

The Dominican Contribution to Christian-Muslim Dialogue

Emilio G. Platti, O.P.

Katholieke Universiteit Leuven, Belgium

IDEO (Institut Dominicain d'Études Orientales du Caire), Cairo, Egypt

Fr. Platti, O.P. is a member of the Dominican Institute for Oriental Studies in Cairo-Egypt (IDEO), established in 1953, a research Institute, providing Egyptian and foreign researchers with a library specializing in the cultural and religious written Arabic heritage, wishing to promote a better understanding among Christians and Muslims.

The aim of this lecture is threefold. First, to make the link between IDEO and the very first century of the Dominican Order and its involvement in studying Muslim authors for a better understanding of Islamic theology and philosophy. Second, to present the most recent research attesting the Biblical background of the Islamic religion and the Qur'ân, so that we are able to understand what Christians have in common with Muslims, and what the fundamental differences are. And third, the involvement of members of the Dominican Institute in dialogue with Muslims in the twentieth and twenty first centuries, based on the teachings of Vatican II, and in particular, the Declaration *Nostra Aetate* and the Dogmatic Constitution *Lumen Gentium*. Following the second part of this presentation, it appears clearly that the presentation of Islam in the text of the Declaration is in perfect conformity with modern research on the historical background of the Qur'ân and his content. From this the actual members of IDEO are confident to be faithful to their mission statement: Involvement in the pastoral mission of the Church and seeking to overcome misunderstandings and violence, undertaking study of Christian and Islamic sources, so that Muslims and Christians can live together in peace and truth, as they worship the One God.

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Introduction

On January 14-16, 2016, the Dominican Institute for Oriental Studies in Cairo organized an international conference on *The Sciences of Islam, between Repetition and Innovation*, concluding a project funded by the European Union, which aims at the historical contextualization of 200 authors of the Islamic written heritage, in various fields, including Qur'ân, Prophetic Traditions (*hadîth*), law (*fiqh*), philosophy, medicine, Sufism (*tasawwuf*), grammar and poetry. The question of innovation is at the heart of contemporary challenges, where “renewal of religious thinking - *tajdid al-fikr al-dîni*” and innovation is an absolute necessity confronting violent radicalism and its static and univocal understanding of Islam and Islamic Law. One of the most important conclusions of research presented at this conference, is that Muslim intellectuals were able, even in post-classical Islam (13th century-19th century), to innovate the religious discourse through commentaries, glosses and addenda in their transmission of knowledge. Transmission is indeed not simply copying what has been said or written before; it is not just simply tradition, it is creative interpretation. This conclusion on historical contextualization and innovation is, of course, already a statement contradicting contemporary radical militancy, understood as an ahistorical totalitarian system, withdrawn from human history, denying any human creativity, where one single way of life, one “de-contextualized” culture, is ascribed an absolute – divine – status. In the case of this conference, we were delighted to have the president of the University of al-Azhar, Dr. Ibrahim al-Hudhud, presiding the opening session of the conference, attended by scholars from America, Europe, the Islamic world from the Maghreb to the Mashriq, and Asia-Pacific. Studying the sciences of Islam has indeed been the *modus dialogandi* with Muslims since the very first generation of Dominican brothers in Cairo, who were founders of our *Ideo-Institute* in Egypt.

To make the link between the *Ideo-Institute* and the very first century of the Dominican Order and its involvement in dialogue with Muslims, we have to mention three of its members. First of all, Father Angel Cortabarría Beitia (1919-2008) and his research on Albertus Magnus and Muslim medieval scholars, such as al-Kindî and Fârâbî, the two first Muslim philosophers, and his writings on the Dominican friars and the Schools of Oriental Languages in the thirteenth century in Spain and Tunis. Second is the long-time director of the Institute, Father Georges Chehata Anawati (1905-1994) and his research on Thomas Aquinas, Avicenna and Arabic Philosophy. Third is Father Jean-Marie Méricoux (1938) and his study on Riccòlò da Monte di Croce (1243-1320), from the Italian convent of Santa Maria Novella in Florence, who went all the way to Baghdad to study Arabic and Islam, passing by

Acco and meeting there the Dominican friars who were later massacred when that last stronghold of the Crusades was taken the 18th of May, 1291.

The first century of the Dominican Order

We know how saint Dominic himself wanted his brothers to study before being sent to different countries preaching the Gospel. Some of them were already at the universities of Paris and Bologna in 1217. *Contemplata aliis tradere* meant not only meditation, but also studying. It is no big surprise that some Spanish brothers, and in particular Raymond of Penafort (d. 1275), were very much involved in the foundation of schools for the study of languages, particularly Arabic and Hebrew. At that time, the south of the Spanish peninsula was at the height of Arabic and Islamic intellectual life, while the Christian North, and in particular the region of Catalonia, was very much open to be informed not only about Arabic and Islamic sciences and religion, but also Jewish thinking flourishing there at that time. Moses Maimonides, Ibn Maymûn in Arabic, was born in Cordoba in 1135 and died in Fustat, near Cairo, in 1204, whose Synagogue, *Maqâm*, the early burial place, is still standing at the heart of medieval Cairo. His *Guide of the Perplexed*, initially written in Arabic as *Dalâlat al-hâ'irîn*, was an important source of knowledge of Arabic philosophy for Thomas Aquinas. There were not only *Studia* for languages in Spain, Murcia, Barcelona, Valencia and Jativa (which closed around 1314), but also, in Tunis, capital of the Hafside emirate of Ifrîqiyya, with a *Studium Arabicum* between 1250 and 1258 or 1259 even for a short time¹.

The most excellent product of this system of schools is Raymond Martin,² born around 1230 in Catalonia, who wrote the famous *Pugio fidei* and other works, including in these treatises many references to outstanding Arab Muslim authors, such as the philosopher al-Fârâbî, whose treatise on the Intellect, *Maqâla fî ma'nâ al-'aql*, was available to him in Spain, in his Arabic original version. He also quoted Avicenna and Averroes, and the great Muslim theologian al-Ghâzâlî who died in 1111. To underline the link between the apostolic work of the Dominicans involved in studying Arabic and Muslim authors, allow me to quote Fr. Cortabarría's introduction of his article on Raymond Martin: *The originality of this work was, in the first place, the spirit of dialogue, in contrast with war and violence which were common before (at the time of the reconquista of the north of Spain, and in particular Catalonia), and also the means: knowledge of the language and culture of the people contacted.*

¹ Cortabarría Beitia, Angel, *L'étude des langues au moyen âge chez les Dominicains*, in *Mélanges de l'Institut Dominicain d'études orientales du Caire - Mideo* 10(1970), p. 189-248.

² Cortabarría Beitia, Angel, *Les sources arabes de l'Explanatio Simboli' du dominicain Catalan Raymond Martin*, in *Mideo* 16 (1983), p. 95-115.

From Raymond Martin's work, it becomes very clear why the Dominican authorities, provincials and masters general, underlined in several general chapters the importance of these *Studia*. They wanted that the Dominican brothers who were sent for pastoral reasons in Muslim countries, got the intellectual formation to understand well the religious and intellectual traditions from the people they were going to meet, so that they would be able to enter discussions with them, to present the Catholic faith, and to refute what contradicted their Christian faith.

It would be too much to mention here in detail the involvement of Albertus Magnus and Thomas Aquinas with Arabic and Islamic philosophy, al-Kindî, Avicenna and Averroes and others. We know how important this interaction was for the whole of the history of Christian Latin philosophy and theology. There was, however, another aspect in the transmission of information about Arab Islamic philosophy and theology: the transmission of information about the Qur'ân and the life of Prophet Muhammad, the two sources of Islam as a religion, not the philosophical and theological reflection written down in so many treatises and books, very much influenced by ancient Greek philosophy. Very little has been said about that, while the Qur'ân and Muhammad's life are indeed the two sources of the Islamic religion – *Usûl al-Dîn*. Something of this, although not much, was transmitted to the Latin west by two Dominican friars, Vincent of Beauvais and Thomas Aquinas. Saint Thomas' refutation of Islam in his *Contra Gentiles* is radical, and will be a guideline for many centuries to come.

Mohammed said that he was sent in the power of his arms (...). He forced others to become his followers by the violence of his arms. Nor do divine pronouncements on part of preceding prophets offer him any witness. On the contrary, he perverts almost all the testimony of the Old and the New Testaments by making them into a fabrication of his own, as can be seen by anyone who examines his law. It was, therefore, a shrewd decision on his part to forbid his followers to read the Old and New Testaments, lest these books convict him of falsity. It is thus clear that those who place faith in his words believe foolishly. (Summa Contra Gentiles, Book 1, Chapter 16, Art. 41).

I researched that a *Letter* written in Arabic in Baghdad around 819-825, by a Christian author, 'Abd al-Masîh al-Kindî, was the main source of information about the religion of Islam, the Qur'ân and the Prophet, available in the Latin west at the time of Thomas Aquinas. In his *Letter*, al-Kindî refutes at great length a shorter *Letter* written by a Muslim colleague and friend at the court of caliph al-Ma'mûn (813-833). It is obvious that this *Letter* played a decisive role in establishing an uninterrupted negative portrayal of Islam and his Prophet through the centuries, in particular through Vincent of Beauvais' *Speculum Historiale*. This French Dominican friar, who

died in 1264, included in this major work at least thirty excerpts from al-Kindî's *Letter*, "the best known Christian Arabic apology in both east and west," because the Arabic text was made available to the west through the Latin translation in 1141 by Petrus of Toledo. It was also because it contained part of a well-known *Collectio Toledana*, not only the *Letter* of al-Kindî, but also a translation of the Qur'ân, commissioned by Peter the Venerable, Abbot of Cluny.

The very interesting point concerning al-Kindî's Refutation of Islam, transmitted by the two outstanding Dominican friars, Vincent and Thomas, is that it renders a negative image of Islam, in conformity with a radical and violent interpretation of Islam, linked to the initial stages of Arabic-Islamic expansion under the Umayyad caliphs, in the second half of the seventh century. As we understand it now, in the context of radicalization in the Islamic community, the theme of *Islam and the jihâd* has, since then, continued unabated, not only in Christian refutations of Islam, but also in the form of a radical interpretation of Islam by some Muslim ideologies and movements themselves. In this interpretation, *Islâm* is not *salâm*, peace and salvation, but rather advancing armies, "war, violence and hostility." In a certain sense, al-Kindî's refutation of Islam is an *unicum* in the long history of Christian-Muslim debates for two reasons. Al-Kindî, who was himself an Arab, a high-ranking colleague of Muslims at the court of the caliph in Baghdad, was perfectly informed about Islamic traditions, the collection of the Qur'ân and the biography of Muhammad, so that the information transmitted by him matches perfectly with the Islamic sources we have now at our disposal. From their Christian point of view in the Latin world, Vincent and Thomas could not find a better source than al-Kindî's *Letter*.³ But from here, however, they could not be aware of the fact that another, more positive interpretation of Islam was possible.

The second point brought up by Thomas Aquinas is that the Biblical sources of the Qur'ân has to be examined later on, in the light of very recent research.

Dominican friars were not only in contact with Islam and Muslims in western Europe. Some of them were also directly involved and in dialogue with them in the Levant, the east of the Mediterranean Sea. From the beginning of the establishment of the Dominican order, friars were sent to Constantinople, which was the capital of the Byzantine empire but eventually had weakened in power, and the Holy Land, which was still under crusaders' control. The first objective was interaction with local churches in order to bring the different Christian communities to unity. But

³ Platti, Emilio. *Criteria for Authenticity of Prophecy in 'Abd al-Masih al-Kindî's Risâla*, in A. Rippin & R. Tottoli, *Books and Written Culture of the Islamic World. Studies presented to Claude Gilliot on the Occasion of His 75th Birthday*, Leiden-Boston, Brill, 2015, p. 3-25.

on the other hand, they also wanted language schools to be taught not only Greek but also Arabic. We know this from an early letter written by the provincial of Syria (the Levant) in 1237: “*Et iam per Dei gratiam linguis loquuntur novis et praedicant et maxime in Arabica, quae communior est inter Gentes.*”⁴

After the generation of Vincent de Beauvais and Thomas Aquinas and in another context, where interaction between Muslims and Christians was different, we hear a more positive witness, who was confronted with the real humanity of Muslims in their own environment. This is what we read in a book written by Riccoldo da Monte di Croce (1243-1320). He knew about Thomas’ *Contra Gentiles* and the texts included in the *Collectio Toledana*, but he went to be initiated much better into the teachings of Islam directly in the heart of the Muslim world, in one of the oldest universities of the world, the Mustansiriyya of Baghdad, founded in 1227 by the Abbasid Caliph al-Mustansir (1226-1242):⁵

Who would not be astonished, should he carefully consider the attention the Saracens pay to study, their devotion in prayer, their mercy for the poor, their veneration for the name of God, the prophets and the holy places, their affability towards strangers, the peace and love they have amongst themselves. To say much in a few words, one should know that they come together from different countries to Baghdad in order to study. Indeed, in Baghdad they have a number of places set aside purely for study and contemplation, after the fashion of our own monasteries.

We can imagine a Dominican friar who knows for himself that *contemplata aliis tradere* meant not only meditation, but also studying, writing down these words, admiring in others what he is used to do himself. The problem however was that his theology didn’t allow him to see Muslims in another way then. For him it was a terrible tragedy to see the people he met and admired not to be saved by their own faith, as they denied the redemption in Christ.

Islam: A Biblical (Christian?) Religion

I recently opened the first lecture of a course I was teaching entitled *Introduction to Islam* with a sentence from Gustav Pfannmüller’s *Handbuch der Islam-Literatur*, published in 1923: “*Schwally is right to complain that theologians are not yet sufficiently aware of the fact that Islam is part of the history of the Church.*” The students

⁴ Cortabarria, *L’étude des langues*, p. 215.

⁵ MÉRIGOUX, Jean-Marie, *Les débuts de l’ordre dominicain et le monde musulman: Riccoldo da Monte di Croce*, in *Memorie Dominicane* 15(2001), p. 55-77; MÉRIGOUX, Jean-Marie, *Un précurseur du dialogue islamo-chrétien. Frère Riccoldo (1243-1320)*, in *Revue Thomiste* (1973) n° 4, p. 609-621.

present laughed, thinking my words were a joke. Friedrich Schwally was co-publisher of Theodor Nöldeke's now renowned *Geschichte des Qur'âns* at the beginning of the 20th century. He had already expressed a similar idea in the latter publication: [We can thus conclude] "that Islam is the form that Christianity took throughout Arabia." It would appear that these prominent Islamologists didn't consider the idea a laughing.⁶ The very fact that the Qur'ân refers to Jesus as "*al-Masîh*, the Christ" might indeed incline us to say that Muslims are "believers in Christ." But there is evidently much more to be said on the matter.

In the course of the 20th century, numerous Islamologists endeavored to analyze the Jewish and Christian elements in the Qur'ân. And while they came to the conclusion that Islam is indeed a sort of Jewish Christianity, they were unable to provide historical evidence to support the idea. Their primary stumbling block was the fact that the entire Islamic tradition, including the Qur'ân itself, describes the religious context in which Muhammad lived and worked as Meccan polytheism. The latter was an astral religion, which in fact constituted a late form of the Semitic religiosity that was dominant in the geographical neighborhood of ancient Israel in biblical times, a religiosity that attracted the repeated ire of many of Israel's prophets in their day. How could those who heard the recitation of the Qur'ân understand any of it if they were dyed-in-the-wool pagans who had been raised in the pagan religious traditions? The Qur'ân, moreover, almost never recounts the stories of the Bible in detail, although it alludes to them time and again; so much so that some argue that the Qur'ân is a sort of *midrash*, a moralizing commentary on familiar biblical narratives. Who then constituted Muhammad's Meccan audience, and who among them were able to understand his words?

I am convinced that recent research into this question has provided a clear answer, in particular the groundbreaking work in the domain of epigraphy by Professor Christian Robin (*Institut de France*), who has dedicated himself to the study of pre-Islamic Arabic. He recently published the conclusions of his research in a number of articles, in addition to a lecture delivered at the IMA (*Institut du Monde Arabe*, Paris) on June 7, 2015, under the title "*Le christianisme ancien en Arabie: Nouvelles données. Le christianisme d'Abraha.*"⁷

⁶ See the dissertation of Willem Abraham Bijlefeld, "De Islam als na-christelijke religie," defended in Utrecht in 1959.

⁷ Institut du Monde Arabe, Paris, 7 June 2015, *Table ronde*. Christian Julien Robin, *The Peoples Beyond the Arabian Frontier in Late Antiquity: Recent Epigraphic Discoveries and Latest Advances*, in Jitse H.F. Dijkstra & Greg Fisher (eds.), *Inside and Out: Interactions between Rome and the Peoples on the Arabian and Egyptian Frontiers in Late Antiquity*, Leuven-Paris: Peeters, 2014, pp. 33-79.

The Qur'ân: In Its Own Way A Biblical Book?

A surface reading of the Qur'ân makes it immediately clear that the 114 suras employ performative language, that the listener is called to accept a specific image of humanity that is intended by God, and that allusions are constantly made to biblical characters who proclaimed this message without quoting the Bible – canonical or apocryphal – literarily. In Muhammad's day, of course, no Arabic translation of these biblical writings was available. The Qur'ân thus relies on oral transmission and alludes to narratives that must certainly have been very familiar. It would have made no sense to refer to them if this had not been the case.

Having explored the Qur'ân in its entirety, one can conclude that only the story of Yusuf in Egypt is recounted at length. For all the other prophets and patriarchs, no coherent narrative account is present; one has to bring together the verses in which allusion is made to them from various different suras. A simple enumeration of the most important characters in the Qur'ân and the number of times reference is made to them makes it clear that the figures in question are biblical figures: Adam (named 25 times), Nûh (33), Ibrâhîm (69), Ishâq (17), Ismâ'îl (12), Lût (27), Ya'qûb (16), Yûsuf (27), Mûsâ (Moses, named 136 times), Hârûn (20), Dâwûd (18), Sulaymân (17), Zakariyyâ (7), Yahyâ (John the Baptist, 9); Maryam (mother of Jesus, 34), 'Îsâ (Jesus, mentioned 25 times as Ibn Maryam, son of Mary, and 11 times as *al-Masîh*, the Messiah or the Christ). These are by far the most important characters in the Qur'ân. Of the twenty-five prophets mentioned in the Qur'ân, only four do not feature in the Bible, among them Ahmad (mentioned once)/Muhammad (mentioned four times). The fact that reference is made to the wise Luqmân, to Alexander the Great and to the Seven Sleepers only serves to demonstrate that they too featured in the oral tradition of the period.

In his critique of Islam, John of Damascus (d. circa 750) claimed that a false prophet by the name of Muhammad, who had acquired a little knowledge of the Old and New Testament and made the acquaintance of an Arian monk, had invented his own heresy. The same argument can be found in several polemical documents. Thomas Aquinas likewise states in his *Summa contra Gentiles* (book I, chapter 6), that Muhammad had in fact corrupted the teaching of the Old and New Testament. This has its roots in older, more detailed legends concerning contact between Muhammad and a monk by the name of Sergius – known as Nestorius or Bahîrâ⁸ – and others who were said to have been his teachers. The most elaborate version of this polemic is to be found in the renowned *Apology* by the Christian 'Abd al-Masîh al-Kindî,' written

⁸ Barbara Roggema, *The Legend of Sergius Bahîrâ. Eastern Christian Apologetics and Apocalyptic in Response to Islam*, Leiden-Boston: Brill, 2009.

during the caliphate of al-Ma'mun (813-833).⁹ Reference is also made therein to Jews such as 'Abdallâh Ibn Salâm (d. 663) and Ka'b al-Ahbâr (d. 652?), who are said to have played a decisive role in the composition of the Qur'ân. These arguments are not simply plucked from thin air, however, since the oldest biography of Muhammad, written by Ibn Ishâq (d. 767) and revised by Ibn Hishâm (d. 828), also makes reference in passing to contact with a monk named Bahîrâ, while other Islamic sources use the name Nestor. Bukhârî's canonical hadîth collection even speaks of Muhammad having a Christian secretary, a fact confirmed by contemporary research.¹⁰ Moreover, the Qur'ân itself offers a hint in this regard, referring to a possible intervention by someone said to have influenced Muhammad and rejecting the claim: "We know what they say: 'A mere human is teaching him.' The language of him to whom they allude is foreign, but this is clear Arabic language" (Qur'ân 16: 103). Reference is thus being made here to someone who did not speak Arabic, which might potentially be an allusion to a Syriac monk or to Hebrew speaking Jews. Whatever the truth of the matter, these witness point to a Christian and Jewish background on which the Qur'ân leaned for support, only fragments of which remain visible, encapsulated as they are in polemic legends and stray anecdotes.

Evolution of Qur'ânic Themes

The following observation might serve to bring us closer to a solution to the problem of the Qur'ân's biblical background. If we introduce chronological order into the various themes present in the 114 suras – from early Meccan to late Meccan to Medinan¹¹ – then it becomes abundantly clear that Muhammad was convinced at the outset that the message he proclaimed was precisely the same as that proclaimed by the (biblical) prophets before him, namely: 1) that there is life after death, that people will be judged by God, and that they will find themselves in paradise ("paradise or the garden of Eden," *jannat al-firdaws* or *jannat 'Adn*), or in the fires of hell, depending on the way they lived their life; 2) that every human being is under the authority of the one unique God, referred to as *al-Rabb* (the Lord), *Allâh* (the God) and *Al-Rahmân* (the Merciful One), whose primary attribute is being merciful (*Rahîm*);

⁹ Emilio Platti, *Criteria for Authenticity of Prophecy in 'Abd al-Masîh al-Kindî's Risâla'*, in Andrew Rippin and Roberto Tottoli (eds.), *Books and Written Culture of the Islamic World*, Leiden-Boston: Brill, 2015, pp. 3-25.

¹⁰ Emilio Platti, *Les chrétiens en pays d'islam*, in Thierry BIANQUIS e.a. (éd.), *Les débuts du monde musulman. VII^e-X^e siècle* (Nouvelle Clio), Paris: P.U.F., 2012, pp. 470-482; Claude Gilliot, *Creation of a Fixed Text*, in Jane Dammen McAuliffe (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to the Qur'ân*, Cambridge: C. University Press, 2006, pp. 41-58: "... after Muhammad went to Medina, his employment of secretaries is attested" (...); "Zayd Ibn Thâbit who had been one of the secretaries of Muhammad in Medina ...".

¹¹ See Angelika Neuwirth, *The Qur'ân as a late antique text*, in Bilal Orfali (ed.), *In the Shadow of Arabic*, Leiden-Boston: Brill, 2011, pp. 495-509.

and 3) that (biblical) prophets before him proclaimed this kerygma to their own people, as evident from the “heavenly books,” the *Tawrât* (the Torah of Moses), the *Zâbûr* (the Psalms of David) and *al-Injîl* (the Gospel of Jesus).

In the later Meccan suras, and especially in the Medinan suras, a turnabout takes place: Muhammad is directly confronted with the fact that both Jews and Christians do not recognise their doctrines in Muhammad’s proclamation. The Qur’ân stands firm and sticks to the original kerygma. Muhammad accuses both Christians and Jews of falsifying the original revelation to the extent that the “heavenly books” as they now present them are no longer an authentic representation of the original kerygma. Christians call Jesus the son of God, and Jews keep the message for themselves alone in spite of its universal validity.

But the Qur’ân does not stop there. Further accusations are aimed at the Jews in particular. The Qur’ân accuses them of having killed the earlier prophets and of expressing pride in having crucified Jesus. The renowned verse that appears to deny the crucifixion is worth quoting in full here: “They are saying: ‘It is we who killed al-Masih, ‘Isâ, the son of Maryam, God’s messenger.’ – They did not kill him, nor did they crucify him; that was only how it appeared to them (*“shubbiha lahum”*). Those who disagree in this matter are hesitant; but they have no knowledge of the matter and they base themselves on conjecture; and are assured that they did not kill him. Rather, God raised him up to Him. “God is mighty and wise” (Qur’ân 4: 156-158). In the first instance, the intention here is to point out that the Jews were boasting about the fact that they had dealt with Christ (*al-Masih*) once and for all. The Qur’ân argues in contrast that this was only what they thought they had done, since it was God who raised Christ to Himself. This exaltation is thus the second core element of these verses: Christ had not been dealt with once and for all. As a result, it is far from certain that the Qur’ân denies the crucifixion as an event.

Thematic evolution in the Qur’ân, however, is perhaps most striking in relation to Ibrâhîm/Abraham. In the Meccan suras, the most prominent feature in this regard is that Ibrâhîm turned his back on the polytheism of his father and his people. He thus becomes the symbol par excellence for the believing monotheist. God grants him a son in his old age, a son Ibrâhîm was ready to sacrifice had God really asked him to. In the list of patriarchs from the Meccan period, Ibrâhîm, Ishâq and Ya‘qûb are first in line (Qur’ân 6: 84). Ismâ‘îl is mentioned (Qur’ân 6: 86), but he is simply included further down the list of other prophets. This, of course, raises questions as to whether Ismâ‘îl was indeed the son Ibrâhîm was prepared to sacrifice, as mentioned in Islamic traditions, and not Ishâq.¹² In the Medinan suras, Ibrâhîm’s symbolic representation

¹² The most ancient Islamic Qur’ân commentaries ask whether it was not Ishâq instead of Ismâ‘îl. See e.g. the commentary of Muqâtil Ibn Sulaymân.

of pure monotheism (*hanîf*) is even more prominent. And there it is together with his son Ismâ'îl that he constructs the Ka'ba in Mecca, a sanctuary (*haram*) dedicated to the one God. The list of patriarchs now reads "*Ibrâhîm, Ismâ'îl, Ishâq, Ya'qûb and the tribes*," thus deviating from the Jewish list that does not mention Ismâ'îl. The Arabic branch of original monotheism is thus legitimated through Ismâ'îl.¹³

In the period of the proclamation of the Qur'ân in Medina, it appears that an unbridgeable gulf emerged between Muhammad's message and Christians who adhered to the conciliar dogmas of the major churches, namely Jesus as the son of God and the Trinity. Resistance also emerged among the Jewish clans who lived in Medina and were unwilling to exchange the Torah of Moses for the "pure" universal monotheistic Islam of the Qur'ân. Muhammad stuck to his guns, however, and the gulf became definitive in the following verse from the period: "Ibrâhîm was neither a Jew nor a Christian, rather he was a *hanîf* (an authentic monotheist), a *muslim* (one who submits to God), and not one of the idolaters (*mushrikîn*)" (Qur'ân 3: 67). Islam is thus neither Christian nor Jewish; Islam is – via Ibrâhîm – an authentic monotheistic religion.

From the Christian perspective, the Qur'ân in Mecca appears to lose its balance when Muhammad hears from Christians that God has a son and that Mary is the mother of God. The late Meccan sura 19 appears to express revulsion at such an idea: "They say: 'The All-Merciful (*al-Rahmân*) has taken to Himself a son...' (Qur'ân 19: 88). For the Qur'ân, this is clearly atrocious, running counter to every divine revelation. This is also reminiscent of the fact that the Qur'ân in its early stages had already dismissed the three daughters of the god of the Meccans as figments of their forefathers' imagination (Qur'ân 53: 19-23). Now the Christians introduce the idea of a divine son. "They ascribe a son to the All-Merciful! It is not fit for the All-Merciful to take to Himself a son. No one in the heavens and the earth comes to the All-Merciful except as servant (*'abd*)!" (Qur'ân 19: 91-93). It is only at the end of the Medinan period that the idea of a divine son is mentioned unequivocally: "The Christians say: 'al-Masîh (the Messiah, the Christ) is God's son' (*al-Masîh Ibn Allâh*)," which for the Qur'ân is completely unthinkable.

It is also clear how the Qur'ân understands this idea of a divine son: Allâh does not have a son, just as he likewise has no daughters as the Meccans had claimed. It should be observed, however, that the reference to Christ as son of God is immediately preceded by an analogous statement addressed to the Jews: "The

¹³ See Tilman Nagel, *Mohammed, Leben und Legende*, Munich: Oldenbourg, 2008, p. 65: "We should remember that there is evidence, independent of Muslim sources, of a pagan Arabic cult of Abraham long before the period in which Islam came into existence;" meaning, of Abraham as progenitor of the Arabs via Ismâ'îl.

Jews say: ‘Uzayr (Ezra) is the son of God!’ (Qur’ân 9: 30). This claim is somewhat unusual and few bible scholars have been able to locate its source. Some argue that the idea may have been present in Yemenite Judaism, although this clearly requires further exploration. Reference can be made nonetheless to the fact that in the book of Wisdom the righteous person calls himself “child of the Lord” (Wis 2: 13) and “boasts that God is his father,” while the godless say: “Let us test what will happen at the end of his life. If the righteous one really is God’s son God will deliver him...” (Wis 2: 16-18).

The Qur’ân thus firmly rejects the idea of Christ as the divine son and does the same – as logic would require – with the Trinity (“Those who say that God is a third of three speak blasphemy. There is no god except the One God!” [Qur’ân 5:73]). Nevertheless, the Qur’ân does speak of God’s Word (*Kalima*) and God’s Spirit (*Rûh*): “Al-Masîh Ibn Maryam is God’s prophet and His word that He addressed to Maryam and a spirit from Him” (Qur’ân 4: 171). Divine sonship is rejected, but a Word and a Spirit from God is admitted alongside the virginity and unblemished motherhood of Mary, the mother of Jesus, the Christ (*al-Masîh ‘Îsâ Ibn Maryam*). The latter is not questioned in the Qur’ân. On the contrary, the Jews are accused of unbelief on account of “their terrible words of slander against Maryam” (Qur’ân 4: 156a). This is made clear in a recent Iranian film about Mary. When she brings the baby Jesus home to her village after giving birth – alone and without his father – she is reviled by the crowd... until the baby Jesus begins to speak in the cradle and defends his mother’s virginity (Qur’ân 5: 110).

Any observer familiar with the history of the early Church prior to the major councils of Nicaea (325), Ephesus (431) or Chalcedon (451) will recognize a Christology and dogmatic perspective here that does not speak of hypostases or “persons” of a Trinity, but recognizes Jesus nevertheless as Messiah (Christ), recognizes Jesus’ elevation in glory, and ascribes a special status to Mary as the mother of Jesus. In short, what the Qur’ân upholds is analogous to what we know of the so-called church of the circumcision, the Christian community that did not follow the Greek path of the Gentiles with Peter and – in particular – Paul, but remained faithful to the Jewish traditions, to the Law of Moses and to Abrahamic descent; meaning, the Jewish-Christian tradition ascribed to the Nazarenes and the Ebionites. Present restrictions do not allow us to explore this topic in any further depth.

Judaism and Christianity in Arabia

The impression is sometimes given that the Qur’ân emerged among the pagan Arabs of the Arabian Peninsula as a completely new message, but nothing

could be further from the truth. The Qur'ân states this itself in fact when it asserts that it is in line with the proclamations of earlier prophets, albeit in this instance in the Arabic language. As we observed above, no translations were available at the time of the Bible or the apocryphal books or narratives from which are to be found in the Qur'ân. But this does not mean that the Arabs were isolated from the rest of the Near East nor that they were immune to the influence of Judaism and Christianity, both of which had criss-crossed the region in the preceding centuries. But the question is extraordinarily complex and difficult to summarize. Interested readers should refer in this regard to the magnum opus of Irfan Shahid, *Byzantium and the Arabs*.¹⁴ Nevertheless, a few simple facts – discussed in more detail by Christian Robin in his aforementioned article – make it clear that the Arabs did not live in a cultural ghetto.

As a matter of fact, Arabia was far from cut off from the neighboring regions. Caravan routes crossed the peninsula, departing from the Hijâz region and connecting Mecca and Yathrib – later Medina – with Palestine, Mesopotamia and Yemen. Furthermore, after the destruction of the temple and the failure of the Jewish revolts against Rome, large numbers of Jewish refugees made their way to the oases of Northern Arabia and Yemen. In addition, Syriac Christian missionaries established churches along the eastern coast of Arabia – ruins of which are still to be found today – as well as the south-west, where an important settlement – Najrân, now in southern Saudi Arabia – adhered to Christian Monophysitism. Armies crossed Arabia for centuries and political power positions evolved. Indeed, Arabia was surrounded by the day's superpowers – Byzantium, Persia and Aksum in Abyssinia/Ethiopia – which established alliances with the Arabic clans and were involved in proxy wars across the region. None of this left the Arabic clans that occupied the peninsula indifferent, some of which were migrants and far from their homeland.

It is in this context that we must also situate the complexity of religious movements that existed throughout the Arabian Peninsula, and in the first instance of the Judaism of the time in both North and South Arabia. Diversity within the Christian churches was particularly evident. Miaphysite-monophysite communities were scattered across Ethiopia, Egypt and Syria-Palestine, and were opposed by the dominant imperial Chalcedonic church. At the same time, they were in competition with the Nestorian-Assyrian church that despatched its missionaries from Persian Mesopotamia. One must also account for the fact that these three major Christian church communities were themselves undermined by countless minor schisms on the margins of the great kingdoms. These tensions were particularly evident in

¹⁴ Irfan Shahid, *Byzantium and the Arabs in the Fourth, Fifth, Sixth Century*. 6 vol., Washington: Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection, 1984-1989-1995.

the history of the Christians of Najrân, who were directly associated with the anti-Chalcedonic churches of North Syria at the beginning of the sixth century, and were then subjected to persecution and massacre by the Jewish prince Yûsuf As'ar in November 523. They came under the influence of Ethiopian Christianity, and were later associated with heretical Julianism.

From the Pagan and Later Jewish Himyar to an Ethiopian Christian Occupation

The narrative that concerns us here begins in Yemen with the Himyar kingdom, which expanded northward in the third and fourth centuries as a result of numerous expeditions. In religious terms, a gradual evolution was taking place in South Arabia at the time. While each clan adhered to its own religious traditions and divinities, a sort of henotheism slowly began to assert itself,¹⁵ whereby a supreme deity gradually marginalized the other gods. This tendency continued and slowly evolved into a sort of 'anonymous' monotheism. Anonymous because it was detached from the major institutionalized religions of the kingdoms of Byzantium, Persia and Ethiopia. The same henotheistic situation was later to be found in Mecca in Muhammad's time, with Hubal as the supreme deity together with his three daughters Allât, al-'Uzza and Manât.

The evolution toward monotheism was rounded off in Himyar when a monotheism inspired by Judaism was granted official recognition in 380 by King Malkikarib. Given Himyar's far-reaching influence in the north, it is important that we do not underestimate the importance of this situation, namely the existence of an official Jewish monotheism that was to last for one century and a half. At the beginning of the sixth century, however, Himyar's monotheism with Jewish roots went into decline. The history of the Christians in Najrân serves to illustrate this evolution. In a counter-reaction to the Christian presence in the city, the Jewish prince Yûsuf As'ar invaded Najrân and massacred its Christians in November 523. This was clearly a military action intent on stemming the advancing influence of Christianity.

The reaction of the Negus, the Christian king Kâleb of Aksum, was swift and decisive. In the period 525-530, he headed an expedition that recaptured the entire territory from Himyar, eliminated the rebellious prince Yûsuf, and established a Christian Ethiopian viceroy on the throne of Himyar. The Christianization of South Arabia was then pushed through from Aksum, taking the Ethiopian model as its guide. An inscription bears testimony to the sort of Trinitarian Christianity

¹⁵ Robin, *The Peoples Beyond the Arabian Frontier*, p. 49.

this implied, whereby the Yemenite name for God, *Rahmânân*, is maintained: “In the name of *Rahmânân* (the Merciful One!), His Son Christ (*Kristôs*), the Victor, and the Holy Spirit...”¹⁶

The Religious Revolution of Abraha

A reversal took place, however, that was to be of vital importance for our appreciation of Qur’anic monotheism. A general in the Ethiopian army by the name of Abraha dethroned the viceroy and took control in Himyar where he remained in power from roughly 535 to 552 and brought almost all of Arabia under his authority, including Yathrib which was later known as Medina. He failed, however, in his efforts to conquer Mecca, a fact to which the Qur’ân itself alludes in sura 105. In addition to expelling the viceroy, Abraha subjected the content of Ethiopian Christianity, which had gradually asserted itself in Yemen, to a thorough revision. According to Robin, one can read in the inscriptions he has examined that Abraha’s reformed Christianity exhibited features of earlier monotheism influenced by Judaism. But there was no unequivocal return to a dominant and exclusive Judaism. Christianity maintained its primary position, but it took on an anti-Chalcedonic form with, as Robin puts it, “Julian features,” referring to Julian of Halicarnassus (d. after 527?).¹⁷ In any event, it seems clear from the inscriptions that Christ was no longer termed Son of *Rahmânân*. Reference was made rather to “*the mercy of Rahmânân, his Messiah, and the Spirit of holiness.*”

We can thus discern the characteristics of Abraha’s Christology: Jesus was called the Christ (the Messiah, *al-Masih*) and no longer “son;” God, as is also the case in the Qur’ân, has acquired the proper name *Rahmân* and a fundamental attribute, namely being merciful (*Rahîm*). And on closer inspection, it thus becomes crystal clear that the Qur’ân, which was proclaimed less than a century later, exhibits striking agreement with the primary traits of the faith of Abraha.

For Robin, this leads to an enormously important and unavoidable conclusion, namely that *in other words, the teachings of Muhammad have their roots in the debates that are waging amongst the Christians of Arabia and that opposed them to mainstream Christianity.*¹⁸ Robin’s study demonstrates that the Qur’ân fits perfectly within this global context of previously dominant Judaism and of marginal Christian theologians who introduced a certain Jewish-Christian character into the religious

¹⁶ Robin, *The Peoples Beyond the Arabian Frontier*, p. 71.

¹⁷ Robin, *The Peoples Beyond the Arabian Frontier*, p. 74.

¹⁸ Robin, *The Peoples Beyond the Arabian Frontier*, p. 77.

situation. It is also evident from the chronology of the suras that Muhammad was confronted in the first instance with a remnant of henotheism in Mecca, which he countered with a sort of “Jewish-Christian” monotheism. It also appears that he was relatively quick to observe that the strictly monotheistic Qur’ānic kerygma was not in line with the conciliar Trinitarian doctrines of the major churches, representatives of which engaged Muhammad in direct debate. In the last analysis, however, it is also clear that Muhammad preferred to break with these Christians and with the Jews who refused to exchange the Torah for the Qur’ān, rather than discard the vision of the Qur’ān. He did this, as we have noted, by pointing to the “original and authentic” monotheism of Abraham/Ibrāhīm.

Jesus, Paul and Judaism

The conclusions that follow from recent research considerably advance our understanding of the Qur’ān’s conceptual horizon in late antiquity. There is one aspect of this conceptual horizon, however, that we cannot leave unexplored. It would appear that the Islamic tradition as it evolved from the Qur’ān also adopted a typically Jewish feature that ultimately came to determine the essence of the Islamic faith as such: dependence on the Law, on *Shari’a*, the heart of Islam. A brief search on the internet will reveal the many fatwas that have been issued in relation to the food laws, *halāl* (legal, permitted) and *harām* (illegal, forbidden), which serve to demonstrate the importance of the complex casuistry that characterizes traditional Islam, appealing to the Qur’ān and the prophetic tradition, the *Sunna*. It should thus be clear: Muhammad and the Qur’ān did not continue the revolution started by Jesus and Paul with respect to the Law. This explains why Paul is not mentioned in the Qur’ān. Paul wrote to the Galatians: “It is evident that no one is justified before God by the Law” (Gal 3: 11); “And because you are children, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into your hearts, crying ‘Abba! Father!’ So through God you are no longer slaves (the plural of *‘abd*: slave of God, *‘Abd-Allāh!*), you are children of God...” (Gal 4: 6-7); “There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus” (Gal 3: 28). While the Qur’ān in Islam guides the life of a Muslim, for Christianity *the encounter with Christ is sacrament of the encounter with God*. Christ is the Way, the Truth and the Life, because Christians live in his Spirit and are not obliged to follow specific rules of behavior as is the case in the *Sunna* of Muhammad.

Some Marginal Notes

The impression is sometimes given that the pope in the Vatican is a sort of Grand Mufti who is expected to explain in lengthy fatwas the revealed rules of

conduct inscribed in the divine Law, occasionally accepting the guidance of episcopal synods in the process. Biblical religions are seen as religions of revealed prescriptions. People speak of a “Judeo-Christian” tradition into which Islam is gradually being incorporated. This, however, is far from the spirit of the gospel. The core of Christianity is not a Law, a *Shari’a*! *The freedom of the children of God* implies that men and women are free to live autonomous lives, to construct a human ethics together with so-called “non-believers,” albeit with the goal of divine salvation in mind, for ourselves and in unity with the men and women with whom we live. Antoon Vergote drew the following conclusions in this regard in his book *Modernity and Christianity*: “If there is no such thing as a specifically Christian ethics (and Vergote is convinced of this), then the Christian faith remains an exceptional source of trust, generosity, concern for humanity. Jesus did not propose an alternative ethics to that of the Decalogue. But he asked *more* of those who desired to follow him. He said: if your righteousness is no more than that of the Scribes and the Pharisees, you shall not enter the kingdom of God. The ‘more’ here has to do with *agapè*, the attitude appropriate to the communion of love with God.”¹⁹ Medieval Christian-Arabic theologians understood this very clearly. And it was to this that Pope Benedict intended to make implicit reference in his address in Regensburg in 2006. The reference was too implicit, however, otherwise he would almost have been obliged to quote the entire text of the controversy between Manuel Paleologus and the Muslim teacher *Mudarris*...²⁰ Sadly, he limited himself to a single sentence, a question, and made no further reference to the discussion behind it, namely the familiar commandment *love your enemies*, which the Muslim *Mudarris* found exceptionally difficult. Later in his discussion, Vergote alludes to the Christian politicians who dared to call for reconciliation through confession of guilt and forgiveness after the Second World War. The same should be possible today as a message of peace in time of war, a contribution rooted in authentic evangelical Christianity.

As general conclusion of this chapter we can return to the question posed in our title: The Qur’ân: Biblical? Certainly! Christian? In terms of form, yes! Evangelical? No.

***Nostra Aetate*, Dominicans and Dialogue with Muslims**

In his inaugural speech at the conference organized in January, and his words of appreciation for all the work done by the *Ideo*-Institute during the more than sixty

¹⁹ Antoon Vergote, *Moderniteit en christendom. Gesprek in vrijheid en respect*, Tiel: Lannoo, 1999, p. 89.

²⁰ Manuel II Paléologue, *Entretiens avec un musulman. 7^e Controverse* (Sources chrétiennes, 115), Paris: Cerf, 1966.

years of existence to improve dialogue between Christians and Muslims, Dr. Ibrahim al-Hudhud mentioned the Egyptian father Georges Chehata Anawati, who died in 1994. He was the long time director of the Institute (1953-1984), which was founded officially in 1953. He expressed gratitude to the efforts of three different personalities. First, to Father Lagrange, the founder of the Biblical school in Jerusalem, who wanted an institute for Oriental studies in Egypt linked to Jerusalem. Together with Father Antonin Jaussen, who built the new convent in Cairo before the second World War. Second to Cardinal Eugène Tisserant from the Vatican, who wanted the Catholic Church to have a research center on Islam in the heart of Egypt, the most important Islamic country in the Middle-East, and contacted the Dominican authorities in Rome and in France. And third, to Father Dominique Chenu (1895-1990), the great French Dominican theologian and specialist of medieval Latin theology and philosophy, who wanted to have a group of Dominican scholars to study Arabic and Islam so that the Islamic sources referred to by Albertus Magnus, Thomas Aquinas and many others could be integrated in the history of medieval philosophy. Three young brothers were already prepared to go to Egypt before the war, Jacques Jomier, Serge de Beaurecueil and Georges Anawati, who were able to join Cairo after 1944. Father Dominique Boilot would join them afterwards. They were the founding fathers of the Ideo-Institute. Others would follow until the new generation of young fathers who are running the Institute now, and who are organizing the international conference in January.

Anawati was, and apparently still is, the symbol of a fundamental change in the Catholic Church concerning Islam, opening the way for respectful dialogue without denying a possible salvation for sincere Muslims. What was the case for Riccoldo. As we mentioned before: “for him it was a terrible tragedy to see the people he met and admired not to be saved by their own faith, as they denied the redemption in Christ.” The text from the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, *Lumen Gentium*, succinctly explains that: *The divine plan of salvation also includes those who acknowledge the creator, in the first place amongst whom are the Moslems: these profess to hold the faith of Abraham...* (§ 16). We will however not forget that, for Christians, Jesus Christ is the mediator of salvation, Son of God, Lord, Saviour and Redeemer, while the same is never said of Muhammad. This is extremely important, as the way of life of Muhammad, his *Sunna*, is considered by Muslim tradition to be impeccable and worthy of imitation, so that for them it is salvific to follow the *Sunna* of Muhammad. We cannot here describe in detail how the theological work of the fathers, members of the Ideo-Institute, together with Congar, Chenu and other brothers in France, were instrumental in preparing this new approach towards Islam. It has been done in

detail in Dominique Avon's 1029 pages book on the Dominicans in Cairo.²¹ Father Anawati, representing the spirit of the Ideo-Institute, and recognized as such, was in Rome at the time of the Council, and participated actively on the redaction of the text of the Declaration *Nostra Aetate*, signed by Pope Paul VI on October 28, 1965.

Leaving behind considerations brought about by the negative image of the Islamic religion transmitted over the centuries, the second Vatican Council underlines the positive dimension of Islamic faith— a completely different dimension of the Islamic religion other than organizing society by *Shari'a* Law and conquering new territories through *jihâd*. *Nostra Aetate*, by including a specific paragraph on Muslims and following what is said on Judaism, and before the text on non-Christian religions, is in a certain sense including Islam in the group of monotheistic religions, and, even more, including Islam in the group of three biblical religions, without expressing it explicitly. Doing so, the Declaration is indeed in perfect conformity with modern research on the historical background of the Qur'ân. The *Declaration* is even using the term *faith of Islam*, translating it correctly by *submission*, the very same term used by Anawati's friend Louis Gardet²² in the first line of his article on "Islam" in the second edition of the *Encyclopedia of Islam*, "*total surrender (to God)*," a spiritual and even more mystical interpretation of Islam.

The Church regards with esteem also the Moslems. They adore the one God, living and subsisting in Himself; merciful and all- powerful, the Creator of heaven and earth,(5) who has spoken to men; they take pains to submit wholeheartedly to even His inscrutable decrees, just as Abraham, with whom the faith of Islam takes pleasure in linking itself, submitted to God. Though they do not acknowledge Jesus as God, they revere Him as a prophet. They also honor Mary, His virgin Mother; at times they even call on her with devotion. In addition, they await the day of judgment when God will render their deserts to all those who have been raised up from the dead. Finally, they value the moral life and worship God especially through prayer, almsgiving and fasting. Since in the course of centuries not a few quarrels and hostilities have arisen between Christians and Muslims, this sacred synod urges all to forget the past and to work sincerely for mutual understanding and to preserve as well as to promote together for the benefit of all mankind social justice and moral welfare, as well as peace and freedom.

The spirit of Dialogue of Vatican II and the Declaration of *Nostra Aetate* is still active in our Institute until now, with good relations with the religious

²¹ Avon, Dominique, *Les frères prêcheurs, en Orient. Les Dominicains du Caire (années 1910- années 1960)*, Paris, Cerf, 2005.

²² G. Anawati and L. Gardet published together the now famous Introduction to Islamic Theology (1948), a book on Islamic Sufism (1961) and another book on Ibrâhîm Bâjûrî (1951).

Muslim authorities, and in particular with those of al-Azhar. It is because of that that I participated myself at the very first interreligious conference with Muslims in the Vatican in November 2008. The Catholic-Muslim Forum was formed by the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue and a 24 member-delegation of the 138 Muslim signatories of the open letter called *A Common Word*. The theme of the Forum was: *Love of God, Love of Neighbor: that is our Common Word*. Christians said: *For Christians the source and example of love of God and neighbor is the love of Christ for his Father, for humanity and for each person. God is Love* (1 Jn 4, 16); while Muslims said: According to the Qur'ân: *Those who have faith, have most love of God* (2:165), and *those that believe, and do good works, the Merciful shall engender love among them* (19:96) “In a *Hadîth*, a Prophet's Tradition, we read that ‘Not one of you has faith until he loves for his neighbor what he loves for himself.’”

Dialogue, however, has never been that easy. It depends mainly on the dimension of Islamic religion and its interpretation one is talking about. We know for now that the radical interpretation of Islam doesn't allow us to talk about any common word between radicals and Christians. This word *common* reminds me of what happened when father Anawati was invited to present a paper at al-Azhar University, on the occasion of an official visit of al-Azhar by a delegation from the Vatican in April 1978.²³ The title of his paper was *Common Faith in God*. After reading the paper, Father Anawati was however not allowed to present it at the conference, and a strong refutation was published in the *Journal of al-Azhar* by Dr. 'Abd al-Fattâh 'Abd Allâh Baraka in February 1979. Dr. Baraka had three fundamental objections:

The first objection is obvious; when asking if we have the same God, some Muslims will answer that Allâh is not the same as the Christian God, who is Trinity, while His Son, “the Word became flesh” (Jn 1:14). Father Anawati was of course aware of that, but in the line of Vatican Two, he wanted to underline by how many attributes Muslims are qualifying Allâh, the God of biblical monotheism, which are actually all mentioned in the Bible and the Qur'ân. *The second objection* is more philosophical: Muslim theologians are very reluctant to say that God is “a spiritual substance,” an expression used by the first Vatican council. *The third objection* is actually the most important for us. Father Anawati said, along with *Nostra Aetate*, that we can *promote together for the benefit of all mankind social justice and moral welfare, as well as peace and freedom*; this means that humans can build society according to our intellectual capacities. Dr. Baraka objected that Islam does not accept that humans have to create their human environment, but that God revealed to Muhammad the detailed way

²³ Pisani, Emmanuel, *Le dialogue islamo-chrétien à l'épreuve. Père Anawati o.p. – Dr. Baraka. Une controverse au vingtième siècle*, Paris, L'Harmattan, 2014.

of life he has to follow. God's Law, His *Shari'a*, is the only model to build a human society.

Contemporary radicalism is completely identifying Islam with organizing society: no democracy, no human laws, no human creativity in solving problems concerning the way of life of humans – only divine law. Political Islam means that obeying God's Law is adopting a way of life that is always identical to organizing society in the Middle ages. Dr. Baraka wrote at the end of his article that Father Anawati intended to destroy Islam altogether in the speech he wanted to present in the heart of the most prestigious institution of Sunni Islam. If this is Islam, then, indeed, Father Anawati was completely wrong. And that is exactly what contemporary Muslim radicals are saying. Other Muslims will however disagree. Last year in Surabaya, a professor of the Islamic University told us that radical Islam is a complete misunderstanding of Islam because it forgets the heart of Islam, the spiritual dimension of faith. Father Anawati went on to present his paper in other circumstances, and Muslims who attended that meeting agreed with him that Christians and Muslims, indeed, have so much in common if they define themselves as faithful, abandoning themselves to God in a spiritual way, that we should *forget the past and work sincerely for mutual understanding*.

It is clear now that the great majority of Muslims are terribly embarrassed by the surge of radicalism, exclusivism and violence in their own community. Dialogue is needed more than ever to counter this radicalism and its terrible consequences for humanity as a whole. This is why we are very much pleased by the two Documents of al-Azhar, written during the Spring-Revolution in the Middle-East. To end this paper, allow me to quote two important paragraphs of the first Document from 2012. From this statement of the highest Sunni Muslim authority, we understand and appreciate the presence and words of encouragement of the president of the prestigious University of al-Azhar, Dr. Ibrahim al-Hudhud, presiding the opening session of our conference. The Document referred to mentions the following principles agreed by the meeting participants:

The commitment to freedom of thoughts and opinions with a full respect of humans, women and children's rights, to multi-pluralism, full respect of divine religions and to consider citizenship as the basis of responsibility in the society. Full respect of counter opinions and the manner of dialogue, avoid labeling people as believers or traitors, making use of religion to disunite citizens and pit them against

each other and consider acts of instigating religious discrimination, sectarianism and/or racism as crimes against the state.

Al-Azhar supports dialogue and mutual respect between citizens based on equality in terms of rights and duties.■

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