

ISLAM *FACE-À-FACE* CHRISTIANITY

Anthony O'Mahony

THE IRAQI JESUIT, PAUL NWYIA (1925-1980), grew up in the northern, Kurdish part of Iraq, in a mixed Christian-Muslim village. Reflecting on his childhood, he remembered his first contacts with Muslims:

Searching far back in my memory, I rediscovered my first impression of my contacts with Muslims. Those contacts were frequent, for many Muslim religious leaders used to visit my family. But despite the real friendship on which these relations were based, I had a strong feeling that, in the eyes of these Muslim friends, we were and remained *strangers*: people who because of their religion were fundamentally different. What awakened this feeling in me was the superior attitude which these friends adopted, an attitude that only their religion could justify. They regarded themselves as followers of the true religion and manifested this conviction with such self-satisfaction and such contempt for others that they were the living image of those whom the Gospel describes as men with pharisaical traits. Many of them were very brave and their attitude towards us was often only unconsciously superior, but we always remained strangers in relation to them. This fact did not bother them; on the contrary, it made them feel that they were all the more faithful to their religion.¹

Even as a child, Nwyia was sensitive to the tensions between Christianity and Islam. Not only is Islam different from Christianity; it sees itself as positively abrogating Christianity. Muhammad is the 'seal of prophets'; the revelation accorded to him supersedes all that came before.

¹ Paul Nwyia, 'Pour mieux connaître l'Islam', *Lumen vitae*, 30 (1975), pp. 159-171, here pp. 159-160.

Islam and the Scriptures of Judaism and Christianity

Christianity nevertheless has an important, if negative, role in Muslim self-understanding. Muslim writers have always been quick to claim that Islam's abrogation of Christianity mirrors the Christian abrogation of Judaism. A Christian might respond that this is unfair, since Christianity understands itself not as abolishing Judaism but fulfilling it. The Christian tradition continues to acknowledge Judaism as a source of its identity; it at least claims to be constantly revisiting Judaism, and it continues to use—in its own fashion—the Hebrew Scriptures. Islam, by contrast, sees itself as the restoration of what Judaism and Christianity would have been, had they not become corrupted, especially with regard to their Scriptures.²

Within the long history of polemics between Muslims and Christians, the most persistent Christian response to the assertion of abrogation has been a straightforward rejection of how Muslims understand Christianity. Christian apologists have repeatedly insisted that the Qur'anic and post-Qur'anic comprehension of Christian doctrine is seriously flawed. The conflict centres on three issues: the reality of Jesus' crucifixion and death; the doctrine of the incarnation; and the Christian understanding of God as Trinity. The Qur'anic accounts of all three of these, as well as subsequent interpretations and elaborations, stand in sharp contrast with mainstream Christian self-understanding. Conversely, both Jews and Christians questioned Muhammad's prophetic status. This led Muslims to develop traditions of argument in vindication of Muhammad as prophet, and Christians in turn responded by articulating their own version of the 'signs of prophecy'.³

Muslims assert the superiority of the Qur'an by identifying it with the divine Word (*Kalima*). This Word is a divine attribute subsisting in God but distinct from God's essence. God is therefore the unique, total

² Frederick Mathewson Denny, 'Corruption', in *Encyclopedia of the Qur'an*, edited by Jane Dammen McAuliffe (Leiden: Brill, 2001), pp. 439-440. On the Qur'an as Scripture and the Qur'anic view of religion, see the work of Guy Monnot, for example: 'Le corpus coranique', in *La formation des canons scripturaires*, edited by Michel Tardieu (Paris: Editions du Cerf, 1993), pp. 61-73; and 'L'idée de religion et son évolution dans le Coran', in *The Notion of Religion in Comparative Research*, edited by Ugo Bianchi (Rome: 'L'Erma' di Brettschneider, 1994), pp. 97-102.

³ Jane Dammen McAuliffe, 'The Abrogation of Judaism and Christianity in Islam: A Christian Perspective', *Concilium*, 1994/3, pp.116-123, esp. pp. 117-118; Sarah Strouwsma, 'The Signs of Prophecy: the Emergence and Early Development of a Theme in Arabic Theological Literature', *Harvard Theological Review*, 78 (1985), pp. 101-114, esp. p. 114.

and exclusive cause of Scripture, and the Qur'an must be considered to be *uncreated*. Consequently, the Prophet is simply the spokesman who hands on 'the supernatural dictation'⁴ he receives from God.

However, qualifications must be made. Although Islam claims that Judaism and Christianity are superseded as independent traditions, it nevertheless sees the revelations accorded to Moses, the *Tawrat*, and Jesus, the *Injil*, as something like proto-Qur'ans: compilations of God's direct verbal revelation to Moses and Jesus. Consequently, it matters greatly how reliably or unreliably these traditions have been transmitted. And Muslims claim that the Jewish and Christian Scriptures are, in their present form, both textually and semantically corrupt. What Jews and Christians now recognise as their scriptures do not coincide with the Qur'an, God's full and final revelation. Since God's word does not change, this lack of consonance must result from more or less intentional alteration or corruption of the text. When Muslim theologians and apologists speak of Jewish and Christian corruption, therefore, they rarely use it to justify a wholesale rejection of either the Hebrew Bible or the Christian gospel.⁵ Rather, they balance assertions about corruption with an insistence that both Testaments prefigure the advent of Muhammad and the success of his mission.



'There is no God but Allah and Muhammad is Allah's Messenger.'

⁴ This phrase comes from the work of the eminent French Islamicist and mystic, Louis Massignon (1883-1962).

⁵ David Thomas, 'The Bible in Early Muslim Anti-Christian Polemic', *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations*, 7 (1996), pp. 29-38; Jane Dammen McAuliffe, 'The Qur'anic Context of Muslim Biblical Scholarship', *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations*, 7 (1996), pp. 141-158.

Islam: God's Only Revelation

Christian accounts of Islam vary, but they nevertheless generally draw attention to how Islam is expressive of a kind of natural law, given with the creation. Louis Massignon, for example, writes as follows:

The goal of Qur'anic revelation is not to expose or justify supernatural facts hitherto unknown, but rather, through a reminder issued in God's name, to enable the understanding to rediscover sanctions both temporal and eternal: the natural religion, the basic law, the simple worship that God has prescribed for all time, practised by Adam, Abraham and all the prophets in the same forms.⁶

Jacques Jomier, another great Catholic Islamicist, complements this account:

Islam is a natural religion in which the religious instinct which is present in the heart of each person is protected by a way of life, with obligations and religious observations imposed in the name of One who is, for the Muslim, the Qur'an revelation. It is a patriarchal religion, spiritually pre-dating the biblical promise made by God to Abraham, but which conserves the episodes of the life of the Patriarch involving his struggle against his fathers' idols and his voluntary submission to God, even his sacrifice of his own son. Islam re-presents Abraham (Father of the Prophets) as its great ancestor.⁷

For Muslims, Islam is not simply God's final revelation but also God's first.⁸ Both cosmically and individually, human beings are born in submission (*islam*) to God. An important Qur'anic passage vividly depicts the primordial covenant which God forged with the creation:

When your Lord brought forth their own behalf, saying, 'Am I not your Lord?' they said, 'Most certainly; we have testified'.

⁶Louis Massignon, *Examen du "Présent de l'Homme Lettré" par Abdallah ibn Torjoman* (Rome : Pontifical Institute of Arabic and Islamic Studies of Rome, 1992), p. 38.

⁷Jacques Jomier, 'Le Coran et la Liturgie dans l'Islam', *La Maison-Dieu*, 190 (1992), pp. 121-127, here p.121.

⁸Guy Monnot, 'Ce que l'Islam n'est pas', *Communio* (French edition), 16 (1991), pp. 28-41.

The verse closes with God's explanation that he had forged this covenant with humankind lest 'you say on the Day of resurrection that "of this we were unaware"'.⁹ Thus other religious identities are seen as conflicting with a fundamental state of *islam*, a primordial Muslim identity.

A saying ascribed to Muhammad runs as follows: 'Every child is born a Muslim, but his father makes him a Jew, Christian or Mgian/Zoroastrian'. Like all humans, therefore, Moses and Jesus were Muslim. Further, as prophets, they were privileged with a special divine covenant:

When We took their covenant from the prophets, from you [Muhammad] and from Noah, Abraham, Moses and Jesus, son of Mary, We took from them a binding covenant.¹⁰ (33:7)

God sent these prophets and others to particular peoples so that they might remind their listeners of the primordial covenant, and summon them to *islam* (submission). While Judaism and Christianity tend to think of prophets as inspired, classic Islamic thought has functioned with what might be termed a 'doctrine of dictation', with the human agent being far more transparent. Prophets receive and transmit God's very words; Muslims revere Jesus, Moses, and their prophetic predecessors as faithful conduits of God's invariant message to humanity. Though Muslims do minimally recognise the importance of historical context, the Islamic notion of prophet-as-divine-mouthpiece is essentially atemporal. God's words and God's will can never change: the message conveyed by Abraham or Moses or Jesus or Muhammad has an inherent and inviolable continuity. Muslims believe that these earlier messages as originally proclaimed were perfectly consonant with the Qur'an. It was, as we have already seen, in order to account for the evident inconsistency between these texts in the forms now available that Muslim apologists and theologians developed a doctrine of scriptural corruption. And this doctrine supports a wider vision of Islam abrogating both Judaism and Christianity.

⁹ *Surah 7*, 172. Translations from the Qu'ran are based on A. J. Arberry, *The Koran Interpreted* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983).

¹⁰ Cited in McAuliffe, 'The Abrogation of Judaism and Christianity in Islam', p. 117.

Doctrinal Differences

The historic break caused by Islam did not influence in the slightest the internal development of Christianity. One can study that development today as a completely autonomous whole, as though Islam did not exist. Christianity is wholly intelligible, to the extent to which it is intelligible at all, without any reference to Islam. By contrast, Islam is not so intelligible unless reference is made to Christianity.

Historically and theologically, however, Christianity inevitably challenges and disturbs Islam; and Islam inevitably challenges and disturbs Christianity. Neither religion can ignore the other, happy in its own conviction and simplicity.

A Christian is disturbed and challenged by the Islamic refutation of Christianity: that the Holy Trinity is *shirk* (polytheistic blasphemy); that the crucifixion was only an apparition; that the stories about Christ and his mother in the Qur'an are the authentic ones, rather than those in the four Gospels. Similarly, a Muslim must be disturbed by what Christianity at least implies about Islam: that Christianity has not in fact been abrogated by Islam; that God became flesh in Jesus of Nazareth without ceasing to be God; that this same Jesus actually died and rose from the dead on the third day; that the Church, as a distinct historic body, makes absolute claims about itself. And this mutuality of disturbance is not confined to the order of theory: it expresses itself in the growth of distinct historic communities, with conflicting norms, laws and mores.

The central question is whether the Word of God is literally a word, or rather a living person. On this issue, Christianity and Islam frankly diverge, and all the other differences relate to this one. Whatever affinities between Christianity and Islam there may be, arising from their common links with Abraham, this question about the nature of revelation remains. Any dialogue which avoids it remains sentimental and superficial. The Qur'an has the highest respect for Christ and his mother, and speaks of him as a Word of God; nevertheless, the authoritative Muslim doctrine is that *the* Word of God is the Qur'an itself.

Building Bridges

Paul Nwyia may have sensed the conflict between Islam and Christianity even as a child. But he was also aware, even then, that a Christian could not rest content with this situation. The passage quoted at the beginning continues as follows:

One could easily have been tempted to react like them, to regard them as 'strangers', to transform the difference into indifference, or to meet their contempt with even deeper scorn. But this is precisely what my faith forbade me to do. To react thus would have meant doing away with the difference and, by that very fact, disowning my Christian identity. Hence I came to ask myself: 'How can I turn these strangers into the *neighbours* of which the Gospel speaks? How can I resist the temptation to react as they do, so that my way of seeing them may be different from the way they look upon me?' I understood that to achieve this I would have to discover, beyond the image they projected of themselves, certain things in them or in their religion which could help me regard them as neighbours whom one must love.

This quest for understanding and for the love of neighbour led Nwyia to study and reflect on Islam throughout his life until his tragic death in 1980. Trained in France by Louis Massignon, Nwyia became a widely renowned and celebrated scholar in the field of Islamic mysticism. His contributions included an edition of letters on spiritual direction by Ibn 'Abbad of Ronda, who was chiefly responsible for putting forward an understanding of Sufism as a spirituality available to all who put their trust in God. He also wrote on Islamic mysticism and Christianity, with special reference to the *Spiritual Exercises* of Ignatius of Loyola; and on the monastic character of early Muslim spiritual life.¹¹

Nwyia reflected on the different ways in which Islam characterized the religious other, and what these revealed about Muslim self-understanding. For Nwyia, Islam's relations with other faiths are shaped by the tension between two antagonistic principles: mutabilities and immutability, between the diverse, changing forms in which religious commitment is lived on the one hand, and on the other the unchangingness of God. This tension has been operative since Islam began; it reflects the complex attitude of Muhammad towards the religious other: polytheists, Jews and Christians. Islam is faced with a

¹¹ See Nwyia's second edition of Ibn 'Abbad de Ronda, *Lettres de direction spirituelle (ar-Rasa'il as-sugrā)*, (Beirut: Dar el-Machreq, 1974), and also the following from among his numerous academic studies: 'Ibn 'Abbad de Ronda et Jean de la Croix: à propos d'une hypothèse d'Asin Palacios', *Al-Andalus*, 22 (1957), pp. 113-130; *Ibn-'Abbad de Ronda (1332-1390): un mystique prédicateur à la Qarawiyyin de Fès* (Beirut: Catholic Press, 1961); *Exégèse coranique et langage mystique: nouvel essai sur le lexique technique des mystiques musulmans* (Beirut: Dal el-Machreq, 1970).

crucial dilemma of how to find ‘the synthesis between historical and spiritual truth’.¹²

Within the Qu’ran, there are also discussions of how Muslims should relate to Christianity. These vary in tone from unequivocal rejection to ambivalent co-existence. We find both warnings to Muslims not to make friends with Christians, as well as more positive calls for interreligious understanding. A dictum in the Qu’ran placed on Muhammad’s lips, ‘to you your religion and to me mine’ (109:6), can be interpreted in both these ways. It might suggest a gentle tolerance, honouring the diversities of culture and experience. Alternatively, it could be taken as expressing an exasperated weariness with how the differences in belief and ritual can never be resolved.¹³

Christianity’s encounter with Judaism following the *Shoah* raises questions touching very deeply on the core identity of the Christian. Similar questions arise from its encounter with Islam, particularly as regards mission. The Jesuit Islamicists, Henri Sanson and Christian Troll, have suggested that Christians should reflect on their missionary vocation towards Muslims ‘in the mirror of Islam’. This means that we should take into account at every step the fact that our Muslim partners are convinced in faith that they have a missionary vocation towards us, that they too are called, individually and collectively, to witness to the Truth. Only in this light can we discern with any sensitivity what a Christian missionary vocation towards Islam might amount to, and how it might appropriately be lived out.¹⁴

Challenges to Islam

There are also tensions within Islam that may serve as a stimulus for Moslems to move beyond the impasse I have been sketching out. The German scholar, Josef van Ess, has documented three forms that sceptical challenges have taken in Islamic tradition. The first of these is theoretical and philosophical: it draws on the sceptical tradition in Hellenism. The second arises from doctrinal tensions and difficulties

¹² Paul Nwyia, ‘Mutabilités et immutabilité en Islam’, *Recherches de sciences religieuses*, 63 (1975), pp. 197-213.

¹³ Kenneth Cragg, ‘Islam and Other Faiths’, *Studia missionalia*, 42 (1993), pp. 257-270, here p. 257.

¹⁴ Henri Sanson: *Dialogue intérieur avec l’Islam* (Paris: Centurion, 1990); Christian W. Troll: ‘Witness Meets Witness: The Church’s Mission in the Context of the Worldwide Encounter of Christian and Muslim Believers Today’, *Vidyajyoti Journal of Theological Reflection*, 62/3 (March 1998), pp. 152-171, reprinted in *Encounters*, 4/1 (March 1998), pp. 15-34.

internal to Islam. The third is generated by practical and political concerns.¹⁵ Scepticism, says van Ess, 'is something like the salt in the soup'; it makes theology interesting. Dogmatic speculation, of the kind put forward by Islam's great systematic thinker, al-Ghazzali, is 'like a game of chess' that becomes interesting only when there is an opponent, 'when the devil is playing on the other side'.

Van Ess speculates that Islam might have improved had the sceptical tradition continued into more recent times. He brings out the positive contribution made by scepticism to Islam. Islamic scepticism arose within the 'pluralistic outlook of a multiform society'. Islam was being challenged by the close proximity of other faith-systems, and was only one among many vigorous traditions: Christianity, Judaism, Zoroastrianism, Manichaeism, and various forms of religious Hellenism. Scepticism was a stimulus to Islam's health and progress: 'Islam as well as Christianity ought to be glad about a time full of spiritual plurality, a time like ours'. Contemporary pluralism is challenging Islam almost to breaking point. When it was more or less alone or apart, it did not need to ask fundamental questions about itself: it could take itself for granted. Where it was the dominant cultural and religious force, it could dismiss minority traditions out of hand. Today such attitudes are impossible. Today, Islam finds itself neither alone nor apart nor dominant. Moreover, like Christianity, it must also face the profound questions raised by modern intellectual discoveries, technological changes, and socio-economic globalization.

However, one factor that makes it difficult for Muslims to face these questions, and for non-Muslims to understand the world of Islam, is that there is nothing like the Church in Islam. There is no worldwide organization with a strong sense of its own historical continuity, speaking and teaching authoritatively about itself. For all its fragmentariness, there is a Christian Church; there is no such organized, unitary, historical tradition in the world of Islam. 'Christianity' means something more than the physical or cultural space occupied by Christians; it means primarily the Kingdom of Christ, manifest in his Body, the Church. The word 'Islam' can only mean the world of Muslims.

¹⁵ Josef van Ess, 'Scepticism in Islamic Religious Thought', in *God and Man in Contemporary Islamic Thought*, edited by Charles Malik (Beirut: American University of Beirut, 1972), pp. 83-98.

In this context, van Ess's observation about the positive role of scepticism may need to be qualified. Scepticism can act as 'the salt in the soup' only if the soup is there to be tasted, out of a definite, secure vessel. When 'the salt of doubt' is sprinkled over the Christian world, when 'the devil' tantalizes and undermines or even checkmates Christian thought, the Church can sooner or later address the issue in an ecumenical council, a forum where the matter is considered and then somehow settled by an authoritative pronouncement. There is no such possibility in Islam.

If a Muslim thinker or theologian, or even a whole Islamic state, seeks to move Islam forward by asking fundamental questions, the question arises whether the result is still authentically Muslim. Because there is no central teaching authority in Islam, there is no possible answer to this question. There is, therefore, a permanent ambiguity about the nature of Islam. Nevertheless, Islam still needs to ask itself fundamental questions regarding its nature and origins, and not let these questions be asked only by people outside Islam. Can it still be seriously and responsibly maintained that the Hebrew Scriptures have been falsified by the Jews and the Christians, and moreover that the original gospel is lost, corrupted by the Christians? Facing this sceptical challenge may help Islam reconcile, in all truth and humility, the Qur'an with the Bible.¹⁶

The Muslim claim that Islam constitutes 'the essence of truth and religion' implies a sharp judgment on other religions. It is saying, for instance, that Christianity's true essence is found in Islam. But if that is so, then normal Christians ought to find themselves wholly at home in Islam. This is manifestly not the case. Perhaps Islam needs to ask itself some sceptical questions and move forward.

Agenda for the Future

Several decades ago, the Lebanese Christian thinker Charles Malik, a former President of the General Assembly of the United Nations, who helped draft the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, set out an

¹⁶ For further explorations of this theme, see Mohamed Talbi, 'For Dialogue Between All Religions', in *Muslim-Jewish Encounters: Intellectual Traditions and Modern Politics*, edited by Ronald L. Nettle and Suha Taji-Farouki (Amsterdam: Harwood Academic, 1998), pp. 171-199; and Ronald L. Nettle, 'A Post-Colonial Encounter of Traditions: Muhammad Sa'id Al-Ashmawi on Islam and Judaism', in *Medieval and Modern Perspectives on Muslim-Jewish Relations*, edited by Ronald L. Nettle (Luxembourg: Harwood Academic, 1995), pp. 174-185.

agenda for ongoing Christian-Muslim encounter. The list of tasks which he gives is still worth reading.

One set of tasks centres on the sacred texts: how and why the Bible and the Qur'an were each formed; the intentions of the Bible and the intention of the Qur'an; the difference in their contents; why Muslims never read the Bible, whereas Christianity has fully incorporated the Old Testament into its theology and liturgy; how revelation is understood both in the foundational texts of the two religions and in subsequent tradition. Then there is the issue, already mentioned, about the word of God: in Christianity the Word is a person, while in Islam it is literally a word. A further set of issues centres on Muhammad's limited knowledge of Christianity. Must Muhammad's objectively deficient understanding be permanently binding on Islam, or can this knowledge be supplemented and corrected today by a fuller awareness of what Christianity is? It is worth noting, too, that the temporal and spiritual orders tend to be separated in Christian thought, whereas Islam makes no such separation.¹⁷

Malik's list, here quoted only selectively, brings home how wide the differences are between Christianity and Islam: a Christian committed to dialogue can only think of Jacques Maritain's dictum, *distinguer pour unir*. Moreover, these questions touch on the very identity of Islam, since Islam's self-understanding essentially refers to how it abrogates or supersedes Christianity. Even though, then, Islam may traditionally have set itself in confrontation with Christianity, it must face questions about its own identity that it cannot settle without involving authoritative representatives of Christianity. Perhaps, therefore, Islam's own internal tensions may lead it eventually to move forward. If so, the work of pioneers such as Paul Nwyia will not have been in vain.

Anthony O'Mahony is a member of the Centre for Christianity and Interreligious Dialogue at Heythrop College, University of London. His specialist research interests are in Islam, Muslim-Christian relations, Christianity in the Middle East, and the religious and political history of Jerusalem.

¹⁷ Charles Malik, 'Introduction', to his *God and Man in Contemporary Islamic Thought*, pp. 98-99.