

New Perspectives For A Jewish-Christian-Muslim Dialogue

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I have been involved in interreligious dialogue, especially Muslim-Christian dialogue, for more than twenty years. During this time I have attended many meetings, conferences, and seminars; given several lectures and courses; and written books and articles dealing more or less with the cultural and scientific conditions of a modern, critical view of the religious legacies of these three monotheistic communities.

The ongoing political struggle between several Muslim societies and Western societies, the tragic ongoing conflict between "Jews" and "Arabs" (actually Israelis and Palestinians), the presence in European societies of important Muslim minorities-all generate more and more obstacles, misunderstandings, and misrepresentations that feed the social "imagination" of every nation or community against the "Others." Instead of seeing new possibilities opening up for learning, integrating, and revising old prejudices, we too often witness violent mass-media campaigns, against "Islamic radicalism," "Islamic fundamentalism," and "Islamic violence and terrorism." Almost no newspaper or journalist speaks of liberal Islam, although there are liberal Muslim intellectuals in each of their countries who write, teach, and participate in the heated debates on current issues. Leonard Binder seems to be about the only scholar who has published a book with such a title as *Islamic Liberalism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988).

This situation is not favorable to a fruitful dialogue among the three monotheistic religions. The fact is that most competent theologians themselves are not intellectually prepared to engage in and to follow up an inquiry on common theological issues on a new scientific basis. On the contrary, from my own experience I can point to the frequent open opposition of official Christian theologians who consider my attempt to initiate a critical evaluation of Islamic reasons as a dangerous threat to Christian theological reason. The use of the human and social-scientific methodologies is rejected as irrelevant to a "spiritual" perspective that is central in the "study" of religions; it "reduces" the "faith" to an ordinary object, of knowledge.

This kind of debate is well known as has been recurrent since the Middle Ages when philosophers and theologians struggled over "truth" by opposing "faith" and "reason." It is vital that we not fall again into this wrongheaded scholastic debate. Even though in fact many theologians, and also social scientists, are still prisoners of the old repeated categories, themes, or concepts, we must, nevertheless, get beyond their dogmatic statements and contradictions. This can only be done by training in the new scholarship in the context of the new intellectual-spiritual framework of thinking, writing, evaluating, and knowing-approaching the ultimate question of *meaning*.

Nevertheless, I must again stress the *psychological* obstacle that dominates most participants in the current religious dialogue. Members of each community feel obliged to stand up against the others-not to enter into the other' perspectives, but to protect, proclaim, and ascertain the specific "values" or unsurpassable "authenticity" or their own religion. Theological references are then

used as *cultural systems for mutual exclusion*, never as tools to cross the traditional boundaries and to practice *new* religious thinking.

The most despairing fact is that scholarship-even in the departments of religion, history, anthropology, or sociology in secular (public or private) universities-most frequently does not help us to move toward this new religious thinking. Religions are still taught separately with very few, weak interdisciplinary exchanges. More than that, Islam is not present as a case study in the majority of the departments mentioned. When and where Islam is taught, it is most often relegated to departments of "Near Eastern Studies," or to a "Middle Eastern Center" if it is taught in a department of religion. There is no opportunity to develop a common approach and a significant program for the three "revealed religions," or "religions of the book." Again, each religion is taught apart from the others. No one is exposed to the questions-eventually the criticisms-of the two others. Even my experience at the Religion Department of Temple University for two years (1988-1990) confirms this situation totally, although my colleagues, as individuals, are totally open to the comparative perspectives I am mentioning.

Scholars involved in the study of any religion can test, and confirm, my assertion through their experience. There are only two kinds of institutions where religion is taken as an object of study: First are theological seminaries or institutes (such as Princeton Theological Seminary or the Institute Catholique in Paris), where all religions are considered from the viewpoint of *Religio vera* (with mutual exclusion). Second are departments in secular universities with the usual divisions or distinctions among,

(a) primal, archaic societies, with primal religions studied by "ethnographers";

(b) premodern, traditional societies with conservative, rigid, fundamentalist religions (mostly Muslim societies);

(c) modern, developed societies, where Christianity is the dominant religion, strongly committed to the trend of modernization. The Euro-American model of learning, thinking, and production of culture and civilization is equated to Christianity (especially the Protestant churches promoted by Max Weber to the historical role in the generation of capitalism, liberal philosophy, and the underlying political and economic system of the "West"). These divisions and categories have a powerful impact on teaching and scholarship. This points up the hierarchical relationship between *political* reason and so-called *scientific* reason, as far as the study of religions is concerned. (I leave out of this overview the case of technological and scientific reason in the hard sciences.)

During the colonial period, from 1800 to 1960, Christianity shared the supremacy of capitalist knowledge and power in undertaking a conversion of primitive people chained to "wrong" religions. In the present period of "decolonization" or liberation, Christianity still has the historical privilege of being the religion of highly developed societies. It has participated in secularizing thought and situations to such an extent that Christians accept being, sociologically, a minority among atheists and secularized religious citizens. The status of religion is strongly questioned in societies such as France and even Italy; the debate between Christianity and "modernity" or secularism does not include other religions, especially Islam and Judaism, that are present everywhere in European societies. This shows how societies that are deeply concerned with scientific knowledge and technology can remain closed, even hostile, to "values" and "cultures" considered alien, disturbing, primitive, or uncivilized. It is amazing how these "modern," "free," "egalitarian" societies are reluctant to consider their prejudices, intellectual conservatism, xenophobia, and cultural narrowness-combined with an arrogant claim of superiority, true knowledge, and progress (certainly true in material civilization, which is not necessarily supported by a commonly shared intellectual modernity).

In this context where struggling ideologies are at work, it seems totally romantic, irrelevant, and useless to engage in debates between religions about traditional faiths, values, or dogmas. Positive and efficient initiatives should be taken in the field of education-primary and secondary

schools, universities, the mass media, nongovernmental organizations, and other private and public institutions-so as to promote a new teaching of history, *comparative* cultures, *comparative* religions, *comparative* philosophies and theologies, *comparative* literature and law.

History is still taught for *nationalist* purposes; it is a glorification of the nation or the community, not a critical analysis of all the historical forces at work in a large area disputed by several nations for their own interest. This approach would lead to a better understanding of the ideological role of all religion in the genesis of “nations” and nationalism. We know how this issue was central in the nineteenth century and still is today in Muslim and all third-world countries. It is not acceptable to teach religious “values” on one side and to let political leaders manipulate these “values” for imperialist purposes on the other. Although this situation is known at present, nothing is undertaken by the states or by the religious institutions to elucidate the relationships between “values” and political strategies; the programs of education are still largely desperately deficient concerning this huge, ongoing, and universal issue.

Comparative methodology is still largely absent in current teaching and scholarship. Here I would mention only one example to show how far we are from what I call new religious thinking. While revelation is claimed to be the common supreme reference for Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, each community speaks for its own (and “true”) conception of revelation, without any kind of distinction among the three levels of the concept:

(a) Revelation as the word of God, transcendent, infinite, unknown to us as a whole, only fragments of it having been revealed through prophets like Jesus; this level is well expressed in the Qur’an by such expressions as “the well preserved Table” (*al-lawh al-mahfuz*) or “the Archtype Book” (*Umm al-Kitab*).

(b) The historical manifestations of the work of God (level 1) through the Israelite prophets (in Hebrew), Jesus of Nazareth (in Aramaic), and Mohammed (in Arabic). Originally, this level was *oral*; it was memorized and transmitted orally during a long period before it was written down. In the case of the Qur’an the revelation lasted twenty years and was written down another twenty years after the death of the prophet. In the case of Jesus, it is interesting to note that the wording was in Aramaic, a Semitic language sharing all the cultural connotations of Semitic culture in the Middle East, while the Evangelists reported the teachings of Jesus in Greek, a fact that led to the decisive shift from a Semitic to a Greek-Mediterranean culture. Likewise, the later translation of the Hebrew Bible and the Gospels into Latin and other languages had immeasurable consequences on the emergence of new cultural *codes*, or new semiological systems-not effectively considered up to now by theologians or historians.

(c) The third level is the most influential in the history of the Book/book. Here, we raise new problems and open up a new space of intelligibility for the three religions; it is no longer a question of an *encounter* between the religions but, rather, a program for a common endeavor to reinterpret the totality of our religious and theological traditions. The third level means the revelation written down and preserved in what I call the *official closed canons*. This concept is extremely important; it refers to many *historical* facts depending on social and political agents, not on God. Let us elaborate it more clearly.

A *linguistic corpus* or canon is a body of texts collected in one or several volumes; in the case of the “holy” texts, we have a sacralized copy called *Byblos* (the Book) or *Mushaf* (the pages arranged together in a single copy) for the Qur’an. In Arabic, “Qur’an” refers at the same time to all three levels. (The Mu’tazilit school endeavored to distinguish the third level [*Mushaf*] from the first and even the second. They asserted the theory of God’s created speech, unfortunately

rejected by “orthodoxy,” which has been the prevailing conception since the eleventh century C.E.)

Who decided about the texts to be collected, the way to transcribe it when the alphabet in Hebrew or Arabic was still uncertain, especially for the vowels? Who decided that text A belonged to revelation and text B or C or D did not? Who fixed the number to texts to be included in the canon and then closed the canon so that no text could be added or suppressed and no word changed or read in a way different from the “original” form given when the canon was closed?

The Rabbis, the church Fathers, and the ‘*Ulama* (the Companions and the followers-*Sahaba and Tabi’un* for the Qur’an) made all these decisions; they are the official “authority” recognized in each “tradition.” Tradition, then, means a lengthy process with successive agents leading to a final result that for the three communities is commonly labeled the “Holy Scriptures” or the “Holy Book.” The lengthy process that led to the constitution of the official closed canons has been studied by philologists from the *historicist* perspective since the nineteenth century. ‘The German school is particularly known in this trend of “modern” scholarship: even the Qur’an was studied for the first time with this philological approach by German scholars-among whom Th. Noldeke has a prominent place.

This is not the place to mention the positive and negative aspects of the philological study of religious texts in general. More important and enlightening for the dialogue are two points that I wish to stress. First, modern linguistics and semiotics have developed a theory of *texts*. What are the roles of the “author” and the “reader”, and what is their interacting impact on the text? While these are the main questions raised in literary criticism, they have not yet been fully applied to sacred religious texts.

Second, the official closed canons are the common, large linguistic and cultural space in which revelation is approached, interpreted, and used in the three revealed religions. The theological status of revelation in each tradition does not and cannot affect the canon as a collection of texts insofar as these texts are read as *linguistic* theological commandments. Linguistic evidence should precede any theological speculation on revelation, not the other way around as we have done for so many centuries.

Since the witnesses of revelation have all disappeared, there is no possibility for later generations to have access to the “word of God” except through texts collected in the official closed canons. There is no point, then, to objecting to a linguistic, semiotic reading of the texts from the perspective of the differences among Christian, Jewish, and Islamic *theological* definitions of revelation. These definitions are legitimate in maintaining the living tradition of each community, but they cannot be used to justify the rejection of the linguistic evidence that may differ from, correct, or deny the dogmatic definitions generated by later mental projections of various beliefs on the original texts.

I have shown all this with the example of the Qur’an (cf. my *Lectures du Coran*¹ and *Critique de la Raison islamique*²). The methodology and the problematic, however, should be generalized to the other official closed canons to provide a common epistemological basis for the study of the societies of the Book/book-“*B*” referring to levels (1) and (2): “*b*” to level (3), including all the juridical and theological literature derived from the official closed canons through the special methods and postulates of medieval exegesis or philological procedures, or even the well-known technique of *Formgeschichte*.

The linguistic and semiotic reading of the official closed canons is enriched and enlarged by all the recent developments of political, cultural, and social anthropology. The new definitions of myth, rationality, and reason related to the concept of the “imagination” provided an open scientific framework that will deliver us from the reductionist interpretations of the sacred as it triumphed with the demythologization approach. Unfortunately, however, as I pointed out above, present scholarship-let alone the “managers of the sacred”-is frequently not acquainted with the

new trends in anthropology represented by Clifford Gertz, Claude Lévi-Strauss, J. Goody, E. Gellner, P. Bourdieu, James Boom, etc. The *ethos* of academic scholarship is still dominated by postulates proper to the Age of Enlightenment reason viewing religion as a negative influence on human societies and doomed to vanish with the triumph of science. A strong trend in secularism is linked to this view. New anthropology, on the contrary, reinterprets all rationalities produced throughout history without any attempt to declare one of them superior to the others. This has been done and still prevails with theological reason on one side and, on the other side, its most explicit enemy: positivist, historicist, scientific reason. Both, however, are criticized by a critical reason that uses several methods and is flexible enough to submit its own findings to the same critical tools and strategy.

This is, in very short, allusive terms, my proposal as a Muslim scholar-not to contribute, I repeat, to an encounter that would mean that we think and work within the framework of *I and we vs. you and them* but to the creation of new space of intelligibility and freedom. We need to be emancipated from inherited traditions not yet studied and interpreted with controlled methods and cognitive principles.

Muslims are currently accused of being closed-minded, integrists, fundamentalists, prisoners of dogmatic beliefs. Here is a liberal, modern, humanist, Muslim proposal. I await the response of Jews, Christians, and secularists to my invitation to engage our thoughts, our endeavors, and our history in the cause of peace, progress, emancipation, justice through knowledge, and shared spiritual values.