

Islam in the History of Salvation A Christian Interpretation*

INTRODUCTION

1. *New Interest of the Church in Islam*

The Second Vatican Council recognizes that: "In the course of centuries many quarrels and hostilities have arisen between Christians and Muslims. But now this most sacred synod exhorts

* Father Giulio-Francesco Basetti-Sani was born in Florence, Italy, January 6, 1912. He has been a Franciscan (Friar Minor) since 1928. He was ordained priest in July of 1935. After finishing his ordinary theological course in the Franciscan Order, in Italy, he studied at the "Institute Catholique" of Paris (France); the Pontifical Oriental Institute of Rome; the "Facultés Catholiques" of Lyon (France); the Institute of Islamic Studies in Montreal, McGill University (Canada); and Dropsie University, Philadelphia (U.S.A.)

Fr. Basetti-Sani taught Theology at the Franciscan Oriental Seminary of Giza (Egypt); at the "Séminaire Franciscain des Missions", at Lyon (France); and at the Institute of Missions in St. Paul University of Ottawa (Canada). He was Visiting Professor at "Columbia University", New York; the Muir Institute of Edinburgh University, (Scotland), St. Bonaventure University, New York; Notre Dame University, Indiana, and St. John University, New York

His publications include:

1. *Muhammed et Saint Francois*, Ottawa, Canada, 1959;
2. *Per un dialogo Cristiano-Musulmano*, Milano, 1969;
3. *Louis Massignon, Orientalista Cristiano*, Milano 1971;
(English ed. *Louis Massignon, A Christian Ecumenist*, Chicago 1975).
4. *Il Corano nella Luce di Cristo*, Bologna 1972;
(English ed. *The Koran in the Light of Christ*, Chicago 1978).
5. *L'Islam e Francesco d'Assisi*, Firenze 1975.
6. *Muhammad and Francis of Assisi*, Fiesole 1976.

Since May 1978, Father Basetti-Sani, has been in the Philippines and is teaching Theology at Our Lady of the Angels Seminary, Novaliches, Quezon City

everyone to forget the past and to strive sincerely for mutual understanding. Let them make common cause of safeguarding and fostering social justice, moral values, peace and freedom." (*Declaration of the Relationship of the Church to Non-Christian Religions*, n. 3).

We have to recognize the fact that in the scientific world of Islamologists and in the Roman Catholic Church the French Orientalist, Professor Louis Massignon (1883-1962), was the personality who influenced, more than any other, the new orientation in the study of Islam. He discovered the spiritual values of Islam while studying the mystics of the Muslim Community, particularly Ibn Mansour Al-Hallaj (856-922). Throughout his life Massignon did nothing but search for the goodness of God acting in Islam. (Basetti-Sani, O.F.M., *Louis Massignon: A Christian Ecumenist*, Chicago, 1974).

It is not difficult to evaluate today all that Professor Massignon did in the Church, because we can now clearly distinguish the old inherited clichés from the newer and deeper insights which have resulted from a sympathetic study of Islam. Since the researches of Massignon, some Catholic theologians have begun to reflect with a new spirit on the religious phenomenon of Islam.

The first disciple and spiritual son of Louis Massignon was Father Jean-Muhammad Abd-el-Jalil, who, being born in Morocco (1906) to a Muslim family, later discovered Christianity in Paris and became a Catholic and a Franciscan priest. He was a pioneer in introducing a new image of Islam and of Muhammad to the conscience and mind of Catholics. (Abd-el-Jalil, J.M., *Aspects intérieurs de l'Islam*, Paris 1949; *Marie et l'Islam*, Paris 1950).

In 1956 there appeared a book by Abbé Charles Ledit, (*Mahomet, Israel et le Christ*, Paris, 1956) where some of the intuitions of Massignon were presented in a new frame of history and in a theological language, which tried to explain the religious personality and activity of Muhammad in relation to the presence of Israel and Christianity. Islam, for Abbé Ledit, is the realization of the blessing given by God to Abraham through his son Ishmael.

Father Yoaqim Moubarac, a Maronite priest from Lebanon and professor at the Catholic Institute of Paris and the Univer-

sity of Louvain, reflects on the teaching of Massignon. He is his fervent disciple. His thesis "*Abraham dans le Coran*", "*L'Histoire d'Abraham dans le Coran et la naissance de l'Islam*", contributed much to the knowledge of Qur'anic prophetism, centered on the person of Abraham. Moubarac recognizes that what the Qur'an affirms is objectively true, and consequently we must interpret it in a sense which saves this authenticity and objectivity. He again treated the role of Islam in the plan of Salvation in his book, *L'Islam*, (Paris, 1962).

More interested in Abram (before the promise) and in Ishmael, than in Abraham, is another Maronite priest Fr. Michael Hayeck, a professor in the Catholic Institute of Paris. In his books *Le Mystère d'Ishmael* and *Les Arabes et le Baptême des larmes*, he attempts to explore the Biblical mystery of Ishmael, the son of Abram, an out-cast by God's order, and at the same time, bearer of a divine blessing. Hayeck's opinion is that Islam is related with the Abram of the period before the Messianic promise. At Medina Muhammad discovered his connection with the Abram before the promise and intended to recover the blessing for Ishmael and all outcasts opposing Jews and Christians, the privileged of God. This thesis, held by many other Orientalists, is against the Islamic tradition until it was rehabilitated by Massignon and proved by Moubarac (Hayeck, M., "*Le Mystère d'Ishmael*", Paris, 1964; "*Les Arabes et le Baptême des larmes*", Paris 1972).

Opening the Second Session of the Council on September 28, 1963, Pope Paul VI said:

"The Catholic Church, however, looks beyond the frontiers of Christianity. How could she limit her love, as she is to imitate the love of the divine Father, who so loved the world, that He gave His Son for its salvation." (John. 3:16).

Thus she looks sympathetically at the other religions which have preserved the sense of the divine and kept the idea of the One Supreme and Transcendent Creator. These religions venerate God by sincere acts of piety, a piety which, like their conviction, form the foundation of their moral and social life.

The Catholic Church sees gaps and errors in these religions. But she cannot but turn also to them in order to tell them that the Catholic religion gives due respect to whatever truth, good-

ness and humanity she finds in them and to assure them that she is in the forefront of those who among our contemporaries protect the sense of religion and worship, both the conditions and the obligations of the earthly common good in order to effectively defend, as it were, the rights of God over men." (*Commentary on the Document of Vatican II*, t. III, p. 37)

Due to the reactions to the *Declaration on the Jews* by Jews themselves, particularly in the U.S.A., and by the Arabs (Muslims as well as Orthodox Christians) in the Middle East, Paul VI made an unexpected gesture of peace by going as a pilgrim, with humble and praying attitude, to the Holy Land in January of 1964. On different occasions, following the approach of Massignon, Pope Paul VI, speaking to the Jews, Muslims and Christians, emphasized the importance of "the three Abrahamitic monotheistic religions". The fact that Pope Paul VI chose that expression is very important for the understanding of theological implications that followed after the Second Vatican Council concerning Islam and its relation to the Bible's blessing of Abraham. At Bethlehem, on January 6, Paul VI insisted on those "who profess with us monotheism, who worship and give cult to the One and True, Living and Supreme God, the God of Abraham".

In September of 1963, Pope Paul VI expressed his intention to create a Secretariat for Non-Christian Religions. During the Mass of Pentecost, May 17, 1964, in St. Peter's Basilica, he announced the creation of this new Secretariat. By then the Catholic Church was engaged in an absolutely new way of dealing with people outside Christianity. If the Jewish question and the prepared draft of the *Declaration on the Jews* were sources of great controversy, they were also the occasion for a wider interest in the Non-Christian world, especially in the Muslim world. Most of the Council's Fathers were not prepared for a declaration concerning Islam. But Pope Paul VI had his personal vision concerning the great importance of Islam. He was aware of the new approaches of Massignon and asked the Catholic Church to take into consideration the importance of Islam.

In his first encyclical letter *Ecclesiam Suam* of August 6, 1964, Paul VI invited all men of good will to dialogue with the Catholic Church. In his vision, humanity as a whole is centered in Christ and in His Church. He sees diverse circles turning

around Jesus Christ. The first all-embracing circle includes all mankind as such, that is, the world. (nn. 100-110) The second circle includes all those who worship the One and True God, that is, Jews and Muslims. In the third circle are our separated Christian brethren. The statement concerning Islam is the first sympathetic statement in a papal document:

"Then we see another circle around us. This, too, is vast in its extent, yet it is not so far away from us. It is made up of the men who above all adore the One, Supreme God whom we too adore.

We refer to the children, worthy of our affection and respect, of the Hebrew people who have remained faithful to the religion of the Old Testament.

Then we refer to the adorer of God according to the conception of monotheism especially the Muslim religion. These people deserve our admiration for all that is true and good in their worship of God." (*Ecclesian Suam*, n. 111).

This is a very brief statement, but it is very important. First of all, the statement shows that the Muslim religion is considered as the monotheism of the Old Testament; and second, Pope Paul VI declares that Muslims deserve "our admiration for all that is true and good in their worship of God". By this statement, however, Pope Paul did not intend to give any specific judgement on Islam, nor did he give the theological reason for the special place he has reserved for Islam.

These words prepared the way for the great conciliar document, the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church: "*Lumen Gentium*."

By a singular privilege, the Jews are recognized as "the People to whom the Covenant and the promises were given and from whom Christ was born according to the Flesh". (Rom. 9:4-5).

2. *The Constitution on the Church and the Muslims*

Examining the whole documentation for the preparation of the Second Vatican Council, we find very significant the fact that the problem of Islam was almost completely ignored in the answers given by the Catholic bishops of the world. None among the

bishops and theologians of the world had any interest to call the Council's attention to the problem of the Muslims. Pope Paul VI did. Only upon the insistence of the Pope did the Council make a statement concerning Islam.

In fact, the most important doctrinal document of the Council, the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, "*Lumen Gentium*", explicitly speaks of Islam as part of God's plan of salvation:

"But the plan of Salvation also includes those who acknowledge the Creator. In the first place among these there are the Muslims, who professing to hold the faith of Abraham, along with us adore the One and Merciful God, who on the last day will judge mankind." (*Lumen Gentium*, n. 16).

When we analyze the history of the formation of this text, we are surprised to discover that it was dictated by the Arab-Israel conflict. However, the Holy Spirit was pushing the theological reflection of the Church in a new direction concerning the two Biblical Abrahamitic mysteries: the presence of Judaism and Islam in the history of the Church.

After having recognized that the People of Israel belong to the Biblical economy and thus proclaim the relationship between Judaism and Christianity, we find this very important statement about Islam: "*The plan of Salvation also includes those who acknowledge the Creator. In the first place among these there are the Muslims.*"

We know that the conceptions of Creation and of Creator are not fruits of human philosophical speculation, but come from revelation. The Council seems to give reasons for the special place Islam has in the plan of Salvation when it recognizes that "*the Muslims profess to hold the faith of Abraham*".

The precedent text, the first submitted at the opening of the third session of the Council (September 1964) was rejected because it contained the expression: "They (Muslims) are not alien to the revelation made to the fathers, the sons of Ishmael". This jeopardized the solution of a very difficult question: the historical descent of the Arabs from Ishmael, and, above all, the connection of Islam with Biblical Revelation. The adopted text left these questions open, declaring only the fact that "*the Muslims profess*

to hold the faith of Abraham", without giving any solution concerning the objectivity and theological value of this fact.

Of great importance also is the statement that the Muslims "*along with us adore the One and Merciful God*, who on the last day will judge mankind." This explicit affirmation that the God whom Muslims adore is the God of Abraham and the same that we, Christians, adore, was not the first time it was expressed by the Catholic Church. Pope St. Gregory VII, in a letter to Cyriacus, bishop of Carthage in 1073, called the Muslims "a bad and perverse nation". Three years later, however, discovering the kindness of the Emir al-Nasir of Mauritania, he wrote another letter saying: "We must show greater charity among ourselves than with other people, the reason being that, although in a different manner, (*via diversa*), we believe and confess the One, True God and it is He whom we praise and adore every day as the Creator of all ages and Ruler of the world. The same God lead you, after a long sojourn in this life, to the bosom of our blessed and most holy Patriarch Abraham, to whom we pray with our lips and our hearts." (Migne, *Patr. Lat.*, t. 148, 451).

Although the statements by Vatican II in the Dogmatic Constitution *Lumen Gentium* did not explicitly and directly connect Islam to Biblical Revelation yet they did give to Islam a special place among the other "monotheistic" religions. The door was left open for further theological investigations.

3. *The New Spirit of the Church in Dealing with Islam*

On October 28, 1965, Paul VI approved and signed "*The Declaration on the Relationship of the Church to Non-Christian Religions*" (*Nostra Aetate*). The peculiarities of this document are its descriptive style, which is more pastoral than doctrinal, and its close connection to the *Declaration on Religious Freedom*. Cardinal König affirmed that "the document on Non-Christian Religions was of great importance and wide significance". Cardinal Bea said: "The Declaration on Non-Christian Religions is indeed an important and promising beginning, yet no more than the beginning of a long and demanding way towards the arduous goal of a humanity whose members feel themselves truly to be sons of the same Father in heaven and act on this conviction".

"This is the first time in the history of the Church, he said, that an Ecumenical Council exposed these principles so solemnly".

Father Anawati, O.P., Director of the Dominican Institute of Oriental Studies in Cairo, Egypt, and member of the Commission which prepared the text concerning the Muslims, (n. 3) declared: "The revival of enquiry into the subject of Islam is due to the work of Professor Louis Massignon. In the opinion of Massignon, Christians should embark upon a *spiritual Copernican revolution* and return to the origin of the Muslims teaching, to that point of virgin truth that is found at its center and makes it live. He characterized the three monotheistic religions as follows: Israel is the religion of Hope; Christianity is the religion of Love, but Islam is the religion of Faith. To some extent Massignon adopted the Muslim concept that the three monotheistic religions derive from the same source, and he acknowledges the Muslims' connection with Abraham through Ishmael: they were the heirs of his blessing and of his vocation as the Chosen One." (*Commentary on the Documents of Vatican II*, t. III, 152).

Some Muslims were surprised that the Fathers of the Council remained silent concerning the most important question in their eyes, that is, the second part of the "*shahada*": And *Muhammad is the Apostle of God*. How can Islam be without its Prophet? Why did the Council remain silent concerning the person of Muhammad or concerning the religious value of the Holy Qur'an?

Catholics recognize this as the most sensitive point for the Muslims, and yet Catholic experts have chosen to deal with it *by ignoring it*. They assert that once the dialogue is under way, this central point will have to be considered in more detail.

4. *The Declaration on Non-Christian Religions*

This Declaration is presented in five paragraphs:

1. *The Preamble* relates the process of unification towards which all mankind is tending today. The Church examines with great attention the bonds that exist among all peoples and communities in our time, particularly between the Church and Non-Christian Religions.

She enumerates three distinct bonds: 1) The task of the Church in Modern Society: In her task of fostering unity and love

among men and even among nations, the Church gives primary considerations to what human beings have in common, and to what promotes fellowship among them. 2) *The Common Destiny of the Human Race*: For all people comprise a single community, and have a single origin, since God made the whole human race of men dwell over the entire face of the earth. One is also their final goal: God. 3) *The common starting point of mutual understanding*: Man looks to the various religions for an answer to those profound mysteries of the human condition which deeply stir the human heart.

2. *The Second Paragraph*, after having emphasized the religious sense innate in man who many times arrives at a knowledge of a Supreme Being, points to the sense of sacred in the great religions of the Far East: Hinduism and Buddhism. A General note says: "Likewise, other religions to be found everywhere strive variously to answer the restless searching of the human heart by proposing "Ways" which consist of teachings, rules of life, and sacred ceremonies."

The Declaration repeats a great principle of St. Paul: "The Catholic Church rejects nothing which is true and holy in these religions. She looks with sincere respect upon those ways of conduct in life, those rules and teachings which, though differing in many particulars from what she holds and sets forth, nevertheless often reflect a ray of the Truth which enlightens all men."

3. *The Third Paragraph* deals with the Muslim Religion and the special place specifically given to Islam.

4. *The Fourth Paragraph* is concerned with Judaism and wishes to bring to mind the links by which the People of the New Testament are spiritually bound to the lineage of Abraham.

5. *The Conclusion*, finally, affirms the universal brotherhood of all men which excludes every discrimination in those things which concern the dignity of man and which diminishes their rights. It bids all Christians — accordingg to the admonition of the Apostles Peter and Paul — and ardently implores them to "maintain good fellowship among nations" (I Peter 2:8) and as far as in them lies, to keep peace with all men (Rom. 12:8) so that they may truly be sons of the Father who is in heaven.

5. *"The Special Place given to Islam"*

The Council recognizes that the Muslims have a special place among the religions of the world. The third paragraph of the Declaration is only a glimpse of the Church's stand on Islam, which presents the authentic elements of the Muslim religion.

"Upon the Muslims, 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 associated itself. Though they do not acknowledge Jesus as God, they revere Him as a Prophet. They also honor Mary, His Virgin Mother; at times they call on her, too, with devotion. In addition they await the day of judgment when God will give each man his due after raising him up. Consequently, they prize the moral life, and give worship to God especially through prayers, almsgiving, and fasting. Although in the course of the centuries many quarrels and hostilities have arisen between Christians and Muslims, this most Sacred Synod urges all to forget the past and to strive sincerely for mutual understanding.

On behalf of all mankind, let there make common cause of safeguarding and fostering social justice, moral values, peace, and freedom." (*The Declaration*, n. 3).

These words of the Council do not constitute a theological evaluation and interpretation of Islam. The Declaration maintains a practical position with the intent of opening a dialogue with the Muslims.

The elements that are emphasized above as characteristic of Muslim religiosity have to be considered as points of departure for initiating our dialogue with Muslims.

In fact the following aspects of the Muslim faith seem to be essential for a dialogue:

1) The Muslims adore the One, True, Living and sustaining God, who is the Creator of heaven and earth.

2) Their spiritual attitude before God is one of total submission to his supreme Will, even to His inscrutable decrees, just as Abraham was, with whom the Islamic faith is pleased to associate itself.

3) The Muslims venerate Jesus Christ and honor His most Holy Mother, Mary.

4) They believe in the future life, awaiting the last judgment "when God will give each man his due after raising him up".

5) They are bound to a moral law, and give worship to God, through prayers, almsgiving and fasting.

These five points which the Council present as authentic elements of the Muslim faith constitute "the glance of esteem which the Church has for the Muslims". They provide also topics of mutual dialogue. (Basetti-Sani, *The Koran in the Light of Christ*, Chicago, 1978, 191-210)

FIRST PART

AN ATTEMPT AT A THEOLOGICAL INTERPRETATION OF ISLAM

THEOLOGICAL PRINCIPLES

1. *The Whole Creation and the Human History are Centered in Jesus Christ*

I would like to present as a hypothesis my personal interpretation of the great religious phenomenon of human history, Islam, in the context of Franciscan Theology. I know that the problem of the relationship between non-Christian religions and Christianity is a complex one. I must first expose some theological principles on which I will try to base my hypothetical interpretation of Islam. K. Rahner has stated that Dogmatic Christology must be interested in the history of religions. The starting point for our knowledge of the mystery of the Incarnation must be an enlightened interpretation of the history of religions.

My interpretation, however, of the religion of Islam and its Prophet Muhammad, must always be considered within the framework of a vision of universal history which is centered upon the mystery of Jesus Christ. Christ is the King of History and in this light I will try to interpret not only the problem of the sur-

vival of Judaism after the coming of Christ, but also the problem of the presence of non-Christian religions in today's world, in particular the presence of Islam.

St. Paul's dominant theme in the *Letter to the Romans* was the restoration of a humanity fallen through the sin of the first Adam, but saved by the second Adam, Jesus Christ. During his imprisonment in Rome Paul reached the stage of an ecstatic who ceaselessly fixed his spirit in his Lord Jesus Christ. Due to Paul's fidelity God gave him a profound revelation of the full knowledge of Jesus' mystery. God's eternal design is presented by Paul in Ephesians (3:8-11), in Colossians (1:15-20) and again in Ephesians (1:3-14). In this new revelation Christ is not only the Second Adam willed by God to repair the sin of Adam. Christ is the center of God's plan. He is willed by God for his own sake, because of his intrinsic worth, and for his sake all the universe, man and angels, are willed. Jesus is no longer seen as a Redeemer whose function is merely related to the disaster of Adam and his children. It is a completely new vision of the Christological significance.

2. *The Absolute Primacy of Christ in a Theology of Religion*

It was this Pauline conception of the predestination of Christ in Ephesians and Colossians that was pondered by the theological genius of Blessed John Duns Scotus. He was able to transpose the visionary words of St. Paul into the language of Scholastic Theology. The Scotist theory of the Incarnation as being independent from Adam's sin, permits us to penetrate into the real ontological aspect of the total unity of the universe and of human history. Christ is the foundation, not only of "static" ontological reality, but also of the dynamic and vital aspect of reality. Christ is the foundation of the historical unfolding of reality, especially of persons, angels and men.

If God, — as St. Paul affirms — "will that all men be saved and come to the knowledge of the truth" (I Tim. 2:4), and if, in fact, all mankind before and after the time of the Incarnation is included in that divine salvific plan, then it is our duty to try to discover all the phases in universal history on which hinges the history of salvation. We have to keep in mind that the God

of Revelation is the God of history. The unfolding of human history, according to the supernatural plan centered in Christ, is not to be limited first to the development of the people of Israel and later to the history of Christianity. Once God's external activity, willed and oriented essentially towards Christ, began with creation, it continued on through all the progress and vicissitudes of humanity, governing the entire evolutionary process.

I would like to remind the reader of some of the principal points of Bl. Duns Scotus about Christ. God is all perfect in Himself, supremely happy in knowing and loving Himself. Therefore — says Duns Scotus — God is supremely good in Himself and has no need of creation for his perfection. God has no necessity in creating. The creation was a free and loving act on the part of God, an expression of his goodness and liberality. Man is not the reason for creation. God Himself is the only reason. (Prov. 16:4).

“First God wills Himself. As to the beings outside Himself, the Being next to God is the Soul of Christ. Therefore, after willing whatever is within Himself, God first wills this glory for Christ. Therefore, before any merit whatsoever, God foresaw Christ to be united to Himself in the unity of the Person of the Word.” (Duns Scotus, *Report Paris.*, 3, d. 32, q. 1, n; 19, t. 23, 508)

This and other texts of Duns Scotus are very important for the interpretation of the history of salvation. I prefer to speak of the “History of Christification”, because in the plan of God every being is to be in Christ, and in the image of Christ. As a first act of His will *ad extra* God oriented all rational beings, angels and men, to participation in His divine life as *Co-Lovers* (“*divinae consortes naturae*” = “*condiligentes*”) with Jesus, making them conform to the image of His beloved Son. The order and perfection of the universe are expressions of the will and the activity of God, Who is essentially Love. He chooses all created beings in hierarchical order, first of all the Soul of Christ-Man, who through the hypostatic union can love as Man-God (“*Summum Opus Dei*” — The greatest work of God) the Trinity; He is the Supreme Lover and Worshipper of the Trinity. With Christ and for Christ all angels and men, as co-lovers (*condiligentes*) are predestinated to be adoptive sons of God, participating through

Christ in the divine Life. Since the beginning, God has chosen angels and men for this unique purpose, this supernatural end.

The Second Vatican Council affirms:

"By an utterly free and mysterious decree of His own Wisdom and Goodness, the Eternal Father, created the whole world. His plan was to dignify men with a participation in His own divine life". (*Lumen Gentium*, n. 2)

"The truth is that only in the mystery of the Incarnate Word does the mystery of man take light. For Adam, the first man, was a figure of Him who has to come namely Christ the Lord... For by His Incarnation the Son of God has united Himself in some fashion with every man." (*Gaudium et Spes*, n. 22)

Also, the natural order of creation is chosen for Christ and the predestined. Each individual person is essentially linked with Christ. God's plan has as beginning and end, the reality of the existence of Jesus Christ, the Alpha and the Omega. This plan contains all the growth of the history of humanity, because every man is called to conform himself to Christ's image. Since the beginning of humanity God has given to every man in his own life, in every time and in every situation, the possibility of entering into a filial and saving relationship with Him, because rooted in the ground of every man's ontological being is the orientation to participate through Jesus Christ in the divine life as co-lover.

The insertion of each person into the universal network (concatenation) of angels and men is not achieved solely through the sacred humanity of Christ. St. Paul says: "All things are yours,... whether the world, or life, or death or the present or the future; all are yours; and you are Christ's; and Christ is God's" (I Cor. 3:22-23).

So the material universe is oriented toward man. The entire man-centered cosmic reality exists for and is centered upon Jesus Christ. God's salvific will develops its activity along the Christocentric lines of Salvation History, and is co-extensive in time and space with that integral whole that is human history.

Pope Paul VI declared: "Christ is the center of humanity. He gives significance to all human events. He is the focal point

of history and of civilization. He is the apex of human aspirations". (Osserv. Romano, Febr. 3, 1965).

If every event of human history takes its sense and its deep significance in Christ, the world's religions must also be considered in the Light of Christ.

3. *The Non-Christian Religions in the Christological Plan of God*

The whole history of humanity is centered in Christ, including the Non-Christian Religions which are a very important part of the history of humanity, and perhaps a historical realization of the will of God for salvation. They are social forms of expression of the orientation of man towards the Godhead. K. Rahner affirms that other Religions could have been willed and fore-ordained by God; they bind their followers until that moment when they come to a real and adequate discovery of the Gospel. So in some sense these religions are part of the plan of God. In fact, they are the social and structural objectivation of the fundamental religious feeling innate in man; they are the exteriorization of interior propulsions and aptitudes. In their exterior and social objectivation the interior action of God is present though these religions are subject to man's limitation and ambiguity. Hence there exists the need for distinguishing between the various levels of each religion, so that they can be considered as ways of salvation in the measure they express the response of man to God, and to the degree in which they are a manifestation of the divine image in man, of his creatureliness enlightened by Christ.

The Second Vatican Council invites us to study the Non-Christian Religions, when it says:

"Let them (the Christians) be familiar with their national and religious traditions, gladly and reverently laying bare the seed of the word which lie hidden in them. . . . So also his (Christ) disciples, profoundly penetrated by the Spirit of Christ. . . can learn by sincere and patient dialogue *what treasures a bountiful God has distributed* among the nations of the earth. (underscoring mine). But at the same time let them try to illumine these treasures with the Light of the Gospel, to set them free,

and to bring them under the dominion of God their Savior". (*"Ad Gentes"*, n. 11).

Paul VI expressed the Church's appreciation for non-Christian Religions again in his Apostolic Exhortation "*Evangeliis Nuntiandi*": (December 8, 1975)

"This first proclamation of the Gospel is also addressed to that immense section of mankind which follows non-Christian religions. The Church respects and esteems these non-Christian religions because they are the living expression of the soul of vast groups of people. They carry within them the echo of thousands of years of searching for God, a quest which is incomplete but often made with great sincerity and righteousness of heart. They possess an impressive patrimony of deeply religious texts. They have taught generations of people how to pray. They are all impregnated with innumerable "*seeds of the Word*" and can constitute a true preparation for the Gospel, to quote a felicitous term used by the Second Vatican Council and borrowed from Eusebius of Caesarea." (*Evangeliis Nuntiandi*, n. 53).

4. *The Possibility of a Para-Biblical Revelation*

Today theologians are looking into other religions as possible ways for salvation. In the Pauline-Scotistic vision of Christ, God first chose the Supreme Religion of the Trinity (Olier). Providence disposes all events of human history toward Jesus Christ. On different occasions the Second Vatican Council hints at "*the seeds of the Word*", but never expressly deals with the question of the possibility of a "para-biblical" revelation. By a "para-biblical revelation" we mean some intervention of God in the history of humanity analogous to His intervention in the history of Israel, as a supplementary function for the teaching of truths concerning faith and morality.

From some facts of the Old Testament and their interpretation by the Fathers of the Church we can point out a historical-theological demonstration of a special intervention of God outside the history of the Jewish and Christian peoples.

In Scripture we find that God speaks also to some "pagan". The case of Baalam, a pagan, upon whom the Spirit of God came. God made Baalam His instrument as "prophet" (Numb. 22-24).

The Fathers of the Church take into consideration what the book of Chronicles said about God speaking to Neco, the Pharaoh of Egypt (2 Chron. 35:21-22). Cyrus, King of Persia, is presented as the divinely appointed agent, inspired and guided by God to fulfill the prophesy of Jeremiah. The book of Job presents Job, an Edomite, (the Edomites were the most bitter enemies of the Israelites) in a special relationship with God. God is pleased to speak to Job, a pagan. So also is the example of the book of Jonah.

All the biblical examples of God's intervention outside Israel were an occasion for the Fathers of the Church to see a kind of revelation of God given outside the Jewish revelation.

The tradition concerning the special intervention of God outside the revelation of Israel and Christianity is taken over by many Fathers and theologians. We are reminded of St. Justin, St. Theophilus of Antioch, Clement of Alexandria, Origen and St. Athanasius. They considered that the philosophers received special enlightenment from the Divine Word. St. Augustine also alluded to the fact that God spoke to pagans as in the case of Job, and said; "The Gentiles also have Prophets". The case of the Sibyl was considered as a revelation concerning Jesus. Among the Medieval Fathers and theologians we find St. Gregory the Great, who examined particularly the case of Job, a Gentile; St. Peter Damiani recognized that Baalam was under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit and spoke concerning profound mysteries. Peter Abelard says that philosophers were inspired like the Prophets of the Old Testament. Like all his contemporaries he believed the books of the Sibyl to be inspired.

In the centuries that followed this tradition was maintained. We wish that special studies concerning this old tradition would be undertaken, because of its importance today as a principle for a deeper elaboration of the possibility of a para-biblical revelation.

SECOND PART

IS ISLAM A BIBLICAL MYSTERY?

In the text of the Declaration on Non-Christian Religions the part concerning Islam starts with these words: "*The Church*

regards with esteem also the Muslims". The Council has payed attention to the affirmation of the Muslims that Islam is an Abrahamitic religion. Muhammad claimed to be a "spiritual descendant from Abraham". Some hints made by the Council about the relationship between the faith of Abraham and the faith of Muslims persuade us to research toward a possible biblical basis for this Muslim conviction. If Islam claims to be tied to Abraham, we must start by looking into the texts of Genesis concerning Ishmael. It is surprising that these texts are preserved by the written Jewish tradition and not by any written Arabic pre-islamic tradition.

1. *Abraham Asks a Blessing for Ishmael and His Descendants*

Considering the development of the whole religious history in the light of Christ, we must connect Islam with the realization of the promise God gave to Abraham for his son Ishmael. Then Islam appears truly as a "biblical mystery".

The story of Abraham contains narratives concerning his son Ishmael. These narratives are an essential part of the whole of Abraham's history. The cycle of Isaac and the cycle of Ishmael are presented in Semitic parallelism. We must discover the importance that the Holy Spirit gives the narratives concerning Hagar and her son Ishmael. The first escape of Hagar and the announcement of Ishmael's birth have a strong sacred significance. (Gen. 16:6-15). Hagar knows the predilection that God has for Abraham, and also that the fruit of her womb is seed of Abraham. The announcement of the birth of Ishmael and the imposition of the name hold a religious and sacred character concerning the destiny of Ishmael and his descendants.

Announcing the birth of Isaac, the son of the promise, God's angel gives a prophesy about Ishmael:

"As for Ishmael, I have heard you; behold, I will bless him and make him fruitful and multiply him exceedingly. He shall be father of twelve princes, and I will make him a great nation. But I will establish my covenant with Isaac." (Genesis. 17:18-21)

The text is certainly in parallel with the promise of Isaac. The prophecy concerning Ishmael is presented as real, but of

secondary importance. Jewish and Christian reflection have paid considerable attention upon the destiny of Isaac, while the lot of Ishmael has been left out. A mysterious destiny was prepared for Ishmael: "He will be in front of his brothers!". He shall be a wild ass of a man, a "*ferus homo*". Since Ishmael is also the fruit of the seed of Abraham, he receives a blessing which assures him of the assistance of God. "And God was with him". God prepared him for a different and distinct destiny. The covenant and the promises are only for Isaac and his descendants. Ishmael and his descendants appear to be excluded and eliminated, inspite of being "seed of Abraham". When Christ comes to embrace all humanity, the descendants of Ishmael do not remain "excluded for ever". God has reserved a special plan by preparing slowly their participation in the full knowledge of the mystery of Christ through a special and temporary economy. Ishmael and his descendants carry the sign of membership in the family of Abraham, the circumcision, until today; and they remain of the family of Abraham, even after being cast out of his house.

2. *The Expulsion of Hagar and Ishmael from Abraham's House*

Chapter 16 of Genesis shows the jealousy of Sarah for the maternity of her maid and the flight of Hagar into the desert. The angel of the Lord asked Hagar to go back and surrender to her mistress. Then after the birth of Isaac, Sarah required Abraham to cast out from the house the maid Hagar and her son. Only the Lord's words urged Abraham to this sacrifice of paternal love. Sarah's desire was not only the fruit of her jealousy, but also a manifestation of God's will. Then, once again, God repeated to Abraham the limitation of the Covenant and the election of Isaac, expressing clearly the exclusion of Ishmael:

"And the thing was very displeasing to Abraham on account of his son (Ishmael). But God said to Abraham: "Be not displeased because of the lad and because of your slave woman. Whatever Sarah says to you, do as she tells you, for through Isaac shall your descendants be named. And I will make a nation of the son of the slave woman also, because he is your offspring". (Gen. 21:10-13)

It is time to recognize that the whole of Ishmael's story is unfolded in a religious context and is intimately connected with

the plan of salvation, centered on the figure of Isaac. Since the first appearance of the angel to Hagar in the desert it was promised that special assistance would be given to her and to her future son, the belligerent Ishmael. The conclusion of the whole of Ishmael's story, in Chapter 21, confirms this particular destiny.

"Hagar.... wandered in the wilderness... When the water in the skin was gone, she cast the child under one of the bushes. Then she went, and sat down over against him a good way off, about the distance of the bowshot; for she said: "Let me not look upon the death of the child." And as she sat over against him, the child lifted up his voice and wept. And God heard the voice of the lad; and the angel of the Lord called to Hagar from heaven and said to her: "What troubles you, Hagar? Fear not, for God has heard the voice of the lad where he is. Arise, lift up the lad, and hold him fast with your hand; for I will make him a great nation. Then God opened her eyes, and she saw a well of water; and she went, and filled the skin with water, and gave the lad a drink. And God was with the lad, and he grew up; he lived in the wilderness of Pharan; and his mother took a wife for him from the land of Egypt." (Gen. 21: 15-21)

This scene is full of human sensibility! Hagar did not like to see her son dying. In the Greek and Syriac versions it is Hagar who "lifted her voice and wept". In any case, here the Bible speaks of the "first tears", and this fact having been noted means that there is a special significance and value to those tears. God answers the cry of both Hagar and Ishmael.

These Biblical events concerning Ishmael, considered in the context of Abraham's story, belong to the history of salvation as a parallel with Isaac's story. They retain religious and prophetic features. It seems that even today the very important significance of the Biblical roots of the mysterious presence of Islam in the history of salvation has not been given sufficient attention in theological reflections.

3. The Descendants of Ishmael in the Jewish and Christian Tradition before Islam

In order to have a theological reflection on the prophetic significance of the Biblical texts about the destiny of Ishmael, it

would be interesting to analyze the Jewish and Christian traditions before and after the coming of Islam.

It is clear that the Rabbinic tradition interpreted the story of Hagar and Ishmael in an unfair manner, insisting only on the ferocity of Ishmael and his descendants. The few allusions of the Old Testament to the "Sons of Ishmael", the Hagarenes, are interpreted in reference to the Arabs. The Apocrypha and later the Talmud give a black picture of Ishmael and his descendants, the Arabs. They are scorned and called "bastards"; "sons of a slave woman", marauders and robbers.

The phrase: "God was with him" has a malevolent meaning, denying to Ishmael any special divine assistance. God was with him as He is with a donkey or a camel-driver. All these malevolent Jewish opinions from the Rabbinic tradition against Ishmael and his descendants, the Arabs, have passed on to Christian authors.

St. Justin affirms that Abraham is not the father of the Arabs; their father is Ishmael. St. Ephrem the Syrian speaks of Hagar as "the mother of the wild asses dwelling in the desert". St. Gregory of Nyssa and St. Jerome continue the Talmudic tradition, calling the Arabs "sons of Quetura", "the slaves of the powers of darkness". St. Jerome speaks also about the cult of the Black Stone conserved in the temple at Mecca and relates this cult of the Black Stone with that of Venus' star. In his interpretation of the different texts of the Bible concerning Ishmael and the Ishmaelites, Jerome shows his scornful spirit, inherited from his Rabbinic teachers. Commenting on the text of Jeremiah and of Isaiah against Edom he writes: "the prophecies would be realized when the sons of Ketura, the Arabs, sons of the East will convert themselves from idolatry to the true and living God. Then they will dominate from India to Mauritania until the Atlantic Ocean."

Ancient Christian writers like Socrates, Sozomen, Ruffinus, etc. avoid the Biblical names of Ishmaelites and Hagerenes; they prefer the names Saracenes or Arabs.

5. *Islam claims Descent from Abraham*

In his work on *Abraham dans le Coran*, Father Moubarac clarified the relationship between Muhammad and the Patriarch Abraham. It is extremely important that the Second Vatican Council recognizes the faith of Muslims as an Abrahamitic faith. The Muslims then are *the spiritual descendants of Abraham*. It seems very symptomatic also that the Council does not mention Ishmael. By the fact that the Islamic faith does not express the promise of the Messiah explicitly, but still accepts Jesus as a prophet, it recognizes the realization of this promise and shows that this faith is genuinely Abrahamitic, an initial supernatural faith in the God of Abraham and in Jesus. Father Moubarac has demonstrated that Islam is authentic Abrahamism and not only "Ishmaelism", for it participates in the faith of Abraham. Muhammad confessed this since the time of his Meccan preaching. (Mcubarac, Y.: *"L'Islam et le Dialogue Islamo-Chretien"* — *Pentalogie Islamo-Chretienne*, t. III, pp. 103-112) At Mecca Muhammad discovered more and more his ties with Abraham. The portrait of Abraham as a religious type, completed at Mecca, is the principal foundation for the subsequent development. All the spiritual attitudes of Muhammad are molded on the surrendering of Abraham to God (*Muslim*); the believers, "muslims", are presented by the Qu'ran as descendants of Abraham, who is called "the first muslim". He is their example for surrendering themselves to God. For Muhammad, Ishmael does not depend more on Abraham than Isaac. It is not the fleshly generation that is necessary for having the faith of Abraham but the spiritual descent. This is the reason to state that Islam is not "Ishmaelism" but an "Abrahamism of the desert".

First Massignon and then Moubarac have showed the similarities between Abraham and Muhammad. If Muhammad acquired a clearer consciousness of his descent from Abraham through Ishmael, he never gave importance in the Qur'an to the colorless figure of Ishmael. Only later in the Muslim tradition was the fact of their descent from Abraham through Ishmael emphasized in opposition to the Jews.

The texts of the Qur'an concerning the "City", the "Temple" are written in a polemic context against the Jews; their meaning has to be reinterpreted concerning Jerusalem not Mecca. Later

Muslim generations understood these texts as referring to Mecca. They insisted on the role of Abraham and Ishmael as founders of the temple of Ka'ba at Mecca, with a pre-occupation to exalt Ishmael over Isaac. So, for example, the son whom God commands Abraham to sacrifice is not Isaac but Ishmael.

This consciousness of the Abrahamitic connection through Ishmael descendants is maintained during the centuries and is expressed by many Muslim authors, basing it on the biblical story. The fact of the Muslims tradition linking them to their Prophet Muhammad and to Abraham must be taken more seriously by Christian theologians.

6. Islam's Descent from Abraham in the Jewish and Christian Traditions

After the appearance of Islam, the Jews saw the Muslims as the "Ishmaelites" or the "Hagarenes". When Caliph Omar conquered Jerusalem in 638 and Caesarea in 641, he relaxed the ban on Jewish residence in Jerusalem; the Jewish Academy was allowed to move to the Holy City. Jews and Christians were protected minorities. Since contact with Arabs was first made outside Arabia the Jews regarded the Muslims with a certain scorn; yet they recognized them as descendants of Abraham through Ishmael. So Saadia Ben Joseph (892-942) was much milder in his treatment of Islam than of Christianity; both are daughter religions of Judaism, but Islam maintained more faithfully the monotheism of Abraham and Moses. Rabbi Solomon Ben Isaac Rashi (1040-1105) strongly expressed his scorn for the Muslims, calling them "Ishmaelites who are similar to the bad spirits because they dress themselves in black color." Rabbi Sherira Ben Hananian (990-968) and his son Rabbi Hai (+1038), who held discussions with Muslim theologians, both called the Muslims descendants of Ishmael.

The Muslims are considered Ishmaelites also by Judah-ha-Levi (1085-1142), by Rabbi Jacob Ben Nathaniel-ha-Cohen. Many pilgrims and travellers to Palestine often described Muslims as virtuous and praying people. Benjamin of Tudela who visited Jerusalem, Damascus, and Baghdad left an enthusiastic presentation of the Caliph al-Abasi. He called the Muslims "Ishmaelites".

The German Rabbi Petachia of Ratisbone speaks with respect of Muhammad and of Muslims, whom he also called Ishmaelites. In 1210 Samson Ben Samson of Concy made a pilgrimage to Palestine together with Rabbi Jonathan-ha-Cohen. Arriving at Jerusalem they both wept bitterly. They called the Muslims Ishmaelites; the Christians were the "uncircumcised".

The great Rabbi Moses Ben Maimonides (1135-1204) recognized the particular Abrahamitic character that Islam claims through Ishmael. He refused to describe as superstitions such customs as prostration in prayer and the stone throwing at the Ka'ba. He affirmed the validity of the pilgrimage to Mecca for the remission of the sins among Muslims. The teaching of Jesus and Muhammad bring to perfection all mankind, as they serve God with one consent. Islam, "the Ishmaelites", who arose after the Nazarene, serve to prepare the way for the Messiah.

After Maimonides many other Jews recognized the claim of Islam as descending from Abraham. Rabbi Moses Ben Nahman (Nahmanide or Gerondi), Simon Ben Zeman Duran (1361-1444), Elijah of Ferrara, Rabi Meshullam Ben Menahem of Volterra and the Karaite Isaac Ben Abraham Troki (1533-1594) called the Christians Edom and the Muslims Ishmael.

These scattered evidences collected through the Jewish tradition show the permanent awareness of a linkage of Islam to Abraham, through Ishmael. It is also very important to note that all Jewish interpretations of this fact are not without prejudice.

Since the appearance of Muhammad we find the same tradition among Christians.

It is very significant to note the fact that the first official encounter between Islam and the Catholic Church took place in Jerusalem. The Patriarch St. Sophronius in his sermon on the eve of Christmas in 635, when the army of the Caliph Omar was besieging the Holy City, said: "since we have kept the orthodox faith constantly, it will be easy for us to break the Ishmaelites sword, to send away from us the dagger of the Saracenes, to smash the armor-plates of the Hagarenes and contemplate our holy Bethlehem". St. Sophronius used the three Biblical names Ishmaelites, Hagarenes and Saracenes for designating the Muslims.

Starting with the Byzantine polemist St. John Damascene, Theodore Abû Qurra, Theophanes the Confessor, Nicetas of Byzantium, etc., the naming of the Muslims as Ishmaelites and particularly as Hagarenes has come to mean something scornful in the mind of the Christians. It is observed that the scornful names of Ishmaelites or Hagarenes are not found among the Christian Monophysites or Nestorians who, living among Muslims, ordinarily speak with more care about Islam and its Prophet.

In the West the naming of the Muslims as Ishmaelites and Hagarenes by Popes, Councils, Scripture Commentators and theologians, is constant. Another fact is very important; in the Papal Bulls calling the crusades, we always find quoted the Genesis text: *Ejice ancillam et filium eius* (Cast out the maid and her son). Thus started Pope Urban II's appeal for the First crusade. Eugene III, Lucius III, Innocent III, Honorius III, Gregory IX, Innocent IV, Boniface VIII, and Clement V, repeated the same text.

The relationship between Islam and Abraham is affirmed by many Christian authors. In spite of the allegorical interpretation given by St. Paul in Galatians to the texts of Genesis, Rabanus Maurus sees the story of Hagar and Ishmael as a mystery which concerns the Ishmaelites and the Saracenes.

The Spanish St. Agobard, Archbishop of Lyons, France, affirms that the Muslims, known as Hagarenes and also called Saracens, are descendants of Abraham; but they are better than the Jews. St. Bede the Venerable, in his Biblical Commentary, explains that the Saracens were descendants from Hagar, and the actual descendants of Ishmael are the Saracens. Ishmael was driven into the desert. The Saracens came from the desert. Ishmael was a wild man whose hand was against every man's. Could any better description of the Saracens be found than this? Ishmael was outside the Covenant, so were the Saracens. For St. Bede there were several other ways in which the character of the Saracens could be understood in the light of this identification with the children of Ishmael.

The same identification is found in Walafrid Strabon, in Angelomus of Luxeuil, an author of the Carolingian school, in Fredegarius Scholasticus. Peter Abelard (1079-1142) speaks of the Muslims descendants from Abraham through Ishmael as living in a stage of natural law, predestined to the Sinaitic and Evan-

gelical laws. With the Muslims he emphasized the importance for dialogue through the use of human reason in order to reach supernatural faith.

St. Bernard, Peter the Venerable, Peter Comestor and Godfridus of Viterbo associated Islam and the Saracens with the descendants of Ishmael and Hagar. They often identified the Arabs with the Ishmaelites of the Bible.

I could continue to quote names and texts, but it is not necessary to do so. Unfortunately, the greater part of Christian authors only saw the negative aspect of Islam. Apriorisms and many prejudices against the Arab prophet Muhammad and his Qur'an have hindered an objective and sympathetic study of Islam.

This convergence of Jewish, Christian and Islamic traditions in a common consciousness attesting to the relationship between Abraham — Ishmael and Islam is a strong invitation for a theological reflexion concerning the biblical mystery of Islam. And the use that many Popes have made of the text of Genesis revealed also the important need to analyze the nature of the religious phenomena initiated by Muhammad, in the light of the development of the history of Salvation.

"In the course of the centuries — said Second Vatican Council — (*Nostra Aetate*", n. 3) many quarrels and hostilities have arisen" between Christians and Muslims. I think that the first difficulty to be overcome in the Christian consciousness is to accept the value of the tradition that recognizes the Muslims as true descendants of Abraham. In order to give a more theological value to this consciousness or subconsciousness it would be necessary to collect most of the exegetical commentaries of the Patristic as well as of the ecclesiastical tradition concerning the biblical texts of Genesis related to Ishmael. We must discover the meaning of the blessing and promises that God gave to Abraham through his son Ishmael.

From this analysis a theological reflexion could be prepared for a deeper interpretation of the significance of Islam in the history of Salvation.

THIRD PART

ISLAM IN THE HISTORY OF SALVATION

After having recalled some theological principles; the possibility of a para-biblical revelation; the Jewish, Christian, and Islamic traditions which seem to affirm a relationship between Islam and Abraham through his son Ishmael, we must seriously consider two main facts:

1. For many centuries a great part of mankind, made up of Muslim believers, has accepted, as the foundation of their faith, the fact that *the Qur'an is a Sacred Book revealed by God*.

2. This same part of mankind, for many centuries, has considered Muhammad as the bearer of the Word of God. This, too, is an article of Faith for the Muslims: *Muhammad is the Messenger of God*.

For an evaluation of Islam in the light of salvation history it is urgent and extremely important to start from a study of the Qur'an, accepting it hypothetically as the true Word of God, as the foundation for a para-biblical revelation which God gave to some people as a preparation for the Gospel.

Is it possible to re-read the Qur'an in the light of Christianity? If the Qur'an is taken, as the Muslim faith affirms, as a revealed book, then we can verify this assumption shedding the light of authentic revelation on this mysterious book, and try to "open" it with a Christian key.

Pius XII invited us to "to show that everything that is good and right in other religions finds its deepest meaning and its ultimate perfection in Christ". (Dec. 31, 1952, *Acta Apost. Sedis* 45, 1953, 99) This invitation is a challenge for the educated Christian to find a possible interpretation for the Qur'an, which would harmonize with Christian Revelation. I am convinced that the interpretation which Muslim commentators have given for centuries to the Qur'anic message and Muhammad's mission, after the first hundred years of the Hegirah, was primarily the work of the Jewish Rabbis converted to Islam such as Abd Allah Ibn Salam, Rabbi of Medina (d. 663), Rabbi Ka'b al-Ahbar, Abu Ya' qûb, etc., and of Christians converted to Islam such as Tabati.

Unfortunately these new converts gave a strong anti-Christian tilt to Islam in its historical and doctrinal development.

I am convinced that the traditional and often anti-Christian interpretation of the Qur'an is not the only interpretation possible. Ibn Ayad, a Muslim mystic who was touched by the grace of God and gave up a life of brigandage for one of prayer and penance, says: "He who has understood the hidden meaning of the Qur'an has no need of the books of the hadiths".

By re-reading the Qur'an with the Christian key, as we Christians do with the Old Testament, we could discover a deeper sense and more correct explanation. Muslim mystics as well as the Shi'ite traditions speak of the hidden sense of the Qur'an (*batin*). I am concerned with discovering a reality that is much more profound than that which appears from a simple glance at the literal sense. Just as the Bible, as St. Augustin said, is "pregnant with the mystery of Christ", the mystery of Christ may also be found in the Qur'an! In my re-reading of the Qur'an with the Christian key, I try to place myself within the living context of Muhammad's religious activity and find how he used an idea, why he used it, and to whom he was preaching. It is not necessary to admit that Muhammad, and after him his followers, understood the complete sense of the Qur'anic message. I could quote St. Thomas Aquinas regarding the knowledge the prophets may have had concerning what they saw and wrote: "Since the mind of the prophet is a defective instrument, even true prophets do not always know everything the spirit intended by visions and words and deeds". (*Summa Theol.* II-II; q. 173, a. 2).

I think that a kind of veil has prevented the Muslims from seeing the true and authentic countenance of Christ in the Qur'an. A sincere and loving effort on the part of Christians could help Muslims to discover in their Holy Book the real meaning of its message, oriented towards the "Good News of the Gospel".

Some Islamologists, looking for the sources of the Qur'an, conclude that Muhammad had the ability to take from Judaism, from Christianity and from Gnosticism what was necessary in order to establish a religion adequate for his Arab pagans. But, in fact, Muhammad was not an expert "alchemist", to repeat Massignon's expression!

"The Church looks with esteem upon the Muslims", says the Second Vatican Council. In this spirit of esteem I shall try to present in the following pages the essential message of the Qur'an.

1. *The Muslims Adore the One, True, Living and Sustaining Creator of Heaven and Earth*

Many Christians in the past have maintained that "Allah", the "God of Islam", was "an Oriental despot". When we get acquainted with Yahwé of the Old Testament we could recognize in the God of the Qur'an many of the characteristics of the God of Abraham, of Isaac, and of Jacob. *Allah* is the name given in the Arabic language to the One, True and Living God. It is used not only by Muslims but also by the Christians of the Middle East. God is named differently and is held holy in every language: *Yahwé* in Hebrew, *Theos* in Greek, *Deus* in Latin, *God* in English, *Gott* in German, *Dieu* in French, and *Allah* in Arabic. It is often heard that "*Allah* is the god of the Muslims" and the question is easily dismissed.

Many centuries before the Second Vatican Council, Pope St. Gregory VII declared: "We [Christians and Muslims] must have greater charity among ourselves than with people of other faiths because, although there are mutual differences, yet, we believe and confess the same One, true God; it is He whom we praise and venerate every day as the Creator of all ages and Ruler of the world" (Migne, *Patr. Lat.* t. 148, c. 451).

Allah, the God of the Qur'an, is the same God of Revelation, the God of Abraham. For this reason I do not agree with those who speak of Islam as a "natural religion", in the sense that the God whom the Muslims adore is a God of philosophers arrived at by human reason. *Allah* is the God of Biblical Revelation. It is true that the essence of the Religion of Islam is the "proclamation of the absolute transcendence of God", by the "Shahada". "*It is not a deity, but true God!*" The monotheistic and transcendent Qur'anic God cannot be reduced to a pure affirmation of the natural order (theodicy). Muhammad and his followers did not arrive at the confession of One God through a process of reasoning (rational demonstration), but they discovered the God of Abraham under the impulse of supernatural grace.

It is also superficial to speak of the Qur'anic God as "a capricious arbitrator", or of the Qur'an as a fatalistic religious book without regard to a profound sense of divine transcendence and freedom of God. The monotheism of the Old Testament is the affirmation of Yahwé, whose Being and Power the Israelites experienced in action in their history. He is not some numinous power, but the One, Only, Absolute God, beside Whom there is no other god. This same affirmation appears at every Qur'anic surah, in which God continuously speaks to man.

The Qur'anic message was directed to the Arab pagans of Mecca and later of Medina. It is a very simple affirmation of the Unicity of God, against the polytheistic conviction of the Arab people. It is something unique for a primitive mentality to be introduced into the depth of God's mystery and to keep this mentality pure without being contaminated by materialistic ideas.

Islam forbids any representation of images because a primitive mentality would be tempted by idolatry. It has sometimes been stated that pictures are forbidden in the Qur'an; but I do not see any specific mention of this in the Holy Book. Theologians later quoted Surah 5:92 in support of their condemnation of the art of avoiding idolatry. Islam is the religion of faith. The Qur'an insists on the doctrine concerning God, His Unity, His Essence, His Attributes and His works. This insistence urges the people to turn away from pagan idolatric polytheism and accept the unique One God, to Whom belong 99 excellent names (Surah 7:179).

"Surely your Lord is God, who created the heaven and the earth in six days, then sat Himself upon the Throne..." (Surah 7:52). The Qur'an calls God Omniscient, Judge of all, Author, Preserver of all things, the Might, the Wise, (Surah 6:59-60, 95-108), God Everlasting, Self-subsisting. God brings forth the living from the dead, and the dead from the living (Surah 3:25).

The simplicity of the Qur'anic description is due to the fact that it is meant for a primitive simple people. Later theological reflection has developed into different schools of thought.

The text of the Second Vatican Council states: "Muslims adore One God, living and enduring, merciful and all-Powerful, Maker of heaven and earth and Speaker to man". It is very

important to note this expression of God as "speaker to man". Islamic faith is founded on the conviction that the Qur'an is the Word of God. The belief of Muslims concerning revelation is that God speaks to man through the Divine Scriptures. This has a good value when we consider it in relation to Hinduism and Buddhism. Besides Judaism and Christianity, only Islam has the concept of Revelation, viz. that Sacred Books originated from God. So too Islam jealously preserved the Abrahamic monotheism untouched and pure for over 1300 years despite the penchant of human beings toward idolatry. The fidelity to pure monotheism and the fact of its spread among mountain peoples, Persians, Turks, Hindus, etc. goes beyond man's activity. The First Vatican Council affirmed that due to this penchant toward idolatry, man cannot persevere in monotheism without special divine assistance. It is a moral miracle that Islam maintained with constant endurance the purity of the monotheistic faith. (First Vatican Council: "*De Revelatione*", Ench. Symb., n. 1786).

2. *The Islamic Attitude before God means to be completely
Submissive to Him as Abraham was*

Father Moubarac says that the "*Religion of Abraham is Islam*", and that the Faith of Abraham is the faith of Islam. ("*Abraham dans le Coran*", pp. 103-108). Massignon declared: "If Israel is rooted in Hope, and Christianity is devoted to Charity, then Islam is centered on Faith. Islam is the religion of Faith. But it is not a religion of a natural faith in the God of philosophers, but a religion of faith in the God of Abraham, of Isaac and of Ishmael. It is the same as our faith in God". ("*La Salut de l'Islam*", in *Jeunesse de l'Eglise*, 1947, 140). The Qur'an invited Muslims to confess: "We believe in God, in the one who has been sent down to us and was sent down to Abraham, Ishmael, Isaac and Jacob..." (Surah 2:130).

The Second Vatican Council recognized the relationship between Abraham and Islam when it said: "They (the Muslims) strive to submit wholeheartedly even to his inscrutable decrees, just as Abraham did with whom Islamic faith is pleased to associate itself".

The absolute transcendence which God asks from man is the complete dependence and total unconditional surrender of himself

to the Lordship of God. *Islam* means precisely this "total submission", and "*muslim*" means "one who is submissive to God". And the Qur'an says: "Abraham was the first muslim", viz. the first one who was submissive to God.

The relationship to Abraham is expressed by every Muslim at the end of his prayer: "O God, call down a blessing on Muhammad and on the family of Muhammad, as Thou didst call down a blessing on Abraham". "Through this formula *Tasliya* — Massignon comments — the Muslim faith links itself to the prayer of Abraham, who is called the founder of the Muslim Community (Surah 22:77), and consequently superior to Muhammad according to some ancient Muslim scholars. The Muslim faith thus points to a supernatural source, giving it (one could almost say) a theological foundation: the last incorruptible part of the paternal legacy to Ishmael, finally rediscovered and venerated by Muhammad with jealous exclusiveness". (Massignon, *Les trois prières d'Abraham. Second prière.*, Tours, 1935, p. 15).

This relationship with Abraham constitutes what we should call "the mystery of Islam". Massignon continues: "This is the mystery of a religion which was born at the Patriarchal age and which got aware of itself six hundred years after Pentecost, after the effusion of the Holy Spirit over the Church, and vindicates its original link with Abraham, the father of all believers. Thus we Christians are in front of a people who affirm their faith in One God; we are in front of a religion which expects its salvation through this truly theological faith and through this fidelity." (*Ibid.*)

Every Muslim considers himself mobilized to defend the transcendence of God. He hopes to accomplish the will of Muhammad, the command of the holy war: "I received an order to fight men until they confess that there is no other deity except God."

In the name of Abraham, Muhammad transposed the Jewish pilgrimage of Jerusalem to Mecca, the Hajj. He substituted the pagan sacrifice of a camel with the lamb's sacrifice, in remembrance of the sacrifice of Abraham, which is the figure of the sacrifice of Christ on the cross.

The Qur'an affirms that "the hands of God are not closed" against the exclusiveness of the Jews and of the Christians. It maintained and proclaimed the universal divine protection, also

over those who were disinherited of the excluded Ishmael. (Surah 7:156-158).

God's ways often are different from man's ways! To the scholars of Athens, He sent, as the announcer of His divine Word, a contemptible Jew, the Apostle Paul, in order to confuse the wisdom of this world (I Cor. 1:27). A new gift of God comes now to the children of Israel. God had chosen what in their eyes had neither nobility nor value. From the stone of the desert, He raised up a son of Abraham, a descendant of Ishmael, who was sent to claim the honor of Christ and His mother, which the Jews had rejected.

Against the self-sufficiency of the Jews, who rely upon their law and their righteousness, the Qur'an — as St. Paul does — exalts the omnipotence of God and His independence from all. "God leads astray whomsoever He will, and whomsoever He will guides." (Surah 35:8/9). Man cannot pretend to be anything. All that he has, all that he is, is a pure gift of God. God, therefore, appears as supremely and absolutely free and claims continual adoration and the acknowledgement of His divine omnipotence. The emphasis on the absolute will of God, exacting from man an unconditional surrender, as He did from Abraham, "the first Muslim", is directed against the monopoly of the Jews who were claiming that God's Covenant was promised only to them.

Muhammed feels himself linked to Abraham and because of this link he is aware of his special divine mission to the idolatrous Arabs and Jewish communities of Mecca and Medina. In spite of the immemorial scorn that the Jews had against the Arabs calling them "*dodain*" (cousins) and Ishmaelites, Jews considered the Arabs as spurious children of Abraham. The call of Muhammad, as recorded in the Qur'an (Surah 96:1-5) comes "from the Lord who created man, who taught by the pen". These words link the mission of Muhammad with the Revelation already given by God. Mecca contained not only pagan Arabs but also Jews, related to the Falashia of Abyssinia, and influenced by Sadduceism. In the Qur'an these Jews appear to be hard and arrogant, complacent about their prosperity and economic position. They were not concerned with the coming of the Messiah. They rejected the doctrine of the resurrection of the dead, personal immortality, rewards and punishment beyond the tomb, and the existence of

angels and devils. These Jews of Mecca, as well as those of Medina, were, to a large degree, assimilated through the use of the Arabic language.

The preaching of impending judgment and of the existence of a future life after the resurrection was addressed to Jews and pagan Arabs, who were immersed in material interests, heedless of any spiritual value. Muhammad's announcement was done in a language full of Biblical images and with elements that recall the history of Israel. The Mount of the Fig, the Mount of Olives, the Sinai, the Land or City (Jerusalem), the Book written in a parchment roll, the Temple, etc., all these were familiar expressions for the Jews.

It is also clear that all the Bible stories used by Muhammad in his preaching at Mecca and later at Medina required a Jewish audience who had some knowledge of them. It is in this anti-Jewish polemical context that the Surah 2:118/124 shows the Jews as wicked descendants of Abraham who received no benefit from the Messianic promises. The "House", as a meeting place for all humanity, is not the sanctuary of Ka'ba in Mecca, but the Temple of Jerusalem. Jerusalem is seen as the place of the great return of all the people of Israel and all mankind at the last judgment. And it was here that Abraham along with Ishmael made the covenant with God. Abraham's prayer is for Jerusalem, the Promised Land, and above all for the promised one. The promised one is not — as the Muslims believe — Muhammad, but Jesus Christ (v. 123-129), who will teach wisdom and will purify the descendants of Abraham (Cfr. John 8:56).

The Second Vatican Council, recognizing the spiritual attitude of Muslims before God, the complete submissiveness to the Supreme Will of God, "just as Abraham did", affirms the link with the father of believers. This is of great spiritual value. The Islamic faith is Abraham's faith; and therefore we must see Islam as an authentic Abrahamism.

3. The Muslims venerate Jesus Christ and honor His Most Holy Mother Mary

The prophetic message of the Qur'an was intended for the Arab descendants of Ishmael, as well as for the Jews of Mecca and Medina, the new "sons of Ishmael" according to St. Paul (*Gal.*,

4:22-30). Muhammad had to announce to them the Messianism of Jesus and the holiness of His Mother Mary. The Christology of the Qur'an has its limitations. Out of the 6236 verses of the Qur'an, only seventy-four have an explicit reference to Jesus Christ. Jesus, the Messiah, and His Mother, the Virgin Mary, really are the personages who dominate the Qur'anic message by their excellency among all other Biblical characters. In fact the Qur'anic references to Mary are more articulate than those to Jesus.

I affirm that the Qur'an is an authentic revelation destined for the pagan Arabs, descendants of Ishmael, as well as a witness to the Messianism of Jesus for the Jews of Mecca and Medina. It is the beginning of an avenue to God: the discovery of the first commandment for an idolatrous people and, at the same time, the first presentation of Jesus. Under certain aspects this initial step is comparable to the beginning of the religious-social development of the Hebrew people in the desert of Sinai, under the guidance of Moses. In fact between Moses and Muhammad there exists profound psychological and spiritual similarities. The religious content and the social ethics of the Exodus are similar to those of the Qur'an. The Qur'an does not speak to the Israelites in Palestine at the time of the coming of Jesus, nor does it speak to the Orthodox Christians of the seventh century, but to the Jews who dwell in the desert of Arabia, in the same way as Moses spoke to the Israelites of the Exodus. The Qur'an, in addition, presents to the Arabs, in an initial manner, the mysterious personage of Jesus Christ. But above all, it is a call to the Jews of Mecca and Medina to accept Christ as their Messiah, and His Mother, the Virgin Mary as holy.

In many texts of the Qur'an it is repeated that Muhammad does not possess *the treasure of God*, nor does he know the "Mystery of God" (*al-ghayeb*). For this reason we must place his presentation of Jesus in the general context of Muhammad's mission. As I have exposed in my book (*"The Koran in the Light of Christ"*, Franciscan Herald Press, Chicago, 1978, pp. 122-124), I am convinced that the Qur'anic expression "*Ahl al-Kita*", "*the People of the Book*", is the equivalent of the Hebrew "*Soferim*": the men of the book. The expression refers to the Scribes and Rabbis of Judaism, the interpreters of the Torah. So all texts

in which we find this expression "*Ahl al-Kitab*" refer to the Jewish Rabbis who polemized with Muhammad. We have to remember that the Christians of Arabia in Muhammad's time were mostly individual men without a following, who had preserved very little of authentic Christianity. There were not any organized Christian communities, with bishops, or priests. The scanty allusions to Christians in the Qur'an are not sufficient to identify them. Nor is there any explicit mention of Christians, even where the Qur'an records the annunciation of Mary and the birth of Jesus (Surah 19:41/40). The entire context reveals that the history is intended to present the figure of Christ to the pagans of Mecca and to the Jews. Thus the Surah 61, which is a polemical passage encountering the Jewish resistance to Muhammad's preaching, speaks of the origin of the two communities, Jewish and Christian. It recalls the resistance of the Jews to Moses, then to Jesus, then it tells that Muhammad would come to restore to Him the honor the Jews refused Him (cf. John 8:50). The Apostles are mentioned as "helpers of God", an expression that reminds one of St. Paul (I Cor. 3:9). A section of Israel who accepted Jesus was confirmed and emerged victorious. This is an allusion to the beginning of the Christian Church. Sometimes Christians are explicitly named in connection with the followers of monotheism (Surah 2:59/62; 22:17; 5:73/69). At other times they are criticised, like the Jews, for their exclusiveness. This refers to particular Christians of that period rather than to any doctrines of the Church. The Qur'an does not criticize Christian Orthodoxy, but some Christian individuals or groups which showed signs of hostility to other Christians and Jews. In fact the antagonism between Jews and Christians was one of the barriers that halted Islam on its way towards Jesus Christ, just as the divisions among Christians stopped Islam from discovering the true face of Christ (Cf. John 17:21).

From these few and scanty details it is not possible to pinpoint who these Christians were. The Qur'anic rejection of the formula "*ittakhadha waladan*" i.e. "to take a son", can mean polytheistic idolatry because it refers to sexual generation, and could refer to the Nestorian formula. Likewise they rejected the Monophysite formula: "*God is the Messiah, Son of Mary*" — *Allah Huwa al-Masih Ibn Mariyam*". This in itself does not indicate a rejection of the orthodox Catholic formula. The same must be

said about the rejection and condemnation of a threetheism, which seems to have been professed by some Christian heretics in Arabia. They believed in a "trinity" composed of God (the Father), Mary, goddess and wife of God [the Holy Spirit = because *Ruh*, Spirit, in Hebrew, Syriac and Arabic is feminine and was identified with Mary = *Theotokos*], and Jesus, the Son of God and Mary. Many Jews considered this "trinity" the Trinity of Orthodox faith. Then by the fact that Muhammad condemned such a wrong formulation of the Incarnation and Trinitarian threetheism, he did not reject the Christian doctrines in their correct formulation. There is not the slightest hint of this in the Qur'an.

The Qur'an gives an eminent position to Jesus. Much has been written about the place of Jesus and Mary in the Qur'an, but the real reason why Jesus and Mary are wrapped in mystery has still to be found.

Jesus for example is presented as the "*Servant*" — "*Abd*". All the texts are polemic in character and are against the Jews. They try to present Jesus' Messianic work in relation to the prophecies about the "*Servant of Yahwe*" in Isaiah. The Qur'an counters the Messianic triumphalism of some Jews, first by presenting Jesus, not in the glory of Tabor, to which only the privileged ones are invited, but in the meekness of the one who said: "Learn from me, for I am meek and lowly of heart" (Matt. 11:29), and "the Son of man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many". (Matt. 20:28). The insistence, certainly deliberate, with which the humanity of Christ is emphasized, was not intended to be a denial of His divinity. Jesus is always named "Son of Mary" *Issa, Ibn Mariyam*. This is in accordance with the Qur'an's special purpose in rehabilitating Jesus in the wake of the blasphemies against Him and Mary. "The illegitimate birth of Jesus has always been a firm dogma of Judaism" (Krauss). Every Jewish source speaking about Jesus puts him in a bad light by ascribing illegitimacy to Him, the practice of sorcery with help of the devil, and a shameful death. At Mecca, too, these blasphemies were current among the Jews (Surah 4:154-155).

If we read closely the texts concerning Jesus and Mary, keeping in mind the Rabbinic tradition about the illegitimate birth of Jesus, we discover in the Qur'an the constant preoccupation to

defend and vindicate Christ's honor before the Jews. As Massignon suggests, we can understand Jesus' prophetic vision of the future in which He saw a "bastard" son of Abraham refuting the blasphemous accusation: "Yet I do not seek my own glory: there is One who seeks it and He will be the judge" (John 8:50). The Heavenly Father will do Him justice, and in the course of history Muhammad, claiming the honor of Jesus and Mary in front of the Jews, became an instrument of this justice.

Moreover this inchoate presentation of the Mystery of Christ and of God cannot but be rudimentary and elementary for the idolatrous Arabs of the time and also for the Jews. Perhaps, too, for the millions of people in the other parts of the world who have not yet arrived at the notion of the personal God of Biblical Revelation (Zoroastrians, Hindus, Buddhists, etc.). This presentation, according to the divine pedagogy, St. Paul says, must be gradual (I Cor. 3:1-3). It is the task of the Church to help the Muslims, starting with the Christian truths implicit and latent in the Qur'an, to come to a full understanding of the mystery of Jesus and of God's inner life.

One could ask then: Why did not God give enough illumination to Muhammad's mind so that his preaching would be protected from any error, especially in light of the subsequent history of Islam and Christianity? We must remember, first of all, that God respects human freedom, even in the building of His kingdom. On the other hand, God entrusted to the Church the duty to lead mankind to the fullness of the truth. (Matt. 28:18; I Tim. 2-4).

In my opinion it is possible to discover in the Qur'an following the chronological order of the Surahs, a gradual presentation of Jesus, through the typological figures of the Old Testament. Christian tradition recognizes these as prophetic figures or types of the future Messiah. Until today Muslim exegetes and Orientalists have payed no attention to the presence in the Qur'an of those personalities of the Old Testament. For orientalists the Qur'anic lists of Biblical personages differ one from the other; it is very difficult for these Orientalists to guess their significance. They attribute the unruly succession of names to the ignorance of Muhammad. But if we take the name of Jesus as the central point of reference, with the semitic parallelism, then we will

discover a precise internal order in the prophetic figures in relation to Jesus Christ.

The Qur'anic characters of the Old Testament are "types" of the Messiah. For example, in the first part of Surah 37, the prophet Muhammad argues with pagan Arabs concerning the unity of God, threatening those who deny this with final judgement and condemnation to hell, etc. In the second part, which is addressed to Jews, Muhammad evokes the history of Salvation for his Jewish listeners, presenting the Christological types which announce Christ: 1. Noah, delivered with his family, was made by God the seed of a new generation (cf. I Peter 3:20-1; 2 Peter: 1-10). 2. Abraham is a descendant of Noah by faith. He is a figure of Jesus Christ, as well as his son Isaac. 3-4. Moses and Aaron, both deliverers of Israel from Egypt, are types of Jesus, liberator of men from sin. 5. Elijah, who appeared with Moses at the moment of the transfiguration of Jesus on Mount Tabor, was defender of monotheism and a figure of Christ.

Then we have two prophets who were sent to non-Jewish people and were considered by Christians as types of Jesus, 6. Lot and 7. Jonah. The Rabbinic tradition considers Lot as a lustful sinner and drunkard. On the contrary, in the New Testament and in the Christian tradition Lot is considered as a saint, a figure-type of Christ risen from the dead (Matt. 12:40).

The other characters of the Old Testament who are mentioned in the Qur'an are also types of Christ. David who sang in the psalms the royalty of the Messiah, typifies Christ as King and Prophet. Solomon his son, the King-Priest who built the Temple, is a type of Christ as the divine Wisdom and the Holy Temple of God. Abel and Job are both prophetic types of the suffering Christ.

We must note that the life of Christ and His Apostles, as recorded in the Gospels, as well as the origins of the Christian Church described in the Acts of Apostles, are completely absent from the Qur'an. It is because the Qur'an is intended for those who are at their first glimmering of the mystery of Jesus Christ and His doctrines.

The deficiencies concerning the life and mission of Christ are understandable in the historical context of the preaching of

Muhammad. As Christians, we cannot accept the interpretation that Muslims give of Muhammad's mission, viz., Muhammad came to supplant the Gospel by the Qur'an, Christianity by Islam.

The reality of the crucifixion and the death of Jesus is essential to the Christian faith, since it is inextricably bound up with the resurrection. St. Paul is clear: "Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, He was buried, He was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures" (I Cor. 15:3-4); "If Christ has not been raised, then our preaching is in vain and your faith is in vain. We are even found to be representing God, because we testified of God that He raised Christ, whom He did not raise if it is true that the dead are not raised. . . . If Christ has not been raised your faith is futile and you are still in your sins." (I Cor. 15:14-17). The Muslims think that the Qur'an denied the historical fact of Jesus' death on the cross, in spite of the contrary testimony of seven centuries of historical Christian tradition. As Massignon notes, this denial started only 150 years after the Hegirah. Because of this denial all Christian apologists were firm in concluding that the Qur'an could not possibly be of divine origin. Some Orientalists see docetism as the root of this error in the Qur'an. I feel we should attempt a re-examination, starting with the conviction of the hypothesis that the Qur'an is of divine origin. For this reason we cannot accept such a clear contradiction between the Islamic interpretation of the Qur'an and the historical data of Christian Revelation. The text of surah 3:47/54-48/59, affirms very distinctly the reality of Jesus' death, when God said to Jesus "*Oh Jesus, I shall cause you to DIE, and then I SHALL RAISE YOU UP TO ME!*" The words of God are addressed to Jesus in the first person singular, not in the plural "We". The text emphasized clearly that the death of Jesus is the work of God and not of men. Romans and Jews alike are but instruments used by God for his own purposes. In this context we must interpret the highly controversial text of surah 4:156/157, which is strongly polemical against the Jews of Medina. The Qur'an accused them of having violated the Covenant of Sinai, denying the signs of God's intervention in the world and particularly in denying Jesus and Mary. The Jews even denied the mission of Muhammad himself concerning the announcing of the Messianism of Jesus to them. The argument that the Jews of Medina used to prove that Jesus was a false prophet was

based upon his shameful death on the cross. The Jews have always maintained that to say that the Crucified Jesus was the Messiah is a sacrilegious affront to God's providence and an insult to human intelligence. The Jews of Medina knew for certain that their forefathers in Palestine killed Jesus, and they repeated, as the Qur'an reported: "We killed the Christ, Jesus, Son of Mary, the Messenger of God". The statement of the Qur'an "Whereas they neither killed him nor crucified him, although somebody was rendered to their eyes like him", does not refer to the fact of the crucifixion and death of Jesus. These statements show that the true perpetrators of the deed were not the Jews. If we re-read these texts in the light of Christian doctrine, on the meaning and value of Jesus' death, we could interpret them in the true sense. The death and the resurrection of Christ are the proof of his divine mission. This is the great mystery of God's mercy, which has a cosmic meaning, and cannot be the work of mere men. Therefore the death of Jesus was not the result of the trial and condemnation of a supposed criminal, brought about by the religious authority of Israel, ("We killed the Messiah!") and by the Romans. It was an event preordained by God and executed by diabolic powers, which used men as mere tools to carry out the affairs, as St. Paul affirms. (I Cor. 2:7-8; Gal. 6:12-14; Phil. 3:18).

The death of Jesus was a free and spontaneous self-immolation. No one, except the Father and Jesus himself, could have disposed of Jesus' life. (Matt. 2:13-21; Luke 4:29-30; John 7:30-32; 8:59; 18:4-9).

Hence, we must read and interpret the Qur'anic text in the light of these Gospel texts and Christian dogma on free and spontaneous self-immolation of Jesus. It was not the Jews who crucified and killed Jesus. He gave Himself freely. Even after his death, during the hours that preceded his rising, Christ remained alive in some manner, in the sense expressed by the Latin liturgy for Holy Saturday: "I have become like a man who needs no help, *free among the dead*".

The other statement of the Qur'an: "although somebody was rendered to their eyes like him" could be seen as the reflection of St. Paul who saw death as the "wage of sin", and Jesus made himself "sin" (2 Cor. 5:21), a "curse" (Gal. 3:13) for love of

us. All of humanity was condemned. Christ set aside the decree of condemnation, nailing it to the cross (Coloss. 2.14).

In spite of the strong denial by Muslims of the crucifixion and reality of Jesus' death, there were in history many Muslims who believed in the reality of Christ's death. Al-Ghazàlî and his brother Ahamad al-Ghazàlî, with his disciple 'Ayn al-Qudat Hamadhamî; the Shi'ites Mu'ayyud Shirazi and the "*Ikhwan al-Safa'*" the "Bothers of the Purity", all believed in the reality of Christ' death.

Muslim exegesis and Orientalists have not payed much attention to a Qur'anic text concerning the "red-Heifer" (surah 2: 67/72-69/74). The surah has the title "*the Cow*". Christian tradition has always considered the sacrifice of the red heifer, referred in the book of Numbers (19:1-10), as a type or figure of Jesus in his suffering and death, the sacrifice of the New Covenant.

In the Qur'an there are more Christian truths than usually are recognized. While Israel continues to reject the historical Christ, Islam, as presented in the Qur'an, accepts Jesus as the Messiah and vindicates against Israel the honor of His most holy Mother Mary. The Muslims still believe in a Christ born of the flesh. One day, we hope, they may more easily believe in a Christ born of God.

The initial acknowledgement of the mystery of Christ must be the point of departure for a more profound discovery of the unfathomable riches of the mystery of the Incarnation.

4. *Muslims believe in the Future Life and in the Last Judgment*

The Declaration of the Council also states that the Muslims "believe in an after-life and await the last judgment, when God will give each man his due after raising him up."

Muhammad was not only the herald of Abraham's monotheism to the Arab people; he was also the cantor of the greatness of God, the Creator. He proclaimed the messianism of Jesus Christ to the Jews of Mecca and Medina. He also announced to them the resurrection of the dead, the final judgment and the life everlasting.

The resurrection of the dead and the final judgement are themes (apocalyptic and biblical in inspiration) continually heard in his Meccan preaching. The "expectation" or "awaiting" can be clearly seen in the Qur'an. Muhammad asks his followers to live in this expectation of the day of final judgement. The surah 5, with which Muhammad concludes his preaching, portrays the scene of the last judgement, where Jesus appears as the "Son of Man" (vv. 109/110-120), as the true and perfect man. God is pictured as the Supreme Judge, who addresses himself to Jesus to defend himself against the Jewish accusation that the Trinity is composed of God, Mary and Jesus:

"God said: "O Jesus, Son of Mary, did you ever say to mankind: "Worship me and my mother as gods beside God?"

He will answer: "Glory be to thee! It is not for me to say what is not true; if I did say it, thou knowest it; Thou knowest what is in my inner self."

Some Muslim theologians think that God will reveal the true mystery of Jesus to angels and to men. He will reveal Him as the universal Judge of all people.

This initial presentation which the Qur'an gives of Jesus, can help Islam to reflect more in depth on the mystery of Jesus in its fullness. The Qur'an only touches the mystery in a vague, incomplete and obscure manner.

5. Muslims are bound to the Moral Law and give worship to God through Prayer, Almsgiving and Fasting

Until today many prejudices remain among Christians concerning the moral life of the Muslims. It is a courageous statement the one made by the Fathers of the Vatican Council when they said: "The Muslims have an esteem for moral life". We must remember that the most valuable aspect of moral life is the place God has in the life of every Muslim.

The faith in the God of Abraham, whom Islam worships and prays to five times a day, is the greatest of all commandments in Islam. Faith in God and in His attributes, faith in the angels, in the revealed books, in the prophets, in the last judgement are

aspects of the simple creed of Islam. The theological reflection of Muslims centers around the oneness of God (*Tawhid*). The Qur'an did not reveal the mystery of God, or his inner life, nor did it reveal the function of His divine faculties of Intelligence and Will. Rather the Qur'an emphasized the transcendence of God: "to Him nothing is similar!" The Transcendent God does not invite man to his friendship; man remains always a "servant". If the New Testament is a "sacrament for the union with God, our Father", the Qur'an is a "sacrament of Separation" because man is a slave and never could he long for the familiarity with God.

This faith in God, in his books, particularly in the Qur'an, established the Islamic Community of ecclesial type supported by the unity of cult. It is a true Community even though it appeared after the Gospel and Pentecost, on its march towards God. The discovery of the first commandment, the existence of a unique and true God who calls all men to return to Him, is the basis of this unity of the Muslim Community. The entire message of the Qur'an pivots around a return to God: "And you will all return to Him". All men belong to God: "I created angels and men just that *I SHOULD BE WORSHIPPED!*"

The first and principal duty of every Muslim is the proclamation of the unity of God through the "*Shahada*", viz: "There is no other divinity except God!" followed by the affirmation of Muhammad's mission: "and Muhammad is the Messenger of God!" The mere proclamation of the *Shahada* is an act of piety and it is commonly accepted that merely to proclaim it is sufficient to make one a convert to Islam.

The second duty of a Muslim believer is to recite the official prayer "*salat*". The tradition holds that the Prophet prescribed this prayer at five different times of the day, at dawn, midday, afternoon, evening and night. The prayer has to be accompanied by ritual purification, facing the shrine at Mecca (quibla) and the recitation of a passage from the Qur'an, or other formulas of prayer. Besides the five prescribed daily prayers, many pious Muslims observe other additional prayers, too.

Almsgiving or "*zakat*" is obligatory. It implies legal alms or tithes for the service of the community. Islam also invites

the believers to fraternal generosity by charitable almsgiving over and above the legal alms. Many texts of Qur'an recommend this.

"The virtuous fulfill their vows, and are fearful of the day of judgement.
They give food, out of love for Him,
to the unfortunate, the orphan and the prisoners, saying:
We feed you for God's sake only;
we wish from you no recompense or thanks,
for we fear from our Lord a day of anguish and of woe".

(Surah 76:7-10)

The annual fast during the month of *Ramadan*, together with the Pilgrimage to the Sanctuary at Mecca, are two prominent external manifestations of living Islam today. During the whole month of Ramadan, every practicing Muslim abstains from food, drink, and sex, from early morning till night, when the fast is suspended. Fasting is a means of expiation.

In the second year of the Hegira, Muhammad changed the direction of the prayer (qibla) from Jerusalem to Mecca. He was then in Medina. He spiritually transposed the pilgrimage from Jerusalem and from the Temple of Abraham to the Sanctuary at Mecca, the Ka'ba. According to Muslims this sanctuary too was founded by Abraham and his son Ishmael.

All these acts are called the five "Pillars of the Faith"!

In the Qur'an there is no clear parallel to the Ten Commandments, but we can recognize a few of them in Surah 17:23-40, viz. the first, fifth, sixth, seventh, eighth, ninth, and tenth. The path by which one must return to God consists on the fulfillment of those divine precepts. Sin is the transgression of the divine ordinance, disobedience to the command of God, a revolt against Him, and a great ingratitude! However, the greatest of all sins is the refusal to recognize God as One and Supreme God by adoring other beings beside Him.

We observe that Islamic morality has been concerned primarily with the external aspect of one's act, and not always with the internal. For this reason, Islam sees only the social aspect of sin, and tends to minimize the internality of sin. Islam denies original sin. Therefore it punishes adultery but not the impure

desire, fraud and cheating but not lying; it punishes detraction and calumny but not envy. So the responsibility of the actor is reduced to external imputable acts.

Because of this deficiency of interiority Muslim society is tempted to succumb to formalism and legalism. Its tendency is to reduce the spiritual to the temporal, and the value of faith, which is above reason, to the level of reason.

All these deficiencies and temptations proceed from the fact that Islam is a religion for primitive people; it remains at the stage of the Patriarchs of the Old Testament, of Abraham, before Sinai and the Gospel.

CONCLUSION

As a conclusion of what I have said I would like to quote some texts from Louis Massignon, concerning the Patriarchal character and nature of Islam.

"We must remember, first of all, that the Muslims have not received from God all the graces, private or sacramental, which Christians have received from God Himself.

These graces are a privilege. It would be dreadful for Christians to use these graces wrongly while, at the same time, scorn the Muslims to whom God did not give all these graces.

In the history of humanity, we have three religious periods:

1. *The status of nature* when mankind was wounded by Adam's sin. This period corresponds to the Patriarchal Epoch.

2. *The Legal Status* which started with the Decalogue of Moises at Sinai.

3. *The Evangelical Status* which started with Jesus Christ and Pentecost.

It would be absurd to discuss with a believing Jew as if he had arrived at the Evangelical Status, because he is still in the Law of fear. It would be equally absurd to discuss with a Muslim,

as if he had arrived at either the Legal Status, or the Evangelical Status.

Islam remains until now at the Patriarchal Status, as in the time of Abraham. The fact that Muhammad preached 600 years after Pentecost, and the Qur'an names Moises and Jesus, son of Mary, does not remove Islam from the Patriarchal Status. Islam remains very primitive. Although the moral consciousness concerning obedience to God, and concerning interdiction of idolatry is wonderfully enlightened, yet it remains obscure regarding polygamy, concubinage, rapt and the tricks of war. Christians arrived very slowly at the Evangelical Status. Christians rejected all that was evil but, at the same time, they practised it, knowing that it was evil.

The moral conscience slowly acquires the moral natural laws. Revelation also distributes slowly to men the divine positive laws. We must always remember that Muhammad was still at the Patriarchal Status, while practicing naively and most cruelly the wars, ruses, retaliation and the revenges with undisturbed conscience. We Christians, on the other hand, know that these practices are bad.

Also the question concerning Muhammad's women can be passed over in silence. His life of the *harem* did not give him a sense of culpability, because for him that was the Patriarchal polygamy before the Law.

How did God permit the Christian East to move back from the Evangelical Status to the Patriarchal Status with Islam? Practically, as God permitted the Germans during the Protestant Reformation to move back from the Evangelical Status to the legal status, substituting the Bible for Jesus, as "the word of God". Just as the Protestants kept some parts of our sacraments and the veneration of the Gospel's texts, but to the detriment of Jesus and His mother, Mary, so Muhammad accepted in the Qur'an some elements of the Patriarchal Status. Furthermore, he invoked the Blessed names of Jesus, Mary and John the Baptist.

More important, Muhammad, as a result of his wish to have Abraham's blessing (*baraka Ibrahim*) on his descendants, dreamt he was at the pyre of Abraham's sacrifice in Jerusalem. He iden-

tified the temple where this sacrifice took place with the "mihrab" of Zachary, namely, the Church of Our Lady of the Presentation, where she had dedicated herself to virginity from her childhood. He then realized the prayer of St. Anne, quoted by the Qur'an, which for the Muslims corresponds to the Immaculate Conception. (Surah 3:31-33).

Also Muhammad revived the Jewish passover of Exodus at the Mella (Hajj) as it was first of all the commemoration of the Lamb of Abraham, immolated instead of Isaac. This is an admirable symbol of the Crucifixion.

Surely among the Muslims there are some pure consciences to whom Jesus and Mary and the Passover of Hajj are interior sacramental sources of public sanctification as they are among the Christians.

Muhammad founded a temporal state, Jesus never wanted to establish a temporal one. The Muslims reproach us for having a very demanding law; theirs is more proportionate to the average man. Muhammad did not make it by calculation, but in the ingenuity of a contemporary of the patriarchal period of Abraham. He believed he received it from God.

Islam is a great mystery of the Divine will. It expresses the claims of the out-casts thrown into the desert with Ishmael, their forefather, against the "privileged of God", Jews and particularly Christians, who abused the divine privilege of Grace.

Islam is the divine lance which, through Holy War, has stigmatised Christendom!" (Louis Massignon, *Letter to Mme. Charles-Barzel*, quoted in her book: "*O Vierge Puissante*", Paris 1958, pp. 59-61)

FOURTH PART

THE PROPHETIC PERSONALITY OF MUHAMMAD

"Upon the Muslims the Church looks with esteem!"

These words of the Second Vatican Council are a kind of reparation for the insults heaped by Christians through the centuries on the religious personality of Muhammad.

During the Second Muslim-Christian Congress of Cordoba, Spain, March 1976, a sincere effort was made by some Catholic theologians to re-examine the religious character of Muhammad, and his prophetic mission. A Catholic theologian of the University of Louvain in his article "*Muhammad, est-il considéré comme Prophet?*" (Revue Théologique de Louvain, VI (1975), 311-323) presents the different opinions of Catholic theologians of today, since the studies of L. Massignon, who described Muhammad as "a negative prophet".

Muhammad — said Massignon — was sincere during all his life. He was an authentic prophet in the measure we think that to be a false-prophet, one must prophesize wrongly, namely speak in name of God when one knows that he is being and trying to deceive others. Muhammad never did this; therefore he is not a false prophet. His prophecy is also positive because it announces to all humanity the transcendence of the Unique and true God. This message of Muhammad is truly a progress from idolatry". (Quoted by G. Harpigny, in his *art. cit.* p. 311-314)

For Abbé Ledit Muhammad had the "*prophetia directiva*" that St. Thomas speaks of, even though he did not possess the knowledge of the whole revelation. (St. Thomas: "*Summa Theol.*, II-II, q. 170-174).

Cardinal Charles Journet (1891-1975) was particularly interested in the theological problem of Islam. Every Christian position concerning Islam originates from the theological judgment concerning the mission of Muhammad. For Journet the mission of Muhammad was the supernatural revelation of God as Unique and Transcendent, which was made to Abraham with reference to the mysteries of the Trinity and the Incarnation. For these reasons Cardinal Journet sees "the terrible lasting ambiguity of Muhammad's message". Muhammad would have received a charismatic gift of the intellectual and practical order.

Father Rovert Caspar, W.F. thinks that Muhammad should be considered as a prophet for there are some truths in the Qur'an.

Also among Protestant authors, such as James Royster, W. Montgomery Watt, Wilfred Cantwell Smith and Willem Bijlefeld there is a new evaluation of the religious character of Muhammad and his mission. Yet many others question it. In fact this is

a very old problem much discussed since the arrival of Islam. But today the spirit of sympathy is completely new.

We must take up this study of Muhammad's personality once again, viewing him with Christian eyes. We must try to form an impartial and, as far as possible, complete judgment of his religious experience and his message.

1. "*Before speaking, it is necessary to listen, not only to a man's voice, but to his heart*"

Pope Paul VI wrote these words quoted above in his first encyclical letter "*Ecclesiam Suam*" (n. 90). I think we should apply these words in our study of Muhammad and Islam. For over thirteen centuries, five times a day, the Muslims have proclaimed their faith: *Là ilâh illâ Allâh wa Muhammad rasûl Allâh*, "there is no other divinity but God, and Muhammad is the Messenger of God".

I must confess that I have heard for years the call of the *muezzin*, and I have always wondered what is really the meaning of the second half of the *shahâda*: "Muhammad is the messenger of God".

Following the principle quoted above from Pope Paul VI, concerning the attitude in the study of another faith, I think that *a priori* nothing could prevent a Christian from recognizing the authentic prophetic mission of Muhammad.

For this reason we should accept in all seriousness the fundamental conviction of the Muslim faith: "Muhammad is a prophet sent by God". A prophet "is a man really chosen by God, to whom God has spoken in some way (revelation, inspiration, whether public or private) and whom God charged with a message and with a mission whose criterium of authenticity is the conformity with the Christian message and its orientation toward it" (Fr. R. Caspar).

I can find all these elements in Muhammad and in his mission.

2. *Muhammad is a true Prophet.*

To get a true portrait of Muhammad, Christians have to listen, not only to the voices of millions of Muslims, but also to their

hearts, and study with sympathy what they see and admire in their prophet.

Massignon writes:

"The secret of this soul, consecrated to such a destiny, remains hidden from us. We cannot but take seriously the hypothesis of al-Ghazâlî, who maintained that from the very beginning Muhammad was "passionately in love with God", wandering about in the wastelands of Mount Hira. He was drunk with the desire for union with God. We cannot deny Muhammad's sincere and lasting devotion, his severe discipline, and those frequent and voluntary prayers he poured forth nightly. This man, like all real leaders, was hard on himself. The very diversity of Muslim mystics' *meditation* upon the interior life of Muhammad is evidence of how mysterious this aspect remains". (*Essai sur les origines du Lexique technique de la Mystique musulmane*, Paris 1954, p. 143-144).

a) Muhammad in fact represents a unique religious phenomenon in the history of Arabia. Many elements prevalent in Arabia in his time can be recognized in the personality of Muhammad and in his religious activity. (Cf. Moubarac, Y: *Les Etudes d'Epigraphie sud-sémitique et la naissance de l'Islam*, Paris 1957, pp. 55-68).

Above all Muhammad had many characteristics and charisms of the Biblical Prophets of the Old Testament. These charisms that millions of Muslims recognize in Muhammad cannot be fully explained as a natural phenomenon. It is not the same as the phenomenon of seers and poets of Arabia before and after Muhammad.

b) After the first "revelation" Muhammad began to be gradually aware that he was directed by God. Today no one doubts the subjective sincerity of Muhammad. This must be an honest basis for dialogue. Now, some non-Muslim people do recognize the objective value of the inner conviction of Muhammad. He was not deceived by autosuggestion, nor by evil fraud. He was not an impostor. Muhammad was transformed through an impulse from God, and he perceived that this impulse originated from heaven and he received it as the "Word of God", compelling him to proclaim it.

c) Through this impulse he found himself transformed. He became the witness of the supremacy and transcendency of God, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, the God of Moses and of Jesus. He recalled to the mind of the Jews certain events of their history. To the pagan Arabs, who confusedly admitted a Supreme God, Allâh, Muhammad announced the presence of God in every moment of human life. He also announced to them the imminence of final judgment.

d) As the Prophets of the Old Testament, Muhammad appeared as "a man of God". Through his message he continually reminded others of the men of God of the Old Testament. As I noted above in the Christian tradition, all these Biblical personages are the types or images of Jesus Christ. It is important to see how Muhammad moulded his religious experience according to the Biblical figures, particularly Abraham and Moses. Contemplating them he transformed himself into a man of God and affirmed God's rights. As a man totally dedicated to God he conformed himself to the Will of God.

e) As a man of God, Muhammad brought about a spiritual renewal among his people. His prophetic activity helped his people to rediscover their duty to proclaim the oneness of God, and his providence. Also they became aware of the promises made by God to Abraham through Ishmael and his descendants. Thus his preaching helped his people to remove idolatry from their midst and set out on a march toward the Living and true God, renewing their spiritual life.

f) Muhammad roused Arabians from their religious indifference. Through his message he shook both Jews and Arabs alike. With the threat of divine punishment and final judgment, Muhammad called men to a more authentic human life, redirected to God and the after life.

g) Muhammad, like Moses, is the founder of the Community of Islamic believers. As mentioned earlier there are similarities between the ancient Prophets of Israel and Muhammad, as well as with the diviners and prophets of oriental peoples, particularly in what concerns the "political" life. In fact in the East the king or the Chief of the community gathered in himself all power, assuming as his right all the religious functions as priest, prophet, and wise man. The distinction, as in any primitive society, be-

tween the religious and secular spheres did not exist in practice. When Muhammad started to organize his community of Muslim believers, as did Moses and other religious chiefs in Israel, he was endowed with the charism of prophetic wisdom.

From a historical and a theological point of view, a fact, I think, which deserves special attention is that Muhammad never claimed any priestly function. Thus Islam does not have a sacrifice. This fact stands out in the religious mentality and religious climate of the Semites. Scholars in comparative religions have tried to find reasons for this deficiency. Why is it that Islam alone among semitic religions has no priesthood and sacrifice, unlike the Arab paganism, Judaism and Christianity? For me this fact is inexplicable without postulating a supernatural origin because not only among Jews and Christians, but also in pre-islamic Arab paganism there was a priesthood and a sacrifice. This in turn points to the inner capacity and necessity for Islam to integrate and complete itself in the supreme Christian economy. Islam, coming after the Incarnation and the sacrifice of Calvary, cannot have either a priesthood or a sacrifice of its own. For there exists in the Church the authentic priesthood and authentic and exclusive sacrifice, Christ's Priesthood and the Sacrifice of the Mass.

3. Muhammad is the True Prophet of the Gentiles for the Reunion of People inaugurated by Jesus Christ

In the particular moment of the history of Arabia, Muhammad was truly the man of God for his people. He reformed their religious behaviour. He gave them the notions of God as Creator and Remunerator, and inserted them into the history of salvation. He brought for them and for all the people who did not receive the Gospel's message, the first announcement of a primitive Abrahamic revelation.

Muhammad is called by the Qur'an the "*Prophet of the Gentiles*" "*Nabî Ummî*". He is truly the prophet of people who are not yet ready spiritually for the full Christian revelation. He brings to them, the Gentiles, a message of faith, and a certain hope, together with a style of life and an experience of God's presence and activity in human history. He did not impose himself by the power of working miracles on his people or on the

Gentiles, except by the force of the Word of God which he announced. His charismatic influence over many people for the last thirteen centuries up to today, comes from his gift of faith and from his personal experience of God, calling all men to justice and the recognition of God's rights.

The appearance of Islam in history has put many questions to Christian theologians. What is the need for a new religion after the coming of Christ? In the Old Testament we see a continuous process of setting apart certain people for the fulfilment of the messianic promises. God chose Abraham as the depositary of the messianic promises which was continued by his son Isaac, and then Jacob, until the time of Mary, the Mother of Jesus. God also separated first Ishmael, then Esau, etc. All their descendants remained on the borders of Israel, without participating in the revelation of the Old Testament, and in the benefits of the Mosaic Law and Prophets.

St. John in his Gospel after reporting the words of Caiphas: "It is expedient for you that one man should die for the people than that the whole nation should be destroyed", comments: "He did not say this of his own accord, but as the High Priest in office that year he prophesied that Jesus would die for the nation, and not for the nation alone, but to gather together the scattered children of God" (John 11:50-52).

From the death of Christ on the cross started the new process of reunion of humanity scattered by sin. "There is no distinction between Jew and Greek because the same Lord is Lord of all and bestows his riches upon all who call upon Him" (Rom. 10:12).

The sudden entrance of Islam in the history of humanity makes more sense when we see it in the new development of the Kingdom of God. In the march for reunion of all men in Christ, starting with the Cross, Islam acquires the true significance as a preparation for the announcing of the Gospel.

"Moving beyond the descendants of Ishmael — said Massig-non — the Muslim religion, bursting forth from Yemen and Oman as far as the Sahara and the Gobi deserts, has brought to far-off places a new community of believers, in the one God of Abraham. Starting in Medina, Islam, using the Qur'ân, popularized the taste for a monotheistic revelation among many people to whom the

idea of the Living God of Abraham and the rewards and punishments of the next life had not yet arrived. In Persia, it extinguished forever its sacred fire, to light, with Abraham's faith, the road to the hereafter. It introduced to the Indians the notion of a personal God and broke the cast system. It extends its open arms with the invitation to share in the patriarchal blessing given to the excluded, to the Turks, the Mongols, the Chinese, the Indonesians, the Malaysians, the Berbers and the Negroes. With the monotheism of the Bible, it gave them at the same time some simple acquaintance with Jesus Christ and Mary." (*Les trois prières d'Abraham*", pp.14-15)

Muhammad is then truly the prophet of the Gentiles. In some way we must consider him as a prophet before the Mosaic Law, and in that situation we have to judge his morality, as the Fathers of Church used a great moderation when they spoke of the polygamy and wars of extermination and genocide carried on in name of God by the Patriarchs, and holy men of the Old Testament. As Josue, Gideon, David and Solomon. Muhammad too has been a man totally committed to God, notwithstanding, here and there, a fierce and warlike deed in vindication of God's honor. In spite of his polygamy and his sensitivity to feminine charm Muhammad has been a man of prayer, and a true worshipper of God, as were the "holy king David, the harp of the Holy Spirit", and the wise Solomon, whose harems were much larger than those of Muhammad.

Thus understood, in these special connotations, the prophetic mission of Muhammad is authentic and from God. Islam, as an Abrahamic mystery, appears as a provisory and relative economy with an inner orientation, not yet fully discovered, toward the mystery of Christ. A day will come when Islam will be fully initiated into the knowledge of Jesus Christ. Then every Muslim will have access to the Trinitarian Mystery of the inner life of God. All those treasures of God (*al-Ghayyeb*), which remained hidden from the Prophet Muhammad, will be revealed one day.

What I have presented here should be regarded as a private theological opinion. I hope these pages would lead the reader to a deeper reflexion. These "complex and delicate questions must be studied in the light of Christian tradition and Church Magisterium". (Paul VI: "*Evangelii*", n. 53).

GUILIO BASETTI-SANI, O.F.M.
Manila, Philippines