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A relational theology in dialogue with Islam

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As my contribution to this panel on “Christians in Pluralistic Contexts” (WCC 20 October 2008), I have prepared a small theological reflection under the heading “A relational theology in dialogue with Islam”. Although much of my reflection will be of a more general nature, in parts of my presentation my Scandinavian context will also shine through.

TRADITIONAL PLURALITY AND MODERN PLURALISM

Let me start with a brief note on the notion of pluralism. When reflecting theologically on the encounter between Christians and Muslims in modern pluralistic societies, we should keep in mind that there is a difference between traditional plurality and modern pluralism. Traditional plurality refers to a situation in which different cultures and faiths coexist as entities that can be neatly separated, in a relatively stable constellation in which the borders between the communities can only be crossed at great personal cost.

In situations of modern pluralism, everything is more fluid. Individuals may identify with more than one culture and may develop plural identities. In the course of their lives, some individuals may also change their religious affiliation. Modern pluralism implies also that every faith has to recognize a plurality of views within one’s own tradition, as a given fact. For instance in ethical discussions, disagreements might be just as difficult to tackle within the Christian family as between Christians and Muslims. In some critical issues (gender relations is a point in case), liberal Christians may join hands with liberal Muslims, just as conservative Christians may sometimes try to strike alliances with conservative Muslims (typically around traditional family values, as we have seen it in connection with some UN conferences).

With regard to overarching theological reasoning, “Christianity” (as an ecumenical whole) is certainly distinctively different from “Islam”. But in the case of ethical disagreement (sometimes also in theological matters), the fault lines do not always coincide with the boundaries of our religions. When we recognize this, the distinction between ecumenical conversation and interreligious dialogue may sometimes become blurred.

RELATIONAL THEOLOGY: AN ASPECT OF TRINITARIAN THOUGHT?

As we move on to theological reflections, we all realize that the issue of Trinity is still a bone of contention between Christians and Muslims. I will nevertheless frame my thoughts within a Trinitarian scheme. Implicitly, however, I will raise the question of whether some aspects of Trinitarian theology may be reformulated as a Relational theology in dialogue with Islam.

IS RELIGIOUS PLURALITY WILLED BY THE CREATOR?

As regards the first article of faith, in the Creator, Muslims are still waiting for a Christian response to what they perceive as the Qur'an's acceptance of religious plurality as something willed by God. We all know the verses of the fifth sura which read as follows:

Let the people of the Gospel judge by what Allah hath revealed therein ... To each among you have we prescribed a law (*shir'a*) and an open way (*minhaj*). If Allah had so willed, He would have made you a single people (*umma*), but His plan is to test you in what He hath given you: so strive as in a race in all virtues. The goal of you all is to Allah; it is He that will show you the truth of the matters in which ye dispute.¹

In this passage, the historical fact of religious plurality is seen as a divinely willed test for humanity, in which each people (or community) is seeking to implement the will of God in accordance with the path to which they have been guided.

We know, however, that there are other passages in the Qur'an that point in a different direction, as when Christians and Jews are chastised as *kafirun* because they are perceived as having "covered up" some central aspects of God's will. But the question remains of how we as Christians respond to the fundamental qur'anic acceptance of religious plurality as a divine *test* and a potential *blessing*.²

This has also to do with how we see the other's scriptures. When the signatories of *A Common Word* quote the Qur'an and the Bible side by side, they implicitly dissociate themselves from cruder version of the *tahrif* dogma,³ treating instead central aspects of the Bible as reliable revelation. How do we as Christians respond to that, with regard to the Qur'an? In the Archbishop of Canterbury's response to *A Common Word*,⁴ which is very rich in biblical references, he quotes also verses from the Qur'an. Implicitly, he seems at least to treat parts of the holy book of Islam as a divine source of spiritual guidance.

Are we ready to pursue this course? When we engage in scriptural reasoning together with Muslims, meditating together on texts from the Bible, the Qur'an and Hadith (as it was done in the conference on *A Common Word* in Cambridge some days ago), a double experience can be made: a sense of joint blessing, but also a recognition that differences in scriptural interpretation do not necessarily coincide with the boundaries between our religions.

For me, this double experience of joint blessing and sometimes confusing difference resonates with an article that was written as early as in 1972 by the Shi'ite Muslim Hasan Askari, entitled "The dialogical relationship between Christianity and

¹ Sura 5: 47f. (in Yusuf Ali's translation).

² Cf. sura 49: 13 (in Yusuf Ali's translation): "O mankind! We created you from a single (pair) of a male and a female, and made you into nations and tribes, that ye may know each other (not that ye may despise (each other))."

³ Implying that Jews and Christian have altered their scriptures.

⁴ "A Common Word for the Common Good"

(<http://www.acommonword.com/lib/downloads/Common-Good-Canterbury-FINAL-as-sent-14-7-08-1.pdf>), 14 July 2008.

Islam.”⁵ Here, Askari warns against the monological tendency in both religions. He suggests that “the monological trap” can only be escaped if Christians and Muslims engage each other in an open conversation about how to understand the signs of God. Recognizing that Jesus is regarded as a divine sign in both religions, but interpreted in painfully different ways, Askari suggests that it belongs to the very nature of a divine sign that it is interpreted in different ways. He writes:

A common religious sign must be differently apprehended. It is the very ambiguity, richness, of the religious sign that gives rise to different and even opposed interpretations and understandings [in this case, of Christ].

This is Askari’s way of reasoning about religious plurality before God: the Creator has left sign for us that can be interpreted differently. Can we follow Askari in this line of reasoning? Or do we feel that such an open approach to divine signs compromises our Christian faith in Christ?

HUMANIZATION OF THEOLOGICAL ETHICS: A CHRISTOLOGICAL CONCERN?

In the second part of my reflection, I will not address the classical Christological controversies between Christians and Muslims. Instead, I would like to bring up the issue of humanization of theology, or more precisely, of theological ethics. In my view, humanization of theological ethics could (or should) be seen as an aspect of Christology (or of incarnation theology). Already in the Jewish Bible, the human other can be seen as an epiphany of God.⁶ Further enlightened by the Christ experience, New Testament authors insist that love of God can never be isolated from love of the human other. In some passages, the vulnerable other is actually placed *between* the Self and God – as a bridge or a potential barrier (cf. 1 John 4: 20: “For anyone who does not love his brother, whom he has seen, cannot love God, whom he has not seen.”) The judgement scene in Matthew 25, where community with Christ and solidarity with the vulnerable other is seen as inseparable, is another and even more striking example.

Can Muslims see the relation between the Self, the Other and God in such intimate ways – to the extent that the human Other is placed between the Self and God? Interestingly, in Sahih Muslim’s “Book of Piety” there is a Hadith Qudsi about the merit of visiting the sick which comes very close to the judgement scene in Matthew. According to this hadith, God will say on the Day of Resurrection: ‘O son of Adam, I was sick but you did not visit Me.’ When the accused exclaims: ‘O my Lord; how could I visit Thee whereas Thou art the Lord of the worlds?’, God will say: ‘Didn’t you know that such and such servant of Mine was sick but you did not visit him and were you not aware of this that if you had visited him, you would have found Me by him?’

In spite of the close association of God with the vulnerable other in this hadith, we know that Muslims are reluctant to associate God himself with vulnerability and suffering. However, when *A Common Word* links love of God and love of the other as

⁵ In *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 1972, pp. 477-487,

⁶ Cf. Genesis 33: 10 and Emmanuel Levinas’ reflections on the face of the Other as an epiphany of God, in his book *Of God who comes to mind*.

intimately as it does, I take this as a possible point of departure for a dialogue on humanization of theology.

The important question is of course what concrete consequences a humanization of theological ethics might have. Let me give but one example from the Muslim side. Three years ago, Tariq Ramadan called for an immediate moratorium on the death penalty and *hudud* punishments (such as corporeal punishment for theft and for illegitimate sexual relationships) in the Muslim world.⁷ When reading his argument, it struck me that the guiding principle behind his moratorium was clearly a theologically motivated concern for the vulnerable human being. He realizes that in a imperfect world with asymmetrical power relations, severe punishments seem regularly to hit women more than men and the poorer and weaker members of society more frequently than the rich and powerful ones. From this recognition, Ramadan draws the conclusion that corporeal punishments and the death penalty must simply be suspended for an indefinite period of time (does he mean for ever?).

I take Ramadan's moratorium as a recent example of humanizing theological reasoning in Islam. In Ramadan's case, his application of the humane criterion in theological reasoning leads him to sidestep important aspects of classical sharia – for the sake of humanity.

From Christian-Muslim dialogue in Norway, I might cite several examples of how concern for the vulnerable other has gradually become a *shared* religious commitment. Consider the following list of examples from the last three years of the Contact Group between the Church of Norway and the Islamic Council:

- We have engaged each other in a joint concern for religious minorities, be it in Norway or in Pakistan (from where the largest group of Norwegian Muslims come);
- We have formulated a joint declaration on the inviolable right of the individual to change his or her religion, without being met with any kind of sanctions;⁸
- We are jointly addressing the question of family violence and other critical aspects of gender relations;
- We have also opened a dialogue about the highly controversial question of homosexuality.

On most of these issues we have been able to reach a common stand, but in some cases not. However, when discovering deep-going divergences (as in our different approaches to homosexuality), we realise that ecumenical disagreement on the same issues might be equally hard to tackle as Christian-Muslim differences.

You might think that the churches in Norway are pressing a liberal agenda in some of these issues. I would rather say that the cited issues arise from the context, and form a shared public culture in Scandinavia. Imbued with egalitarian and feminist thought, public discourses in my context constantly challenge Christians and Muslims alike to reconsider their traditional positions – and humanize their theologies.

⁷ “An International call for Moratorium on corporal punishment, stoning and the death penalty in the Islamic World” (http://www.tariqramadan.com/article.php?id_article=264&lang=en), 5 April 2005.

⁸ Joint declaration on the freedom of religion and the right to conversion (<http://www.kirken.no/english/news.cfm?artid=149142>), 22 August 1997.

As for the issues I mentioned (from minority issues to homosexuality), the Church of Norway has increasingly come to see them as interrelated, since they all touch upon the integrity of vulnerable groups and individuals. Thus, addressing them becomes also a necessity from our faith in Christ.

RELATIONAL PNEUMATOLOGY

In the last part of my reflection, I will briefly touch upon the question of a relational Pneumatology. What I have in mind is Martin Buber's philosophy of dialogue which includes a relational way of understanding the work of the Holy Spirit. Buber's main ethical point is to avoid reducing one another to an object, an "It". If instead, in a truly dialogical relation, we treat each other as I and Thou, the space between us (what Buber calls "the realm of 'between'"⁹) will be filled by Spirit. In *I and Thou* he speaks of the realm of between as the place of the Holy Spirit:

Spirit is not in the I, but between I and Thou. It is not like the blood that circulates in you, but like the air in which you breathe. Man lives in the spirit, if he is able to respond to his Thou. He is able to, if he enters into relation with his whole being. Only in virtue of his power to enter into relation is he able to live in the spirit.¹⁰

Buber's horizon of dialogue was mainly a Jewish-Christian one. Does this kind of relational theology, or Pneumatology, give sense in Christian-Muslim dialogue? I believe it does, because this way of reasoning protects the sanctity of every true encounter, whether it is experienced as a blessing or as a difficult test. It reveals both modes of interreligious encounter as a potential dwelling place of the Holy Spirit.

⁹ Martin Buber: *Between Man and Man* (London and New York: Routledge 2004), p. 242f.

¹⁰ Martin Buber: *I and Thou* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark 1987), p. 57f. In an essay on dialogue Buber even characterizes the word of dialogue as a sacrament: "... where unreserve has ruled, even wordlessly, between men, the word of dialogue has happened sacramentally." Martin Buber: *Between Man and Man*, p. 5.