28

Comments on a Few Theological Issues in the Islamic-Christian Dialogue

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The crucial questions and difficulties that confront serious ecumenism are above all of a metaphysical and theological order and must be confronted in a sincere and serious manner if a profound understanding is to be created between the two sides. It is too late for diplomatic platitudes and the kind of relativization which in the name of ecumenical understanding belittles issues of major theological concern, creating so-called human accord at the expense of truncating, reducing, or distorting the Divine Message.

I believe that seven outstanding theological and metaphysical issues can be identified between Islam and Christianity which need to be studied, elaborated, and better understood in order that a more profound harmony and comprehension between Christians and Muslims can be fostered. Specific cases of interaction between Christian and Muslim communities and groups, of course, raise other issues as the attention shifts to human and social considerations. From the theological perspective, however, these seven points remain crucial and need much further reflection by those theologians and religious scholars on both sides who are concerned with a deeper understanding between Christianity and Islam.

I

The first and most complex question is not so much that of the nature of God but rather of the way in which God manifests Himself. The nature of God is of course itself the basic reality of both religions and has been dealt with by numerous generations of Christian and Muslim theologians, philosophers, and gnostics (in the sense of *'urafā'* in Islam rather than the sectarian gnostics of the early Christian centuries). Despite the difference of emphasis in the two re-

ligions, namely the insistence of Christians upon trinity and of Muslims upon unity, it is not difficult to reach an accord on the ultimate nature of God, the One Reality. The works of such persons as al-Ghazzālī, Rūmī, and Ibn ʿArabī on the Islamic side and Erigena and Nicolas of Cusa on the Christian side provide the necessary metaphysical and theological doctrines on the basis of which one can formulate a doctrine of the nature of God which would be acceptable to either religion. What is needed is a further effort on the part of both Christians and Muslims to provide formulations of traditional and orthodox doctrines in a contemporary context along the lines found in the works of F. Schuon[1] and also in the writings of such Christian theologian-scholars as Louis Massignon, Louis Gardet, Wilfred Smith, and Willem Bijlefeld.[2]

What is much more difficult to understand in its full theological significance across the Christian-Islamic religious frontiers is the way in which the Divine Reality manifests Itself. Here one comes to the question of theophany (*tajallī*) and incarnation (*ḥulūl*) and the relation between the Divine (*lāhūt*) and the human (*nāsūt*). Both religions, of course, accept the primacy of the Divine and the blinding reality of God. But they differ as to whether that Transcendent and Divine Reality can become manifested in the world of becoming and if so, what constitutes the meaning of manifestation. Islam rejects the incarnation, fixing its gaze upon the Absolute as such, which cannot become incarnated without entering into the domain of relativity. Christianity places its emphasis not on the Absolute as such but on the manifestation of the Absolute as the son or the Truth incarnate.

Debates within Christianity concerning the Divine and human natures of Christ actually have been and are of great significance for the debates between Christianity and Islam over this issue. Were Islam to carry out a dialogue with some of the Eastern Christian churches, there would be quite a different theological climate of discourse precisely because of other christologies which were cultivated by some of the early Eastern churches. Does *lāhūt* enter in *nāsūt*, or is it simply reflected in it? Can the two become united in a single reality or do they remain apart? Many of these issues were discussed by early Muslim scholars in works on "schools and sects" (*al-milal wa'l-niḥal*) in the context of early Islamic-Christian debates. But they have not been discussed sufficiently in the contemporary context by theologians and religious thinkers who would take their own tradition seriously. There is no denying the fact that serious Muslim thinkers cannot accept the penetration of *lāhūt* into *nāsūt* or the incarnation of God in any form unless incarnation be understood in a metaphysical and symbolic sense. In any case it is important to realize the central significance of this issue in any Christian-Islamic dialogue that seeks to go beyond simple formalities and human niceties.

II

The second question of great theological significance is that of finality. Islam claims finality for itself in the present period of human history and asserts that there will be no major religious message, including the revelation of a new *sharī'a* and Sacred Book, until the second coming of Christ and the ending of human history. The history of the past fourteen centuries has in fact vindicated the Islamic view insofar as no major religion comparable to Buddhism, Christianity, or Islam has appeared since the descent of the Qur'an. The Islamic attitude toward religious movements that have appeared more recently, such as Bahā'ism and the Aḥmadiyya in the nineteenth century, is well-known precisely because they negate the basic Islamic doctrine concerning the Prophet Muhammad as the Seal of Prophets, *Khatam al-anbiyā'*. Although the particulars of these two religious movements are not the same, in both cases the question of finality of prophethood has been at the center of this confrontation with Islam.

As for Christianity, its founder never claimed to be the "Seal of Prophets." Yet he spoke on the one hand of false prophets who would arise after him and on the other of the rule of the Paraclete, which Muslims identify with the coming of Islam, equating the name of the Prophet as Ahmad with the Paraclete.[3] If the identification of the rule of the Paraclete with the coming of Islam is rejected and Islam is simply identified with the false prophets mentioned by Christ, then there is of course no possibility of a serious religious dialogue and one is back to the position taken by the majority of Christian theologians since the advent of Islam. But as far as Christianity is concerned, the very existence of Islam poses a greater challenge than its finality. In any case it remains for Christian theologians to delve more deeply into the doctrine of the Paraclete in its relation with the Islamic revelation.

The problem of finality is more acute as far as Muslims are concerned because Christianity in its own way also claims finality for itself. Nor in fact could the "sense of the Absolute" in every religion not bring with it a sense of finality of the message of that religion for those who have accepted it. But it is finality in a historic sense that is particularly problematic in the Islamic understanding of Christianity, for the vast majority of Christians have interpreted the saying of Christ, "I am the way, the Life and the Truth," to mean "I am the only Way" and also the final way. Such a view obviously makes any discourse with a religion which comes after rather than precedes Christianity historically impossible. This issue certainly plays a role in the contrast between current Christian theological studies of Judaism and of Islam. In any case the question of finality as understood in the two religions must be thoroughly studied and elaborated,

both as this question relates to the sense of the Absolute in each religion and as it relates to their particular views concerning historical finality.

Furthermore, this question, which is obviously related to the issue of "final things" or eschatology in each religion, cannot be discussed without considering those secular philosophies of time and of history for which historical finality in the religious sense is meaningless, philosophies which were born in the Renaissance and the seventeenth century and reached their peak of influence in the nineteenth century. These philosophies have influenced Christian thought much more than they have Islamic thought, where the traditional doctrine of the terminal nature of history of humanity is widely held. An in-depth examination of the question of finality in the context of Christian-Islamic dialogue requires taking into consideration the view of an indefinite linear history in which there can never be any finality except through some unforeseen natural cataclysm and not because of a divine intervention in human history. In earlier centuries, both Christian and Islamic thought had to confront other views of time, including that of cyclic time as expounded by later schools of Greek philosophy, distinct from the traditional view of cosmic cycles found to this day in Hindu doctrines. The modern philosophical challenge is, however, of a different nature and needs to be considered fully in any Christian-Islamic dialogue, especially since so much of Christian thought has been influenced by these modern philosophical ideas during the past two centuries.[4]

III

The next question of considerable theological import in the Christian-Islamic dialogue is that of the meaning and status of sacred scripture in the two respective traditions. A great deal of discussion concerning this issue has already taken place in both camps but much of it has been in the form of soliloquies which fail to address the main issues involved. On the Christian side the status of the Qur'an has been taken to be the same for Muslims as the Bible is for Christianity. Even the meaning of the Qur'anic revelation has been evaluated in the context of Christian theological understanding of revelation as this understanding has been modified and even distorted as a result of the epistemological premises of modern philosophical schools of thought based on rationalism and empiricism. There have been a few Western Christian theologians such as Wilfred C. Smith who have taken the Islamic meaning of sacred scripture as it pertains to the Qur'an seriously, but such figures have been rare. Most Western scholars of Islam have sought to criticize the Islamic understanding of scripture, and many have even gone so far as to claim that for fourteen centuries Muslims have failed to understand how simplistic and naive their understanding of revelation and sacred scripture really is.[5]

Western Christianity's understanding of sacred scripture has itself changed to a large extent during the past two centuries, at least in many of the churches. The application of rationalistic and empirical methods of research and so-called higher criticism have removed the sense of the sacred from the Bible even for many who are still believers, reducing Christian and Jewish sacred scripture also for them—as for the nonbelievers in the West—to either literature or history. These developments are taken by many Christians to be universal and global, like so many other intellectual trends and philosophies that have emanated from the West during the past two centuries and for which their proponents have claimed and still claim universal validity and applicability. Christian students of Islam have then proceeded to apply their own findings, experiences, and methods to Islam, all defined by a particular cultural context, and to teach Muslims what their own sacred scripture really means and what the status and reality of the Qur'an are.

On the Islamic side, Jewish and Christian scriptures have rarely been studied seriously and have been dealt with by many contemporary Muslim thinkers under the category of abrogated texts, *mansūkh*, with which one does not have to bother. Some have in fact dealt with the Bible in a manner that is in sharp contrast to the dignified language of the Qur'an where all sacred scriptures are mentioned with great respect. The long tradition of exegesis and discussion of the meaning of *naskh* or abrogation have rarely been seriously pursued and applied by present-day Muslim scholars dealing with Christian-Islamic dialogue. While many Christian students of the Qur'an seek to impugn the sacrosanct character of the text in Muslim eyes—by comparing the text to that of the Bible, which has been reduced for many in the West to a historical document of human inspiration or of partly divine inspiration interpreted in human terms—most Muslims are happy to discuss the Christian scriptures as simply abrogated or as humanly altered, as is also claimed by so many modernized Christians themselves.

Such attitudes and approaches leave out of consideration the most crucial and essential issues which must be resolved if there is to be better mutual understanding. What is the sense of the sacred as it applies to scripture in the Christian case and in the Muslim perspective? Wherein do they differ? How does the role of the Bible in the Christian perspective resemble and differ from the role of the Qur'an in Islam? These and many other questions need to be addressed more profoundly from both sides. Christians cannot create better understanding of Islam by destroying the sacrosanct nature of the Qur'an through the application of Western methods irrelevant to Islam any more than Muslims can gain a better understanding of Christianity by simply dismissing the Bible as abrogated or distorted by human interventions. Muslims in fact need to know that there are people in the West, both Jewish and Christian, who

hold views concerning sacred scripture which are close to those of Muslims. Regrettably, until recently such groups have in general not been among those interested in Christian-Islamic dialogue.

IV

The fourth question concerns sacred language. The lack of understanding by most Christians of the significance of Arabic as the sacred language of Islam is related directly to the fact that Christianity has no sacred language of its own. Rather, it has several liturgical languages ranging from the Aramaic spoken by Christ and still used in the Christian mass among the Assyrians of Iraq and western Iran to Greek, Latin, Slavic, and even Arabic itself as used by Arab Christians. Not enough theological attention has been paid in Christian circles to the difference between sacred, liturgical, and vernacular languages and their role in the economy of different religious worlds. This has been due partly to the lack of appreciation by followers of one religion of where the sacred is to be found in the other religion, and partly to the difference in the structure and form of the Christian and Islamic revelations.

There is also a lack of parallelism in relation to this issue between Islam and Christianity as a result of the fact that in the present-day context Islam is not strong enough politically, economically and militarily to interfere in the life of the West, Christian or otherwise, while the reverse is obviously not true. Muslims had no influence whatsoever in the decision of the Catholic Church to discontinue the Latin mass, but Christian as well as so-called humanistic and secular missionaries functioning in the Islamic world have played a considerable role over the past century and a half in seeking to limit the spread of Qur'anic Arabic through a thousand and one programs both outside and within the Arab world. These attempts have not gone unnoticed by Muslims and constitute a major stumbling block in Christian-Islamic understanding. Christians who are earnest in their attempt to create better Christian-Islamic relations should put aside political machinations and study the meaning of sacred language as understood not only by Muslims but also by orthodox Jews. It is also important for Muslims to comprehend the role of liturgical languages in Christianity in contrast to the use of Arabic as the sacred language of Islam.

V

Another important question, which is related to how the sacred is situated differently within the structure of the two religions, is that of sacred law in general

and in particular sexuality as governed by sacred law. It is now fairly well known that the very concept of law in Islam differs from what is prevalent in the West and that sacred law in Christianity refers to the spiritual and moral principles enunciated by Christ, whereas the sacred law, *sharī'a* in Islam involves not only principles but also their application to daily life in the form of legal codifications. It is now necessary to bring out further the human, social, and political implications of this theological difference in the understanding of law so as to permit a better mutual understanding between the two communities. Only then can there be a change in the current situation in which many in the West criticize Islam for holding on to rigid laws while times change, as if time rather than God's Will were the ultimate determining factor of human life,[6] while Muslims continue to criticize Christians because they seem to have no immutable laws at all.

No issue in this domain is as controversial as sexuality, considered sacred in Islam and a consequence of original sin by the mainstream of Western Christian theology. For over a millennium Christians have viewed Muslims as hedonists and Muslims have loathed the Christian attitude toward sexuality as unnatural and against God's plan for His creation. Each religion emphasizes one aspect of the complex reality of sexuality, and there seems to be no way of reconciliation save by pointing to the fact that sexuality is a reality with different and contrasting aspects. It can lead the soul to God as well as to dispersion and perdition. Each religion appears to have chosen one aspect of this reality and made it central without neglecting the other aspect completely.[7]

Mutual misunderstanding on this point is further aggravated by the collapse of traditional Christian sexual ethics in the West with all its latent consequences for the whole social fabric. For centuries Christian missionaries compared and contrasted the chaste, monogamous Christian marriage with the "immoral" polygamy of Muslims and depicted the Islamic East in terms of harems and concubines. Today, however, there are some practices in the West, even among still nominal Christians, in comparison to which the wildest depictions of the harem of some pasha in "orientalist" literature appear as tame as the description of monastic scenes. All of this has added further confusion to a major issue which needs to be studied not only sociologically and anthropologically, as has been the case for the most part until now, but also theologically in a dialogical context.

VI

The sixth point of great importance in the Christian-Islamic dialogue that needs to be mentioned here is the life of Christ as seen in the two religions. Paradoxi-

cally, theological christology is not as acute a problem as his historical life. Islamic christology actually resembles certain forms of early Christian christology, such as the Ebionite, which were discussed and rejected by the magesterium and which can now be discussed anew in an intra- as well as interreligious context. The much more difficult problem, if the two religions are taken seriously, is the historical life of Christ.

If one rejects the life of Jesus as recorded in the gospels and accepted in Christian tradition for nearly two thousand years, then there is of course no problem to discuss. Nor would there be an obstacle to Islamic-Christian understanding if the Qur'anic account of the life of Jesus the Son of Mary were to be brushed aside as simply a distorted version which reached Arabia and was then incorporated into the Qur'an. If, however, one takes the claims of the two sides seriously, accepting both the traditional Christian account and the Qur'anic account as true, then there is an obvious problem especially as far as the end of that life is concerned (setting aside for the moment the question of filial relationship and the incarnation). Was Christ crucified or was he taken alive to Heaven and not crucified as asserted by Islam? Here one faces what seems to be an insurmountable obstacle. While this problem may have been placed there providentially to preserve both Christianity and Islam as distinct religions, it is nevertheless an issue which must be confronted squarely and discussed seriously.

Modern epistemologies, based upon empiricism and a one-to-one correspondence between the knowing subject and the known object, would be at a loss to find a way out of this impasse. Traditional epistemologies which take into account both levels of reality of consciousness—that is, the knowing subject and the known object—however, could provide a solution were they to be taken seriously. One could say that such a major cosmic event as the end of the earthly life of Christ could in fact be "seen" and "known" in more than one way, and that it is God's will that Christianity should be given to "see" that end in one way and Islam in another. Be that as it may, it is essential to consider this question theologically and metaphysically in any serious Christian-Islamic dialogue even if the solution proposed cannot be accepted easily by those who find themselves bound to the epistemological premises of rationalism and empiricism.

VII

The seventh and final point to be mentioned here is perhaps the most subtle and elusive one. It concerns that silent and often unnoticed partner in Christian-Islamic dialogue, namely, modernism and, in increasingly important ways, post-

modernism, phenomena which have influenced and continue to influence Christianity much more than Islam. When various religious questions are discussed in a dialogical situation, it is often forgotten that the Christian position is not one of a St. Augustine or St. Bernard or even Martin Luther or John Wesley. Many ideas and practices which are now defended as Christian are the result of antireligious and secularist forces of modernism before which certain Christian thinkers have retreated or which they have joined during the past few centuries. There is in fact no serious dialogue possible without taking this fact into account, especially since for several centuries most Christians have identified themselves completely with modern Western civilization and many continue to do so today.

Muslims are fully aware that Christian missionaries often have tried to defend the superiority of Christianity in many parts of the world with the help of modern medicine and technology, as if the superiority of the message of Christ were proven by the fact that vaccines were developed in France in the nineteenth century. It is only recently with the collapse of the modern world view and the catastrophes brought upon the whole ecosystem of the planet by modern technology that many Christians gradually are beginning to distance themselves from a civilization which was once Christian but can no longer lay claim to such a status. Still it is essential to be aware of the fact that the silent partner, modernism, continues to be present in Christian-Islamic dialogues, whether they be theological or political.

Such awareness is difficult to attain because almost unconsciously many Christians, including a large number of theologians, identify the historical processes which Western civilization has experienced as the inevitable historical process which is to be experienced sooner or later by every other society on the surface of the earth. From this perspective there must be a period of rationalism and humanism, leading to the separation of religion from many domains of life and of various branches of knowledge from theology. In most cases where dialogue is carried out, Western Christian partners tend to reify their own experience and judge Islam accordingly. This attitude creates a particularly difficult barrier to overcome at a time when the Islamic world, representing a civilization as well as a religion, is seeking to assert its own identity. It thereby wants to follow a path different from that followed by the West from its Christian medieval phase to Renaissance humanism, to the scientific revolution, through the secularization of knowledge with the rise of rationalism and empiricism, the Age of Enlightenment, Romanticism, the Age of Ideology, and up to the present century. The very assertion of an Islamic identity by Muslims today thus poses a challenge to Christian-Islamic dialogue based on earlier assumptions of the identification of Christianity with Western civilization including its modern developments and the belief that there is but one historical

process to be followed by all civilizations and human collectivities if they are to survive historically. It is a challenge by no means insurmountable but which must be understood in all its profound dimensions including the acceptance of the presence of this third partner in Christian-Islamic dialogues, a partner which is outwardly silent but which influences deeply the ongoing religious and theological dialogue.

Concluding Remarks

It might appear strange that such basic questions as the nature of God, the soul, eschatology, the status and meaning of creation and the natural order, and many other issues have not been mentioned here. The reason is that although these are basic issues, and in the case of "the theology of nature" a most timely one, they have either been discussed in various sources already or can be resolved fairly easily by turning to the rich theological traditions of the two religions wherein they have been discussed extensively. If these discussions were fully understood, such issues would not pose obstacles to mutual Christian-Islamic understanding.

The seven points mentioned above explicitly, however, are more divisive and require greater theological attention at the present moment in the history of Christian-Islamic dialogue. In drawing the attention of those seriously involved in religious dialogue to these issues, it is my hope that they can be more satisfactorily addressed and treated. Such a treatment would in turn be of great assistance to mutual understanding if one were to respect both the Christian and Islamic positions in the spirit of authentic ecumenism to which Willem Bijlefeld has devoted so much of his scholarly life.

NOTES

1. F. Schuon has dealt with this subject and also the more general questions of the relation between Christianity and Islam in many of his works such as *Christianity/Islam—Essays on Esoteric Ecumenism*, trans. G. Polit (Bloomington, Ind.: World Wisdom Books, 1985); *In the Face of the Absolute* (Bloomington, Ind.: World Wisdom Books, 1989); and his earliest and most significant book in the field of comparative religions, *The Transcendent Unity of Religions* (Wheaton, Ill.: The Theosophical Publishing House, 1984). He has also dealt with the Islamic attitude to Christian doctrine of the nature of the Divinity and vice versa in his *Understanding Islam*, trans. D.M. Matheson (London: Allen & Unwin, 1975). See also "Form and Substance in Religions," in his *Islam and the Perennial Philosophy*, trans. P. Hobson (London: Festival of the World of Islam, 1976), esp. pp. 17 ff., where specific comparisons of the profoundest nature are made between Christian and Islamic doctrines.

See also S.H. Nasr, "The Islamic View of Christianity," in *Christianity Among World Religious*, ed. Hans Küng and Jurgen Moltmann, *Concilium* (1986): 3–12; "The *Philosophia perennis* and the Study of Religion" in his *Need for a Sacred Science* (forthcoming); and *Religion and Religions: The Challenge of Living in a Multi-religious World*, The Loy H. Witherspoon Lecture in Religious Studies (Charlotte: University of North Carolina, 1985).

2. Many Western Islamicists have discussed the Islamic doctrine of the Divine Nature in comparison with Christian teachings without being themselves theologians, while more recently certain Christian theologians such as H. Küng have dealt with the same subject without being Islamicists. But Christian theologian scholars who have been serious Christian thinkers as well as being well versed in Islamic thought have been relatively rare. That is why the work of scholars such as those cited here stands out in any discussion of the theological dimension of the Christian-Islamic dialogue.

3. In the Qur'an (S. 61:6) Jesus says, "O children of Israel! Lo! I am the messenger of Allah unto you, confirming that which was (revealed) before me, in the Torah, and bringing good tidings of a messenger who cometh after me, whose name is the Praised One (Aḥmad)" (Pickthall translation). Aḥmad, the praised one, is *periklytos* in Greek and Muslim commentators through the centuries have believed that the term *paracletos* in the gospels is an alternation of *periklytos* and that Christ referred directly to the Prophet of Islam when he spoke of the coming of the Paraclete. This has been dealt with extensively by H. Corbin in many of his works, especially *En Islam iranien* (Paris: Gallimard, 1970–71), 1: 171, 4: 280. See also M. Lings, *Symbol and Archetype* (Cambridge, U.K.: Quinta Essentia, 1991), pp. 39–40.

4. This is not the place to deal with this complicated issue, which involves the view of history of the Abrahamic religions, possessing certain significant differences among themselves; the traditional doctrine of cycles as found in Hinduism; the ancient doctrine of cosmic cycles as they were separated from their metaphysical basis in antiquity and presented as the simple repetition of cosmic events; and the modern idea of a secularized historical time marching forward either indefinitely or toward some secularized form of religious eschatology as one finds in Marxism. See S.H. Nasr, *Knowledge and the Sacred* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1981) chap. 7, addressing the metaphysical foundation of the rapport between eternity and time and the question of cyclic versus linear conceptions of history and providing in the notes many references to works on this complicated and at the same time crucial subject.

5. Such views have been espoused even by those like Kenneth Cragg who have claimed and in fact shown some sympathy for Islam and Muslims.

6. On this complex and at the same time crucial question see "The *Sharī'a* and Changing Historical Conditions," in S.H. Nasr, *Islamic Life and Thought* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1981), pp. 24–30.

7. This question has been examined in depth by F. Schuon in his discussion on "The Problem of Modern Divergencies," in his *Christianity/Islam*, pp. 109–17.