THEOLOGICAL TRENDS

Christian-Muslim Relations: Assessing the Problems

A new constellation

NO DOUBT, OVER THE PAST DECADES OR SO, especially since the beginning of the 1960s, a new situation has come about in the relations between Christians and Muslims. Both religious communities by now are present practically everywhere on the globe. Both are essentially universal in character and vocation. Both see each human being as a potential member of the community and, hence, invite each and everyone to institutional membership. Even if many Muslims and Christians consider our times as continuing to be shaped by the structures and forces of neo-colonialism and neo-imperialism, it can hardly be denied that both Christians and Muslims live in the post-colonial age.

In colonial times a number of nations who belonged to the area shaped by Christian civilization ruled, by direct or indirect influence, the major part of the Islamic world. This had a decisive influence on the properly religious relations and shaped not least the mutual theological images and assessments. Ideologically and normatively the breakthrough towards a new vision and approach occurred on the Christian side. This shift, backed by the highest authority, found expression in the texts of the Second Vatican Council. They clarify the Church's stand on the dialogue with non-Christian religions and cultures in general and the dialogue between Christians and Muslims more specially. The authoritative texts of the Council were the result and culmination of such prophetic pioneers as Charles de Foucauld, Louis Massignon, W. H. Temple Gairdner and Kenneth Cragg—to mention only some of the outstanding champions for a new vision of and approach to the relations between Christians and Muslims. Thus we read in the Vatican II Declaration on the Relationship of the Church to Non-Christian religions (*Nostra aetate*) about the dialogue with non-Christians and about the end and meaning of religions:

> In our times, when every day men are being drawn closer together and the ties between various people are being multiplied, the Church is giving deeper study to her relationship with non-Christian religions . . .
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> For all peoples comprise a single community, and have a single origin, since God made the whole race of men to dwell on the entire face of the earth. One also is their final goal: God. His

> providence, His manifestations of goodness, and His saving designs extend to all men . . .
>
> Men look to the various religions for answers to those profound mysteries of the human condition which, today even as in olden times, deeply stir the human heart: What is man? What is the meaning and purpose of our life? What is goodness and what is sin? What gives rise to our sorrows and to what intent? Where lies the path of true happiness? What is the truth about death, judgement and retribution beyond the grave? What, finally, is the ultimate and unutterable mystery which engulfs our being, where we come from and where our journey leads us?

Nostra aetate then comments on Islam and on Christian-Muslim relations in more detail:

> Upon the Moslems, too, the Church looks with esteem. They adore one God, living and enduring, merciful and all-powerful, Maker of heaven and earth and Speaker to men. They strive to submit wholeheartedly even to His inscrutable decrees, just as did Abraham, with whom the Islamic faith is pleased to associate itself. Though they do not acknowledge Jesus as God, they revere Him as a prophet. They also honour Mary, His virgin mother; at times they call on her, too, with devotion. In addition they await the day of judgement when God will give each man his due after raising him up. Consequently, they praise the moral life, and give worship to God especially through prayer, almsgiving and fasting.
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> Although in the course of the centuries many quarrels and hostilities have arisen between Christians and Moslems, this most sacred Synod urges all to forget the past and to strive sincerely for mutual understanding. On behalf of all mankind, let them make common cause of safeguarding and fostering social justice, moral values, peace, and freedom.

We may retain here the following points: (1) The character of the basic approach which underlines and puts first what is positive and unites. (2) The omission of such crucial and central themes as the importance of the life and person of Muhammad for the faith and life of the Muslims, and of the ascetical-mystical element in Islam, as well as the passing over of the basic political concepts and ideals of the community of the Muslim believers, the *umma*. (3) The acknowledgement of the painful past, yet without explanations being given that might help towards understanding it.

The first years after Vatican II, on the whole, were marked by optimism and enthusiasm, almost by euphoria—at least among those who took the

teaching and exhortation of the Council seriously and who tried earnestly to translate it into reality. However, in the 1970s, 'fundamentalist' and thereby, in our understanding of the term, politically-oriented tendencies of various colours and shades gained power and prominence in different parts of the Muslim world—as fundamentalism, in characteristically different forms, arose in the world shaped by the Christian tradition.

This affected first of all countries with ancient and venerable Christian minorities as for example Egypt and Syria, but also Lebanon where the Christians constitute almost half of the population, and countries with Christian minorities of more recent origin as for example Pakistan and Sudan, and also the Gulf and Saudi Arabia with the substantial numbers of Christian guest workers there.

The political currents led among these Christians to insecurity and anxious questions, comparable to the questions and anxieties of many Muslim believers and communities in the newly-born western diaspora. The political evolution of the Islamic revolution in Libya and the world-moving drama of the Islamic Revolution in Iran 1978-79 led to further disillusionment, particularly of those who had engaged with great hopes and, perhaps, at times, also naive expectations, in work for the transformation of Christian-Muslim relations. On both sides ancient, deep-rooted prejudices, anxieties and animosities rose to new life.

Clashes and encounters in the past

We will do well to remind ourselves for a moment of the history of the encounter of Western Christianity with Islam. In a first movement, during the seventh century, the Arab-Islamic empire expands east- and westwards. By the time of the Prophet's death in 632 it comprises already most of the whole of the Arab peninsula—at times, by the way, welcomed by the local Christian population which, in many parts, was tired of the despotic rule of the Greek Orthodox Byzantines.

In the year C.E. 711 the Muslim armies cross the straits of Gibraltar. The West Gothic empire falls. In 732 the Battle of Poitiers prevents the spread of Islam northwards beyond Spain and puts a stop to the Arab invasion in that region. In other parts of Western Europe the Islamic conquests continue. In the East the Byzantine empire is continuously menaced, in the West Sicily comes, in the ninth century, under Arab rule.Yet in the western European region Muslim rule and culture took root for a prolonged period of time only in Spain until, during the fifteenth century, the *Reconquista* reconquered the whole of Spain.

Faced with the teaching of Islam Christians first were helpless and embarrassed. As a Christian one considered oneself in possession of the perfect and complete truth; with the death of the last of the apostles the revelation had come to an end. Since then nothing new had or could be added. Thus Islam, with its claim to perfect and supersede Christianity

could only be theologically dismissed and rejected. If one looked more closely at the new religion, it was not in order to know its unique features but in order to discredit it.

From the earliest phase of widespread mutual ignorance stands out the figure of John of Damascus (C.E. 675–753) who owed his knowledge of Islam to personal contacts. Like many other Christians in the early centuries of the Arab empire his father had occupied a high position at the court, as the caliph's personal physician. John of Damascus categorizes Islam as a heresy because Muhammad had been informed in a particular way by an Arian monk. Thus John also explains the fact that although Christ in the Quran is designated as 'Word' and 'Spirit' his divinity is disputed. In short, John considered the doctrine of Muhammad about Christ a Christian heresy of the Arian type. Underlying this view of Islam—which in manifold variations was to find wide acceptance over the centuries—was the obvious tendency to depict the new religion as lacking originality and to stamp it as echoing Christian-heretical teaching and hence as falsification. In this way the claim of the Quran to be revealed scripture of divine origin was to be weakened and invalidated.

However, in addition to polemic and biased legends about Muhammad there were also laid during the Middle Ages the first foundation stones for an intellectual-theological debate with Islam. At the behest of the Abbot of Cluny, Peter the Venerable, the English monk Robert of Ketton produced around C.E. 1143 the first Latin rendering of the Quran and thus provided the basis for a relatively more objective estimation of Islam.

The writing on Islam connected with the missionary and intellectual activity of the newly founded mendicant orders in the thirteenth century had, to a large extent, an apologetical purpose. Ludwig Hagemann writes:

> This new accent resulted from the newly awakening intention, to preach the faith to the Muslims and to provide to the preachers arguments for the truth of the Biblical message since the crusades for the liberation of the Holy Land had not produced the hoped-for results.[1]

Instead of blind polemic one began now to recognize the need for a theological controversy. At the various universities, language schools for Arabic were founded. Thomas Aquinas, the towering scholastic theologian, identified the inadequate knowledge of the Muslims and the lack of a common scriptural basis as serious difficulties in the effort to evolve an adequate apologetic theology. In the work *De ratione fidei* Thomas provided the Muslims with a succinct statement of the Christian faith on the basis of human reason, common to both Christians and Muslims. Ricoldus de Monte Crucis (d. 1320), Raimundus Lullus (1232–1316) and Nicolaus Cusanus (1401–1464), all outstanding pioneers, can only be mentioned here.

During the very year of the Fall of Constantinople (29 May 1453) Nicolaus Cusanus wrote the prophetic work *On the peace of God (De pace fidei)*, a visionary dialogue about the faith among representatives of different religions and ideologies. A few years later he published a critical *Sifting of the Quran (Cribratio Alcorani)*, in 1461. Although these remarkable works do not abandon completely polemics and apologetics, they witness to thorough and intensive study of the Quran and to a search for links between Christianity and Islam.

The Protestant Reformation did not lead to an improvement of the Christian understanding of Islam. Only with the Enlightenment and with the loosening it promoted of the shackles of dogma and tradition, a new phase in Islamic-Christian history began. The painfully experienced plurality, estrangement and even militant antagonism of the various denominations and religions during the post-Reformation period became the stimulus and occasion to search for an all-transcending religion. People believed they had found in reason the all-unifying principle. The idea of tolerance made headway. Gotthold Ephraim Lessing (1729–1781) in his pedagogical drama *Nathan der Weise* answered the question which of the three monotheistic religions was the true one: as gift of God the Father each of the three rings is authentic insofar as the gift must not be discerned theoretically but attributed on the level of practice, in other words, the possessor of the ring must be accepted by God and men, he must prove himself on the level of action. Each of the three rings mirrors the revelation of God.

The great change in the image of Muhammad was effectively initiated on the European continent by Johann Wolfgang Goethe (1749–1832) in his *West-Östlicher Diwan* and, under his influence, in the Anglo-Saxon world, by the Scottish romantic Thomas Carlyle (1795-1881). In an essay in his book *On heroes* he saw Muhammad as Prophet and literary genius in the sense that he had translated in a unique and effective way the Spirit of the universe and of its sacred, eternal laws into the word of the Quran and thus into history. It is the merit of scholars like Ignaz Goldziher and Theodor Nöldecke to have founded during the decades preceding and following the turn of the century the scholarly discipline of Islamology with its historico-critical method of text interpretation. However much many of the leading scholars of Islam may have been shaped by the general outlook and the political constellation of the nineteenth and early twentieth century, through the method and the results of their researches they contributed significantly to an objective knowledge and true understanding of the development and of the abiding, essential features of Islam.

Official statements of the Church since Vatican II

The statements of the Council we quoted have been taken up by later popes in leading statements, often made in addresses to groups during

their countless pastoral visits in various parts of the world. In Mainz in Germany in 1980 Pope John Paul II addressed the Muslim guest workers there in these words:

> With upright hearts you have carried your faith from your homeland into another land. If you pray here now to God as your Creator and Lord, then you, too, belong to that immense band of pilgrims who from the days of Abraham onwards, again and again have set out from home in order to search the true God and to find Him. When you are not afraid to pray in public, you give an example to us Christians which deserves our respect. Practise your faith in foreign lands, too, and do not allow it to be misused by any human or political interest.[2]

From the relevant papal statements taken together, the following themes emerge: the submission to the living and merciful God, so clearly preached by the Quran (Sura 29,46: 'Our God and your God are one, and to Him we submit') and acknowledged by the Church (*Lumen gentium*, no 16: 'They adore God') constitutes a special 'spiritual bond', a true brother- and sisterhood. We speak here of faith in the One God, the Creator, the All-mighty and All-merciful Lord of history who has spoken to humankind through the prophets and will judge all men and women on the Last Day. Based on the shared faith in God is a similar view of the human person: he or she is God's creation, 'servant of God', steward of the gifts of God; he is subject to the law of good and evil and called to come near to God. For Christians and Muslims the basis of ethics lies in the tension between the personal God and humankind as a creature of God. For both the objective of life consists in the service of the human person and the glorification of God. In the same way both, Christians and Muslims, are under the imperative of justice and mercy as well as of commitment to truth and the peace from God. Hence John Paul II stated in Ankara in 1979, at the very time of the Islamic Revolution of Iran:

> My brothers! When I think of this spiritual patrimony and the value it has for man and for society, of its capacity to offer, especially to the young, a direction of life, to fill the void left by materialism, to give a sure foundation to social and juridical organization, I wonder whether it is not urgent, precisely today when Christians and Muslims have entered a new period of history, to recognize and develop the spiritual bonds which unite us in order to 'safeguard and foster on behalf of all mankind—as the Council invites us to do—social justice, moral values, peace and freedom'.[3]

Essentially the same message John Paul II gave on 19 August 1985 to an audience of 80,000 young Arab Muslims in Casablanca stadium in Morocco. Again he stressed how necessary dialogue between Christians and Muslims is for the whole world. Dialogue should lead to a common witness to spiritual values in a world increasingly secularized and often atheistic. It is the mission of Christian and Muslim youth to 'build this new world in accordance with God's plan'. In a similar way, and often in ventures of dialogue and research shared with the Roman Catholic Church, the World Council of Churches and its member Churches have approached the Muslim world.

The reaction of the Muslims

But how do the Muslims react to these initiatives of the Church? The Church has come nearer to Islam, can one speak of a comparable effort on the part of Islam? Pietro Rossano, for many years the secretary of the Vatican Secretariat for Relations with Non-Christians (recently renamed: Pontifical Council for Dialogue with Other Religions), states:

> The answer to this question is neither easy nor simple. One has to distinguish between individuals and institutions, between intellectuals and the people, between Islam in a minority situation as in Europe or, say, the Republic of India, and Islam in a majority situation as in all Islamic states . . ., especially between the different sects and the different movements and their corresponding basic religious mentalities.

On the level of the 'dialogue of life' as it is commonly called, i.e. in the every-day living together as Christians and Muslims, wherever steps have been taken, we notice a whole range of positive and negative attitudes. We could give here countless examples concerning India and other, totally different regions: mutual respect and the readiness to share; a palpable increase in neighbourliness which finds expression in the exchange of gifts and good wishes, e.g. on the occasion of the important feasts; help in the area of education; getting to know the ways of worship of others and of their motivation for religious practice. At the same time negative attitudes have manifested themselves: repeatedly a false sense of security; distrust; rejection of any kind of pluralism; jealousy and fear of success of the other; a sectarian outlook which does not allow the other to be of different opinion; rivalry; proselytism and one-sided demands. A closer look at the mutual relations of Christian and Muslim believers shows how difficult it is for both sides to renounce the striving for strength and superiority in numbers and to make the necessary inner effort towards viewing the other understandingly and without bias and to treat the partner with the same fairness as the members of one's own religious group.

With regard to organized, official religious dialogue we note first that gestures of surprising openness and cordiality have taken place on the part of individuals, institutions and states. Many encounters on this level have and continue to occur on Muslim initiative. True, for some years now these encounters have noticeably decreased. For some time now Islam shows in many countries a more self-confident and somewhat harsher face and is concerned about maintaining identity, power and political influence. Two fairly recent Islamic documents—the 'Islamic Universal Declaration' on 12 April 1980 and the 'Islamic Declaration of Human Rights' of 19 September 1981 certainly do not display a markedly open attitude towards Christian positions and concerns.

Islam in its relations with the Church seems to be torn between feelings of attraction and aversion. The Church impresses and attracts by its unity and organization, by its educational and social services, by the weight of its moral and diplomatic interventions which Islamic countries and organizations at times wish to be made use of to their advantage. Muslims also admire the Church's social and charitable work.

Yet in more recent years Islamic rejection of the Church and Christianity seems to have become more prominent and prevalent again. In the Islamic world the Church is often identified and condemned together with the West: both are held responsible for the crusades, for colonialism, capitalism, Marxism and the widespread breakdown of the family and of morality in general. Christianity is accused of preaching a too idealistic moral doctrine which ultimately is to be held responsible for the evident decline in moral standards and the decadence not only of the West but also of the westernized sections of the Islamic societies. The problems of family breakdown, sexualism, alcoholism and drug addiction, for example, are adjudged as obvious signs of such decay.

In a special way Islam resents the Christian missionary activities in Muslim countries. They are a thorn in Islam's flesh notwithstanding the fact that Islam on its part promotes all over the world organized mission activities *(da'wa)* without any scruples or feelings of compunction. Also, the Church is repeatedly criticized for being in agreement with Israel and Zionism. In short, the Muslims gladly take notice of the conciliar and post-conciliar attitude of the Church, but on the whole they are far removed from turning openheartedly towards a dialogue with Christianity.

One reason for this sobering fact surely is the difference between the two partners as to general social background and historical experience and the ensuing difference in their respective theological consciousness. What the Tunisian scholar Muhammad Talbi had to say on this point, almost twenty years ago, about the 'disparity between those taking part in dialogue', remains very largely true. In the Islamic world a theology continues to be taught the evolution of which practically came to an end in the twelfth century C.E. Hence the Islamic community counts only a

very small number of scholars that can be considered truly competent Christianologists or Occidentalists.

The deeper, underlying difficulties in Christian-Muslim dialogue

And yet, the question remains: given such basic theological correspondences as for example the faith in the God of Abraham; the view of the human person as created by God; the acceptance of a divinely revealed Law; the foundation of society upon divine order and the expectation of an eternal retribution—why does there seem to exist for Islam this enormous difficulty to open itself to the dialogue offered by the Church? Are these beliefs—fundamental to both religions—not all based on the Quran and do they not thus precede all the differences of Islamic sects of juridical-theological schools?

The true cause seems to be this: the great religious principles, common to Christianity and Islam, and their ethico-social implications in daily life are not understood and interpreted in the same way. This is so because the two religions have different religious roots: Jesus of Nazareth and Muhammad of Mecca. The same could be said of the Jewish religion with regard to Moses. Moreover, the whole religious reality of Christianity is permeated by the historical person of Jesus as mirrored in the faith of the gospels and the New Testament writings. Or, to put it differently, just as Christian faith and practice again and again have to take as a paradigm Jesus's life and teaching and ultimately the mystery of his passion, death and resurrection, in a comparable way the reality of Islamic doctrine of faith and religious practice is shaped by the life and teaching of Muhammad as perceived in the light of the faith in the Quranic revelation. The basic Muslim paradigm is determined by Muhammad's own distinct character and career, which is deeply marked by his emigration from Mecca (*hijra*) and political achievement in Medina.

So we have the absolute and purely transcendent God of the Islamic faith on the one side and the one-and-three personal God of self-communication of the Christian faith on the other. The Holy Law (*shari'a*) of Islam, revelatory and all-encompassing in character, contrasts with the Christian teaching of unconditional service of neighbour,which breaks the old Law and establishes the 'new Law of the Spirit'. In Islam, man and woman as 'servants' or as 'vicegerents' of God are called to be obedient to the will of God as it is believed to have been definitively revealed in the Quran, whereas the Christian faith conceives of man and woman as the images of God, called to be adopted as children of God in Christ, in the Spirit.

In Islam human rights are viewed as dictated and sealed by the *shari'a* whereas Christian doctrine teaches that they are implanted in each and every human being. The Islamic ideal or utopia of one society, to be united and guided by a theocratically-conceived Law, markedly differs

from the modern Christian concept according to which society is shaped by a distinction between the religious and political spheres of life. The ever-new experience of such deep-rooted differences in basic beliefs and attitudes as these puts the readiness to go out to one another in dialogue and collaboration to a serious test.

The common path into dialogue and shared service of the wider community

It is not surprising then, that some tend to confine the scope for dialogue to the secular, strictly human dimensions of life; whereas others declare dialogue with Muslims as simply impossible from the outset. But today, after the event of Vatican II and in the light of the example set by Popes Paul VI and John Paul II in applying the Council's teaching on Christian-Muslim relations, it does not seem any longer legitimate for Christians to separate themselves spiritually from Islam.

The spirit of the gospel summons Christians to view Muslims with respect and sympathy and to try to make out patiently all the possible ways of knowing them better, establishing contacts with them as believers, promoting spiritual communion in prayer and collaborating with them in promoting the common good. Thus they will be instruments of the 'Kingdom' which is at work everywhere, in the true 'seekers' of all cultures and religions, especially in those belonging to the Abrahamic family of monotheistic faiths. However, criticism as well as reconciliation is part of the mutual responsibility of dialogue, and Christians must voice dissent wherever, in the name of Islam, political aims and legislative measures are promoted which contradict the dignity and equal rights of the human person.

To practise dialogue with other believers does not mean that we renounce being what we are and expressing what we try to live. It means to welcome the gift of God revealed in Jesus Christ in the Church and to make every effort to translate this gift into life, aware of the fact that others believe, pray and live their relationship with God in a manner that is similar as well as different from our own approach. The more we understand and recognize the other as he is and wishes to be, the more we can 'give an account of the hope that is in us, with courtesy and respect and a clear conscience' (1 Pet 3,15). 'These words of the Apostle', John Paul II said in Ankara on 30 November 1979, 'are the golden rule for the relations and contacts which the Christian should have with the believers of the other religions.'[4]

However, given the historical burden, the social tensions and the international context of Christian-Muslim relations, we all have a long way to go until the basic orientations the Church has spelled out over the past decade are translated into the reality of shared everyday life. We agree with Muhammad Talbi of Tunis:

> The dialogue is a drawn-out test of patience. To engage in dialogue does not mean necessarily to look for solutions or, even, to find

by all possible means a consensus. The scope of dialogue would rather seem to be to contribute clarity and openness to the debate and to enable participants to grow beyond themselves instead of basking in isolation and false security. The road to the realm of light will be long and God has chosen to shroud it in the veil of mystery.[5]

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NOTES

[1] Ludwig Hagemann, *Christentum und Islam zwischen Konfrontation und Begegnung* (Altenberge, 1983), p 74.
[2] *Papst Johannes Paul II in Deutschland* (Bonn, 1980), p 95.
[3] *CIBEDO-Dokumentation* (Frankfurt a.M.), Nr. 18/19 (April/August, 1983), p 15.
[4] *Ibid.*
[5] Muhammad Talbi, *Islam und Dialog*, in *CIBEDO-Dokumentation*, Nr. 10 (März 1980), p 7.