

## **Christian theological reflection on the experience of Christian-Muslim dialogue**

An invitation was given to write a piece of theological reflection from a Christian perspective on my experience of Christian-Muslim dialogue but the sting was in the tail... in only 750 words! This led to several attempts and, rather than delete them, I compile them together here without any particular sequential theme running through them other than the topic.

### **i. Expanding horizons whilst remaining faithful**

As regards the churches of the West, the second half of the twentieth century marked a turning point in relations between different religions. The spur was given by a recognition of the part played by Christian theology in the development of the anti-Semitism of the Nazis. This was in the mind of the Catholic bishops at the Second Vatican Council (1962-65). The extraordinary development there was that on the floor of the Council itself a remarkable initiative of the Holy Spirit took place. For the first time, a formal declaration was made (*Lumen Gentium* §16 and *Nostra Aetate* §3) that Christians and Muslims worship the one and only God. The impulse for this was given by bishops who had lived alongside Muslims in various countries of the world; it was based on their lived experience as well as on intellectual theology.

This statement of Christian faith marks a paradigm shift. It means that we have to develop our theological system to accommodate (at least) three faiths worshipping God, viz., Judaism, Christianity and Islam, with all their particularities as well as their commonalities. For the Christian, this places a duty before God to explore what God is doing in and through another faith community. As agents of justice, we must seek to equip ourselves with sufficient knowledge of Islam to be able to articulate the truth of Muslim belief in the face of misunderstandings and falsehoods. Similarly, we need to reconsider the way in which we present Christianity to a Muslim audience to ensure a degree of understanding and avoid the misunderstandings that all too readily occur. When faced with irreconcilable truth claims, we need a degree of humility (God is bigger than any of us can explain) and fidelity (In all good conscience, I must bear witness to what God has planted within me and my community). As faith communities before God, we must be attentive to God speaking to us through the testimony of other believers. This is a two-way process; as the Lambeth Conference of 1988 made clear, building on Vatican II, Christians and Muslims must not only listen to one another before God but also seek to correct one another: God speaks to members of both faiths, through both faiths, to bring humankind into a closer knowledge and embrace of the divine.

Much of my work has been as a teacher promoting growth in understanding both ways in Christian-Muslim relations. Understanding a complete way of life, is not just a matter of the intellect but demands also intuitive knowledge of the heart; Christians need to feel what it is to follow God's guidance as a Muslim and thus to see the world through Muslim eyes. This I call empathetic understanding and see it as a journey

deeper into faith in God, both in my own way and through the way of Islam. All serious Christian-Muslim relations are part of a journey into this exploration of God, in which I learn more about my own Christian faith in the mirror of Islam and am brought thus to ask the extent to which we believe in the same way and whether the differences that are unpacked are important or not. Thus Christian-Muslim relations are necessarily theological investigations, in which old truths are re-examined and clarified, and new truths are unearthed and evaluated.

From the perspective of Christian theology, this encounter requires us to re-examine the work of God in Christ in healing the divisions within and between the created order and God (salvation). Can we make room for the one eternal *logos* of God to speak not only through prophets, law and religious practices pre-Christ but also post-Christ through Muhammad, the Qur'an and Islam? Do we seek our own comfort by restricting the action of the Holy Spirit to being within the visible Christian community rather than embracing the whirlwind of the unbridled Spirit in the world and in the hearts of every human being? Do we attempt to claim proprietorial rights over the grace of God in Christ by restricting this to the baptised rather than accepting that the Christ-act speaks to the nature of every human being and that God's grace is wider than our narrow imagination can allow? In all these challenges to Christian theology, the invitation is to remain faithful and yet expand our horizons through the lived experience of another faith community alongside us to glimpse vistas into the way of God that enable us to commit in a deeper way to the embrace of the Beloved that will not be limited.

## **ii. The products of dialogue**

Dialogue (from the Greek "talking through") so: "two or more parties talking something through" but to what end? Necessarily to something that did not exist before the process began. Thus dialogue is a creative process; it is taking part in the very act of God, but in this case, creating something out of elements that existed before. It involves a change in all constituent members. As a student under the tuition of the great Pentecostal theologian, Walter Hollenweger, I recall his illustration of dialogue being like two chromosomes coming together, interacting, and exchanging material with both being changed as a result and thus the generation of something new. However, theological dialogue has another dimension because there is the additional partner in the person of God, and thus theological dialogue can be revelatory, it can bring the parties to new insights that did not exist beforehand but are generated through the process. What new theological insights then have emerged through Christian-Muslim dialogue in Britain in recent decades?

The first is the awareness that one stands alongside another faithful community before the one and only God but that the other community sees the nature of God and the divine-human relationship significantly differently. This promotes a spirit of humility; perhaps we cannot be as sure that "we know all about God" as some religious people are prone to be. The second is Islam's insistence that this is a

complete way of life in which everything must be brought under divine guidance. This understanding is there also in Christianity but it has slipped from the top of the agenda in the lives of many Christians, who would find it hard to articulate how their “Monday to Friday, 9 to 5 existence” stands influenced directly by Christian principles. The third is the importance of submission to the God-given rule of life, in good times and bad, which carries people through the discipline of religious obedience: of prayer, fasting, and compassion for others, for example, to higher spiritual congress.

Part of the character of Islam is to be a religion of revealed text and law; it is the giving of the guidance that enables people to live a godly life. And yet living in a multifaith, secular society has called Muslims to dig deeper into their treasury of wisdom to see the hierarchy of values that need to be implemented afresh in this new context: the centrality of saving life, the principle that God wants our ease and not our hardship, the crucial intention underlying every act and the God-given flexibility to mould a life that is possible to follow in this society around the ethical principles contained in the Qur’an. This should cause Christians to reflect in a similar way on their own living, in which “the law written on the heart” without careful vigilance can become permissive. The new experience of living as a powerless minority in a secular multifaith society has given Muslims cause to reflect on elements that appear quite differently here compared to in a Muslim majority culture: apostasy, blasphemy, freedom of speech, religious exclusivism, two-faith marriages and compromises necessary in this economic system, could be mentioned amongst many others. How do other believers handle these issues? What can be learnt from Christians’ successes and failures?

One outcome of dialogue is that we practise seeing things from another perspective. This sharpens and questions our perceptions. Does the way that we have always assumed it to be necessarily have to be? Is this a central point or sufficiently peripheral that I can accept that it might be other? For example, the Qur’anic account of the willingness of Abraham to sacrifice his son is nearly unanimously interpreted by Muslim commentators to refer to Ishmael, whereas the Bible refers to Isaac. Is the point of the story lost if Christians accept that it might have been Ishmael? On the other hand, if we take the Qur’anic verses about the end of the earthly life of Jesus, there is no way that they can be interpreted to mean his death and resurrection to eternal life as in Christian understanding; is this not a matter on which Christians must respectfully stand firm and agree to differ, because to accept the Qur’anic interpretation would be to disembowel the message as Christians understand it?

Dialogue is not just a matter of doctrine and practice; there is also the dialogue of spiritual experience. Such dialogue requires the participants to expose their hearts to the spiritual quest of the other in such a way that the spirit that guides that quest is tested to determine how God is at work there. At the end of his life, during which he had written his massive systematic exposition of Christian theology, Thomas Aquinas had a direct spiritual experience that made him refer to all his intellectual work as

mere straw. Critical though the theological encounter in Christian-Muslim dialogue is, there comes a time when God breaks through into the lives of the participants with such undeniable power and presence that one comes to a knowledge that lies beyond the realm of the intellect alone. Such is the goal for which we strive.

### **iii. Learning from one another**

How are we to work with the diverse and apparently irreconcilable nature of the truth claims of Christianity and Islam? The traditional approach has been simply to say that the other faith has got it wrong. So, from the Christian perspective, it was posited that Muhammad did not receive the Qur'an as a direct, literal revelation from God, as Muslims believe, but rather than he was, at best, a genius editor of various elements of Jewish and Christian scripture and practice, that he moulded into the united whole of the Qur'an. Some of these elements were heterodox and thus Muhammad perceived a wrong understanding of what Christians believe, for example, that they worshipped a three-fold god comprised of God, Jesus and Mary. Likewise, from the Muslim perspective, the Prophet Jesus was the recipient of an authentic direct revelation from God (the *Injil*) that taught essentially the same message as the Qur'an but that later "so-called Christians" deviated from the correct teaching of Jesus and developed their own doctrines that had no foundation within the text of the *Injil*, which they, either in whole or in part, had lost, distorted or destroyed. This leads to a Christian-Muslim animosity that we can trace through history and which, at times, has led to open conflict between followers of the two faiths. It is the stuff of polemics and leaves both communities, at best, with the task of defending the truth claims of their tradition over against the other. Is there another way forward? This is particularly pertinent if we take the position that both faiths worship God and both are based on divine initiatives, in other words, they are revealed and not human constructions, therefore we need to think about God's intentions in their diversity.

One possible way forward is to take seriously the question: What is God saying to Christians and their Christianity through the revelation of the Qur'an, the life of Muhammad and the way of Islam? Might it be that the Qur'anic injunction against taking Jesus and his mother as gods beside God, given that it comes at a time when the divisions over the doctrine of *theotokos* were still raw amongst Christians, is a warning not to go to excess in doctrinal formulations? The Greek word *theotokos* literally means "the God-bearer" and, when referred to Mary, is a statement about the divine nature of Jesus, which is why it was unacceptable to the Nestorians, but when it is translated colloquially as "the Mother of God" then this is open to potential excess and misunderstanding. Similarly, Muhammad teaches a doctrine of religio-political leadership *under* the law of God and not in some way *above* it as in the Caesar-like Byzantine system of Christianity at that time. Likewise, the way of Islam is through sanctity in this world and not by withdrawal from it into monasticism.

Is it also possible to see that God is pointing to different aspects of the divine-human drama in the three Abrahamic faiths? The Judaic stress on sanctification for humanity

through following the universal Seven Commandments of the Sons of Noah, while they are summoned to be a beacon community in the world called to the more restrictive following of the 613 Commandments of the Mosaic Code is a token of the way in which God can call a religious community into a particular function of holiness within one single shared humanity. This complements the Christian stress on the inner law written on the heart and the universal *shari'a* of Islam. The Christian understanding of the relationship between the divine and human in Jesus is not something confined to him but is a revelation of the true nature of what it is to be fully human through the breaking-in of God rather than through the efforts of human beings. This goes further than the Islamic paradisiacal understanding of the never-ending drawing closer to the infinitude of God without entering into a union (at least not one in which the identity of the individual endures). The Islamic understanding of the unity of God (*tawhid*) as the archetypal state of being not only of God but of the whole created order in a relationship of submission in ultimate peace with the Creator conveys a truth about the integrity of the creation worshipping God from which all can learn.

#### **iv. What can you say of Muhammad and the Qur'an?**

A critical development in Christian-Muslim relations can be dated to the declarations of the Second Vatican Council of the Roman Catholic Church (1962-65), which stated explicitly for the first time in documents with such authority (*Lumen Gentium* §16 and *Nostra Aetate* §3) that Muslims and Christians worship the same, one and only, God. This statement was reinforced by the Lambeth Conference, the ten-yearly gathering of principal bishops of the Anglican Communion, in 1988, when it went further and noted that that both faiths will correct one another in their understandings. Various elements of Muslim belief and practice were lauded, e.g., prayer, fasting, almsgiving, and submission to the inscrutable divine will, but on two issues of prime importance the Vatican documents were silent, viz., the status of Muhammad as prophet and the nature of the Qur'an as the word of God. If these two points are not addressed theologically, then the step accomplished, though seminal, is limited.

#### **Muhammad as Prophet?**

The question is often posed thus by Muslims: "I as a Muslim must accept that Jesus was a Prophet sent by God; why can't you say the same of Muhammad?" The question hinges on the definition of the term "prophet." In Muslim understanding, prophets are human beings of the highest degree of spiritual excellence, who are preserved from sin by their interaction with God, who receive revelation from God (in the case of those who are the bearers of a new scripture and code of living; a direct verbal revelation of which they are the conveyor and not the author), who perfectly put the teaching into practice in their lives in an infallible way and who are sent to lead a community of people on a spiritual and material path that leads to paradise. In the case of Muhammad, he is the sinless, infallible recipient of the Qur'an, as a literal verbal revelation sent down by God and the last and final guidance sent to the world to

correct errors in the way that earlier communities have understood their revelations and to lay down the universal, perpetual way of life for all humankind to follow. Given this definition, if I as a Christian could affirm that, I would cease to be a Christian and would have become a Muslim.

So the question to Christians must be: What can you say of Muhammad? Some Christian scholars have responded that Muhammad should be regarded as a prophet but they use a religious studies definition of the term and not an Islamic one; so William Montgomery Watt judged Muhammad to be a prophet on the basis of the ethical lives of his followers. Some Christian scholars have used a construction that Muhammad was like the biblical prophets, whilst stressing immediately that Jesus was more than a prophet; so Kenneth Cragg and the Council of European Churches' Islam in Europe Committee (St Pölten, Austria 1984). The Nestorian Catholicos Timothy I in 781 set a high benchmark by accepting Muhammad as "walking in the way of the prophets" on the basis of him teaching monotheism and good works. This was taken up by the contemporary theologian, Hans Küng, who accepts that Muhammad shares the vocation of a biblical prophet on the grounds that he taught monotheism, social justice and submission of all to God on the basis of his personal relationship with God. Other Christian scholars have refrained from granting this title, e.g., Jacques Jomier regards Muhammad as a religious and political genius and a religious reformer; and Christian Troll points to elements of Muhammad's teaching that do not accord with the biblical understanding of prophethood, in particular that he does not point towards Christ as the natural fulfilment of the message. Muslims will regard even the most generous of these assessments as being mean-spirited and not meeting their expectations of true followers of the Prophet Jesus.

### **The Qur'an as word of God?**

As we have seen above, in Muslim understanding, the Qur'an in the last, definitive, universal, literal, verbal revelation from God, which corrects errors that have come into the deposits or interpretation of earlier scriptures; it is thus literally the word of God. If I could accept it as such, then again, I would have left Christianity for Islam. Less Christian theological work has been done on this question. The French Christian-Muslim theological working group (GRIC) came to a position in which the majority of Christian members could say of the Qur'an that it was "a word from God" and Wm Montgomery Watt concluded in saying that Muhammad believed it to be a divine revelation. Both fall far short of Muslim anticipated responses. These two questions remain critical to the future theological development of Christian-Muslim relations.

### **v. Are our irreconcilable differences irreconcilable to God?**

If we begin from the starting point that Jews, Christians and Muslims all worship the one and only God, which is the confirmed position of western mainline Christianity for at least the last half-century, then interesting theological issues arise. If the

Christian doctrine of the trinitarian understanding of God is so central to the eternal nature of God, why was it that God delayed for millennia in revealing it? It is a doctrine around which many things spin that are quite unacceptable to Judaism and Islam. Given that all three religions see themselves as being based on divine revelations, how can it be that God reveals things in the Qur'an some six hundred years after the time of Jesus that are critical of the Christian deposit and indeed at times quite inimitable to it? In Christian history, simplistic answers to these questions were given: the Jews failed to recognise the indications throughout their own scriptures that pointed to the true nature of God and the Qur'an was not a true revelation from God. Is there another way forward based on the position that all three faiths are worshipping God that allows for these differences? Some Muslim scholars have said that Christians and Jews are worshipping God but, due to their failure to recognise the prophethood of Muhammad and revelation of the Qur'an, God will not accept their worship; they are, as it were, sending their worship up the wrong pipeline, a line that once was valid but that God has now closed down. Could Christian theology take such a position?

One key element of Christian theology has been the apophatic approach, which holds that the human being using human languages cannot make any positive statements about God, who remains essentially ineffable, unknowable; therefore only negative statements can be made, "God is not..." rather than "God is..." This emphasises the transcategorical nature of God; God is beyond all human categories. If we apply this to the Christian doctrine of God by way of example, it means that our trinitarian formulae are the best ways that we can find, within given philosophical codes of speech and categories, to say something valid about the God who is in essence unknowable. To put this in another way: Is it a valid Christian expectation that when we break through to seeing things from God's perspective, we will apprehend God within our Greek trinitarian concepts or will they seem "like so much dross" by comparison with the knowledge of God that will then be accessible to us? Could it be that the diverse and apparently irreconcilable nature of our Jewish, Christian and Muslim formulations of doctrines are indeed capable of reconciliation when viewed from the divine perspective? Could this be the meaning of the Qur'anic statement that "on that day, God will make clear to you all those things on which you disagreed"?

Such an approach would allow us to maintain the integrity of our faith traditions with their apparently irreconcilable truth claims and without the relativism of saying that all truth claims are equally valid; that is a judgement that lies beyond the ability of human beings to make but must be left to the ultimate arbitration of God. It would mean that diversity amongst these three faiths can be seen as an enrichment through which each can share in the faith journey and integrity of the other, and thus gain new insights into God and the drama of creation. It would promote humility and mutual respect between adherents of these faiths and perhaps prevent us from trying to limit God to that which is within our own ability to comprehend or articulate and yet leave us free to be true to God's planting within each community.

## vi. On the non-negotiable centrality of the Trinity

The critical development in theological understanding between Muslims and Christians in the twentieth century is the acknowledgement in the Catholic (Vatican II: *Lumen Gentium* §16 and *Nostra Aetate* §3) and Anglican (Lambeth Conference 1988) communions that followers of both faiths worship the one and only God even though they understand that God fundamentally differently. This parallels an equivalent Christian understanding of the worship of Jews. The Yale theologian, Miroslav Volf, has examined the Muslim dimension in his monograph: *Allah: a Christian response* (HarperOne, 2011). The Muslim doctrine of absolute monotheism (*tawhid*) sits irreconcilably alongside the Christian theology of trinity. Throughout the centuries, Muslims have understood Qur'anic verses against speaking of God as one of three (Q. 5:73) or Jesus as the son of God (Q. 4:171; 9:30) to prohibit a trinitarian understanding of God and to see it as, at least, going to excess (*ghulat*). Even at those times in their common history when the scholars of both religions have commanded a precise understanding of the Aristotelean terms in which the Christian doctrine was written, the Muslims have been reserved, whilst understanding that the doctrine does not amount to polytheism or *shirk* (associating partners with God), in seeing it as a dangerous formulation that can lead people not trained in philosophical theology into the most grievous error and thus it is a doctrine to be avoided. There have been Christian groups and individuals who have moved in a unitarian direction by downplaying or denying the divinity of Christ but a trinitarian belief is still a requirement for membership of the World Council of Churches and still upheld by the Roman Catholic Church. Is this a piece of stubborn traditionalism or is it essential to the authentic Christian world-view?

At the heart of the Christian vision is that what God has done in the incarnation of the *logos* in Jesus reveals something fundamental about what it is to be human. What can be said of Jesus, viz., that he is all that it is to be God and all that it is to be human, can be said too, at least *in potentia*, of every human being. At the heart of the Christian vision is the doctrine of *theosis*, that human beings are in the process of becoming or are realising the actuality that we partake of the divine. The doctrine of the Trinity, understanding God as a dynamic fellowship in unity, makes it possible to grasp the divinisation of human beings as entry into that fellowship through the portal of the second *hypostasis*, or in simpler language, human beings realise their Christ-nature and each becomes “another Christ.”

It is no part of Christian understanding that God “became Trinity” at the incarnation of the *logos*, rather God always was Trinity from eternity but was only revealed as such through the Christ-event. This means that when the Jews before the time of Jesus, and Jesus himself as a boy, worshipped God, they worshipped unknowingly the trinitarian God that was later revealed. In the same way, Jews and Muslims in contemporary times, in Christian perspective, worship the God that Christians understand as Trinity, even though they would not agree with that theological formulation. In the same way,



from Muslim understanding, the God worshipped by all three faiths is to be understood according to the doctrine of *tawhid*, whatever Christians may say.

To take this just one step further: When Muslims pray, they prostrate in total submission before the awesome God. This is not the “Muslim” attitude in prayer, as though Muslims were a sub-set of humanity, but this is according to the divine revelation for the whole of humankind. Such a prostration, then, is the most profound expression of the relationship between human and divine in prayer. From the Christian perspective, the human being stands as Son before the Father and prays through the power of the Holy Spirit. This means, in Christian understanding, that all authentic prayer is trinitarian. The indwelling Spirit cries from the breast of the truly human Son, to the Father of all. Christian theology then requires us to say that, unknowingly, Muslims in prayer before God are engaged in a trinitarian activity, just as are Christians and any other human being in authentic prayer; it cannot be otherwise even though this would be an explanation unacceptable to Muslim understanding.

Although the explicit acknowledgement that Christians and Muslims worship the one and only God was indeed significant, the implications need to be worked through in theological dialogue from both perspectives and this is the task of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.