

# REFLECTIONS ON THE ENCOUNTER BETWEEN CHRISTIANITY AND ISLAM

**"I have been on my guard  
not to condemn the unfamiliar.  
For it is easy to miss  
At the turn of a civilization."**

*The Sleeping Lord*  
by David Jones (1895–1974)

## CROSSING FRONTIERS

Never before has history known so many frontiers as in our contemporary world, and at no period has there been such a frequent violation of frontiers as happens today. It would seem that the establishment and removal of frontiers is the order of the day. This contradictory process is a window into the plight of humanity in these times: a dialectical tension between demarcation of particular identities and crossing over to the other shore.

We are struck by the ambiguity of the phenomenon of frontier crossing. Crossing over could mean a march of aggression that infringes upon the freedom and autonomy of the realm invaded. It could be overt and violent, as when a power intrudes into the territory—physical, cultural, spiritual—of the other; or it could be covert and subtle, as in the transnationalization of capital and homogenization of cultures. A sense of ambiguity marks the affirmation and negation of frontiers.<sup>1</sup>

It is important to note that the crossing of frontiers and the birth of the new are a sheer necessity for a new historical period or a particular context. The

reality or the search for authentic renewal from within tradition outgrows the bounds and frames in which it was set up. It forces the crossing of frontiers and the breaking of the frame. A re-mapping of the territory and a re-drawing of the frontiers follow it: tradition is an ever-emerging source of theological creativity, rooted identity and wise compassion.

However, crossing is not simply an external event. It is also a spiritual experience. This 'journey as an enriching spiritual endeavour' has been taken up by the American Catholic theologian, David Burrell, who writes:

We are, invited, in our time, on a voyage of discovery stripped of colonizing pretensions: an invitation to explore the other on the way to discovering ourselves. The world into which we have been thrust asks nothing less of us; those of us intent on discovering our individual vocations cannot proceed except as partners in such a variegated community. And as that journey enters the domain of faith, our community must needs assume interfaith dimension. What once were boundaries have become frontiers, which beckon to be breached, as we seek to understand where we stand by expanding our minds and hearts to embrace the other. Put in this fashion, our inner journey can neither be syncretic nor procrustean: assimilating or appropriating. What

is rather called for is mutuality of understanding and of appreciation, a critical perception which is already incipiently self-critical. Rather than reach for commonality, we are invited to expand our horizons in the face of diversity. The goal is not an expanded scheme, but an enriched inquirer: discovery of one's own faith in encountering the faith of another.<sup>2</sup>

Today we are witnessing a further shift or moment in Christian history which witnesses to profound deepening or self-understanding in relation to other religious traditions. This engages the Christian tradition in a reassessment not only of its own striving Trinitarian unity, which presents itself in its 'fractured oneness', but also of how others bear witness to the Christian tradition from without.

Christianity was born into a religiously plural world. It has remained in one ever since. At different times in its history it has been especially sensitive to this context. The mandate to go preach the gospel to the corners of the earth, as well as its own socio-economic political position, has resulted in a complex range of relations and responses to other religions. However, Christians in the modern world cannot ignore the existence of other faiths. Global communications, extensive travel, migration, colonialism, and international trade are all factors that have brought the religions closer to each other in both destructive and creative ways.

Today we are witnessing a global theological encounter of profound critical importance. John Renard, a theologian and scholar of Islam, once told a story to convey a warning.

Once upon a time an itinerant grammarian came to a body of water and enlisted the services of a boatman to ferry him across. As they made their way, the grammarian asked the boatman, 'Do you know the science of grammar?' The humble boatman thought for a moment and admitted

somewhat dejectedly that he did not. Not much later, a growing storm began to imperil the small vessel. Said the boatman to the grammarian, 'Do you know the science of swimming?'<sup>3</sup>

Thus we are reminded that at the beginning of the new millennium too much of our theological activity remains shockingly introverted. Instead of allowing an inherent energy to launch us into the larger reality of global religiosity, we insist on protecting our theology from the threat of contamination. If we continue to resist serious engagement with other theological traditions, our theology may prove as useful as grammar in a typhoon. One of the most important tasks of theology today is to develop strategies for determining how to enter into the meaning system of another tradition, not merely as a temporary member of that tradition, but in such a way as to see how they bear upon one another.<sup>4</sup>

The concern for an understanding of the 'other'—seeing the relationship of the one to the many, struggling with the questions of identity and difference, unity and diversity—has been a serious preoccupation of post-modern philosophy. In a somewhat different, though not unrelated, arena contemporary Christian theologians have been increasingly aware of the necessity to formulate a theology that takes serious account of the 'otherness' as it is reflected in the existence of a great variety of forms of human religiousness.

The French Dominican theologian, Claude Geffré, suggests that there is a risk involved in the work of theology. Since theology is a hermeneutical task 'from beginning to end', it involves 'the risk of distortion and error', but unless theology is willing to take that risk by presenting a creative interpretation of Christianity, it runs the no less serious

risk of 'simply handing on a dead past'. As we have now embarked on the third millennium, the major challenges for the mission of the Christian churches include not only atheism and religious indifference, but what amounts to a religious explosion and the proliferation of beliefs of all kinds. As we survey the religious supermarket, it is important to make the necessary distinctions between sects in the strict sense of the term, the New Age, with its nebulous esoteric and mystical currents, and the increased vitality of the great non-Christian religions. The religious 'come-back' is a typical symptom of our post-modern age. It coincides with the death of the ideologies, and is a reaction to the failure of modernity to keep its promises in the face of secularization and the anxiety caused by meaninglessness. It is part of the great movement of the *re-enchantment* of the world, of humanity, and even of God. With regard to the urgency for mission, the most formidable challenge for the Christian faith is the historical experience of a plurality of religious faiths.

A further vital component of our contemporary situation is the growth of a certain awareness among the world's religious communities of the Other. The engagement between the religions has been characterized by two points of orientation: one of fear and one of hope, both elements poised between – on the one hand – conflict, and – on the other – a deepening realization of the necessity and possibility of dialogue. However, this does not allow for a neutral position *vis-à-vis* one's own religious identity and the Other. Those who adopt a theoretical, privileged position outside any specific faith community, and elaborate a general structure of religious 'truth' that can provide a space

for every religious tradition, but which no body believes in, will not satisfy. Thus any dialogue requires respect of the dialogue partners and interest in their beliefs—especially if these beliefs are culturally and religiously different from our own. At the same time we must retain our own cultural and religious identity. Lack of commitment under the pretext of openness leads to no real dialogue, or to sham agreements. We cannot put our faith in parentheses to connect with another's faith.

It is never easy to enter without prejudice into the world of another human being, even when access to that person's mind and heart is facilitated by actual presence, direct engagement and an appreciation of the people, places, and events that have shaped that person's experience. To meet another across the considerable distances created by differences in time, place, language, culture, and religion is still more challenging. But for someone to reach out to encounter a faith tradition which is not only different to one's own, but which also sees its existence as an abrogation of the faith tradition of the other has little to commend it. This is the reality that confronts the Christian *voyageur* in Islam. The comprehensive challenge with which Islam confronts Judaism and Christianity, the claim that Muhammad is the 'seal of prophets' and that the revelation accorded him abrogates all previous ones is one such context.

#### AN ISLAMIC ACCOUNT OF CHRISTIANITY:

##### AN HERMENEUTICS OF SUSPICION

Islam is not neutral to Christianity, for the latter performs an important function in the Muslim narrative and thus becomes part of its identity. However, the rôle that Christianity appears to play for the Islamic tradition

seems to be an entirely negative one. Muslim writers have always been quick to note that Islam's abrogation of Christianity mirrors the Christian abrogation of Judaism. Thus any Christian resentment at the Muslim assertion must surely be tempered with a concomitant recollection of how Christianity took the same advantage of its own position of posteriority.

But the relationship between Christianity and Judaism does not bend to this characterization. It may be more accurate to say that Christianity understands itself as the fulfillment of Judaism and continues to acknowledge Judaism as a source of its identity, which is continually revisited, and renewed; whereas Islam sees itself as the restoration of what Judaism and Christianity should have been, had they not suffered corruption (*Tahrif*).

Within the long history of Muslim-Christian polemic, the most persistent Christian response to the assertion of abrogation has been a straight-forward rejection of the Muslim understanding of Christianity. Christian apologists have repeatedly insisted that the Qur'anic and post-Qur'anic comprehension of Christian doctrine is seriously flawed. The polemic itself centers upon three main issues: the reality of Jesus' crucifixion and death; the doctrine of the incarnation; and the Christian understanding of God as Trinity.

For all three, the Qur'anic account and its subsequent interpretation and elaboration stand at considerable variance with normative Christian self-understanding. For centuries, therefore, Christians have not been able to see themselves in the mirror of Muslim reflection. For equally as long, the theological debate engendered by these issues has deadlocked upon the assertion of Qur'anic superiority.<sup>5</sup> The assertion of abrogation (*naskh*) has

both a narrow and a wider meaning. In its more restricted sense, the charge constitutes a qualified annulment of both the Jewish and Christian scriptures. More broadly constructed, it nullifies the continuing validity of those traditions themselves.

Again, it is important to note that a very different understanding of scripture and of scriptural transmission undergirds these claims. It is also important to recognize that the Qur'anic designation for the revelation given to Moses, the *Tawrat*, and for that accorded to Jesus, the *Injil* [this term refers to what the Islamic tradition understands the Christian Gospel to be: it is not related to the canon]. Both are conceptualized as proto-Qur'ans, i.e., as compilations of God's direct verbal revelation to Moses and Jesus. Consequently, the reliability, or unreliability, of their subsequent transmission matters greatly. Judgement of their authenticity necessarily involves considerations of both content (*matn*) and conveyance or transmission (*isnad*).

Muslims, therefore, ground the Qur'anic abrogation of Jewish and Christian scriptures in their assessment of the latter as textually and semantically corrupt. Simply put, the logic of this position is as follows: what Jews and Christians now recognize as their scriptures does not coincide with the Qur'an, God's full and final revelation. Since God's word does not change, this lack of consonance must be consequent upon either deliberate or inadvertent alteration (*tahrif*) of the text and interpretation of these prior scriptures. Muslim theologians and apologists, however, rarely present the charge of *tahrif* as a wholesale rejection of either the Hebrew Bible or the New Testament. Rather, they balance assertions of their textual and semantic corruption with

the insistence that both scriptures announce the advent of Muhammad and the success of his mission.

The Dominican Islamicist Jacques Jomier has reflected upon these themes and has asked in the context of inter-religious dialogue and the encounter between Christians and Muslims globally how does the Islamic *umma* define itself *vis-à-vis* the other, non-Muslim communities? Can Muslims today, with good qur'anic conscience, as it were, attribute to non-Muslims, including those who freely reject the message of Islam, the same human dignity as to the Muslim believer? What practical consequences follow from this teaching in the contemporary context? These are crucial and decisive questions of contemporary interpretation and reading of the Qur'an.

Or, are all non-Muslims to be viewed – qur'anically – as somehow deformed by their erroneous beliefs and their refusal to adhere to Islam? Do they merit to be treated as human beings of equal dignity and rights? Jomier has observed that to many, the Muslim appears uniquely sure of his faith, convinced of the truth of Islam being self-evident, even to the point of suspecting those who do not accept it of acting dishonestly. Is that certitude linked with the specifically qur'anic view of man as believer? And if so, what is the consequence for dialogue in Muslim-Christian relations today.<sup>6</sup>

To you your religion and to me mine, (Surah 109,6)

This rendition of the mind of the Qur'an through the mouth of Muhammad might seem to answer decisively the question of how Islam sees other faiths.

The answer is less clear when we consider how it should be read. It might be thought to suggest a gentle

tolerance, a posture of mutual co-existence in which disparities are conceded to be part of divergent heritages of culture and experience. Or it might be taken as registering a kind of weariness of the whole matter of beliefs and rituals as impossible of resolution anyway.

The religious history of mankind and its religious diversity has been a central theme in Muslim tradition since the earliest stages of its development. From its inception Islam has lived with other religions. Its emergent self-definition evolved through a process of differentiation from other contemporary belief systems. As textual attestation to this process, Islam's foundational document the Qur'an offers abundant evidence of varied interreligious concerns and connections—for example, a primary theological assessment created the fundamental categorization of believer/unbeliever.

In conclusion to his latest work *Dieu et l'homme dans le Coran*, Jomier sets out to pinpoint the specific character of the Qur'an's teaching on God and the relationship between God and man:

For the Muslims God is above all the Master, the Lord of the universe and of all humans; however, a master and lord without any of the imperfections that we encounter in this world. For the Christian God is essentially Father, but in a sense that must be carefully specified. In both cases we have to do with a master and lord and who has no need of possession or of created servants; and, if one speaks of father one does so in order to underline the perfection of God and the delicacy of his tenderness and the fact that he grants life in its fullness.

As to the frequently raised question of the love of God in Christian and Muslim faith teaching, Jomier judges that Muslims perceive God to love like a most merciful master, whereas the Christians compare his love to that of a

father. And, whereas Islam understands itself as the re-establishment of the original patriarchal religion that continues to be valid, even exclusively so, and refuses any other type of monotheism, Christianity teaches that progress has taken place in revelation: the prophets, the psalms, the very history of the elect people are the motivating forces of a spiritual movement which will reach its summit with Christ, in whom it continues to expand. (cf. *ibid.*, p.220).

Christian accounts of Islam vary, but they nevertheless generally draw attention to how Islam is expressive of a kind of natural law, given with creation. Louis Massignon (1883-1962), a professor of Islam at the Sorbonne, a mystic and political activist, ordained a married Catholic priest in Cairo in 1950 into the Melkite Catholic rite, was close to Paul IV and the most influential Christian thinker on Islam of our age.

The goal of Qur'anic revelation is not to expose or justify supernatural gifts so as to be ignorant of them, but, in recalling them to the name of God, to bring back to intelligent beings the temporal and eternal sanctions – natural religion – primitive law, the simple worship that God has prescribe for all time – that Adam, Abraham and the prophets have always practiced in the same way.<sup>7</sup>

Jomier complements this observation:

Islam is a natural religion in which the religious instinct which is present in the heart of each man is protected by a way of life, with obligations and religious observations imposed in the name of one who is, for the Muslim, the Qur'an revelation. It is a patriarchal religion, spiritually pre-dating the biblical promise made by God to Abraham, but which conserves the episodes of the life of the Patriarch involving his struggle against his fathers' idols and his voluntary submission to God even his sacrifice of his own son. Islam represents Abraham (Father of the Prophets) as its great ancestor.<sup>8</sup>

The account given of Christianity in the Qur'an can be subdivided into three

themes: Jesus and Mary, Scripture and 'Christians'. Other categories than these could have been used to subdivide the Qur'anic material further, such as Christian practices – Monasticism or Christian doctrines – the Trinity.<sup>9</sup> Qur'anic statements that refer to Christianity may be provisionally put into two general categories. The first category would include allusions to prominent Christian figures, especially *Maryam* (Mary) and *Isa Bin Maryam* (Jesus), and to the theological assertions, which have for so long preoccupied Muslim polemicists and Christian apologetics. What Christianity terms the doctrine of the Incarnation and the Trinity, Muslims have frequently excoriated as the blasphemies of divine reproduction and tritheism. The second category would be one, which includes the references to Christians (through a variety of verbal designations) as a particular religious group. On first reading of the Qur'anic text, what constitutes a Qur'anic reference to Christians as a social (religious-communal) group ranges from the unequivocal to the ambiguous. A second grouping can be made of those verses that seek to guide Muslim behaviour toward Christians, both socially and economically, such as reference to the collection of the special tax, the *jizyah*, levied on Christians (and others of the *ahl al-Kitab* / Peoples of the Book) and provisions for the protection of existing churches and cloisters. Representative examples of this category include both cautionary strictures, such as those, which urge Muslims not to make friends with Christians, to more positive calls for interreligious encounter.

For Muslims, Islam is not simply God's final revelation but also God's first. Both cosmically and individually, the natal condition of human beings is that of



submission (*islam*) to God. An important Qur'anic passage (7,172) vividly depicts the primordial covenant which God forged with his creation:

When your Lord brought forth their own behalf, saying, 'Am I not your Lord?' they said, 'Most certainly; we have testified.'

The verse closes with God's explanation that he had forged this covenant with humankind lest 'you say on the Day of resurrection that "of this we were unaware"'. If, as a species, humans are ontologically Muslim, they are also individually so. This condition, subsumed under the concept of *fitrah*, finds expression in a famous *Hadith* (saying) ascribed to Muhammad: "Every child is born a Muslim (*ala al-fitrah*) but his father makes him a Jew, Christian or Magian/Zoroastrian". Like all humans, therefore, Moses and Jesus were Muslim. Further, as prophets, they were privileged with a special divine covenant (33,7):

When We took their covenant (*mithaq*) from the prophets, from you [Muhammad] and from Noah, Abraham, Moses and Jesus, son of Mary, We took from them a binding covenant. God sent the prophets just named, and many others, to particular peoples so that they might remind their listeners of the primordial covenant and summon them to submission (*islam*).

While much of contemporary Judaism and Christianity operate within an understanding of prophetic 'inspiration', classic Islamic thought has functioned with what might be termed a 'doctrine of dictation'. In the Muslim concept of the revelatory activity, the human filter is far more transparent. Prophets receive and transmit God's very words and Muslims revere Moses and Jesus, like their prophetic predecessors, as faithful conduits of God's invariant message to humankind. While there is a contextual aspect to God's inducement of the prophetic function, the Islamic notion of prophet-

as-divine-mouthpiece is essentially atemporal.

God's words, like his will, can never change, so that the message conveyed by Abraham or Moses or Jesus or Muhammad has an inherent and inviolable continuity. Were it possible to recapture those earlier messages as originally proclaimed, Muslims believe that they would be perfectly consonant with the Qur'an. To account for the evident inconsistency in their current redactions, Muslim apologists and theologians have developed a doctrine of scriptural corruption (*Tahrif*) by Jews and Christians that supports the sweeping assertion of abrogation of Islam of the Other.

#### THE NEIGHBOUR AS STRANGER

This theological disposition is echoed in the lived childhood experience of Iraqi Jesuit, Paul Nwyia who, reflecting upon growing up in a mixed Christian-Muslim village in the Kurdish north of the country, wrote:

Searching far back in my memory. I rediscovered my first impression of my contacts with Muslims. Those contacts were frequent, for many Muslim religious leaders used to visit my family. But despite the real friendship on which these relations were based, I had a strong feeling that, in the eyes of these Muslim friends, we were and remained *strangers*: people who because of their religion were fundamentally different. What awakened this feeling in me was the superior attitude, which these friends adopted, an attitude that only their religion could justify. They regarded themselves as followers of the true religion and manifested this conviction with such self-satisfaction and such contempt for others that they were the living image of those whom the Gospel describes as men with pharisaical traits. Many of them were very brave and their attitude towards us was often unconsciously superior, but we always remained strangers in relation to them. This fact did not bother them; on the contrary, it made them feel that they were

all the more faithful to their religion.

One could easily have been tempted to react like them, to regard them as 'strangers', to transform the difference into indifference, or to meet their contempt with even deeper scorn. But this is precisely what my faith forbade me to do. To react thus would have meant doing away with the difference and, by that very fact, disowning my Christian identity. Hence I came to ask myself: 'How can I turn these strangers into the neighbours of which the Gospel speaks? How can I resist the temptation to react as they do, so that my way of seeing them may be different from the way they look upon me?' I understood that to achieve this I would have to discover, beyond the image they projected of themselves, certain things in them or in their religion which could help me regard them as neighbours whom one must love.<sup>10</sup>

For the love of neighbour and in quest to understand, Nwyia studied and reflected upon Islam up until his tragic death in 1980 in Paris. Trained in France by Louis Massignon, the great Catholic political-mystic and Islamicist, Nwyia would become a widely renowned and celebrated scholar in the field of Islamic mysticism. His contribution ranged from the *Letters of Direction by Ibn 'Abbad of Ronda*, the key figure in propounding an understanding of Sufism as virtually synonymous with a vibrant spiritual life, available to all who put their trust in God; the relationship between Christianity and Islamic mysticism including the spiritual exercises; and the monastic character of early Islamic spiritual life. But he would also return to the Muslim characterization of the religious other, as the crucible upon which that tradition would understand its hidden identity. He stated that Islam's relations are dominated by two antagonistic principles—*mutabilités et immutabilités*. These frameworks have been at work since the beginning of Islam as a result of Muhammad's attitude towards, polytheists, Jews and

Christians, which translates into the crucial dilemma in Islam of "finding the synthesis between historical and spiritual truth".<sup>11</sup>

Like its encounter with Islam, Christianity's encounter with Judaism is a contemporary and ongoing event, not reducible to historical questions. Certainly, the challenge of a contemporary post-Holocaust Christian theological response to Judaism necessarily raises questions, which touch very deeply on the core identity of the Christian. The encounter with Islam poses questions for the identity of the Christian mission. The Franco-Algerian Jesuit, Henri Sanson, has reminded us that we should reflect on our Christian vocation towards Muslims 'in the mirror of Islam', that is, taking into account at every step the missionary vocation which our Muslim partners, in faith, know themselves to be charged with. We shall then reflect on our mission to Islam in the light of that of Islam, i.e. the Muslims' consciousness of being called by God, individually and collectively, to witness the Truth. This encounter with Islam as a missionary religion will lead us to greater precision in the grasp of the distinctive features of our Christian missionary vocation and message and of appropriate ways to respond to them today.<sup>12</sup>

#### THE CHALLENGE

The German scholar of Islam J. Van Ess posited a challenge to Islam as tradition when he distinguished three kinds of scepticism in Islam: theoretical-philosophical, religious-Islamic, and practical-political. The ultimate ground of the first is whatever trickled into Islam from the sceptical tradition in Hellenism, that of the second internal, doctrinal difficulties within Islam itself, and that of the third practical, political motives. Scepticism, van Ess avers, 'is

something like the salt in the soup' and the dogmatic theology of the type practiced by al-Ghazzali would be 'like a game of chess' which can 'win our special interest only when the devil is playing on the other side'.

'Would Islam have improved if there had been skeptics after the time of Ghazzali?' asks van Ess. Such skepticism as existed in Islam historically arose within the 'pluralistic outlook of a multiform society', when Islam was immediately challenged by the other systems of faiths, when it critically found itself only as one among many with the other members of 'the many' quite vigorous and kicking: Christians, Jews, Zoroastrians, Manichaeans, as well as thinkers influenced by Greek thought. It follows, van Ess holds, that for the sake of their very health and progress 'Islam as well as Christianity ought to be glad about a time full of spiritual plurality, a time like ours'.

In a world miraculously shrunk, physically as well as intellectually, to a close neighbourhood, Islam certainly finds itself today within 'the pluralistic outlook of a multiform society'. Every aspect of Islam is challenged almost to the breaking point.

When it was more or less alone or apart, it did not need to ask fundamental questions about itself—it took itself for granted. And when it was a dominant world force in *Dar al-Islam* it dismissed the questioning minorities – the Christians, the Jews, the Manichaeans, the thinkers influenced by Hellenism – out of hand. Today it is impossible for it to do so. Today it is neither alone, nor apart, nor dominant. The complete disclosure of history, the revelation of science, the challenge of technology, the vast horizons of social and economic difficulties (which one might call globalization), the shame of impotence in a world of power, the lure of the

universal in literature and philosophy, the beholding of other spiritual and existential types—all these make it imperative upon Islam to know itself and to justify itself.

But when we say 'Islam' what do we mean? Do we mean this or that Islamic thinker, or Islamic theologian, or Islamic state, or the Muslim masses, or *Dar al-Islam* in general? The problem is that there is nothing like the Church in Islam—a worldwide organization summoning up its own history in itself, and speaking and teaching authoritatively about itself.

In Christianity there is a perfectly self-conscious unitary tradition, which is the Church, even the churches that broke off from the Church, whether from the Roman or the Byzantine trunk, can only depart within limits from its fundamental persuasions. There is no such organized, unitary, historical tradition in the world of Islam. The word 'Christianity' need not only mean the world of the Christians; it can mean, and it essentially and primarily means, *of the Church*.

The word 'Islam' can only mean the world of Muslims. Islam means the world of Islam and not a central, historically continuous authority like the Church. This is the difficulty in wondering whether Islam can profit from 'the salt in the soup'; the truth is that 'the soup' is not contained in a firm and definite and secure enclosure.

When 'the salt of doubt' is sprinkled over the Christian world, when 'the devil' tantalizes and undermines, or even checkmates on the other side, the effect of all this is sooner or later gathered up by the Church in some ecumenical council where it is thoroughly considered, and then the Church pronounces authoritatively on the matter. In the nature of the case there is no possibility of such an

authoritative pronouncement in Islam. If a Muslim thinker or theologian or even a whole Islamic state 'improves' by asking fundamental questions about Islam, how do we know that in their 'improved' state they are still Muslim? Because there is no central teaching authority in Islam, there is no possible answer to this question. How can one 'improve' without a given enduring unity? 'Improvement' then could very well be total departure. The firm consistency of the Church guarantees the possibility of improving and yet remaining Christian. Because Islam itself is thus essentially ambiguous, the most important skeptical-critical question about Islam is, *What after all is Islam?*

Bracketing off this essential ambiguity, somebody in Islam must nevertheless dare to ask fundamental questions about its nature as well as about its roots and origins. The matter is exceedingly serious, because it is not satisfactory for Islam that these questions be always asked by people outside Islam. Authentic being is known by itself and not only by others. Can it still be seriously and responsibly maintained that the Jewish-Christian Scriptures have been falsified by the Jews and the Christians, that the original Gospel is lost and has been corrupted by the Christians?

This is the real challenge today—Islam's origins and roots as a religion, as a doctrine of God, and not only as a socio-political system. The old convenience of dismissing disturbing discrepancies between the Qur'an and the Jewish-Christian scriptures by the simple expedient of holding summarily that the original text of the latter is lost and the version before us is corrupted, is no longer possible. Real creative scepticism sets in within Islam only when Islam, realizing that the existing

scriptures of the Jews and the Christians – scriptures which pre-existed exactly as we have them today long before Islam – are absolutely authentic, sets about reconciling, in all truth and humility, its own scripture, the Qur'an, with the Bible.

But to say that it constitutes 'the essence of truth and religion' is another matter: it is to pass an important judgment on other religions. In the case of Christianity, it is to say that the essence of Christianity is found in Islam. If Islam is the essence of Christianity, then a normal Christian ought to find himself wholly at home in Islam, since the essence of his religion is there. The objective fact, however, is that Christians, for instance St John of Damascus one of the first and authoritative commentators on Islam, do not find themselves at home in Islam because they do not recognize 'the essence' of their religion there. On the contrary, they find themselves in a fairly non-Christian world, with its distinctive non-Christian principles, beliefs and modes of evaluation.

### THE TASK

The historic break caused by Islam did not influence in the slightest the inner-self development of Christianity, and you can study the history of Christianity today as a completely autonomous whole, as though Islam did not exist. Christianity is wholly intelligible, to the extent to which it is intelligible, without any reference to Islam, whereas Islam is not wholly intelligible, to the extent to which it is intelligible, without any reference to Christianity.

But this is not the whole story, as disturbance and challenge belong to the essence. Christianity inevitably challenges and disturbs Islam. Islam inevitably challenges and disturbs Christianity. In the nature of the case

neither religion can leave the other alone—happy in its conviction and simplicity.

A Christian is disturbed, beyond and despite any simplicity of conviction by the Islamic critique of Christianity: that the Holy Trinity is *shirk*, that the crucifixion was only an apparition, that the stories about Christ and his Mother in the Qur'an are the authentic ones, and not those in the four Gospels. Similarly, a Muslim must be disturbed, beyond and despite any beauty of simple conviction, by the Christian (implied) critique of Islam: that Christianity has not been abrogated by Islam, that God became man in Jesus of Nazareth without ceasing to be God, that this same Jesus actually died and rose from the dead on the third day, that the Church, as a distinct historic body, makes absolute claims about itself which imply fundamental criticism of Islam. And this mutuality of disturbance is not confined to the order of theory. It expresses itself also in the creation of distinct historic communities—with characteristic norms, laws, mores, spirits and social life, and with different types of human individuals—so that you can tell that this is an Islamic community and that a Christian one, and this a Muslim character and that a Christian one.

Several decades ago, the late Lebanese Christian thinker Charles Malik, who had been at one point Professor of philosophy and President of the General Assembly of the United Nations and who helped to draft the Universal Declaration of Human Rights set out an agenda for the ongoing Christian-Muslim encounter. It still holds true:

Each religion first makes known in full explicitness its own criteria of judgment;  
How the Bible and the Qur'an were each formed;  
The intention of the Bible and the intention of the Qur'an;

The contents of the two scriptures;  
The nature of revelation according to the Bible and Christian teaching and according to the Qur'an and Islamic teaching;  
The removal of prejudice or misunderstanding by one religion of the other;  
The significance of the fact that the Bible came down originally in Hebrew, Greek and Syriac, whereas the Qur'an came down to us originally in Arabic;  
The significance of the fact that the word of God in Christianity is a person, while in Islam it is a word;  
The actual origins and roots of Islam, as a religion, in Judaism and Christianity;  
Why Muslims never read the Bible, whereas Christianity fully incorporated the Old Testament in its theology, worship and Liturgy?  
Which portions of the Qur'an may be singled out to show that in them there is a closer approximation to Christianity than in others?  
How the difference in the early development of the two religions stamped their character and differentiated them from each other?  
The problem of unity (*tawhid*) in the three Abrahamic religions and between them;  
The significance of the fact that Christianity and Islam spread for the most part among different peoples and cultures, and how these different peoples and cultures affected their respective characters;  
The ontological differences between four kinds of relations:  
i). Christianity's relations with Judaism,  
ii). Christianity's relations with Islam,  
iii). Islam's relations with Judaism and  
iv). Islam's relations to Christianity;  
Christianity's obligations towards Islam as having come after it, and Islam's obligations towards Christianity as having come before it;  
Must Muhammad's limited knowledge of Christianity be binding on Islam for all eternity, or may this knowledge be further supplemented today by a full and first-hand knowledge of Christianity?  
Jesus Christ of Christianity and Jesus Christ in Islam;  
The significance of the Church;  
The significance of the separation between

temporal order and the spiritual order in Christianity and the absence of this separation in Islam; the significance of Sufism for Islam and Christianity;  
Reconsideration by each religion of its own original criteria of judgment.<sup>14</sup>

These items are a listing of so many essential problems which Islam, to be at peace with itself and the world, must at some point raise and face. They touch on more than the 'relations' between the two religions, as though Islam's 'relations' with Christianity were casual or external—they touch on the essence of Islam, since Islam came upon the scene of history after Christianity and since it explicitly relates itself to Christianity. Islam cannot determine them by itself but only by meeting the authoritative Christian representatives. The fateful question is whether the Word of God is a word or a living Person. On this question Christianity and Islam frankly diverge. The truth always liberates, and to know that this is the truth of the most fundamental difference between Christianity and Islam is a most liberating thing, alike to the Christian and the Muslim. One then holds the clue to every other difference. One can work out endless agreements between the two religions, both being grounded in the Abrahamic tradition, but one will always in the end come up against this personal factor, and if he does come up against it, then he or she is still moving in sentimental superficialities.

Although, the Qur'an has the highest respect for Christ and his mother, and speaks of him as a Word of God, still the authoritative Muslim doctrine is that the Qur'an itself is the Word of God. All this is intimately related to the question of the community of history and the tradition, and to the nature of revelation. In Islam the way in which revelation is conceived is closely

linked with the ideas developed by the theologians concerning God's relations with the world. Two explications were opposed to one another in the past, and although for a long time now one of these has prevailed in classical Muslim theology, it is not at all certain that the other opinion will not re-appear one day in one form or another.

Responding to this pending theological proposition in Islam, Louis Massignon witnessed:

This is the reason for the importance and scandal surrounding all integral mystic life in Islam. It is forbidden to try and pass beyond the threshold where Mohammed halted, and to penetrate the 'holy light' once promised to Abraham as his real inheritance. It is enclosed under a glass, and against it enamoured butterflies come and dash themselves to pieces. To wish to follow to the end the nocturnal ascension begun by Mohammed breaks the secular prohibition and one falls under the power of the Law. 'God's Law puts God's saints to death', says the Moslem adage—and it crucifies them. No man has proved this better than Hussein Ibn Mansur Hallaj.<sup>15</sup>

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