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## ISLAMIC-CHRISTIAN DIALOGUE – PROBLEMS AND OBSTACLES TO BE PONDERED AND OVERCOME

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### Introduction

During the past half century Islamic-Christian dialogue has turned from a rivulet into a roaring river, from an occasional conference to numerous meetings, oral and written exchanges and round table discussions taking place year around in nearly every corner of the globe from Australia and Malaysia to the Arab world, from Europe to America and Canada. During this period much of both a scholarly and a theological nature has been written and debated including numerous studies of historical encounters between the two religions and even journals are now being published devoted solely to this subject. Likewise, basic theological and ethical issues have been discussed and as a result a more favorable climate of discourse has been created in many circles within both religious communities. One can cite the regular meetings organized by the Vatican and the World Council of Churches with various Islamic bodies in both the West and the Islamic world. Then there are the Selly Oaks colleges in Birmingham in England devoted to Muslim-Christian understanding as there are the centers at Hartford and Georgetown in America and at Balamand University in Lebanon devoted to the same goal.

From the Islamic side regular conferences on this subject have been instigated and organized in Jordan, Egypt, Turkey, Iran and many other Muslim lands, while some of the leading Muslim authorities and organizations—both Sunni and Shīʿite—have been at the forefront of the movement for better understanding between Islam and Christianity including its Orthodox form. There has also been some harmony on the plane of action as far as common ethical interests are concerned as can be seen in the 1994 United Nations conference on the family in Cairo. While some of these meetings have been carried out for the sake of political expediency for one or both sides of the dialogue, many substantive spiritual, theological, philosophical and ethical issues have also been discussed beyond immediate political interests and some agreements reached at least among those participating in such activities.

While there is no doubt that among proponents of genuine dialogue there is now a better understanding of basic issues and even laudable proposals for the solution of certain contentious ones, there are still many problems and obstacles on the path of a genuine dialogue which would create mutual understanding and respect and recognition of each religion

by the other as a divinely ordained path for salvation in the strictly religious sense of the term. In this essay our goal is to deal with some of these basic problems and obstacles rather than the issues which have already been "resolved" at least to an appreciable extent and in a manner that is satisfactory to the mainstream if not to all sectors of each community. We shall deal with these outstanding problems and obstacles under the four categories of theological issues,<sup>1</sup> freedom of worship, missionary activity, and attitudes toward modernism and secularism.

### Theological Issues

Despite all these decades of dialogue, the central issue of the acceptance by Christianity and Islam of each other as veritable revelations, without destroying the traditional meaning of revelation (the *wahy* of the Islamic tradition) has not been totally settled. Granted that it is easier for Islam to accept Christianity as an authentic message from Heaven than vice-versa, difficulties remain on both sides although in this particular issue Christians have a higher hurdle to surmount than do Muslims. A number of Christian theologians such as John Hick among Protestants and Hans Küng among Catholics have stepped forward as theologians to face this problem squarely, but most of the influential Christian theologians, even among Catholics and Protestants wishing to carrying out serious religious dialogue with Muslims, find it difficult to go beyond the literal meaning of "I am the way, the life, and the truth" and *extra ecclesiam nulla salus*. Many try to stretch the meaning of such sayings, including believing that Christ's grace can include Muslims in its embrace, without however accepting the Qur'anic revelation as such as a revelation from God.

In general a great deal of polite diplomacy seeks to veil authentic theological issues among which the question of the incarnation and the Trinity loom as being formidable in any Muslim-Christian debate. Here most Muslim thinkers, while accepting the Qur'anic dictum about the divine origin of Christianity, attribute these central Christian doctrines to misinterpretations of Christ's message and the alteration (*tahrif*) of the text of the New Testament and do not distinguish between the trinity (*tathlith*) strongly opposed by the Qur'an and the orthodox Christian understanding which does not in any way neglect the unity of God although, needless to say, the emphasis on unity is different in the two religions and a "unitarian" interpretation of the Trinity as demanded by the Islamic perspective can only be carried out on the esoteric level.

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<sup>1</sup> In a sense of course all the issues discussed in this essay are theological, but in this context by theological issues we mean those dealing with theology in the more strict sense of the term.

From the Christian side, however, few attempts are being made to interpret these doctrines metaphysically and esoterically and even in the more traditional circles where these doctrines are still fully accepted, they are interpreted as dogmas rather than metaphysical truths. When the Trinity is considered completely *in divinis* and identical with God as Unity so that Unity has no significance outside of the Trinity, one of whose members then becomes incarnated in history, it is very difficult if not impossible to come to basic theological understanding with Islam or Judaism for that matter. Furthermore, some like John Hick who do seek to interpret the doctrines of the Incarnation and the Trinity in such a way as not to impinge upon the unity of the Divine Principle are not considered as orthodox; nor are they accepted by the mainstream Christian theological community.<sup>2</sup> As for Muslims, outside Sufi circles there are many who are not willing to follow the Qur'anic doctrine of the universality of revelation to its conclusion and accept Christianity in its traditional and millennial formulation as an authentic religion whose central doctrines must contain the kernel of the truth which must be interpreted in an esoteric and metaphysical manner beyond their literal interpretations in order to bring out their profound accord with the doctrines of Unity (*al-tawḥīd*).

If anything, the theological debates of the last few decades between Islam and Christianity demonstrate clearly that, to repeat a saying of Frithjof Schuon, complete accord between religions is not possible in the human atmosphere but only in the Divine stratosphere. Furthermore, ecumenism in order to be efficacious, that is to reach inner unity without doing injustice to the diversity of external forms revealed by Heaven, cannot but be an "esoteric ecumenism".<sup>3</sup> If we remember that in the climate of Christianity esoterism is to be found in sanctity and in Islam sanctity in esoterism which is found primarily in Sufism,<sup>4</sup> it becomes clear why in fact many major theological problems have not received a proper solution in the present day context by those seeking common accord between Islam and Christianity. On the level in which such solutions are sought, that is on the formal level, by scholars of religion and theologians even if they be motivated by good intentions, it is simply not possible to reach an accord which would do full justice to the Islamic and Christian perspectives without distortion. The best that one can do in such cases is to have respect

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<sup>2</sup> On our debate with Hick on major theological issues in Muslim-Christian dialogue see A. Aslan, "Religions and the Concept of the Ultimate—An Interview with John Hick and Seyyed Hossein Nasr," *Islamic Quarterly* 40 (1996): 266-83.

We use the term esoteric to mean the inward dimension and inner reality of things and not occultism with which it is often confused in academic studies of religions.

<sup>3</sup> See F. Schuon, *Christianity/Islam—Essays on Esoteric Ecumenism*, trans. G. Polit (Bloomington, IN: World Wisdom Books, 1985).

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 167.

for the other and for the Muslims at least to remember the Qur'anic verse, "And argue not with the People of the Scripture (including Christians) unless it be in a mostly kindly manner, save with such of them as do wrong; and say: We believe in that which hath been revealed unto us and revealed unto you; our God and your God is One, and unto Him we surrender" ( S.29:46—Pickthall trans. modified). The rest should be left in God's Hands.

And yet, "esoteric ecumenism" has also taken place as one finds in the writings of many traditionalist writers foremost among them Schuon himself but also many from traditional Christian circles who are at once traditionalist and universalist. The problem remains that a chasm separates the fruit of such efforts from the ordinary dialogues carried out by many scholars and theologians of both sides who are either impervious to such writings or are opposed to the esoteric dimension of their own tradition. Here it may be added that it is quite paradoxical that so many exoteric religious scholars espouse more easily modernistic ideas which undercut the very foundation of their faith than esoterism which could not but strengthen that foundation. In any case the basic theological issues between Islam and Christianity remain unresolved on the formal theological level while on the metaphysical and esoteric level the truths of the two religions reside in harmony which transcends all tensions that lie in the realm of differentiation below the state of principial Unity. It is perhaps better therefore to accept on the formal level certain difference as being precisely irreducible on that level and then go on to cultivate mutual respect even if one is not able to gaze at that principial Unity in which all formal differences are resolved.<sup>5</sup>

A second major set of theological questions involves salvation and the answer to basic question of who is saved. Although there are of course differences in the Christian idea of salvation and the Islamic one of *falāḥ*, enough similarity exists based on the common doctrine of the immortality of the soul and the reality of posthumous states of the inferno, purgatory and paradise to allow us to ask the question in this form across the religious boundaries of Islam and Christianity. For Christians to extend the possibility of salvation beyond the redemption offered by Christ is difficult indeed. But so is condemning all Muslims to hell-fire at least for Christians of conscience who have had first hand experience of pious Muslims. Some have tried half way solutions such as extending Christ's redemptive grace to Muslims and considering them as "Christians" without knowing it. Obviously such solutions are rejected out of hand by Muslims.

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<sup>5</sup> See our *Knowledge and the Sacred* (Albany, NY: The State University of New York Press, 1991), chapter nine, 280-308.

On the Muslim side a most unfortunate "narrowing of faith" has taken place during the past century among many believers as one of the concomitant effects of modernism on the Muslim soul and the reaction to it. Traditional Islamic literature is replete with assertions that if Christians or Jews were to live according to the tenets of their religion, they would be saved. This is perfectly in accord with the teachings of the Qurʾān. Furthermore, it was always argued that the Qurʾān and the *Shariʿa* order Muslims to protect the lives, property and religion of the "People of the Book." Now if their religion would simply lead them all to hell, why would God order Muslims to protect them and their religion? This would be a monstrosity against both the justice and the mercy of God.

In the last few decades, rather than perpetuating and expanding this attitude of earlier generations in respecting the religions of the "People of the Book" as leading those who follow it earnestly to "salvation," many Muslims, hardened by attacks against them by both Christian missionaries and secularists, have begun to propagate, often with fanaticism, the idea that all non-Muslims are *kāfir* in the theological (and not metaphorical) sense and condemned to eternal damnation. Although much of the hardening of this attitude is a reaction to blatant attacks against Islam, there is no doubt that the result has been to eclipse to some extent the universalist perspective of Islam itself in certain circles concerning the question who is saved, to which traditional Islam and especially Sufism have always answered those who follow their religion faithfully, if it be an authentic revealed religion which would certainly include Christianity.

In the current dialogue between Christianity and Islam there are of course many groups on both sides with differing degrees of universality of perspective. But whatever the perspective of the two sides might be, it is important to bring out the question of who is saved to the center of the stages of dialogue and discuss it rigorously. It is not only difficult but futile to carry out religious dialogue religiously between one party which considers itself as future inhabitants of paradise and its opponent party which the first party considers as occupiers of hell. There are groups on both sides who hold such views openly but then they do not usually carry out religious dialogue. For those who do so, however, it is imperative to avoid falling into provincialism at the very moment in their history when it is most essential to re-assert the universality of perspective which is stated so clearly for Muslims in the Qurʾān and is inherent in the Islamic tradition. This universalism is in fact in the deepest sense the very *raison d'être* of Islam.

A third set of theological questions concerns sacred law. In the modern world law is seen as being completely distinct from theology while in Islam law, being seen essentially as Divine Law, is not only related to what in the West is called theology but plays the same central role in

Islam as does theology in Christianity. It is, therefore, appropriate to discuss the Islamic and Christian attitudes toward divine and secular law in this section dealing with theological issues.

Both Muslims and Christians contrive in their dialogues, and especially in more popular discourse on the mass media, to criticize the other side on the basis of their understanding of divine and secular law. The idea of "God's laws" is certainly of much importance in Christianity even in this secular age as seen in the constant recurrence of its discussion on such current issues as the abortion debate. And yet law is seen in the West as primarily secular law and historically the Christian churches have easily accepted the difference between God's laws which are moral and spiritual and secular laws which govern the everyday life of people. In fact laws are supposed nowadays to change according to the will of the people and also according to the whims of that strange new deity "the times" which in the mind of so many who speak of the "spirit of the times" or the *Zeitgeist* has come to replace in many ways the function of the *heilige Geist* or Holy Ghost.

The Islamic view of the Divine Law or al-Shari'a is totally different.<sup>6</sup> Rooted in the immutable sources of the Qur'an and Hadith, this Law possesses a trunk, which has remained firm and steadfast throughout the ages, and branches which have grown according to different temporal conditions. In this perspective the Divine Law molds society and not society the Divine Law. And this Law is no more outdated because "it belongs to seventh century Arabia," than the Sermon on the Mount would be outdated because it was pronounced two thousand years ago in Palestine.

In Muslim-Christian debates, the Muslims have shared with Christians in their lack of comprehension of the view of the other side concerning law, but most of the pressure has come from the Christian side. Few Christians sympathize with Muslims who wish to return to the laws of their religion which were forcefully changed during the colonial period, while in general Muslims have been more sympathetic to Christians who wish to continue to live according to their traditional moral laws in a hedonistic society. Strangely enough, such Christians, many of whom are Evangelicals and new born Christians, are those most opposed to Islam and the attempt of Muslims to live according to their religious laws as do such Christians themselves. In this domain traditional Jews, who possess a Divine Law rooted in the Bible, have a similar conception of Divine Law as do Muslims and could perhaps one day play a greater role in clarifying this issue in the West for both themselves and Muslims.

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<sup>6</sup> We have explained these differences in our *Ideals and Realities of Islam* (London: Harper/Collins, 1994), chapter IV, 93-120.

In any case a major obstacle to Muslim-Christian understanding is the concept of Divine Law versus secular law which also involves the whole idea of a religious versus civil society as well as religious and secular political authority. Without the development of mutual respect of the two sides for each other in the understanding of Divine Law in relation to secular law, genuine respect for each other's perspective and the reaching of accord on certain basic issues will not be possible.

This question is of course clearly related to the relation between spiritual and temporal authority. There are still too many Christians who find fault in Islam because its founder was also the ruler of a human community and because Islam has never separated religion from politics. There are also many Muslims who believe that Christ by giving unto Caesar what is Caesar's made religion an otherworldly affair and marginalized the significance of religion in human life leading finally to the secularization of the West. Yet, at the same time many Muslims also claim that the separation of Christianity from politics in the West is only outward and that there are hidden links between the two which are revealed from time to time as in 1992 through the type of reaction shown to the tragedy of the massacre of Muslims by Christian Serbs by supposedly secularized Western governments devoted to human rights.

There is no way for either Islam or Christianity to impose its views on law on the other, although the modern West in distinction from Christianity is seeking to impose its views of politics in relation to religion upon the whole world and to privatize and "ghettoize" religion—to use the expression of a Catholic sociologist—globally as one sees in the West. For Muslims and Christians there can be no triumphalism if one is seeking mutual understanding. Each side must understand that the figures of both Christ and the Prophet, one of whom refrained from all matters of the world and the other immersed himself in it in order to transform it, were divine possibilities that had to be realized and were therefore realized by God and that both exemplars do in fact come from Him leading to two different perspectives on the relation between spiritual and temporal authority. Furthermore, each side must learn to respect the perspective of the other side beyond all transient opportunism. Each side must also be able to distinguish between the principles involved and contingencies which of necessity partake of the imperfections belonging to the domain of political action.

Finally among theological issues one must mention the fact that strangely enough with the approach of the millennium, one of the theological issues where Christianity and Islam possess more common views and accord than any other two religions, that is eschatology, has also become a major point of contention between certain strands of Christianity and Islam. Both Islam and Christianity believe in an end to human history

marked by divine intervention which for both religions involves Christ and his return. Moreover, the theater for the final events leading to the end of this world is identified by both religions with Jerusalem. Many theological dialogues of the past few decades have brought out these similarities, which, however, are not still well known by most ordinary Christians in the West.

What is paradoxical, however, is that with the approach of the millennium certain Christian groups, identified by some scholars as Christian Zionists, have adopted a virulent anti-Islamic attitude especially as far as the destiny of Jerusalem is concerned and highly support the complete Jewish domination of the city not because of their love for Judaism—for they believe that later the Jews will become Christians—but to carry out what they believe to be stages of human action necessary to prepare for the return of Christ. While some leaders of these groups openly take on an anti-Islamic stance in the Israeli-Palestinian question, others go further and openly identify Islam with the force of the anti-Christ. One hardly needs to emphasize how damaging are the virulent and crazed views of such groups to Muslim-Christian understanding and how unfortunate it is that eschatological doctrines of the two religions, which should constitute one of the main bases of accord between the two religions, should be used by certain Christian groups to ferment hatred against Islam on every level from the spiritual to the political.

### **Freedom of Worship**

During the last few years many Christian groups in the West have complained about the lack of the freedom of worship for Christians in the Islamic world while there is freedom for Muslims to worship in the West. Certain have argued that there should be strict reciprocity and that the West should also curtail the freedom of worship of Muslims in the West accordingly.<sup>7</sup> This issue has been repeated during the past few years especially in Great Britain and America but also in Germany, creating, on the basis of the lack of knowledge sometimes combined with malice, a major obstacle to Muslim-Christian understanding.

To clarify the issue, it is necessary to bring out clearly the principles as well as the facts involved. First of all historically, there was always

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<sup>7</sup> A case in point is that in 1996 in the debate at Oxford, England, to build a new edifice for the Center of Islamic Studies, some wrote in a local paper that Oxford should not allow minarets amidst the Church spirals of Oxford (in fact the edifice is not a mosque and does not have a minaret) because no churches are allowed in the Islamic world. An Englishman soon reminded the readers of the newspaper in question of what the sky lines of cities like Cairo or Beirut, combining minarets and spirals, really look like.

greater right of worship for Christians in the Islamic world than for Muslims in the Christian world as can be seen in the destiny of Christians in the Islamic world and Muslims in Spain, Portugal, Sicily and many other regions during and at the end of the Middle Ages when the West was a veritable Christian civilization. All one has to do is to compare the fortunes of Christians and Muslims in the two peninsulas, namely Asia Minor and Iberia, which exchanged hands between the followers of the two religions during the fifteenth century. Today, even after five centuries of the rise of secularism in the West, there are more Christian churches in present day Iran alone than there are mosques in all of Western Europe. Despite sad exceptions and the fact that the life of religious minorities was not ideal in all Islamic societies (or for that matter other societies), Muslims have in general guaranteed the freedom of worship of Jews and Christians under their rule through the ages as a result of which some of the most ancient forms of the rites and practices of these religions have survived within the Islamic world to this day, including the Aramaic mass, long after they were lost elsewhere.

Furthermore, in general the freedom of the practice of religion in the West is due not so much to Christianity—although there are notable exceptions to this assertion—but to the curtailment of the power of Christianity by secularism and secularist ideas of civil liberties and rights which grew out of the American and French Revolutions.<sup>8</sup> While the Puritans ruled in New England on the basis of a Christian theocracy, there was certainly no freedom of worship for the Native Americans, while countless natives were killed by Catholic Spaniards and Portuguese in Central and South America precisely on the pretext that they were “savages” and not Christian, not to speak of giving them the right and freedom of worship. Nor was this attitude confined to the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. In later periods many instances concerning the right of Muslims to worship freely in Europe came up, sometimes defended by European governments for political reasons while being opposed by local church authorities. It is well known how long it took to finally receive permission to construct a mosque in Rome where tens of thousands of Muslims reside and what battles are being fought right now in the suburbs of Washington to build a new campus for an Islamic school, the opposition coming not from ordinary citizens most of whom are in accord with the plan, but from a few Christian ministers who keep preaching their opposition although there are also many Christians who have supported the plan for the new campus of the school.

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<sup>8</sup> By this assertion we do not mean in any way to defend secularism or praise its curtailing the power of Christianity in the West but only to state a historical fact.

When one speaks of the freedom of worship in the Islamic world and the West in Muslim-Christian and not only political terms, one must face the issue with honesty and objectivity. In most of the Islamic world today there is as much freedom of worship for Christians as there is freedom of worship for Muslims in the West not to speak of the much greater influence that minority Christians exercise on Muslim authorities in *Dār al-Islām*, than vice-versa. Yet, the intensity of attachment to the teachings of the religion, performance of rites, belief in the theological tenets of the faith and similar factors for Muslims today must be compared with the Europe of 1400 and not of the present day. It is not only ten percent of Muslim Egyptians, Syrians or Persians who perform their daily prayers and attend mosques as is the case of the population of so many Western countries and especially Europe as far as church attendance is concerned. The freedom of worship for Christians in the Islamic world must be understood in light of this basic reality and the realization that this freedom does not come from the imposition of secularism in the Islamic world, as it has done in the West, but from Islam itself.

And that is why precisely when discussing the question of the freedom of worship certain religious factors enter into play which are not identical between Islam and Christianity but which need to be taken absolutely into consideration. Christianity did not arise in Europe but came from Palestine and does not have a "holy land," a term used in the Qur'ān and not the Bible, in the same way that do Islam and Judaism. Likewise, the spaces of a Christian church have a different function than do the spaces of a mosque or a Hindu Temple. A Muslim or a Hindu could walk into St. Peter's Basilica without any offense to Christians except perhaps at the time of mass, whereas neither a Christian nor a Muslim may go into a Hindu temple without causing serious offense to Hindus. As for Muslim places of worship, some can be visited like churches when it is not the time of prayers, while others usually adjacent to tombs of saints are closed to non-Muslims. Respect among religions requires not to search for or impose uniformity but to respect such differences and more generally the different ways in which the sacred manifests itself in various religious universes.

Now, within the Islamic world there is an area designated according to Muslim belief by God Himself through the Prophet as a holy precinct (*ḥaram*) encompassing the area of Makkah and its environs up to Madinah. Only Muslims are allowed within this area and Christians should not complain that since they allow Muslims to visit the Vatican, then why they are not afforded equal access on the basis of strict reciprocity. How the sacred manifests itself in each religion is dependent upon the Divine Will for those who accept the authenticity of that religion. In Islam the holy area of Makkah and Madinah possesses this unique feature as do

certain sanctuaries such as those of Moulay Idrīs in Fez, Ra's al-Ḥusayn in Cairo, the tomb of 'Alī in Najaf, the mausoleum of 'Alī al-Riḍā , the eighth Shī'ite Imam, in Mashhad, etc. In principle outside such areas, there should be freedom of worship in the rest of the Islamic world for the "People of the Book" which includes Christians, provided such a freedom is not combined with political coercion and cultural domination.

When we look at the situation in the Islamic world today, we find that in the vast majority of Islamic countries from Indonesia and Malaysia, to Bangladesh and Pakistan, to Iran and Iraq, to Turkey to Black Africa and of course nearly all the Arab countries, with the exception of Arabia (and certain areas of the Sudan), Christians under Muslim rule possess freedom of worship. If here and there one finds occasional attacks against Christians, it is almost always based not on religious issues but on political and economic factors derived from the fact that local Christians have often sided with Western ruling powers against the Muslim populations in the past two centuries and today, although a minority, they enjoy much more economic and political power than their numbers would warrant.

There is also a cultural element to consider in the case of recent converts in the hands of Western missionaries. In contrast to traditional Christian elements such as the Orthodox of Syria, Lebanon and Jordan who identify themselves completely with the Arabic culture of the societies in which they live, many new converts identify themselves culturally almost completely with the West, causing thereby natural resentment similar to some extent to the resentment of Christians in small English villages toward Indians and Pakistanis trying to pursue life patterns which are exotic and strange to the scene although even in this comparison there is a major difference in the dynamics of power. The power of India and Pakistan in the West can hardly be compared with that of America and Europe in the Subcontinent. Despite such occasional frictions, however, the freedom of worship remains a reality for the vast majority of Christians in the Islamic world and the recent moves in America to legislate for the protection of minorities (in reality Christian) should apply certainly as much to Muslim minorities in many lands such as China as it does to the Christians in that country and elsewhere.

Besides Islamic countries in which there is nearly complete freedom of worship for Christians, there is a second category of countries where as a result of factors already mentioned, as well as more particular local forces, some curtailment of this freedom has taken place in the past few years. A case in point is Egypt where for centuries the 10% Coptic population lived in remarkable peace with the 90% Muslim majority but where during the past few years there have been attacks against certain churches and Coptic villages. It must be known, however, that such attacks have been strongly condemned by the highest Islamic authorities of the country and

not only by the government. While the situation is deplorable, one that needs to be corrected as soon as possible, it must also be realized that there are also complicated political and economic issues involved and that in any case this phenomenon should not be a source of contention between Christianity and Islam in their mutual dialogue for better understanding any more than should the torching and burning of several mosques in America during the past decade.

Another category of countries are those in which the lack of freedom of worship has been raised specifically as an issue by Christian groups in the West, chief among them being the Sudan and Saudi Arabia. From what has been said already it should be clear that the case of these two countries is in fact very different. In the Sudan there are of course many Christians with close contact with missionary groups from the West and receiving political and even military support from them, while a war goes on which is far from being between Islam and Christianity although there is rivalry between the two religions in seeking to woo to their ideas followers of the African religions who still survive within the Sudan. There is also the question of material help given to missionaries with wide range political ramifications. All of those factors have naturally affected the question of the freedom of worship in certain areas marred by tragic wars and battles. To keep bringing up the case of the Sudan (or even Saudi Arabia) in the West as proof of lack of freedom of worship in the whole of the Islamic world is to say the least disingenuous and hardly contributes to better relations between the two religions. One wonders how the West would react if a major Muslim leader would visit a Western country's Muslims without permission of that country's political authorities. Still lingering colonial struggles must be taken exactly for what they are and not made use of religiously at least by those seeking earnestly rapprochement between the two religions.

As for Saudi Arabia, as already stated, its heartland at least presents a special case related to the structure of the Islamic religion which must be respected accordingly and which could not be altered by Muslims under any conditions, whether they be Saudi or non-Saudi. The fact that Saudi culture sees the whole of the domain under its jurisdiction under the same light is another matter based upon strong historical traditions which it is for the people of that country to evaluate and act upon. The argument that since there are no churches in Saudi Arabia, therefore, one should not allow the Saudis to build a mosque in the West, is totally erroneous. It is as if Muslims were to say that since the Vatican does not allow mosques in Vatican City, there should be no Catholic churches allowed in the Islamic world.

Freedom of worship also involves the question of conversion and apostasy. Christian missionaries often criticize Muslims for branding a Muslim

who converts to Christianity as an apostate (*murtadd*) whose punishment is death according to the dictates of the Sharī'a. First of all let it be said that if such a promulgation had been carried out strictly historically and especially in modern times, there would not have been all those Pakistani, Bangladeshi or Black African Christians of Islamic origin who are presently living as Christians in the Islamic world. Secondly, the Sharī'a injunction against apostasy was in the context of the presence of the Islamic state in which turning away from Islam implied not only a religious act but also treason against the state.

Present day conditions necessitate a re-thinking by Muslims of this whole issue in light of the immutable principles of the Sharī'a, which must now be applied to situations where the question of treason to the state, also punishable by death in many Western countries to this day, does not apply. There is in fact a movement afoot among traditional authorities in Islamic Law to rethink and reconsider the status of Muslim conversion to another religion in the context of the present day situation. The problem has not been as yet solved in a final manner but the process of addressing it has begun in Egypt, Iran and elsewhere. The situation is of course still difficult in that the political dimension of the issue has not at all disappeared as can be seen by the strong concern of Western circles for the "human rights" of let us say Pakistani Christians even when they calumnize the Prophet of Islam. This is done under the banner of the defence of free speech while the same circles show little concern for the rights of free speech of the Muslim citizens of the same countries as long as their governments are pro-Western.

In any case in this whole debate about the freedom of worship, the points discussed briefly here must be kept in mind by both Muslims and Christians and one should constantly remember the actual realities on the ground including the vast number of Christian churches which exist throughout the Islamic world. One should also remain aware of the fact that while Muslims in the West enjoy economic and political power way below what their numbers would warrant, in the Islamic world and also many African countries, where the governments are still supported by Western powers, exactly the reverse is true. Furthermore, as we shall see shortly, missionary activity is often combined with cultural and political domination by alien forces so that reactions against such phenomena must not be confused with the curtailing of the freedom of the right of worship.

### **Missionary Activity**

Needless to say, one of the most contentious issues in the dialogue between Islam and Christianity is missionary activity. Both Christianity and Islam envisage themselves to have a global mission and are therefore rivals in many areas of the world, but at this moment of history there is

such disparity of power and wealth between the two sides, that the situation cannot but lead to serious contention and even conflict at least in certain areas. For centuries there was the rivalry of the crescent and the cross especially in the Mediterranean world. Each side in addition to its religious message possessed its own military might and distinct culture. But even across battlefields commerce continued and ideas were exchanged. The Christians came to the Islamic world with the Bible in their hand and if we put aside the Crusades many of them sought to practice the charity and poverty of Christ. Then during the colonial period, there arrived Western powers supporting the missionaries and the Bible on the one hand and wielding the sword on the other. Lest one forgets, during the colonial period missionaries were almost always supported by the military power of the West, even of governments such as that of France which was persecuting Catholics within its own border. This phase was in time followed by educational and medical crusades which had as its consequence the destruction of the unity and homogeneity of Islamic civilization. Even when some Christian missionary schools in the Islamic world were secularized, they remained major centers of missionary activity although now for secular humanism. Many missionaries were in fact happy to destroy the faith of their Muslim students even if this did not lead to their becoming Christian. It is not accidental that some of the most virulent anti-Western nationalists in the Islamic world learned their secular nationalism in such missionary schools.

During the past few decades Christian missionary activity has increased but now often wed to current Western consumerism and commercialism as far removed from the poverty preached by Christ or St. Francis of Assisi as possible. It is through the lure of worldly things combined with a diluted form of Christianity that many are wooed away from Islam. With all the syringes, libraries, employment advantages and now wealth on the one side and the lack of them on the other, the level playing field of the earlier centuries has been destroyed causing often anger and reactions to the much wealthier Christians on behalf of the majority Muslims, especially in times of economic difficulty as can be seen in the recent events of Indonesia.

It is of the utmost importance to discuss in all honesty this question of missionary activity from the perspective of the two sides. Each must of necessity allow the freedom of being witness to its faith in the world dominated by the other. But one must also deal with other questions resulting from the earlier close association between missionary activity and colonialism and what some have called "cultural imperialism." Although Christianity no longer possesses the dominant position it held once upon a time in the West and perhaps needs to send missions to re-Christianize the West itself, still Christians would protest strongly if Muslim missionaries

had private airfields in Western countries and if Christians were to see that the children of most of their social, political and intellectual elites went to Islamic schools supported financially not by local Muslims but by foreign Muslim governments.

In this sensitive issue there is also the looming presence of modern Western culture, which, although secular in most of its basic features, has been espoused during the past few centuries by Western Christianity as if it were Christian.<sup>9</sup> This predominantly anti-religious culture has therefore been propagated among Muslims by many Christians as if it were part of the Christian message. When it comes to the consideration of creating a veritable Christian presence among Muslims in modern times such figures as Père de Foucault and Louis Massignon have been truly exceptional. Indeed, the major obstacles set on the road to Christian Muslim understanding cannot be removed without taking into full consideration the presence of what we have had the occasion to call the "silent third partner" in the current Muslim-Christian dialogue, namely, modernism in all its modes and ramifications.

### Differing Attitudes Towards Modernism

It is strange that despite countless books and articles that have been written concerning theological modernism in Christianity on the one hand and Islam and modernism on the other, in depth little attention has been paid until now to the role of modernism, that "silent third partner" in all its ramifications in the Muslim-Christian dialogue.<sup>10</sup> There are those in the Christian camp who complain why Islam does not modernize along the lines of Christianity and evaluate contemporary Islam accordingly. In fact most Western studies on Islam are completely determined by this unstated prejudice that modernism is a positive force to be taken seriously not as an adversary but as source of emulation, with the result that Islamic realities are judged and evaluated by the degree to which they accommodate modernism with little attention paid to what modernism has done to Christianity and its role in Western societies during the past few centuries. Every Muslim who deviates from Islamic orthodoxy, con-

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<sup>9</sup> There are now some signs of change in this attitude in certain Christian circles, both Protestant and Catholic, which are trying to present Christianity to the non-Western world independent of the particular embellishments of Western civilization.

<sup>10</sup> By modernism we do not mean what is simply contemporary, but a particular worldview which places man rather than God at the center of things and which arose in the West during the European Renaissance, spreading from the eighteenth century onward to other parts of the globe. R. Guénon, *The Crisis of the Modern World*, trans. O. Osborne (Ghent, NY: Sophia Perennis et Universalis, 1996); also W.N. Perry, *Challenges to a Secular Society* (Oakton, VA: The Foundation for Traditional Studies, 1996).

sidered in its widest and most universal sense, is immediately aggrandized in Western circles as the next possible Martin Luther and those who do not depart from the traditional norms are usually neglected, no matter how profound their thought, by Western scholars who are usually trained to study change rather than permanence and to bestow the epithet of "significant" only to what changes and not to what reasserts the permanent and the enduring.

On the Muslim side, serious Muslim thinkers are puzzled why Western Christian theology allows itself to be so seriously affected by passing philosophical trends and by the scientism which has now staked its claim as a rival "religion" in the modern world. Comparing Christianity to Islam, Muslims are at a loss to explain why every few decades the very bases of Christian theology seem to undergo major changes if not in all circles, at least in the "liberal" strands of Christianity which are the very elements usually carrying out dialogue with Islam.<sup>11</sup> If on the Christian side it has been the ecumenists who are usually "liberal" and modernists often in confrontation with their own co-religionists, on the Islamic side no such similar "ecumenism" equated with modernism exists. Putting a few modernized scholars aside, most of those interested in dialogue with Christianity on the Islamic side have relied upon what one might call "Qur'anic ecumenism" and the long tradition of Sufism on the one hand and the Shari'a on the other. If they have met opposition from their co-religionists, it has been from those Muslims who, influenced by so-called current reformism, refuse to heed the import of the universalist message of the Qur'an. The debate has therefore been set under very different terms in the two contemporary worlds of Islam and Christianity.

A Christian seeking to understand the Islamic view of the nature of God, prophecy, eschatology, ritual, etc. may wish to refer to different schools of interpretation, Sunni, Shi'ite, Sufi, Ash'ari and the like, but he can rest assured that if he selects any of these strands in the rich tapestry of Islamic thought, he will not have to contend with the problem of changing his very understanding of these principles of the religion from century to century, as a Muslim would have to contend with sea changes from a St. Thomas to a modern Catholic theologian or a Jonathan Edwards to a modern Protestant preacher. There is nothing in Islam to compare with

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<sup>11</sup> It is of significance that there has been much less dialogue between Islam and those elements of Christianity which have been theologically much more conservative such as traditional Catholicism, conservative Protestantism and Orthodoxy than with the more "liberal" segments of the Christian community. In the last few years, however, an important number of dialogues have taken place between both Russian and Greek Orthodoxy and Islam and continue to do so. These exchanges are bound to be of great significance for Christian and Muslim dialogue in general, not only politically but also theologically, given the orthodox nature of both sides.

innovations in the understanding of God from the traditional manner that Catholic and Protestant theology have understood Him and certain current views of the Divinity in evolutionary theology à la Teilhard de Chardin or process theology à la John Cobb via Alfred North Whitehead.<sup>12</sup>

Every religion has of course its own inner dynamic and specific history. However, in carrying out religious dialogue between two religions, it must be understood clearly how elements of change drawn from the secular realm have influenced or continue to influence one or both sides. If after long discussions Muslims and Christians come to a common understanding concerning, let us say, the meaning of the Trinity or the nature of revelation, this understanding will be of little avail if the views of one side change subsequently in a serious fashion. For the Muslim Allāh still sits on His Throne (*al-ʿarsh*) and rules the universe and he can hardly understand why after two thousand years Christians are now in need of debating God's gender along with His immutability and perfection and why there is change in basic theological views every few years.

For several centuries Western Christianity has allied itself with modern Western civilization with its essentially secularist outlook based on secular humanism, rationalism, empiricism, nationalism, evolutionism, scientism and skepticism. It has also for the most part refused to ally itself with other religions still breathing within a sacred universe, preferring often an anti-religious Western secularist ally to a non-Christian but religious one. This position has been of course a choice made by Western Christianity, or at least much of it, and it cannot be the concern of Islam or any other religion. But its consequences must be taken seriously into consideration if there is to be any dialogue in depth beyond platitudes and diplomatic gestures,

The understanding of how the "kingdom of man" came to replace the "kingdom of God"<sup>13</sup> in the West is a matter of the greatest import for all future religious dialogue between Islam and the West. Muslims are in general unaware of the deeper meaning of modernism and the dynamics which transformed medieval Christian civilization, which like Islam was based on faith, to the modern and now post-modern world. Many of the more traditional Islamic thinkers in carrying out debates with Christian theologians think and act as if they were facing St. Bonaventure, St. Thomas or Nicholas of Cusa, and despite two centuries of domination by the modern West still suffer from the lack of an in depth understanding of modernism.

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<sup>12</sup> For the whole question of change and permanence in the traditional and modern context see S.H. Nasr, *Knowledge and the Sacred*, 221ff.

<sup>13</sup> See T. Lindbom, *The Tares and the Good Grain*, trans. A. Moore (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1988).

In order to remove this obstacle in dialogue, it is essential to take full cognizance of the third apparently "silent partner" and to realize that in fact this partner, although its voice seems to go unrecognized, is far from being silent and in fact wields pervasive influence. What is needed is to have both sides of the dialogue recognize fully the significance of the presence of modernism in current religious dialogue and to understand fully how modernism affects this dialogue on various levels from the purely theological, to the social and political, to the scientific and technological. What is at stake here is not only making possible better understanding between the two religions, but also to enable each side to understand how and why the forces of modernism have affected or not affected the other side. The future of the religious history of the world will of course depend on the attitude of various religions toward the banner of forces and ideas unfurled in the world by modernism in the light of their own sacred and immutable principles and teachings. One cannot be sure that this attitude will be the same among Christianity and non-Christian religions and certainly until now at least it has not been the same for Western Christianity in comparison with all other non-Christian religions and even Orthodox Christianity, Judaism in its Western manifestation being an exception.

What is certain, however, is that a serious intellectual effort is necessary to bring out the impact on religious dialogue of modernist and now post-modernist ideas concerning the nature the Divine and of man, of intelligence and knowledge, of the meaning of life, of the structure and origin of the universe and many other fundamental issues, which are also of central concern to all religion and therefore cannot but affect Muslim-Christian dialogue. This effort must also pay attention to the very different way in which these ideas, many of which issued from the European Enlightenment and claimed for themselves universal application, have influenced Christianity on the one hand and Islam on the other. If one might use the metaphor of a happy marriage in the Christian sense as the goal of serious religious dialogue between Christianity and Islam, it might be said that here even more than in ordinary human life a *ménage à trois* is impossible and religiously unacceptable. Nor can its presence be accepted in a marriage seen through Islamic eyes since the third element, being of a secularist nature, does not even belong to a religious universe and cannot participate in a religious marriage. Rather, the third partner must be recognized for what it is and not allowed to dictate relations between Islam and Christianity which, with the presence of this "silent partner", will always remain shaky and unstable on the theological level although useful accommodations can always be made on the practical, social and political levels.

### Concluding Comments

The obstacles mentioned above must not be considered to be insurmountable. They are discussed here not to cause discouragement but to present the reality of the present situation beyond political niceties and diplomatic decorum. Problems must first be stated in honesty before they can be solved. We believe, in fact, that with good will, love for truth and charity, rather than passion, fanaticism and love for power, most of these obstacles can be overcome. What is needed is to understand and accept first of all the universal metaphysics and perennial wisdom in light of which it is possible at least for the few who are universalists to assert the universality of the Truth while accepting each revelation of the Truth as a unique revelation to be deeply respected as being the result of God's Will and reflecting some aspects of His Wisdom. Then it is necessary to remember the following verses from Islamic and Christian sources: "What is the life of this world but play and amusement? But best is the home in the other world." (S.6:32) and "But seek first the Kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all these things shall be added to you." (Matthew 6. 33) It is therefore a sin in the theological sense of the term to put worldly expediency before the basic goal of religion which is to live according to God's Will and die in the state of grace, to use a Christian term. There is also the need, mostly on behalf of Christianity in whose domain modernism was first born and nurtured, but also by the modernized Muslims, to realize that there is no way to make peace between Islam and Christianity on the one hand and secular and agnostic humanism on the other. Fire and water cannot be harmonized together.

As the challenges of the modern world become ever more pervasive and overwhelming, and as unprecedented crises ranging from the destruction of the natural environment to the total desecration of life by technological penetration into the very structures of the web of life threaten to an ever greater degree the religious conception of life, Christians and Muslims will discover to an ever greater degree that they have much more in common with each other than they have differences. Confrontation between the two religions still persists in lands as far apart as Indonesia, the Sudan, Albania and Nigeria, but these rivalries and confrontations can easily be overcome through the realization of the much greater danger to both religions of the globalization of an avid consumerism which is devouring to an even greater degree the souls of men and women and destroying with incredible rapidity the very fiber of life upon which human existence here on earth depends. Let us hope that the problems and obstacles mentioned here can be overcome by turning to the spiritual, intellectual and ethical teachings of both traditions and through casting one's gaze upon the azure heaven, the luminous symbol of the Divine Emphy-

rean, from which both religions have descended with the same task of guiding their followers back to their original paradisaal abode.

In Divine Love there is no difference between the monastery  
and the tavern of ruins,<sup>14</sup>

Wherever it may be, there is manifested the light of the  
Face of the Friend (Ḥāfiẓ).

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<sup>14</sup> "Tavern of Ruin" or *Aharābāi* is the symbol of the Sufi center in classical Persian poetry.