DIMMID
Dialogue Interreligieux Monastique / Monastic Interreligious Dialogue

THE GOD WHO PROVOKES US ALL TO HOLINESS

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Précis – English/Français

The language of 'provocation' is generally used in an entirely negative way, and in the Hebrew Bible expresses a breakdown in the exclusive covenant which God forges with his people. In the New Testament, however, the reality of different groups in a covenant relationship with God begins to open up the idea of provocation as a positive catalyst for authentic discipleship. In our own inter faith context, as Louis Massignon amongst others suggested, it is possible for us to be provoked by one another to a greater holiness; such provocation is counter to what the world would expect of relations between people of different religions, and is a sign of the Spirit working in our encounters.

Le langage de la "provocation" est généralement utilisé d'une manière entièrement négative, et dans la Bible hébraïque il exprime une rupture de l'alliance exclusive que Dieu établit avec son peuple. Dans le Nouveau Testament, cependant, le fait qu'il y ait différents groupes avec lesquels Dieu établit une alliance commence à introduire l'idée de la provocation comme un catalyseur positif pour devenir des disciples authentiques. Dans notre contexte interreligieux, comme Louis Massignon, entre autres, l'a suggéré, il est possible que nous puissions être provoqués par un autre à une sainteté plus grande; une telle provocation est contraire à ce à quoi le monde pourrait s'attendre en fait de relations entre personnes de religions différentes, et elle est un signe que l'Esprit est actif dans nos rencontres.

[Notes can be found at the end of the article. They are also placed in a separate file called "Notes Ipgrave." By clicking here you can open them in a separate window, thus making it easier to consult them as you read the article.]

At the heart of religious life is an encounter with God, whether named as God or understood – as in some forms of Buddhism – in some other, e.g. more impersonal way. The differences in theology between different religious communities are profound and many of them irreducible, and the way in which the ultimate Other of encounter is described will shape the dynamic of the encounter; but in this presentation I do not propose to enter into these

crucially important issues, and will generally refer simply to "God", meaning by that the One whom others encounter and who is known to me as the Trinity. This, as I understand it, is the fundamental insight on which the idea of a "dialogue of salvation" is founded: that God, in different ways, engages people and communities of each religion in an exchange, conducted through the scriptures, rituals and values of their religious traditions, in which they seek him and he in some measure responds to them. Note that this does not imply that all these conversations are the same in content, or of equivalent value. Different things can be said in different dialogues, and some may be far deeper than others; the point is, that there are a number of different divine-human exchanges going on.

In Jewish and Christian understanding at least, this dialogue is seen as an encounter with a strong affective dimension, marked on the human side by longing, attachment, and the demand for exclusive commitment; on the divine side, by unconditional love and what the scriptures call God's "jealousy", his demand for a fitting response on our part. In the case of Christianity, I think it is possible to say that the monastic tradition in particular has been responsible for maintaining the strength of that affective encounter – think, for example, of the emotional literacy with which reflections on the Song of Songs describe the spirituality of that encounter. Perhaps the same could be said of monastic or quasi-monastic traditions in other faiths too – the intensity of Hasidic Judaism, for example, or the overpowering longing of the Sufi paths of Islam.

Be that as it may, the affective encounter, charged by the divine jealousy which demands a whole-hearted and exclusive commitment, has within it a potential for massive and destructive malfunction when the relationship is violated or ignored by God's people. One of the ways in which the Bible describes this malfunction is through the language of "provocation". For example, in Isaiah 65.2-3, God complains of "a people who provoke me to my face continually", because they are "rebellious": "I held out my hands all day long to a rebellious people, who walk in a way that is not good, following their own devices" – that is to say, not following the covenanted way set out by God in his dialogue of salvation with the people he wants to call his own.

I want to suggest that, by the mercy of God, there are two successive theological transformations in the meaning of the word “provocation” which can provide a key to understanding one aspect of inter-religious relations, and of the place of the monastic dialogue within wider inter faith dialogue.

Central to the first transformation for Christians is the seminal experience of the parting of the ways between Jewish people who did not accept Jesus as Messiah and the Gentiles who recognised in him the decisive encounter of God with humanity. Michael Barnes [1] has pointed out with great insight how formative for the whole of a Christian theology and praxis of inter faith relations is this question of the Church’s relation to the Jewish people as the “primary other”; it is, for example, the issue which underlay the evolution of the Second Vatican Council’s declaration *Nostra Aetate*, on the Church’s relationship with other religions.

To return to the theme of “provocation”, I would see the meaning of this being firstly transformed in this earliest layer of Jewish-Christian separation and self-definition, as Christians have to wrestle with the reality of different groups positioned in a covenanted relationship with God in the dialogue of salvation. The chief protagonist of that wrestling is of course Paul, in particular the Paul of Romans chapters 9 to 11. Here, the apostle writes in an intensely dialectical way, trying to understand, as a Jewish believer in Jesus, the relationship between two groups both of whom can claim a covenant with God: on one hand, Jews who do not believe in Jesus, and on the other hand Gentiles who do so believe.

Paul’s challenge is to reconcile the identity of the newly shaped Christian community with a recognition of the reality of the long called Jewish community – and to do so as a Christian for whom the knowledge of God is in some sense mediated through the religious other, since to Israel belong “the adoption, the glory, the covenants, the giving of the law, the worship and the promises; to them belong the patriarchs, and from them according to the flesh comes the Messiah” (Rom 9.4-5). From his own deeply conflicted personal position, he writes passionately – in language so dense and tortured that it cannot be simply ironed out and

fitted into neat theological categories – of the newness of the Christ event, and of the continuing zeal of the Jews for God; of the universality of the Gospel for all people, and of the particularity of the covenant with Israel; above all, of the continuing faithfulness and mercy of God, despite the disobedience of Jews and Gentiles alike. In Romans 11.30-32, his writing reaches a crescendo of unsurpassed paradox: “Just as you were once disobedient to God but have now received mercy through their disobedience, so they have now been disobedient in order that, by the mercy shown to you, they too may receive mercy. For God has imprisoned all in disobedience so that he may be merciful to all.”

It seems clear to me that we can understand this in terms of the motif of provocation; indeed, in Romans 10.20, Paul explicitly quotes the verse from Isaiah (65.2) I mentioned earlier, referring to a rebellious people. For Paul, however, through the controlling motif of God’s mercy, the theme of “provocation” has been turned around: although God’s “provocation” still arises in response to negative behaviour (the disobedience or unbelief of some of God’s people), its results become positive, as that provocation becomes a stimulus to another part of God’s people to embrace the way of holiness which Jesus opens to them. In fact, Paul’s logic carries further the positive consequences of this “provocation” in the dialogue of salvation. His argument, roughly, goes as follows: Jewish unbelief has provoked Gentile faith; that Gentile faith can in turn provoke renewed Jewish belief; and final Jewish belief will signal the salvation of all people. Applying this to his own work, Paul says: “Inasmuch as I am an apostle to the Gentiles, I glorify my own ministry in order to make my own people jealous, and thus save some of them. For if their rejection is the reconciliation of the world, what will their acceptance be but life from the dead!” (Rom 11.13-14)

Paul’s thinking, then, has transformed the wholly negative sense of provocation, as it is found in the context of Old Testament covenant-breaking, into something which is potentially positive in its results, though still based on negative behaviour. It is important to see, both that this happens in a situation where he has to address the complexities of a plurality of groups claiming to be in relationship with God – so there is an inter-human dynamic

generating his thought – and also that he sees this new sense of “provocation” as arising from the mercy of God – so it is a divine working, not a purely human contest, which ultimately produces this new possibility. The salvific working of provocation in some sense arises from the heart of God; from being a measure of his irritation with his people, it is transformed into a way in which he stimulates them to holiness through their contested relationships with one another.

Now, it seems to me that a second step to explore in this journey of transformations of meaning would be, to see whether provocation in this catalytic, salvific sense could be something arising not merely, as for Paul, from behaviour which is seen as negative (disbelief, disobedience), but from behaviour which could be viewed in a positive light, though embodying difference. That is to say, in a situation where different communities are claiming to be in some sense in a “dialogue of salvation” with God, through religious beliefs, histories, values, practices which are quite different from one another, is it possible to see them as in some sense provoking one another to greater holiness within that dialogue. Or, to put the question with greater theological accuracy, is it possible to see the mercy of God as provoking them all to greater holiness through their inter-human context of difference and encounter? From the way I have phrased the question, you have probably realised that I think the answer is a tentative “yes”, and I believe that one way of understanding the dynamic of inter-monastic dialogue in particular could be through this sense of a merciful God who provokes us all to holiness. I want to refer to the figure of Louis Massignon in particular, but first, on a more mundane level, I want to mention a simple experience of my own, and I want to say a little more about our use of the word “provocation” in English.

What I want to describe is a fairly straightforward experience, and one I have had on more than one occasion, and maybe you have met with something similar; but it is of no less significance for that. I was visiting a mosque in Leicester, and fell into conversation with a holy man from Gujarat who was leading an Islamic mission of revival and renewal there. Seeing that I was a Christian priest, this man soon turned our discussion towards Jesus. While expressing great respect for Jesus as a prophet of God, he

vigorously questioned the account of the Lord's death, and went on to show genuine distress over my belief in the Crucifixion. "How could God abandon his prophet?", he asked, and he wept tears of sorrow over me for my misbelief. From that moment, I began to think in a new way of Paul's description of God as a Father: "Who did not withhold his own Son, but gave him up for all of us ..." (Rom 8.32). I came to appreciate both the nobility of the Islamic vision of loyalty, and the humbling paradox of the Christian *skandalon* of the Cross. I at any rate felt this as a provocation to a deeper discipleship; for if I probably provoked that Islamic preacher, certainly he provoked me – provoked me to a renewed appreciation of the distinctiveness of our own respective faiths. I came to understand more about the strange paradox of the cross, of the mystery of power in weakness; also, and at the same time, I appreciated the integrity of the Islamic vision of united strength through loyalty and commitment. [2]

Why do I use the word "provocation" in this context? In contemporary English, "provoke" has a generally negative, somewhat insulting, connotation, "invite to anger". However, it still retains traces of an older, broader meaning: "to call forth, summon, invite" – a sense still present in the expression "thought-provoking". In Shakespeare's The Tempest, for example, Miranda's father Prospero tells her the tale of her early years, when, before they landed on the enchanted island where she has grown up, they were at the mercy of his enemies. She asks her father: "Wherefore did they not that destroy us?" And he replies: "Well demanded, wench: my tale provokes that question". [3] The word here conveys a sense of stimulation into an appropriate response, laced with some measure of being shocked, triggered into an action which might not otherwise have happened. Prospero's narrative opens a new horizon in Miranda's self-understanding.

In a relationship between different groups of people, such as we are dealing with in inter-religious dialogue, I think this means that "provocation" is a little different from both "competition" and "challenge", albeit there are points of similarity between these motifs. "Competition" between two communities, or two teams, means being spurred by the example of the other to do the same thing as them, but in a more forceful and effective way. In distinction from this,

“provocation”, while likewise being triggered by the example of the other, elicits from one’s own community that which is a distinctive expression of its identity and values, and which might not have been brought forth at all, or which might have been brought forth in a different way, but for the catalytic role of the *provocateur*. “Provocation” also carries a different nuance from “challenge”: whereas a challenge is laid down to us in the interpersonal arena, facing us from outside, provocation is a reception within the self of s stimulus from the other, leading to a change in attitudes and behaviour.

It is in this sense, I believe, that we are to understand the place of “provocation” in the witness of Louis Massignon, the distinguished French Islamicist, Roman Catholic and mystic. Massignon described himself as “provoked to holiness” by the example of Islam and of Muslims. His view of Islam was in the first place built on his discernment of the authenticity of God as worshipped by Muslims. Bearing in mind the claim of Islam to derive from Abraham through Ishmael, he saw it as “the monotheism of those who have been excluded from the privileges awarded to Isaac and so to Israel and the Christian Church, and it calls these two to account for the use made of their privileges”. [4] I want to note three significant points in this.

Firstly, there is an intense acknowledgement of the integrity of Islam, and its spiritual power – nor is this in a hostile sense: uniquely, Massignon felt he had been brought back to Catholic faith through the intercession of Muslim saints. He recognised the grandeur of God in Islam, mediated by Abraham – he had a significant influence on the teaching on Islam in *Nostra Aetate*, which is now part of the ecumenical heritage of all Christians. In that sense, he is one of the spiritual progenitors of modern Christian-Muslim dialogue, and particularly of the dialogue of religious experience.

Secondly, despite this, or even because of it, Massignon was equally clear about the distinctiveness of Islam and Christianity, even of their opposition. This for him was symbolised in the two brothers Isaac and Ishmael (an imagery which appears also in Galatians, where Paul, rather unconvincingly for me, uses it to signify the opposition of Christianity and Judaism; Massignon, more accurately, links Judaism with Christianity through a

common affiliation to Isaac). Massignon was not particularly interested in identifying “common ground”, though he was profoundly interested in unexpected points of contact; the heart of his energy was in the way Islam challenged, “provoked”, Christianity.

It is significant in this connection to note that the Qur’ān speaks of people of different religions “vying with each other in good works”, and does so in the context of explaining why God has willed the existence of religious differences. [5] Elsewhere, the Qur’ān links religious difference to the exercise of divine mercy in ways that resonate with Paul’s conclusion in Romans 11.32. These resonances point, I think, to resources within Islam which could support a concept of holy “provocation” similar to that developed by Massignon.

Thirdly, Massignon saw Islam primarily as something to which Christianity was accountable, and which therefore served the spiritual health of the Church – describing the aim of the *Badaliya*, a sodality of Christians with especial concern and prayer for Muslims, Massignon wrote: “Islam exists and continues to subsist because it is of Abrahamic faith, to force the Christians to rediscover a more bare, more primitive, more simple form of sanctification, which Muslims admittedly only attain very rarely, but through our fault because we have not yet shown it to them in us, and this is what they expect from us, from Christ.” [6]

Massignon was a seminal figure, but he belonged to a particular time and culture; yet his view of other faiths as “provoking Christians” to holiness has been influential beyond his particular idiom. In the Church of England, I have been closely involved in a national project which looks at the experiences of our many parishes and schools which are situated in neighbourhoods and communities with a prominent, sometimes a dominant, Islamic presence in this country. Many of these Christian communities are indeed feeling hard-pressed, fragile and insecure; but many others are reporting a sense of positive stimulation through their daily contact with people of Islamic faith, and in some places this is leading to a numerical as well as a spiritual growth in Christian commitment. [7] I would describe this as “Christians (even Anglicans) being provoked to a more faithful discipleship through their Muslim neighbours” – or,

more precisely, being so provoked by the Spirit of God in the context of meeting with their Muslim neighbours. At a wider sociological level, while the new presence of Muslims in Western European societies has generated among some Christians a reaction of arrogant defensiveness, the Welsh-born historian of religion Philip Jenkins, writing from an American perspective, discerns a more positive experience of “provocation” when he writes that “However counter-intuitive this may seem, the advent of Islam might be good news for European Christianity”. [8]

But, of course, sociology is not enough: we have to ask also some questions which arise from our faith, and it is with four such questions of faith that I want to finish. Firstly, if there is any truth in what I have suggested about God as positive *provocateur* of holiness in the context of inter-religious dialogue, we must ask about the theological significance of other religions – particularly, in our present European situation, about the theological significance of Islam. Can we and should we see this (as Massignon certainly did) as a factor ordained by God to provoke Christians to greater holiness? In which case, what would an Islamically provoked movement of holiness look like in the Church?

These questions may be raised, and answered, by both Muslims and Christians. For the former, the answer is fairly straightforward: Islam is definitely intended by God as a summons to Christians to return to the purity of Abrahamic faith, to turn away from the corruptions and excesses of Trinitarian and incarnational beliefs. For many Muslims, an “Islamically provoked” holiness arising in the Church would be indistinguishable from Islam itself, as Christians found their true vocation in becoming Muslims; others, though, would admit of the continuing possibility of a purified Christian religion, closer to its Semitic roots, subsisting alongside the community of Islam. Among Christians, while many would still adopt the traditional designations of Islam as either a heretical distortion or a downright denial of orthodox Christianity, some would follow Massignon in seeing it as either directly willed or indirectly permitted by God in order to renew the church through the kind of dynamic I have sought to sketch. Yet even if the emergence of Islam is not traced to a theological origination in this way, it is still possible for Christians to experience in its “provocation” an existential challenge to their discipleship.

Secondly, this then in turn raises an intriguing question in the converse direction: is Christianity perhaps intended by God to serve as a provocation to Muslims to incite them to greater holiness? In which case, what would a “Christianly provoked” movement of holiness look like among Muslims? These questions too are pertinent for both Christians and Muslims, but the historical priority of the one religion over the other means that it is deceptive to draw simple parallels between these questions and my first set.

In this case, as the Islam preached by Muhammad postdates Christianity and includes elements which seem explicitly to repudiate orthodox Christian teaching, there is a sense in which Islam must appear to Christians as a movement which resists the provocation of the Gospel, the *skandalon* of the Cross. For Muslims, on the other hand, the “provoking” aspect of Christian belief and practice is found not so much in its original existence as in its obdurate persistence in a post-Islamic world: like those Christians whose exasperation with contemporary Judaism led them to ascribe wilful blindness to *synagoga* in the face of *ekklesia*, it is tempting for Muslims to conclude that Christian persistence in misbelief must be rooted in deliberate obstinacy. Again, though, whatever the theological argumentation, the existential challenge to Muslims of Christian faithfulness remains, echoing one aspect of the witness of the Qur’ān: “You are sure to find that the closest in affection to the believers are those who say, “We are Christians,” for there are among them people devoted to learning and ascetics.” [9]

The Arabic words *qissīsīna wa-ruhbānan*, “people devoted to learning and ascetics”, are often translated as “priests and monks”, and this brings me to my third question: What is the place of professed religious communities in this dynamic of provocation? If, as I understand it, the monastic community in Christianity is given to the whole Church as a sign of and a summons to a more radical engagement with the vocation of holiness; and if, as might be plausibly argued, monastic or quasi-monastic communities play a not dissimilar role in other religious traditions also, how in practice are professed religious in different religions to provoke one another to greater holiness, to a more fervent discipleship, to a more faithful following of the way; and how

are they to share the fruits of that provocation with their wider hinterlands of faith?

Finally, if the idea of being provoked to holiness is one useful way of understanding some inter-religious dialogue, it most obviously relates to the type of exchange called the "dialogue of religious experience", distinguished in the now standard typology from the other three forms of the "dialogue of life", the dialogue of social action, and the dialogue of theological experts. Is there perhaps a role for this dialogue of religious experience, perhaps particularly for monastic dialogue, to remind the wider dialogue scene of the importance in all our inter faith encounters of recognising holiness in one another, being stimulated by it in our own discipleship, and acknowledging the primacy at all times of the provoking God who has brought us into encounter with one another and with him?

Notes:

[1] Michael Barnes SJ, *Theology and the Dialogue of Religions* (Cambridge: CUP, 2002), 31.

[2] These issues are powerfully narrated in an extraordinary Islamic novel about Good Friday, M Kamel Hussein, *City of Wrong: A Friday in Jerusalem*, tr. Kenneth Cragg (Oxford: OneWorld, 1994).

[3] *The Tempest*, Act I Scene ii.

[4] Anthony, O'Mahony, 'Our Common Fidelity to Abraham is What Divides': Christianity and Islam in the Life and Thought of Louis Massignon', 159, in Anthony O'Mahony and Peter Bowe OSB, ed., *Catholics in Interreligious Dialogue: Studies in Monasticism, Theology and Spirituality* (Leominster: Gracewing, 2006).

[5] *al-Mā'ida* 5.48.

[6] Louis Massignon, 'Le Signe mariale' – interview in *Rhythmes du Monde*, 1948-49; cited in O'Mahony, *op. cit*., 177.

[7] Mission and Public Affairs Council of the Church of England: *Presence and Engagement: the Churches' Task in a Multi-Faith Council* [GS1577] (London: Archbishops' Council, 2005).

[8] Philip Jenkins, *God's Continent: Christianity, Islam and Europe's Religious Crisis* (Oxford: OUP, 2007), 287.

[9] *al-Mā'ida* 5.82, in the translation of Muhammad Abdel Haleem (Oxford: OUP, 2004).