

## CHRISTIAN-MUSLIM EMPATHY IN AN HOUR OF CRISIS

Thomas J. O'Shaughnessy, S.J.

Deep sympathy should unite Christians with Muslims in the crisis of faith all believers are now going through. Both religions hold many basic doctrines in common — one God, Creator and Judge of mankind, who is the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Moses; the prophets and the revelation they brought; Jesus, the sinless Messiah and worker of miracles, born of Mary a virgin; the need for prayer, fasting, and almsgiving. It was not courtesy alone that led the Fathers of the Second Vatican Council to say, "The plan of salvation also includes those who acknowledge the Creator. In the first place among these are the Moslems. "Upon the Moslems, too, the Churches looks with esteem."<sup>1</sup>"

The basic creed and practice of Islam are simple: God is one; Muhammad is His final prophet; prayer is made towards Mecca. But a Muslim has wide freedom to read his own meaning into these tenets. The Ash'arites, an important school of Muslim theologians, held God's attributes to be over and above His essence and accepted real distinction within the Godhead. In modern times one occasionally encounters statements like that of Sayyid Hossein Nasr, dean at the University of Teheran: "The Qur'an is not against the Trinity as long as this does not put a determination into God's essence."<sup>2</sup> There are differences of opinion, too, even on more questions fundamental to Muslims: "Whether the Prophet [Muhammad] was sent by God or not, whether his mission be true or not, what counts is the message he brought. The person of the Prophet is not part of this message,"<sup>3</sup> is the interpretation given by Hassan Hanafi, professor of philosophy and comparative religion at the University of Cairo, to the whole phenomenon of Islam. Citations like these and the ones to follow do not, it is true, always represent com-

mon ways of thinking in present-day Islam. But they are the opinions of Muslim intellectuals which cannot fail to influence Muslim thinking in the future.

Most Muslims refuse to admit that Jesus died on the cross. To them it is inconceivable that God should so abandon a prophet in the accomplishment of his mission. The Qur'an too would seem to confirm their denial (surah 4. 157). But Muhammad Hamidullah, professor at the University of Istanbul and member of the Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique at Paris, holds another view: "The question of the Crucifixion is . . . very secondary for Islam. Even if Jesus was crucified and killed, nothing changes. Other prophets were likewise assassinated by unbelievers."<sup>4</sup>

Until recently, Muslims commonly believed that salvation was possible only for followers of their own faith. Of course, there were dissenting voices even on this point. Ibn Arabi, a Spanish Muslim contemporary of St. Thomas Aquinas, had worked out a theory of membership by implicit desire (and consequent salvation) in the Islamic community several decades before Aquinas proposed a similar doctrine for non-Christians. Today, however, the most common opinion among Muslims, especially the young, grants salvation to sincere believers in any religion. Closer contacts with men of other faiths and the spread of modern reformist views within Islam itself would seem to explain this more liberal attitude.

The many evident similarities between Christianity and Islam can easily give the impression that terms common to both have common meanings. For example, to Christians, "Holy Spirit" and "Word" are divine Persons. For Muslims, the "Holy Spirit" is the angel Gabriel and the "Word" is a title given to the prophet Jesus because Mary conceived him at God's command "Be." In Christian "revelation" God "chose to show forth . . . Himself and the eternal decisions of His will."<sup>5</sup> But for Muslims "revelation" is *from* God, not *of* God. In giving it, God does not disclose Himself to man. Man's mind may not reach Him. "The Qur'an does not present dogma," says Hassan Hanafi, "but an . . . ideology to make the real a better real."<sup>6</sup>

Muslims, like Christians, look to a God who has mercy on sin and blots out man's wickedness. To express his aversion to sin a Christian

will say, "My God, I am heartily sorry for having offended You." But with the sinner in the Qur'an (e.g., surahs 7. 23; 27. 44; 28. 16) the Muslim's cry will be "My Lord, I have wronged myself." Islamic belief regards God as above man's failings.

Sin cannot reach Him nor is He offended by it. The moral lapse can be set right by the sinner's turning from it and performing a fast or a ritual washing. Men are not a sinful race. All sin is personal and it needs no vicarious savior or atoner. But finer points of meaning do not preoccupy the average believer in either faith. What works more to wall off one from the other is prejudice shown in certain attitudes. On the Muslim side the common feeling is, "Islam is enough. I have nothing to learn." A Muslim's mind is made up. Anything else seems absurd. This attitude often varies inversely with the real state of knowledge. It is strong in the intellectually underprivileged and weaker in the more literate. Another deepset belief is that Christians say God is one but do not mean it. The Qur'an warn Christians not to worship a trinity made up of God, Jesus, and Mary. "How shall God have a son," it asks, "when He has no wife?" (surahs 5. 116 and 6. 101) A great step towards mutual understanding takes place when a Muslim understands that Christians are monotheists in the sense of defined by the Fourth Lateran Council in 1215 A.D.: "We believe and profess . . . that there is a certain one supreme reality . . . And that reality does not beget, nor it is begotten."

Another block to amity is the use Christian nations once made of colonies to found missions in Muslim lands. The West may have forgotten its harsh and baseless judgments then passed on Islam. But the Muslim remembers. He sees them hidden in the jibes of *Time* magazine: "One of the major inhibitors of Arab progress is Islam. To almost all Arabs . . . Islam is still God's perfect society — and the problem is how to respond to the upsetting fact that Western technological society is . . . a lot more effective."<sup>7</sup> Dr. Muhammad Kamel Hussein, Rector of the University of Ayn-Shayms of Cairo and President of the Institute of Egypt, speaks out his resentment against such talk: "It is an error to base the preaching of the Gospel on the denigration of Islam."<sup>8</sup> Sayyid Hossein Nasr also deplores the linking often made between modern civilization and Christianity: "Christianity is generally held out to Muslims

as part of modern civilization. But this is in fact the most anti-religious civilization the world has ever known. From this results . . . a deplorable hypocrisy that tries to lessen Islam in the eyes of Muslims, not as one might expect by citing the Gospels, but by having recourse to material means.”<sup>9</sup>

Muslims also resent the Christian assumption of superiority shown in statements that ridicule their beliefs: “Islam postulates a . . . way . . . transmitted through mortal messengers . . . . Until Mohammed, man misinterpreted the message, but the Prophet revealed it correctly. He permitted Moslems four wives (he had about a dozen) and invented a masculine eternity full of nubile virgins.”<sup>10</sup> Comparisons divide and both sides should eschew them. The aim should be, not to compare, but to learn what God has taught man. Jokes about polygamy and divorce in Islam can easily be turned against Christians. The Old Testament approves or at least tolerates similar patriarchal customs.

The best antidote to negative attitudes is a realization of what dialogue really is. In its dictionary sense, it is an exchange of opinion between two or more persons. But religious dialogue can be carried on only in a climate of charity. This climate in turn results from mutual respect and understanding for the beliefs of all engaging in it. It is the purpose of the participants that sets the whole character and tone of the dialogue. To understand what is needed it may help to consider two common attitudes that a committed Christian will encounter among Muslims.

The first and most common attitude flows from the belief already mentioned: “Islam is sufficient. Nothing more is necessary.” It is an attitude of indifference or even hostility to any other religious belief. Often it is found among Muslims who are most devoted to God’s service and most fervent in carrying out their religious duties. Their feelings make good sense in the light of what they regard as God’s solemn command in the Qur’an:

God will not pardon ascribing a partner to Him. He will pardon anything but that to whomever He pleases. Whoever ascribes a partner to God has devised a great wickedness (surah 4.48).

But Muslims commonly believe that Christians do ascribe partners to God by asserting that the Messiah is God’s son, equal to his father in every respect.

They surely disbelieve who say: Truly God is the Messiah, son of Mary. The Messiah (himself) said: O children of Israel, worship God, my Lord and your Lord . . . God will exclude from Paradise whoever ascribes a partner to God. His abode is the Fire . . . They surely disbelieve who say: God is the third of three; when there is no god but the one God (surah 5. 72-73)

Since, then, the Qur'an brands Christians as polytheists, good Muslims must take care not to be led astray by them and must never be close friends with them.

Let the people of the Gospel judge by what God has revealed in it .... Beware of them lest they seduce you from some part of what God has revealed to you . . . . He among you who takes them for friends is (one) of them (surah 5. 47, 59, 51)

A second attitude, becoming more common today, is interest in dialogue itself on problems that both religions face in a situation of rapid change and expanding technocracy. Such problems are secularization, national underdevelopment, the alienation of youth, the weakening or shifting of moral standards, social injustice, the content of course taught in public schools, statism, and the like. Christianity and Islam are both inspired by the vision of a unified humanity. The two faiths are therefore deeply concerned with topics like these in today's world where socialization and human solidarity are dominant phenomena.

Understanding in the face of this attitude will not have doctrine as its main concern. It will look rather to the help that believers in God and in personal immortality can offer each other in reaching solutions that are neither specifically Muslim nor specifically Christian but are acceptable to all who hold a spiritual and moral view of man's destiny. It will foster the mutual conviction that Muslims and Christians as men of faith are tending in the same direction. It will sincerely desire the spiritual good of the other party and the spiritual deepening that each can derive from the values and insights of his neighbor's beliefs.

Modern conditions of life that are moving mankind towards a global uniculture favor the kind of dialogue desired by those entertaining this second attitude. One great obstacle in past centuries to any fruitful discussion was the deep involvement of both religions in secular politics. This involvement worked serious harm to personal and social liberty. Islam has freed herself from these shackles less completely than Christianity in most parts of the world. But hope exists that the close

union of religion and politics may soon be a thing of the past also in Islamic countries.

The view among Muslim traditionalists until now has been that Islam is both a religion and a state. This view is still common, but many progressive Muslims are beginning to question it. Dr. Hussein, voicing such doubts, said:

The statement that Islam is both a religion and a state is disputable. The evolution of Islamic countries has shown that in practice they are tending towards the distinction between state and religion — a phenomenon not confined to Islam. Nor do I believe for a moment that history can reverse itself.

A well-known Indian sociologist and historian, Prof. Syed Hassan Askari of the Osmania University of Hyderabad, shares Hussein's opinion:

My deep conviction is that the Prophet of Islam did not create a state . . . . I think Islam can survive without political power, without a state . . . . I dare affirm that historical Islam has been a lasting denial of Qur'anic eschatology . . . . Perhaps Islam is to vanish as a historical and political institution — as a structured community. Only then will the true Muslim be able to appear.<sup>1 2</sup>

Askari points up the fact that the content of the Meccan surahs of the Qur'an, embodying the first ten years of Muhammad's preaching, is dominantly spiritual and eschatological, centering on God's imminent judgment. It is only in the surahs proclaimed at Medina, in the last ten years of his life, that Muhammad makes Islam a sacral society.

Modern Muslims cannot be isolated from the universal trend to separate civilization and culture from the influence of religious institutions. So the desire is spreading in Islam today, especially among the young, to return to the primitive preaching at Muhammad at Mecca — monotheism and a final judgment on human injustice. The process of secularization tends to free individual belief from dependence on sociological structures. It also detaches from religious practice those for whom such practice was only a matter of social custom. So it nourishes a personal and active faith and prepares the individual for a religious option that is radically free.

Cooperation between Muslims and Christians, where both sides desire it, is possible almost everywhere in areas like those of social

justice, the guaranteeing of basic human rights, national development, medical and counselling services, and especially in laying low the ghosts of past prejudices against each other.

**Editor's note:** "Christian—Muslim Empathy in an Hour of Crisis" appeared in a slightly different form in *The Ecumenist*, Vol. XII, No. 6 (Sept.-Oct. 1974).

**THOMAS J. O'SHAUGHNESSY, S.J.**, is professor of Islamics in the Loyola School of Theology and in the East Asian Pastoral Institute, both affiliated with Ateneo de Manila University in Quezon City, Philippines. He obtained his S.T.D. (1947) from the Gregorian University and its affiliated Pontifical Oriental Institute in Rome and from Loyola University in Chicago, U.S.A. and his M.A. (1948) on Islamic revelation as embodied in the Qur'an.

#### NOTES

1. Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, n. 16; Declaration of the Relationship of the Church to Non-Christian Religions, n. 3.
2. *Les Musulmans: Consultation islamo-chretienne*. Edited by Youakim Moubarac. Verse et Controverse: Le Chretien en dialogue avec le monde, No. 14. Paris: Beauchesne, 1971, p. 53.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 95.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 54.
5. Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation, No. 6.
6. Moubarac, *Les Musulmans*, p. 96.
7. *Time*, July 14, 1967, p. 23.
8. Moubarac, *Les Musulmans*, p. 78.
9. *Ibid.*
10. *Time*, July 14, 1967, p. 22.
11. Moubarac, *Les Musulmans*, p. 64.
12. *Ibid.*, pp. 132-133.