

Islam and Christianity

I. *On Muhammad*

Introduction

Let us face reality: Muslims and Christians are living together in your country, the Philippines, and in my country, Indonesia. But we don't know each other very well. This is not in accordance with the wishes of Vatican II which urges Muslims and Christians (I quote) "that a sincere effort be made to achieve mutual understanding" and this is not only for their own benefit, but (I quote again) "for the benefit of all men, let them *together* preserve and promote peace, liberty, social justice and moral values" (Vat. II *Nostra Aetate*, no. 3).

Together preserving and promoting peace, liberty, social justice and moral values means: cooperation in mutual understanding. Such a cooperation, however, is only possible between people who are willing to accept each other not only *as they are*: with all their faults and shortcomings, but who are also willing to accept each other *as they like to be*, with all their good endeavours and all their good intentions. We think it not very fair when Muslims base their judgment of Christianity mainly on the Crusades, on Colonialism and on the big wars made in Christian Europe by Christians, who — they say — should love each other. The Muslims think it is not very fair when Christians base their judgment of Islam mainly on the stories of the many wives Muhammad had, on Holy War and on the backwardness of many Muslim countries.

Naturally, we must be realistic, taking each other *as we are*, with all our deficiencies; but our ideals, our good intentions, and our efforts to live up to the demands of our religious convictions are *also* a part of reality.

So, in order to come to cooperation with understanding, — call it — “dialogue”, Muslims and Christians should accept each other as they are *and* they like to be.

I will try to give you a better understanding of Muhammad and of the Kur'an, because many Christians — and many religious — are not very well informed exactly on these two points.

Before starting with Muhammad, I give you first a summary of the *political* situation in the West and the Persian Empire in the East, fighting each other till exhaustion with varying victory and defeat on both sides. Especially during the life of Muhammad and the beginning of the spread of Islam Arabia suffered from those wars: first the Persians were victorious, occupying Yeman (South Arabia) and taking the Holy Cross from Jerusalem, twenty years later the Byzantines (called “the Romans” by Muhammad in Sura 30 in the Qur'an) dislodged the Persians and brought the Holy Cross back to Jerusalem (Exaltation of the Cross, 14th September). — And then: the *religious* situation: the widely spread religion in Arabia was the semitic religion of Kanaan, mentioned in the Bible: i.e. polydaemonism and polytheism with many male and female deities and demons, for each tribe its special gods, with among them often a kind of chief, protective god. So in Mecca, where Muhammad was born in 570, there was a small building, called Ka'ba, 120 m² and 15m. high dedicated to the god-protector Hubal and near a pit of salty water, called Zemzem. Each year the tribes living in the vicinity of Mecca, made a pilgrimage to that building, because the clever businessmen of Mecca had put around the Ka'ba all kinds of big stones, representing all the gods of the said tribes who went around the Ka'ba to worship their gods; and so there was that well-known combination of religious ceremonies and business (Rome, Lourdes, etc.). Those Meccans had become really good traders, because their town was a famous halting-place for the caravans going to the North, to the South, to the North-West and through the desert (to Mesopotamia).

What about Jesus and the Christians:

The *Jews* lived in isolated, fortified communities; they took already refuge in Arabia since the destruction of Jerusalem in the year 70; they were very skilled peasants in flourishing cases, but always keeping to themselves and to their Talmudic and Midrash traditions. — The *Christians* were spread all over the peninsula; they fled to Arabia because of religious persecutions by Byzantine or political pressure from Persia. They were divided in numerous sects, fighting and murdering each other because of Christian dogma or political reasons: Arians, Nestorians, Jacobites, Melhites and so on.

There are scholars who dare to say that Muhammad never got a knowledge of true Christianity; he always faced Christians who were fighting heretics!

Muhammad was brought up first by his grandfather and later on by his uncle Abu Talib, who took him as a companion on the caravan trips. On those trips Muhammad heard the christian monks reciting the many apocryphal stories on Jesus and Mary; dancing and singing monks were an ordinary entertainment during the night on the halting-places.

Later on Muhammad got a job with Khadidjah, a Nick widow, doing caravan-business, in Mecca. Khadidjah proposed marriage to Muhammad, although he was ten years younger than she was, all scholars agree that this marriage was based on a deep love from both sides and not only because Muhammad was a good organizer. They were married probably in the year 600; during the 19 years they lived together, Muhammad was a faithful husband and that in a society where a rich man (and Muhammad was now a rich man) naturally could take another wife or several other wives. *A first question:* was Muhammad really that women-chaser as Christian tradition often is telling us?

Khadidjah will play an important role after Muhammad got his first revelation in the year 612. Though he had a good life: a happy family, big business, Muhammad was not an easy-going man. Often he left Mecca, that materialistic and polytheistic town, to be alone, meditating, in search of the true meaning of life and death. And then, one night, in a cave outside the town, he saw the angel Gabriel, coming to him with a piece of silk

brocade whereon words were written and Gabriel said: "Recite!" Muhammad answered: "What shall I recite?" The order was repeated three times, while he felt continually increasing physical pressure, until the angel said:

"Recite thou in the name of thy Lord, who created —
Created man from clots of blood;
Recite thou! For thy Lord is the most Beneficent
Who has taught the use of the pen
Hath taught Man that which he Knoweth not."

A Western scholar explains: I understand this passage to mean: "Preach to thy fellow men what thou believest to be true of thy Lord who has created man from the meanest materials and who can in like manner prosper the truth which thou proclaimest. He has taught man the art of writing (recently introduced in Mecca) — and in this thou will find a powerful help for propagating the knowledge of divine unity". (Rodwell). —

Father Fitzgerald remarked the difference between this first Sura of the Qur'an and the gospel of saint Luke: Saint Luke writes that he for his gospel studied several sources and then made a selection; the Qur'an was not composed in such a way: Recite thou! That means: it is an announcement; it must be a proclamation of what Muhammad had experienced, had received during the moments of revelation. And so it will be during 20 years of succeeding revelations. Non-muslims are often bewildered reading the Qur'an; there seems to be a lack of logical composition, subjects are often and suddenly changed; there are so many repetitions and sometimes contradictions. But keeping in mind this Kerygmatic character of announcing, of proclaiming, during 20 years and in very different circumstances, makes repetitions and eventual contradictions more understandable. At least they do not *prove* that Muhammad was an impostor and deceiver, as often has been said in Christian tradition.

How did Muhammad respond to this appeal: to proclaim the One God in the materialistic and polytheistic society of Mecca? Was he happy with this task? Not at all. Grasping very well the burden of this Assignment, he felt the temptation to attempt suicide, but then he saw a figure astride the horizon which turned him from his purpose and he heard a voice from heaven hailing him as the Apostle of God.

Now, don't ask me whether I believe in this story, because that question is not so important. But I tell you now that I don't believe that God sent the angel Gabriel to Muhammad. But the question is not important because whether we like it or not we must try to have a dialogue with muslims who are firmly convinced of Gabriel's apparition. When you start attacking them dialogue becomes impossible. So leave that question as it is and make only this conclusion — which is made now by nearly all scholars, included Christian scholars, — that Muhammad at that moment was in good faith, not deceiving and not consciously cheating.

Muhammad started preaching in Mecca and had to face a very hostile reaction; for years they mocked him, the once poor orphan who fancied himself now to be a messenger of God. Besides, for a long time there were no revelations. But Khadidjah took sides with him. She was one of the first believers. Why? Because of the magnificent language used by Muhammad, an unlettered man, in the following revelations. We are not so impressed by the translations of the Qur'an, but all scholars of Arabic literature hail the Qur'an as one of the most beautiful products in the history of Arabic literature. Khadidjah also, as Muhammad, went in rapture and herein she is the example of all muslims who read and meditate on the holy Qur'an, often called: the glorious Qur'an. The Qur'an itself is the proof of Muhammad's veracity: He says in Sura 2, verse 2: "This is the Scripture where there is no doubt, a guidance unto those who ward of evil; against the unbelieving Meccans Muhammad will fulminate: And this Qur'an is not such as could ever be invented despite of Allah; it is a confirmation of that which was before it and an exposition of that which is decreed for mankind — therein is not doubt — from the Lord of the Worlds" (S. 11, 38). — Or say they: He (himself) has invented it! Say: "then bring a sura like unto it and call for help (in making *one* sura only) on all ye can, besides Allah....? Muhammad's belief in his own Qur'an as a gift from God the Most High, is the belief of all the muslims. They are absolutely not influenced by the argumentation against their Holy Book from the side of the unbelievers, be they Jews, Christians or heathens. So it was in the time of Muhammad and so it will be till the Last Day. Disputes on the reliability of Muhammad makes all dialogue impossible. You have the right to have your own opinion but

you have to take into consideration the opinion of the muslims concerning their beloved Prophet, *if* you really — as the Vatican Council is asking from us — wish to have a dialogue with them.

As I said already Muhammad and the small group of followers (30 followers) suffered because of their honest conviction; how much they had to suffer is difficult to say but after three years holding out in Mecca, two small groups of Muslims took refuge in Christian Abemñia; Muhammad stayed in Mecca, together with his most faithful follower, Abu Bahr, a rich merchant. In the year 622 Muhammad took the decision to break away from his town, his clan. He saw that he did not make any progress in converting the Meccans from polytheism to monotheism; they remained deaf and blind for the truth he announced that God is one, Spirit, Person, Beneficent and Compassionate and the Judge of mankind on the Last Day. But the people of Yathrib, a small town 80 miles from Mecca, were willing to listen to his message: they offered him to emigrate to their place in order to found a new society in conformity with his religious ideas. The date of Muhammad's emigration was 20 September 622, and that year is the beginning of the muslim calendar. During the last years in Mecca Muhammad experienced periods of depression: S. 16, 127: "Endure thou patiently O Muhammad. Thine endurance is only by the help of Allah. Grieve not for them and be not in distress . . .!" He compares his lot with that of so many prophets before him: S. 6, 34: "Messengers indeed have been denied before théé; and they were patient under the denial and the persecution till our succour reached them. There is none to alter the decisions of Allah. Already there has reached thee (somewhat) of the tidings of the messengers We sent before thee." The founder of Islam himself put into practice those high virtues of patience and surrender to God in difficult circumstances, as we often see in the lives of so many pious muslims.

Yathrib, after a short time, changed its name: it became the town of the Prophet: madina al nabi. Muhammad the Prophet became Muhammad the Statesman, the politician, organizing a polytheistic and tribal society into a monotheistic community united in faith. There is a big difference between the revelations during the Mecca period and those of the Madina period. But also in these Madina sura's with so many pronouncements

on worldly affairs, the element of proclamation will not wholly disappear.

The Madina-period lasted from 622-632, Muhammed and his followers went to the two arabic tribes who had invited them to come to Madina. These two tribes were dominated by the Jews in Madina; Muhammad put an end to this, making the Jews his implacable enemies.

In 623 Muhammad started to raid the caravans of the Meccans; in 624 he defended the Meccans in the battle of Badr but was defeated by them in 625. From 625 till 627 there was a constant guerilla — warfare between Madina and Mecca. In 627 the Meccans attacked with an army of 10,000 soldiers; but they did not succeed and went back to Mecca. Muhammad took the initiative and with many followers now — people from Mecca who had emigrated to Madina and people from several tribes around Madina, who had pledged loyalty to him, tried to enter Mecca in order to visit the Ka'ba (628). The Meccans proposed negotiations; Muhammad should not enter Mecca now, but next year he will be allowed to enter the town, to make the pilgrimage with his followers and will be free to make propaganda for his religion. In the next year Muhammad made the pilgrimage, still in heathen style to Mecca but triumphantly and peacefully with a crowd of 2000 companions; immediately they started to make new converts. Then they returned to Madina, after some months Muhammad attacked Mecca. One of the leading merchants persuaded Muhammad to accept the surrender of the town without further bloodshed.

After the surrender of Mecca the arabic tribes sent successively their delegations, submitting themselves to Muhammad. In 631 there was a further expansion in Arabia *and* the first pilgrimage with AbuBahr as leader in pure muslim style; during that pilgrimage the nephew of Muhammad, Ali, read the famous verse of the sword: (9, 1-5): "Freedom from obligation is proclaimed from Allah and His messenger towards those of the idolaters with whom ye made a treaty. . . . A proclamation from Allah and His messenger to all men on the day of the Creator pilgrimage, that Allah is free from obligation to the idolaters and so is His mes-

senger.... When the sacred months have passed, slay the idolaters wherever you find them and take them captive and besiege them and prepare for them each ambush. But if they repent and establish worship and pay the poor-due, then leave their way free. Lo! Allah is Forgiving, Merciful."

In January 632 Muhammad received a delegation of Christians from South Arabia. After holy Mass, celebrated in Muhammad's house in Madina, which was used also as a mosque, the two parts entered in long debates with each other, on christological issues. Muhammad proposed an ordeal, the Christians refused. The meeting resulted in a pact, still valid for the muslims, that Christian and Jews were free to confess their own religion, to maintain their hierarchy and their own ceremonies, but with the obligation to pay a special tax. Christians in most of the muslim countries, are second class citizens. This meeting was by no means a dialogue! In 632 Muhammad led himself the pilgrimage, the only one he made in pure muslim style. His death came on the 8th of June of the same year.

II. *On the Qur'an*

The Vatican Council II teaches us: "Seeing that in Sacred Scriptures, God speaks through men *in human fashion*, it follows that the interpreter of Sacred Scriptures, if he is to ascertain what God has wished to Communicate to us, should carefully search out the meaning which the sacred writers really had in mind, that meaning which God had thought well to manifest through the medium of their words." (Divine Revelation, III, 12).

We have here the well known Catholic doctrine of holy inspiration: God uses the sacred writers in order to communicate with us; but He uses them in a human fashion; i.e., they become instruments in God's hand without losing their human nature, their human capacities of thinking, willing, feeling, without being out from their own personality or from their special cultural background. In *this* regard, reading the Bible is not different from reading a letter from your relatives or reading a book: You always ask: what does he or she *mean* to tell me?

Though Muhammad — and after him nearly all the muslims till nowadays — have a very different perception of inspira-

tion, *we* read the Qur'an in this ordinary human fashion: what does he, Muhammad, mean to tell us in his Qur'an?

The general meaning of the Qur'an, though it often attacks Jews and Christians, is *not* the proclamation of a new religion directed *against* Jews, Christians (and heathens). Muhammad's central idea was: mankind as a whole went astray; heathens, Jews and Christians are deviating from the original pact between God, the only One God and the children of Adam: S. 7, 172: "And remember when the Lord brought forth from the Children of Adam, from their reins, their seed, and made them testify of themselves, (saying): Am I not your Lord? They said: Yea, verily; we testify. (That, We — the Lord — did) lest up we should say the Day of Resurrection: Lo! of this we were unaware". The answer to the question: what does he, Muhammad, mean to say?, is as follows. He is telling us that at the dawn of creation — in some kind of pre-existence, — the whole mankind was gathered before God, who reminded them of their obligation to worship Him as the only God, Spirit, Creator. And all mankind promised to worship Him alone. And God gave them a fair warning: You have to remember this for ever: You can never deny this, your promise, to worship me and me alone; on the last Day, I will call you to account for your faithfulness or unfaithfulness to this promise. — This promise is called: Mithaq. This Mithaq is repeated in the Qur'an. Now it was clear for Muhammad that the heathens were unfaithful to the Mithaq by worshipping idols. He, Muhammad, was sent by God as the Apostle of God, to bring them back to faithfulness to the Mithaq, through the proclamation of the Qur'an! — In this holy endeavor he was thwarted by the *Jews*, who were unwilling to acknowledge his God-given authority and they appealed to the Taurat (The Thora) their holy Scripture. For Muhammad who was convinced of being called by God, this could only mean that the Jews had falsified their holy Books —. The same applied to the *Christians* with their Gospel: they said that, according to the Gospel, Isa (Jesus) was the last Prophet; this was evidently not true; Muhammad was called by God after Isa; the very announcement of Muhammad in the future as a new and last prophet was given by Jesus Himself: S. 61, 6. And remember, when Jesus, son of Mary said: "O children of Israel, in all truth I am God's Apostle to you to confirm the law which was given before me, and to

announce an apostle that shall come after me whose name shall be Ahmad". But when he (Ahmad) presented himself with clear proof of his mission, they said, "This is manifest sorcery!" (Paraclete-Periclebos).

It is clear that we don't agree with Muhammad and the Muslims. The main point is: to understand what Muhammad means: he did not intend to found a new religion: anti-polytheism, anti-Judaism, anti-Christianism; he intended to *bring back* heathens, Jews and christians to faithfulness in submitting themselves to the One God, in conformity to the Mithaq. His announcement, his proclamation was the more urgent because in Muhammad God was giving the *last chance* to mankind to repent: Muhammad was the last Prophet and therefore the Seal of the Prophets, with the task to remind all human beings of the Mithaq.

This he did in the Qur'an. God's last message to the last Prophet: Now, here you can see a kind of parallelism between Muhammad's idea on Prophetism and the function of the Prophets, *and* his idea on revelation, coming down from heaven with the Qur'an. — The Greatest Prophets were Musa, David, Isa and Muhammad. They all have been called by God to do the same thing: to remind mankind of the Mithaq. Therefore God inspired them to announce the same eternal message written in the holy Books: Taurab (Thora), Sabur (Psalms), Injil (Gospel) and the Qur'an, all containing that same eternal message, with-naturally-some necessary adaptations to different time and circumstances, but essentially the same. This eternal message is called the Word of God, God Himself as speaking to man. So: This word of God comes down from Heaven in inspiration; but this inspiration is given — (not as we say "in a *human* fashion" but) in a pure *divine* fashion: that means: without interference from any human element. This eternal word in God is seen as a Mother-Book: Taurab, Sabur, Injil and Qur'an are a kind of foto. Copies of that Mother-Book: the *eternal*, "glorious Koran", written on the well-preserved Tablet (S. 85, 21), this is the source of revelation, being with God (cf. S. 13, 39) in eternity. Musa received it, David received it, Isa received it, as so many tokens of God's mercy in order to remind men again and again oblivious of their primordial obligation, to worship God and Him alone. Muhammad is not founding a new religion, abandoned by heathens, Jews and Christians.

Summarizing: 1. the Qur'an is absolutely outstanding in comparison with the Scriptures of other religions, which have been falsified. Our theological explanation of inspiration as God speaking through men in *human fashion*, is *not* easily understood by our Muslim brethren; it means for them that the purity of God's word in our scriptures is mixed up with elements of human frailty.

2. Muhammad is the seal of the Prophets: he came after Musa, after Isa in human history; he brings us for the last time God's warning. Islam has to be accepted by all men, because that is God's holy will.

3. When you ask for a proof: how did Muhammad prove his mission? what proof is there for the veracity of the Qur'an as being God's inspired? the answer of the Muslims is not very different from the answer 10 centuries later given by the early Protestants: the Qur'an as the Bible, proves itself; it is in itself the greatest miracle and therefore doesn't need any proof. S. 10, 39838. Do they say, "he hath devised it himself!", *Say*: Then bring a Sura like it; and call for help on all ye can besides Allah...! This Qur'an is not such as could ever be invented despite of Allah; is a confirmation of that which was before it...". In order to understand why the muslims love their Qur'an so profoundly, I give you only two examples really beautiful, one from the Mecca period and one from the Madina time.

The first example is the Sura Fatika, which is called: the opening of the Book; this sura is recited several times in each of the five daily prayers.

"In the name of God, the Compassionate Praise be to God, Lord of the world! The Compassionate, the Merciful! King on the day of reckoning! Thee alone we worship; Thee alone we ask for help. Show us the straight path. The path of those whom Thou hast favoured. Not the path of those who earn Thine anger nor of those who go astray."

The famous verse of the throne in Sura 2,255, a Sura from the Madina period with all kinds of political, social and economic regulations, but then, at once, this deeply felt awareness of God's greatness: "Allah! There is no God save Him, the Alive, the Eternal. Neither slumber nor sleep overtakes Him. Unto

Him belongeth whatsoever is in the heaven and whatsoever is in the earth. Who is he that intercedes with Him save by His leave? He knoweth that which is in front of them and that which is behind them, while they encompass nothing of His knowledge, save what He will. His throne includes the heavens and the earth and the upholding of both burdeneth Him not. He is the Sublime, the Tremendous."

There are in the Qur'an, especially in the Sura's of the Madina period, many revelations which in a conspicuous way fitted very well with Muhammad's difficult moments. F. i. after having been severely criticized for marrying the divorced wife of his adopted son Said, he received a revelation (S. 33, 39) . . . "thou didst fear mankind whereas Allah had a better right that thou shouldst fear Him. So when Said had performed the necessary formality of divorce from her, We gave her unto thee in marriage, so that (henceforth) there may be no sin for believers in respect of wives of their adopted sons, when the latter have performed the necessary formality (of release) from them. The commandment of Allah must be fulfilled."

We all agree that this was not a God inspired commandment. However, it is still another question whether Muhammad was *consciously* deceiving. Muslim tradition says that the case of Seinab, unhappily married and therefore divorced by her husband Said, is not very different from the case of several widows whose husbands died in holy War; Muhammad married them because they lived in very difficult circumstances. — I am only telling this, so that you may understand why Muslims don't take offense at this Sura.

Whatever we say, Muslims remain convinced of the inimitability of the Qur'an, of its superiority above all other Scriptures which are confirmed and rectified by their Holy Book, the Qur'an. — For many years, Protestants and Catholics were publishing books comparing the Qur'an with the Bible, pointing out its contradictions, its deviations from the Bible. Those books were disastrous for the dialogue; the Muslims became only irritated and were absolutely not impressed by all those argumentations, of the unbelievers!

There is another way of comparing Qur'an and the Bible. In the Qur'an, as in the Bible, God is announced in his divine unity,

the living God, Compassionate, Almighty, Creator, Communicating with men. Man must submit himself to God as Abraham did, in faith and surrender. Christians and Muslims are both taught by their Scriptures to respect Jesus, be it in a different way, each of them in their own belief, and they are taught to love the Virgin — Mother of Christ, Mary. In both Scriptures God will judge all human beings after resurrection, on the last day.

I like however, to repeat what I already said, Jews and Christians are always called in the Qur'an: "People of the Book", and therefore they received in Muslim law a privileged position in comparison with the heathens. But for us Christianity means: faith in Christ, who is the Divine Word; Him we know through the Gospel. This is different from the Muslim vision, where the Qur'an, known through Muhammad, is the subject of faith. Christians (and also the Jews) believe in God's Word not in the first place as it is found in the Bible, but in the facts, the events of human history of which the Bible gives special witness! God's intervention in human history. In the Old Testament we have such events as Exodus, the entry in the promised Land, the return to it from Egypt. In the New Testament, Jesus Christ God's Word, God's Son, is the great event of God's revelation of Himself in a man. The Bible, including the Gospel, is not the Divine Word itself but the special witness of that Divine Word. This witnessing has been written down under the inspiration, under the assistance of the Holy Spirit.

Our Gospel is not in the first place a book (as is the Qur'an). The Gospel is the Great News of the Kingdom of God, in perfect form announced by and manifested in Jesus Christ, of whom the Gospel gives witness. If there would be a Muslim friend who really desires to know why there are 4 gospels and not *one* gospel (as there is only one Qur'an), you could try telling him this: the Qur'an was also first transmitted orally by the Companions of Muhammad, who had been witness of his life and his sayings. Those oral traditions have been written down in several redactions, which, afterwards, have been sorted out during the reign of Abu Bakr and Umar, the first two Caliphs. Under the third Caliph Uthman, the official version of the Qur'an was established, about 20 years after the death of Muhammad.

A similar process had gone on for the Gospels: the companions of Jesus (the Apostles) and other people who had been with

Him first transmitted the life and message of Jesus orally. The Gospels are only 4 traditions in writing. We Catholics believe that the whole process in the primitive Church went on under the assistance of the Holy Spirit.

Let us hope that your muslim friend will understand you!! — But you can also tell him that in the meeting of Muslims and Christians in Tripoli in 1976 both parties reached an understanding, that dialogue is only possible, if Muslims and Christians are willing to acknowledge mutually the authenticity of the Qur'an as well as of the Gospel. Now that you have heard a very short summary of the muslim belief in the Qur'an, you are able to understand their deep respect for their Holy Book. There are some practical consequences resulting from this belief e.i. in a muslim country you cannot enter a book store and say: I like to buy the Qur'an; because that would mean for the muslim owner of the shop that you intend to buy God's word! You should tell him: I like to buy a "copy" of the holy Qur'an. Muslims will never treat, also in daily life, the copy of the Qur'an as an ordinary book, as we do with our Bible which you put here and there; therefore, when you have a muslim friend visiting you, be careful not to treat your copy of the Qur'an as you treat your Bible.

Reciting the Qur'an, also privately, is always a liturgical act with a religious meaning. They like to listen to famous recitals on tapes, sent out from minarets, by radio and television, for us rather disturbing, by them highly appreciated and never boring. The Qur'an is frequently quoted in daily life, also by Muslims who are not so fervently practicing their religion. Orthodox Islam does not allow the use of pictures in Qur'an editions; but they found a substitute in calligraphic adornments of highly artistic value.

When we ask how the difference between Christians and Muslims belief in their holy Scriptures may be overcome, the answer does not give much hope. Apart from the content or the message which is absolutely different, the different approach also in reading the Qur'an and the Bible makes dialogue difficult. Till now orthodox Islam is very hesitant, perhaps even totally unwilling, to apply the principle of historico-literary research to the Qur'an. Human nature, the personality of the inspired writer, his historical and cultural background, are — as we have seen —

irrelevant. This is muslim doctrine. On the other side: Islam has shown in history a great ability to absorb new ideas, though perhaps with reservation from the side of its orthodox leaders.

The method of historico-literary approach, as we Christians are using in studying the Bible, has something very rational in itself. In modern Sciences muslim scholars are adopting, without difficulty, the methods of modern scientific research. Let us hope that these methods in the future will be applied by them also to the study of religion, of their holy scripture. There are some Scholars who tried already to do so; they met heavy resistance from the traditionalists. But modernization is an irresistible process, which will go on, also in the muslim milieu. The results will be seen in "God's own good time."

III. *Jesus and Mary in the Qur'an*

I give you in telegram style the image of Jesus as it appears in the Qur'an. It is impossible to quote all the Sura, one by one. But if you have the list of Christian themes in the Qur'an, you would be able to check all the verses. (Sometimes there is a slight difference in the numbering of the verses in the various editions of the Qur'an).

John the Baptist was Jesus' predecessor, confirming that Jesus is the "word of God". The "Spirit of God" (i.e. the Angel Gabriel) announces Him to his virgin mother Mary as a righteous child and as a token. Jesus is created —as was Adam — by the breathing of God; a sure result of the creative power of God's Word, without a human father, conceived by Mary. His grandmother, giving birth to Mary, cried to the Lord: "I crave Thy protection for her (Mary) and her offspring (Jesus) from Satan, the outcast." God taught Jesus the Scriptures: Wisdom, Torah and Gospel.

He has been sent to the children of Israel as a Successor of the former prophets, in order to confirm the Torah, save for some prohibitions; He announces Muhammad.

There are many *miracles*: Jesus speaks immediately after His birth to console His mother and speaks in the cradle in order

to defend His mother against the calumnies of the Jews and to bear witness to His mission; He makes birds, made of clay, into living creatures; He heals many people, discloses secret things, raises the dead. *Important* is the alusion to the Holy Eucharist (Sura 5, 112-115): The Apostles ask Jesus to bring down from heaven a table (Ma'ida) garnished for a meal, in order to assure them that he is really sent by God. Jesus asks for the table from God, who promises to send it down to the earth. As asked for by Jesus, "this table spread with food from heaven will be a feast for Him and his followers, for the first of us and for the last of us" (always going on; perhaps Easter, Sunday — Mass?); it is a sign from God giving sustenance, i.e. profound peace. Those who eat must bear witness to it; those who are unfaithful (disbelieving), will be severely punished by God.

Muslims asking what we are doing in church every Sunday, will be satisfied, when we refer to these verses of the Qur'an; but it is not wise to connect the Eucharist with the Crucifixion, because Crucifixion is denied in the Qur'an (4, 156-159).

Jesus' preaching is: adore the only One God: fear of God and obedience to Him; He reproaches the Jews with their discord among themselves. At the end of his life Jesus will curse the Jews, their guiles in order to murder Him; but He is saved by God, not crucified and has been elevated into heaven.

As a token of the last Hour, Jesus came back to earth; will die and will rise from his tombs in Madina; during the Last Judgment He will give witness against the Christians.

Who is Jesus? Always called: Isa biu Maryam: Jesus son of Mary; al-Masih = Messiah. He is one of the Prophets, giving a holy Book, the Gospel, which is guidance, light and mercy. He is a portent for the whole world, an example for the Meccans and for the Jews. But He remains an ordinary, mortal creature, who takes food as we all do. He is extremely righteous and pure, virtuous and near to God, receiving many gifts from the Lord, He was noble in this world and will be noble in the world to come; He is not violent nor malicious and fulfilled his obligations of prayer and alms-giving.

Jesus is several times called: "Kalam Allah": Word of God; this has not the same meaning as Divine Word. It means only:

a word coming from God Kun, wa jakun = Be, and it is. This Creative word from God was brought to Mary in the breath of Gabriel. — Jesus is also called: Ruh min Allah, the Spirit from God. Perhaps an echo of the christian doctrine on the Holy Spirit; but in the Qur'an it has only the meaning of the Angel Gabriel.

Jesus himself said that He was not God; and He *is not* God; He *is not* Rabb (title of God) nor the son of God; He is not one in a triad of gods; He is only an adorning servant, a messenger. The Christians should stop their endless disputes on Jesus. — This is the image of Jesus in the Qur'an and this is the opinion of all the orthodox Muslims till nowadays.

But in *the tradition of the Mystics* Jesus was often given a very special place: His person becomes the real type of the mystical union between God and man. He is sometimes called: Seal of Sanctity (cf. Muhammad who is Seal of the Prophets), because Jesus is the great witness of God in our hearts, whereas Muhammad is the great witness of God in language. The great Muslim theologian Ghasali (1111) calls Jesus: "the Poor One" par excellence, because all His actions are directly coming from God. This sounds very familiar to us who are trying to give full meaning to our vow of poverty in being poor in front of God in total self-denial, open only to God's calling and His grace; but a moment later Ghasali will write: Jesus' chastity on earth will be rewarded in heaven with 10.000 huri's (beautiful, young women). Much more spiritual was the mystic Al-Hallj, put to death in grueling torture, by the orthodox people (921). His followers attributed to him a long prayer on his cross; I give only some quotations:

"Go to my friends and tell them that I launched forth into the open sea and that my long-boat went broken; I will die because of the religion of the Cross. —

Now I will sacrifice myself out of love for the eternal mystery;

As Jesus I reached the top of the stake With Him, out of love, I am doing iustice on the same place.

The Cross of Jesus has become my home, where I will stay.
The Cross of Jesus has become for me the only place.

The Cross of Jesus has become my royal See
"And my death will glorify Him."

Here we have an example of how far God's grace can guide man, also in Islam. Al-Hallj has been put to death by orthodox Mus-

lims, but he was a Muslim, surely not a Christian, yet so near to Jesus.

Mary in the Qur'an

Mary has been chosen by God from all women and He purifies her. She was miraculously born from the wife of Imran, dedicated to God already in the womb of her mother, where Satan could not touch her. She is presented in the temple, accepted by the Lord who took care of her healthy growth by sending her food, which was not known to her protector Zacharia. She accepted the message of Gabriel and gave birth under the palm tree. Her child Jesus defends her against the calumnies of the Jews. Perhaps there is also a faint allusion to the flight to Egypt.

She is — as it seems — the most high of all women (on top of Khadidjah Aishyah, Fatima?). She is Virgin par excellence. She is full of faith and prayerful; a token for the world. Her highest dignity is to be the Mother of Jesus. But she is an ordinary creature, taking food as we all do; she is not a goddess, as christians are believing. — There is a confusion between Mary, sister of Aaron and the daughter of Amran (Imran) = Yaachim.

In the *tradition* on Mary the commentators use authentic as well as apocryphal sources to give more details of her life. The relation with Joseph, the three Wise Men, the massacre of the Innocents, Cana, the exclamation: "Blessed the womb..." the apparition of Jesus after his elevation into heaven; her death, 6 or 8 years later, at the age of 51 years.

Summarising: The Qur'an praises Jesus and Mary without reservation. The denying of Jesús' divinity is intended to *safe-guard* Jesus' reputation: (because the true religion, as seen by Muhammad believes in *One* God). The same can be said concerning the denial of the Crucifixion: a messenger of God should be victorious, as was Muhammad himself. But Jesus in the Qur'an is a muslim Jesus, an ordinary, though very honoured, prophet, having special privileges which however have not much meaning, being only a vague echo of the christian doctrine. Muhammad never knew the real Jesus. Says Father Caspar: he passed near the mystery and of this mystery there are traces in the Qur'an, but he refused (let us hope bona fide, in good faith) to enter the mys-

tery, because he was offended by the scandal of the Cross; and the scandalous situation of the Christians did not help him to overcome this scandal. — The Muslims have very strict opinions regarding Jesus' nature and birth (only human). You can say: the muslim Jesus is not the same person as the Christian Jesus, who is the eternal son of the Father. But there are christian words in the Qur'an and God's grace can help a muslim to surmount the limitations and negations of the Qur'an. The dialogue with a Muslim should not start with Jesus. The holy Virgin is extremely honoured by Muslims; her shrines in several places are frequented by Muslims.

I will now speak about several difficulties felt by Muslims regarding some points in christian doctrine or some aspects of christian life.

Celibacy: They say: it is the natural vocation of every man and woman to found a family, taking responsibility for it: it is a duty towards society. Their slogan says: "marriage is half the faith." Celibacy is for them a source of scandal, and provokes disbelief, condemnation, as it is in the Qur'an S. 24, 32, "and marry such of you as are solitary".

Possible way of answer.

Where egoism is suspected: reply that celibacy is motivated by dedication to the service of fellowmen. But then our community life should be really a token of that service by its disponibility and availability. Perhaps this is not always the case. —

Where duty to get married is stressed, we could reply that our life of celibacy is "consecration to God in prayer." But then our life should be a token of prayer, not only of activity.

Holy Trinity

There are well educated Muslims who admit that Christianity is a form of monotheism; the majority of Muslims however believe that Christians are tritheists.

Possible way of answer

Say that we are monotheists: we believe in *one* God. Try to explain that the one God, the *same* God in Christian faith is

Father, Son and Spirit; that this confession is only possible for a Christian who accepts the teaching of Christ, who spoke about Father, Son and Holy Spirit. — The old way of speaking about God, used by the arab Christians in their dialogue with the Muslims in Damascus (8th century) is perhaps more useful; it was more metaphorical, f. i. one substance *fire* is at once heat, flame and light; the human mind which is at once understanding, word and life. Muslims, in their whole tradition, are afraid to speak about God's inner life; besides there is a big confusion about the meaning of notions as "person", "nature" and so on. For them metaphors are often more respectful of the divine mystery than our philosophical explanations. And they will feel satisfied when we show understanding for the fact that they do not understand, because they don't accept the teaching of Christ. —

Jesus Son of God.

You know already what the Qur'an says and what Muslims think about Jesus. This central mystery of our faith is, together with the mystery of the Holy Trinity, the biggest stumbling block for our muslim friends. Say simply that you can understand that they don't understand; avoid the slightest impression that you are trying to convince them. Tell them that Incarnation does not mean: deification of a human being, but that the eternal Word of God became in our religion a man as it became in their religion a holy Scripture (Qur'an). — And for the rest: leave it to the Holy Spirit to guide them!

Original Sin, the Cross, Redemption

Muslim opinion:

1. Christians have a pessimistic idea regarding human nature (original sin and its consequences). Man is not so bad.
2. God will not let down his prophet, the more so when this prophet, as the Christians say, is His own son.
3. It is a supreme injustice that an innocent, righteous person should die in place of the guilty. God is Merciful and doesn't need that; without redemption He is willing to forgive our sins. — From our christian side: our explanation of original sin is often far from clear. Our theologies of Redemption were sometimes rather one-sided as f. i. Christ paying the debt of sin, due to divine

Justice; satisfaction theory: sin is an offense against God and calls therefore for infinite reparation: and therefore Christ was made by God a substitute for men.

possible answers on original sin:

Point out 1) that the story of Adam's sin as told in the Qur'an is not so different from that told in the Bible. 2) That the Qur'an on many places is calling man: "rebellious, unfaithful, violent, impatient, inconsistent, never stopping, shedding blood and sowing scandal (Adam's son killed by his own brother, the children of Israel killing the prophets).

Now, in connection with original sin as taught in Christianity, try to explain that the first chapters of the Bible are not a scientific explanation of man's appearance on earth and of the phases of his evolution, but that they are a symbolic story (a myth) with a doctrinal aim, starting from the existential observation of evil and sin in the world (This is already impossible to understand for a muslim; remember their theory of inspiration, absolutely different from ours). Thus: as we see it: man is always a sinner and every man and woman experiences in themselves this struggle between the good they would like to do and the evil which attracts them (c.f. Rom. 7, 21-25) on this, Muslims can agree!

To overcome this struggle in himself, man, living in a society whose structures show the consequences of this common human weakness, is in need to be saved from "the sin of the world," by the grace of Christ.

So we don't think (as Muslims assume) that there is an inheritance of *personal* sin, which would make every person born in this world, guilty for God. There is no transmission of guilt in Christianity; for us — as for the muslims, every person is responsible for his *own* deeds.

possible answer on Cross and Redemption

first: remember that the Qur'an denies the Crucifixion of Jesus but, *if* the Muslim is asking for an explanation (how is it possible: God punishing an innocent person), you may try to explain: the Crucifixion appears to be the *normal* outcome of Jesus' life; it is the result, which could be expected, from the growing conflict between Him and the Jewish religious leaders,

ending in a clash: their condemnation of Jesus to death in a society, dominated by the Roman Law, which executed Him by death on the cross.

Then you could further try to explain that Jesus *knowingly* accepted His lot as *martyr-prophet*, in fidelity (as so many prophets before Him in the history of Israel) rather preferring to go to death than becoming unfaithful to the message received from God. He refused to become a political Messiah and was unwilling to use miraculous power in order to find the kingdom of God or to save Himself. His message was to reveal God as Father, who forgives; He himself therefore had come not to condemn, but to reconcile all sinners; He asks his disciples to do the same, to love their enemies and He gave himself as example, in his death forgiving his executioners.

This message, already understood by his followers but not perfectly, became much more clear for them after Jesus' Resurrection. Under the powerful illumination of the Holy Spirit, the Apostles and the early Christians were able to grasp the meaning of Jesus's Life and Death for each of them and for all mankind. As Jesus fought against sin we all have to do the same, fight against sin in ourselves, fight against sin in society; we can do this thanks to His grace which unites us with Him and the Father, in the strength of the Holy Spirit. The early Christians and we, reading the Bible, see the forecase of Jesus' saving life and death in the history of Israel (Yahwe saving his people, the Servant of God suffering and dying for his people, etc. And this is what the Scriptures of the New Testament are telling us.

It is a very, very long explanation and I would say, the muslim friend who is willing to listen patiently to this all, is certainly already moved by grace. How far that grace will bring him remains a mystery!

Still one question: Redemption?

The muslim: — but God is the merciful, the beneficent. He will forgive all sins when we repent. Why do you make redemption so difficult?

possible answer: Redemption

In connection with what already has been said regarding the Cross and the Theologies of Redemption, try to combine several ideas:

Sin is an offense to God; redemption from sin therefore is something "onerous"; God *could* forgive sin directly, but He has to give man the chance to take part in this work of restauration and redemption; Christ was truly one of us; in Him every man who follows his example in faith and conversion, can share in Christ's salvation.

Say clearly: in our view of Redemption there is not the idea of re-establishing divine justice, nor substitution of an innocent person, expiating for other guilty persons nor is there a necessary: God may forgive all sins. But Christ is the example of a person who gives his life for those He loves and God clearly accepted that, raising Him from the death. In Christ, our example, we are given the strength to follow Him and become also victorious in the struggle against sin, especially by loving our fellowmen without reservation.

MSGR. M. J. C. GEISE, D.D.