Christians a forceful "return" of religion to public life as well as the emergence of spiritual-charismatic movements, some of them with syncretistic tendencies.

The clash between the sacred and secular, the spiritual and material, and theocentric and anthropocentric approaches is identifiable in many aspects and spheres of society life. This concern is commonly shared by Christianity and Islam. Therefore, responding to secularism in a more effective way must occupy a prominent place on the agenda of Christian-Muslim dialogue.

### Mission: conversion, witness or co-habitation?

Christianity and Islam are both missionary religions; they have an eschatological vision and claims for absolute truth and universality. Although missionary outreach is an essential dimension of Islam, it leaves the space to coexist with others within the framework of *dhimmi*. Christianity considers mission as *Missio Dei*; hence, it cannot surrender its missionary vocation and compromise on this fundamental affirmation of Christian faith. These competitive claims may lead to confrontation if they are not discussed seriously and seen in the right perspective.

We have always affirmed that plurality of religious traditions is "both the result of the

manifold ways in which God has related to peoples and nations, as well as a manifestation of the richness and diversity of human response to God's gracious gift"<sup>13</sup>. Respecting others' identity, claims and conviction does not mean compromising our own. Exclusive claims and uncompromising attitudes must not be opposed with confrontational spirit. We should approach this extremely sensitive issue proactively.

Both religions have painful memories in this respect. Christianity has always made clear the distinction between witness and proselytism. Witness to the Christ-event is the essential vocation of a Christian under all circumstances. We have also stated on many occasions that Christ may encounter us in the faith of our neighbour and that the Holy Spirit may lead us to discern the divine presence in the faith of others. We have recognized that Christ may use us to transform the other. He may also use the other to teach and transform us<sup>14</sup>. Therefore, how can we develop a Logos-centered, not church-centered, theology of mission that embraces the "other" without jeopardizing the "otherness" of the other? I believe that both faiths can engage in a creative interaction on the basis of their common affirmation that mission belongs to God, and that their intention is neither Christianization nor Islamization but transformation of the world and humanisation of humanity.

### **From Co-Existing to Living Together**

In my judgment, living together in community must take the centre stage of Christian-Muslim dialogue. Both faiths have common values and resources that promote life-in-community. The solid foundation of such a community is laid in a local context. Indeed, Christians and Muslims can build a shared life that encompasses and transcends differences at the local level:

### **By moving from isolation to integration**

A community defines its self-understanding either in relation or in opposition to the other. Religion is regarded as an enemy of integration since its value system is uncompromising. Often religious identity generates isolation and threatens national unity. In the globalized world the other<sup>15</sup> is no more a distant or undisclosed reality; he or she is our neighbour. Unconditional love of neighbour and hospitality towards the stranger are essential features of the two faiths (Mark 12:29-31; Qur'an 3rd Sura)<sup>16</sup>. We must therefore build a quality of relationship with our neighbour that enhances a deeper and holistic self-understanding and a greater understanding of the other, and which leads us from estrangement to a common life together. A society is composed of multiple identities. Co-existence of these identities remains a potential source of conflict when they are not integrated into a coherent whole. Community building presupposes a quality of integration that provides equal opportunity, ensures diversity and enhances mutual acceptance. Ethnic, political and cultural factors and considerations establish demarcation lines; religions with their common values must become bridges of interaction. A harmonious interaction between religious identity and national loyalty is crucial. This is the most effective way of arriving at integration.

### **By moving from exclusion to participation**

When minorities are considered as outsiders, there is no community. When in a society there is a centre and a periphery, there is no community. When there is lack of mutual trust, there is no community. Rejection leads to isolation and isolation breeds hate and violence. Alienation or marginalization leads to radicalization. Community means full participation; it means inter-connectedness and inter-dependence, underpinned by mutual understanding and trust.

Religion protects identity and promotes security. In situations where identity is threatened and participation denied, religious loyalties are enforced. Such situations develop insecurity, isolation and hate. Hence, full and active participation of all members of a society, irrespective of their colour or religion, in all aspects of society life, including decision-making, must be ensured. Where there is participation, values interact and identities are integrated to build a community of reconciled diversities.

### **By moving from reaction to interaction**

Religions used to define and protect themselves by reacting to the other. The interdependent world imposes new paradigms, new criteria of self-understanding. Indeed, a genuine self-understanding implies engaging in creative dialogue with the other, and moving from a self-centered to an interactive self-understanding. Identity based on exclusive claims threatens the other and generates alienation. Identity defined exclusively in religious terms becomes a source of tension. Openness, dialogue and interaction do not create vulnerability; rather, they test the credibility and relevance of identity, and help community building.

We must create open spaces where dynamic interaction may take place. Creative interaction of perspectives, concerns and expectations will undoubtedly challenge and help us to move towards building a common life together on solid ground. We must endeavour together with our Muslim neighbours to consolidate our commonalities, which ensure wholeness and integrity, and we must preserve our diversities, which enrich community.

### **Concluding Remarks**

The ecumenical movement has always emphasized the “urgency” of dialogue<sup>17</sup>. The present world, in which walls are destroyed, distances are reduced and the other has become neighbour, has created

a new quality and form of dialogue: dialogue of life. We are all engaged, in one way or another, in the dialogue of life. The ecumenical movement has also emphasized the “uniqueness” of Christian-Muslim dialogue. This is true for historical, theological and geo-political reasons. Wrestling with ontological and metaphysical questions is not a priority for Christian-Muslim dialogue. In a world marked by confrontation and polarization, the top and urgent priority is how we should live together as a community. We should not impose our values on each other; we must strengthen our common values, respect our differences and together strive for a common life in community. Unrealistic expectations and aggressive reactions, unrespectful attitudes and arrogant behaviour will only produce alienation and distrust. Learning from each other and sharing our concerns will help us to grow together towards a harmonious life together<sup>18</sup>.

In my response to the Islamic letter of “A Common Word Between Us and You”, I said: “Relationship, reciprocity and accountability build community. Sharing life together implies building community. Human beings cannot live without community. As an expression of love towards God and towards neighbour, community building has been central to both Muslim and Christian teachings and ways of life. We firmly believe, as we have stated on different occasions in ecumenical meetings, that a strong commitment to living together would help us to destroy the walls of prejudice, reassert that each religion has integrity, and generate mutual accountability and common responsibility”. I believe that “we must accept and respect the way we are, by suspending our desire to emphasize differences and committing ourselves to becoming communities of living together with the fear of God and not with the fear of one another”<sup>19</sup>.

In conclusion, I want to make a few suggestions for the future work of WCC.

1. Religious plurality and Christian self-understanding must remain a major item on the agenda of the ecumenical movement. Issues related to this area need to be tackled with an interdisciplinary approach and in a way that is holistic in perspective. Insights and experiences gained through the studies of “Gospel and Culture” and “Christian Anthropology” must be taken into consideration in this process.

2. The ecumenical movement has a rich history of Christian-Muslim dialogue. A critical evaluation of the Christian-Muslim common journey is imperative at this time, as we seek new ways of living and working together in a new world context.

3. The agenda of Christian-Muslim dialogue must be more focused, touching issues that pertain to the life of people. The concepts of “broader community” and “holistic mission”, as well as “global ethics” based on shared values are critical areas which require deeper scrutiny and further discussion. In this context we must make us of the rich debate that Faith and Order and CWME had in the last two decades.

4. Finally, the process that the WCC started with the Critical Moment Conference (2005) and the Christian-Muslim Conference (2002) must continue with renewed pace. As a global ecumenical fellowship, the World Council of Churches is called to play a leading role in Christian-Muslim dialogue, engaging in working relationship with Muslim Centres and Institutions, which enjoy a high degree of representation.

6. H. Bashiriyeh, “A Critical Examination of Reason in Western and Islamic Philosophies: The Limits of Dialogue between Islam and the West,” *Dialogue*, Spring 2001 N. 3, pp. 89-90.

7. <http://www.ammanmessage.com>.

8. In 1993 the UN declared the “International Declaration of Minority Rights” emphasizing that the protection of minority rights in a country is no longer an internal affair but a matter of international concern. In the Muslim world this was considered a sort of pretext for the Western powers to interfere in the internal affairs of a Muslim country.

9. In 1948, when the UN proclaimed the International Declaration of Human Rights, and in 1989 the International Declaration of Children’s Rights, several Muslims countries expressed their reservation in respect to some articles considering them conflicting with Islamic *Sharia*.

10. M.M. Ayoub, “Islam and Pluralism,” *Dialogue*, Spring 2001, N.3, p. 107. These issues have been treated by Muslim and Christian scholars within the framework of a consultation organized by WCC’s office on Interreligious Relations in 1995. See T. Mitri (ed.), *Religion, Law and Society*, Geneva, 1995.

11. Dr Muhammad Sammak, a prominent Muslim scholar with rich experience in Christian-Muslim dialogue, in a recent lecture on “Human Dignity: An Islamic Perspective”, says: “Human rights and minority rights pose fundamental challenges that face the normalization of relations between Islam and the West during the post-Cold War period.”

12. W. Saif, “Human Rights and Islamic Revivalism” in *Religion, Law and Society*, pp. 121-122.

13. “*Religious Plurality and Christian Self-understanding*” (a study document of WCC) p. 4.

14. See “*Religious Plurality*”; Aram I, *For a Church*, pp. 95-121. Cf. also the conferences of the Commission of World Mission and Evangelism (CWME).

15. The concept of “other” is crucial in interreligious dialogue. The otherness of the other is a source of enrichment. The more we take a distance from ourselves and discover the other, the more we discover ourselves. To identify commonalities in respect to the concept of “other”, it is worth reading the following Jewish, Christian and Muslim perspectives: J. Sacks, *The Dignity of Difference: How to Avoid the Clash of Civilizations*, London, 2002; Aram I, *For a Church*, pp. 108-112, 253-285; M. Sammak, “Human Dignity.”

16. The recent letter of Muslim scholars, “A Common Word between Us and You” has

1. C. Kimball, *When Religion Becomes Evil*, New York, 2008 p. VIII.

2. S. Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order*, New York, 1996.

3. T. Ali, *The Clash of Fundamentalisms: Crusades, Jihads and Modernity*, London, 2002.

4. Aram I, *For a Church Beyond Its Walls*, Antelias, 2007, p. 272.

5. S.J. Samartha (ed.), *Dialogue between Men of Living Faiths*, Geneva, 1971, p. 20.

---

emphasized the crucial importance of neighbourhood as a basic value. The idea of hospitality has been spelled out as a common value in "Religious Plurality."

17. *Striving Together in Dialogue: A Muslim-Christian Call to Reflection and Action*, Geneva, 2001, pp. 2, 13.

18. The growing openness of the Muslim world toward the West is, indeed, a positive step forward.

In this context the initiatives taken by the Muslim countries of the Middle East and Asia must be warmly welcomed. In this regard I want to make three observations: (1) These initiatives need to be more organized in terms of agenda, methodology and representation. (2) They must not become one-time events but a continuous process with a

clear focus and objective. (3) Particular attention needs to be given to the churches in the Middle East because of their centuries of co-existence with Islam.

---

**His Holiness Aram I, Catholicos of the Holy See of Cilicia, is an internationally known spiritual leader and ecumenical figure. He served for two terms (1991-2005) as the Moderator of the World Council of Churches. Since 2006 he has been a honorary president of the World Religions for Peace and president of the Middle East Council of Churches.**

---

## **The Holy Spirit in the World:**

### **The Tension of the Particular with the Universal**

**Emmanuel Clapsis**

#### **The Challenge of Present Social Realities**

Orthodox theology cannot ignore the current social realities of late modernity that decisively shape the personal and collective identities of all human beings by resorting to a historicism that imprisons its thoughts in things of the past without any connection to or sensitivity for the rapidly changing realities of the present world. Neither is it acceptable to escape through eschatology into the heavenly and ethereal matters by disconnecting history from eschatology. The world is not simply the realm of darkness where the principalities, the powers and the spirits of the world reign without the active presence of God's Spirit in it. God has never abandoned his creation to the destructive and death dealing forces but through his providential love continues to sustain the world, and through the energies of God's Spirit to lead the whole creation towards its ultimate fulfillment. Every new development in history is the unfolding of the future that God has prepared in his love for the world, and at the same time contains elements of evil that leads the world to new forms of oppression, injustice, corruptibility and alienation. The intrinsically ambivalent nature of history does not allow either an outright endorsement or a rejection of the emerging historical and cultural realities. Rather, it is a challenge that invites Christian theology to refigure how faith in the triune God provides a transformative basis for life in its wholeness.

The compressed space of the global world, while it generates irresistible and irreversible forces of homogenization, simultaneously unleashes dynamics that

accentuate particularities<sup>1</sup> As Antony Giddens states, globalization is a dialectical process because it does not bring about a generalized set of changes acting in a uniform direction but consists in mutually opposed tendencies.<sup>2</sup> Globalization simultaneously universalizes while it particularizes. It intensifies homogenization as well as differentiation and it integrates as well as it fragments. In the context of this paradoxical plurality the need arises to refigure how the particular is universal and how the universal is particular in an inclusive manner that avoids, at the same time, exclusivism that breeds intolerance of difference and a pluralistic pluralism that leads to fragmentation.

The economic and technological advances of the modern world have forced different cultural, social, racial, national, and/or religious communities to live together and mingle indistinctly in the compressed space and time of the global world. They are affected by a "rapidly developing and ever-densening network of interconnections and interdependences."<sup>3</sup> This erodes the distinctive communal boundaries and unsettles personal and communal identities. In this highly contested situation, where everything that was solid and relatively transparent has become "fluid" and ambivalent, there is a danger to attribute all the personal and social ills that the new global world brings to the "unwelcoming" others. The others are all those who have intruded in the living space that a particular religious, cultural, racial, national consider to be exclusively theirs. The anxiety and the fear of those assaulted by the new global realities leads, in most instances, to

issues such as sectarianism, tribalism and fundamentalism with potential violent explosions against the imaginary and real threats against their allegedly fixed personal or collective identity. In this volatile situation, the configuration of the tense relationship between the particular and the universal, as well as of the universal with the particular in light of the irreversible pluralism of the global world, is an urgent task for the advancement of peace in the world. In light of this assumption, Christian theology must revisit its understanding how the particularity of the Christian faith relates to God's providence for all his creation once we have accepted the irreversibility of the pluralistic global world.

Religious communities, by virtue of their particularity and their universal claims, have contributed to and have caused social unrest and violence by limiting the presence of God and the dignity of human beings only to those who have embraced their religious beliefs and by demonizing those who are irreducibly different and disallowing the recognition and respect of their difference in the common public life. It is also equally true that religious faith and communities have empowered people to recognize the deeper unity of all human beings based on their belief in a benevolent God and to work together with them for the advancement of peace and of greater justice in the world. The commitment of the Christian Churches to, and their cooperation with, people of other faiths and ideologies for the advancement of a just, peaceful and participatory society must not have its origins simply in ideological, political, or pragmatic factors. It must be an expression of the public implication of the Christian faith or else it loses its theological claims and uniqueness. The plurality of the modern democratic world demands from all those who desire to contribute the gifts of their particularity towards the crafting of the common good that they develop sufficient conversational skills and humility to allow them to contribute towards the advancement of the common good without

claiming any kind of superiority over others.

The explicit affirmation of the dignity of all human beings because of the presence of the Holy Spirit in them theologically grounds the deeper unity of humanity in a way that allows them to be in communion with and to be committed to the well being of others despite religious, cultural, racial, economic and social differences. This theological assumption can only be sustained if we acknowledge that God's Spirit has been active together with the Logos in the creating, redeeming and sanctifying work of God. In God's economy, the Holy Spirit either precedes or follows the presence and the work of Christ but it never acts independently of its relationship with God the Father and the Son. The recognition of the work of the Spirit in nature as well as in moral, cultural, and political life is derived from this affirmation of its mission. "If the Spirit did not participate in the creative acts of God by which the universe came into being, then the Spirit becomes too sacralized, too tied to holy objects and events, and thus the life of the world apart or independent of the Church appears as void of God's presence."<sup>4</sup> The recognition of the operation of God's Spirit in the world beyond the boundaries of the Church is foundational in establishing and developing a relationship of respect and continuous conversation of the Church with the world. This dialogue provides opportunities for the Church to enrich itself by deepening its understanding of the Christian truth through the insights, observations, critiques, and life stories of others. In this dialogical context the Church evangelizes by offering its gifts to others without the zeal of proselytism.

Once the Christian churches have recognized the presence of God's Spirit in the life of the whole universe (in ways that cannot, a priori, be specified), a presence which precedes the personal or particular operation of the Spirit through the prayer of the Church they need to reflect on how the universal presence of God's Spirit

relates to the uniqueness of its claims about Jesus Christ. An obstacle that still exists in appreciating the universal aspect of God's Spirit in the world is the *filioque* that subsumes the work of God's Spirit under Jesus Christ and thus implies that the Spirit is present only where there is an explicit confession of Jesus Christ.<sup>5</sup> The Spirit of God acting in the world beyond the distinctive boundaries of the Church may work prior to an explicit affirmation of Jesus as Lord and Saviour, preparing and moving the world in unity with the risen Christ in ways and a manner that is comprehensible or transparent to those who have not yet been touched by the boundless love of God. The Spirit of God either precedes Christ or follows Christ but always acts in relation with Christ carrying out the will of God the Father. Thus, while we affirm that in Christ's ministry the Holy Spirit is actively present, it is important to recognize that in the mission of God's Spirit in the world, the risen Christ is mysteriously present since God in his economy is always acting as Trinity.

### **The Holy Spirit in ecumenical theology**

With few exceptions Christian theologians have not yet sufficiently reflected on the work of the Holy Spirit in the world. They have focused their reflection on its operation in the spiritual life of the believers, the life of the Church, the sacraments, and on how it relates to God the Father and the Son. The presence of God in the secular order, programs of social transformation, public service, politics and other religious or humanistic systems of belief and communities remains, in the word of Kilian McDonnell, an undeveloped aspect of the Christian theology of the Holy Spirit.<sup>6</sup> This pneumatological deficiency must be corrected in light of the urgent need to cooperate with and be in dialogue with people and communities of other living faiths and ideologies. The openness of the Church to such cooperation and dialogue is expressive of its belief in the active presence of the energies of God's Spirit in us and in them and in the whole humanity. These energies lead the world

to a greater and deeper recognition of its unity and openness to God's future. This belief requires the churches to be attentive in the context of its dialogue with others in the public space of life to the insights, critique, and contributions of others because the Spirit of God may tell us through them how to live in a more authentic and loving manner the gospel of Jesus and deepen our unity with God and the created world. Thus, while the Holy Spirit may act in the world through the prayers and the living witness of the Church, it may also guide the churches, through its presence in communities of living faiths and ideologies, to understand better how to live more authentically the gospel and deepen participation in God's mission for the salvation of the world. This latter possibility is accepted with difficulty by those who believe that the plenitude of God is actively present only within the distinctive boundaries of the Church, while the world as the realm of darkness and sin has nothing to offer to the Church, which by virtue of its divine origins is the living presence of God in the world.

The operation and presence of the Holy Spirit in the world, outside of the boundaries of the Christian Church became the focus of the Seventh Assembly of the World Council of Churches.<sup>7</sup> The assembly, as well as its proceedings, was controversial because for the first time the assembly of the World Council of Churches focused its attention on the economy of the Holy Spirit.<sup>8</sup> The theme of the assembly "Come, Holy Spirit – Renew the Whole Creation" and the subthemes, "Giver of Life – Sustain your Creation"; "Spirit of Truth – Set us Free"; "Spirit of Unity – Reconcile your People"; and "Holy Spirit – Transform and Sanctify Us", aimed to recognize the presence and the work of the Holy Spirit in the world. The theme of the assembly captured the imagination of those who advocate that the universal presence and salvific work of God's Spirit in the world makes the Christian claims of

the uniqueness of Jesus Christ unnecessary for the salvation of the world although Christ's uniqueness does not cease to be normative for the faith of the Christian Church. This view disassociates the salvific work of the Spirit from that of Christ. It abandons the Christocentricity of the Christian faith in favor a theocentricity. On the other hand, those who adhere to the belief that only those who believe in Jesus Christ are saved perceived the pneumatological focus of the assembly as a trend relativizing the faith of the Church. The real flaw with both of these positions is their deficient trinitarian faith. Those who advocate that there are multiple ways to salvation tend to be pneumatomonists in their theology. Their focus on the Holy Spirit provides them with a universal framework to understand the operation of God in history without attributing any decisive salvific significance to what God has granted to the world through Jesus Christ for those who live outside of the Christian Church. On the other hand, those who believe that salvation is granted only to those who believe in Jesus Christ and have been baptized in his name tend to be christomonists in their theology. They limit the salvific work of Jesus Christ only within the distinctive boundaries of the Christian Church or of their particular confession without any acknowledgment of the universal aspect of the Christian faith by the omnipresence of God's Spirit.<sup>9</sup> Adherence to the christocentricity of the Christian faith must be distinguished from a Christomonism that fails to recognize the trinitarian economy of God and the active participation and cooperation of the Holy Spirit with Christ in God's salvific work. On the other hand, the recognition of the presence of God's Spirit in the world, outside of the distinctive boundaries of the Church, must not be disassociated from Christ. Pneumatomonism is not a substitute for Christomonism.<sup>10</sup>

God reveals Godself and acts in the world through his Spirit and his Word. Hence, any attempt to limit and monopolize God in

terms either solely of Jesus or of the Spirit turns to a binitarianism or unitarianism, which fails to account for the fullness of God's being, presence and operation in the life of the world. Orthodox theology in light of its trinitarian faith simultaneously rejects exclusivism (christomonism) and pluralism (pneumatomonism or theo-centrism) by dialectically relating the universal – through the omnipresence of God's spirit to the entire history of humankind – with the particular of God's self-disclosure in Jesus Christ.<sup>11</sup> Thus, the Christian understanding of God cannot be divorced from the story of Jesus Christ and/or the universal operation of the mission of God's Spirit in the world, and it cannot rend asunder the particular and the universal. Trinitarian faith anchors God's revelation in the particularities of history reaching its climax in Jesus Christ without limiting God to any particularity, because of the universal active presence of his Spirit in the world. Thus, the particularity of God's revelation in Jesus of Nazareth understood from a trinitarian perspective cannot be disassociated from the universal presence and operation of God in the world through his Spirit.

### **The ambiguity of Christian tradition**

The irreversible religious plurality of the world, the conflicting claims of universality that different religions claim, as well as the potential conflicts that they generate because of exclusivity of their truth claims, give a sense of urgency to the need to reflect on whether Christianity is inherently exclusive of other religions as it has been generally proclaimed up to now. Here, I must pay tribute to the contribution of Metropolitan George Khodr who, almost thirty five years ago, called the churches to assess the theological significance of religious plurality. He opted for a dialogue of thought, life patterns and action on the part of the Christian churches with different religious communities for the sake of advancing peace, giving positive appreciation to a sense of goodness and spiritual life that exists beyond the distinctive boundaries of the Church.<sup>12</sup>

The early formative years of the Christian community that shaped and differentiated

Christianity from Judaism and Hellenistic religious thought and practices provide evidence of the ambivalent attitude of Christianity towards other religious communities.<sup>13</sup> The early Christian Church in expressing what it has received from God through Christ and the Holy Spirit acknowledges that God has acted in the life of the world through other religious communities. In the Acts of the Apostles it is stated that “In every nation the man who is god-fearing and does what is right is acceptable” to God (10:35). “In the past ages God allowed all nations to go their way” (14:16) “yet he has not left you without some clue to his nature” (14:17). There is among the Gentiles a yearning for the “unknown God” (17:23), a search for the God who “is not far from each one of us, for in him we live and move, in him we exist” (17:28). But this recognition that God is actively present in other religious faith and in the nations is held simultaneously with the belief that “gods made by human hands are not gods at all” (19:26). For Saint Paul “a false god has no existence in the real world” (1 Corinthians 8:4). In Revelation, paganism is identified as a lie (21:8) and as deceit (22:15). Yet, St Paul in his Areopagus speech expresses the view that the Athenians worshipped the true God without recognizing him as the Creator. His face had not been unveiled to them. Paul gave their god a name. The Name, together with its attributes, is the revelation of God. Here we find the germ of a positive attitude to other living faiths, which goes hand in hand with the complete negation of their value. This explains why, from the beginning, Christian apologetics would have two different attitudes. On the one hand, the gods are identified with images of wood or stone fashioned by human hands and are regarded as demons fighting against the Lord; on the other hand, a more positive and inclusive attitude is found acknowledging the presence and the operation of God’s grace in them.

The hostile attitude of Christianity towards other religions became a fixed position and further accentuated by the battles of the Church against heresies which generated

attitudes of intolerance and even of hatred. On the other hand, the more positive approach to other religions inspired by Paul’s address to the Athenians continued to evolve in the life of the Church. According to the notion of *spermatikos logos*, as it was understood by Justin the Martyr, all who have lived according to the *Logos* are Christians, since there is no truth apart from God and his action in the world. Clement of Alexandria, the leading representative of this line of thought, sees the whole mankind as a unity and beloved of God. On the basis of Hebrews (1:1) he asserts that it was to the whole humankind and not only to Israel that “God spoke in former times in fragmentary and varied fashion.” Origen expresses a similar view when he discerns “elements of the divine in the pagan religions and in Greek philosophy”<sup>14</sup> The fathers of the Church continued to respect the wisdom of antiquity, although with a clearly apparent reserve. Gregory of Nazianzus declared that a number of philosophers, like Plato and Aristotle “caught a glimpse of the Holy Spirit”<sup>15</sup> Despite his strong criticism of idolatry, he does not shrink from declaring that he sees in the religious life of humankind “the hand of God guiding people to the true God.” This entire trend of patristic thought can be summed up in the following sentence of Irenaeus: “There is only one God who from the beginning to end, through various economies, comes to the help of humankind.”<sup>16</sup>

In short, the early Christian Church, while it unequivocally affirmed that in Jesus Christ God has fully and definitively revealed himself and has decisively acted for the salvation of the world, acknowledges that God’s grace operated and continues to operate independently or apart from the Church because of God’s providential love for the world. It also implies that while it affirmed Christ to be the definitive and full revelation of God, it did not exclude the possibility that God in his unconditional freedom and love has revealed himself to others, albeit not as fully and definitively as in Jesus Christ. Such imperfect or partial revelations of God in other cultures and

religions can only be discerned and appreciated by what we know about God through our faith in Jesus Christ. The denunciation and rejection of other religious systems, beliefs, and practices, while they reveal the strong conviction of the early Church about the fullness of the truth that it can be found in its life, beliefs and practices as it struggles against heresies, schisms and other religious practices and belief, constitutes a warning that not everything found in other religions or in the life of the world can be attributed to the presence and operation of God's grace in them.

### **The Spirit of God in the world**

As we have noted, Orthodox theologians, with few exceptions, have not reflected on the presence and operation of the Holy Spirit in the life of the world beyond the distinct boundaries of the Church, although they acknowledge in prayer that the Spirit of God, the Spirit of truth, is everywhere present and fills all things. These theologians, following the Greek Patristic tradition, strongly emphasize the infusion of the energies of the Holy Spirit into all creation. In Orthodox theological tradition, the energies of God's Spirit are active in all creation and history and indeed in all things. Despite the pervasiveness of evil in the created world, there is always a progressive force in it for the sanctification of everything and of everyone. "The Spirit of God, direct, authoritative, and fount of wisdom, and life, and holiness...full...all ruling, all-effecting, all-powerful, of infinite power, Lord of creation, and not under any lord...sanctifying, not sanctified...and participated in by all creation (μεταλαμβάνόμενον υπό πάσης της κτίσεως)"<sup>17</sup> This conviction about the universal presence of God's Spirit which sanctifies everything including human existence is also expressed in the hymns of St Symeon the New Theologian who prayerfully asks for the coming of the Holy Spirit: "Come true light; come eternal life; come that which is ineffable; come thou who canst not be known; come joy unceasing! Come resurrection of the

dead, come, O mighty One, who dost accomplish, transform and change everything through thy will alone... Come, thou whom my miserable soul has loved and loves!"<sup>18</sup>

The pervasive presence of the energies of God's Spirit in the whole universe and in the Church is incompatible with any personal and/or collective self-sufficiency and isolationism. The Church, constituted simultaneously by Christ and the Holy Spirit, discloses the future of humanity and of creation as community that transcends all its divisions and fragmentation by the power of God's Spirit and lives forever in unity in God's love:

*Men, women, children, deeply divided as to race, nation, tongue, way of life, work, knowledge, dignity, fortune...the Church recreates them all in the Spirit and stamps on all in like manner a diving form. All receive from it a single nature, which cannot be fragmented and no longer allows them to pay heed to the many deep differences affecting them. Hence all are raised and united in truly catholic fashion. In it, no one is in the slightest separated from the community; all are so to speak merged in each other through the single indivisible power of faith.*<sup>19</sup>

While Orthodox theology has a profound understanding of the active presence of God's Spirit in creation and in history, Orthodox theologians seem to limit the operation of God's Spirit within the sacred space of the Church and the inner life of its members.

They are reluctant to acknowledge the universal salvific presence of God in the world because they are particularly fearful of the potential relativization of the Christian gospel. Yet, I wonder whether it is desirable that, for the sake of actual or imaginative fears and risks, essential aspects that shape the understanding of God's involvement in history should be silenced or insufficiently emphasized. Orthodox theology, based on the indivisibility of the humanity and the

recognition of the active presence of God's energies in fullness of the world, must be able to discern and appreciate whatever rays or glimpses of God's Spirit discerns in life in the world outside of its distinctive boundaries. This requires the rejection of filioquism which subsumes the Spirit's work under Christ's, a position that Orthodox theology, at least in theory, does not accept.<sup>20</sup> The Spirit of God while it is actively present in the interior life of the baptized faithful and constitutes the Church as the body of Christ, is also active in the fullness of God's creation and in history. This affirmation held together with recognition of the omnipresence of evil provides a safeguard against the adoption of any kind of Manichaeism and enables the Church to cooperate with other communities in the civic space by recognizing in them the energies of God's Spirit.

The Orthodox contribution to the Seventh Assembly of the World Council of Churches in 1991 expressed this positive and yet critical recognition of the energies of God's Spirit in the world. The 1990 report of the Eastern Orthodox and Oriental Orthodox Consultation on the theme of the Seventh Assembly of the World Council of Churches held in 1991<sup>21</sup> entitled *Come, Holy Spirit – Renew the Whole Creation: An Orthodox Approach*<sup>22</sup> articulates the premises for understanding the operation of the Holy Spirit in the history of the world. It states that Orthodox theology understands the presence and operation of the Holy Spirit in the world from the perspective of God's economy, which is intrinsically Trinitarian. It cannot be independent or separate from the work of Jesus Christ and the loving will of God the Father. The aim of God's Spirit in creation and redemption is to liberate humanity and creation in general from all forms of self-sufficiency and "autonomy" vis-à-vis God. The Spirit opens up the boundaries of whatever he touches and brings it into relation with the transcendent God. It serves the will of God, who desires and actively works so that humanity and creation in general will

transcend its creaturely limitations and enter into the glory and life of God (Romans 8:20-21). The transcending and liberating aspect of the work of the Holy Spirit shows God to be the Spirit of communion (2 Corinthians 13:13). This is not only true with reference to the relation between God and the world, but also with regard to inter-human relations and indeed to the relations of humanity with the whole creation. Wherever the Holy Spirit blows, the boundaries of individualism are transcended and love and communion emerge. Thus the Church as the "temple of God's Spirit" participates to and brings to the world the spirit of communion that leads all into unity and moves the whole created world and humanity towards the reign of God. From the perspective of the understanding of the mission of the Holy Spirit in the world, all human ideologies, religious beliefs that lead to a life pattern of self-sufficiency, self-enclosure, exclusivism and triumphalism are incompatible with the Spirit of God that generates communion and relationality. Being as communion through the work of the Holy Spirit reflects for the Christians the pattern of sacrificial love that Christ has disclosed to the world through his life pattern.

The trinitarian understanding of the presence and operation of God's Spirit in the world means that the economy of God's Spirit cannot be perceived apart from the redemptive and deifying work of the Incarnate Logos of God. Christ's mission is the mission of the Triune God and that means that the Holy Spirit cannot be disassociated either from the entirety of life or from his salvific work. In the same manner, the mission of the Spirit is the mission of the Triune God and this means that Christ is actively present in its mission. This trinitarian perception of God's mission for the salvation of the world is transparent and fully disclosed in the Church. For those who live in the world, this active and salvific presence of God's Spirit in the life of the world cannot be fully understood and be transparent to them but even Christians are cautious

about trying to explain the mysterious presence of God's Spirit in the world.

The trinitarian understanding of God's economy does not allow the disassociation of the work of Holy Spirit in history from Christ and his Church. But, the mission of the Holy Spirit cannot be limited to the distinctive boundaries of the Church:

*Although the Spirit constitutes the Church and acts in her life, the Spirit of God is not limited or contained exclusively by it. The Holy Spirit is everywhere present since it "blows where it wills, and you have the sound of it, but you do not know whence it comes or whither it goes" (Jn 3:8). The mysterious character of the Holy Spirit constantly help us to transcend all narrow perspectives with regard the work of the Spirit. The Spirit is at work in the whole of God's creation though not all are aware of it.<sup>23</sup>*

What does this recognition of the active presence of God's Spirit in the life of the world mean for the witness of the Christian churches to the world? The report, expanding the presence and the operation of the Holy Spirit beyond the interior life of the believers and the sacramental life of the Church recognizes its presence in all human efforts and movements for the removal of all causes of injustice and oppression.<sup>24</sup> It advocates that those who have been anointed by the Holy Spirit and through its guidance united with God in Jesus Christ have the responsibility to participate in God's salvific and liberating ministry:

*Christians must actively care for the healing of those who suffer as a result of human brokenness. This healing involvement in the suffering of the world must not be one dimensional. The people of God through the divine gifts of the Spirit are actively, and in diverse manners, involved in history to reduce the suffering of the poor, the weak, and the voiceless. The Church, by being faithful to its inner life of the Spirit and the Gospel becomes*

*the power of healing and liberation for God's creation.<sup>25</sup>*

The participation of the Church in movements of social transformation is guided by its vision of what it is and is becoming because of its identification with Christ by the grace of the Holy Spirit. If its life is "being as communion" then it is its essential mission to be in the world the "extension (and prolongation) of the communion of the Spirit."<sup>26</sup>

The identification of God's presence in movements of social transformation is not uncritical since all efforts for human liberation are subject to corruptibility by the sin that pervades in the world:

*Given the intrinsic ambiguity of history and the awareness that spirits other than the Holy Spirit may act in the world, we must be very careful not to identify in an absolute manner the Holy Spirit with human progress, actions, social movements, and ideologies. Sometimes what we call human progress or liberation may be a passing from one slavery to another, more subtle and oppressive. Since the reign of God is an unconditional gift of God, we must concur that all human actions in themselves are essentially imperfect and thus contain hidden elements of evil. This awareness shapes the critical task of the Church in the life of the world as the power that unmasks and resists all new and old forms of idolatry and false messianic expectations.<sup>27</sup>*

In conclusion, the Orthodox churches in their contribution to the pneumatological theme of the Seventh Assembly of the World Council of Churches recognized the active presence of God's Spirit in the world acting beyond the boundaries of the Church, but not independently or separately from Christ, since both in their distinctive but interdependent missions disclosed that active love of God the Father. The report while it recognized that the fullness of God's love for the world is revealed and experienced in the Church, also acknowledged that the Holy Spirit is

working in the world towards the unity of all and the participation of all in God's kingdom. From a trinitarian perspective, we assume that wherever and whenever we discern the operating presence of God's Spirit in aspects of the world's life, Christ is also active present in these situations in a hidden form and manner. In the words of Metropolitan George Khodr:

*Christ is hidden everywhere in the mystery of his lowliness... Every martyr for the truth, every man persecuted for what he believes to be right, dies in communion with Christ. The mystics of Islamic countries with their witness to suffering love lived the authentic Johannine agape. For if the tree is known by its fruits, there is no shadow of doubt that the poor and humble folk who live for and yearn for God in all nations already receive the peace which the Lord gives to all whom He loves (Luke 2:14).<sup>28</sup>*

Those who live the Christian pattern of life, openness to God and embracing in an active love all human beings even though they may not explicitly confess Jesus Christ as their Lord and Saviour are not far from God.

### **The Church and the salvation of the world**

If salvation is understood as participation in God's trinitarian life through the mission of the Holy Spirit that leads and makes possible the unity of the world with Christ, how is it possible for those who do not believe in Jesus Christ to be saved? In other words, is the presence and the operation of God's spirit in creation salvific in nature? If the answer is affirmative, then how is the salvific presence of God's spirit in history related to the salvific work of the incarnate Word of God and by extension to the, which is the body of Christ and the temple of the Holy Spirit? Orthodox theologians, although they are reluctant to affirm in concrete terms the presence of the risen Christ in the world, affirm the unity of creation and of humanity with the risen and exalted Christ through the cosmic and eschatological

understanding of the Eucharist and the active operation of the Holy Spirit in the world. In the Eucharist, the whole created world becomes the body of Christ and receives sanctification. The Church in the Eucharist is disclosed as the visible and effective sign of the coming reign of God. The Church constituted by Christ and the Holy Spirit is the ark of salvation. The salvific grace of God expands even beyond its distinct boundaries (Titus 2:11) offering salvation to all people of all ages throughout the world.<sup>29</sup> None is excluded, in Professor Karmires' view, from the gift of salvation that God grants to humanity regardless of race, language, colour, class, age and even of belief. Through Christ's redemptive sacrifice, the whole creation and humanity has been reconciled to God (1 John 2:2, 4:10).<sup>30</sup>

Humanity finds its wholeness and unity in the Church through the reconciling ministry of Christ that becomes accessible to all by the Holy Spirit. The sacramental life of the Church as it is lived and actualized, especially in the Eucharist, brings the whole humanity and creation into unity with God through Christ and the Holy Spirit. Humanity and creation constitute the body of Christ in its wider sense as the unity of creation with the uncreated God through the recapitulation of all in Christ and the indivisibility of humanity. In this wider sense of the Church's being, the Church is not just the Orthodox Christians but all other Christians, heterodox and people of other living faiths. What brings them into unity with God is their openness in desire and intention to God and their active love for all humanity and creation. Orthodox theologians while they acknowledge the presence of God in the entirety of creation and in the wholeness of humanity are reluctant to identify how and in what specific ways the Holy Spirit is mystically present to those who live outside of the distinctive boundaries of the Church.<sup>31</sup>

The incomprehensibility of God's active presence in the world beyond the boundaries of the Church is a sign of

God's unconditional freedom and providential love for all his creation. The unconditional freedom of God's operation in the life of the world implies that while the plenitude of Christ through the active presence of the Holy Spirit is present in the Church, the cosmic dimension of the new creation that his resurrection brings embraces the whole humanity and the whole created world at large. Thus, while God is actively present in the Church granting salvation to all who confess Jesus Christ as their Lord and Saviour, God does not limit His presence and operation only within the distinctive boundaries of the Church:

*The work of salvation outside of Israel "according to the flesh" and outside the historical church, is the result of the resurrection which fills everything with the fullness of Christ. The coming of Christ, in whom "all things are held together" (Col. 1:17) has led the whole of mankind to its true existence and brings about spiritual renewals, economies which can take charge of human souls until He comes. The Church's mediatorial roles remain unimpaired. But the freedom of God is such that He can raise up prophets outside the sociological confines of the New Israel just as He raised them up outside the confines of the Old Israel. But these callings to prophecy and wisdom outside the sanctuary possess a secret bond with the power of the Risen One and in no way conflict with the uniqueness of Christ's economy.<sup>32</sup>*

God in his love for the created world and humanity has acted before and continues to act even after the incarnation of his Word in multiple and diverse ways for the purpose of saving the world. For instance, before the incarnation of his Word, according to St John Chrysostom, God gave to the gentiles the natural ethical law and to the Jews the Mosaic Law. Both the natural ethical law and the written Mosaic Law, although they are different, prepared the gentiles and Jews for salvation "κοινά τὰ τῆς πρόνοιᾳς ἢ, εἰ καὶ διαφόρως." What God had granted to both was not of less of

value and importance despite their difference. Here we have a disclosure of God's providence for all humanity and his freedom to act differently in different contexts for the purpose to communicate his love for the world. God in his grace and philanthropy has never ceased to do everything for the salvation of the human race from the beginning of time until its end.<sup>33</sup> Chrysostom named the righteous people of the old times as "Christians in practice if not in name since we cannot place them outside of the truth." Gregory of Nazianzus states that "just as many of our own are not with us because their lives alienate them from the common body of the faithful, in like manner many of those outside are with us, in so far as by the way of life they anticipate the faith and only lack in name what they possess in attitude."<sup>34</sup>

The belief that there is salvation outside of the Church seems to contradict the axiom that *extra ecclesiam nulla salus*. The axiom affirms negatively that there is no salvation outside of the Church and in a positive manner that salvation and unity with God can only be realized only through and in the Church. Professor Karmires recognizes that many of the church fathers have adopted this position but it does not have a doctrinal status because it does not have biblical origins and foundations.<sup>35</sup> It was advanced in the history of the church by Cyprian, Origen, Augustine, Chrysostom and other church fathers as an exhortation to avoid heresies and schisms and safeguard the unity of the Church. Karmires then suggests that the Fathers through the concept of *extra ecclesiam nulla salus* expressed the belief that there is no salvation in heretical and schismatic churches and communities but not that people in such communities cannot be saved through their baptism and/or their righteous life. Similarly non-Christians can be saved as people of God for whom salvation is possible through God's salvific grace. Megalos Pharantos concludes his study on the theology of religions by stating that the Fathers of the Church simultaneously affirm that there is

divine grace before the incarnation of the Word and outside of the Church despite the fact that it is at the same time emphasized that apart from Christ and the church there is no salvation.<sup>36</sup> Professor Karmires states that we must have an unshakeable hope and conviction, that God in his boundless mercy and wisdom knows and possesses other ways, other unknown to us “incomprehensible ways” by which he grants salvation to those that live beyond the distinctive boundaries of the Church but possess the natural knowledge of God and faith as well as ethical consciousness.<sup>37</sup> Their salvation originates in God’s providence and is achieved through the – incomprehensible to us – working of the Holy Spirit in the world that brings all into unity with the risen Christ and consequently in the Church in its wider sense.<sup>38</sup>

The Church does not reject whatever is holy and true existing either in history or in other religious communities because it considers them as rays of the divine truth that enlightens and leads their people to God. The Church completes whatever is incomplete in others. It enhances those elements of faith and life that reflect God’s love and will for his Creation. It completes those elements of truth that have their origins in God since Christ’s mission is not to “abolish but to complete” (Matthew 5:17). Thus, the Church cannot be indifferent to those who are not Christians because they are also guided by God’s Spirit. It is a fundamental belief of the Christian Church that all creation is incessantly influenced by the *dabar*, or Word of God, and by the *ruah*, or Spirit of God. The “two hands” of the Father, the equally glorious Persons of the Son and the Spirit, extend and bestow elements of divine truth to all human beings in ways conducive to their salvation. Even if the Church insists that its own preaching contains and promulgates divine truth most unambiguously and thus most adequately, Christians should never cease either to marvel at the spiritual force underlying the universal quest for truth or

to invoke the Holy Spirit to rejuvenate the self-transcending impetus of this quest.

<sup>1</sup> Emmanuel Clapsis, “The Challenge of the Global World,” in *The Orthodox Churches in Pluralistic World*, ed. Emmanuel Clapsis (Geneva: WCC Publications, 2004), 47-66.

<sup>2</sup> Antony Giddens, *The Consequences of Modernity* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1990), 64.

<sup>3</sup> John Tomlinson, *Globalization and Culture* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1999), 2.

<sup>4</sup> Kilian McDonnell, “The Determinative Doctrine of the Holy Spirit,” *Theology Today* 39 (1982).

<sup>5</sup> Harvey Cox, “Make Way for the Spirit,” in *God’s Life in Trinity*, Miroslav Volf and Michael Welker, eds., (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2006), 93-100. In rejecting the *Filioque*, Cox states: “To say that the Holy Spirit “proceeds” from both the Father “and” the Son, as the Western Churches (Roman Catholic and most Protestant creedal churches) do, is to imply that the presence of the Spirit of God must in some way be subsumed under Jesus Christ. This view has usually meant that the Spirit can be present only where there is an explicit confession of Jesus Christ. In turn, this affirmation suggests that the Spirit of God, which according to John 3:8 “blows where it wills,” must now restrict itself, as it were, to ecclesiastically approved channels, Its freedom is delimited, whereas in the Eastern and more mystical version of Christianity, the experience of God the Spirit is at least theoretically available in a wider, less refined, and less controlled way.” 96.

<sup>6</sup> Kilian McDonnell, *The Other Hand of God: The Holy Spirit as the Universal Touch and Goal* (Collegeville, Minnesota: Liturgical Press, 2003)

<sup>7</sup> Michael Kinnamon, ed., *Signs of the Spirit: Official Report Seventh Assembly, Canberra, Australia, 7-20 February 1991* (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1991). The Orthodox actively contributed to the deliberations of the Assembly by its contributions that can be found in Gennadios Limouris, ed., *Come, Holy Spirit Renew the Whole Creation: An Orthodox Approach for the Seventh Assembly of the World Council of Churches Canberra, Australia 6-21 February 1991* (Brookline, MA.: Holy Cross Orthodox Press, 1990).

<sup>8</sup> Kirsteen Kim, *The Holy Spirit in the World: A Global Conversation* (New York: Orbis Books, 2007).

<sup>9</sup> The relationship of Christianity to other religions currently is understood through the typology of exclusivism, inclusivism and pluralism. Exclusivism refers to the view that there can be no salvation other than through explicit faith in Jesus Christ. In some moderate versions of the exclusivist type, other religions may possess some knowledge of the truth of God; but they are not ways of salvation. Inclusivism teaches that Jesus Christ is the definitive revelation of God, that the salvation accomplished in him embraces all people, and that it is somehow made available to all. Pluralism holds that all religions mediate true, if partial, knowledge of the mystery of God and that all are equally valid ways of salvation. For a discussion of the strengths and weakness of these different understandings of the salvific significance of religions see: Gavin D'Costa, *Theology and Religious Pluralism*. (Oxford: Blackwell, 1986)

<sup>10</sup> For an Orthodox Trinitarian critique of both Christomonism and Pneumatomonism, see Nikos A. Nissiotis, "The Importance of the Doctrine of the Trinity for Church Life and Theology," in *The Orthodox Ethos* (Oxford: Holywell Press, 1964), 32-69.

<sup>11</sup> Ioannis Karmires, *Η Παγκοσμιότητα της έν Χριστώ Σωτηρίας*, *Θεολογία* 51/4 (1980), 645-691; 52/1 (1981), 14-45.

<sup>12</sup> Metropolitan Georges Khodr, "Christianity in a Pluralistic World: The Economy of the Holy Spirit," in *The Orthodox Church in the Ecumenical Movement*, ed. Constantine G. Patelos, (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1978), 297-307.

<sup>13</sup> Richard P. C. Hanson, "The Christian Attitude to Pagan Religions up to the Time of Constantine the Great," in his book *Studies in Christian Antiquity* (Edinburgh: T & T. Clark, 1985), 144-229.

<sup>14</sup> Metropolitan Georges Khodr, "Christianity in a Pluralistic World: The Economy of the Holy Spirit", 299.

<sup>15</sup> Orat. 31.5; PG 36, 137c.

<sup>16</sup> Adv. Haer. III, 12. 13.

<sup>17</sup> St John of Damascus, *De fide orthodoxa*, PG 94.821 Bc.

<sup>18</sup> PG 120. 507-509.

<sup>19</sup> St. Maximus the Confessor, *Mystagogia*, PG 91, 665-668.

<sup>20</sup> This is evident in the Orthodox critique of the *filioque* and its implications for the trinitarian faith and the understanding of the Church. The work of the Spirit is not limited just in communicating in a subjective manner what Christ has objectively granted to the world.

<sup>21</sup> Michael Kinnamon, ed., *Signs of the Spirit*.

<sup>22</sup> Gennadios Limouris ed., *Come, Holy Spirit Renew the Whole Creation*, 36-55.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 43

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 42.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 44.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 44.

<sup>28</sup> Khodr, "Christianity in a Pluralistic World", 304

<sup>29</sup> Joh. Chrys. hom. Rom 8.4 (PG 32.1160).

<sup>30</sup> Ioannis Karmires, *Η Παγκοσμιότητα της έν Χριστώ Σωτηρίας*, *Θεολογία* 51/4 (1980), 645-691; 52/1 (1981), 14-45.

<sup>31</sup> Karmires, *Η Παγκοσμιότητα της έν Χριστώ Σωτηρίας*, , 657. Επομένως εις τόν άνθρωπον είναι άγνωστος ό τρόπος, καθ' όν ενεργεί έν προκειμένω ή χάρις ως σωτήριος ενεργεια του Θεού και λυτρωτική δύναμις του Παρακλητου, καθ' ότι είναι «ανεξεύνητα τά κρίματα του Θεού και ανεξιαχνίαστοι αι όδοι αυτού» (Ρωμ. 11.33, βλ. Γενικώτερον κεφάλαια Ρωμ. 9-11). Άλλά πάντως διά της επιθυμίας και της επιδιώξεως της σωτηρίας και διά της έν αγάπη ενεργουμένης πίστεως και της έναρέτου ζωής, δύνανται και μη χριστιανοί να συνάπτωσι πραγματικόν σύνδεσμον μετά της Έκκλησίας, βαπτιζόμενοι οιονεί έν τη πίστει αυτών, και ούτως ανήκοντες άοράτως και πνευματικώς εις αυτήν, καιπερ μή συμπεριλαμβανομένοι σωματικώς εις την έξωτερικήν κοινότητα αυτής.

<sup>32</sup> Khodr, "Christianity in a Pluralistic World", 304.

<sup>33</sup> Joh. Chrys., Hom. Joh. 14.2, PG 59.94.

<sup>34</sup> Greg. Naz., *Epitafios to his father* 5, PG 35. 92.

<sup>35</sup> Karmires, *Η Παγκοσμιότητα της έν Χριστώ Σωτηρίας*, , 16.

<sup>36</sup> Megas Pharantos, *Η Θρησκεία, Δογματική Θεώρησις* (Athens, 1978), 73-74.

<sup>37</sup> Karmires, *Η Παγκοσμιότητα της έν Χριστώ Σωτηρίας*, , 21.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.* Εκ τών άνωτέρω δήλον, ότι οι έκ τών και μετά Χριστόν έτεροθρήσκων και έτεροδόξων πιστοί και δίκαιοι πάντων τών αίωνων και πασών τών ανθρώπινων φυλών δύνανται να θεωρῶνται ως ανήκοντες μυστικώς και άρρήτως και άοράτως ει την έν ευρυτέρα έννοία Έκκλησιαν ή όπωσδήποτε ως διατελοῦντες πόθω εις άόρατον μετ' αυτής σχέσιν και συνάφειαν, καθ' όσον και επ' αυτών έπεξατάθη και επέκτείνεται ή παντουργός πρόνοια και σωτήριος χάρις του θέλοντος πάντας ανθρώπους σωθηναι φιλανθρώπου Θεού, του γινώσκοντος και δυναμένου βεβαίως και δι' άλλων τρόπων να χορηγή αυτοίς την χάριν και σωτηριαν,

---

οὐδαμῶθεν δε περιοριζόμενων ἢ κωλυόμενου  
πρὸς τοῦτο, ὡς προεῖπομεν.

---

**Emmanuel Clapsis** is a tenured professor of systematic theology at the Holy Cross Greek Orthodox School of Theology in Brookline, Massachusetts. Since 1985, he has taught dogmatic theology and courses that relate Orthodox theology to modern and postmodern sensibilities. His main academic interests include ecclesiology, ecumenism, the public presence and witness of Orthodoxy in pluralistic world, globalization and religion, pneumatology, anthropology, suffering and hope, spiritual life and prophetic witness.

---

*He has represented the Ecumenical Patriarchate in several ecumenical consultations and as a delegate to the Seventh, Eighth and Ninth Assemblies of WCC. He has served as the vice-moderator of the Faith and Order Commission of the World Council of Churches (1991-1998). Currently, he is a member of the Reference Group that informed and accompanied the work of the World Council of Churches during the Decade to Overcome Violence (DOV: 2001-2010).*

---

## On Lutheran Theology and Practice in Relation to Islam

Simone Sinn

### **Lutheran Churches Engaging with Muslim Communities: An Educational Opportunity**

In recent years a considerable number of Lutheran churches, especially in Europe and North America, have produced public statements on Islam and Christian–Muslim relations. There is an increased awareness of the growing presence of Muslims in these parts of the world, as well as of the opportunities for mutual encounter. The public statements explore a number of practical issues and theological questions that arise during such encounters. Most of them provide an assessment of the current situation in Christian–Muslim relations, propose basic theological guidelines and put forward practical examples or recommendations. These statements show that churches are in the midst of an intensified hermeneutical process in which they try to understand Islam as well as themselves in relation to Islam. For many Christians Islam seems to have become, again, the significant “Other” that plays an important role in shaping one’s identity. Consequently, Islam and other religions are no longer simply part of the context in which they live, but are seen as (counter) parts in their own faith formation. Lutheran churches have realized that learning about Islam and encountering Muslims have become important educational opportunities for their members.

Such processes enhance the mutual understanding between Christian and Muslim communities, and at the same time deepen their faith. In response to the letter *A Common Word*, Bishop Mark Hanson, then presiding bishop of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America and president of the Lutheran World Federation (LWF), highlighted the spiritual significance of

encounter between Jews, Muslims and Christians:

*I acknowledge this letter in gratitude and recognition of the need for its further study and consideration. I likewise accept it in the belief that Jews, Muslims, and Christians are called to one another as to a holy site, where God’s living revelation in the world is received in reverence among the faithful and not in fear of our neighbors.<sup>1</sup>*

For Lutherans, faith formation has always been more than handing down faith traditions from one generation to the next. It involves an existential process of understanding God’s grace in relation to one’s own times and one’s own life. Maturity in matters of faith and responsible citizenship are vital Lutheran concerns in that process. Today, this includes actively engaging with Muslim communities, enabling direct interfaith encounter and listening to the questions that young people ask in their faith formation.

The actual encounters between Lutherans and Muslims, of course, differ widely depending on the cultural, socioeconomic and political contexts in which they meet. Lutherans in Denmark have another story with Muslims than Lutherans in Indonesia, and this again differs from Lutheran - Muslim interaction in Nigeria. Multidimensional studies of such contextual experiences are extremely important in order to understand the complexity of these interactions. The LWF and other institutions have in the past undertaken such studies and will need to continue to do so in the future.<sup>2</sup>

This contribution focuses on some basic theological ideas in relation to Islam and

Christian–Muslim relations from a Lutheran perspective. This will by no means be exhaustive, but simply offer a few thoughts for further discussion. It needs to be mentioned that during most of the twentieth century, Lutheran theology mainly discussed the theology of religions in general,<sup>3</sup> and also made important contributions to Christian - Jewish relations. Only in recent times, the number of Lutheran scholars working more specifically on Islam has been increasing.<sup>4</sup>

Five themes which are relevant for Lutheran relations to Islam will be highlighted in the following. First, the meaning and impact of relational ontology as presented in Martin Luther's theology will be introduced. Second, the issue of adequate knowledge about one another will be explored by pointing to Luther's own efforts. Third, interfaith cooperation is emphasised as a joint responsibility in the worldly realm, with reference to Luther's distinction between the spiritual and the worldly realms. Fourth, joint theological explorations into sacred scriptures and into understandings of freedom and responsibility are proposed. Fifth, the need for multidimensional engagement with Muslim neighbours as experienced by many Lutheran churches is affirmed and interpreted in relation to the Pauline triad "faith, hope and love".

### **Relational ontology as a key insight in Lutheran theology**

Understanding who we are in relational terms is at the heart of Lutheran theology. Martin Luther emphasised that our identity as Christians cannot be explained by naming specific characteristics or properties, but by exploring the constitutive relationships in which we live. In his theological writings, the preposition *coram* (in face of/in relation to) is of key importance.<sup>5</sup> Luther explores how we exist in relation to God (*coram Deo*), in relation to the world (*coram mundo*) and to ourselves (*coram meipso*). Our being can only be grasped as being in the presence of God, world and ourselves.

For Luther, the foundational relationship within these relations is God's relationship to us in God's unconditional love. God grants justification by faith through grace alone. Being justified, however, is not a property that we possess, but something from outside of ourselves.<sup>6</sup> Thus, it is not because we belong to the group of Christians that we are justified, but because God grants his unconditional love to us in Jesus Christ. It is the living relationship with God that shapes who we are, not our belonging to a specific group of people.

In the midst of all kinds of identity politics and controversial identity markers in the religious field, Lutheran theology offers the possibility to rethink the foundational meaning of "relationality" and the living relationship with God. From this perspective, essentialist views of Christianity and Islam must be questioned. In the midst of our struggle to deepen Christian self-understanding and our understanding of Islam, we are called to meditate on our understanding of God and God's relationship to us.

What are the issues to be discussed when we enter into dialogue about our understanding of God? Traditionally, Lutheran theology focused on a Christocentric view of God, *solus Christus* (Christ alone) being one of the four *solas* that mark Lutheran identity.<sup>7</sup> In the twentieth century, then, theological reflections on the Trinity have gained momentum in ecumenical dialogue and have had a significant impact on Lutheran theology. There have been important studies on the inner-Trinitarian relationality, exploring oneness and otherness in Godself.

These perspectives, in turn, have also provoked conversation about the Trinity and the oneness of God in Lutheran - Muslim encounter. In this dialogue, similarities and distinctive differences in our understanding of God come to the fore. In listening to Muslim perspectives we deepen our own faith understanding. In his scholarly elaboration on the Trinity in

Christian - Muslim conversation, Mark Swanson concludes:

*Islam is allowed to become a teacher of the Church. Its central category for illegitimate God-talk, shirk, is accepted as a powerful contribution to Christians' own discussions. Once brought into the discussion in this way, however, the notion of shirk functions as a warning to Christians to keep their trinitarian nerve: the way forward in inter-faith conversation is, in this view, not through retreating on Nicea, but rather by going deeper into the peculiar understanding of divine unity that the Nicene theologians laid out.*<sup>8</sup>

There is rich spiritual and theological potential in reflecting on our relationship with God together with Muslims. We thereby deepen our relations with God and with one another. The theological insight into relational ontology is mirrored in lived experiences of dialogical relations. Olaf Schumann emphasises that we do not need to be in fear of losing our identity in dialogue. He stresses that in active participation in dialogue "faith becomes relational, not relative: it opens relations with the other, but relations exist only as long as those who are related are distinguishable from each other"<sup>9</sup>.

### **Seeking adequate knowledge about Islam and Christian-Muslim relations**

Today, most of the Lutheran churches are in direct contact with Muslims and Islam. This has not always been the case. In recent centuries, a considerable part of Lutheran theology was developed without immediate contact with Muslims. Nonetheless, in Lutheran theology there has been a strong sense of the need to acquire adequate knowledge about Islam. Martin Luther himself tried to get information about the belief of the Turks that was available at his time. Admittedly, he based his judgement on the limited written sources in Latin available at the time, and certainly had no direct relations with Muslims.<sup>10</sup>

Luther's critical theological position towards Islam is widely known, as is his

polemical way of talking about the Turks. A number of detailed studies on this matter caution against any easy reference to Luther's statements today. On which sources did Luther base his judgements?

Luther first used the *Libellus de ritu et moribus Turcorum* (On the Rites and Customs of the Turks). As he regarded adequate knowledge as essential for any judgement, he published this document with his own preface so that others could also form their judgement.<sup>11</sup> He used Nicolas of Cusa's, *Cribratio Alkorani* (Sifting the Qur'an), and translated Riccoldo of Monte di Croce's *Confutatio Alcorani* (Confutation of the Qur'an) into German.

Furthermore, in 1543 Luther strongly supported the reprinting of Robert of Ketton's Latin translation of the Qur'an in Basel, adding a theological preface in which he set forth his critical theological position towards Islam. Looking at Luther's activities and statements today, Johannes Ehmann points to their ambivalence:

*Apologetic polemics played a role in Luther's decision to support the publication, as did freedom and the courage to promote an authentic view on Islam. Of course, Luther could not possibly form a truly authentic view on Islam. He depended too much on sources that he was not able to read critically. But he demonstrated a clear will to avoid using false arguments in interreligious dispute.*<sup>12</sup>

Luther's writings on the Turks and especially his polemical comments en passant need a critical reading today. His efforts to obtain authentic information remain an important reminder for Lutherans to move beyond stereotypes and preconceived ideas. Being aware of this heritage, Lutheran churches have in recent decades developed information and educational material about Islam.<sup>13</sup> There have also been studies on how Islam is presented in school books in European countries, as well as how Christianity is presented in school books in Muslim majority countries.

In times when caricatures easily become the focus of debate about Islam and Christianity,<sup>14</sup> sound knowledge is desperately needed. This knowledge includes familiarity with the other's sacred scripture, doctrines and practices, and also knowledge and historical consciousness about the entangled history of Christian–Muslim relations.

### **Joint humanity in a shared world: interfaith cooperation**

As Lutheran theologians started to reflect on the plurality of religious beliefs in the twentieth century, Luther's explanation of the two kingdoms or reigns was regarded as an important contribution for dealing constructively with religious plurality. According to that theological model, the distinction between the worldly and the spiritual realms gives space to live together with people who have different worldviews. As faithful individuals, we might not agree on theological issues, but as citizens we live together, work together and jointly promote the common good of society. In the LWF, the term "diapraxis" has been used to describe that joint working together; the term was introduced by Lissi Rasmussen in 1988. For several decades, the LWF has been working with and for Muslim communities through its World Service programmes (humanitarian and development work) in countries such as Bangladesh and Mauritania. Most of the local staff in these countries are Muslims. These rich experiences of working together for people in need are to be highlighted.

Poverty, illiteracy, illness, natural disasters and similar challenges need our joint responses. Moreover, what is needed is not only a "re-acting" to such urgent issues, but together to work on a vision of the common good. During the LWF study process on conflict and peace in Denmark, Nigeria and Indonesia, the Lutheran–Muslim study team identified the lack of citizenship rights as a root cause of conflict. In all these countries, the study team heard about events where an "us" versus "them" mentality had been created, e.g., indigenous versus settler, majority

versus minority. Consequently, citizenship has become a common concern for Lutherans and Muslims, as Lissi Rasmussen highlights:

*To have a sense of belonging, dignity and value as a citizen is important for everyone. Therefore, we are challenged to educate one another to be citizens so as to make room for one another and one another's freedom and rights in our common political and social communities.*<sup>15</sup>

As many societies today experience the marginalisation and exclusion of certain groups, Christians and Muslims need to be active partners in civil society and advocate together for citizenship rights. At the same time, they need to look self-critically at processes of marginalisation within their own communities. Critical issues for faith communities include patriarchy and discrimination based on gender. Christian and Muslim women together have formed interfaith groups that discuss oppressive practices and develop transformative perspectives together.<sup>16</sup>

Lutherans are involved in interfaith cooperation with Muslims in manifold ways: highly organised cooperation in humanitarian relief work, strategic advocacy work for citizenship rights, spontaneous care for people in need, groups from the margins that challenge traditional structures and more. The question for us Lutherans is how these intense experiences in the worldly realm affect our images of the spiritual realm. If we are serious about the idea that these two realms are distinct but not separated, we need to reflect on their relationship with regard to interfaith matters.

### **Joint theological explorations: sacred scriptures, freedom and responsibility**

Reading, interpreting and translating Scripture was a key practice in Martin Luther's theological work. For him it was a liberative experience to grasp the meaning of God's justice when struggling with the biblical text. Until today, Lutherans continue to emphasise sound biblical interpretation, and to have lively debates

about how to discern God's will in hermeneutically responsible ways. At the grassroots level, some dialogue initiatives between Lutherans and Muslims have started to read the Bible and the Qur'an together. They jointly explore how God and human beings are described in these scriptures, and discover together how the texts speak about their forebears in the faith. Also in academic settings, the joint exploration of each other's scriptures has been promoted.<sup>17</sup>

For both, Lutherans and Muslims, God's Word is a key notion in their faith understandings. It is, however, conceptualised differently. This affects how we read sacred scriptures and construe hermeneutics. But precisely because meticulous work with the text is dear to both, both sides are willing and eager together to explore scriptural traditions.

Beyond hermeneutical questions, a number of different theological *topoi* have been discussed in theological conversation between Lutherans and Muslims. Grace and good works are traditional themes of interest for Lutherans. Freedom and responsibility was explored at a June 2009 Christian-Muslim Dialogue Consultation in Yogyakarta, Indonesia, initiated by the LWF Department for Theology and Studies. In his paper for the consultation, Oddbjørn Leirvik highlighted the need jointly to discuss issues of freedom and responsibility:

*In modern multi-religious societies Muslims and Christians increasingly face the challenge of reflecting together on how to strike a balance between the freedom which any individual must have to protect one's integrity, and the limits which any community must draw in order to protect the vulnerable Other.*<sup>18</sup>

In his famous writing "The Freedom of a Christian," Martin Luther highlighted how faith frees from human-made bondage, liberates the faithful to have a trusting relationship with God, without fear, and how at the same time this freedom calls

the faithful unconditionally to serve their neighbours. Since then, the closely related themes of "freedom based on faith" and "responsibility for the neighbour" have been important notions in Lutheran theology and anthropology.

Taking this legacy seriously prompts us to ask concrete questions: What are the situations of bondage and domination that existentially enslave people today? How do we speak about the freedom that God gives in ways that are relevant to people's actual lives? Who are the neighbours whom we need to serve? Liberation theology has radically questioned traditional concepts, as has feminist theology. There is a critical impetus in theological discourse on freedom and responsibility that prompts Lutherans to engage self-critically with their own realities of domination and bondage.

In conversation with Muslims, Lutherans have discovered engaging with questions of freedom and responsibility to be a fruitful common issue. At the recent Christian-Muslim dialogue consultation, the Indonesian Muslim scholar Siti Syamsiyatun names concerns that were echoed by Christian participants. She pointed out:

*While it is true that God's gift of freedom to the rational human beings is liberating them to have choices, it also implies responsibility. Human beings must use God's gift of reason, and engage in rational discourse and be responsible to the consequences of their choices. [...]Who has taken away these fundamental principles of humans' and especially women's sanctified freedom in our society, and how are they taken away? Women's freedom has been taken out by several agents which have manifested in different forms and institutions: from the institutions of family to schools, and from religious organizations to the state. Violations to women's freedom have been frequently committed by the name of preserving the local culture, women's dignity, and religious purity.*<sup>19</sup>

This brief look at one of the topics that Lutherans and Muslims have explored together shows that joint theological exploration today is not carried out by comparing doctrines in a traditional way. For engaging in theological conversation together with Muslims, the reflection on actual realities and faith practices is indispensable. As Martin Luther said at the end of one of his table talks in 1531: "*Sola [...] experientia facit theologum*"<sup>20</sup> (experience alone makes a theologian).

### **Deepening faith, hope and love in relations with Muslim neighbours**

When people of faith work together, their faith shines through their actions, and their hope radiates through their commitment. Mark Swanson describes the dynamic of such processes as follows:

*As Muslim and Christian villagers gather together in Egypt, in Pakistan, in Tanzania, or wherever – to think about the health, education, and economic well-being of the people in their community – they will in subtle ways, as they give sacrificially of time and energy, exercise patience, and overcome difficulties, bear witness to the Lord whom they serve. And as Muslims and Christians gather in our cities to think about the things that make for peace and a civil society and the thriving of neighbourhoods, we will reveal to one another our deepest sources of hope and courage.*<sup>21</sup>

In Christian - Muslim encounters, faith, hope and love are intertwined. These three dimensions interconnect the relationship to God, the relationship to the future and the relationship to fellow human beings. Bringing together these three dimensions is an alternative to a popular position according to which we have to concentrate on joint social action and to avoid theology and spirituality in interfaith relations. These are regarded as contested and divisive areas. Instead of this narrow view of interfaith encounters, there needs to be an integrated perspective, where faith, hope and love mutually enhance the relationship.

Faith points to the existential dimension at stake in interreligious relationships. For people of faith, the relationship to God enables and sustains life; faith is not simply one aspect of their lives, but the very basis of their being. Hope is the eschatological dimension of religious belief. In the midst of the human struggle, hope opens up a new horizon, with God at the center. Love stands for the committed relational dimension between human beings. It involves developing relationships that empower others and means acting in ways that are supportive of them.

As stated above, for Lutherans the notion of the neighbour is of key importance. Luther was convinced that whenever people are liberated from anxieties pertaining to their own well-being, they can freely care for that of others. For Christians, the Good Samaritan is the prime example as they cross ethnic, cultural and religious boundaries and give assistance in concrete ways. Nevertheless, much more remains to be done. The challenges posed by socioeconomic, political or other asymmetries in interreligious relations must not be underestimated; working toward just and participatory structures is vital.

Therefore, within their specific contexts, Lutheran churches need to ask themselves: What does the church do in order to actively provide conditions conducive for Christian - Muslim relations? Do congregations give time and space for people of different faiths to meet and constructively to discuss issues of common concern? Are pastors, social workers and youth leaders well prepared to accompany such processes?

Finally, Lutheran churches benefit from conversations across different contexts and regions. In times of globalization, people of faith experience both a new interconnectedness as well as a new polarization. This is especially true for Christian - Muslim relations. Charles Amjad-Ali underlines the need for taking seriously the global horizon:

*It is obvious that we Christians need a new theological discourse for a new relationship with Islam. This relationship must no longer be based on an internal discussion within the West itself, but rather based on a relationship between our idea of what it means to be a Christian with its exclusive claims and a phenomenological existence which has a fundamental plurality of values which find their location in multiple religious systems.*<sup>22</sup>

The ecumenical movement has been an important forum where Christians share with one another how they live out the Christian faith in different contexts. In this process, the conversation about “context” has become much more specific and is spelled out by naming important relations that form Christians and churches in their respective places. For centuries, “How do we understand ourselves in relation to Muslims?” has been a vital question for churches in the Middle East, in Southeast Asia and in some parts of Africa. For others, such as the churches in Europe and the Americas, it has only recently become a key concern. These churches need one another to be able to deepen their understanding of Christian - Muslim relations today.

<sup>1</sup> LWF press release on 15 October 2007: “LWF President Hanson Responds to Letter from Muslim Leaders”, <http://www.lutheranworld.org/News/LWI/EN/2104.EN.html>

<sup>2</sup> See the findings of a LWF study process documented in: Lissi Rasmussen (ed.), *Bridges Instead of Walls: Christian-Muslim Interaction in Denmark, Indonesia and Nigeria* (Geneva/Minneapolis: LWF/LUP, 2007).

<sup>3</sup> For an overview see e.g. Willem A. Bijlefeld, “Theology of Religions: A Review of Developments, Trends and Issues”, in: Roland E. Miller and Hance A.O. Mwakabana (ed.), *Christian-Muslim Dialogue: Theological and Practical Issues* (Geneva: LWF, 1998), pp. 45-100.

<sup>4</sup> For results from international working groups under the auspices of the LWF, see: J. Paul Rajashekar and H.S. Wilson (ed.), *Islam in Asia: Perspectives for Christian-Muslim Encounter* (Geneva: LWF, 1992); Roland E. Miller and Hance A.O. Mwakabana (ed.), *Christian-Muslim Dialogue:*

*Theological and Practical Issues*, (Geneva: LWF, 1998); and Sigvard von Sicard and Ingo Wulfhorst (ed.), *Dialogue and Beyond: Christians and Muslims Together on the Way* (Geneva: LWF, 2003).

<sup>5</sup> See “Die coram-Relation als ontologischer Schlüssel zur Anthropologie” in Gerhard Ebeling, *Dogmatik des christlichen Glaubens*, vol. 1 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck<sup>3</sup>1987), pp. 346-355.

<sup>6</sup> In his *enarratio* of Psalm 51 Luther says: “*Ergo Christianus non est formaliter iustus, non est iustus secundum substantium aut qualitatem[...], sed est iustus secundum praedicamentum ad aliquid*” WA 40 II, 354,36ff: This “something else” is God’s grace that we receive in Christ.

<sup>7</sup> J. Paul Rajashekar has pointed to the challenge that this poses: “The traditional Lutheran *solas* have made Christian engagement with others problematic because of their claim to exclusivism and exclusion.” J. Paul Rajashekar, “Rethinking Lutheran Engagement with Religious Plurality”, in Karen Bloomquist (ed.), *Transformative Theological Perspectives*, Theology in the Life of the Church series vol. 6 (Geneva/ Minneapolis: LWF/ LUP, 2009), p. 116. He highlights the potential for constructively relating with others in the Lutheran dialectic of the *simul*, e.g., the view of the Christian as *simul iustus et peccator* (simultaneously justified and sinner), and the dialectic of law and gospel.

<sup>8</sup> Mark N. Swanson, “The Trinity in Christian-Muslim Conversation”, in: *Dialog* vol. 44, no. 3 (Fall 2005), p. 261.

<sup>9</sup> Olaf Schumann, “Some Reflections on the Meaning and Aims of Interfaith Dialogue”, in: Sigvard von Sicard and Ingo Wulfhorst, (ed.), *Dialogue and Beyond: Christians and Muslims Together on the Way* (Geneva: LWF, 2003), p. 16.

<sup>10</sup> See Johannes Ehmann, “Martin Luther and Islam”, in: Simone Sinn (ed.), *Deepening Faith, Hope and Love in Relations with Neighbors of Other Faiths*, Theology in the Life of the Church series vol. 2 (Geneva: LWF, 2008), pp. 19-30.

<sup>11</sup> For an English translation, see Sarah Henrich and James L. Boyce, “Martin Luther – Translations of Two Prefaces on Islam: Preface to the *Libellus de ritu et moribus Turcorum* (1530), and Preface to Bibliander’s Edition of the Qur’an (1543),” in *Word and World*, vol. XVI, no. 2 (Spring 1996), pp. 258-62, at [www.luthersem.edu/word&world/Archives/16-2\\_Islam/16-2\\_Boyce-Henrich.pdf](http://www.luthersem.edu/word&world/Archives/16-2_Islam/16-2_Boyce-Henrich.pdf).

<sup>12</sup> Johannes Ehmann, “Martin Luther and Islam”, in Sinn (ed.), *Deepening Faith, Hope and Love*, p. 27.

<sup>13</sup> In 1990, the United Evangelical Lutheran Church of Germany published the first edition of a book

---

called "What everybody needs to know about Islam," which became a standard reference book in educational settings as introduction to Islam: Amt der VELKD and Amt der EKD (ed.), *Was jeder vom Islam wissen muss* (Gütersloh: Güterloher Verlagshaus, 2007).

<sup>14</sup> For an analysis of the Danish cartoon crisis, see: Mogens Mogensen, "The Danish Cartoon Crisis", in Lissi Rasmussen (ed.), *Bridges Instead of Walls*, pp. 27-46.

<sup>15</sup> Lissi Rasmussen, "Engineering Bridges", in Rasmussen (ed.): *Bridges Instead of Walls*, pp. 202f.

<sup>16</sup> See Anne Hege Grung, "Christian-Muslim Dialogue: A Gendered Arena: A Norwegian Experience", in Sinn (ed.), *Deepening Faith, Hope and Love*, pp. 97-101; and Helene Egnell, "The Discourse at the Margins: A Feminist Approach to Religious Plurality", in: Sinn (ed.), *Deepening Faith, Hope and Love*, pp. 103-108.

<sup>17</sup> For example, the Annual Sacred Texts Conference, which takes place in the Center of Christian-Muslim Engagement for Peace and Justice at the Lutheran School of Theology in Chicago (USA): <http://centers.lstc.edu/ccme/>.

<sup>18</sup> Oddbjørn Leirvik, "Law, Freedom and Responsibility in Christianity and Islam", p. 15, paper prepared for the Christian-Muslim Dialogue Consultation on "Freedom and Responsibility: Joint Theological Explorations by Christians and Muslims", 15-20 June 2009, organized by the LWF Department for Theology and Studies, the International Consortium for Religious Studies (ICRS) and the Center for Religious and Cross-Cultural Studies (CRCS) at the University Gadjah Mada in Yogyakarta (Indonesia).

<sup>19</sup> Siti Syamsiyatun, "Women's Freedom and Responsibility in Islam: A Brief Review on Texts and Contexts in Indonesia", p. 6, paper given at the dialogue consultation on "Freedom and Responsibility: Joint Theological Explorations by Christians and Muslims", in Yogyakarta, 15-20 June 2009.

<sup>20</sup> W A T 1, 16, 13.

<sup>21</sup> Mark N. Swanson, "'Thinking through' Islam", in: *Word and World*, vol. 22, no. 3 (Summer 2002), p. 274.

<sup>22</sup> Charles Amjad-Ali, "Some Critical Issues for Muslim-Christian Relations and Challenges for Christian Vocation and Witness", in: *The Muslim World*, vol. 99, no. 4 (2009), p. 567.

---

---

**Rev. Simone Sinn** is researcher within the Cluster of Excellence on "Religion and Politics in Pre-Modern and Modern Societies" at the University of Muenster, Germany, since 2009, and currently finishing her doctoral thesis. In this thesis, she explores Muslim and Christian discourses on religious pluralism in post-Suharto Indonesia, analyzing recent legal and theological debates. From 2006 to 2009 she served as theological associate in the Department for Theology and Studies of the Lutheran World Federation in Geneva, Switzerland. She holds a theological degree from the University of Tuebingen, Germany, and an M.Phil. (Ecumenics) degree from the Irish School of Ecumenics in Dublin, Ireland.

---

## **Some Aspects of Christian Theologizing**

### **in Relation to Islam**

**Daniel A. Madigan, S.J.**

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; 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 with Muslims 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 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.<sup>1</sup>

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 (1 John 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 sacred 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.<sup>2</sup> 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” Christology<sup>3</sup> 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.<sup>4</sup>

### **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 issues**

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'an - 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'an 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, Christians and Muslims, 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.<sup>5</sup> 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 enough – about the difficulties raised by the term “person” in our trinitarian proclamations, and this deserves much more study.<sup>6</sup> 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. One can find a tendency in parts of the Christian tradition at times to reduce the message of the Gospel from a joyful proclamation of what God has done for love of us to a systematic treatment of what we must do in order to be loved by God. At the same time, one can see emerging sometimes in the Islamic tradition a more complex understanding of human alienation from God and a richer appreciation of the tireless and self-emptying love God bears us.<sup>7</sup>

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 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.

---

<sup>1</sup> 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.

<sup>2</sup> 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.

<sup>3</sup> 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.

<sup>4</sup> See, for example, Hans Küng, *Christianity and the World Religions* (London: Fount, 1987) 33-36, 122-130.

<sup>5</sup> 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 appears as "God's Word to the World: Jesus and the Qur'ān, Incarnation and Recitation," in Terence Merrigan and Frederik Glorieux (eds.), *Godhead Here in Hiding: Incarnation and the History of Human Suffering* (Leuven: Peeters, 2009).

<sup>6</sup> See, for example, Karl Rahner, "The Oneness and Threeness 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.

<sup>7</sup> I deal with this issue at greater length in "Yahya bin Zakariya, Giovanni Battista e il Culmine della Profezia," in Giuseppe Palummiere (ed.), *Un profeta e tre religioni: Giovanni Battista nei Monoteismi* (Trapani: Il Pozzo di Giacobbe, 2010).

---

**Daniel Madigan** is an Australian Jesuit priest who is the Ruesch Family Associate Professor of Islamic Studies in the Department of Theology at Georgetown University, where he directs a doctoral program focussing on issues in religious pluralism. He is also a Senior Fellow of the Woodstock Theological Center, also at Georgetown, under whose auspices he directs a project entitled "Christian theologies responsive to Islam." In 2013 Dan is succeeding Archbishop Rowan Williams as chair of the international Christian-Muslim Building Bridges Seminars.

---

## A Relational Theology in Dialogue with Islam

Oddbjørn Leirvik

### Traditional Plurality and Modern Pluralism

Let me start with a brief note on the notion of pluralism. When reflecting theologically on the encounter between Christians and Muslims in modern pluralistic societies, we should keep in mind that there is a difference between traditional plurality and modern pluralism. Traditional plurality refers to a situation in which different cultures and faiths coexist as entities that can be neatly separated, in a relatively stable constellation in which the borders between the communities can only be crossed at great personal cost.

In situations of modern pluralism, everything is more fluid. Individuals may identify with more than one culture and may develop plural identities. In the course of their lives, some individuals may also change their religious affiliation. Modern pluralism implies also that every faith has to recognize a plurality of views within one's own tradition, as a given fact. For instance in ethical discussions, disagreements might be just as difficult to tackle within the Christian family as between Christians and Muslims. In some critical issues (gender relations is a point in case), liberal Christians may join hands with liberal Muslims, just as conservative Christians may sometimes try to strike alliances with conservative Muslims (typically around traditional family values, as one has seen it in connection with some UN conferences).<sup>1</sup>

With regard to overarching theological reasoning, "Christianity" (as an ecumenical whole) is certainly distinctively different from "Islam". But in the case of ethical disagreement (sometimes also in theological matters), the fault lines do not always coincide with the boundaries between the two religions. When we recognize this, the distinction between

ecumenical conversation and interreligious dialogue may sometimes become blurred.

### Relational Theology: An Aspect of Trinitarian Thought

As we move on to theological reflections, we all realize that the issue of Trinity is still a bone of contention between Christians and Muslims. I will nevertheless frame my thoughts within a Trinitarian scheme. Implicitly, however, I will raise the question of whether some aspects of Trinitarian theology may be reformulated as a relational theology in dialogue with Islam.

### Is religious plurality willed by the creator?

As regards the first article of faith, in the Creator, Muslims are still waiting for a Christian response to what they perceive as the Qur'an's acceptance of religious plurality as something willed by God. We all know the verses of the fifth Sura which read as follows:

*Let the people of the Gospel judge by what Allah hath revealed therein ... To each among you have we prescribed a law shir'a and an open way minhaj. If Allah had so willed, He would have made you a single people umma, but His plan is to test you in what He hath given you: so strive as in a race in all virtues. The goal of you all is to Allah; it is He that will show you the truth of the matters in which ye dispute.*<sup>2</sup>

In this passage, the historical fact of religious plurality is seen as a divinely willed test for humanity, in which each people (or community) is seeking to implement the will of God in accordance with the path to which they have been guided. We know, however, that there are other passages in the Qur'an that point in a different direction, as when Christians

and Jews are chastised as *kafirun* because they are perceived as having “covered up” some central aspects of God’s will. But the question remains of how we as Christians respond to the fundamental qur’anic acceptance of religious plurality as a divine *test* and a potential *blessing*.<sup>3</sup> This has also to do with how we see the other’s scriptures. When the signatories of *A Common Word* quote the Qur’an and the Bible side by side, they implicitly dissociate themselves from cruder version of the *tahrif* dogma,<sup>4</sup> treating instead central aspects of the Bible as reliable revelation. How do we as Christians respond to that, with regard to the Qur’an? In the Archbishop of Canterbury’s response to *A Common Word*,<sup>5</sup> which is very rich in biblical references, he quotes also verses from the Qur’an. Implicitly, he seems at least to treat parts of the holy book of Islam as a divine source of spiritual guidance.

Are we ready to pursue this course? When we engage in scriptural reasoning together with Muslims, meditating together on texts from the Bible, the Qur’an and Hadith (as it was done in a conference on *A Common Word* in Cambridge in October 2008), a double experience can be made: a sense of joint blessing, but also a recognition that differences in scriptural interpretation do not necessarily coincide with the boundaries between our religions.

For me, this double experience of joint blessing and sometimes confusing difference resonates with an article that was written as early as in 1972 by Hasan Askari (an Indian-British Muslim of Shi’ite background), entitled “The dialogical relationship between Christianity and Islam.”<sup>6</sup> The double context of Askari’s writings is his background from multi-religious India and his commitment to Muslim-Christian dialogue on the international scene. In his reflection on dialogical relationship between Christianity and Islam, Askari warns against the monological tendency in both religions, suggesting that “the monological trap” can only be escaped if Christians and Muslims

engage each other in an open conversation about how to understand the signs of God.

For Askari, the discovery of the Other is both a soothing and a painful experience.<sup>7</sup> Thus when Askari speaks of divine revelation as essentially dialogical, this has nothing to do with harmonizing away religious differences. What does Askari mean by a dialogical to divine revelation, then? According to Askari, reading the revealed signs of God in a dialogical way is different both from objectifying the Word of God in a book (the potential Muslim fallacy) and from identifying it with a particular Person (the corresponding Christian one). Convinced that Christianity and Islam constitute ‘a dialogical whole’, Askari speaks of Christ as a common sign of God for Christians and Muslims. Recognizing that Jesus is regarded as a divine sign in both religions, but interpreted in painfully different ways, Askari suggests that it belongs to the very nature of a divine sign that it is interpreted in different ways. He writes:

*A common religious sign must be differently apprehended. It is the very ambiguity, richness, of the religious sign that gives rise to different and even opposed interpretations and understandings [in this case, of Christ].*

This is Askari’s way of reasoning about religious plurality before God: the Creator has left signs for us that can be interpreted differently. Can we follow Askari in this line of reasoning? Or do we feel that such an open approach to divine signs compromises our faith in Christ?

### **Humanization of theological ethics: a christological concern?**

In the second part of my reflection, I will not address the classical Christological controversies between Christians and Muslims. Instead, I would like to bring up the issue of the humanization of theology, or more precisely, of theological ethics. In my view, the humanization of theological ethics could (or should) be seen as an

aspect of Christology (or of incarnation theology). Already in the Jewish Bible, the human other can be seen as an epiphany of God.<sup>8</sup> Further enlightened by the Christ experience, New Testament authors insist that love of God can never be isolated from love of the human other. In some passages, the vulnerable other is actually placed *between* the Self and God – as a bridge or a potential barrier (cf. 1 John 4: 20: “For anyone who does not love his brother, whom he has seen, cannot love God, whom he has not seen.”) The judgement scene in Matthew 25, where community with Christ and solidarity with the vulnerable other is seen as inseparable, is another and even more striking example. Can Muslims see the relation between the Self, the Other and God in such intimate ways – to the extent that the human Other is placed between the Self and God? Interestingly, in Sahih Muslim’s “Book of Piety” there is a Hadith Qudsi about the merit of visiting the sick which comes very close to the judgement scene in Matthew. According to this hadith, God will say on the Day of Resurrection: “O son of Adam, I was sick but you did not visit me.” When the accused exclaims: “O my Lord; how could I visit thee whereas thou art the Lord of the worlds?”, God will say: “Didn’t you know that such and such servant of mine was sick but you did not visit him and were you not aware of this that if you had visited him, you would have found me by him?” In spite of the close association of God with the vulnerable other in this hadith, we know that Muslims are reluctant to associate God himself with vulnerability and suffering. However, when *A Common Word* links love of God and love of the other as intimately as it does, I take this as a possible point of departure for a dialogue on the humanization of theology.

The important question is of course what concrete consequences a humanization of theological ethics might have. Let me give but one example from the Muslim side. In March 2005, Tariq Ramadan called for an immediate moratorium on the death

penalty and *hudud* punishments (such as corporal punishment for theft and for illegitimate sexual relationships) in the Muslim world.<sup>9</sup> The intention behind the call, Ramadan explains, was to address:

*... the conscience of each individual, to mobilise ordinary Muslims to call on their governments to place and immediate moratorium on the application of these punishments, and to call for Muslim scholars for the opening of a vast intra-community debate on the matter.*<sup>10</sup>

When reading his call, it struck me that the guiding principle behind his moratorium was clearly a theologically motivated concern for the vulnerable human being. Ramadan realizes that in an imperfect world with asymmetrical power relations, severe punishments will regularly hit women more than men and the poorer and weaker members of society more frequently than the wealthy and powerful ones. If we recognize this sombre reality, says Ramadan, “it is impossible for us as Muslims to remain silent as irreversible injustice is done to the poorest and weakest members of society in the name of our religion”.<sup>11</sup>

Muslim reactions to the proposed moratorium proved its controversial character, whereas some Western reactions implied that Ramadan should rather have called for a full abolition of *hudud* punishments and not merely a “moratorium”. The way Ramadan argues his proposed moratorium, however, gives the impression that his call is really meant for an indefinite period of time, probably for ever. For in Ramadan’s perspective, how can such punishments ever be justified, as long as human injustice exists? Ethical concern for the vulnerable human being is clearly the implied premise for Ramadan’s moratorium. I therefore take his call as a recent example of humanizing theological reasoning in Islam. In Ramadan’s case, his application of the humane criterion in theological reasoning leads him to sidestep important

aspects of classical Shari'a – for the sake of humanity.

From Christian-Muslim dialogue in Norway, several examples might be cited of how concern for the vulnerable other has gradually become a *shared* religious commitment. Consider the following list of examples from the last three years of the Contact Group between the Church of Norway and the Islamic Council:

- Christians and Muslims have engaged each other in a joint concern for religious minorities, be it in Norway or in Pakistan (from where the largest group of Norwegian Muslims come);
- In 2007, a “Joint declaration on the freedom of religion and the right to conversion” was issued, confirming the inviolable right of the individual to change his or her religion without being met with any kind of sanctions;<sup>12</sup>
- After long conversations about the question of family violence and other critical aspects of gender relations, a “Joint Statement on Violence in the Family and in Close Relationships” was published in 2009.<sup>13</sup>
- In 2006, a dialogue about the highly controversial question of homosexuality was also opened.

On most of these issues we have been able to reach a common stand, but not in the last case. However, when discovering deep-going divergences (as in our different approaches to homosexuality), we realise that ecumenical disagreement on the same issues might be equally hard to tackle as Christian-Muslim differences. As for the issues mentioned above (from minority issues to homosexuality), the Church of Norway has increasingly come to see them as interrelated, since they all touch upon the integrity of vulnerable groups and individuals. Thus in the Church's perspective, addressing them becomes also a necessity from faith in Christ. From the cited examples, one might perhaps think that the churches in

Norway are pressing a liberal agenda in some of these issues. I would rather say that the issues in question arise from the context, and from a shared public culture in Scandinavia. Imbued with egalitarian and feminist thought, public discourses in the Norwegian context constantly challenge Christians and Muslims alike to reconsider their traditional positions – and humanize their theologies. As indicated by the following statement from the leader of the Muslim Students' Association, Bushra Ishaq (when commenting on increased subscription to values of gender equality), processes of change cannot be grasped unless in a contextual perspective:

*Were it not for the fundamental influence of Norwegian culture and the values of the welfare state, the emerging Muslim feminism would not be a matter of fact*<sup>14</sup>

In humanizing theological ethics, then, Christians and Muslims are not merely in dialogue with each other but with society at large as well.

### **Relational pneumatology**

I now briefly touch upon relational pneumatology. What I have in mind is Martin Buber's philosophy of dialogue which includes a relational way of understanding the work of the Holy Spirit. Buber's main ethical point is to avoid reducing one another to an object, an “It”. If instead, in a truly dialogical relation, we treat each other as I and Thou, the space between us will be filled by Spirit. In *I and Thou* he speaks of the realm of between as the place of the Holy Spirit:

*Spirit is not in the I, but between I and Thou. It is not like the blood that circulates in you, but like the air in which you breathe. Man lives in the spirit, if he is able to respond to his Thou. He is able to, if he enters into relation with his whole being. Only in virtue of his power to enter into relation is he able to live in the spirit*<sup>15</sup>

In a later essay on “What is man?” Buber elaborates his relational philosophy and speaks of the “sphere” or the “realm” of

between as that which constitutes human communication. The realm of between is also the sphere in which true dialogue takes place, as a third dimension beyond the individual and social aspects of existence:

*In the most powerful moments of dialogic, where in truth 'deep calls unto deep', it becomes unmistakably clear that it is not the wand of the individual or of the social, but of a third which draws the circle round the happening. On the far side of the subjective, on this side of the objective, on the narrow ridge, where I and Thou meet, there is the realm of 'between'.<sup>16</sup>*

In Buber's vision of dialogue, something sacred takes place in any open-ended encounter. He even characterizes the word of dialogue as a sacrament: "...where unreserve has ruled, even wordlessly, between men, the word of dialogue has happened sacramentally."<sup>17</sup>

Buber's horizon of dialogue was mainly a Jewish-Christian one. Does this kind of relational theology, or pneumatology, make sense in Christian-Muslim dialogue? I believe it does, because this way of reasoning protects the sanctity of every true encounter, whether it is experienced as a blessing or as a difficult test. It reveals both modes of interreligious encounter as a potential dwelling place of the Holy Spirit.

---

<sup>1</sup> In her book *Born Again. The Christian Right Globalized* (London, Ann Arbor MI: Pluto Press), Jennifer S. Butler describes and analyzes several attempted alliance of this kind.

<sup>2</sup> Sura 5: 47f. (in Yusuf Ali's translation).

<sup>3</sup> Cf. Sura 49: 13 (in Yusuf Ali's translation): "O mankind! We created you from a single (pair) of a male and a female, and made you into nations and tribes, that ye may know each other (not that ye may despise (each other))."

<sup>4</sup> Implying that Jews and Christian have altered their scriptures.

<sup>5</sup> "A Common Word for the Common Good" (<http://www.acommonword.com/lib/downloads/Common-Good-Canterbury-FINAL-as-sent-14-7-08-1.pdf>), 14 July 2008.

---

<sup>6</sup> In *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 1972, pp. 477-487.

<sup>7</sup> "The discovery of the other, of our own being, is both soothing and painful, more the latter. The other is pain, a sting, a bite, but a pain in our very being, of it." (ibid.: 486)

<sup>8</sup> Cf. Genesis 33: 10 and Emmanuel Levinas' reflections on the face of the Other as an epiphany of God, in his book *Of God who comes to mind*.

<sup>9</sup> "An International call for Moratorium on corporal punishment, stoning and the death penalty in the Islamic World" ([http://www.tariqramadan.com/article.php3?id\\_article=264&lang=en](http://www.tariqramadan.com/article.php3?id_article=264&lang=en)), 5 April 2005.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., p. 165.

<sup>11</sup> Tariq Ramadan: "A call for a moratorium on corporeal punishment – The debate in review", in Kari Vogt, Lena Larsen and Christian Moe (eds.): *New Directions in Islamic Thought. Exploring Reform and Muslim Tradition*. London: I.B. Tauris 2009, pp. 163-174.

<sup>12</sup> See <http://www.kirken.no/english/news.cfm?artid=149142>, 22 August 1997.

<sup>13</sup> See <http://kirken.no/english/news.cfm?artid=265872>, 09 November 2009.

<sup>14</sup> Bushra Ishaq: "Muslimer i endring" ("Muslims in the process of change"), *Aftenposten* 5. September 2009 (in my translation).

<sup>15</sup> Martin Buber: *I and Thou* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark 1987), p. 57f.

<sup>16</sup> Martin Buber: *Between Man and Man* (London and New York: Routledge 2004), p. 242f.

<sup>17</sup> Martin Buber: *Between Man and Man*, p. 5.

---

**Oddbjørn Leirvik** is professor of *Interreligious Studies at the University of Oslo*. His books include *Human Conscience and Muslim - Christian Relations* (Routledge 2006/2010) and *Images of Jesus Christ in Islam* (Concilium 2010). Leirvik has been a participant in Christian - Muslim dialogues at local, national and international levels since the end of the 1980s. He is a minister in the Lutheran Church of Norway and co-founder of the national Contact Group between the Church of Norway and the Islamic Council Norway.

---

## **A Theology of Christian-Muslim Relations:**

### **An Arab Christian Perspective**

**Georges Massouh**

It has become very clear to Arab Christian theologians that they should acknowledge that Islamic belief in God is a monotheistic belief, since it stands in the tradition of Abraham, as do Judaism and Christianity. Muslims worship the one and only God, the God who is worshipped by Christians and Jews.

This recognition is rooted in Arab Christian experience of living together with Muslims in the various countries of the Middle East. It is an experience built up over decades in our churches with their different linguistic, doctrinal and liturgical traditions.

In most cases this recognition is linked, particularly in the minds of the heads of the Eastern Churches, to the national and political situation within which Muslims and Christians relate to each other. That is why, on Fridays and Sundays in sermons in mosques and churches, there is often repeatedly heard an insistence on patriotic unity based on their common belief in one God, Allah, the creator of heaven and earth. This call to unity between Muslim and Christian citizens rests on unity in belief. Doctrinal issues, such as the Trinity, the person of Jesus, the cross, Muhammad's prophetic role, the Qur'an, etc., are left aside. What is important is national unity, and particularly so in times of crisis, as was the case after the assassination of the former prime minister of Lebanon, Rafic Hariri, who raised the Lebanese people above all confessional affiliation in order to demonstrate their national, but also religious, unity.

The positive coexistence of Muslims and Christians in good days has certainly influenced Christian thinkers in matters of belief and theology. The love of such

thinkers towards Muslims has greatly influenced the content and form of their theology. In other words, it can be said that such good relations between Christians and Muslims has led Arab theology into making some quite unusual theological statements.

This can be seen in the case of Patriarch Ignatius IV (Hazim), the Greek Orthodox Patriarch of Antioch and All the East, who at the Islamic Summit of Taif in 1981 stated that Christians and Muslims believe in the same one and only God. His statement was made in fact in a national context in which the liberation of Jerusalem was under discussion, "so that," he said, "all worshippers of the One and Only God might there offer their worship." The Patriarch also mentioned the "wounded" land of Lebanon and called on all present to work for it to again find peace.

According to Ignatius IV, the foremost vocation of religions is to gather all humankind together and by God's grace guide them towards holiness and purity. "Jerusalem is an important meeting place for the different religions and the different spiritual traditions. In Lebanon we have an authentic place where diversity can be practiced. In Jerusalem and in Lebanon we seek God's face."

The Patriarch's remarks are based on an apophatic theology in which the main emphasis is on God's omnipotence and transcendence. This offers common ground between Christian theology and Muslim theology which rejects any Christian approach based on the incarnation of the Son of God. That is why in an Arab setting Christian witness is best

served by an apophatic theology. It should not be forgotten that God remains an unfathomable and inaccessible mystery, who can only be discovered by worshippers who are humble of heart.

In this context it is important to quote Mgr Georges Khodr, the Greek Orthodox Metropolitan of Mount Lebanon: "That means that we should use an apophatic approach when speaking of God, not only in a Christian context, since all concepts are idolatrous, but should also expand our way of speaking of God to include the way in which non-Christian scriptures speak of God."

It is also important to examine Mgr Khodr's thinking as regards the link between theology and relations between people holding different beliefs. Khodr speaks of the city of his birth, Tripoli, Lebanon, as containing many memories of respectful and loving relations built up between Muslims and Christians. He has not forgotten his native city and what it stands for: Tripoli, which makes no distinction between its Muslim and Christian sons and daughters, where, he says, "the unhealthy feeling of being a minority does not exist," and where the tensions between the different Lebanese communities have not entered. He still believes in the coexistence that he has experienced over many years. He can only see Lebanon as pictured in his beloved city. He desires to revive the respectful and loving spirit between the two communities, so that they can again find peace and God's name be praised. He rejects the idea of *Harat Alnasara* ('the Christian ghetto'), which seems to him to signify a desire on the part of Christians to live isolated in a ghetto away from what appears to be the danger presented by Muslims. That is why he often appeals to Christians to move out of *Harat Alnasara* and live alongside Muslims without any inferiority or superiority complex. He has actually said, as regards Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem, "Today Jesus has come to abolish *Harat Alnasara*, to break down all walls, after having abolished

*Harat Alyahoud* (the Jewish ghetto). Although, historically speaking, Christians are not responsible for having built their *Harat*."

Alongside his appeal to abandon *Harat Alnasara*, Khodr calls on Muslims to regard Christians as citizens having the same rights and the same duties as their Muslim fellow citizens. He says, "The aim of the national struggle by Christians is that *Harat Alnasara* shall no longer be a feature of the world of Islam."

Olivier Clément notes that for Georges Khodr, as for Kenneth Cragg, "Christians have the task to seek out and to recognize the signs of Christ's presence in the whole of human life, whether religious or not. Now, Islam is a spiritual world where Jesus is present. And the task of Christian witness is to reveal that presence, which is often latent or distorted, but is none the less real."<sup>1</sup>

In fact, Mgr Khodr states that "The whole of the Church's missionary task is to awaken the dormant Christ, who is asleep in the night of other religions," for Christ is to be found outside the historic confines of the Church.

That is why he states, "It is Christ alone who bestows light when grace visits a Brahmin, a Buddhist, or a Muslim as they read their scriptures.' He does this by making no distinction between the activity of the Son and the activity of the Spirit, for 'the activity of Christ cannot be understood apart from the activity of the Spirit.'" Khodr, quoting in his support the words of Irenaeus, Bishop of Lyon, "Where the Spirit is, there is the Church," concludes by saying, "The Spirit operates through the Spirit's energies according to the Spirit's own economy, and on that basis one can regard non-Christian religions as places where the Spirit is at work inspiring them."

The Apostolic Exhortation *New Hope for Lebanon* correctly states, "Muslim/Christian dialogue is not only a

dialogue between intellectuals. Its prime aim is to encourage coexistence between Christians and Muslims in a spirit of openness and cooperation, which is essential for all to be able to flourish by deciding freely, guided by a sound conscience, between the choices offered them.”<sup>2</sup>

### Conclusions

1. Relations between Christians and Muslims come prior to any to any theological theory. We can go as far as to say that theology has developed, either positively or negatively, out of, and reflecting, the state of those relations.

2. Christian/Muslim relations should, at least on the Christian side, not be determined by the strength or the numbers of the two communities. Christians should regard themselves only as citizens who are equal to their Muslim fellow citizens.

3. Ordinary people, in their daily lives, are not interested in discussing theological or doctrinal questions. They all adhere to their own beliefs and inherited traditions. Relations between them develop quite independently of theological disputes. In other words, their living together is far removed from theology.

4. They do, however, often discuss moral or ethical questions in a joking, lighthearted way, issues such as polygamy, temporary marriage, woman's place in society, the veil, and so on.

Finally, there are, to my mind, three challenges which Eastern Christians need to take up as they develop their theological thinking:

1. There is a need for a theology of “the other,” acknowledging the genuineness of their faith and their spiritual inheritance. That also involves finding the place of “the other” in God's plan of salvation for the

world outside the Christian revelation in the person of Jesus Christ.

2. The Eastern Church must respond to the appeal by Professor Mahmoud Ayoub to move beyond mutual tolerance and respect to what he calls “communion of faith between Muslims and Christians.”

3. To be Antiochenes--that is, to sense that the rebirth of our countries will come mainly through the rebirth of all the inhabitants of the region. That is why I ask:

- How can Arab Christians join in the struggle against Islamic fanaticism?
- How can they be salt in contemporary Arab culture?

*Translation from French, WCC language service*

<sup>1</sup> Mohamed Talbi and Oliver Clement, *Un respect têtù* (Collection Rencontres), Nouvelle Cite, 1989, p. 276.

<sup>2</sup> Apostolic Exhortation *Une Esperance Nouvelle Pour Le Liban* (A New Hope for Lebanon) of Pope John-Paul II to the Patriarchs, Bishops, clergy, religious, and all the faithful of Lebanon, 1997. Section 92.

---

---

**Georges Massouh** is Associate Professor of Islamics in the Islamic/Christian Study Centre, University of Balamand, and he teaches in the St. John of Damascus School of Theology there. He holds a doctorate in Islamic studies from the Pontifical Institute of Arabic and Islamic Studies, Rome, Italy.

---

## Historical and Political Context of Christian-Muslim Relations in Pakistan:

### Challenges to Missiological and Theological Vocation

Charles Amjad-Ali

#### Postcolonial State Formation and the Role of Islam

Pakistan is the first modern nation-state to be created in the name of Islamic identity. In spite of the oft repeated romantic Mughal referent, it did not have any genuine roots in an actual past Islamic state. It had further difficulty in that the classical construct of nation (ethnic) state was hard to maintain given its multi-ethnic make up and territorial division into East and West Pakistan with a thousand miles of hostile India in between. It is clearly a post-colonial state, but not in the sense that there was a people called “Pakistani” or a nation called “Pakistan” prior to the arrival of the colonizers. Even the name Pakistan is an artificial construct and given different etymological explanations and mythologies.

It is a given that postcolonial states are new nations. In most cases, however, there was an ethnic identity that existed prior to the period of colonialism in whose name the independence struggle was carried out and the new state(s) created. There was no such ethnic identity prior to the present Pakistan. Rather, this state was created with the idea that a transcendent Islamic identity was the past referent, and would provide the essential homogenizing principle. Such an allegiance was to generate the necessary integration of its multiple ethnicities (*ethnoi*) with their respective cultural ethos (*ethoi*). It is precisely this original assertion that, in recent years, has been pressed into service as the *raison d’être* for Pakistan, along with its concomitant demand for a comprehensive Islamic socio-political structure.<sup>1</sup>

Thus Pakistan sits as a challenge to the primary nation-state paradigm generated by the Treaty of Westphalia in 1648 in Europe. This *first* model, at least in principle, informs the configuration of most major modern nation-states and was based on the:

- homogeneity of *ethnos*;
- homogeneity of *ethos*;
- a fixed *topos* (area) for these homogenous groups; and
- borders as primary demarcations, around which were other states with similar characteristics.

The *second* major state formation model is that of the immigrant states. These states grew out of a particular pattern of colonization in which the land itself was grabbed and occupied. So the original “owners” of these territories were deprived of their land; they were either wiped out or at best treated as alien and trespassers on their own homelands, c.f., USA, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, South Africa, Zimbabwe, etc. These new usurped states were created by diverse European *ethnoi* and *ethoi*, they therefore developed high transcendent nationalisms with whiteness as the superior identity marker, all this to create a new homogenization which excluded the First Nation native peoples as full participants.

The *third* state formation model is largely based on the post-colonial state which emerged and was based on forced amalgamation of several different *ethnoi* (like the immigrant state), however each of these ethnic groups was more or less located on their own fixed *topos*, (like the Westphalian states) e.g., India, Nigeria, etc. These are multi-ethnic nation-states, but they operate largely with the secular

European nationalist ideal as their transcendent homogenizer.

Pakistan is not a typical postcolonial state. It is not a nation based on some model of secular transcending homogenization on top of the heterogeneous ethnicities, like the immigrant states. Nor is it based on some pre-existing state or ethnic identity(ies) acting as the base for its creation, following either the Westphalian or the typical post-colonial models. It is, in fact, a hybrid with some elements of each of the above models. And in this uniqueness Islam plays a major role in the formation and subsequent developments of Pakistan.

#### **Islamic stance: From anti-Pakistan to a radical insistence on an Islamic state**

Most Islamic *ulema* and *mullahs*<sup>2</sup> in India at the time of the struggle for independence were against the formation of Pakistan. They saw it as a creation of modernist nationalism, and therefore in general they held that the concept of nation-state was in fact a return to the period of *jahiliyya*<sup>3</sup> with its tribal and clannish identities. Therefore, for these *ulema* it was a fundamental violation of the principle of Islamic *umma* as the new identity for the community of the Prophet. So people like Abul Ala Maududi, and groups like *Jamiat-e-ulema-Islam* and *Jamiat-e-ulema-Hind* (later changed to -Pakistan), with a few notable exceptions, were against the formation of Pakistan because it violated those historical, theological and doctrinal principles which lay behind the *umma* (community with common faith), led by a common *Khalifa/Khilafat*.<sup>4</sup> This is especially relevant because Indian Muslims were the main champions of the *Khilafat* Movement (1919-24) after the collapse of Ottoman Empire as well as the caliphate on March 3, 1924 and the creation of a “modern” secular nation-state of Turkey by Mustafa Kemal Atatürk.<sup>5</sup>

What therefore is truly ironic is that the very same people who were fervently

opposed, both theologically and doctrinally, to the very concept of Pakistan, now vehemently demanded a comprehensive Islamic character for it; only now on a much smaller and narrower nation-state scale.<sup>6</sup> This began to happen very early during the defining moments of Pakistan as a nation. Once the nation-state of Pakistan was established, they sought to superimpose *shari'a* and *Khilafat* on the new state, even though the concept of nation-stateness was in itself abhorrent to them, and violative of the fundamental principles of Islam. So during the first years of writing the constitution of Pakistan, issues such as the role of *shari'a*, religious minorities and the cynical demands to designate Ahmedis as non-Muslims, etc., all became a part of the debates about the national identity.

These hard debates led to the reworking and rethinking of what were the objectives behind the creation of Pakistan. Such a document had already been produced and promoted by the founding Muslim League party as early as March 1940, but this was superseded by a new series of objectives and *raison d'être* just nineteen months after Pakistan's formation in August 1947. It established the Islamic character/identity of the country and was used by the *ulema* to push their cause throughout the history of Pakistan. So Pakistan is one of those unique countries which had two sets of stated objectives, one generated for the independence struggle, and another to define it post-independence.

The new “Objectives Resolution” (OR) stated for the first time that Pakistan was to function according to the “teachings and requirements of Islam as set out in the Holy Qur'an and the Sunna.” Therefore Pakistan became *de jure* an Islamic state as the politicians cynically demurred to the Muslim forces without allowing the Islamic law and ideology to dominate the *grundnorms* of Pakistani politics and law. Therefore, the OR was consigned to being *only* the preamble of the first three constitutions (1956, 1962 and 1973). This

document has however come to haunt the nation over and over again, especially during the Zia-ul-Haq dictatorship of 1977-1988, who made the OR part of the main body of the Constitution in 1984 and then went on to ensure that all laws of the land were congruent with, and filtered through, his very conservative version of Islam.

Between 1947 and 1971 there were many attempts both to Islamize Pakistan on the one side, and secularize it on the other. As such there are many precursors to what led to the present crises in Pakistan. Something very critical, however, took place in 1971. Suffice it to say that what was Pakistan prior to that year no longer existed. Not only the political and policy infrastructure that had been in place but also the various ideological foundations that undergirded Pakistan all collapsed with the secession of East Pakistan and the independence of Bangladesh. The 1971 crisis challenged the whole infrastructure that had so far held Pakistan together, namely:

1. Transcendent homogenizing Islamic identity – a nation for Muslims, not for Islamic law;
2. A bureaucracy which provided the permanent state;
3. A “militocracy” mostly from Punjab, which provided the security of the frontiers; and
4. Economic infrastructure based largely on West Pakistani “carpet baggers” in East Pakistan controlling its industry and exploiting its raw materials.

All these collapsed: the military was reviled by Pakistanis, who physically spat at them; the *ulema/mullahs* were seen as at best irrelevant and at worst as failed interpreters of Islam and as hypocrites (*munafiqun*); and the bureaucracy and the capital base were now divided between two countries. Zulfikar Ali Bhutto emerged as the charismatic leader in the aftermath of this critical crisis in Pakistan’s history. He governed from 1971-1977 and tried to find space for, and to reinvigorate, all the defeated elements in the newly truncated Pakistan, except for the *ulemas/mullahs*.

Bhutto’s government was the most secular government in Pakistan’s history and was deeply disliked by the Islamic forces. This was, in fact, the second formation of Pakistan, with a newly defined territory and restricted ethnicities with a new configuration of military, bureaucracy, and the capital base as well as ideological reconceptualization.

The character of Pakistan underwent a radical change with the military coup of General Zia-ul-Haq in July 1977. The Islamic character was not only endogenously generated, but within two years, three critical exogenous elements came together which greatly helped this process: 1) in 1979 the Soviet Union walked into Afghanistan – the aftermaths of this are still with us; 2) the revolution of 1979 fully established Iran’s Shi’a identity which in return provided succor to Shi’as around the world and to the possibility of successful revolution in Muslim countries ; and 3) Pakistan, which had already begun to claim a nuclear status as early as 1974/5, negatively dubbed the “Islamic Bomb,” was allowed to pursue the finalization of these goals, now as an ally of the West.

#### **Islamization and the dislocation of the Christians**

In Zia, the West found an ideal Sunni figure to fulfill all their purposes in the region. As an ally of Saudi Arabia, Pakistan became an anti-Iran force; and as an ally of the United States and Saudi Arabia, it became a major force against the Soviet Union and against nascent “socialism” in the region. These two international alliances reinforced Pakistan’s Islamic identity, which was now combined with the military’s dictatorial rule. This led to a state-based revival of Pakistan’s Islamic character through a change in the constitution and the introduction of new laws. For the first time in fact, Pakistan was finally established as an Islamic state. The minorities were removed from adult open franchise through “separate electorates” into a restricted apartheid electoral role. Though

these separate elections were very detrimental for the minorities, they were at first welcomed by the Christian leadership. Ostensibly they provided the minorities certain rights of self-determination, however limited such rights were. Later, however a consensus emerged on the negative implications of these separate electorates which led to a general activism against them in the Christian community. Separate elections were finally discarded during the 2002 elections.

Throughout these developments, the minorities, especially the Christians, have responded in two ways. In public they act as totally obsequious sycophants toward whoever is in power, while in private they are absolutely negative toward those same power holders and Muslims in general. The level of obsequious sycophancy and internal negativity towards Islam has been proportionate to the public demand for Islamic law in political and social life. The Christian missiological and theological vocation within Pakistan was determined by their social background and theological formation. Inside the Protestant traditions, almost all followed the evangelical theology that was coming out of Presbyterian and Reformed circles in the West. In the case of the West, this theology was developed largely as a counter point to the Enlightenment and the scientific revolution, and was based on an appeal to the past. It developed a very conservative theological, doctrinal and biblical position. Pakistani Christians adopted this theology wholesale without ever raising the question of contextuality, etc. So they applied this theology in the context of Islam while it was developed in the context of what we compositely call "modernity." On the other hand, although this is rarely acknowledged, in terms of piety they were deeply affected by Islam. So, on issues like fasting, clothing, and anything to do with sexuality (including wedding rituals), their cultural norms are overlaid by a deep Islamic and/or Hindu veneer. Theologically, however, there has

been little local contextual development. So while they were being very conservative Christians, they were in fact much closer to Islam than they realized or acknowledged. When theology was done at all, it was usually done as a high polemic against Islam and as a debating tool against it, following the traditions of Phander's *Mizan ul Haq* (Balance of Truth). This tradition made five basic points:

1. Muhammad was a corrupt and lecherous man who was not a prophet or even a holy person;
2. Islam is basically a corruption and distortion of Christianity, and is therefore, by default, of the Devil;
3. Islam is nothing more than Judaism warmed over and a corruption of it. So, in terms of abrogation or evolution of theology, Islam, though a post-Christian faith, is seen as actually a backward-looking rather than a forward-looking movement, and clearly pre-Christian in its ontology;
4. Islam is totally law-bound and has no grace. Further since it has no Fall it has no salvation, and also no real concept of sin and sinfulness.
5. Finally, Islam is devoid of any freedom of thought, action, and will, and is fundamentally fatalistic.

That polemic still continues to be a part of the convention circuits of the Pakistani churches today, though now there is a little more discretion, not because of some change in theology, but rather because of the more violent, vicious and aggressive nature of Islamic groups in Pakistan. Christians who make such claims ignore the fact that their own theology makes almost exactly the same moves as Islam. They hold to a hard inerrancy of the text (the direct revelatory quality of the Bible), and the use of legal piety, etc., in the maintenance of morality and devoutness, which are an absolute requirement for faithfulness and sanctification.

It is absolutely undeniable that the Christians in Pakistan have physically suffered, and often this suffering has been

extremely severe. One overlooks this at the cost of truth, virtue and even sanity. One should also, however, acknowledge that sometimes the perception of that suffering has been exaggerated and further aggravated because a lot of that suffering is psychological rather than simply physical and at times a product of paranoia.

### **Inherited Christian theology and lack of contextuality**

Following the traditional evangelical theology which saw the political arena as a place of corruption to be avoided, the Pakistani Christians largely stayed away from any role in public life and the political arena. So they did not even deal with the role of religion and politics and/or church and state. They read Romans 13 as a literal statement of essential fact, but argued that in the context of Pakistan it did not apply to them, because their authorities were Muslim and this text applied only to Christian leadership. So their theology was predominantly based on Christendom and for a Christian majority, however, their experience of piety and religious practice was determined by their minority status under a serious Muslim threat. This theological schizophrenia caused a serious crisis of responsibility and theological formation, mission and witness.

Christians of all stripes in Pakistan followed the dominant western theology and missionary structures in adopting the theology of glory, with its spirituality and concomitant emphasis on power, rather than the theology of the cross and theology of vulnerability, which their context surely demanded. This was of course further exaggerated by a vulnerable minority wanting to exert the superiority of its God over the God of the Muslim majority. Thus they totally aligned themselves with the successful West over against the “failure” of the Islamic world. The emphasis on power, based on the normative of the post-Constantinian church, influenced Pakistani Christians, and they looked for ways of achieving the

same sort of power, however eschatological or apocalyptic such an expectation was. One of the ways they thought they could achieve this was through continuing the mission and ministry of firstly education and secondly health put in place by the missionary structures. Following a tradition in which education was seen as a way to raise standards of life, and provided access to power and position, the Pakistani church continued to sustain the schools which had been put in place across the Indo-Pak subcontinent by the Catholic and Protestant missionaries, and built further on that foundation. These institutions, however, almost exclusively catered to the Hindu and the Muslim elites, so they could be infused with Western and Christian values and thus converted to Christianity. The guiding light behind this was Alexander Duff, of the Scottish Church College, Calcutta, fame. In the early 19<sup>th</sup> century he argued that if we convert the Brahmins, the whole of India would follow. The dysfunctionality of this assumption had already been articulated in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century in what was called the Great Missionary Controversy, for it was obvious that this strategy was not working as only a very few Brahmins had ever been converted. On the other hand a huge number of *Dalits* were converted to Christianity, but could not be given a place in these institutions. After 1947, the Church continued this policy and continued to provide high quality education to the Muslim elite in Pakistan, so much so that there is still a strong distinction between Urdu medium and English medium schools. The former serve the lower classes and the latter is for the elites, a distinction which maintains a permanent underclass as an operational social principle. The Churches have been wholly complicit in this process. The irony is that the Pakistani Christians, who are largely poor and lower-caste, are educated in the Urdu medium schools, and their masters also educated by Christians are products of the English medium schools.

When the schools were nationalized by the first elected head of Pakistan, Zulfiqar Ali Bhutto, in 1971, the Christian community felt utterly disenfranchised and went into a period of bereavement. They saw this as an issue of their vocation, identity, and presence, even though in most cases they did not directly benefit from this system. They therefore developed an antipathy towards the democratic process and leadership, a situation that continues to plague the Christians. So they supported military dictators, even when they were Islamizing the country, like Zia-ul-Haq. The latter completely Islamized Pakistan, changed the constitution and actually degraded minorities, including Christians, to a status of non-citizens, with only a *millat* type *Dhimmization*. Under Zia, each minority group became a *millat* unto themselves, and could only vote for a highly restricted number of their own representatives to the national and provincial parliaments. This was even worse than the Ottoman *millat* system, because Zia added to this marginalization the permanent Sword of Damocles, namely the infamous “blasphemy laws,” which have created and continue to create incredible dislocation and victims in every community. These were clauses 295-B (blasphemy against the Qur’an), and 295-C (blasphemy against Muhammad), in the Pakistan Penal Code; the latter was punishable by death. These have become an ever present cudgel against the minorities, and have been most aggressively used against the Ahmadis and the Christians. There is another irony that I must point out: on the one hand, Pakistani Christians are treated as untouchables (*dalits*), relegated to the margins of society and thus irrelevant; on the other, they are regarded as the agents, allies and symbols of the West, particularly America, and thus a fifth-column. So whenever world events transpire to reflect some anti-Islamic feelings, the Christians are held to blame, and thus suffer mightily at the hands of aggressive jihadists.

### Future Contextual Theology and Ethics

Five critical issues must be brought to the fore for evolving a new doctrinal and theological base for a genuine Christian theology in Pakistan:

1. We must address the critical issues surrounding the theological, missiological, ethical and faith sources. The critical question is whether we follow Islam in treating the *text* as the preexisting *logos* (the Word or *Kalaam* in Arabic), when talking about the Bible, the only difference being, for them it is the Qur’an, and for us it is the Bible. Do we try to compare the sacrality, veracity, authenticity and immutability of our canonical text with the Qur’an? Or should we concentrate on Jesus Christ as the preexisting *logos*, and the Bible not as the preexisting *logos* itself, but as the witness to Christ as the *logos*? So although we acknowledge that the Bible is of critical importance, and even God-inspired text, it has to be seen as human-authored. So inspired but not dictated, or written by God. Further, do we acknowledge the theological task and accept that each generation must do a hermeneutics of the text in which they are fully involved, rather than just trying to find the pre-existing truth of the text which is outside of time and space? Theologically we cannot continue to sustain the notion that *both* Jesus and the Bible are the preexisting word of God. We have to give up the theology that the *theotokos* (the god-carrier), whether that be the Bible or Mary, must have a divine essence also; thus we must reject an immaculate conception for Mary and for the Bible. We must begin in the context of the positive materiality and vulnerability of Christ, following the tradition that comes from Anselm through Thomas and Luther, in the West, which claims that redemption is possible only through the God-Human, two-natures held together in Jesus. Now whether

those who are non-Chalcedonian will accept this, is a conversation for another time, but a conversation that needs to be covered in the context of Islam.

2. What is the nature of law in Christianity and Islam? Is the law binding, like *shari'a*, or is it a parameter defining guide for human ethics, sociality, inter-exchange, inter-subjective activity, etc.? If we Christians take the law of love, our understanding of the law is different, than if we go for an extended list of prohibitions and commands based on either a requirement of sanctification, post-justification or in dialectic with it. If we take the Christian understanding of law, based on God's justice, God's *dikaion*, and God's love – *philia*, *agape* – that changes our understanding of the law itself. It doesn't begin with limiting but with expansion. However, it does not assume a Christendom majority, it assumes a cross-carrying minority of Mark 8:27-38; it assumes the metaphor of leaven (Matthew 13:33, Galatians 5:9) and not of dough, it assumes the metaphor of salt (Matthew 15:13) and not that of the dish, it assumes the metaphor of light (Matthew 15:13-15) and not that of darkness. Thus God who has reconciled the world has to be proclaimed by the ambassadors who know it. (2 Corinthians 5:19ff).
3. What is the status and place of sinners? In Christianity we are all sinners and have come short of the glory of God (Romans 3:23), and at the foot of the cross every one of us is just as dependent and vulnerable (those who know about it and those who don't know about it). Because Christ died for all, and not just for those of us who claim to be Christian, therefore we must begin with the assumption of worth for everyone, and not just because of a common creator,

but because of an ontological saviour. That assumption of worthfulness changes the character of our politics, ethics, philosophy, and theology. This is because it changes our understanding of the character of exclusivity and inclusivity. This is not inclusivity based on the creation model, i.e. God created all and makes his sun shine and rain fall on everybody; but is based on the exclusive cruciform model, with an all inclusive assumption. So instead of looking at everybody as an outsider or as a hostile enemy, we must begin with a tradition of love, care and giving. This worthfulness does not make them non-sinners, but precisely because we and they are all sinners, and therefore subject to the love of the one crucified. This is a theology based both on God's judgment, on sin and the sinner, and God's love on the Cross and salvation for that sinner. Therefore the two commands that the Christians have are: "love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength' ... 'you shall love your neighbor as yourself.' There is no other commandment greater than these" (Mark 12:30-31). We have mostly failed in fulfilling that command vis-à-vis Islam and Muslims, and we have constantly borne false witness against Islam and Muslims as part of our Christian faith expression. So we have violated the central tenet of our faith, and tried to justify it on the basis that "Muslims do it to us, so we should do it to them," – a *lex talionis* of an eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth which may perhaps have credence in Islamic faith praxes, but certainly has absolutely no place in Christian ethics and life praxes.

4. In Pakistan we must relook at our own history and shift our perception of the formation of Christian praxis, theology and mission away from that informed by the post-Constantinian church, to

that which is informed by the biblical and the pre-Constantinian church experience. The pre-Constantinian church experienced intermittent persecution throughout the Roman Empire, in some places and times much worse than others. Occasionally, during periods of intense and sustained persecution, as was the case under Nero and Diocletian, some Christians lapsed but the church was also purified and understood the centrality of the theology of the cross. We, Pakistani Christians, haven't dealt with these issues well, because we keep looking to a Constantinian model of Christianity and thus see all persecution as abnormal.

5. The separation of church and state, which is often confused with a separation of religion and politics, is a much more nuanced and complicated subject than we have claimed when we have demanded such a separation within Islam. A product largely of post-Reformation theology, starting with Luther, and re-worked by Calvin, it became part of the Western constitutional polity in the Treaty of Westphalia, and the emergence of what we call "modernity." However, it must be remembered that every European nation until the 1917 Russian Revolution (except perhaps in one particular case – since the French Revolution of 1789-99), had a state-based church which was the product of this Treaty and its principle of *cuius regio, eius religio* (whose domain, his religion). So even though *de facto* religion has a minimal role because of modernity, *de jure* there has been a state-sponsored religion in most western European nations. In the US, because of the 1791 First Amendment to the constitution, there is a *de jure* separation of church and state, but *de facto* Christianity, with its myriad of interpretations, is still seen almost as the state religion. I believe that religion and politics cannot be separated

because they are both an ontological part of human existence. However the juridical separation of church and state, as properly expounded in the Reformation call, must be maintained, and one should not be allowed to determine either the functioning or the policy under the dictates of the other. I think this dual position opens us to better dialogical possibilities between Islam and Christianity, for I believe that Islam has this juridical institutional separation of "church" and "state" (though the nomenclature used and the institutions had different expressions), while maintaining an ontological inseparability of religion and politics, more on this later.

This gives us critical clues for a proper dialogical existence with Islam. It challenges us to never accept a theological justification to a state claiming divine right, or special providence or covenantal relationship. Nor should the church or religious institution be allowed to pass *fatwas* on the state, on how it controls the life of citizens, who represent much larger faith expressions than one restricted to the faith of the institutions which pass such *fatwas*, bulls, edicts, etc.

These are the questions we must face squarely because we have neither the possibility of creating a transcendent meta-narrative in which the particularity of the given faith dies, nor do we have the luxury of excluding the other so that the cosmological implications of the incarnation and the cross become only restricted to the confessional borders of a given church.

### **Critical Questions for Islam to Face Squarely**

For the Muslims we need to pose a couple of critical questions as well, which may make for a comprehensive dialogue and reconstruction of political thought.

*First*, it is clear that Islam does not make an epistemological separation of religion

and politics. This poses a challenge to Western political theory and secularity but it also poses a challenge to our missiology, theology and ethics, because we assume, wrongly I might add, that this separation has universal validity. But we must also pose a challenge to Islam about the validity of the separation of institutional expressions of religion and politics ("church and state," if I may!). We must ask the question: Why did the Prophet not make Mecca the capital of the Islamic community after the Treaty of Hudaibiya in 628, or at the latest after the 630 final victory over the Quraish? Mecca, after all, was the place of his origin, early life, work, marriage, relationships, and the place of his first revelations, call to prophecy, and proclamations. Rather, after this victory he returns to Medina as the locale of statecraft (capital), leaving Mecca as the *qibla* – the locus of religion, a status which it still has 1400 years later. Having struggled hard to win Mecca for 8 or 10 years (622 to 630) such a move at least demands a critical examination. This is an extremely telling development, especially since there is a precedent for shifting the *qibla*, the Prophet having moved the *qibla* from Jerusalem to Mecca as late as 624 (i.e. about 12 years after the revelation and 2 years after the migration). The Prophet returned to Medina and died there, and following his death the *Khulafa ar-Rashidun*, all originally from Mecca, kept Medina the capital for the next 29 years and did not attempt to move to Mecca or make it their capital. Already during the rule of the last caliph 'Ali, or around 24 years after the *hijra*, Medina begin to go through a crisis as the political hub of Islamic *umma*, and finally the Khilafat moved to Kufa, from there to Damascus, and then to Baghdad and then all over. None of these capitals, despite high intellectual developments, academic and research activities, architectural wonders, etc., ever acquired, nor were claimed to be, the *qibla*, for this orientation point was always Mecca. Is this not a source for two different loci in Islam, representing two distinct, if not different,

vocations rather than one place in which both the institutions of religion ('church') and politics (the khilafat/'state') are located, in spite of the fact that during this early period the Caliph was seen as the head of both the Islamic state and religion, following the vocation of the Prophet?

The point I am trying to make is that the proper understanding of these two binaries (i.e., religion and politics, and church and state) give us critical missiological clues as to how to do our missiology as a part of our political activity, and our political activity as part of our missiological commitment to God, who is creator, saviour and sustainer of this universe, while maintaining a hard juridical separation of 'church' and 'state.'

The *second* critical issue is that after a prolonged struggle and a stunning victory over a much more powerful enemy – the Quraish – it is surprising that the Prophet declared amnesty for all, no *lex talionis* here. We must ask what the implications are of this amnesty for Muslim theology, law and ethics. Does not this *sunna* (or *hadith*) of the Prophet provide us with ethical imperatives, which act as final abrogation of all that went before this amnesty? Why is the *lex talionis* paradigm constantly used by the jihadists to justify war, terrorism, etc., as part of their fervor for Islam and to be imitators of the Prophet, while seldom if ever mentioning this amnesty? The question is, are the jihadists interpreting Islam for their convenience, or is their claim authentic that they are being good Muslims in doing so?

The *third* series of questions deals with the contemporary Muslim minority status. It is estimated that some 28% of Muslims live as a minority today, from India, which has arguable at least the third largest Muslim population in the world after Indonesia and Pakistan, to all of Europe, Africa and North America. This number is much larger than the Arabic speaking Muslims who see themselves as the

criterion and as normative Muslims. The usual glib answer in the face of this situation is that since there are no resources available in the earliest Islamic history and tradition which provide guidelines for the minority Muslim context, what is exercised and practiced in majority Muslim states must also apply for the minority Muslim contexts. Religion after all is not bound by time or space. Thus what happens in Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Pakistan, etc., has implication for, and must be applied also, in India, South Africa, Germany or USA, etc., so we have the recurrent demand for full application of *shari'a*, etc., in these minority contexts also. Faced with this question the traditional argument is that Islam demands that the faith and piety as established and exercised by the earliest Muslims must be the paradigm for piety and practice of faith today. I would argue that this stance is not only essentially wrong, or simply lazy, but also shows a lack of care for the Muslims in minority situations and does not provide them with a proper place in the *umma*. Besides generally being conservatively backward-looking, even within such an operational stance it fails to look at some of the fully accepted resources within Islam for handling such a task. In these cases the minority Muslims may be more of a criteria than the majority.

There are a number of sources in the early Islamic context which give clear clues and which could help in doing theology in the context of Islam as a minority. These quite diverse sources show that Islam does have a critical understanding of being a minority and it did experience such situations early in its history, so that these sources can be drawn upon for developing new paradigms for Muslim minorities and their piety in the contemporary world.

After all, was the Prophet not a member of a minority community in Mecca from 610 (the beginning of the revelation), to the two Abyssinian *hijras* in 615 and 616, respectively, and all the way till 622 and the *Hijrat* from Mecca to Medina? During

these early years in Mecca, the Prophet survives the persecution because of the protection of Abu Talib, his uncle, and Khadija, his wife. So he is their *dhimma*, as is also the case for those who made their *hijrat* to Abyssinia in 615 and in 616, they become the *dhimma* of the Abyssinian Najaf (king) as Ibn Ishaq records it.<sup>7</sup> So Muslims were clearly a minority during the earliest years of Islam and were someone's *dhimma*. Even after the *hijrat* the Prophet remained part of a minority in Medina where there was a large multi-religious society. This situation lasts at least till 624 and the first expulsion of a Jewish tribe (Bani Qainuqa); or we can fix it to 625 and the second expulsion of a Jewish tribe (Bani Nadir); or finally to 627 and the execution and enslavement of the Jewish tribe of Bannu Quraiza. So the expulsion, execution and enslavement of the Jewish tribes helped in raising the percentage of the Muslims, till they finally acquired a majority status. Thus from 610 to, at the earliest, 624 Muslims were a minority, this status could be expanded to as late as 627. Therefore for a period of over 14 years, during the life of the Prophet, Muslims were a minority group and during most of this period they were under the protection (*dhimma*) of different people. Islamic majority-ness during the life of the Prophet begins at the earliest in 624 and he dies in 632. So at most this status was 8 years but it could even be less. Now why is this *Sunnat-e-Rasul Allah* not being seen as the source for the present dilemma of Muslims being a minority? Further, if Islam is going to talk of *umma*, are these minority Muslims fully a part of the *umma*, only if they follow the patterns of Islamic life based on the majority existence, or have they something to contribute to this universal discourse?

I think, if the Muslims reflect on these three issues, they may find a *modus vivendi*, both for living as a minority and to reach for their own sources while at the same time begin to understand the minorities living in its midst where it is a

majority. This could move the Muslim debate from the trite usage of *dar-ul-Islam* (House of Islam) and *dar-ul-harb* (House of War) to a search for *dar-ul-ahad* (House of Covenant/Contract) and maybe even *dar-ul-aman* (House of Peace).

The time has come for both Muslims and Christians to deal with our respective dilemmas keeping the other in mind. These are wonderful dilemmas to be in, and from which we can truly confess loving God with all our strength, heart and mind, and our neighbor as our self in all its nuances. *Amin.*

<sup>1</sup> The only other state in modern times to have a similar type of religious identity formation and history is the state of Israel, which was created a year later.

<sup>2</sup> For the sake of brevity, let me translate the title *ulema* as theologians, and *mullahs* as mosque (*masjid*)- based leadership. These definitions are good enough for the present purpose, though the meanings of both these titles are far more complex than this.

<sup>3</sup> *Jahiliyya* generally means ignorance, but in the context of Islamic studies and history it acquires a more theological provenance, where it is applied to the period in Arabia prior to the Prophet Muhammad and his revelation, and generally means paganism and related nuances. In the present Islamic jihadist rhetoric the word *jahiliyya* has not only been revived but is used derogatorily against the present leadership in Muslim countries as a full blown critique.

<sup>4</sup> *Khalifa* (caliph) generically means viceroy, viceroy, vice regent, successor, lieutenant, etc. In Islam it is used to refer to the leadership of the Islamic community (*umma*) after the death of Prophet Muhammad, and thus a caliph was the viceroy and successor of the Prophet in terms of the political order. Though the term continues to be applied to the many caliphs who have ruled the Islamic *umma* over time, its true significance is restricted to the *khulafa ar-rashidun* (or the rightly guided caliphs), viz., Abu Bakr, `Umar, `Uthman and `Ali. *Khilafat* (Caliphate) means the rule of the *Khalifa*. *Khalifa* is also used in the Qur'an to mean humanity as the *Khalifa* of God, as in Sura *al-baqara* 2:30; *al-an`am* 6:165; *al-naml* 27:62; *al-fātir* 35:39; Noah and his household as *Khalifa* to the land after the flood, *Yūnus* 10:73; and David as the *Khalifa* of God in Sura *Ṣād* 38:26, etc.

<sup>5</sup> Turkey is the third state in the modern era to emerge as a secular state. The first was the First Republic of France after the Revolution of 1789-99; the second such state was the US with its separation of church and state, or the determination to establish a secular state during the constitutional debates from 1777 to 1788 and especially after the First Amendment of 1791. It is therefore ironic that one of the main reasons for blocking Turkey from the EU is its Islamic identity as compared to the secular identities of other European member states, which are mostly *de jure* religious states, except for the ones who were part of the Soviet bloc till 1989. More on this later in the paper.

<sup>6</sup> This cynicism was similar in a way to Luther's first rightly challenging, critiquing and moving away from the conjunction of Church (Papacy) and state (Holy Roman Empire), but then later applying almost the same conjunction, now on a much narrower and smaller scale, to the princely states which became Lutheran.

<sup>7</sup> A. Guillaume, *The Life of Muhammad: A Translation of Ibn Ishaq's Sirat Rasul Allah* (Karachi: Oxford University Press, 1955), pp. 146 ff.

---

**Charles Amjad-Ali** is the Martin Luther King Jr Professor of Justice and Christian Community, and the Director of the Islamic Studies Program at Luther Seminary in St. Paul, Minnesota. He has graduate degrees in philosophy, theology, and Islamic law and history from Germany and the US. He was the director of the Christian Study Centre in Rawalpindi, Pakistan from 1985 to 1996.

---

## “Christ is Our Reconciliation” Icon: The Story of Jacob and Esau

Clare Amos

***This was an address given at a service of prayers held during the consultation.***

In a service of prayer being held during a consultation about Christian engagement with other faiths – especially Islam – it seems good to spend a few minutes exploring the icon “Christ is our reconciliation.” (The icon can be viewed at [http://www.paxchristi.org.uk/documents/lc\\_on.pdf](http://www.paxchristi.org.uk/documents/lc_on.pdf)) This icon has fascinated me ever since I first caught sight of it in St Ethelburga’s Church in London. St Ethelburga’s is a church in the City of London which was destroyed by an IRA bomb in 1993 – and then reopened 10 years later as a centre specifically dedicated to the work of Reconciliation and Peace. These days a particular focus of its work involves reconciliation between people of different faiths. So it was a very apt place to come across this icon. Across the middle of the icon you can see those words written in Greek and Latin and Hebrew – languages chosen of course to echo the languages that were used to write up the inscription on Christ’s own cross.

Appropriately for an icon which has the desire for reconciliation as its meaning, it was created shortly before the millennium in the Holy Land at a Greek Catholic monastery called St John in the desert, just outside Jerusalem. Implicitly written into the different scenes of the icon therefore is the passion and pain of the Middle East and the Holy Land today and its need for reconciliation at so many levels: between Israel and Palestinians, between the three Abrahamic faiths, Jews, Christians and Muslims, between Eastern and Western Christians, and even between Eastern rite Catholics “Greek Catholics” and their more numerous Western rite, Roman Catholic brothers and sisters. In my reflections in the next few minutes I will be focusing on the main

central scene of the icon – the reconciliation between the two brothers, Jacob and Esau. I will also talk more briefly about about the two smaller scenes halfway down on the left and right of the picture – which illustrate the stories of Sarah and Isaac, and Hagar and Ishmael. And I will conclude with a short comment on the scene depicted in the picture in the bottom left hand corner of the icon, the account of Jesus meeting with the woman at the well of Samaria, which we have just read as our second biblical lesson. Looking over all the scenes and embracing them in his arms is the figure of Christ. I see this as a symbol of the way that Christ invites figures of the past, present and future – the past of the Old Testament, the present of the New and the future of the life of the Church – to share in his ministry of reconciliation.

“Esau ran to meet Jacob, and fell on his neck and kissed him and they wept.” It is these words from Genesis 33 that set the scene which the icon is illustrating. Yet to understand the full power of the scene and the story – what it has to say to us about reconciliation and how we are incomplete without the other – we need also to turn earlier episodes in the story of Jacob. Both the icon and the biblical text hint at this: the icon through the mysterious incorporation of the ladder into the background, a ladder that actually relates to the experience of Jacob at Bethel, in Genesis 28, several chapters earlier in the story – and the biblical text through those words of Jacob to his brother at their meeting, “Truly to see your face is like seeing the face of God, with such grace or favour you have received me.” They are words which both Jacob – and we – have quite literally to wrestle with if we wish to appropriate the exquisite yet demanding grace of what he – and we his spiritual descendants – are being

offered. To understand them we need to dig deep into the whole of the book of Genesis.

I believe that there are two great themes in Genesis, which ultimately cannot be separated. The first is that human beings have been created as the image – or as the Greek translation of the Old Testament actually puts it – the icon of God. The second theme is that the number two, a sense of duality, is written into the fabric of creation. Think for example about how creation happens through a series of splits and pairs - light and darkness, land and sea, male and female. This rhythm of twoness is emphasised by the steady refrain at the end of each day – there was evening and morning. Yet this creation is the expression of a God of whom it is said, “Hear O Israel the Lord is one” and of whom Christians believe that he is unity in Trinity, unity in relationship. So the question the writer of Genesis is posing throughout the book is how can or should the one and the two relate to each other so that neither dominates or disappears? Both unity and duality are necessary. And it is the task of human beings to live at the very heart of this conundrum – as created beings to be part of the world of duality in which ‘otherness’ is important and honoured, and yet also, because we are made in the image of God, to reflect also within ourselves the divine unity. We are if you like to be a sort of sacrament, showing through our human life, just what it means to be incomplete without the other. This is the tension which Genesis explores, initially through the tale of a man and a woman – but then, and for most of the book through the stories of brothers. The question of what it means to be a brother is visited again and again. It is as if the book is telling us – if this can be got right, then the relationship between human beings and God can become what it was always intended to be. But nowhere in Genesis does ‘brotherhood’ get explored as seriously as in the story of Jacob and Esau. It is ‘the’ issue which

binds together this entire section of the book. The story of these particular two brothers is recounted with an intensity unparalleled elsewhere in Genesis. In part this is a reflection of the intimacy of the relationship between Jacob and Esau, not merely even full brothers, but actually twins sharing the same womb. When I wrote a commentary on Genesis I called this section ‘Double trouble’, for the comparisons and contrasts between Jacob and Esau challenge us with the possibilities and problems inherent in the number two. Let us take up the tale of Jacob and Esau at the moment when Jacob has been forced to flee to escape the anger of his brother Esau, after he has deceived his father and stolen Esau’s blessing. Despondent, he is on his way to what will prove to be twenty long hard years of exile.

At a place called Bethel – the name means ‘House of God’ – Jacob sees a ladder which stretches between earth and heaven, with angels going up upon it, and even catches a vision of God himself standing by the ladder. That is the ladder shown in our icon. In the ancient world temples were built to be the earthly house of a god, places where their worshippers would come to meet them and sense their protection. And so in Jacob’s night vision the ladder was there to link God’s heavenly and earthly dwellings, and Bethel is living up to its very name, which means ‘House of God’. Yet then the words that God then speaks to Jacob subvert the very rationale for this holy place – effectively declaring it redundant. For God promises to be with Jacob ‘wherever you go’. Normally worshippers had to come to a particular holy building, a temple, to find their god – that was their essential purpose: but God assures Jacob that he can find him anywhere. This is a God who is not confined by a building or even a holy land. He will be Jacob’s travelling companion – but on his own terms. And in doing so he will offer Jacob an immense challenge. For one way of reading the story of Jacob’s experience at Bethel is to

suggest that God's promise to Jacob to travel with him was effectively offering Jacob the opportunity to be the gateway to God for others. But it was not an opportunity that Jacob is yet brave enough to accept..

We move fast forward 20 years – and to Jacob's eventual return to his homeland. And just as the meeting with God by the ladder at Bethel marked the beginning of Jacob's journey into exile – away from his homeland, afraid of his brother – there is another equally mysterious meeting with the divine that takes place on his return,. It is a wrestling bout with an angel which takes place at a river ford called Penuel, a place whose name means the "Face of God". This is described in Genesis 32.22-32. We shall discover it is strangely interconnected with the meeting Jacob has the next day with his brother Esau in Genesis 33 – that scene depicted on our icon. These two means by which Jacob meet God at this point approach the profoundest insights of biblical spirituality. The key which links them both is the word 'face'.

One of the interesting things about Jacob is that up till now he has never found it easy to look people in the face, especially his brother. His very name means 'heel' and as befits someone of that name he has always been a 'behind' sort of person. But when he wrestles with the angel in the passage we have just read he has no choice: it is a face to face encounter.

Rembrandt has painted an inspired picture of this scene. In it Jacob is being held by the divine wrestler in such a way that his head is gradually being forced round so that he is compelled to look his opponent in the face. He will not be allowed to avoid confronting his past, his present and his future.. There is an incredible frisson to the moment: Jacob is all too aware that to look on the face of God in this way was dangerous – yet it was also his only means of healing. Jacob's cry as the struggle comes to its close, 'I have seen

God face to face, and yet my life has been preserved' is a cry of both exultation and wonder. The new name – Israel – that he is granted as an apparent blessing through his struggle expresses the ambiguity. For, according to the biblical writer, 'Israel' means 'the one who strives with God'. What a name and a destiny for Jacob to bequeath to his descendants! Is it a blessing to struggle with God, or is it the reverse? Elie Wiesel, writing out of the experience of the Nazi holocaust, speaks of the "eternal struggle" of the Jewish people, "in more than one land, during more than one night." Back in 1940 the Jewish sculptor Jacob Epstein sculpted an extraordinary portrayal of the two figures wrestling. It can be viewed in the Tate Britain gallery in London. Epstein's sculpture was created in the knowledge of the terrible suffering the Jewish people were already enduring at that time. The embrace of Jacob by the angel – is tight, so tight that it must have been painful, almost forcing the breath out of him. And yet the massive angel also seems to be supporting the frailer figure with which he is interlocked. The way the statue portrays the intimacy between Jacob and the angel is remarkable – it feels almost shocking. It is a sharp reminder that for God to touch us, and allow himself to be touched, costs God. It foreshadows the intimate relationship God will have with the prophets. Perhaps it also foreshadows the intimacy of incarnation? Words like "incarnation" are Christian terminology, yet it is telling that the Jewish Elie Wiesel writes again, "God does not wait for man at the end of the road, the termination of exile; he accompanies him there. More than that: He is the road, He is the exile. God holds both ends of the rope, He is present in every extremity, He is every limit. He is part of Jacob as He is part of Esau." What might this have to say to us as Christian church people and scholars as we reflect on our engagement with people of other faiths?

But all too often people fail to realize that the story of Jacob's encounter with God's

face does not stop here in chapter 32. After this painful night struggle that has resulted in his wounding – though also his new name – next morning the sun rises. Careful readers of the story of Jacob can notice that this is the first time we read of the sun rising since we were told of its setting more than twenty years before as Jacob approached Bethel. This new day seems to herald a new future and new possibilities. And the new future is fleshed in reality when Jacob finally meets the brother, Esau, whom he once deceived so bitterly and has feared so long, to be greeted with a graciousness which surprises him. Those words that Jacob uses in response to Esau's welcome perhaps offer the profoundest biblical summary of what reconciliation can and should mean. They so often pass unnoticed – but they are at the heart of this story. "Accept my present from my hand; for truly to see your face is like seeing the face of God – since you have received me with such favour." This brother has become a "holy place" for Jacob, the gateway by which he can meet God. Without this brother Jacob is incomplete. Esau seems to have accepted the challenge which Jacob was too afraid to accept all those years ago at Bethel.

Jacob's experiences of the previous dark night and this bright morning somehow mysteriously coalesce – there are Jewish traditions that suggest that Jacob's divine assailant at the river crossing was none other than the guardian angel of Esau, or perhaps the nation of Edom, of which Esau was to be the ancestor. We need to read both episodes together. That Jacob had to struggle so hard for the blessing, and was wounded in the struggle, is a rightful reminder of how costly reconciliation can – and sometimes should – be. As Dietrich Bonhoeffer once commented there must be no "cheap grace". Likewise reconciliation if it is to be authentic must never be easy or "cheap." Any who wish legitimately to claim the name "Israel" given to Jacob that night by the river must be prepared to continue the

dual and interlocking struggle, "wrestling" for reconciliation both with God and with their brothers and sisters, and discovering that the 'face' of each illuminates the other. In that struggle is the blessing. Take another look at the icon. Now you can realise why the ladder is there as the background to the embrace and reconciliation of Jacob and Esau. I think the icon painter is telling us that it is only when Jacob and Esau are reconciled in this way that the ladder really can span from earth to heaven. It is only when human beings can see the face of God in one another that the holy place of God's presence can really be manifested here on earth.

There is a wonderful traditional and humorous Middle Eastern tale which expresses this perfectly:

*Two brothers worked together on a family farm. One was unmarried and the other married with children. They shared what they grew equally as they always did, produce and profit. But one day the single brother said to himself, "You know, it's not right that we should share the produce equally, and the profit too. After all I'm all alone, just by myself and my needs are simple. But there is my poor brother with a wife and all those children." So in the middle of the night he took a sack of grain from his bin, crept over the field between their houses and dumped it in his brother's bin. Meanwhile, unknown to him, his brother had the same thought. He said to himself, "It is not right that we should share produce and profit equally. After all, I am married and I have my wife to look after me and my children for years to come. But my brother has no one to take care of his future." So he too, in the middle of the night, took to taking a sack of grain from his bin and sneaking across the field to deposit it in his brother's. And both were puzzled for years as to why their supply did not dwindle.*

*Well, one night it just so happened that they both set out for each other's house at*

---

*the same time. In the dark they bumped into each other carrying their sacks. Each was startled, but then it slowly dawned on them what was happening. They dropped their sacks and embraced one another. Suddenly the dark sky lit up and a voice from heaven spoke, "Here at last is the place where I will build my Temple. For where brothers meet in love, there my Presence shall dwell."*

The Old Testament will never again wrestle quite so powerfully with this topic of brotherhood. It is as though it is too painful to do so. Human beings cannot bear so much reality. It is easier for Jacob to travel to Canaan and Esau to Edom, rather than live together face to face. But once on a dark night and a sunlit morning we were given a glimpse that we cannot ignore. This blessing will not be taken from us.

But before I conclude – those two other parts of the icon that I want to comment on very briefly: first the scenes of Sarah and Isaac on the one side and Hagar and Ishmael on the other. I suspect that the two different scenes are intended to recall the respective positions of those such as Christians and Jews, who honour Sarah and Isaac as their forbears in the faith, and those, such as Muslims who turn to Hagar and Ishmael. It is perhaps no accident that there is such a distance between the two scenes: it speaks of the sometimes tense and conflicted nature of our mutual relationships. Unlike Esau and Jacob was there ever reconciliation between Isaac and Ishmael and their respective mothers? Well, just perhaps. There is an intriguing line in the birth oracle of Ishmael in Genesis 16. Normally it is translated as "Ishmael will live in hostility with all his brothers." But significantly it is also possible to translate the line as "Ishmael will live alongside his brothers". Perhaps the destiny of the Middle East, Christian-Muslim engagement, even the life of our world, lies caught between these two possibilities.

And secondly the scene of Jesus' encounter between Jesus and the woman at the well of Samaria, which you can see in the bottom left corner and which we had read as our New Testament lesson. It is a passage of extraordinary richness – which offers such a variety of insights that there is no hope of doing it justice in these few remaining words. For our purposes here it is interesting to note that some Christian scholars of Islam compare the relationship of Jews and Samaritans in the time of Jesus, with that of Christians and Muslims in our world of today. In both cases we are speaking of sibling faiths – yet ones whose very proximity to each other can lead to distance and bitter hostility. But there is one thing that I cannot resist pointing out. You will be aware that one of the features of John's Gospel is Jesus' repeated declaration of himself as "I am", an apparent claim to the divine name. Some of these "I am" statements include a predicate such as "I am the bread of life". But some of the "I am" statements do not, and these are harder to recognise in the text because they are often half hidden in the translation. The very first "I am" statement in John's Gospel occurs here in this encounter between Jesus and the woman. In verse 26, towards the end of their conversation Jesus proclaims, "I am, the one who is speaking to you". Isn't it extraordinary that the first time Jesus speaks clearly of his real nature, it would be to a woman, a member of a different religious community to his own, and a person of apparent ill repute? Might that just possibly be hinting to us that it is through our engagement with 'the other' that we can come to a truer revelation and understanding of who God is, that God discloses himself to us in our relationship with others? I leave you with that tantalising thought.

And what might the stories depicted on this icon mean in our world today?

It seems fitting to end with a challenge offered by Archbishop Elias Chacour, a Palestinian Christian, writing from the

context of one of the most intractable conflicts of our world today:

*The true icon is your neighbour, the human being who has been created in the image and with the likeness of God. How beautiful it is when our eyes are transfigured and we see that our neighbour is the icon of God, and that you, and you, and I – we are all the icons of God. How serious it is when we hate the image of God, whoever that may be, whether a Jew or a Palestinian. How serious it is when we cannot go and say, 'I am sorry about the icon of God who was hurt by my behaviour.' We all need to be transfigured so we can recognise the glory of God in one another.*

---

**Clare Amos** became Programme Coordinator and Executive for Interreligious Dialogue and Cooperation at the World Council of Churches in September 2011. At the time she delivered this address during the October 2008 consultation she was Director of Theological Studies in the Anglican Communion Office, London, including holding responsibility for inter faith dialogue.

---

### Forthcoming issues of *Current Dialogue*

**No. 53 – December 2012** will focus on Christian Self-Understanding in the context of Judaism.

**No 54 – July 2013** will include further material relating to Christian Self-Understanding in the context of religious plurality. However we also hope to publish some articles specifically linked to the WCC Assembly which will be held in Busan, Korea, in November 2013. The theme of the Assembly is 'God of life, lead us to justice and peace'. If you wish to propose an article linked to this theme for possible publication in this issue of *Current Dialogue*, please contact the Programme Coordinator, Clare Amos by 31 October 2012. ([clare.amos@wcc-coe.org](mailto:clare.amos@wcc-coe.org))



**World Council  
of Churches**  
Publications

P.O. Box 2100  
150 rte. de Ferney  
CH-1211 Geneva 2  
Switzerland

---

**Copyright © World Council of Churches 2012. All rights reserved.**

*The views expressed in the articles are those of the authors and do not necessarily represent the views of the WCC.*