

In Pursuit of the Divine: Encounter with Islam as a *Locus Theologicus*

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I. THE CALL OF THE MINARET

From the beginning of Islamic history, Christians and Muslims have found themselves living with one another, most of the times occupying the same public space. With the increasing systematization of Islamic societies, a growing demarcation was put into place. However, even when boundaries existed, the relationship of Christians and Muslims has never been completely severed.

While demarcations were still clear in ages past, it is no longer the case today. The phenomenon of globalization and the increasing social fact of immigration have blurred the distinctions between East and West. With this emerging historical and geographical framework, Christians and Muslims are increasingly called to develop their relations and sit down to dialogue, ever aware of the politico-cultural divide that exists between the two.

Islam as the “other” religion is worthwhile encountering, not merely because of its allure as something distinct from our faith, but also because of the values that it promotes, perceived as good or otherwise. In fact, the encounter with Islam can provide a rich theological source, not only because of its sometimes radical alterity but also because of the firm monotheistic view that it proposes and the values that it disposes.

II. THE CHURCH AND DIALOGUE

The Church is insistent on an encounter with the other great religious traditions. This encounter takes place in an experience of dialogue. In recent times, the Church's view of dialogue and well as the need to engage in it have grown and matured. The term *dialogue* finds its first appearance in the encyclical *Ecclesiam Suam*. Over one-half of the content of this encyclical is devoted to the exposition of the term dialogue. In this encyclical, the Pope Paul VI calls the Church to enter into dialogue with the world in which it exists and labors, a call for the Church to be in the world but not of the world.¹ Paul VI sees the transcendent origin of dialogue: that it is found in the very plan of God. Religion is precisely a dialogue between God and man carried out in prayer.²

The Second Vatican Council came up with a document entitled *Nostra Aetate*. This document is entirely dedicated to the relations between the Catholic Church and non-Christian religions. It addresses in particular the religions of Judaism and Islam, to which we share a common bond, that is, a belief in one God. *Nostra Aetate* is clear on the point that the Church

rejects nothing which is true and holy in these religions, that in fact she looks with sincere respect upon their ways of conduct, life and teachings, which while differing in many respects from what she holds, nevertheless often reflect the brightness of that Truth which enlightens men.³

Given this common bond, there should exist among the people a universal fraternity. Catholics should be at the forefront in promoting harmony. Thus, *Nostra Aetate* once again reminds us that

through dialogue and collaboration with the followers of other religions, and in witness of Christian faith and life, to acknowledge, preserve and promote the spiritual and moral goods found among them as well as the values found in their society and culture.⁴

¹ ES 65.

² ES 70.

³ NA 2.

⁴ NA 2.

These statements from *Nostra Aetate* are indications of the humble acceptance from the part of the Church that she does not hold a monopoly of truth. The position of the Church regarding dialogue was radicalized by the change in her ecclesiological outlook, elucidated in *Lumen Gentium*. In this breakthrough document, the Church made it official that all religions can be instruments of salvation.⁵ The document on the Church's missionary activity, *Ad Gentes*, likewise affirmed that there is truth and grace among nations as a sort of secret presence of God.⁶ Further on, the decree goes on to say that Christians can "learn by sincere and patient dialogue what treasures a bountiful God has distributed among the nations of the world."⁷ These pronouncements are all in keeping with what we may term as the "concentric model of ecclesiology" of the Second Vatican Council.⁸

From the inspiration of Second Vatican Council, the Pope John Paul II established the Secretariat for Non-Christians, now renamed as the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue (PCID), a dicastery solely concerned with interreligious dialogue. In 1991, the PCID, along with the Congregation for Evangelization of Peoples, published a document entitled "Dialogue and Proclamation." This document speaks of the four forms of dialogue:⁹

- 1) the *dialogue of life*, where people strive to live in an open and neighborly spirit, sharing their joys and sorrows, their human problems and preoccupations;
- 2) the *dialogue of action*, in which Christians and others collaborate for the integral development and liberation of people;
- 3) the *dialogue of theological exchange*, where specialists seek to deepen their understanding of their respective religious heritages, and to appreciate each other's spiritual values;

⁵ LG 16.

⁶ AG 9.

⁷ AG 11.

⁸ cf. LG 14-16.

⁹ These forms enumerated by the present document echo the forms given in the earlier document of Dialogue and Mission, cf. #28-35.

4) the *dialogue of religious experience*, where persons, rooted in their own religious traditions, share their spiritual riches, for instance with regard to prayer and contemplation, faith and ways of searching for God or the Absolute.¹⁰

In his encyclical *Redemptor Hominis*, John Paul II affirmed that religion is a universal phenomenon that is intimately connected with human history, thus we are in no position to set limits to its exploration. The human quest exemplified in any religious phenomenon is a search for the full meaning of life; consequently, it is a quest for God. And such quest can take multifarious roads and routes, but the destination is always the same.¹¹

Openness, therefore, to other religion is not a perfidy to our commitment but rather a call to faith. It is awakening of our own faith conviction.

The firm belief of the followers of non-Christian religions – a belief that is also an effect if the Spirit operating outside the visible confines of the Mystical Body – can make Christians ashamed at being often themselves so disposed to doubt concerning the truths revealed by God.¹²

All these pronouncements affirm the universality of God working in and through the human condition. The immensity of the divine mystery can never be exhausted by our historicity. There are valid forms of religious expressions outside the confines of our Catholic context of belief, and we should not endeavor to exclude them, lest we fall into the temptation of “owning” God.

III. *LOCI DIALOGICI*: CONVERGENCES WITH ISLAM

A. *De Deo Uno!*

From the Second Vatican Council onwards, the Church's understanding of Islam has undergone radical theological advancements. Until the beginning of the twentieth century, the Church's

¹⁰ DP 42.

¹¹ cf. RH 11 and 12.

¹² RH 6.

attitude towards Islam is one of condemnation. The Church considered Islam as a "new" religion that is trying to supplant Christianity and denying its basic tenets.

With *Nostra Aetate*, there was the recognition of Islam proper to a religion that is not only ancient but also widespread. In minimum words, the texts of this document give the essentials of Muslim theodicy:

The Church has also a high regard for the Muslims. They worship God, who is one, living, and subsistent, merciful and almighty, the Creator of heaven and earth, who has also spoken to men.¹³

In this solemn and official document, the Church affirms that the God of Islam is the one God who is the creator of heaven and earth. This affirmation is of capital importance in the level of Christian-Muslim relations. The declaration that there is only one God is an appeal to a major commonality for Christians and Muslims, and as such provides a strong foundation for dialogue.

<i>Attribute of God</i>	BIBLE	QUR'AN
UNITY	"Turn to me and be saved all the ends of the earth! For I am God and there is no other." <i>Isaiah 45:22</i> "Remember this and consider, recall it to mind, you transgressors... for I am God and there is no other; I am God and there is no one like me." <i>Isaiah 46:8-9</i>	"Know that there is no god but God and seek forgiveness for your sins." <i>Qur'an 47:19</i> "You have not other god but He." <i>Qur'an 11:16</i>
TRANSCENDENCE	<i>Last Chapter of Job</i> <i>Psalms 139</i> <i>Psalms 11:4</i>	<i>Qur'an 2:255</i> <i>Qur'an 59:22-24</i> <i>Qur'an 35:1-2</i> <i>Qur'an 2:109</i> <i>Qur'an 57:4</i>

¹³ NA 3.

Mercy and Compassion	<i>Sirach 2:11 2 Chronicles 30:9</i>	<i>All chapters of the Qur'an begin with the attributes of mercy and compassion (al-Rahman and al-Rahim) except for chapter 9.</i>
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A cursory textual analysis of the Bible and the Qur'an would also reveal that there are common points in both when it comes to the attributes of God.

Further exegesis of the texts might prove that there are more commonalities between the two sacred texts and we are encouraged to foster such commonalities as points for a deeper theological dialogue and understanding.

B. Abraham: Primal Model of Faith

Going a step further but with extreme prudence and precaution, the Council links the Muslims historically with Abraham, and thereby with the true revelation:

They strive to submit themselves without reserve to the hidden decrees of God, just as Abraham submitted himself to God's plan, to whose faith Muslims eagerly link their own.¹⁴

Not only do the Muslims and Christians have faith on the one true God, they also share a common spiritual ancestor in Abraham. Both the sacred texts of Muslims and Christians acknowledge Abraham as the first to worship the one true God.¹⁵ And throughout his entire life, Abraham was loyal and obedient to God, thus he is the primal model of faith for all human beings.¹⁶

The story of Abraham in the Bible is recounted in Book of Genesis. Let us highlight some important persons and events in his life:

¹⁴ NA 3.

¹⁵ cf. Gen. 12:1-3 ff.; Quran 2:125-129; Quran 22:26-29

¹⁶ cf. Quran 16:120-123; Rom. 4:18, Heb. 11:8-12

- Gen. 12:1-3* God promises Abraham that he would be the father of a great nation.
- Gen. 15:1-6* Abraham's descendants would be as numerous as the stars in the sky.
- Gen. 11:30 ff.* Sarah, Abraham's wife, is barren. So she gives Hagar to him and Hagar became pregnant. Due to Sarah's jealousy, Hagar was banished into the desert. However, the angel of the Lord appeared to her in a spring of water and told her that she would have a son whom she was to call Ishmael.
- Gen. 16:10* Through the angel, God promised Hagar that Ishmael descendants would be numerous and cannot be counted for multitude.
- Gen. 17:19* After Ishmael was born, Sarah became pregnant and gave birth to Isaac.
- Gen. 17:18, 20* Abraham prayed for Ishmael, and God reiterated the promise he earlier made.
- Gen. 21:15-21* When Hagar and her son were dying of thirst in the wilderness, the angel of the Lord showed her a spring and saved them.

Woven intricately in the life of Abraham were two sets of personalities that seemed to have determined the course of history. On the one hand, we have the mother and son tandem of Hagar and Ishmael, who were considered for most part of Christian history as outcasts, an aberration in the history of salvation. On the other hand, we also have another mother and son tandem in the persons of Sarah and Isaac. Both tandems seemed to vie for the blessing of Abraham for a rightful and privileged place in God's favored few. In the Genesis account, however, both tandems have been blessed by God and miraculous interventions happened to ensure not only their survival but also their legacy and progeny.

Through Ishmael and Isaac, we have two distinct lines of Abraham's descendants. Ishmael's line leads to Arabia and Muhammad, while Isaac's goes all the way to Jerusalem and Jesus. It is important to emphasize though that Abraham was neither Jew, Christian nor Muslim. Yet all the members of these religions regard him as the father and a model of their faith. This is an

acknowledgement that there is a true knowledge of the one God, a God that goes beyond the limits of their own understanding of what monotheism is.

Abraham's choice of burial place is also indicative of the various expressions of monotheism. He was buried in Makhpelah, which means in Hebrew "multiplicity." The Genesis story elucidates to us that Ishmael returned from the desert when Abraham died, and in an act full of meanings joined Isaac in burying their father in the holy cave.¹⁷

In the Qur'anic version of the story of Abraham, there is no mention of either Hagar or Sarah. Nor is there any implication that Abraham rejected Ishmael in favor of Isaac. In fact, the Qur'an explicitly states that Abraham together with Ishmael rebuilt the Kaaba in Mecca, where they both prayed that God would make their descendants numerous, and that he would send a messenger who would recite God's Revelation.¹⁸

Ishmael is thus very much revered in the Islamic tradition for he remained so closely to his father Abraham that he could not be thought of as outside the monotheistic faith.

Also mention in the Book the story of Ishmael: He was strictly true to what he promised, and he was a messenger and a prophet. He used to enjoin on his people prayer and charity, and he was most acceptable in the sight of his Lord.¹⁹

In fact, according to Muslim tradition he was the one who was sacrificed by Abraham, and not Isaac, in fulfillment of God's command. He was given the appellation "Dhabih Allah" which literally means "chosen sacrifice of Allah." Although no other textual evidence in the Qur'an is present, Muslim scholars are of the view that it was Ishmael who took upon himself to be sacrificed by his father Abraham. In the translation and commentary of the Qur'an made by Abdullah Yusuf Ali, he writes,

¹⁷ Genesis 25:9

¹⁸ Qur'an 2:125-129, 22:26-29

¹⁹ Qur'an 19:54-55

When Abraham told him of the sacrifice, he voluntarily offered himself for it, and never flinched from his promise, until the sacrifice was redeemed by the substitution of a ram under Allah's command.²⁰

Although some dissenting opinions also exist, nevertheless, in both Sunni and Shia traditions, the honor is generally assigned to Ishmael and they believe that the great festival of *Eid ul-Adha*²¹ has been established to commemorate the event.

The Ishmaelic tradition and progeny is given prime importance in the Qur'an, but it has encountered rough opposition in the Christian tradition. The negative outlook emanated mainly from a passage from Paul.

Tell me then, you are so eager to be subject to the Law, have you listened to what the Law says? Scripture says that Abraham had two sons, one by the slave girl and one by the freewoman. The son of the slave girl came to be born in the way of human nature; but the son of the freewoman came to be born through a promise. There is an analogy here: these women stand for the two covenants. The one given on Mount Sinai – that is Hagar, whose children are born into slavery; now Sinai is a mountain in Arabia and represents Jerusalem in its present state, for she is in slavery together with her children. But the Jerusalem above is free and that is the one that is our mother.²²

With this passage, did Paul really exclude the Muslims, or the Ishmaelites, from the Abrahamic descent or from the covenant? On the contrary, Paul was insistent on the necessity of faith for salvation rather than physical descent.²³ It is faith in the one God that will make us children of Abraham. Physical descent is useless if faith is missing. Abraham is the primal model of this adherence to the one God. This is also the same call that the Qur'an makes.

²⁰ Ali 1990. see note #2506 on p. 755.

²¹ This feast of sacrifice is based on the injunction found in Qur'an 22:33-38.

²² Galatians 4:21-26.

²³ cf. Romans 3:19ff., 4:16, Galatians 3:7, 4:29.

Abraham was indeed a model. Devoutly obedient to Allah, and true in faith, and he joined not gods with Allah. He showed his gratitude for the favours of Allah, who chose him, and guided him to a Straight Way. And we gave him good in this world, and he will be in the hereafter, in the ranks of the righteous. So we have taught thee the inspired message: "Follow the ways of Abraham the true in faith, and he joined not gods with Allah."²⁴

However, it is the claim also of the Qur'an, that the Muslims are closest to Abraham in terms of the faith to the one God.²⁵ In the previous passage cited, the words "and he joined not gods with Allah" reverberate, as it is throughout the Qur'an. The reason why the Muslims consider themselves as closest to Abraham is the fact that they have maintained this faith more coherently than either the Jews or Christians, whom they accuse as disputing not only against each other but also among themselves.²⁶ It is also important to state that while the Qur'an affirms that Abraham was neither a Jew nor a Christian since the Torah and the Gospel came long after him;²⁷ still, never in the Qur'an were the Jews and Christians denied their rightful place in the Abrahamic descent.

A reappraisal of the Abrahamic descent of the three major religions of the world will certainly lead to a more tolerant society and a convivial world.

C. *Maryam*

Some essentials of the Muslim faith are also enumerated in *Nostra Aetate*:

Although not acknowledging him as God, they venerate Jesus as a prophet, his Virgin Mother they also honor, and even at times devoutly invoke. Further, they await the day of judgement and the reward of God following the resurrection of the dead. For this reason they highly esteem an upright life

²⁴ Qur'an 16:120-123.

²⁵ Qur'an 3:68.

²⁶ cf. Qur'an 23:52; 2:113.

²⁷ Qur'an 3:65-67.

and worship God, especially by way of prayer, alms-deeds and fasting.²⁸

These declarations point out to the Church's growing understanding and admiration of the Islamic faith and its practices. The veneration they accord to both Jesus and Mary signify that their theological understanding goes beyond mere conjectures. Having personalities dear to the Christians in the Qur'an is quite gratifying and opens up the possibilities for dialogue. But how does the Qur'an treat these personalities? Who is Mary?

According to the Qur'an, Maryam is the mother of 'Isa (Arabic form of Jesus). Aside from that, she is also the daughter of 'Imran and his wife Hanna,²⁹ and the sister of Harun.³⁰

From the Traditions of the Prophet, we know that Yahya is the nephew of Maryam, or the son of her sister, thus making Zakariyya to be her brother-in-law. The reference to Maryam as sister of Harun can either be literal or figurative. It can be that Harun is really a son of 'Imran or that this is an indication that Maryam descended from the line of Harun among the Children of Israel. The same is true also when we consider the appellation daughter of 'Imran, which can be understood also in its literal or figurative sense.

Whether the interpretation of Maryam as the sister of Harun or daughter of 'Imran is literal or figurative is beside the point. One thing is clear: that she descended from the line of 'Imran, thus making her part of an exalted lineage. For 'Imran, and his progeny from after him, is one of the few names ever mentioned in the Qur'an as above all His creatures. "Lo! Allah preferred Adam and Noah and the Family of Abraham and the Family of 'Imran above [all His] creatures."³¹ And whenever the Qur'an singles out someone by name, there is far-reaching purpose for this that exceeds mere information.³² This also goes true with Maryam.

²⁸ NA 3.

²⁹ Qur'an 66:12.

³⁰ Qur'an 19:28.

³¹ Qur'an 3:33.

³² Hammad 2001, 3.

In the general tradition of the Muslims, Maryam is regarded as one of the four best women that ever existed, alongside with Aisya, Khadija, and Fatima. She is also regarded as preeminent among the women of Paradise.³³

The birth of Mary is recorded in *Surat Al 'Imran*³⁴ and her giving birth to 'Isa is likewise recorded in the same *sura*³⁵ and in *Surat Maryam*.³⁶ These textual evidences prove that Maryam indeed occupies a prominent place, not only in the Islamic tradition, but also in their holy book itself, the Qur'an. Aside from these biographical facts, we can also glean from the Qur'an that she has preserved her chastity.³⁷

Mary's story in the Qur'an coincides with the accounts in the Bible, although the latter might contain more information. The veneration of Mary is common to both religions and it can be a rich source for a theological encounter.

IV. *QUAESTIONES DISPUTATAE*: DIVERGENCES WITH ISLAM

A. *De Deo Trino?*

While *Nostra Aetate* is very optimistic on the commonalities of the monotheistic views of Islam and Christianity, it nevertheless remains silent on one thorny issue. In fact it is an issue that even our current theological advancements cannot fully comprehend. It is a mystery far too rich and complex beyond our limited human understanding. This is the mystery of the one and yet triune God.

The Qur'an is replete with condemnations for those who associate gods with Allah. *Shirk*, the Arabic word for polytheism or idolatry, is an abominable sin for the Muslims. It is in fact a denial of Islam's first pillar of faith, that there is no god but Allah.

³³ Encyclopedia of Islam 2, 6, 629.

³⁴ Qur'an 3:35-37.

³⁵ Qur'an 3:45-51.

³⁶ Qur'an 19:16-34.

³⁷ Qur'an 21:91.

Even in the passages wherein we find Jesus speaking, he would condemn the association of gods with Allah.³⁸

From the texts though, it appears that Muhammad thought that the Holy Trinity consisted of the Father, the Son and the Virgin! Historians would tell us that there existed in Arabia a sect called Collyridians who considered the Virgin Mary a divine person and offered in worship to her a cake called Collyris. It must be from this that Muhammad got a perverted view of the Trinity. It would also seem that Muhammad had a sensuous understanding of the Trinity and had never been instructed in the orthodox faith in reference to the dogma of the Trinity.³⁹ Since there was even no Arabic translation of the New Testament available during Muhammad's lifetime, it is apparent that what he heard of the Gospel was filtered to him through controversy.⁴⁰

It was already a challenge to explain the Trinity, or at least a cursory understanding of it, in Muhammad's time. The challenge has never been met and further obscured by writers and historians who obfuscate with their own biased understanding. The challenge thus indeed remains and the search for a better explanation always eludes us.

B. Jesus

What is the Qur'anic view of Jesus? The Muslims recognize the validity of Christian revelation, so it should be no surprise that the Qur'an speak highly of Jesus, as was noted by *Nostra Aetate*.⁴¹

The Qur'an itself refers to 'Isa in 15 *suras* and devoted 93 verses to him.⁴² Also, in the Qur'an, there can be found a lot of appellations to his name, foremost among which is *Ibn Maryam*, which appears in 33 instances. Some of the other names pertaining

³⁸ cf. Qur'an 5:76-79; 116-117.

³⁹ Hughes 1994, 234.

⁴⁰ Mohammed 1990, 61.

⁴¹ NA 3.

⁴² Encyclopedia of Islam 2, 4, 81.

to 'Isa are: *al-Masih*⁴³ which appears 11 times; *nabi*,⁴⁴ *rasul*,⁴⁵ *mubarak*,⁴⁶ *kalimat Allah*,⁴⁷ and *qawl al-Haqq*.⁴⁸ These titles alone bear witness to the fact that the Qur'an places 'Isa in a very much revered position.

From the numerous Qur'anic citations and references to 'Isa, the following storyline can be constructed.

The prophet Mumammad taught that 'Isa was miraculously born from Maryam near the trunk of a palm tree. And then the Jews charges that Maryam was unchaste, but the baby speaking in his cradle, vindicated the honor of his mother. When he grew up, Jesus performed miracles, giving life to a clay figure of a bird, healing the blind, curing the leper, raising the dead and bringing down a table from heaven as a festival and a sign.

'Isa was specially commissioned as a prophet of Allah to confirm the Torah and to reveal the Gospel. He performed his mission with many manifest signs. He foretold the coming of another Prophet, whose name is Ahmad. The Jews intended to crucify him, but Allah deceived them, for they did not crucify 'Isa but only his likeness. And he is now in one of the stages of celestial bliss. After 'Isa left this earth, his disciples disputed among themselves, some calling him a god, others making him one of a Trinity.

From the Traditions of the Prophet, it can be known that 'Isa will come again on the last day, and will slay the anti-Christ, kill all swine, break the Cross, and remove the poll tax from the infidels. And then he will reign as a just king for 45 years, marry and have children. He will die and be buried near Muhammad in al-Madina, between the graves of Abu Bakr and 'Umar.⁴⁹

⁴³ "Messiah" cf. Qur'an 3:40.

⁴⁴ "Prophet" Qur'an 29:30.

⁴⁵ "Apostle" cf. Qur'an 4:157.

⁴⁶ "Blessed" Qur'an 19:31.

⁴⁷ "word of Allah" Qur'an 4:169.

⁴⁸ "word of Truth" Qur'an 19:35.

⁴⁹ Hughes 1994, 280.

While the Qur'an acknowledges all these points, it does so in reference not to the divinity of Jesus but to the omnipotence of God. While it affirms that Jesus was able to work miracles,⁵⁰ recognizes him as the Messiah⁵¹ who will return at the end of time;⁵² it nevertheless denies his death and resurrection.⁵³ This denial of the divinity, death and resurrection of Jesus is integrated into the whole conception of the Qur'an: from its insistence on the unicity of God, to its theological understanding of sin, and to the compassion and mercy of Allah.

The death and resurrection of Jesus for the Muslims are impossible events since these would contradict the benevolence of Allah. Why would Allah allow his prophet to die? He did not allow Ishmael to be sacrificed, and so it makes perfect sense that he would not let Jesus be nailed to the cross. The denial of the historicity of the death and resurrection of Jesus still leaves open the notion of Jesus who was ready to die, a perfect Muslim since he was ready to submit totally to the will of God. This Qur'anic view of Jesus is consistent with the Islamic theology on sin.

C. *O Felix Culpa!*

Of crucial importance to the Christian faith, whether Catholic or Protestant, is the notion of Original Sin. The Fall of Adam had dire consequences to the entirety of humankind and necessitated the Atonement made by Jesus. This understanding of the fundamental transgression of Adam is enshrined in the Augustinian interpretation of original sin that became not only pervasive but also normative in the Western Christian theology.

However, Christians today should be aware of the fact that there is an alternative theology of the Original Sin found among the Eastern fathers who, while affirming the universality of sin, did not connect it to the Fall. For them, the sin of Adam is the prototype or model of sin but not necessarily the cause of human sinfulness.

⁵⁰ cf. Qur'an 5.

⁵¹ cf. Qur'an 3:45.

⁵² Qur'an 4:159.

⁵³ Qur'an 4:156-158.

ness. Irenaeus, for instance, views Original Sin as calling forth God's compassion on account of human weakness and vulnerability and not a damnable revolt against God's eternal goodness. Some contemporary theologians, like Rahner, reject the notion that Original Sin is simply the sinful act of the first man or is a matter of collective guilt, for these cannot be sustained biblically or theologically. What then becomes of Christ's sacrifice? Instead of passively accepting punishment in humanity's place, Christ freely accepted the Cross and the execution that came with it. The sacrifice on the Cross is thus seen as an expression of His love for us, not necessarily an expiation demanded by a vindictive God for human sin committed in the cradle of creation.⁵⁴

While such views maybe a little unorthodox, it nevertheless resonates well into the heart of Islamic theology of sin. For Muslims, God is all merciful and compassionate. People do sin but they are not condemned for eternity, they still have the opportunity to reconcile themselves to God through repentance. Here we find echoes of the parable of the Prodigal Son.⁵⁵ Thus, there is perhaps a need to reformulate our understanding of the theology of the Fall and Atonement in such a way that it would also be a good entry point into the heart of Islam.

D. Reformulating Revelation

In the traditional Catholic theology, the notion of revelation is understood to be the truths disclosed by God that are indispensable for our salvation. This revelation ended with the last Apostle and was stored in a "deposit of faith." This rendered revelation as something closed and static. Non-Christian revelations before the coming of Christ were seen as preparation to the Gospel, while those coming after it are no longer considered valid or true revelations.

In contrast to this, Karl Rahner insists that revelation is fundamentally the self-communication of God to the world, not just limited to the world of the Judeo-Christians. Revelation then has

⁵⁴ Mohammed 1999, 63.

⁵⁵ Mohammed 1999, 62.

a broader character that goes beyond the special revelation that God disclosed in the person of Christ. Building on this conception, other theologians would then emphasize the interpersonal character of the encounter and consider the human response as a necessary component. This human response is contextualized and defined by the social, cultural, political and religious circumstances; thus giving a particular hue to the self-communication of God.⁵⁶

This understanding of revelation as a personal encounter cannot be reduced to relativism or indifference. While the human response is always contextualized and defined, it is always the goal of faith, which is God, that defines that very faith. As Aquinas puts it,

The act of faith does not end with the formula (of church or our personal ideas), but at the very reality of God.⁵⁷

In this view revelation can be classified as either general or special. General revelation is the means by which God has communicated and continues to communicate with humanity. The world religions can be seen as settings for this revelation and thus the people belonging to these religions can still be saved by a grace expressed in terms of their own revelation. World religions are then *extraordinary ways of salvation* for the majority of humanity and the message of their founders are revelations from God in a real but incomplete sense. Special revelation can be considered as the concrete historical manifestation of God which occurred in the Judeo-Christian world that offers the *ordinary way of salvation*.⁵⁸

This distinction does not reduce the uniqueness of the Christian revelation but allows for the possibility of God's self-communication in other religions, thereby ensuring that salvation is also possible in other religions, albeit in a mysterious way. This distinction also opens up the necessity of interreligious dialogue in today's pluralistic world and opens up a plethora of possibilities for a richer field in theological discourse.

⁵⁶ Mohammed 1999, 54.

⁵⁷ *ST II-II*, 1, 2, 2.

⁵⁸ Mohammed 1999, 54.

E. The Prophet and the Word

While *Nostra Aetate* makes mention of the veneration the Muslims accord to Jesus and Mary, it is mute about the prophetic mission of Muhammad. It is also silent about the nature of the Qur'an as the revealed book of Islam. We ask then the two critical questions: Was Muhammad a prophet? And is the Qur'an the word of God? The council provided no explicit answer to these questions.⁵⁹ The questions are of course more complex than they seem.

Can Muhammad be considered a prophet in the Christian sense? The teaching of Paul that there will be authentic prophets after Jesus⁶⁰ opens up the possibility of accepting Muhammad as a witness to the monotheistic faith. Through him, God communicated fundamental truths about the reality of God and the condition of the human being. This view is shared by the Second Vatican Council, which in *Lumen Gentium*⁶¹ accepted that all religions are vehicles of salvation; and by John Paul II, who asserted that Christian and Islamic revelations are parallel expressions of the monotheism.

What is the status of the Qur'an with regard to revelation? Is the Qur'an the word of God? For Muslims, the Qur'an is the final special revelation from God. Revelations prior to the Qur'an serve to convey the basic message that there is only one God. Explicit in the Qur'an is the view that all the prophets before Muhammad and the sacred texts before the Qur'an were written in a specific language.⁶² However, all the messages, including that of the Qur'an's, come from a single source: an eternal book called "Um al-Kitab"⁶³ or "Kitab Maknun"⁶⁴ that can be found in Heaven. This view is a rather explicit assumption that the one universal monotheistic message is diversified by the receiving language, culture, social and historical milieu. Nonetheless, the multiplicity of expression does not in any way hinder the basic message.

⁵⁹ Mohammed 1999, 61.

⁶⁰ cf. 1 Corinthians 14:29, 39; 12:10, 28; and Romans 12:6.

⁶¹ LG 14-16.

⁶² Qur'an 16:36.

⁶³ "Mother of the Book" in Qur'an 13:39; 43:4.

⁶⁴ "Book Well-Guarded" in Qur'an 56:78.

Indeed, no human expression of the word of God can exhaust the mystery of the one God. In accepting this, Islam allows for disparity in the expression of monotheism as is hopeful that all discrepancies will be resolved by Allah:

To each among you have we prescribed a Law and an Open Way. If Allah had so willed, He would have made you a single People, but His Plan is to test you in what he hath given you; so strive as a race in all virtues. The goal of you all is to Allah; it is He that will show you the truth of the matters in which ye dispute.⁶⁵

The immensity of God's will is beyond any other human ability to describe and fathom. The Qur'an is explicit on this point:

If the ocean were ink (wherewith to write out the words of my Lord) sooner would the ocean be exhausted than would the words of my Lord, even if we added another ocean like it for its aid.⁶⁶

This is a view shared by Christians who believe that the person of Jesus Christ transcends the accounts written in New Testament about him:

There are also many other things that Jesus did, but if these were to be described individually, I do not think the whole world would contain the books that would be written.⁶⁷

Given the reformulation of revelation into a general and special kind, and the acceptance of the prophethood of Muhammad, it thus makes possible the acceptance of the Qur'an as a word of God, but not the word of God, which refers to Jesus Christ alone. Christ is the fullness of God's revelation, a special revelation which God privileged the Judeo-Christian world. This does not necessarily prevent us from admitting that God's self-communication continues even up to this time in many varied ways.

⁶⁵ Qur'an 5:48.

⁶⁶ Qur'an 18:109.

⁶⁷ John 21:25.

If the Qur'an is indeed a word of God, then it is not addressed only to Muslims but to Christians as well.⁶⁸ The Qur'an serves as a reminder that God's revelation must be made intelligible to the people of today, just as Christ concretely did in his lifetime.

V. FURTHER CONSIDERATIONS

A. *Identity and Difference*

According to Dialogue and Proclamation, a sound identity and a strong religious conviction are necessary for one to engage in dialogue.⁶⁹ Without a firm anchoring to one's beliefs, then the dialogue becomes merely like a groping in the dark, or a venturing into the unknown, without any hope of coming into light or attaining the joy of discovery.

While maintaining a sympathetic and broad-minded approach to Islam, one must take into account the Muslim tradition of over a thousand years. This is a tradition that forms the basis of belief for the majority of the Muslims. There is also a radical divergence of views that exists between Christianity and Islam. For an authentic dialogue to begin, one must have a respect for the identity of the other:

To accept one another assumes then that Christians and Muslims recognize each other's profound differences, respect each other in the diversity of their religious traditions and try, in meeting, to find out more about each other. This leads to a growth in mutual esteem and love.⁷⁰

Dialogue does not ignore obvious differences. Disregarding diversities does not serve any purpose neither to friendship nor to truth. What is important is the manner of the discourse: that both dialogue partners must be receptive to God's grace and engage all of one's heart and intelligence in order to safeguard the requirements of truth and charity.

⁶⁸ Ovey 1990, 65.

⁶⁹ DP 48.

⁷⁰ Guidelines for Dialogue between Christians and Muslims, 1990. 31-32.

With this, the careful selection of one's dialogue partner is of extreme importance. One cannot dialogue with a person having a closed mind. One cannot make any headway with a person who is so convinced that his beliefs are the best and all the rest are nothing but aberrations. For a dialogue to take place, the partner who is convinced with his beliefs and without renouncing the purity of his faith must also be convinced that the other side can also validly and reasonably claim that his faith is nourished by limpid sources.

With this approach to dialogue, both partners can hurdle any obstacles that may come along the way. Even the theological questions about the Trinity, the nature of the Qur'an, the prophethood of Muhammad, and other related issues could be discussed intelligently. Even if there is no resolution in sight, the mere dialogical exploration of these topics can lead to a deepening of one's own identity and uniqueness as well as an appreciation of other's convictions.

B. The Clearing

On the religious level, dogmas, mysticism and exegesis of both faith traditions offer a fruitful area for mutual deepening and enrichment. To clear the atmosphere, all that is mere fable and that slanders both Islam and Christianity must be removed from educational material, especially from textbooks. The differences and divergences between the two religions must instead be expounded with objectivity, in order to avoid a false irenicism or syncretism.

Most of the times, what is being propagated about the other religion are mere hearsays, or perhaps a retelling of an experience that is isolated in its occurrence. These indeed lead to the formation of bias and prejudice against the other. Thus, in order to avoid these negative thoughts, a clearing of misconceptions must take place.

Furthermore, a sound political structure that recognizes the rights of individuals in a society must be present. In most parts of the Muslim world, the concept of state does not even exist. There is still a theocratic form of governance whose rulers are really men imposing their own will on others. Only the rulers have the legitimate claim to valid interpretations of their beliefs and practices.

In this situation, the religious minority is often persecuted. In the same way, there are also countries or communities who identify themselves as Christians but still trample upon the rights of others. Unless a more or less democratic space opens up, the encounter remains stifled.

C. *A long, long time ago...*

Dialogue between Christianity and Islam may have its finest results in the areas of culture and civilization. The commonly undertaken study of the religious and cultural heritages is a sure guarantee for safeguarding the cultural roles of the different religious areas in the world of today.

Respect for one's culture and the civilization that has so long preceded modern man in his existence will ensure broadmindedness and impartiality. The realization that there must be something good in one's culture and civilization that made it exist for so long leads one to a feeling of respect and even awe. There is much still to be explored in the cultural heritage of the other.

D. *De profundis clamavi ad te, Domine...*

In both Christian and Islamic religion, prayer is an essential part of worship. Both Christians and Muslims are indeed called as praying people. The expressions of prayer are so rich from both sides that each one could actually enrich one another. The contents of the prayer may also vary, but the object of prayer is the one true God who created all beings.

The spiritual experience of Christians and Muslims, both personal and communal, is very rich and sometimes takes on unexpected forms. Both communities practice praise and thanksgiving, offer prayers of request and supplication, and prayers for forgiveness. For the formulation of these prayers they make use of the rich store of sacred texts in their respective traditions. The many forms of prayers help believers to understand better what should be their attitude in worship, as they seek to fulfill the calling which they believe that they have received from the Lord.⁷¹

⁷¹ Guidelines for Dialogue between Christians and Muslims, 1990, 108.

It is also generally accepted that the spread of Islamic faith in the Far East is due to the efforts of Muslim traders and mystics who found their way through the different lands. In the Philippines for instance, the Muslim mystics or preachers came and offered a deeper religious experience. It was quite easy for the natives to be converted, or at least to adapt to this new religion then, since the way to holiness that Islam offered is akin to their experience. It is in this area of religious and spiritual experience that can also pave the way for a much profound and richer dialogue.

VI. EPILOGUE

While indeed the history of Christianity and Islam is replete with conflicts and confrontations, there is still hope for the future. There are many areas where Christians and Muslims can go hand in hand. In the areas of the promotion of human values and rights, there are already cooperative efforts between Christians and Muslims. A dialogue of life and action is already at work.

For the furtherance of these relations however, it is necessary that Christians and Muslims open themselves up for the dialogue of theological exchange and religious experience. These are areas in which a deeper understanding may occur. Even though our world today is menaced by the presence of terrorists who seek to distract both religions from the path of unity and accord, there is still hope in the men and women from both sides who continue to sit down and talk, and share their common experiences as well as thresh out their differences.

The goal of the encounter is neither uniformity nor conversion. It is the seeking of oneness of heart and mind, respecting the other's beliefs and traditions. The aim of the encounter is to make this world a better place to live in, and also to lead us to the life that is to come. □

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