

Islam: Dialogue or Confrontation?

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Since I arrived in Cairo, Egypt, thirty years ago, in 1972, relations between Muslims and Christians changed dramatically. In the sixties, at the time of the Second Vatican Council and the call for dialogue with Muslims, we experienced what I should call, a period of *Kairos*, of optimism, of opportunities to build a new world. But now the Christian theologian is very much divided in himself being confronted to an acute problem of coherence between the respect urged by Vatican II and the fact that he feels obliged to criticize some aspects of modern contemporary Islam.

I.

This is our situation as theologians, not only after 11 September 2001, but since the last years of the seventies, when we were confronted in the streets of Cairo with groups of excited Muslim militants, shouting *Allahu akbar* – God is greater – and demanding that the Shari’a-Law should be applied immediately. We saw slogans appear on the walls of the city: *Islam is the solution; God is our Goal, the Prophet – Muhammad – is our Leader, the Koran is our Constitution*. For them, Islam should be applied as a complete Code “which provides for all areas of life, whether spiritual, intellectual, political, social or economic.” For them, Islam is defined as an all-embracing culture. This Islamic culture should be defended against foreign influences. Muslims became assertive, and some groups turned violent. After thirty years, we find the same kind of attitude described in an article in the *International Herald Tribune* (August 2002), where a journalist, Karl Vick described long conversations in Pakistan with Al-Qaeda people who told him exactly the same: “*The*

Arabs abhorred what they regarded as the corrupting influence of Western money and morals on traditional Muslim societies and Arab governments..."; "they don't want their world polluted. They see us as the greedy people that we are."

Defending Islam means for them, first *Takfir*: to recognize that the West lives in ignorance of the Message of God, in disobedience of the Law of God, and in fundamental injustice: the Egyptian ideologist Sayyid Qutb said that the international economic "order", ruled by the West is in fact an international disorder of usury. And we know that usury is condemned vehemently by the Koran (2:275-6). Many Muslims were convinced that the actual governments of Islamic states were too much influenced by the West to be really Islamic; second, *Hijra*: to take distance of these societies – both the West and the so-called Islamic states – and start an internal Emigration, bringing together Muslim people who are convinced that Islam alone is the human civilization conform to God's Decree; third, *Jihâd*: to defend the Umma, the Muslim community against the ongoing cultural, economic and military aggression. For them, this is the way the Prophet himself showed to his followers: *Takfir*: he proclaimed the injustice and the unbelief of the people of Mekka; *Hijra*: he dissociated himself from this ignorance of God's Law through his emigration; just like Abraham, who left behind his father and native country and their idols; *Jihâd*: he defended his community, fighting the masters of Mekka, his own tribe of the Quraysh, and expanded the civilization of Islam with the sword; as it is written in the Koran 9:5:

"... fight and slay the Pagans whenever ye find them, and seize them, beleaguer them, and lie in wait for them in every stratagem. But if they repent, and establish regular prayers (Salât) and practice regular charity (Zakât) then open the way for them: for God is forgiving, most merciful." This famous verse is known as the verse of the sword; it doesn't use the word "*jihâd*", which has a more general meaning of "effort", but the verb "*qa-ta-la*" which means "*to fight*".

And so we can understand perfectly the logic behind the attack on the trade towers, which was an efficient attack on the symbol of Western economy, culture, way of life and supremacy over the world. It is perfectly in line with the interpretation of Islam by some

ideologist who describe the world's history as a battlefield between good and evil.

This aggressive interpretation of Islam represented by those militants and the ideology behind it, reminds us the words of Saint Thomas Aquinas in the sixth chapter of his *Summa contra Gentiles*, where he dismissed the claim that Muhammad is a prophet by stating that "*he asserted that he was sent with the power of arms, a sign that is not lacking to robbers and tyrants*"...; "*it was by the multitude of (people ignorant of all divine teaching) and the force of arms that he compelled others to submit to his law.*"

Very recent research by scholars like Hoyland (Princeton) and De Prémare (Aix-en-Provence in France) has shown that the Christians in Palestine, with at their head the Patriarch of Jerusalem, Sophronius, reacted in the same way around 634-8 – that means: only a few years after the death of the Prophet of the Muslims in 632 – when they were suddenly confronted with the Arabs invading the Byzantine territories in the name of Islam, surrounding Jerusalem and finally taking the Holy City. The same indignation for using force to impose religion and the denial of the Muslim claim that the triumph of Islam is God's confirmation of the veracity of Muhammad's prophecy will persist until now. So, Christians didn't start to criticize the Muslims on this point in the context of the Crusades.

During the fourteen centuries of the existence of Islam, Christians have consistently argued that the Qur'ân has no real understanding of the religious significance of Jesus, while not presenting essential aspects of his life, and so misunderstood the religious experience of Christianity as a whole, discussing the formal expressions of the Ecumenical Councils (Trinity, Incarnation, Redemption...), but completely unable to catch the real significance of these expressions.

Denying the symbols of the Cross and of the Manger in Bethlehem, Islam refuses the religious experience of God embodied in human life, even humble and finishing in tragedy, and the proximity of God to the righteous even to the suffering, such as understood by Jesus himself in his constant reference to the ignominious afflictions of the Servant of Yahweh in Isaiah. Islam, in a way sometimes near to the Psalms and the Old Testament, stresses the concept of a Mysterious God, to who is Might and Power (*lâ hawla wa lâ quwa illâ billâh*: *there is no Might and no Power except in Allâh*). In the

discussions between Muslim and Christian Arabs in the middle Ages and even in the contemporary discussions between Islam and the West, this became the fundamental argument with much wider implications than generally admitted.

This was never so clearly formulated as it was in *The Apology of Christianity* by Al-Kindi, a Christian Arab from the ninth century.¹ This book influenced the whole of the discussion in the West. The book has been translated in Latin by Petrus of Toledo in 1141, under the direction of Petrus Venerabilis, Abbot of Cluny, together with a translation of the Qur'ân. Saint Thomas Aquinas presented in fact the same arguments in his *Summa Contra Gentiles*.

The Christian Arab author al-Kindî is well informed about the Qur'ân but especially about the Sîra, the Life of Muhammad.² And sees Muhammad, in Medina, as a leader of razzia's, the *Maghâzî*, later glorified by the early biographers of the Prophet. Al-Kindî establishes that the victory against the opponents was for the Muslims a clear sign and proof of the truth of the Message and the demonstration of the prophecy of Muhammad; what is actually confirmed by Muslims scholars, such as Hishâm Djaït, in his book about the early period of the foundation of Islam.³ For him and many others, the military expeditions of Muhammad and his companions, so as the extension of Islam by these expeditions in the first century of the

¹ MUIR, W., *The Apology of El-Kindi. A work of the ninth Century, written in Defence of Christianity by an Arab*, London, 1885. Epistle of 'Abd Allâh b. Isma'il al-Hâshimî to 'Abd al-Masîh Ishâq al-Kindî and Refutation of this Epistle by Al-Kindî.

² TARTAR, Georges, *Dialogue islamo-chrétien sous le calife al-Ma'mûn (813-834). Les épîtres d'al-Hashimî et d'al-Kindî*. Paris, 1985.

ABEL, Armand, *L'apologie d'al-Kindî et sa place dans la polémique islamo-chrétienne*. Accademia Nazionale dei Lincei 361(1964) 501-523.

GRIFFITH, Sydney H., *The Prophet Muhammad, his Scripture and his Message according to the Christian Apologies in Arabic and Syriac from the first Abbasid Century*, in *La Vie du Prophète Mahomet*, Colloque de Strasbourg 1980 (Toufic Fahd), 99-146, p. 144: "Unfortunately, thus far little scholarly attention has been paid to this valuable ninth century discussion of such an important issue. Perhaps the polemical character of the text makes it suspect as an historical document. But the fact remains that it is one of the earliest testimonies to the process of the Qur'ân's canonization."

³ DJAÏT, Hishâm, *La grande discorde. Religion et politique dans l'islam des origines* (bibliothèque des Histoires), Paris, 1989, p. 60: Rien n'a unifié autant les Arabes que la conquête. Rien non plus n'a plus fait pour leur faire aimer l'Islam.

Muslim area, were never seen by Muslims as something negative: *"It was God who granted them this conquest."* What is important, is to see that "Islam" means here, not a "spiritual religion", as religion is mostly understood in the West, but a global civilization, humanity, an human way of, a way society is organized as a civilized society, a better way of life as humans, in strict conformity with God's intentions, His divine Decree.

Al-Kindî mentions also the way in which Muhammad liked prayers, but also perfume and women: this fact has been mentioned by the Islamic Tradition and never denied. He confirms that no prophet before Muhammad *"has been attached to the pleasure of life as Muhammad was."* This brings him to the question *"what the conditions are of true prophecy."* In this case, he concludes that these conditions were not realized in the case of Muhammad. For him, indeed, the conditions of authentic prophecy are implemented only in the case that people convert to the Message *"when they renounce royalty and power; leave human science and wisdom behind, abandon richness and fortune and follow humble people, without nobility or power"...*; *"Force and compulsion, nobility of descent (a reference to Muhammad's tribe of Quraysh), possession of properties, easy prescriptions or permissive commandments concerning the temptations of the flesh, are no proof of (divine) inspiration."*

As we see in the *Summa* of Saint Thomas, these arguments towards Islam and the Prophet become extremely popular, while they were understood by Muslims as blasphemy; not because of the facts mentioned, but because of the conclusions: that Muhammad was not a prophet...

According to Al-Kindî, all this is incompatible with the Divine Nature, God of clemency, compassion and mercifulness towards men, even the most humble; what is represented in the life of Jesus, who lived in humility, as a clear manifestation of God's Love, and the vulnerability of this love. In this explanation of the arguments, we feel immediately that the controversy has his roots in the evangelical concept of God: Muhammad, definitively, was not a Christian.

And when Christian Arab authors such as al-Kindî were shocked by the life of Muhammad, such as is the case in modern times, even for atheists, the reason of this reaction is their sensibility for evangelical values! Islam is not asceticism. It became much

different when Sufism (the Mystical movement in Islam) and Sufi-confraternities started to emerge in later centuries, themselves clearly influenced by Christian Syrian and Egyptian monasticism, but however profoundly routed in the mystical aspect of the Qur'an. In fact, Islam is the expression of a specific religious experience, with direct implications in human life: it is a faith in the positive meaning of Creation, a faith in the Mystery behind this Creation: we cannot ask "why" God created, but we rely on God, we abandon ourselves to God. To have faith in the ultimate meaning includes solidarity with others, sharing the goods of creation. But it means also that men can take advantage of this creation. To remain unmarried is in this way a kind of unbelief. To believe in this positive value of creation and of human life, implies also human love, ambition, conquest and human "grandeur"? As such, Islam appears to be nearer to modern sensibility than we sometimes think; and I was not surprised to hear one of our students in Belgium at her Master's defense last June saying that Christianity is naïve and not realistic. As such Islam is clearly different from Christianity, and is *sui generis*. And so we better understand why it refuses vehemently the symbols of the Cross, Jesus in his non-violent attitude, as manifestation of God in the vulnerability of his love for all men, His compassion and forgiveness. So that "*Christ is the sacrament of the encounter with God*" (Edward Schillebeeckx).

But let us not forget the context in which Islam was born; and there we can see the terrible ambiguity of the symbol of the cross itself. In the fight between the Byzantine emperor Heraclius and the Persians, the Byzantine lost Syria, Palestine and Egypt (an event probably referred to by the Koran: "*The Romans have been defeated in a land close by...*" (30:2-3). But most important of all, the Persians took from Jerusalem the relics of the Holy Cross in 614. So when Heraclius finally defeated the Persians and brought back to Jerusalem these precious relics, the triumph of his army was seen as the triumph of the cross. People in Arabia discovered this triumphal cross on Byzantine coins... This very ambiguity is still alive in Muslim minds; and even confirmed by president Bush saying that the war against terrorism is a crusade...

Even if Muslims have always been aware of the other meaning of the cross, God's Son's humility, which they reject, as they do not believe that Jesus, Son of Mary, is God's son – according to the

Koran: "*It is not befitting to God to adopt a son*" (19:35); while they refuse the idea that the great prophet Jesus died on the cross: "*They (the Jews) said: We killed Christ, the son of Mary, the Apostle of God. But they killed him not, nor crucified him. But so it was made to appear to them...*" (4: 157).

Let us not forget that the Western powers in the nineteenth century had in mind to bring civilization by military occupation. I would like to refer to the article I wrote ten years ago in *Philippiniana Sacra*, where I mentioned the famous discussion about the relations between Europe and Islam, edited in 1905, between a French minister of Foreign Affairs and the leading Muslim reformist theologian Sheikh Muhammad 'Abduh, Mufti of Egypt, who died the same year, July 11, 1905."⁴

Even after about 97 years, it is important to remind some of Hanotaux's statements in this period of triumphant colonialism and cultural and economic expansion of the West. I do believe that the fundamental positions did not change, even as some terms, as "civilization", are not used any more in this context and have been replaced by "human rights" and "democracy." I quote Hanotaux: "*To these Islamic and Semitic peoples, the French people, Aryan (sic!), Christian and republican, has now to bring the bread and the salt of life and civilization.*"

As we read the answer of the introduction by Muhammad Talaat Harb Bey and the text of Sheikh Muhammad 'Abduh, we can probably already grasp altogether the reasons of the Islamic resentment towards the West and the call for a reform in the Islamic world itself: "*For Sir Hanotaux, as for many Europeans, there is no civilization then the civilization coming from Europe. For them, welfare and prosperity can appear only under the rule of European Law, European customs, in one word: by European civilization. But nevertheless, this famous civilization brought to Europe itself an accumulation of disasters and ruins*" (this is written before 1914 and 1940...!)"⁵; "*According to the Gospel, as we read and understand it, the Christian Believer is supposed to detach himself from the*

⁴ M.G. Hanotaux et le Cheik Mohammad Abdou, *L'Europe et l'Islam*. Avec préface de Mohammad Talaat Harb Bey, Le Caire, Jean Politis, 1905.

⁵ *L'Europe et l'Islam*, p. 7.

world and has to live in a simple way, following the straight pad. The Gospel commands him not to repay evil by evil, and condemns the rich who are always ambitious and ready to be harmful to others, as it is easier for the camel to pass through the eye of the needle, than for the rich to enter the Garden of Paradise.⁶ This admirable doctrine has indeed the dignity of the Messenger who announced it...; "but nothing of this beautiful doctrine of the Gospel can be seen in that civilization where Hanotaux is speaking about...: actually it is founded on might, gold, vanity, arrogance, hypocrisy, represented on the one side by the pound sterling and on the other by the golden Napoléon (Franc); but in all of this, the Gospel never appears...; Jesus Christ teaches the Christians that they had to be inspired by the spirit of tolerance; but this lesson was so badly assimilated, that they not only do not tolerate other people's law, but also other people's belief..."⁷

II.

"In history, many dissensions have risen between Christians and Muslims". These are the words of the Declaration of Vatican II, *Nostra Aetate* (quoted NA), from October 28, 1965. And we start there the second part of this talk. In this atmosphere, years before the Islamic militant movement became apparent for the world, the Sacred Council, in his own words, *"pleads with all to forget the past, and urges that a sincere effort be made to achieve mutual understanding."*

On Chapter II, § 16, the fathers wrote in the Constitution *Lumen Gentium* that *"the plan of salvation also includes those who acknowledge the Creator, in the first place amongst whom are the Muslims."*

As we said before, the moment of *Kairos* of the sixties and Vatican II is now surely over, and the Christian theologian is confronted to an acute problem of coherence between the respect urged

⁶ Mt. 19, 24 and par. and also in the Qur'ân, VII, 40: "To those who reject our signs and treat them with arrogance, no opening will there be of the gates of heaven, nor will they enter the Garden, until the camel can pass through the eye of the needle: such is our reward for those in sin."

⁷ *L'Europe et l'Islam*, p. 42-43.

by Vatican II and the fact that he feels obliged to criticize some aspects of modern contemporary Islam. To solve that problem, he has to understand why the sacred Council declared that:

"The Church has also a high regard for the Muslims" (NA).

We therefore have to analyze the short paragraph of the Declaration, and we will find out that every sentence of this text is an implicit reference to verses of the Koran:

"...the Muslims. They worship God, who is one, living and subsistent..."

Kor. 2, 255: "God! There is no god but He, the Living and subsistent...";

"merciful and almighty..."

Kor. 26, 9: "Verily, your Lord is the Almighty, the Merciful";

"the Creator of heaven and earth"

Kor. 6, 1: "Praise be to God, who created the heavens and the earth";

"who has spoken to men"

Kor. 96, 5: "(God) taught man that which he knew not...".

"They strive to submit themselves without reserve to the hidden decrees of God"

Kor. 87, 3.10: "(God) hath ordained by Decree and granted guidance (...). The admonition will be received by those who fear (God)";

"Just as Abraham submitted himself to God's plan to whose faith Muslims eagerly link their own"

Kor. 2, 131: "(Abraham), his Lord said to him: Submit (a-sl-i-m); and he said: I submitted (a-sl-a-m-tu) to the Lord of the universe"; Kor. 16, 120: "Abraham was indeed a model, obedient to God, a pure monotheist";

"Although not acknowledging him as God, they venerate Jesus as a prophet"

Kor. 61, 6: "And remember, Jesus, the son of Mary, said: (...) I am the Prophet (Rasûl) of God";

"His virgin Mother they also honor, and even at times devoutly invoke"

Kor. 19, 20.31: "She said: How shall I have a son, seeing that no man has touched me"...; "and He (God) hath made me blessed wheresoever I be."

"Further, they await the day of judgment and the reward of God following the resurrection of the dead."

Kor. 75, 1: "I call to witness the Day of the Resurrection"; Kor. 1, 2.4: "Praise be to God, the Lord of the worlds (...), Master of the Day of Judgment";

"For this reason, they highly esteem an upright life and worship God, especially by way of prayer, alms-deeds and fasting."

Kor. 9, 71: "The Believers, men and women, are protectors one of another: they enjoin what is just, and forbid what is evil: they observe regular prayers (Salât), practice almsgiving and obey God and His Prophet"; Kor. 2, 183: "You who believe: fasting is prescribed to you..."

If we bring together all the elements presented here, we can define what is Islam, in a coherent scheme, with the following six aspects:

1.1. Islam, as an "existential act of Faith"; to be a Muslim is "to perform the act of Islam", and just like Abraham, abandon oneself to God. That means: to the divine Decree of God, the plan of God that will bring humanity to salvation. According to a famous Islamic Tradition "every child who is born, is born according to that Divine Decree. So: God's Decree is man's Destiny to Salvation. To be conscious of this Destiny, and act accordingly is to be a Muslim. It implies a profound conscience of relatedness. It is in fact the Mystical aspect of Islam.

According to this, "Islam" can be translated as "abandoning oneself, submission, to rely on God, confidence, patience, serenity and peace (salâm!), gratitude, thanksgiving, commitment of the whole life, committing oneself to be "the servant of God", or "Abd-Allâh".

1.2. Islam, as an "existential act of Faith" implies also obedience, because God's Decree establishes the order, the harmony of the universe, and with this a Law. In this sense, God's Law itself becomes men's Path to Salvation. This is the fundamental Ethical aspect of Islam. Which means that I have to relinquish all self-sufficiency, and obey God's Law revealed to men. This Law is heteronymous, irreducible to my human freedom. And the Koran becomes an ethical challenge, a "performative disclosure". In fact, we find in the Koran a list of fundamental commandments in Kr. 17, 22-39, who are comparable – but not identical – with the ten commandments of the Bible, founded on the affirmation that there is only one God, the Creator and Judge: "Thy Lord hath decreed that you serve none but Him." And His commandments are: Respect and compassion towards the parents who attain old age, the newborn child, the orphan, the wayfarer, the poor, and the indigent. No insolence, no adultery, but humility, justice and solidarity. In modern times, Muslims will stress that human autonomy is limited and that human Rights are based on God's Law.

2.1. As a "Religion", and based on his Mystical and Ethical aspects, Islam implies a Creed ('Aqîda) and the exigencies of the praxis of the Law (Shari'a).

The Muslim Creed contains six articles with three essential themes:

1. Monotheism (*Tawhîd*) (1°).
2. Revelation and Prophecy: through the Angels (2°), the Prophets (3°) and the Holy Books (4°).
3. Eschatology: The Judgment of the Last Day (5°), according to Good and Evil which are defined by the Divine Decree (*Qadar*) of the Creator (6°).

As we can see, the Muslim Creed is a clear expression of the faith of the Muslim as it appears in the definition of the existential act of Islam. As such it implies also obedience to God's Law (*Shari'a*):

2.2. Islam as Praxis. Submission to God cannot be something concerning only the individual. We live in a community of humans. And people who perform the existential act of Islam will gather in one community with a particular way of life coincident with God's Law. This Way of Life, observance of the prescriptions of the Koran and in conformity with the example of the way of life of the Prophet, his *Sunna*, is all-embracing, and concerns all areas of life, whether intellectual, political, cultural, social, economic or juridical. The "ultimate concern" of Islam cannot leave politics or economics or social life to be "empty" of Islamic values. Islam concerns the individual life, family life and the relations to others, but also the obligations of the state to "enjoin what is just, and forbid what is evil" as the Koran says, using force and submitting to punishments if necessary, as Muhammad himself did in Medina, in perfect accordance with the prescriptions of the Koran.

3.1. Islam as worship. The existential act of Islam, the conviction expressed in the articles of Faith and the obedience to God's Law expressed in a daily praxis and Islamic Way of Life, is also expressed in a symbolic way, in five rites. This is **Islam as "worship"** ('*Ibâda*, the "service to God"). Worship has also an internal and an external aspect. The internal is the "intention" of the rites: Turn towards God in conscience of one's ultimate dependence of God, and submit to God in perfect obedience to His Law.

3.2. The five Pillars of Islam, the five obligatory rites, are in a certain sense the "sacraments" of Islam, the external symbolic and efficient expressions of the existential act of Islam. Therefore, each of the pillars has a particular "*forma*" which is obligatory for the validity of the rite. To perform the rites shows the world that someone is really a Muslim.

1. The formula of the Profession of faith (*There is no god but Allah, and Muhammad is His Prophet*) is the *forma* in which the adhesion to Islam is explicated.

2. The five ritual daily prayers with the prostrations and the short recitations of the Koran are a perfect expression of one's submission to God.

3. The solidarity tax, or almsgiving, is the expression of the community of mankind and the need to share in justice and generosity.

4. Fastening in the month Ramadan strengthen man's conscience of relatedness to God: nothing is absolutely our own, God is the Creator.

5. The pilgrimage is one of the most important religious events in the world, as more than two million people, men and women, from all classes, races and origin gather in Mekka the first days of the month of Hajj. There the Muslims experience that the unity of God is the fundament for the unity of mankind and the unity of human Destiny of salvation; and ending the pilgrimage with the sacrifice, they remember the sacrifice of Abraham, the monotheist and Muslim by excellency according to the Koran.

Consequently to this description, we can now understand why the Church declared to have a high respect for the Muslims. And this was reiterated by Pope John-Paul II in his Book on Hope; but also why the Pope added that the profound difference between Islam and Christianity lays in the perception of Jesus Christ; and that for a Christian, Islam reduced the plenitude of revelation manifested in Jesus Christ.

III.

Once violence starts, it has to be contained, and Muslims have it difficult to do precisely that; but violence is not the only problem the contemporary Islamic community is confronted to. Shortly, in this third chapter I'll try to describe what is probably an even more fundamental theological or philosophical problem of contemporary Islam, source of so much resentment which is the consequence of what the French Muslim author Abdelwahhab Meddeb characterizes as "*la maladie de l'Islam*" (Paris, 2002), the sickness, or the crisis of contemporary Islam. Where Muslims are aware that their cultural model is not anymore the leading and fascinating civilization it has been.

From the second part of this talk, we understand the fundamental – and for me also authentic – religious "intuition" of Islam: the existential act of faith who will free oneself from self-sufficiency

to compassion, solidarity, and a commitment to act accordingly. As Cantwell Smith and Muhammad Talbi described Islamic faith: it is a recognition that God's final Decree means salvation for humanity, to be Muslim is just say "*yes, that's it*", and commit myself to a way of life in accordance of that ultimate concern. The consequence of the perception of the Koran as a challenge, which brings you to this act of faith, is that it opens the dimension of ethical responsibility, of accountability. And in this movement, humans find their humanity. As such, religion – and I think that this is true for the three biblical religions, Judaism, Christianity and Islam – becomes condition for humanity. On that level, religion has a dimension of universality.

Based on that religious experience, and just like Judaism did in conformity with the Law of Moses, Muslims were challenged to apply this universal Law to build up humanity. So it was perfectly coherent with this fundament of Islam. Muhammad saw the Muslim community of Medina as a global project of society, where an "ideal" human way of life was made concrete. The prescriptions of the Koran were to be applied, while his own lifestyle with his wives and companions became the example to be followed. This coherent and all-embracing way of life was the human answer to god's revealed Decree and Law. So when Muhammad died in 632, it was perfectly coherent with his action in Medina, that the Muslim community had only one question in mind: how to organize the community, so that she went on to be the real *Civitas Dei* on earth, the human city, living in perfect conformity with God's Law and the revealed prescriptions. And in the way the Koran itself expresses it, the Muslim community will be *the best on earth* (2:143). This meant that the Muslim empires of the future were structured on the basis of a more and more developed juridical system, based on Koran and *Sunna*; *Sunna* being the way of life of the Prophet of the Muslims and his companions. And on that juridical fundament they developed the great civilizations of Damascus, Baghdad, Cairo, Istanbul, Samarcand, Lahore, Fez... and so many other capitals of the Muslim States. Islam became identical with that juridical system.

It's in that evolution of the Muslim community that we see how different Christianity has been and still is. When Muhammad died in 632, the question raised was: "What is our way of life?", "How are we going to organize society?". After Jesus' ascension, the

disciples went on to live in the Spirit, and their question, which went on for centuries, until now, was: "Who was, and is, this Jesus, in whose Spirit who live?". Because he was himself the manifestation of God's Creative Word and will to salvation of humanity: "In the beginning was this Word – the *Logos* – and this Word became human...". "*Christ is the sacrament of the encounter with God*" (Edward Schillebeeckx). He is the mediation for salvation, and His Spirit will show us how to live. The Law of God is still there, but spiritualized. Even more: according to Saint Paul, we are not "servants", or "slaves" submitted to God – in Arabic: 'Abd-Allâh – but in Jesus we are free, and even called "*sons of God*", to whom the heritage of the Kingdom will be given. Christianity's evolution was not juridical, but theological and dogmatic. Christians living in the Spirit of God had to find out by themselves how to live in the world. No particular prescriptions were given anymore. "*When you see me, you see the Father*": and then you experience His love for men; this will be the fundament of your ultimate concern. Jesus is image of transcendence to humanity, which means "freedom in the Spirit", communion with God through Jesus Christ.

The Muslim community, built up on a juridical system, a coherent society supporting what is good and prohibiting what is evil, saw itself precisely as the different nations of Europe see themselves now: they are based on fundamental values, in this case the Human Rights included in the *European Charter of Human Rights*, and as such they are examples of humanity – and according to them: the best societies possible, as democracy is the best system possible according to the Western tradition. So much as the Islamic societies were based on the Koran and the *Sunna*. But with one big difference: that in Islam the details of the law-prescriptions were already given in Koran and *Sunna*, while modern states need a democratic parliamentary system to decide about the particular way to organize society. Human autonomy in modern states is much larger than it ever was in Islamic societies.

This coherent and global juridical system, which, as we said, was the fundament for so many Islamic civilizations, was able to develop itself until the seventeenth century. According to Haim Gerber of the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, "*that is, to the last historical moment when the traditional Islamic legal system may be said to have been still undiluted by Western cultural penetration.*"

And indeed, the incredible dynamic of the West from the fifteenth century on, has destroyed very much of the system. And scholars in Islamic Studies will describe how pieces by pieces, chapter after chapter, the system collapsed in most of the Islamic empires, until the final blow, when in 1924, Atatürk abolished not only the Sultanate of the Ottoman Empire, but also the Caliphate, the succession of Muhammad, the link with Medina and the *Sunna* of the Prophet, and replaced the whole Shari'a Law by a Constitution directly influenced by Swiss Law.

After more than twelve centuries, the Muslims had to redefine themselves: the definition of Islam as a global legal system didn't exist anymore. Except in some remote areas, as Arabia, Afghanistan, and towns and villages where the Western way of life did not yet change the cultural environment of people.

In this context, the gap between intellectuals who were very much influenced by the West and traditional institutions grew deeper and deeper. Some reformists saw the need to rethink what Islam was, and tried to redefine Islam in his more fundamental spiritual dimensions, some others rediscovering the popular and devotional aspects of Islam, or his mystical dimension, very much in line with the Sufi-movements of the past.

A much more stronger ideology was developed in particular in Egypt and India – later Pakistan, after the partition of the subcontinent. This movement wanted to be perfectly in line with the legal and juridical definition of Islam, seeing this as the only possible definition. They started to think how to reduce and even exclude Western patterns of life, by reinstalling the Islamic organization of society, as it was the case in the past. Their slogan was "implementation of the Shari'a-Law" (*Tadbiq as-Shari'a*). For them, the only possibility for Islam to recover was to reinstall the legal system in all its details. To change the constitutions of the Islamic states and to become "Islamic Republics" of "Islamic Kingdoms". The most famous ideologist of this movement were Sayyid Qutb in Egypt (d. 1966) and Sayyid Abu'l-A'la Maudûdî in Pakistan (d. 1979). Their influence has been immense. So much so that the whole of the Islamic world was penetrated by their vision. During the last twenty years, the call for Shari'a-Law has been heard in most of the Islamic States, from Egypt to Pakistan, from Nigeria to Indonesia, from Iran to

Turkey. The most spectacular revolution was that of Iran, but other countries had their legal system radically changed. Saudi Arabia was an exception, because it reintroduced a very strict Islamic legal system in the early years of the twentieth century, when the dynasty of the Ibn Sa'ud took control of the peninsula.

This movement of reinstallation of the legal system had however a terrible problem: how to reestablish a system of law, while that system was already dying during two or three centuries, because it was not adapted to the changing modern world? Not adapted, because it referred to a very detailed and explicit lifestyle and organization of human relations, based on prescriptions of the Koran and the *Sunna*. The consequences are that the implementation of Shari'a-Law is diversified in the different Islamic countries. A Dutch scholar, Ruud Peeters will say it this way: "Way is the prescription to cut the hand of thief's is not applied in most of the Islamic countries, while it is an explicit Koranic prescription?". His answer: "While nowadays, almost the whole of the Islamic world has introduced European Law and gives only a limited role to Shari'a-Law."

This conclusion shows clearly, that the static interpretation of Islam as an unchanging legal system is not working. This is the terrible tragedy of contemporary understanding of Islam as an unchanging, universal legal system, reducing the comprehension of Islam to just this particular juridical culture. It can only be imposed in remote areas by violence. As it was written in the International Herald Tribune: "They don't want their world polluted." But history went on, and what actually happened is that they denied the dynamic of historical changes. Their fight became a fight against history, against human creativity, and so it became a fight against humanity itself. And so we understand how it is a denial of any cultural diversity.

As a conclusion, I would like to summarize the problems contemporary Islam is facing:

Islam defined as a global legal system, with very concrete prescriptions coming from the past collapsed during the eighteenth century. The reason was a static interpretation of the Koranic Revelation and of the Prophetic *Sunna*. A static interpretation, which doesn't allow man to be creative in building society. This problem is in fact a theological problem: it is based on the fact that human

autonomy, creativity and inventivity are too much reduced in relation to the all might of God. There we discover how important the question is, raised by early Muslim theologians, of predestination in conflict with human freedom and autonomy, and not understood as a Destiny to salvation, but as a predetermination of human's future and limitation of his autonomy.

God's sovereignty is then understood as imposing a very particular system of Law, a global culture, a way of life or lifestyle to be applied to obey to God's Law. Particularity, which lacks universality. This problem implies the narrow interpretation of the Scriptures, the clash with modernity as lack of inventivity, so that according to the German scholar Tilman Nagel: *"Usually we hear (...) that Islam simply has no difficulties with science and technology, but in view of the disputes over the question where the border is between divine and human determination of actions, and the tendency of Islamic theology to draw this border very much in favor of God, this is a rather implausible claim"* (*The History of Islamic Theology. From Muhammad to the Present*, Princeton, 1999).

In this we understand clearly the tragedy of contemporary Islam. But also where we find ways of dialogue. With a clear mind about the reasons behind *"the Clash of Civilizations"* (Huntington), or "clashes of theologies", the clashes between "Islam and the West" and "Islam and Christianity." □