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Islam, the Prophet and the People of the Book

Speech delivered at the conference “Prophet Muhammad and Compassion”, held by Shia Muslim organisations in Oslo, Grønland kirke 23 January 2014.

Let me first express my gratitude for being invited to this important event in Grønland kirke. It’s almost historic: Shi’ite Muslims, Sunni Muslims and Christians being assembled in a church, to reflect on the teachings and practices of the Prophet Muhammad.

The given title of my speech is “Islam, the Prophet and the People of the Book”. This means that my speech will not directly address the overarching theme of “compassion”. Focusing instead on interfaith relations, I will share with you how I understand what the Qur’an says about Islam, Christianity and Judaism.

Some words about myself: In my professional life, I work as a professor of Interreligious Studies in the Faculty of Theology, at the University of Oslo. My field of specialization is Islam and Christian-Muslim relations. But I’m not just an academic. For 25 years, I have also been involved in various forms of Christian-Muslim dialogue in the Norwegian context. For me, it all began in the late 1980ies. When I was working as parish priest in the city district of Grünerløkka I involved myself – and my congregation – in mutual visits between church and mosque. Gradually my commitment to dialogue between Christians and Muslims evolved into a national concern. In 1992, I became involved in setting up the national Contact Group between the Church of Norway and the Islamic Council Norway which has now been in function for 20 years.

In the national Contact Group, our conversations as well as our cooperation has mostly revolved around ethical and political issues. During the last years the Contact Group has issued joint statements about a number of sensitive issues such as the Israel/Palestine conflict; the vulnerable situation of religious minorities; the right to change your religion; violence in close relationships; and religious extremism. Many of these joint statements are molded in

what we might call a *secular* language, leaning strongly on human rights principles but also on what I would call an ethics of vulnerability which stresses the responsibility of the stronger part. By using a commonly accessible language, we have been able to communicate our joint concerns to a wider public.

Between ourselves, however, we also need to communicate in a *religious* language, jointly addressing resources as well as challenges in our sacred traditions – first and foremost, the Bible and the Qur’an. My task today is to reflect briefly on what the Qur’an has to say about Jews and Christians, considering also what the historical sources report on the Prophet’s practice in this respect. Reflecting on the sacred traditions of a religion that you don’t know from the inside yourself, is always a challenging task. I apologize in advance if in any way you should feel that I misrepresent the Islamic tradition.

When the Qur’an speaks of the Jews and the Christians as “people of the Book” (*ahl al-kitab*), it reflects the basic message that the Qur’an has been prefaced, so to say, by previous Scriptures brought by Moses (the Torah) and Jesus (the Gospel). The designation “people of the Book” seems to recognize the divine origin of the Jewish-Christian Bible, as when in sura 5 (al-Ma’ida) the followers of the Gospel are admonished “to judge according to what God has sent down in it.” In the following verse we find a divine call to Jews, Christians and Muslims alike to compete with each other in good works, according to principles laid down in the Torah, the Gospel and the Qur’an respectively:

We have assigned a law and a path to each of you. If God had so willed, He would have made you one community, but He wanted to test you through that which He has given you, so race to do good: you will all return to God and He will make clear to you the matters you differed about. (Qur’an 5: 48)

To me, this sounds like a truly inclusive message for all of Abraham’s children, practicing compassion, seeking the common good, and leaving the final judgment to God. It cannot be overlooked, however, that three verses below we find the following warning:

You who believe, do not take the Jews and Christians as allies: they are allies only to each other. Anyone who takes them as an ally becomes one of them– God does not guide such wrongdoers. (Qur’an 5: 51)

So what should the reader emphasize? The Qur'an's invitation to Abraham's children to compete friendly in good works – or the qur'anic warning to Muslims not to take Jews and Christians as allies or friends (*awliya*)?

In national Christian-Muslim Contact Group, we have actually taken each other as friends and allies – not only in a common concern for minority groups but also for vulnerable individuals, irrespective of their religious affiliation. Are we wrong in doing this? No, we are not. We are following the divine calling to compete in compassion and good works, a calling you as Muslims find in the Qur'an and we as Christians in the example of Jesus.

But we cannot escape the fact that in doing so, we emphasize some aspects of the Qur'an or the Gospel more than others. In short, we are doing an *interpretative* work which emphasizes the inclusive and dialogical aspects of the Scriptures over against the exclusive and confrontational ones.

Trying to understand our Scriptures in the best way, we also need to take a *contextual* approach, trying to understand the concrete historical background (*asbab al-nuzul*) of the verses that reflect a situation of distrust or conflict between the Muslims and particular Christian or Jewish groups. In that way, the reader can avoid making sweeping generalizations about Jews or Christians in general. As the Qur'an itself asserts, "they are not all alike. There are some among the People of the Book who are upright ..." (Qur'an 3: 113).

So, careful interpretation is called for when reading the Qur'an. As Imam 'Ali has reportedly said: "The Qur'an, written in straight lines, between the two boards of its binding, does not speak with a tongue; it needs interpreters and interpreters are people" (from Imam 'Ali's speeches, No. 125, in *Nahj ul-balagha*).

So here we are, as people before God, seeking an interpretation of the Scriptures that may help us to live well together.

Also with regard to the qur'anic view of the Jewish-Christian Bible, I find some ambivalence which calls for interpretative efforts. For alongside the Qur'an's confirmation of the divine origin of the Torah and the Gospel, we also find in the Qur'an the allegation that the

scriptures of the Jews and (in later interpretations) the Christians have been tampered with – so that they are not really reliable any more when it comes to divine guidance (cf. Qur’an 4: 46). How can these two aspects of the qur’anic view of the Jewish-Christian Bible be reconciled? What should we emphasize?

I could actually ask the same question to my own Bible. How can affirmative and confrontational aspects of the biblical tradition be reconciled, when it comes to the view of other religions – in this case, Judaism? On the one hand, the New Testament condemns the Jews on a par with the Pagans. On the other hand, Jesus was himself a Jew and Christianity is unthinkable without its Jewish roots. Nevertheless, the New Testament’s harsh words against “the Jews” (particularly in the Gospel of John) have served to legitimize brutal persecution of the Jews, perpetrated by Christians who thought they were being faithful to the Gospel.

As I see it, Christians and Muslims face some very similar challenges in the way we see other religions. Christians has tended to think that Judaism has been superseded or completely replaced by Christianity, leaving nothing of real value to the Jews. Similarly, Muslims have tended to think that both Judaism and Christianity have been superseded by Islam, and that neither the Torah nor the New Testament can longer be relied upon as divine guidance. By the way, the Baha’is are sometimes playing the same game. You might have heard the saying that Judaism is like kindergarten, Christianity like primary school, Islam like secondary school and Baha’i like a divine university.

I personally think there is nothing good in this kind of competition for supremacy – either in the name of Christians, Muslims, or Baha’is. In comparison, the Jews have not been equally interested in claiming spiritual supremacy, concentrating rather on their own particular identity and emphasizing what the British rabbi Jonathan Sacks in a book title calls *The Dignity of Difference*.

Returning to the Qur’an, I would also like to share with you a brief reflection of some other verses in surat al-Ma’ida, namely the following characterization of Jews and Christians:

You [Prophet] are sure to find that the most hostile to the believers are the Jews and those who associate other deities with God; you are sure to find that the closest in

affection towards the believers are those who say, ‘We are Christians,’ for there are among them [priests and monks]. (Qur’an 5: 82)

The next verse speaks of the eyes of Christians overflowing with tears because they recognized the truth of Muhammad’s message. This has led some scholars to ask whether the Christians who are mentioned here were actually on the verge of becoming Muslims.

Anyhow, there is no doubt that the Qur’an is far more positive towards Christians than Jews. Trying to understand why, the reader needs to consider the concrete historical context.

With regard to the Jews, they seem initially to have welcomed Muhammad and his followers when they came to Medina. One of the great historical legacies after Muhammad is the so-called Constitution of Medina which was set up as a contract between the Jews and the Muslims, speaking of the two faith communities as one *umma*. However, as things developed, the Jews were accused of breaking the contract and of allying themselves instead with the idolaters in Mecca. What actually happened, only God knows. But there is hardly any doubt that the harsh words against the Jews, in some passages of the Qur’an, must be read against the background of this particular political conflict that erupted in Medina at a certain point of time.

The Christians, in contrast, seem initially not to have been regarded as a political challenge to the Muslims, probably because Muhammad primarily encountered a monastic form of Christianity. The Prophet’s biography (*sira*) indicates that the first Muslims had several positive experiences with Christians, as when some of Muhammad’s first followers in Mecca sought asylum with the Christian ruler of Abyssinia (in present-day Ethiopia). Maybe it is this experience that is reflected in sura 57: 27, where the followers of Jesus are associated with “compassion and mercy”. There is also an interesting story in the Prophet’s biography of a Christian delegation from Yemen who was offered to pray in the Prophet’s mosque when they came to Medina to negotiate a contract with the new Arabian ruler. Reportedly, theological discussion also took place, but apparently in an amicable atmosphere.

But again, the historical memory is ambivalent. In the Prophet’s biography, it is implied that the Christians of Abyssinia, who gave asylum to the Muslims, eventually converted to Islam (of which, by the way, there is no historical evidence). As regards the Arabian peninsula, the

Hadith collections report that both the Jews and the Christians were eventually expelled, either on the command of Muhammad (Sahih Muslim) or of the second caliph Umar (Sahih al-Bukhari).

In general, however, the Jews and Christians of the Middle East gradually found their place as protected minorities (*dhimmi*) under the new Muslim rulers. In the history of civilization, there is now doubt that Islam's *dhimmi* system was in many respects much more generous than say the politics of religion in medieval Europe. But it was not a system of equal citizenship, in accordance with modern ideals.

Today the political situation is complex. Muslim minorities in Europe often feel frowned upon by the majority population and islamophobia is a sad reality. But there are also many Muslims who feel that they are valued by fellow Europeans as co-citizens, working for the common good. In the Middle East, during the last decade the situation of Christians has become dramatically worse, for political as well as religious reasons, in a region which is set on fire by violent sectarianism. As you well know, the current sectarianism in the Middle East has also seriously deteriorated the relationship between Shiites and Sunnites.

In my view, the only viable way forward – be it in Europe or the Middle East – is marked by two signposts: (1) Equal citizenship, with no attempt to establish political hegemony in the name of religion. (2) A serious dialogue between the religions, in which old notions of supremacy are left aside to the benefit of deep understanding and compassionate action for the common good.

Seeking the way forward, I'm convinced that we can seek inspiration from both Muhammad and Jesus, from the Gospel as well as from the Qur'an. But as Christians and Muslims, we also need to recognize that our sacred scriptures speak from a different historical experience than ours. They contain also some problematic passages that, if taken literally and out of context, may threaten interfaith relations. For that reason, the scriptures need careful reinterpretation, in search for some basic and inclusive values that *we* believe constitute the essence of the Gospel and the Qur'an.