



**Christian Troll SJ**

# **WITNESSING TO WITNESSES: THE MISSION OF CHRISTIANS AND MUSLIMS**

(summarized by Joseph Kenny, O.P.)(1)

## **I. MUSLIM WITNESS**

Muslim-Christian relations are fundamentally an encounter of believers called to give, through life and word, a witness. We have to do with two living traditions whose members are called in faith to witness to faith.

Islam is more than a social and political, a religious and humanitarian phenomenon, more than a challenge to the growth of the Church. It is ultimately a theological issue at the heart of the *missio Dei*. How do Muslims understand their faith and their missionary vocation?

### ***Allâhu Akbar: a central theme in Islamic faith***

Islam, as we encounter it, ultimately communicates a distinctive, comprehensive and pervasive vision that emerges from one great intuition. I speak of the nucleus of Islam. The mind and heart of Islam is eloquently verbalized in the Muslim's profession of faith, *Allâhu Akbar* (God is the Greatest), which is intimately related to the first half of the *shahâda*: *La ilâha illa Allâh*. The phrase powerfully and succinctly expresses what the prophet Isaiah many centuries earlier had taught (cf. 40:12-25; 41:21-24, 42:8) with respect to God and His uniqueness and transcendence.

### ***Allahu Akbar in contemporary understanding***

How do most educated Muslim believers today conceive of God, and how do they see their concept of God as distinct from other contemporary religions and ideologies? Khalid Baig answers these questions in an article entitled *Allâhu akbar*.(2)

Khalid Baig writes: "These are the first words that a Muslim child hears in this world right after birth. Welcome to the world! The father makes the invocation in his or her ears. The identical message is heard, wherever Muslims find themselves, five times daily at prayer time. *Allâhu akbar*

is the symbol, the cornerstone, as it were, of Islam. There exists no power nor force in the world that equals the omnipotence of the One God. "Allâh is the Greatest."

Baig states that the God acknowledged by Islam is "an all-knowing, all-powerful God who created the entire universe and constantly sustains it. The Qur'ân teaches this very clearly and distinctly, for example, in the Throne verse of *al-Baqarah* (2:255):

Allah! There is no god but He, the Living, the Eternal, Supporter of all. Neither slumber nor sleep can seize Him. His are all things in the heavens and on earth. Who is he that intercedes with Him except by His leave? He knows that which is in front of them and that which is behind them while they encompass nothing of His knowledge except what He wills. His throne extends over the heavens and the earth and He is never weary of preserving them. He is the Most High, the Supreme.

This kind of faith, Baig emphasizes, embraces a rather large number of unique qualities. It is extraordinarily **empowering**! "The dominion of "world powers" wanes before the announcement of "Allâhu-Akbar".

Furthermore it is "immensely **liberating**," in the sense that this creed or belief "frees us from the slavery of our own desires." But how? "While His knowledge is infinite, ours is extremely finite. What can we do, except to adhere to His commands. He watches over us at all times. It is impossible for us to escape by disobedience because of His constant overseeing us. Only He will judge us, nobody else will be in a position to intercede on our behalf unless they receive His consent. It is plain why those who are fearful of accountability may be threatened by this creed."

It is an awesomely **humbling** faith!" For it reminds us of our lowly position in life with respect to our all-powerful God. The nature of this kind of humility is taught in Sura 40:56:

Those who question the Signs of Allâh without any authority bestowed on them, there is nothing in their hearts except the quest of greatness, to which they will never attain.

On the whole, **Allâhu Akbar "is the weapon that gives us the courage to challenge all enslavement, whether political or intellectual.** It compels us to turn to our Creator and to ignore all other creatures like ourselves. During the *jihad* in Afghanistan, Kashmir or Bosnia, as elsewhere, the power of this weapon has been experienced by the people of both sides of the conflict. In every such strife the echo of Allâhu Akbar instills and permeates dread in the hearts of the *mujâhidîn* to higher degrees of hope and bravery. And that is the way it ought to be. Because *Allah* is the greatest!"

### **Islam as a missionary religion: some Qur'ânic and historical data Da`wa (mission)**

The Arabic concept of *da`wa* signifies "call", "invitation". Specifically, it signifies "outreach", "mission", the content of which is to remind man to accept Islam as the true and final religion and thus to enter the state of *falâh*, i.e. of well-being in this and the other world.

The Qur'an repeatedly calls the believer to spread Islam. Q 16:125-127, for instance, is frequently

quoted by Muslims in this context:

Call unto the way of thy Lord with wisdom and fair exhortation, and reason with them in the better way. Lo! thy Lord is Best Aware of him who strayeth from His way, and He is best aware of those who go aright.

*da`wa* is founded on Islam, "submission" to God. Muslims see this submission as an ongoing process of realizing in this world ever more effectively an Islamic identity, with all the attitudes and acts that go with it. Every human person ultimately is made for *islâm* (Q 30:30). The call to Islam challenges individuals and communities to acknowledge this fact and act accordingly.

The life of Muhammad constitutes as it were a living commentary on the Qur'ân. Muhammad's life-model shapes the life of the Muslim believers and of the *umma* they constitute.

Verily in the messenger of Allah ye have a good example for him who looketh unto Allah and the Last Day, and remembereth Allah much. (Q 33:21)

The *umma* as the community of the believers has the task of testifying to *islâm*, the good news (*bushrâ*, e.g., Q 16:102) and guidance from God, by witnessing to it effectively, following closely the example and the teaching of the Prophet.

The claim of Islam to generate "the best community among men" (Q 3:110) and the perceived God-given duty to establish religion of truth (*dîn al-haqq*), has led to the forming of a socio-political order in which the authority of God sanctions concrete institutions and decisions.

God is subject of *da`wa*: the human person must listen to His call, follow His messenger (Q 14:44), His book, the Qur'an, with its perfect set of God-given rules (*ahkâm*) to be implemented by believers in the framework of the *umma*, the community of the Muslim believers. The religion of Islam was thus perfected (Q 5:3) to be final and unsurpassable until the Day of Judgement.

### **Hostile and peaceful *da`wa***

In doing so, one could base oneself, at least as far as the *ahl al-kitâb* are concerned, on Q 9:29 where we read:

Fight against such of those who have been given the Scripture as believe not in Allah nor the Last Day, and forbid not that which Allah has forbidden by His messenger, and follow not the religion of truth, until they pay the tribute readily, being brought low.

From there then developed the offer of the Muslims to the non-Muslim opponent, consisting of three parts: (1) Acceptance of Islam (2) Submission and payment of tribute (3) Deciding battle. *da`wa* became increasingly institutionalized, being in the end an integral part of Islamic Law and Jurisprudence, within the framework of the "classical" doctrine of *jihad*.<sup>(3)</sup>

How then did Islam spread? In the first centuries, roughly speaking, military conquest preceded conversion. This established an "Islamic milieu" with all its social, religious and political and legal institutions. These led to the gradual conversion and slow erosion of the conquered non-Muslim

religious communities.

In subsequent centuries Islam spread beyond the conquered regions by peaceful means, such as trade and intermarriage. Only sporadically there took place military campaigns in the name of Islam. In this phase of expansion holy men played an eminent role. Often they were members of Sufi societies, and acted as spiritual and juridical experts and as patrons of merchants and seafarers.

Organized mission in the modern Christian sense of the term developed in the Islamic world only towards the end of the 19th century, under the influence of, and in response to, the lively activities of the Christian missionary societies to whom Muslims were exposed, mostly in the framework of colonial rule. This happened roughly at three levels:

**(a) *Da`wa* was dynamized:** it comprises today, besides preaching and propagation (*tablīgh*), a missionary commitment of one sort or another, which itself is a witness sign to the world.

**(b) *Da`wa* was spiritualized:** as a "call" and "admonition" freed juridical and religio-political institutions, it took on the character of a testimony of faith.

**(c) *Da`wa* was institutionalized in a new way:** as an activity of Islamic international organizations, it became a world-wide reforming movement, and provided a dialogue forum with non-Muslims, without ceasing to be an invitation to Islam.

## ***Da`wa* in contemporary Islamic thought and action**

### **-A peaceful approach**

*Da`wa* is the *raison d'être* of the *umma*. Whereas an individual becomes a Muslim by reciting the short testimony of faith (*shahâda*), this testimony cannot mature and bear fruit without a continuing public announcing of the truth. This in fact is *da`wa*, in its central place of importance.(4)

Fadlullah Wilmot, an Australian convert to Islam, criticises a wide-spread narrowing of the concept of *da`wa*. Islam being a comprehensive vision and style of life, it demands a comprehensive conception. In Wilmot's view, *da`wa* properly understood designates the task to make operative in contemporary society the dynamic conception of Islam.

*Da`wa* does not mean imposition of the Faith on others or just inviting them to the truth. There must be credibility to this summons and the quality of the medium will determine the quality of the message. While Christian missionaries are gaining fresh ground all over Asia and Africa, Muslims, despite their faith's emphasis on social services, have reduced *da`wa* to abstract pronouncements. Muslims forget that there is something extrasensory in *da`wa*, which is only achieved when souls establish contact with each other through the loving hand that places balm on the wound and feeds the hungry... If a person is starving, does not have a proper house to live in, does not have more than one set of clothes, how can he or she be dedicated to living an Islamic life? *da`wa* workers should therefore, be motivators who enable the community to help itself and enable people to take up the responsibility to create structures and systems for cooperation.(5)

This approach which up to now is held only by a small minority of Muslim intellectuals, takes position against the pure power-political idiom of the international *da`wa* organizations. Thus F. Wilmot states:

Naturally it is the task of the Muslims to influence wherever possible public morality and political decisions. But all this should not be carried out "in the idiom of the Islamic state". In case the missionaries of Islam do not represent the prophetic attributes of mercy, empathy and understanding convincingly and do not address concretely the questions, for instance, of unemployment, homelessness, underdevelopment, social injustice and the nuclear threat, political action and agitation will turn out to be ineffective.

In the final analysis *da`wa* is all about empowering the powerless, delivering the rights of the marginalized, securing justice for the oppressed, eradicating poverty and providing basic necessities to the vast majority of mankind.<sup>(6)</sup>

An equally relatively small (but rapidly growing) number of Muslim thinkers has advocated, in a clear and theologically reasoned manner, dialogue as a privileged way of relating to the Christians.

<sup>(7)</sup> The late Zainal Abedin, founder of the Institute for Muslim Minority Affairs in Jeddah and of its remarkable bi-annual Journal has been the most remarkable among them. Abedin quotes Q 3:110:

Ye are the best community that hath been raised up for mankind. Ye enjoin right conduct and forbid indecency; and ye believe in Allah. And if the people of the Scripture had believed it had been better for them. Some of them are believers, but most of them are evil-livers.

He states in explanation that participating in the world-wide efforts of men and women of good will, to further what is good, is not only an option for Muslims but a *conditio sine qua non* of their existence as believers. In other words, the Muslims as members of the *umma*, the best community that God has brought forth among humankind, are obligated to such participation. And their contribution must be directed towards the well-being of all humankind, not primarily, or even exclusively, to the well-being of the *umma*.<sup>(8)</sup>

Hence, whereas *da`wa* belongs to the sphere of the human person, conversion and the change of one attitude of heart that goes with true conversion are the prerogative of God. To make conversion (in the sense of change of institutional allegiance) the explicit and measurable objective of *da`wa* violates the God-given freedom of choice, without which the call of Islam to faithful submission would be meaningless.<sup>(9)</sup> Any kind of force or pressure in this field contradicts the soul of the Islamic faith.

### **A hostile approach**

If the Muslims, at least till recently, have remained somewhat reluctant to enter in the world-wide, process of interreligious dialogue, the main reason would seem to be their bitter experience of suffering the comprehensive imperial attack of Westerners (still frequently identified with the Christians) an assault that involved an at times even deliberate effort to weaken the moral and religious foundations and traditions of the Islamic community. However, Abedin adds self-critically that today Islam is in danger of using its new power positions in certain parts of the world in a

manner comparable to the Western imperial attack just mentioned. Doing so Islam violates its own sacred principles.

It is well known that since the abolition of the caliphate in 1924 there has developed a kind of "Islamic ecumene", in other words an organized Islamic internationalism, which wants to serve in new ways the realization today of the unity of the *umma*. The most important organizations are the Islamic World Congress (Mu`tamar), the Muslim World League (Râbita), founded in Mekka in 1962 and the Organization of Islamic Conferences (O.I.C.) founded in 1969 in Rabat. Also influential is the Call to Islam Society, working from Tripoli in Libya since 1982. Since the 1970's a number of congresses convoked by one or the other of these bodies has dealt especially with *da`wa*. The Call to Islam Society, as well as the Ahl al-Bait Foundation of Jordan, have for some years now taken initiatives in establishing regular dialogues with various Christian Churches, including the Catholic Church.

We can here only evoke a few hegemonistic features of the *da`wa* thinking and planning, gleaned from relevant statements of the organizations mentioned.

*Da`wa* aims at two things, the material, moral and spiritual building up and strengthening of the *umma* as well as the effective witness for Islam to the whole of the world. It comprises all decisive areas of human life: e.g. also information and media; Islamic culture; mosque; woman; education, state.

In this effort - wherever Muslims are in power or wield decisive power - the state and all its functions are being claimed and used for the representation and carrying through of the Islamic objectives. It is expected from the state and the state institutions that they initiate and further an ever more intensive Islamisation. This process includes the "purification" of the organs of the state and of the leading institutions from the non- or anti-Islamic elements as well as the endeavour to bring them under the "control" of outspokenly Islamic groups. Concretely this involves the careful selection of journalists and media personal, the continuous checking of information, media production, teaching materials in schools and universities and also "of all cultural and scientific books".<sup>(10)</sup> Nowhere in the documents studied do we come across any effort of trying to explain the underlying ideology and even less to put it into question.

All persons in leading functions in the Islamic and Arab world are reminded of the duty to *da`wa*. They must "make use of the politics and political activities in order to establish the Law of God (*sharî`a*) on the earth... eliminating and eradicating any opposition, which could appear here and there".<sup>(11)</sup>

Special attention is paid to the formation and winning of the youth. The youth is portrayed as continuously endangered by the temptations and plans of the "zionists" and "crusaders".<sup>(12)</sup> Youth congresses, youth camps and courses as well as scholarships are recommended as especially effective means to form youth in Islam.

Preaching and propagating the message of Islam and the educational, social and medical services

advocated by these organisations form one whole. The new concept of the mosque as a community centre that includes and brings together all these services demonstrates this concept effectively. At the same time all Muslim states are asked, to prohibit all missionary institutions that bear an educational and social character, to replace them and to prohibit any new initiatives of this kind.<sup>(13)</sup>

In the statements and resolutions of the above-mentioned congresses (many of which are specifically directed towards the African continent) the points just mentioned are being concretised in great detail. The government of Islamic countries are being invited to employ their financial aid for the strengthening of those institutions in the African countries that are active in the area of *da`wa*.<sup>(14)</sup>

## **The underlying concept of *umma*** **The classical model**

The ideas and aims of contemporary *da`wa* that have been presented here, are based upon a certain view of the *umma*, its place and task in history and its relationship to the non-Muslim world. This vision in turn determines which means and methods are adopted and propagated for strengthening and expanding the *umma*.

Islamic faith conceives of the *umma* as the final and definitive community founded by God through the word of the Qur'an and the God-obedient action of Muhammad. This community has been ideally realised in the polity of Medina as the comprehensive implementation of the clearly revealed will of God, as to law, ritual and doctrine, under the guidance of the Prophet and his immediate successors, the rightly-guided caliphs. Of this community, assembled around the final Prophet and based on the definite revealed Scripture God Himself testifies:

Ye are the best community that hath been raised up for mankind. Ye enjoin right conduct and forbid indecency; and ye believe in Allah... (Q 3:110)

The reputation and preeminence of the *umma* is based "not on people, race or nation but exclusively on the faith and obedience made visible in and through her". She "incarnates the final and most perfect stage of human history."<sup>(15)</sup>

The *umma* is charged not only with preserving unity, fraternity and peace within, but to offer these God-given values to all the world, establishing them within the framework of the *umma*. It is the God-given task of the *umma* to draw within humankind the line of division between believers and godless. The *umma* offers to everyone the "well-being" (*falâh*) of a life under God's Will and carries out at the same time God's judgement towards those which oppose this divine offer.

Insofar as the Islamic community understands itself as *dâr al-islâm*, the world outside is *dâr al-harb*, area of disobedience, of enmity towards God. Among the non-Muslims only the Jews and Christians, as "people of the scripture", have the right to exist within the framework of the *umma*. They are however not qualified to cooperate actively in public affairs, and instead must paying the

*jizya* (poll tax), expressing their subordinate position of humiliation.

What we have indicated here is the classical foundational model: The community of faith and life founded by Muhammad at the behest of God finds legal and politically effective expression in obedience towards God's revealed *Sharī`a*, and makes use of the divinely-sanctioned means, including political and military ones, in a comprehensive effort (*jihād*) to bring ever wider areas of the world under the rule of God, within the framework of the *umma*. Muhammad was equally the founder model, as the absolute faithful preacher and propagator of the revealed message, and the political-military architect of the *umma*.

However, in so far as it turned out practically impossible to realize the comprehensive, religio-political reality of Islam, during the subsequent generations and centuries the political-military aspect of the task was modified or postponed. Islam has been and continues to be implemented in those dimensions which are realisable in the varying historical and regional situations. The tension between the utopian ideal and the realisable possibilities determines the variations of the history of Islam.

### **A revisionist model**

Efforts, not least in our day, to separate in the Islamic institutions lasting norms from historically conditioned political-historical elements have led to a theological questioning of the absolute dichotomy of *umma* and non-*umma*.<sup>(16)</sup> Here is emphasized the teaching of the Qur'ân that the Creator has built *islâm* (congenitally as it were) into the nature of the human person as such. Hence - such thinking proceeds - there are persons who have clearly and unmistakably heard the call of Islam, but because of social and sociological factors, are prevented without their fault from truly understanding and appreciating this call. Therefore their refusal to accept the invitation cannot be taken as a truly free act of disobedience.

Other thinkers, as e.g. the Indian Syed Vahiduddin, want to liberate the Islamic message "from the limited context of the Meccan and Medinan period of the life of the Prophet".<sup>(17)</sup> Today, Vahiduddin writes, Muslims are challenged to interpret the call to Islam within the framework of the overall message of the Qur'ân and the wider principles of its teaching. The *umma* remains charged with the task of preaching the Qur'anic message to all human beings, to invite them to submit to God's Will and Law whole-heartedly, and to build one community of brothers and sisters "who love God from all their heart and one another in God". Vahiduddin quotes in this context Q 5:48"

For each of you have We appointed a divine law and a traced-out way. Had Allah willed He could have made you one community. But He tries you by that which he hath given you. So vie with one another in good works. Unto Allah ye all will return, and He will then inform you of that wherein ye differ.

Vahiduddin sees outside the boundaries of the *umma* the possibility and the reality of a positive answer to the challenge of Islam. *Islâm*, as the eternal and universal dimension of submission to the Absolute in fraternity, can be detected and recognized in the various symbols and patterns of faith and action. Analogous to the distinction of Church and the "kingdom of God", Vahiduddin

distinguishes here between the *umma* on the one hand, and *Islâm* on the other. In this perspective Islam opens up to the vision and realization of an Islamic humanism which can live and compete in open partnership with humanisms of other provenance.

There ensues, for Vahiduddin, a necessary critique of the forms and means which Christian and Muslim faith and life take in the practice of mission and *da`wa* today. The means of preaching and propagation must be the realization of an invitation, totally free from any kind of pressure and manipulation, not so speak of open and hidden violence. Any taking of influence by, e.g., legal, political means in the areas, say, of education, economics and politics which goes against the freedom of religious practice and choice is to be rejected and to be opposed by Christians and Muslims linked by the bonds of ongoing dialogue and collaboration.

## II. CHRISTIAN WITNESS

Is there any Christian mission statement comparable to *Allahu Akbar*? What is the "central point" which sums up the profound mystery of Christian faith? The "Mystery of the Faith" includes God's salvific will and its operation in Jesus Christ. For it is in and through Him that God reveals and "shares" Himself. As Jesus Himself has said: "He who has seen me, has seen the Father" (Jo. 14:9).

### ***Kénôsis*: a key phrase of Christian Faith**

The essential concept which expresses the totality of revelation and salvation in such a fashion as to eminently expose, so to speak, the "heart" of God's *kénôsis* toû Theoû, God's self-emptying love. This is the main issue where Christianity differs from Islam.

The Apostle Paul introduced his letter to the Philippians with the candid exhortation: "Make your own the mind of Jesus Christ!" (See 2:6-11).

*Though in the form of God, \* Jesus would not struggle \* to be treated as God, but emptied himself, \* taking the form of a slave, \* born like anyone else.*

*In every way human, \* he humbled himself, obeying to the death, \* death on a cross.*

*For this God lifted him high, \* and gave him the name \* above all names.*

*So at the name of Jesus \* every knee will bend \* in heaven, on earth and the world below, and every tongue exclaim \* to the glory of God the Father: \* "Jesus Christ is Lord!"*

The offering of himself on the part of the Son for sinful humanity is the act which Paul defines as *heautòn ekénôsen*,: He emptied himself. It is only in the letter to the Philippians that this offering of self is stated directly of Jesus. But the oblation of self on the part of the Son - "for us"(Eph. 5:2), "for the Church"(Eph. 5:25), "for me"(Gal. 2:20) - is inconceivable without Him being offered to the Father "for us all"(Rom. 8:32): "who was handed over to death for our sins and raised to life for our justification" (Rom. 4:25). The two concepts (a) *paradidónai* (to transmit, hand over, extradite) which in its noun form becomes *parádosis* (tradition, extradition) and (b) *kenóô* (to empty self) and its substantival form *kénôsis*, theologically define one and the same "act" or "action", and that is

"the center or focal point with respect to content (*die inhaltliche Mitte*), of revelation and faith," "the one foundation, with regard to content, (*den inhaltlichen Einheitsgrund*) of Christian revelation."

It is obvious that I am not presenting a new idea. This opinion has already been stated, explained and accepted in Catholic theology of this century. My sole intent here is to question whether this kind of theological approach could be of significant "use" in our meeting in faith with Muslims and our task "to give an account of our faith" (1 Peter 3:15), when they request that we do so.

### **Some Aspects of the Theology of *Kénôsis*.**

To answer this question, permit me to recall some fundamental elements of the divine *kénôsis*. We obtain some insight, though limited, into the knowledge of the inmost mystery of God, of His Triune being and life, only through His self-emptying and his self-revelation in the person, life and death of the God-man, Jesus Christ.

Jesus proves Himself to be the Son who alone can reveal the Father, because "no one knows the Father except the Son" (Matt. 11:27). This "revealing" is not merely words that tell about the Father; rather, it is the person of Jesus himself who reveals the Father, so that He can in reality affirm: "He who has seen me, has seen the Father" (Jn. 14:9). It is only faith that assists in the possibility of such "seeing". The full Johannine sense of the expression "to believe" is not only acquiescence to a "dark" mystery, completely inaccessible to the human spirit, but rather a grasp of the truth, and insight and spiritual contemplation which is mediated through "the Spirit of truth who does not speak of his own accord, but will say only what he has been told" (Jn. 16:13-15). This is, truthfully, to aver that he will speak only from the Father and from Christ!

Therefore, God in himself and God for us form a totality. If, with St. Paul, we wish to understand the Incarnation of the Son of God as self-emptying out of Love, we must presuppose that there exists in God a kind of "movement" that urges him to such self-emptying. This position cannot be but the inner-divine love which is itself a kind of "self-emptying", "a giving or offering of self": The Father does not cling on to His own being ; rather, He completely bequeaths it to another, to the Son who possesses it only by owing it totally to the Father in gratitude, in a response qualified by an immeasurable "giving of self." This personal turning to their shared being, on the part of the First and Second Persons, is the fiery breath of their mutual love, the Holy Spirit.

One cannot comprehend the meaning of "person" as long as one considers inter-personal love in God superfluous or impossible on the ground that God is absolutely One and that, therefore, He in no way causes His oneness through Love. In fact, there exists no higher or more noble spiritual act than personal love which is possible only by of the free self-offering of persons to one another. This activity, although it corresponds completely to the nature of God, must be distinguished from exchange of thought. God is love in himself through the *perichôrêsis*, the *circumincessio*, which is the mutual self-giving of each other (*das Ineinanderströmen*) of the Divine Persons.

The origin (*der Ur-sprung*), however, of any other "self-emptying" of God (*die Selbstentäußerung Gottes*) is by way of creation and sanctification (*Begnadigung*), and by way of incarnation and the

offering of self unto death "for others." The Divine Persons's "not clinging to themselves" is the first emptying (the *Ur-Kenose*), the first motive (*Ur-impuls*) for God's "not-clinging to Himself" in creation, in the "marriage bond" with Israel. It is, finally, the first motive for the Son's "not clinging to" His godhead, to His divine power and to His glory. Rather he gave himself up entirely and without reserve, so as to suffer, die, rise from the dead and ascend to the right hand of the Father in heaven.

It is of utmost importance to keep before us this perspective, because only this can give us a true understanding of God. We begin "from below", in creation and the concrete historical Jesus whose transparency reveals the the inner life of God "above". Then we can begin to understand creation, incarnation and the Cross from the viewpoint of the Tri-Unity of God.

We were searching for the culminating point of all of theology, the position from which God and all that He does "comes into view", and we discover it exactly here, in the *kénosis of our Triune God, which is the genuine expression of His absolutely free divine love. At this point, I believe it is possible to distinguish seven modes of the divine kénosis:*

1. the original *kénosis* in God, which is the generation of the Son and the breathing of the Holy Spirit;
2. the *kénosis* of God in creation, which is ordered to:
3. the *kénosis* of the incarnation
4. the *kénosis* of Christ on the cross
5. which is sacramentally continued in the Eucharist
6. the *kénosis* of the Holy Spirit in the minds and hearts of human beings
7. the participation of Christians, in spirit and life, in the *kénosis* of Christ.

In summary, we Christians believe in the *kénosis* (i.e., the self-emptying, self-giving love) of the Triune God.

I ask myself if the term *mahabbah*, as understood in contemporary Arabic, sufficiently defines and asserts the self-giving nature of love (*agápê*)? If yes, then Allâhu mahabbah would definitely appear to be a most appropriate phrase to echo from the perspective of Christian faith. It would also "correct" the Muslim affirmation *Allâhu Akbar*.

The notion of *kénosis*, like most theological concepts, is abstract. But the reality which it expresses, is the innermost mystery of our Christian Faith. How did the saints grasp this mystery? Allow me to concentrate on but one example. St. Francis of Assisi, of whom his biographer Tomaso da Celano testifies, had this experience: "The ecstasy of love of God in the *kénosis* of Christ elicited St. Francis' utter amazement and effected a proper *exinanitio*: He completely divested himself (*totus exinanitus*) and rested in the wounds of the Savior", until the moment when the wounds became visible on his own body. In the Eucharist, the self-oblation of Christ again and again stirred him intensely, so that he was unable to keep anything to himself. The saints (and not the average consciousness ascertained by opinion polls) make it abundantly clear as to what is essential, what in fact is the heart of our Christian faith and vocation. Our

Christian witness to Muslims should be integrally informed by, and focused on, it.

So, if we wish to understand God's "greatest greatness", as the Christian faith perceives it, it is exactly here. It was revealed in Jesus' parable. God, Jesus' Father, brought to light his divine magnanimity. It exceeds all human comprehension or imagination, especially when he makes Himself equal to us human beings, sharing with us every aspect of our human condition except sin. Thus he has offered us an example of how we can transform our hearts and minds, our entire lives, to imitate Him in order to share His own triune life of love forever!

### **The missionary encounter of the Church with Islam today**

From the data and reflections presented above, how can the missionary Church make an ever more credible presentation of the sacramental mystery of salvation in Jesus Christ to the world of Islam?

In the face of the Islamic vision of the human creature before God and of divine guidance conveyed by the prophets - which, from the point of view of Christian faith, does not perceive and even obscures in some respect, the true depth of God's self-giving love - the Church has the duty to witness to the full truth revealed in the person and career of Christ, doing so with a delicate and serving love towards Muslims.

The Islamic witness to the unity and unicity of God challenges the Church to present her entire life and doctrine in a radically theocentric way, following from a properly understood doctrine of the Incarnation, the paschal mystery and the "divinization" of the human person in the mystery of the imparting of the Holy Spirit.

In the many forms of dialogue which the Church engages in, the all-determining principle is: "One can witness to the Gospel only with the weapons of the Gospel," i.e. with the ever renewed willingness to approach our neighbour, to accept the other as other and to enter into positive relations with him/her. We cannot deny that in some places religious freedom is restricted. Relations between Christians and Muslim are still loaded with misconceptions, tension, rejection, even hatred. On both sides fear and diffidence linger on, ever ready to flame into conflict. But everywhere there remains broad space for those who have the will and courage to go out and meet, in order to learn to live together in mutual respect.

Christians know themselves sent as "ambassadors of reconciliation". The sermon on the Mount (Mt 5:45) and the Second Vatican Council (*Nostra Aetate*, n. 3) call for this missionary service (2 Cor 5:18-6:10). The Christian working for reconciliation continues the mission of Jesus himself who died "not for the nation only, but also to gather together into one the scattered children of God" (John 11:52; cf. Lk 10:5). The unity will reach its final fulfilment in the community of the faith in Jesus the Christ.

Here and now the local Churches are called, in following the parable of the good Samaritan, to put into practice respect and love beyond all barriers of society, culture and religion and to strive for

reconciliation with all human beings and cultural-religious communities. The countless dialogue initiatives during the past decades since the Second Vatican Council have not removed difficulties and conflict. But the call to be servants of reconciliation remains as urgent and attractive as ever.

## Conclusion

We may conclude, following closely the words of Henri Teissier, the archbishop of Algiers<sup>(18)</sup> : As Christians we are deeply convinced that we have discovered in Jesus of Nazareth the true face of God and the true vocation of the human person. To live as disciples of Jesus among the Muslims means to show to our Muslim partners how we exist before God, what we think fidelity to God implies and what, we believe, is the true religion, wanted by God, that fully honours Him. Our Muslim partners only rarely will become Christians. However, we believe that many Muslims, moved by the Spirit, recognize in the challenges of the Gospel the true vocation of man and the true face of God. Our daily experience shows us that these challenges transcend the barriers of religion and stimulate spiritual life beyond the visible confines of the Church. It is therefore our mission to bear witness to Jesus Christ and his Gospel wherever we are, in this case among Muslims. This witness is not a one-way street because we detect on our part in the lives of many of our Muslim partners those evangelical attitudes and values which we know to be the fruits of the Holy Spirit in them.

---

1 This article is a summary of two papers: "Allâhu Akbar as a Central Theme of Religious Conversation with Muslim Believers," *Encounter* (Rome), February 2001 (No 272), and "Witness Meets Witness: The Church's Mission in the Context of Worldwide Encounter of Christian and Muslim Believers Today" *Encounters* (Leicester) 43:1 (1998), pp. 15-34.

2 In the column, "First things first", *Impact International* (London), October 1996, page 5.

3 See Klaus Hock, *Christliche Mission und Islamische Da`wa: "Sendung" und "Ruf" im geschichtlichen Wandel*. CIBEDO (Frankfurt), 3, pp. 11-16.

4 Cf. M. Manazir Ahsan, "Da`wa and its significance for the future," in Merryl Wyn Davies and Adnan Khalil Pasha (eds.), *Beyond frontiers. Islam and contemporary needs*. London: Mansell, 1989, p. 14.

5 In Davies and Pasha (eds.), *op. cit.*, pp. 26.27.29.

6 *Ibid.*, p. 40.

7 See the recent analysis of contemporary Muslim thought on Christian-Muslim dialogue by A. Siddiqui, *Christian-Muslim Dialogue in the Twentieth Century*. London: Macmillan, 1997.

8 See Syed Z. Abedin, "Da`wa and dialogue: believers and promotion of mutual trust," in Davies and Pasha (eds.), *op. cit.*, pp. 42-55.

9 Cf. M. Talbi, "Religious Liberty: A Muslim Perspective," *Islamochristiana*, 1985, vol. 11, pp. 99-113.

10 "Al-da`wa al-Islamiyya/ l'appel à l'Islam," *Etudes Arabes* (Rome), n. 73, p. 75.

11 *Ibid.*, p. 83.

12 *Ibid.*, p. 101.

13 *Ibid.*, p. 67.

14 *Ibid.*, . 117-139, esp. 135.

15 In these paragraphs I follow closely J. Bouman, *Gott und Mensch im Koran*, Wiss. Buchgesellschaft, Darmstadt, 1977.

16 Cf. C.W. Troll, "Der Blick des Koran auf andere Religionen," in W. Kerber (ed.), *Wie tolerant ist der Islam?*, Kindt, München, 1991.

17 S. Vahiduddin, "Comment le Coran conçoit l'harmonie et la réconciliation entre les confessions religieuses," *Islamochristiana*, 1980, vol. 6, pp.-25-31.

18 H. Teissier, "Chrétiens et musulmans aujourd'hui. Remarques sur l'attitude chrétien devant l'Islam et les musulmans," *Unité Chrétienne*, 1986, no. 82 (mai), pp. 27-39.