

Christianity and World Religions: Dialogue with Islam

By Hans Küng

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I am happy to see again leading figures in interreligious dialogue who long before I entered this field have done so much pioneering work: John Cobb in Christian-Buddhist dialogue; Raimundo Panikkar in Christian-Hindu dialogue; and the "elder statesman," whom I was especially eager to meet, Wilfred Cantwell Smith. Professor Smith has done more than anyone else to promote what this conference calls "a universal theology of religion," an encounter of different religions, especially from a Christian perspective.

This year is also the one hundredth anniversary of Temple University. This symposium, I believe, is probably the most suitable way to celebrate such a centennial. I recall another centennial of another university where a conference like this was also held. It was the centennial of the American University in Beirut, almost twenty years ago, to which I was invited, along with Cardinal Willebrands, head of the Roman Secretariat for Christian Unity, and Dr. Visser't Hooft, then secretary general and now honorary president of the World Council of Churches.

There were, however, significant differences between the conferences. At Beirut we Christian theologians met one week, and Muslim theologians-invited from all over the world-met another week. I asked the president of the conference (who was the former president of the United Nations General Assembly), Charles Malik, foreign secretary of Lebanon at that time, whether it would not be possible to meet with the Muslim scholars; in the end, however, it was so arranged that we did not meet. Today I am convinced that if a serious dialogue between Christians and Muslims would have been started twenty years ago, Muslims (who were already *then* practically the majority in Lebanon) would have long since received the rights that are still being fought over after thousands and thousands of victims. I think Lebanon could have remained what it was then called-"the Switzerland of the Near East"-a beautiful, happy country, whereas today many sections of the capital are destroyed, hostility is rife, and much of the land is occupied by Syrians, Palestinians, and Israelis-a real *catastrophe*.

Thus, when we speak about interreligious dialogue, it is not just a matter of a few theologians debating some abstract questions. I am convinced that the Vietnam war was, behind the scenes, also heavily grounded in religious antagonism, in that case between Buddhists-Buddhist monks especially-and the Catholic regime of Diem and his princes, together with the colonial powers. And I am also convinced that the antagonism between India and Pakistan, the war between Iraq and Iran, and the whole situation in the Middle East are largely grounded in religious antagonism. I am, of course, well aware that these conflicts are not just a matter of religion; there are also political, military, economic, and social aspects. Yet battles and wars become fanatical when they have a religious base. We in Europe have enough experience of what it means to conduct "religious wars."

I am convinced it would be possible to avoid this kind of war. I am not an illusionary; I have seen it happen in Europe. After having had several hundred years of wars between Germany and France, Germany and Poland] but especially Germany and France-the origin of World War I and World War II-religiously committed persons after World War II said, "Enough!" (In this case, they were Christians, but I am sure that persons like Gandhi and others from other faiths would have said the same thing.) I am convinced that it could have been done because at that time we had not only technocrats in European governmental agencies (as we have them now in Brussels), but also the likes of Konrad Adenauer, Robert Schuman, Charles DeGaulle, Alcide DeGasperi, and

others who, because of ethical and religious convictions, thought that we must put an end to warfare. One of the greatest achievements of this century, I believe, was to bring together nations that had considered themselves hereditary enemies.

So why should it not be possible-of course with adequate preparation-to do this also in the Near East? Somebody must make the effort. We must urge what I proposed to Muslims in Lebanon, to Christians in Lebanon, and to Israelis in their Foreign Ministry: They must begin something like a "trilateral", conversation, a "trialogue," as it is called. Of course, it will demand sacrifices; persons are needed who will commit themselves even when it is very dangerous.

I remember the story the former chancellor of the Federal Republic of Germany, Helmut Schmidt, told me of his trip down the Nile with Anwar Sadat. Sadat, then president of Egypt, said that he was convinced that there would never be peace in the Near East without having peace among the religions, and that was why he wanted to establish a common sanctuary for Jews, Christians, and Muslims.

Hence, I would very willingly subscribe to what Wilfred Cantwell Smith has said at this conference about the religious dimensions of all history. It is our intellectual error not to see those dimensions, and I think that this error has been committed especially by politicians. This error has also been committed by many development experts-all those Western advisors, Europeans and Americans, who, for instance, advised the Shah of Iran not to bother with the religious dimension, because they themselves did not think it important. They thought only about technocratic problems -and we have seen what has resulted.

My thesis, therefore, is: No world peace without peace among religions, no peace among religions without dialogue between the religions, and no dialogue between the religions without accurate knowledge of one another. This is one reason why we are assembled here. We can no longer regard the world religions simply as existing side by side; rather we must view them together-in interdependence and in interaction. Today, no religion can live in splendid isolation.

I am well aware of the fact that there will always be persons (in certain religions more than in others) who will ask, "Why should we talk to each other?" I asked a European specialist of the Arab world why should we talk to each other, and what, in his opinion, the solution is for Jerusalem. He was quite candid when he said, "War." I believe that this is the alternative to religious dialogue: war. I told him that we had already had a number of wars-without resolving anything. I am convinced that interreligious dialogue is of the greatest importance not just for politicians concerned with conflicts in the Near East, but for all human beings involved in the ordinary business of life.

Another element that should concern us in this issue is the fact that out of every six persons in the world, one is Muslim and two are Christian. This is one of the reasons why I have chosen the encounter between Christianity and Islam as a model for interreligious dialogue. I could also talk about the encounter between Christianity and Hinduism, or Christianity and Buddhism, though of course the approach would have to be different, because these religions are so different. These dialogues are especially important for us Americans and Europeans, partly because Hinduism and Buddhism still are for us largely unknown universes. We have not had direct conflict with these Eastern religions, whereas the -history of Europe, since the seventh century, has also been a history of conflict with Muslims. This must be borne in mind today in a period of re-Islamization as a fundamental reason for the pressing need of dialogue with Muslims.

Dialogue with Muslims? Who is ready in Islam to have dialogue? Perhaps Khomeini? I have met Muslims all over the world who find recent developments in Iran catastrophic; such developments, they feel, are blocking mutual understanding and are propagating prejudice against Islam. I believe, however, that it is precisely at *this* time that we need to talk about our relationship to Islam, and not simply to think about the terrible things that have happened in Iran. Such events should not deter us. I am convinced-without going into detail here-that the present

situation in Iran is ultimately an episode (as was the “reign of terror” within the French revolution), after which a process of normalization will begin. But it is important that we now actively prepare for that process and not just wait for it to happen.

I now want to speak as a theologian. I am not speaking as a politician, nor as a specialist in comparative religion. I have studied many religions, talked to many of their adherents, and visited many of their countries. However, as a theologian, I have to answer a particular question: How can Christians today come to terms with the claims made by the Muslim faith? I shall take up questions that will help us to thoroughly examine our altered ecumenical stance toward other world religions in general, with a view to greater broadmindedness and openness; and I shall try to focus the questions so that they will help us to reread our own history of theological thought and faith against the background of Islam. I do this as a Christian theologian; from my Christian basis, I want to take other religions seriously.

To a great extent Christians still regard Islam as a rigid entity, a closed religious system, rather than a living religion, a religious movement that has been continually changing through the centuries, developing great inner variety, all the time shared by real persons with a wide spectrum of attitudes and feelings. I think no one has done more than Wilfred Cantwell Smith to make it clear that Islam is not just a system of the past or a collection of theories we have to study, but a reality today; Professor Smith has urged us to make an attempt to understand *from the inside* why Muslims see God and the world, service to God and to their fellows, politics, law, and art with different eyes, why they experience these things with different feelings from those of Christians. Keeping Iran in mind, we must first grasp the fact that even today the Islamic religion is not just another strand in the life of a Muslim, what secularized persons like to refer to as the “religious factor” or “sector” alongside other “cultural factors” or “sectors.” No, life and religion, religion and culture, are dynamically interwoven. Islam strives to be an all-embracing view, an all-encompassing perspective on life, an all-determining way of life-and so in the midst of this life a way to eternal life. Islam is referred to as paradise, salvation, liberation, redemption, but it is not just a way in this life, with the focus on only the here and now. This leads to one of the eight questions I should like to raise-and they are all very delicate questions.

1. *Islam-A Way of Salvation? of Eternal Salvation?*

I pose the following question (not least because of the ambivalent attitude of the World Council of Churches, which, due to the conflicting standpoints of its member churches, chose not to answer it even in its 1979 “Guidelines for Dialogue with People of Different Religions and Ideologies”): Can there be salvation outside the Christian churches, outside Christianity? This is a question of great urgency today, because if we think Muslims are going to hell anyway, it is not really worthwhile to engage in a dialogue with them. Thus I do not understand why the WCC does not speak out on this matter.

The *traditional Catholic* position, as forged in the first centuries of the Christian church by Origen, Cyprian, and Augustine, is generally well known: *extra ecclesiam nulla salus*. No salvation outside the church. Thus for the future as well: *extra ecclesiam nullus propheta*. No prophet outside the church. The Ecumenical Council of Florence in 1442 defined this very clearly:

The Holy Church of Rome ... believes firmly, confesses and proclaims, that no one outside the Catholic Church, neither heathen nor Jew nor unbeliever, nor one who is separated from the Church, will share in eternal life, but will perish in the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels, if this person fails to join it [the Catholic Church] before death [Denz. 714].

Does that not settle the claim of Islam, at least for Catholics? It seems to have done so for more than five hundred years.

Today, at any rate, the *traditional Catholic* position is no longer the *official Catholic* position. We cannot change the words, because the conciliar statement was, indeed, an infallible definition, but

we are allowed to say the contrary! The Second Vatican Council declared unmistakably in its "Constitution on the Church" that "those who, through no fault of their own, do not know the Gospel of Christ or his Church, but who nevertheless seek God with a sincere heart and, moved by grace, try in their actions to do his will as they know it through the dictates of their conscience- they too may achieve eternal salvation" (Art. 16). This is valid even for atheists of good will.

Particular mention is given by Vatican II to those who, due to their background, have the most in common with Jews and Christians through their faith in the one God and in doing God's will: Muslims. "But the plan of salvation also includes those who acknowledge the Creator, in the first place among whom are the Muslims: they profess to hold the faith of Abraham, and together with us they adore the one, merciful God, the judge of humanity on the last day" (*ibid.*). Thus, according to Vatican II, even Muslims need not "perish in that eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels"-they can "achieve eternal salvation." That means that Islam, too, can be a way of salvation.

The next problem is, what about prophets? The "Constitution on the Church" and the "Declaration on Non-Christian Religions" mention Islam but do not mention Muhammad. So I turn to my second question.

2. Muhammad -A Prophet?

Of course many religions do not have prophets in the strictest sense. Hindus have their gurus and sadhus, the Chinese their sages, Buddhists their masters-but they do not have prophets, as do Jews, Christians, and Muslims. There is no doubt that if anyone in the whole of religious history is termed the prophet, because he claimed to be *just that*, but in no way *more* than that, it was Muhammad. But may a Christian assert that Muhammad was a prophet? Christians, if they pause to survey the situation, must admit the following (especially in light of the Hebrew Bible):

- Like the prophets of Israel, Muhammad did not function by reason of an office assigned to him by the community (or its authorities), but by reason of a special personal relationship with God.
- Like the prophets of Israel, Muhammad was a person of strong will who felt himself fully imbued with a godly calling, fully consumed, exclusively appointed to his task.
- Like the prophets of Israel, Muhammad spoke to the heart of a religious and social crisis, and with his passionate piety and revolutionary proclamation he opposed the wealthy ruling class and the tradition it was trying to preserve.
- Like the prophets of Israel, Muhammad, who mostly called himself the "Warner," sought to be nothing but the verbal instrument of God and to proclaim not his own, but God's word.
- Like the prophets of Israel, Muhammad untiringly proclaimed the one God who tolerates no other gods and who is at the same time the good Creator and merciful Judge.
- Like the prophets of Israel, Muhammad required, as a response to this one God, unconditional obedience, devotion, submission, which is the literal meaning of word *Islam*: everything that includes gratitude to God and generosity toward fellow human beings.
- Like the prophets of Israel, Muhammad combined monotheism with humanism or human values, belief in the one God and God's judgment with a call to social justice, and a threat to the unjust, who go to hell, with promises to the just, who are gathered into God's paradise.

Whoever reads the Bible-at least the Hebrew Bible-together with the Qur'an will be led to ponder whether the three Semitic religions of revelation-Judaism, Christianity, and Islam-and especially the Hebrew Bible and the Qur'an, could have *the same foundation*. Is it not one and the same God who speaks so clearly in both? Does not the "Thus says the Lord' of the Hebrew Bible

correspond to the “Speak” of the Qur’an, and the “Go and proclaim” of the Hebrew Bible to the “Stand up and warn” of the Qur’an? In truth, even the millions of Arab-speaking Christians have no other word for God than “Allāh.”

Might it not therefore be purely dogmatic prejudice that recognizes Amos and Hosea, Isaiah and Jeremiah, as prophets, but not Muhammad? Whatever one may have against Muhammad from the standpoint of Western Christian morality (armed violence, polygamy, a sensual lifestyle for males), the following facts are indisputable:

- Today there are almost eight hundred million persons in the huge area between Morocco to the west and Bangladesh to the east, between the steppes of central Asia to the North and the Island world of Indonesia to the south, who are stamped with the compelling power of a faith that, like virtually no other faith, has molded into a universal type those who confess it.
- All those persons are linked by a simple confession of faith (There is no God but God, and Muhammad is his prophet), linked by five basic obligations, and linked by thorough submission to the will of God, whose unchangeable decision, even when it brings suffering, is to be accepted.
- Among all the Islamic peoples there has remained a sense of fundamental equality before God of an international solidarity that is basically capable of overcoming race (Arabs and non-Arabs) and even the castes of India.

I am convinced that, despite all the renewed fears of Islam, there is a growing conviction among Christians that, in the light of Muhammad’s place in world history, we must correct our attitude toward Islam. The “scourge of exclusiveness,” arising from Christian dogmatic impatience and intolerance, condemned by the British historian Arnold Toynbee, must be abandoned. Regarding the figure of the prophet, I believe the following must be admitted:

- Arabians in the seventh century rightly listened to and followed the voice of Muhammad.
- In comparison to the very worldly polytheism of the old Arabian tribal religions before Muhammad, the religion of the people was raised to a completely new level, that of a purified monotheism.
- The first Muslims received from Muhammad-or, better still, from the Qur’an-endless inspiration, courage, and strength for a new religious start: a start toward greater truth and deeper understanding, toward a breakthrough in the revitalizing and renewal of traditional religion.

In truth, Muhammad was and is for persons in the Arabian world, and for many others, *the* religious reformer, lawgiver, and leader; *the* prophet per se. Basically Muhammad, who never claimed to be anything more than a human being, is more to those who follow him than a prophet is to us: he is a model for the mode of life that Islam strives to be. If the Catholic Church, according to the Vatican II “Declaration on Non-Christian Religions,” “regards with esteem the Muslims,” then the same church must also respect the one whose name is embarrassingly absent from the same declaration, although he and he alone led the Muslims to pray to this one God, for through him this God “has spoken to humanity”: Muhammad the prophet. But does not such an acknowledgment have very grave consequences, especially for the message he proclaimed, the teachings set down in the Qur’an?

I think for the peoples of Arabia Muhammad’s prophecy led to tremendous progress. Whatever we Christians do with this fact, we must affirm that he acted as a prophet and that he was a prophet. I do not see how we can avoid the conclusion that on their way of salvation, Muslims follow a prophet who is decisive for them. This leads us to an even more difficult question. If he is the prophet, what, then, about the Qur’an?

3. *The Quran-Word of God?*

The Qur'an is more than an oral tradition, which can be easily altered. It is a *written* record, set down once for all time; it cannot be altered. In I respect it is similar to the Bible. Because of its written form, the Qur'an has retained a remarkable constancy from century to century, from generation to generation, from person to person, despite the changes and variety in Islamic history. What is written is written. Despite all the different interpretations and commentaries, despite all the forms taken by Islamic law (the *shari'ah*), the Quran remains the common denominator, something like the "green thread" of the prophet in all Islamic forms, rituals, and institutions. One who wishes to know not only historical Islam, but also *normative* Islam, must, stiff today, return to the Qur'an of the seventh century.

Although the Quran in no way predetermined the development of Islam, it most certainly inspired it. Commentators came and went, but the Qur'an remained a source. of inspiration. Commentators came and went, but the Quran remained intact. It is the one great constant in Islam amid all the countless variables. It provided Islam with moral obligation, external dynamism, and religious depth, as well as with specific enduring doctrines and moral principles: the responsibility of the individual before God, social justice, and Muslim solidarity. The Qur'an is *the* holy book of Islam; it is understood to be, in its written form, not the word of a human, but the word of *God*. For Muslims, God's word became a book. Our question is: Is this book really the word of God?

Here we can turn to Wilfred Cantwell Smith who was one of the first to focus this question concerning the authorship of the Qur'an. For centuries this question was never posed as a serious issue. It would have threatened with excommunication Muslims as well as Christians-the former if they had doubted it, the latter if they had affirmed it. And who can deny that this question has caused deep political divisions among the peoples of the world, from the first Islamic conquests in the seventh century to the Crusades and the capture of Constantinople, to the siege of Vienna in modern times and the Iranian revolution under Khomeini. Just as naturally as Muslims from West Africa to central Asia and Indonesia have answered this question affirmatively and have oriented their lives according to the Qur'an, so believing Christians all over the world have said no. This negation was later restated by secular Western scholars of comparative religion who took it for granted that the Qur'an was not at all the word of God, but wholly that of Muhammad.

In 1962 Wilfred Cantwell Smith posed this question in clear terms, threatening though it was for both sides. I cannot but agree with his assertion that the two possible answers, both of which were supported by intelligent, -critical, and thoroughly honest persons, in fact relied upon an unquestioned, insistent *preconviction*. On both sides, the opposite viewpoint was seen as either superstitious or lacking in faith.

It is true then, as Smith's Canadian colleague and my friend Willard Oxtoby claims, that a rule of thumb in the study of religions is that "you get out what you put in"? In other words, is it true that those who regard the Qur'an as the word of God from the start will repeatedly see their conviction confirmed in reading it, and vice versa?

Can we allow this contradiction between Muslims and Christians to perdure, unsatisfactory as it is from an intellectual standpoint? Are there not increasing numbers of Christians and Muslims who have become better informed about the faith of others and about their own position, and who are, therefore, posing self-critical questions? Let me outline the situation from both points of view.

a) *Self-critical questioning of an -exclusively Christian understanding of revelation*. This, of course, is a very delicate question for us. Many Christians are not ready to face this question, but are content to let the great majority of humanity be consigned to hell. It must be recalled, however, that Adam was not the first Jew, but the first human being. And the first covenant was not with the people of Israel, but with the whole of humanity. In contemporary religious literature, besides talk of erroneousness, benightedness, and guilt, there is a wealth of positive statements

about the world outside Israel, in the distant past, and outside Christianity, since then. The thinking behind these positive statements is that originally God bestowed self-revelation upon the whole of humanity. Indeed, both the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament teach that non-Jews and non-Christians can also know the true God (I cannot go into details here). These texts explain this possibility in terms of the revelation of God in creation.

Considering this biblical background, and reading it now to see what we could learn for our time, we cannot exclude the possibility that countless persons in the past and in the present have experienced, and are experiencing, the mystery of God on the basis of the revelation of God in creation, and that such experience involves the grace of God and true religious faith. And we cannot exclude the possibility that in this context certain individuals have also, within the bounds of their religion, been endowed with special insight, entrusted with a special task, a special charism.

Many Christians do not realize that the Catholic Church has excluded as an error the claim that outside the church there is no salvation, no grace. By implication, there is grace outside the church. There can be special charisms outside the church. How, then, can we deny that outside the church there also are persons who have such charisms, including prophetic gifts? *Extra ecclesiam gratia!* If we recognize Muhammad as a prophet, to be consistent we must also admit that the message of Muhammad was not of his own making; the Qur'an is not simply the word of Muhammad, but the *Word of God*. And the Qur'an is much more important for Muslims than is the prophet!

b) *Self-critical questioning of the Islamic interpretation of the Qur'an*. I come now to the hardest point in discussion with Muslims. It is a question that applies, uncomfortably, to both sides, but it must be faced. The question concerns the Quran (or the Bible) as the word of God. That the Qur'an is the word of God I do not contest. However, there is the further question: *How* is the Qur'an (or the Bible) the word of God? Does revelation directly fall from heaven, so to speak? Is it, as some maintain, dictated word for word by God? Is there nothing human in this word of God? It must be remembered that not only Muslims believe this; fundamentalist Christians look upon the Bible in the same way. The fundamentalist Christian says: All this is dictated by God, from the first phrase to the last. There is nothing that changes, nothing to interpret. Everything is clear.

Today it is important that the Qur'an as the word of God be seen in its historical context. Many Muslims would tell me that it is blasphemy to think that this word of God could also at the same time be the word of a human being. I would answer only in a provisional way. When the first Jew asked this about the Hebrew Bible, he was excommunicated; this was Spinoza, the seventeenth-century Jewish philosopher in Amsterdam, who started critical exegesis of the Bible. The first Catholic to raise this question was a disciple of rabbis in Paris at the time of Bossuet, also in the seventeenth century. He was exiled and had to publish his books in Amsterdam. That was Richard Simon. Thus the Catholic Church missed the chance to formulate a critical approach to the Bible as early as the seventeenth century. Reimarus, the first Protestant to propose a critical approach to scripture, also had the greatest of troubles, in Germany, and as a matter of fact did not even dare to publish his work. The great poet Lessing published it after Reimarus's death, claiming that, although it was not his own view, it was worthy of discussion. Later on, Lessing admitted that he shared Reimarus's views, and he was told not to speak of it further.

So who would be surprised if today in Islam there are similar reactions? It is dangerous to take up this matter publicly. But I know that Muslim students say in private what they will not say in public. I am accustomed to such a situation in the Catholic Church, having raised the same questions for Christians that I am proposing for my Muslim friends.

This is, then, not only a question for Muslims. It is really contrary to the word of God if we say that this word is at the same time the word of a human being and that it has been influenced by a human medium? There are a few Muslims, like the Pakistani Fazlur Rahman at the University of Chicago, who entertain such thoughts and provide supporting evidence from Islamic tradition.

Such scholars are often attacked by orthodox Muslims, as was Rahman, who was even forced to flee his own country. This question, however, cannot be suppressed. If even the Catholic Church, with all its organization and power, was unable to suppress the issue, neither will Islam be able to do so, for Islam does not even have a magisterium or a Holy Office. (In Islam it is mainly the masses of the believers who can prove to be threatening and dangerous.)

Is it not possible to understand and experience the Qur'an as a great witness to the all-merciful God, as Muslims do, without viewing it as *dictated* by God? Such an understanding would also be a help in dealing with the question of capital punishment and other issues that *have* to be changed, and not only by reinterpretation but by admitting that certain practices that were necessary or meaningful in a past historical context are no longer fitting for our present context.

4. What Are the Main Common Elements Among Muslims, Jews, and Christians?

a) The basic common area among Muslims, Jews, and Christians is found in their faith in *one and only one God*, who gives meaning and life to a.

b) Jews, Christians, and Muslims are also of one mind in their belief in the *God of history*-the God who is not *above*, but *in*, history, intervening, calling in a hidden way.

c) Jews, Christians, and Muslims agree in their belief that the one God is an approachable partner. God can be addressed.

d) Finally, this God is a *merciful and gracious God*. The Arabic *al-Rahmān*, the "merciful one," is etymologically linked to the Hebraic *rahamim*, which, together with *hen* and *hesed*, represents the semantic field for the New Testament *charis*, the Vulgate *gratia*, and the English "grace." This shared belief has a political relevance. I have been told that for the Camp David Agreement it was not unimportant that a believing Christian, a believing Jew, and a believing Muslim came together and saw that they finally had to do something for world peace.

These shared beliefs clear the way for more difficult questions.

5. Is the Quran Portrayal of Jesus Accurate?

It is well known that the Qur'an speaks of Jesus of Nazareth, and always in a positive manner. This is astonishing when one considers the very different attitude of Jewish sources and also the centuries-old history of hatred and vilification between Christianity and Islam. How can we assess these passages theologically? A close examination of the texts of the Qur'an relevant to Christianity reveals that all the material concerning Jesus found in the Qur'an is integrated *in a fully coherent manner into the whole theological conception of the Quran*. From whatever tradition this testimony to Jesus may stem-and I shall go into this more closely-the whole is conspicuously permeated with the spirit of Islam, with Muhammad's intense prophetic experience of the one God. On the basis of this experience, Muhammad had no cause whatsoever to contradict Jesus (in fact he does not contradict him): the preaching of Jesus he makes his own, and both the virgin birth and miracles are acknowledged without envy by the prophet. There is but one disclaimer: Jesus may not be made into a god; he may not be put alongside the one God as a second deity. For Islam, that would be the ultimate abomination.

The position of Jesus in the Qur'an is unambiguous. Dialogue is therefore not aided by contemporary well-meaning Christians who read more into the Qur'an than it contains, claiming that in the Qur'an Jesus is called the "Word" of God. For the Qur'an, however, he is not the Word of God in the sense of the prologue of John's Gospel, in which the preexistent divine logos became flesh. If the Qur'an acknowledges the virgin birth of Jesus, it is a sign of God's omnipotence, but emphatically not a sign of the deity of Jesus.

In other words, for the Qur'an Jesus is a prophet, a greater prophet than Abraham, Noah, and Moses-but certainly not more than a prophet. Further, just as in the New Testament John the Baptist is the forerunner of Jesus, so in the Qur'an Jesus is the forerunner of, and undoubtedly the encouraging example for, Muhammad. According to the Qur'an, Jesus was created directly by God as a second Adam (this is the meaning of the virgin birth), unlike the Prophet.

For this reason, Christians should avoid wanting to make "anonymous Christians" of Muhammad and Muslims, as some theologians (among them my friend Karl Rahner) have attempted; such attempts run counter to the Muslims' understanding of themselves. We must never give others names they cannot apply to themselves. If we call them "anonymous Christians," then we also should be willing to be called "anonymous Muslims." Then of course there arises the question, whether Muslims would not like to make Jesus an anonymous Muslim.

If we who represent Christianity concern ourselves with a reevaluation of Muhammad on the basis of Islamic sources, especially the Qur'an, we hope that Muslims might eventually do what Jews have begun to do: Jewish scholars have started to study Jesus, to do research on him. Our hope is that in time Muslim scholars also will consider the historical sources and will come to a reevaluation of Jesus of Nazareth on the basis of those sources-that is, the Gospels themselves.

The portrait of Jesus in the Qur'an, I would say, is too one-sided, too monotone, for the most part lacking in content; in the Qur'an Jesus simply proclaims monotheism, calls to repentance, and performs miracles. This is a weak, one-dimensional picture in comparison, for example, with the Jesus of the Sermon on the Mount. Precisely because legalism is a central problem in both Judaism and Islam, it is important to examine Jesus' position concerning the law and legalism; he was, after all, executed because of his stand against legalism. According to Islam, Jesus did not really die; he simply was assumed into heaven. It is, however, important to recognize that according to the original sources of the first century he really did die. We must, I believe, rely on these sources. I am aware that it is said, "But Muhammad received his revelation directly from God." Here again we have a historical problem.

6. What is the Central Theological Difference?

The focal concern of Jesus himself was to overcome legalism by fulfilling the will of God in love, in view of the coming reign of God. For the Christian church, however-and here we come to the decisive difficulty-the focal concern slowly shifted from the reign of God to the person of Jesus and his relationship with God. The debate between Christianity and Islam remains focused on this question. Up to now, the decisive Christian objection to Islam has been that Islam disputes the two related central doctrines of Christianity: The *Trinity* and the *incarnation*. Indeed, the Qur'an addresses Christians:

People of the Book, do not transgress the bounds of your religion. Speak nothing but the truth about Allāh. The Messiah, Jesus, the son of Mary, was no more than Allāh's apostle and his Word, which he cast into Mary: a spirit from him. So believe in Allāh and his apostles and do not say [of Allāh, that he is] "three." Allah is but one God. Allāh forbid that He should have a son! [sura 4:171]

Furthermore, there is no truth in the assertion of Christian apologists and many scholars of religion that Muslim theologians have always misinterpreted the Christian doctrine of the Trinity (three in one) as a doctrine of tritheism (three gods). There is a certain misunderstanding of the Trinity in the Qur'an, I believe, but that is not so important. As early as the medieval controversies there were many Muslim theologians who understood the Christian doctrine quite well. But they were simply not able to understand what the Jews as well could not grasp: that when there is one godhead, one divine nature, the recognition of three persons in one God does not automatically lead to the relinquishing of that faith in one God that Abraham stood for, and Moses, and Jesus, and finally Muhammad also.

Why distinguish at all between nature and person in God? It is obvious that the *distinctions* between one and three made by the Christian doctrine of the Trinity do not satisfy Muslims. All these concepts of Syrian, Greek, and Latin origin are more confusing to them than enlightening, a game of words and concepts. How can the one and only God, asks the Muslim, be a conglomeration of hypostases, persons, processions, and relations? Why all the dialectical tricks! Is not God simply God, "combined" neither in this way nor that?

According to the Qur'an, "Unbelievers are those who say, 'God is one of three [or 'three-faced']'." This viewpoint, which was completely unacceptable to Muhammad, is flatly rejected by the statement, "There is but one God" (sura 5:73). This brings me to my seventh question.

7. How Are We to Assess the Central Theological Difference?

That which applies to the doctrine of the Trinity applies also to christology. I think that today if Christians and Muslims (and Jews as well) wish to come to a better mutual understanding, they must *return to the sources* and then look critically at all subsequent developments.

I know this is a difficult point, especially to our Orthodox Christian brethren, who do not want to go back behind the councils of the fourth and fifth centuries to the New Testament. It is not merely for archeological reasons that we should want to go back; all the churches, including the Orthodox churches, are founded-as all the fathers of the church say-"on the New Testament." When the term *homoousios* was objected to, because it was not in the Bible, Athanasius said, "Read the Bible and then you will understand it correctly." Read the Bible, read the New Testament, and the relationship between Father, Son, and Spirit will be more understandable-and it will become clear that the dogmas of the fourth and fifth and seventh centuries are not a little different from what was said about Father, Son, and Spirit in the New Testament. It can also be shown that what was said about Jesus in the beginning was somewhat different and may be easier to understand than what was said in Greek in the fourth and fifth centuries.

I acknowledge the intentions of those councils and their decisive content, but I also understand that for persons not educated in this tradition, who do not understand *hypostasis*, *physis*, *homoousios*, *homoiousios*, *homoousios kata panta*, this language can be not just mysterious but meaningless. So it makes sense to ask how the first disciples, who were Jews, understood Jesus. Such a question opens many complex but fruitful issues. In the beginning our church was a church of Jews. Then it became a church of Jews and gentiles, but what remained finally was a church of gentiles. Where are the Jewish Christians today? I met one recently at Harvard. He came to me after my lecture and said, "I am so grateful that you spoke about Jewish Christians"-he had become one.

It is unfortunate that after the destruction of Jerusalem under the Emperor Hadrian in the year 132 and the flight of all Jewish Christians to the East, the growing church was almost completely uprooted from its Jewish soil. The gentile, Hellenistic Christians did not really care. I do not want to blame them; we probably would have done the same thing. The whole Roman empire despised Jews, and gentile Christians despised Jewish Christians. It was rather sickening; but they "knew not what they were doing." Though difficult and delicate, the question of the early Jewish Christians must today be reexamined.

I have found that some scholarly research has been done, but it had been completely silenced, especially in dogmatics, both in Eastern Orthodox churches as well as in Catholic and Protestant churches. In fact, the picture of Jesus in the Qur'an may well have had something to do with the Jewish Christians. Muslims, of course, traditionally say that the quranic depiction of Jesus had nothing to do with human factors; it was all dictated by God. I have respect for this-a conviction of faith-but from a historical approach to the Qur'an, further questions arise. The picture of Jesus in the Qur'an, because it is a sympathetic picture, cannot come from orthodox Christianity, for the Qur'an continually protests against orthodox christology. So where does the picture come from?

There is an evident, though surprising, answer. The picture of Jesus in the Qur'an is very analogous to the picture of Jesus in Judeo-Christianity.

It is difficult to prove historico-genetic links between the two pictures, for we do not know much about the Arabian peninsula before Muhammad. I would, however, like to quote a famous-and conservative-Protestant exegete, Adolph Schlatter of Tübingen, who as early as 1926 had traced connections between gentile Christianity, Jewish Christianity, and Islam:

The Jewish-Christian church died out in Palestine only west of the Jordan ["West Bank" we say today]. Christian communities with Jewish practice continued to exist in the *eastern* regions, in the Decapolis, in the Batanaea, among the Nabataeans, at the edge of the Syrian desert and into Arabia, completely cut off from the rest of Christendom and without fellowship with it.... For the Christian of this time, the Jew was simply an enemy, and the Greek attitude, which overlooked the murders by the generals Trajan and Hadrian, as if they were the well-earned fate of the evil and contemptuous Jews, was accepted by the church as well. Even leading figures, such as Origen and Eusebius, remained astonishingly ignorant about the end of Jerusalem and of the church there. In the same way, the information they give us concerning the Jewish [i.e., Judeo-Christian] church in its continued existence is scanty. The Jewish Christians were heretics because they would not submit to the law that applied to the rest of Christendom and were therefore cut off from that body. None of the leaders of the imperial church guessed that this Jewish Christendom, which they held in contempt, would someday shake the world and cause a large part of the dominion of the church to break away. [Here Schlatter plays the prophet:] That day came when Muhammad took over many of the beliefs preserved by Jewish Christians -their awareness of God, their eschatology with its proclamation of the Day of Judgment, their customs and legends-and launched a new mission as "the one sent from God."¹

Is Muhammad then, according to Schlatter, a "Judeo-Christian apostle" in Arabian dress? That is an astonishing claim, which Schlatter, incidentally, had substantiated as early as 1918 in an essay on the development of Jewish Christianity into Islam.² Forty years earlier, Adolf von Harnack had perceived the wider influence of Jewish Christianity on Islam, or more precisely of gnostic Jewish Christianity, and in particular of the Elkesites, who stood for strict monotheism and rejected the ecclesiastical teaching concerning *hypostasis* and "Son of God."³

Considering the present state of research, any direct dependence of Islam on Jewish Christianity will continue to be disputed. Yet the similarities are amazing. Muhammad rejected the orthodox (and Monophysitic) Son-of-God christology, yet accepted Jesus as the great "messenger" (*rasul*) of God, indeed as the "messiah" (*masih*) who brought the gospel. The Jewish scholar Hans-Joachim Schoeps (probably the foremost Jewish scholar on Judeo-Christianity) states:

Even though it is not possible to clearly establish the precise connection, there can be no doubt about Muhammad's indirect dependence on sectarian Judeo-Christianity. It remains one of the truly great paradoxes of world history that Jewish Christianity, cut off from the Christian church, has been preserved in Islam and so has been able, to this day, to continue its influence.⁴

Strangely enough, these pieces of historical knowledge have hardly been known in Christian theology up to now, let alone been taken seriously. There is still much to be investigated, such as the history of Muhammad's cousin-by-marriage, Waraqa, who was a Christian (probably speaking Hebrew, certainly not a Hellenistic Christian) and who according to the sources early drew Muhammad's attention to the relationship between his revelation experiences and those of Moses. Be that as it may, what we have here are previously unimagined possibilities for trilateral dialogue between Jews, Christians, and Muslims. Discussion of such matters will perhaps be uncomfortable in the beginning, but will eventually be of advantage to all concerned-for we need not be afraid of the truth.

In this context we must bear in mind that in his struggle against ancient Arabic polytheism, according to which Allah had daughters and maybe also sons, Muhammad had no choice but to

reject the heathen-sounding term "Son of God." This was polytheism. And yet Muhammad took up the story of Jesus as it was being circulated in Arabia at the time and gave it his own meaning. What had happened so often in the Bible now happened in the Qur'an: an old tradition was not simply handed down; it was interpreted so as to make it relevant to contemporaneous experience. The same thing happened in the New Testament: just as Christians referred many elements ("prophecies") of the Hebrew Bible to Jesus, even though these passages originally meant something quite different, so Muhammad used much of what he had heard (probably not *read*) about Jesus to refer to his own time. For Muhammad, Jesus' greatness consisted in the fact that, in him and through him as the servant of God, God had been at work. Thus Muhammad's "christology" (if you wish) was not far removed from that of the Judeo-Christian church. What will be the ultimate consequences of all these new findings?

8. *What Should Muslims and Christians Do?*

We are faced with a problem of extraordinary moment, the consequences of which are not yet visible. If the exegetical and historical data outlined above are accurate and open to further clarification, then both sides in the Muslim-Christian encounter are faced with the challenge to stop thinking in terms of alternatives-Jesus *or* Muhammad-and to begin thinking instead, despite all the limitations and differences, in terms of synthesis-Jesus *and* Muhammad. This does not mean that everything has to be put on the same level. We have to recognize that Muhammad himself wanted to be a witness to Jesus-not to a Jesus of the Hellenistic gentile Christians, but, rather, to a Jesus as seen by his first disciples, who were Jews like Jesus himself.

As I already have pointed out, I have no intention of rejecting the early councils; rather, what needs to be done, in our contemporary ecumenical context, is to rethink what it means to call Jesus the Son of God or the Word of God. Inasmuch as today we have come to a new, and we think, clearer understanding of the concept "Son of God," perhaps we can better explain this belief to contemporary Jews and Muslims. So, with all due reservations and in the hope that others "I join the discussion, let me try to comment, very briefly, on these two pivotal questions: How might a Muslim today view Jesus? How might a Christian understand Muhammad?

a) In what way might *Muslims* view *Jesus*?

According to the Qur'an, Muslims already see Jesus as the great prophet and messenger of the one God, designated by God to be the "Servant of God" from his birth to his exaltation, as one who, along with the message he proclaimed, was of lasting importance to Muhammad.

Certainly, for Muslims, Muhammad and the Quran remain the decisive guideline for faith and conduct, life and death. I do not expect Muslims to simply accept the Bible.

However, if in the Qur'an Jesus is called the "Word" of God and bringer of the "gospel," should not Muslims try to gain a broader understanding of this gospel and take it seriously? Understood in the light of the message and conduct of Jesus, Islamic law, which is often characterized even by Muslims as oppressive, would perhaps receive a less stringent interpretation-commandments being given for persons, not persons for commandments. Also, in the light of Jesus' person and message, the Qur'an could be interpreted in a way that would make for greater personal freedom-not from the law but from legalism, as was the case with Jewish Christians.

Furthermore, the picture of both the life and death of Jesus-and according to our earliest sources his death is undeniable-and of his new life with God and in God might enable Muslims to come to a deeper understanding of a God who lives and suffers with human beings. The death of Jesus, endured in the name of this very God, might provide meaning for suffering and failure, not only for success. Islam has been a religion of success; failure, however, is also a reality of human life.

b) How might *Christians* view *Muhammad*?

Many Christians already look on him as a prophet of importance for many peoples of this earth, who was blessed with great success in his lifetime and throughout these subsequent centuries.

Certainly, for Christians, Jesus Christ and the good news he proclaimed are the decisive criteria for faith and conduct, life and death: the definitive Word of God (Heb. 1: 1ff.). Thus Christ is and remains the *definitive regulating factor* for us Christians, for the sake of God and humanity.

However, insofar as Christians, following the New Testament, acknowledge the existence and value of prophets even after Christ, should they not take Muhammad and his message more seriously-especially because Muhammad understood himself to be part of the Judeo-Christian tradition?

Christians need to take Muhammad more seriously in order that the one, true, incomparable God might always occupy the center of their faith. I think my friend John Cobb would agree that Christocentrism without theocentrism is valueless, for Jesus is the Word and, as Cobb has stressed, the Wisdom of God. Christians also need to hear Muhammad's warning against the dangerous idolatry of listening to other gods, as well as his admonition that faith and life, orthodoxy and orthopraxis, belong together, even in politics. Thus, Muhammad could provide for us Christians, not the decisive, guiding norm that Jesus gives us, but a *prophetic corrective* in the name of the one and same God: "I am nothing but a distinctive warner" (sura 46:9).

The questions and issues we have looked at can present difficult challenges for everyone involved: Eastern Christians, Western Christians, Hellenistic Christians, Judeo-Christians, and of course for our Muslim brothers and sisters. The observation of a Pakistani friend of mine, a Muslim scholar, Riffat Hassan, is appropriate:

Every religion has its problematic point, a crucial point that seems to be indisputable, not negotiable, and which is the main difficulty for the others. For Christians, this point is christology, that Jesus is the Son of God. For Jews, it is the promise that Israel, with its land, is the People of God. For Muslims, it is the Qur'an as the Word of God-Son of God, People of God, Word of God.

I think, as she does, that we should discuss these issues with reverence, with great esteem for all those who hold one of them as their professed faith, knowing that this matter is very delicate.

But I come back to my beginning: we stand before the alternatives of war and peace. I am certain we can have peace among nations only if there is peace among the religions, and especially among Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. And that will happen only if we are able to speak together as brothers and sisters.