



Philosophisch-Theologische Hochschule Sankt Georgen  
Frankfurt am Main – Virtueller Leseraum

Christian Troll SJ

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## Christian Spirituality and Islam

### I. The focus of this essay

Given the broad scope of the topic of this chapter it is fitting first to indicate, in which sense we are going to speak here of Islam and what we understand by the term ‚Christian spirituality‘, before we discuss which aspects of this spirituality gain heightened significance in the encounter of believing Christians with believing Muslims.

#### *Islam*

The word Islam is derived from the Arabic verbal noun *islām*. It indicates the act of submission or surrender to the sovereignty of the one God and his will (see Q 2:130-132). „Islam“ with a capital “I”, however, normally today designates the socially defined religion of which the Qur’an is the foundational text and Muhammad the prophet.<sup>1</sup>

Currently, in many parts of the world public discussion of Islam is dominated by political aspects and even by concern with forms of Islamic political extremism. In this situation it is of great importance not to lose sight of the fact that Islam, although in its multidimensional totality it encompasses religious, cultural and political elements, in the first place is a religious phenomenon. None of its various dimensions can be appreciated properly without taking into account the act of faithful submission to the one, transcendent God who has revealed his will in the Qur’an. This personal act of faith forms indeed the kernel of Islam and is its distinctive and pervasive feature.

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<sup>1</sup> For a sensitive, basic introduction to Islam see: C.T.R. Hewer, *Understanding Islam. The first ten steps*. London: SCM Press, 2006.

God is the first and fundamental object of Muslim belief and, ultimately, its only one. In other words, Islam is radically centred upon God. Muhammad figures as its second object, since he was sent to convey the authentic and final revelation of God's guidance. The total ordering of the human being towards God expresses itself in the attitudes of adoration, submission to his will and respect of the 'rights of God'. The Muslim is first and foremost a servant-worshipper, 'abd, and Muhammad is precisely in this regard 'an excellent model' (Q. 33:21) for the believers. Obedience in faith is essential for Muslims, so that their actions may be in total correspondence with the will of God.<sup>2</sup>

One cannot fail to notice evidence of a strong faith in God in the lives of Muslims as well as in Muslim societies. One is also struck, and at times shocked, by the all-encompassing nature of their faith commitment. The faith of contemporary Christians, on the other hand, would seem to be characterized by more questioning and searching. Christians and Muslims would do well to cherish both the certitude of faith, which is a gift of God received in prayer and humility and the need for faith to grow and mature by ever new questions of a theological nature.<sup>3</sup>

Islam is one of the great religions of the world. For more than fourteen hundred years the Islamic faith and the values anchored in it have enabled countless people to lead a life rich in human and religious terms and to find meaningful answers to life's deepest questions.

On the normative level two basic features of Islam are of outstanding and lasting significance. On the one hand the foundational scripture of Islam, the Qur'an, which according to Islamic faith is the word of God himself, and on the other the live and teaching of Muhammad, the founder. Both, the Qur'an and the body of Islamic custom and practice based on Muhammad's words and deeds, called the sunna, from the beginning and throughout the centuries have been interpreted in very different historical and regional contexts, leading to a great deal of variation. Both, Qur'an and sunna have shaped profoundly Muslim belief and life throughout the centuries.

It is well-known that the career of the Prophet as well as the 114 suras of the Qur'an belong to two distinct periods, the Mekkan (610-622) and the Medinan. They are united, and at the same time divided, by the Hijra, that is the emigration or flight of

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<sup>2</sup> Christian W. Troll, 'Catholicism and Islam' in: Gavin D'Costa (ed.), *The Catholic Church and the World Religions. A Theological and Phenomenological account*. London/New York: T&T Clark International, 2011, pp. 72.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 93

Muhammad and his small community of believers from Mecca to Medina. In Mecca Muhammad preaches the message, warns people of the imminent Judgment Day and asks them to convert to One God serving him alone. In Medina, the Prophet in obedience to God's call effectively translates the revealed message into reality by all the diplomatic, political and military means at his disposal. Here Muhammad knows himself commanded by God not only to preach the doctrine of the one God and of His divinely revealed will (which later finds its binding expression in the jurisprudential development of a comprehensive corpus of laws, the *shari'a*) but also to give it through the rule of the Muslim community (*umma muslima*) political authority and supremacy.

Historically speaking Islam has found expression in the most diverse local and regional cultures, their customs, legal concepts and life worlds. Thus, in the course of time ever anew and in broad range local and regional variations of Muslim life have formed. In this process frequently compromises were made with regard to the practical application of the *shari'a*. In other words, besides the corpus of laws held in faith to be revealed because they are deduced from the divine commands of Qur'an and *sunna*, in some areas the local customary law also was in force.

When we look at Islam as a whole we can – roughly speaking – make out three main currents:

- a cultural, moderate Islam of the middle way;
- an Islamist (or fundamentalist) Islam focused on the text;
- an Islam undergoing radical interpretation according to the spirit of the text.

Two further, most relevant distinctions within the total reality of Islam should be mentioned here. First, there is the division between Sunnis and Shi'ites, but each of these two major traditions is further subdivided into many other groups. Second, there is the inner or mystical dimension of Islam, also designated by the term Sufism. By this is indicated the 'inner' path (*tariqa*) of Islam - complementary to the 'outer' path, indicated by the *shari'a* - which in its countless expressions in ritual and teaching has led ever anew to an interiorization of Muslim believing and acting, guided throughout by the exemplary life of the prophet as well as by the 'friends of God' (*awliya' Allah*). All

Muslims in their teaching and life to this day remain shaped, more or less strongly and in diverse ways, by this inner, 'spiritual' dimension of Islam.

### *Spirituality*

The use of the term spirituality is notoriously vague and far from precise. In a wide sense, regarding all monotheistic religions, the term spirituality indicates "the comprehensive act of faith in response to the experience of the saving reality of God" (E. Heyen). In other words, it indicates the basic attitude on the part of the believer of living submission to God and His cause. Etymologically speaking, the noun spirituality is derived from the New Testament term *pneumatikós* ('gifted with the Holy Spirit') and thus qualifies Christian life as a life in and out of the Holy Spirit. "Since spirituality puts the accent on the concrete realization of the faith, it constitutes a multiform reality just as human life and the relations of the human with God are multiform." (G. Greshake)

### *The Focus of this chapter*

In this chapter we do not intend to depict the history, or only certain phases of the history, of Muslim spirituality,<sup>4</sup> trying thus to show, how -either with regard to ritual or to doctrinal accentuations - the shape of lived Muslim faith in the course of the centuries has been modified as a result of the encounter with Christian believers and their faith and practice. Also, we are not going to try to offer a succinct summary of the history of the encounter of Christian spirituality with Islam,<sup>5</sup> nor do we intend to demonstrate to which particular forms and accentuations in Christian spirituality this encounter has led.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> See C. E. Padwick, *Muslim Devotions. A Study of Prayer-Manuals in Common Use*. London: S.P.C.K., 1961; A. Schimmel, *Mystical Dimensions of Islam*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1975; S. H. Nasr, (ed.) *Islamic Spirituality. Foundations*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1987; J. Renard (ed.), *Windows on the House of Islam. Muslim Sources on Spirituality and Religious life*. Berkeley/Los Angeles/London: University of California Press, 1998;

<sup>5</sup> See J.M. Gaudeul, *Encounters & Clashes. Islam and Christianity in History*. I. Survey; II. Texts. Rome: Pontificio Istituto di Studi Arabi e d'Islamistica, 2000; H. Goddard, *A History of Christian-Muslim Relations*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2000.

<sup>6</sup> Ali Merad, *Christian Hermit in an Islamic Word. A Muslim's View of Charles de Foucauld*. New York / Mahwah, N.J. Paulist Press, 1999 ;M. Borrmans, *Prophètes du dialogue islamo-chrétien*. Louis Massignon, Jean-Mohammed Abd-el-Jalil, Louis Gardet, Georges Anawati. Paris : Cerf, 2009.

Rather, within the straight frame set for us here we shall try to indicate succinctly which aspects of Christian spirituality are likely to gain special relevance in the worldwide encounter of Christians with Muslims today.

## **II. Basic features of a Christian spirituality in encounter with Islam today**

### *A challenge that cannot be evaded*

The Second Vatican Council (1962-65) was marked significantly by the consciousness of the Church of being called to be attentive to the “signs of the times”. The new global presence of Islam and of Christianity and, in consequence, the encounter of Christians and Muslims in almost all parts of the contemporary world, including those traditionally shaped by the Christian tradition, constitute a development that calls believing Christians to a renewal of their faith and to a Gospel-inspired spiritual attitude towards Muslims and Islam. Muslims and their Islam not only put questions the Christian faith and life but question them radically.

More than one billion people profess Islam world-wide, and their number grows steadily. This is a fact that cannot leave Christians untouched. The spectacular expansion of Islam concerns the Christian spiritually. Each Muslim who does not explicitly negate Islam as religion, professes faith in the One God, Creator and Judge, Almighty and All-Merciful. Christians, who in faith also relate to the One God, are spiritually challenged to relate in one way or other to the Muslims as fellow believers in God and to understand them and their societies with an open heart and critical mind.

### *Openness and willingness to know and to understand*

If Christians take their faith seriously and therefore strive for the ideal that every one of their thoughts and acts should be shaped by the love of the one, who is “the Way, the Truth and the Life” (Jo 14:6), then they are challenged first of all to get to know and to understand the witness of Muslims. The ruling principle of any Christian believer in approaching Islam follows from the Golden Rule, as expressed by Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount (Mathew 7:12). This principle of ethical behavior states that we should do to others as we would have others do to us. This would seem to in-

clude the demand: try to understand Muslims, and to describe Islam, as you would like Muslims to understand Christians and to describe Christianity. Hence, in describing Islam Christians are asked to present its ideals and standards, its history and development while holding as closely as possible to the way in which Muslims themselves describe it. That is the way Christians would like Muslims to present the Christian faith when they have occasion to describe it. We would be disappointed, if Muslims chose to dwell on some on the petty and unworthy aspects of the Church's history. We would consider it best for Muslims to describe Christianity in terms of the highest and noblest ideals, the way it wants to be known to the world. Thus it is essential for Christians who wish to establish relationships with Muslims and develop dialogue with them to gain an understanding of the type of Islamic outlook held by Muslims in question. This means encountering the Muslims themselves, listening to them and also studying the programs and literature published and distributed by the mosque communities and the Islamic umbrella organizations. Christians should then, of course, analyze such information and try to assess it with an open and yet also critical mind, taking realistically into account the realities on the ground. Whether Christians live with Muslims within Muslim majority societies or as members of a Christian minority that shares national life with Muslims in minority status or as members of a minority of immigrants in one of the western secularized societies, in each case they are asked to be ready to know, understand and critically assess the situation in which their Muslims partners live and the equally the ideals for which the different groups of Muslims strive.

### *Readiness to encounter*

However, real and deep knowledge of Muslims will not be possible without readiness to encounter the Muslim neighbor in person, taking real interest in him, as individual and as member of a collective. The Christian will have to make a serious effort to overcome the inner and outer hindrances to such encounter.

Muslims and Christians live in a great variety of different social constellations and normally today, they live together with non-believing citizens or at least with citizens alienated from organized religion. As believers in God and adherents of a religion they share the divine call to co-shape and to promote the common good of their societies. They are thus spiritually challenged to develop and foster societal dialogue

without which harmonious and just living together (*convivencia*) cannot be achieved and maintained. Such dialogue and collaboration implies Christian respect of Muslims in their distinctiveness and otherness, eschewing contempt or violence in any of its forms.

*Need for a properly critical analysis*

However, the considerable differences in Christian and Muslim outlook and practice in no way are to be denied or disguised. Christians (as well as Muslims) in the given situation, and especially in situations of tension, will be tempted in two ways: either to deny reality and its frequently complex and harsh face, painting a rosy picture or to give in to the temptation of exaggerating, generalizing, employing inflationary, popular terms and also of failing to distinguish between, say, vexation, discrimination, mobbing, injustice, persecution.<sup>7</sup> Courage and intelligence are needed in the effort of identifying the concrete problems, analyzing them and thus preparing lasting solutions. To isolate the religious factor from the concrete context and thus from all the various social, psychological and possible further elements that may play a role in a given situation, falsifies the picture and renders difficult finding adequate solutions. The objective should be to arrive at a view that focuses on complementarity rather than on oppositeness.

*The basic spiritual quality needed: inner freedom*

The relationship of Christians to Muslims often is marked either by an almost passionate sympathy that lacks differentiation - and can be bitterly disappointed when confronted with fact and reality - or by a fierce, unqualified rejection that does not see anything good in the Muslims or/and in Islam. The spiritual quality of inner freedom is of capital importance here. It will make willing the person and enable her to enter a shared process of reflection and exchange that can lead to the healing of memories, a psychological as well as spiritual process by which the person experiences the personal love of God as liberating from resentment and rejection. The healing of the

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<sup>7</sup> Christian van Nispen tot Sevenaer, *Chrétiens & musulmans frères devant Dieu?* Paris: Les Éditions de l'Atelier, 2004, p. 111. On a number of points we follow here this remarkable work..

memory facilitates an unobstructed view of the other and opens the heart to accept the person that has hurt.<sup>8</sup>

Such spiritual freedom also will enable the person to understand the religious convictions and traditions of the other with a positive presupposition. To give the other person, in our case the Muslim, such a positive 'benefit of the doubt' would seem to be the essential condition of a successful relationship. The famous 'presupposition', formulated by Ignatius of Loyola right at the beginning of the Spiritual Exercises (n. 22) with the aim of assuring "that both he who is giving the Spiritual Exercises, and he who is receiving them, may more help and benefit themselves"<sup>9</sup>, very much also applies to Christian-Muslim relations. Ignatius considers such a presupposition the necessary condition of the success of the spiritual retreat. At the same time he states that a positive presupposition should characterize all human relations. As long as we do not have proof of the contrary, we should be ready to put a good interpretation on another's statement rather than condemning it as false. If an orthodox interpretation cannot be put on a proposition, the one who made it should be asked how he understands it, and if possibly misunderstanding has occurred, it should be cleared up with Christian understanding. So, too, if actual error seems to be held, the best possible interpretation should be presented so that a more correct understanding might develop. Anyway, what is of central importance here is the ability to recognize the facts instead of basing oneself on mere suppositions.

### *Considering one another sisters and brothers in God*

In so far the faith of the believer in God is a real personal act and not simply a social inheritance taken on without thinking, and provided that, and in so far as, Christians and Muslims seek to live their relationship with God out of deepest conscience, they can also be together where they are different. This can be said because, and in so far as, they believe in the one God, and in this belief perceive the mystery presented by each person's journey with God. In this understanding Christians and Muslims are brothers and sisters in God. Thus Pope Paul II said to the Muslim representatives in Davao in the Philippines on 20 February 1981:

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid., p. 115

<sup>9</sup> David Fleming, S. J., *The Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius. A Literal Translation and a Contemporary Reading*. St. Louis, Missouri: The Institute of Jesuit Sources, 1978, p. 20..



I deliberately address you as brothers ...we are especially brothers in God, who created us and whom we are trying to reach , in our own ways, through faith, prayer and worship, through the keeping of his law and through submission to his designs.<sup>10</sup>

In other words, real and profound differences in faith do not have to mean absolute separation as we stand together before God. Of course, if talking about God turns out a tournament or a battlefield, so to speak, very soon there is the danger of no longer talking about the living God who is, for all of us, first of all ineffable mystery. The mystery invites us: not to eschew understanding, but to surpass what understanding can reach with its own power. Mystery is given through grace, through disinterested love. The mystery of divine love is in fact the real mystery, into which we enter by gift. It invites us to build a community of life with God Himself, which transcends every human idea about community and relationship.

In Christian faith Jesus Christ opens to us and shares with us the mystery of this love 'to the end'; better, 'to completion' (John 13:1). The mystery of God's triune life invites to share in the divine life - a life of connectedness and endless love - in which the unity itself is the absolute unity of absolute love.

Muslims, following the Qur'an and their whole religious tradition, constantly emphasize that it is not given to the human being to enter into the intimate life of God; the human being is not allowed to fathom the 'inner' life of the divine Being. However, the area in which Muslims come nearest to the mystery of God is undoubtedly, where they try to follow God's unsearchable will according to the model of Abraham. The Abraham of the Qur'an was ready at God's command to sacrifice his own son, without being able humanly to understand God's decision in any way. Through his submission and dedication, supported by believing trust, Abraham became the absolute model of the Muslim.

Obligation to Dialogue - Obligation to Prayer<sup>11</sup>

Islam and Christianity differ with regard both to attitudes in prayer and in content of prayer. From this it is understandable that Christian and Muslim prayer are not the

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<sup>10</sup> *Interreligious Dialogue: The Official Teaching of the Catholic Church from the Second Vatican Council to John Paul II (1963-1995)*, edited by F. Gioia (Boston: Pauline Books and media, 1997), n. 363.

<sup>11</sup> The following paragraphs take up with light modifications passages of the following essay: Christian W. Troll, "Can Christians and Muslims pray together?" in: *The Way* (Oxford), January 2011, pp. 53-70, here esp. pp. 66; 70.

same or interchangeable. This difference is to be respected. However, it is certainly true that along with the possibility of an encounter in faith in the one living God there is also the possibility of such encounter in prayer. Further, the obligation of Muslims and Christians to recognize one another before the one Creator and Judge, to share with one another and, in short, to encounter one another in dialogue, is likely constantly to evoke desire and perhaps to arouse awareness of the obligation - precisely in a world which largely forgets God - to witness to this common task, glorifying together before God, and constantly to ask God together for help to know our common responsibility and carry it out better.

It is no easy matter to hold the two ends of this paradox together somehow - the difference in views in faith and attitudes to prayer, on the one hand, and the commitment to encounter one another in prayer on the other. But simply to make a contradiction out of this tension and paradox is inadmissible and highly damaging. This is the more true as today the tendency is predominant to present Islam and Christianity as fundamentally opposed to one another, even as completely and essentially in conflict with one another.

Spiritually it seems of central importance that Christians desire encounter with Muslims before God and in prayer. No difficulty should prevent Christians from knowing themselves to be responsible before God jointly and mutually with Muslims. Nor should anything prevent them from finding themselves together - wherever there are meaningful opportunities - for common supplication of God, for praise of the one whom both faith-communities confess as their Creator, Preserver and Judge, by whom they know themselves called in common responsibility.