

# The Dialogical Relationship between Christianity and Islam

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It is sometimes easier to reflect with the aid of poetic metaphors, particularly when one has to tread the difficult space between two massive traditions. Where the conceptual finds the door solidly barred against all entry, the symbolic carves its way in. Where the theologian is confident within his boundaries, the poet takes the risk and leaps beyond. Rumi, the Persian Sufi poet, once said:

O for a friend to know the sign,  
And mingle all his soul with mine.

With the help of these two lines, let us reflect on the "friend," the "sign," and the mingling of "all his soul with mine." Is there any common sign between Christians and Muslims? Would they become friends? And would their souls mingle?

There are certain difficulties in the way. Dialogue is sometimes misunderstood by Muslims as a masked attempt at syncretism. The suspicion is not always without basis. The Muslim immediately becomes self-conscious of the differences that lie between Christianity and Islam. He often fails to notice the deep and vast changes the Christian faith, in its interpretation and expression, has been undergoing in almost every century. The notion of an evolving and expanding faith is somehow alien to the Muslim mind. It is however strange that evolution is often considered as betrayal and perversion of the original dogma. Herein lies, I suppose, that most serious disparity between the Christian and Muslim attitudes to questions of faith. Secondly, the political experience of Christianity, recently in the form of imperialism, hampers on both sides the openness and trust necessary for an informal encounter. Thirdly, the cultural experience of Christianity, particularly in the shape of science and technology, is usually looked upon as a threat to Islamic civilization. The Christian-Western influence is held responsible for secularization of culture and institutions. The intermingling of academic and religious traditions by Muslims is another aggravating factor. One often comes across an intriguing mixture of fantasy with fact, inquiry with apology. It appears that, more than the primary and fundamental differences in the dogmatic frame, the differences in historical experience and cultural development are responsible for incommunication and mistrust among Christians and Muslims.

But equally grave are certain features in the Christian situation. Many a complex issue owe their origin to the scientific traditions as well. The speech of religion is being determined after the model of the speech of science. The process of secularization has already taken command paving the way for the priority of "word of man" over "Word of God." Above all, the entire theory of communication on which most of the theologians and philosophers rely is a historicist theory through and through. We are told that the first revolution in communication was brought about by scientific invention and mechanical engineering, and the heroes of this revolution were Thomas Edison and Alexander Graham Bell. At the heels of this revolution came another, the consequence of the theory of cybernetics headed by Norbert Wiener and Dichter. It was the discovery of the unity of communication and control. All communication to the giant computers seems to take place in an imperative mood. Wiener is afraid that this process might be reversed with immense consequences for the human civilization: The process of *from man to machine* might soon become *from machine to man*. A corrective against the cybernetic threat becomes imperative. The foundations of a third revolution have to be explored. The forces of monologue

engendered by cybernetics should be countered by a dialogical revolution. Camus, Buber, Marcel, and Erich Fromm seem to be the prophets of this third revolution. The end of human communication is not to *command* but to *commune*. Dialogue should confront the forces of monologue. Alienation and anxiety are to be fought with the instruments of "love" and "intersubjectivity." "There is a third attitude (of dialogue) which the Catholic should adopt *at this period* in this history of the world, an attitude characterized by study of contacts which the Church ought to maintain with humanity," says Pope Paul VI (*Ecclesiam suam* III).

From mechanics to cybernetics the forces of monologue become clearer, stronger, wider. The twentieth century is considered to be the point at which man is most threatened, lonely, driven to despair and insanity. It is to this challenge that the forces of dialogue should respond. Interreligious dialogue is therefore urgent and imperative.

My protest against this mode of formulation is that it makes dialogical consciousness in matters of religion a question of historical need. It seems to rest on history as creed. It might be misunderstood as implying that the monologue-dialogue confrontation is a challenge of this epoch only. It is not realized that human communication can fall into a monologue, and can rise into dialogue, irrespective of any epoch or culture. The sickness of monologue is as ancient as the remedy of dialogue. The threat of monologue, in every age, is both complete and incomplete. The revolution of dialogue is likewise both finished and unfinished. It is only the historicist attitude that gives to both a false finality.

One might not be aware that acceptance of history as creed is in fact acceptance of the cybernetic revolution that history might act as a giant computer issuing messages to man, the great invisible machine recoiling on us all. Dialogue in service of this machine is another monologue in disguise. The very talk of dialogue, as history being the master, is a fulfillment of the cybernetic threat. All dialogical consciousness might then turn into its very opposite, and might return to man the very loneliness that he had intended to shake off. Man becomes a sacrament unto himself, and this pure monological existence. Let us look into the matter in detail.

The distinguishing trait of a monological self is its insistence on autonomy. It feels, thinks, speaks, and acts as an autonomous being. It resists, attacks, destroys anything that either qualifies or threatens this autonomy. Ontologically, there is no other for such an existence, no interexistence, only existence, no speech, only language, no future, only time, no neighbourhood, only home, no family, only individuals, no children, only issues. Thus, monologue is a monstrous existence that sweeps the social and the cultural worlds, without conditions, without limits. One should suspect that the feeling that one is in dialogue might be a form of reminiscence of the bygone society wherein the monological forces were not predominant. Both speech and prayer, work and sacrifice, turn into dead rituals under the stamp of a monological era. Other evidence of monological existence is the destruction and irrelevance of all addressees. Either there is a frank admission of this destruction or a helpless postponement of the question of the addressee to some distant future. Phrases like politics for future, art for future, are quite self-revealing. This is more manifest in the realm of science and technology. Science does not address any particular person: it is an address to all and to none. The particular listener, the concrete addressee, is absent in science. Science, like play, creates a group, a team, a code, a heritage of principles. In order to be true to itself, science should not have any concrete addressee. Science thrives in general principles and truths, in methods that could be used without any essential, emotional relationship between the users. Under the impact of the monological era, religion might also attempt to imitate the preoccupation of science with general and abstract truths. Religion might thus be drawn into a false position of being a rival to science. The co-presence of science and religion, in our age, with their highly articulate and confident representatives, is hazardous and crucial. There are dangers of mutual falsification.

The only way to confront monologue is to free religion from this sense of being a rival to science by keeping in view the specific form of religious speech. Religion is made of the hazards and

crises of being personally addressed. Here, address is not a general formulation, nor an abstract truth, but a promise or a threat to our entire being. Either as affirmation or denial, it has grave and abiding consequences. We are familiar in our scriptures with such calls as, "O Noah," "O Abraham," "O Moses," "O Jesus," and "O Mohammed." God addresses in particular. When He says "O Mankind," it is not a general address, it is again specific: God confronted with Man. Each address is thus an opening or a chasm, an uplifting or an abyss. Something is always at stake in thus being addressed. The response is equally crucial. In turn, man says "O God," and alters his being accordingly. Monological autonomy is instantly destroyed. A divine companionship comes to birth. Existence now becomes inter-existence. Each man becomes a neighbour. "O Mankind" and "O Man" are God's calls of confrontation and concern. "O Lord of the Worlds" and "O My God" are man's expressions of alienation and belonging. Perhaps God also takes the risk in addressing man. The speech of religion is therefore a unity of these tensions and risks. It rests on the universal forms of tension and anxiety, and is not exhausted in only one or another period of history. It uses the medium of language, subject to change and development, but does not become its subordinate. With the aid of symbols and allegory, religious speech transcends the limitations that history and social organization impose on language. The word of man dies several times in history, but the Word of God remains alive and eternal. They refer to the temporal and the eternal components of human speech. The "Word of God," apart from its divinity and infallibility, is also a critique of the word of man. Dialogue rests on their inter-relationship and distinction.

With this introduction we turn to the particular issue of Christianity and Islam, how they constitute a dialogical whole, how their differences and what they share are essential to their dialogical authenticity.

Is there any common "sign" between Christianity and Islam? Would Christians and Muslims become "friends"? Would their souls "Mingle"?

These are not primarily questions of fact, event, or probability. These are methodological questions. They are not intended to explore the *where* of the "sign," the *when* of the "friendship," and the *what* of the "mingling." They are intended to *create* dialogical consciousness in both Christianity and Islam, and to enable one to *feel* the dialogical bond between them. No other two faiths on this planet share so much of the other. Each has a viewpoint for the other, not an external viewpoint, but one which is internal to their creeds and claims. Each has something to say to the other. The misfortune is that their speech so far has been a monologue. It was not intended thus.

The kind of relationship laid down in the Quran between Christians and Muslims is fundamentally a dialogical relationship. From chapter to chapter the Quran engages the Christians in discussion, and all the time insists that Jesus is an integral part of the Muslim faith. The Quran thus involves Christians in the new faith of Islam, and reminds Muslims that Christians have a special relationship with them. The real dialogue between religions was, however, started by the Quran. Its recognition of the People of the Book-the believers in God spread all over the earth, the Sabeans and the Jews-was a dialogical recognition. In all such Quranic discourses it is difficult to miss the deep feeling of Christianity and Islam being present to each other. One is aware of the other's presence. One is aware of strong disagreements. One is aware of deep sharing. What else could signify this deep sharing more than the fact that Jesus is the common center between Christians and Muslims? He is the word, speech, meaning, and occasion of the dialogical relationship between them. He is the common "Sign."

This most difficult statement raises a series of uncertainties both in the minds of Christians and Muslims. The source of uncertainty is, however, located within the viewpoint of each creed. For the Muslim, Christ is a sign among other signs. But the Quran takes care to emphasize the uniqueness of Christ as Sign. He is the Word of God. He is unlike any other sign the Quran speaks about-the heavens and the earth, the day and night, the sun and moon, thunder and

lightning, life and death, the different stages of man's life, his mating and his food, his cattle and his children, the early hours of the morning, the death and still nights, the winter and summer, the dry and thirsty earth, the refreshing and life-giving rain, the ships sailing amidst vast waters, and the storm and the safe approach to shore. All these the Quran calls "*aiyat*," signs. Is Jesus a similar sign? Other signs are referred to in order to remind man of his being and his world, to invoke in him the feeling and the presence of god. But Jesus, in my view, lives as a Sign in a different realm, the realm of the deep relation between God and man. The Sign refers to how ambiguous and how difficult is the sphere of this relationship, how deeply man can deceive himself in the name of God, how truth could be used to destroy truth, how the most elaborate and confident theologies could become a wall between God and man. It is here, in this realm, that Christ lives on in history as a sure reminder, as an unmistakable warning. Christ appears then a Sign *outside* and *against* all creed-based testimonies of truth, love, and suffering. All creeds, even the best of them, might turn their truths into a monologue. To me, personally, Christ as Sign of God liberates man from the dead circle of monological religion and restores unto him his genuine dialogical existence.

Monological religion might give a sense of security, a feeling of certitude, a confidence in the finality of dogmatic beliefs. It is in the nature of all monological consciousness that it gives to its owner the feeling of self-sufficiency and self-adequacy. Hence, it destroys the listener, the other. This is obvious in situations of man-to-man communication. But its seriousness is not clear when we turn to communication between God and man. As all monological speech destroys the listener, so all monological religion might tend to neglect God as Listener. One of the Arabic names God is *as-samih*, one who listens. The Muslim has to repeat seventeen times during his prescribed prayers the self-reminding clause: "God listens to one who praises (Him)." Most of us tend to forget that while we discourse on religion, while we talk *about* God, as we discuss the formulations of faith and different systematizations of creeds, God is always present listening to what we utter about Him. It is again not always remembered that God is free. It is this awareness of the *listening of a free God* that lends to the religious mind its tension, anxiety, and fear. It is then that man becomes free from his monological speech, and having become free, feels anxious and afraid. It is in this state that man's speech to God becomes prayer (praise), and God's speech to man, Blessing and Grace.

As God is Absolute, we can never, in life or beyond death, comprehend His Being. What He allows us to know of Him is His Revelation. The highest form of the knowledge of God is to admit that He is unknowable. What we know of Him is equal to what we do not know of Him. He is both Manifest and Hidden. To the Hidden Being of God we bow in humility and silence. No words can express this awareness of the Hidden God. Silence itself becomes the profoundest form of religious speech. To the Manifest Being of God, we bow in prayer and praise. Even in prayer and praise, there is an element of silence. There is a vast abyss after every word we speak before God. Night, death, nothingness are the expressions of the Hidden Day; life, and existence are the symbols of the Manifest God. Silence and speech, meditation and prayer, submission and praise are the reflection in man of the Absolute, equally Hidden and Manifest. The Hidden partakes of the Manifest, and the Manifest partakes of the Hidden. The Hidden is revealed in the Manifest, and the Manifest is always on the verge of being Hidden. Silence and prayer are likewise interrelated. One of the great differences between speech in general and speech in religion is that in the latter the element of silence and prayer is even present. There is always a surrender of speech in every speech, and there is deep awe about words even if they are of praise. It is in this dichotomy that religious speech maintains its dialogical character.

When we say that Christ is symbol *par excellence* of the dialogical relationship between God and man, we mean that Christ reminds us not to regard as "fetish" the revealed word, the revelation in terms of human speech, the "book" as such, the commandments in themselves. Human speech, the word spoken by man, does receive the divine light and becomes the scripture. But when Christ is addressed as the Word of God, here the Person is addressed, here the Person is the Word. Here is no book as such, but the Life of Christ. Even the revealed word, the scripture, as it is made of the finite stuff of the speech of man, may fall short of the real Intent and Being of God.

The scripture may even tend to substitute the revelation for God. The very revealed word may become a barrier between man and God. But the Person of Christ having become the Word questions the complacency of the believer in the revealed word, and keeps him in perpetual openness before his Lord. It is the wisdom of the Quran, its *hikma*, that Christ is called the Word of God. The Quran keeps the two forms of revelation—the revelation in words, and the revelation as a Person—in constant tension. Both are held in such a relationship that one is made to check the idolatry of the other. It is in this mode that Christ is present in the Quran, as a warning, as a Sign, against the tendency (with men in general) of the very word, the revelation as such, becoming an idol. When the Quran rejects the Incarnation of God in Christ, it corrects the idolatry of the Person as Word of God, and this it does by establishing the supremacy of Speech (“Kalam”) as Revelation. But when the Quran narrates the events of life of Jesus, and refers to the manner in which the Jews had flouted the revealed truth of God, it invokes the supremacy of the Person of Christ as Word of God (“Kalama”).

It is in this capacity of the Word of God as Person that Christ is in each faith, and yet outside. He stands between. He is the redeemer of the monological man with his monological faith. By believing in Christ, a Muslim has to be aware of the monological traps within his own faith. The truth is that Christianity and Islam constitute one complex of faith, one starting with the Person, and another with the Word. Their separateness does not denote two areas of conflicting truths, but a dialogical necessity.

Is there any common “sign” between Christians and Muslims? Answer: Only “friends” would know.

A sign is not a technical truth nor a new discovery in one or another discipline. Technical truths and new discoveries can be known and shared without persons necessarily becoming friends. It is very significant that for the possession and communication of knowledge, as we understand it today, friendship is not required. Total strangers and enemies can share technical information. But in matters spiritual, to know is to be in a new relationship with one who shares that knowledge. To know is to belong. Friendship is presupposed in common religious knowledge. Unity is had when a religious sign is shared. Once having known Christ is to belong together. It is true that the Christian and the Muslim attitudes to Christ are not similar. They are *different*, not conflicting. A common religious sign must be differently apprehended. It is the very ambiguity, richness, of the religious sign that gives rise to different and even opposed interpretations and understandings. But those who know Christ as Love do not dispute about his Being. They are silent. They are humble. They love one another. They all know the mystery of his Being, but do not become impatient about it. They all know that it is the love of Christ that creates their mutual humanity, their suffering in togetherness, their submission to God. The Sign precedes their consciousness as humanity, creates it, and uplifts it as prayer and sacrifice to God. Are humanity and love mere horizontal and uniform expressions of mundane peace and tolerance among men? Perhaps not. Humanity is worth having only as an act of sacrifice before God. Hence, the humanity in us all has the tragic potentiality of being annihilated by God inasmuch as it is mere pride and self-love. Humanity as an offering to God is the beginning of love and friendship between mankind. Here, the sign that inspires love, and love are one. Here, “sign” and “friend” mean one thing—one cannot be had without the other. Two persons torn by mutual hatred cannot possibly know and share the sign of Christ. To know is to discover the common ground of existence. To know is to love. If there is a common “sign” between Christians and Muslims, they *are* friends. The question is not to create this belonging but to discover it. And the discovery is immediate as soon as both drop their respective monologues.

To drop the monologue is to immediately discover the other. Confrontation follows. Most of us fear it. Most of us like to remain inside the fortress of the monologue. To discover the other is to discover the very core of our being. Most of us are afraid of this. We even use the best of our beliefs and loyalties to keep away from that core. The discovery of the other, of our own being, is both soothing and painful, more the latter. The other is pain, a sting, a bite, but a pain in our very being, of it. It is right in the middle of this pain and anxiety that a Divine Sign is known. It is

known, not in the ordinary way, but in its act of sharpening the frontiers of otherness, of heightening anxiety, of deepening confrontation. It is here that a Sign is both Love and Suffering. Christ alienated man, and also reconciled him. It is here that crisis and salvation merge and mingle. Upheld by God, forsaken by God, are the names of the same Love.

Hence, "friendship" in relation to "sign" is not without pain and crisis, But pain and crisis, in this realm, are without hate and fear. Its first challenge is the deepening and sharpening of the differences. Christians and Muslims, when they accept "common sign" and "friendship" between have to undergo the deep pain and crisis of being *other* in relation to each other. This is essential, paramount, desirable. They have to resist the temptation of drowning this crisis for the sake of political and social challenges. The argument of common humanity, common heritage, common predicament in the world, and common spirituality should not be allowed to blunt the primary crisis which is essential to all deeply religious friendships."

Being committed to a common "sign" and being "friends," the primary crisis and pain will lead us, by and by, to discover the futility, the relativity, the *worldliness* of our theological and religious standpoints. Thrown in front of God, facing this deep, vast Absolute, Christians and Muslims will undergo the second pain, far acuter, wider and sharper than the first. This is Second Suffering. It is here that God meets man, and man meets Christ. It was in this state that Mohammed heard the Word of God.

It is by the aid of the aforesaid symbolic structures that Christians and Muslims might help one another in transcending their differences, not so much in their creeds, but in their crisis-consciousness regarding faith and God. But within the Christian situation there are dangers, as we notice in our times, of secularizing and demythologizing the Cross, of according a false finality to the suffering and tragedies of the world, of drawing the Cross into a parallel position with other symbols of tragedy and alienation. Here, the Muslim recalls his witnessing-there is no God but God-and might remind his Christian brother that there is no Cross but the Cross of Jesus.