

Islamic-Christian Dialogue: Approaches to the Obstacles

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Introduction

Why limit to Christians and Muslims the research that justifies this article? To be more precise, why not also take into account Jewish believers? As is known, their faith is chronologically located at the source of the religious current from which issue the three great religions that recognize Abraham as Father. Let me explain.

Even if the Qur'an acknowledges as divinely inspired the Torah of Moses, the Psalms of David, and the Gospels, these books do not appear to be known directly in the Qur'an, nor are they even cited textually, as, for example, when the Gospels quote Isaiah or the Psalms; rather, they are simply named and that is all. The Qur'an retains a certain number of Judeo-Christian traditions, biblical and non-biblical, which comprise some noteworthy and shared values in the three religions. These religious traditions derive from Jewish or Christian spheres contemporary with the beginnings of Islam. Their primary source is not always the Bible. Certain episodes about the Patriarchs recorded by the Qur'an are not of direct biblical origin; one Qur'anic tradition on Jesus is found only in an apocryphal gospel (see Qur'an 3:49). Hence we can see what kind of information the Qur'an conveys to the Muslims about the Jewish and Christian faiths. Strictly speaking, no common scriptural basis exists between Muslims and Jews or between Muslims and Christians. The Qur'an is separate, apart.

Moreover, a widespread conviction among Muslims, based on this or that verse of the Qur'an (and not without underscoring its objective importance), affirms that the very text of our Bible, with its two great divisions, does not conform to the authentic text—a text that has undergone certain manipulations (*tahif*) at the hands of Jews and Christians alike, or by Jews and Christians of false faith or of no faith. Muslims do not read the Bible (not, in fact, unlike Christians, who are similarly ignorant of the Qur'an). Thus, Holy Scripture cannot serve as a common point of reference, a serious obstacle on the path of understanding. Christians and Jews of course possess the Old Testament in common, and it constitutes a privileged basis with mutual appeal—an interesting but useless fact in the Muslim dialogue as long as this deep-rooted prejudice remains.

The Qur'an retains traces of the serious difficulties raised by Arabic Jews opposed to nascent Islam. It is very hard on the Jews. The Qur'an acknowledges Jesus as God's chosen prophet—"messenger." It manifests, at least in certain verses, confidence and consideration for Christians, such as in this verse: "Of all men thou wilt certainly find the Jews, and those who join other Gods, to be the most intense in hatred of those who believe, and thou shalt certainly find those to be nearest in affection to them who say, 'we are Christians.'" (5:85). There is nothing like this regarding the Jews. but in spite of such positive attitudes toward Christians, the Qur'an opposes certain essential articles of the Christian faith. It overwhelms some Christians with reproach for their unfaithfulness to divine Revelation and, above all, for their infidelity to monotheism, as revealed by God to Abraham and to those who followed the Father of the Believers.

The history of Islamic-Jewish relations is quite different from that of Christian-Islamic relations. We should think not only of the current struggle of the Arabs against the Israeli state, but let us recall also from the past the long period of coexistence in Spain, for example, when Jewish communities were in contact with the Muslim towns of Andalusia. Between Christians and Muslims, however, there were the struggles of the Christians against the conquests by Caliphate

powers on the one hand, and the other, conquest and domination of Muslim countries by Western powers (usually considered Christian by the Muslims)-all this complex past is at the root of the deep wounds, grievances, and prejudices. They have only compounded the difficulties at the doctrinal level and the disagreements over scriptural traditions.

One is doubtless inclined to hope that the time will come when Christians, Jews, and Muslims will be able to study together, objectively and in tranquility, the obstacles to mutual understanding. But the experience of problems and delays encountered in ecumenical efforts among separated Christians invites our caution in these delicate, diverse, and heterogenous areas which are only now becoming accessible. It seems much more prudent at present to define the interlocutors, with the firm hope of uniting them one day. Moving too rapidly or aimlessly risks burking or bungling the real issues.

The following text draws essentially from a report to the Seminar on Islamic-Christian Dialogue in Tripoli, Libya, in February, 1976. The Seminar's organizer, Colonel Kaddafi, extended invitations to Christians and even to the Vatican itself in order to initiate this dialogue with Muslims. He himself expressed the sincere hope of one day seeing a tripartite meeting of Jews, Christians and Muslims on the religious questions, but, in fact, Tripoli was only a two-party meeting.

The author of this report is informed on Islamic-Christian problems, but much less so on Jewish problems. This is why that subject is absent, for these remarks are limited to a communication presented at Tripoli as part of a contribution to the development of relations between Muslim and Christian believers.

Can the thirteen centuries of history which Christians and Muslims have in common serve as a lesson for today's believers? The two groups have inherited a sum of prejudices and an ensemble of behavior patterns which have left their mark on the level of conscience and in the inner recesses of the mind. A Lebanese Muslim recently said: "Christianity and Islam are two sister religions. Both are monotheistic. Rarely have two religions had such close relations down through the centuries as have Christianity and Islam. Yet these relations have been those of hostility rather than friendship. Their belief in God has separated them far more than it has united them. Why is it that hostility rather than friendship has governed these relations? What are its causes? Are they essential or accidental causes? Can we rediscover the authentic sources common to the two religions, and from them draw new understanding that will contribute to the moral regeneration of people today? Now, more than ever, Christianity and Islam must subordinate their relations to their spirit of charity and mercy rather than to any other consideration."¹ In order to suppress the prejudices and reduce the misunderstandings which today are still the cause of so much havoc, especially where Christian or Muslim communities happen to be a small minority (in the Middle East, Sudan, the Philippines, or Ethiopia, for instance), believers-and, it would seem, Christians first of all-are invited to contemplate and to repent of past faults, to weigh and evaluate actual prejudices and misunderstandings, to examine and make known the already prodigious efforts that have been, made to reduce and suppress them, and to give expression to hopes and regrets in the interest of keeping one another better informed.

1. Admitting Past Errors and Injuries

"Muslim-Christian relations are as old as Islam. They have appeared in the most contradictory forms. There were hard and painful periods on both sides," admits a former Christian member of the Vatican Secretariat for relations with Non-Christians,² periods of Muslim conquests and of crusades, recent periods of colonization and, still more recently, those of struggles for independence. A semi-official document frankly states that "...Past events as well as those of recent years have left a deep feeling of bitterness towards the West in certain regions of the world. In the course of history there have been short but happy periods of collaboration, at Damascus, Baghdad, and Toledo. But such items on the credit side of the balance go little way towards correcting in the minds of the Muslims the firm impression that Christians have always

blocked the development of their MP civilization. According to their reading of history, the Crusades first of all helped to bring to an end the most brilliant period of their existence. Then they complain that colonialism rendered less fruitful than had been hoped the renaissance (*nahda*) which began in the 19th century.³

This bitterness, the same document goes on to admit, "has suddenly flared up again in recent years in connection with their struggle for liberty. Every one of their reviews and newspapers, all their political and... religious leaders, have stressed the link between the distant past and what is happening as the present moment, and they have all found this comparison to be one of the most effective arguments to sway the emotions of the East against the peoples of the West. Even the political and economic maneuvering of the West, carried out by men who are well-known as being without faith in any religion, is seen and explained to their own people as a continuation of the Crusades in but another way,"⁴ or of colonialism. Imperialism today is very quickly accused of being Christian-inspired, even if Christians themselves deny any such collusion or confusion. And the responsibilities of traditionally Christian countries in the dramatic difficulties surrounding the Palestinian affair have only added to the misunderstandings of history.⁵ If Christians today are earnestly invited to renounce the political methods of the Crusades, and of colonial and imperialist enterprises, they must also examine themselves with regard to other errors and injustices if their dialogue with Islam is to be an honest one.

In fact, beyond political and economic confrontations, a vast cultural and religious misunderstanding between Christians and Jews has developed in the course of history. Each has dramatically ignored the other and each has disregarded the proper value of the other.

In the Middle Ages, the scientific and philosophical contribution of the Arabs (Muslims) was clearly paramount, a fact recognized in the West only by a well-informed elite. With a few notable exceptions (Ramon Lull and Thomas Aquinas), it was rare for Christian theologians to ponder the religious abundance of Islam. Professor Norman Daniel has recently outlined for us the essentials in the false representation of Islam by Western Christians.⁶ This is what made Prof. Abd al-Rahman Badaoui respond: "What monstrous slanders and what frightful lies have been heaped upon our Prophet and upon Islam! I myself have seen the disastrous effects, still rooted in the opinions of both simple people and the educated alike.... All sorts of circumstances have contributed to the formation and growth of this misunderstanding: circumstances in the religious,⁷ political and even economic sectors... with its origins dating as far back as St. John Damascus."⁷

However, let us not accept too readily Christian ignorance and misjudgment about Islam as normally deliberate or intentional. We must not forget that for centuries the Christian Greco-Latin West was wrapped in deep ignorance of Muslim reality because of a lack of knowledge of the language and of Arabic culture. Eastern Christians, aware from birth of this very culture, have not been quite so terribly locked into their prejudices as the Christians of the West. And the Eastern churches of Antioch, Damascus, and Baghdad have been attentive to Muslim reality, so to promote, under present social and political conditions, mutual understanding.

One cannot therefore overemphasize the work of linguists and of Western orientalist who have granted Westerners an understanding of Islam and also some access, through Eastern culture, to knowledge of the truths and religious values conveyed in the Qur'an and Muslim traditions.

Christians could no doubt complain as well of having been misunderstood by their Muslim brothers and sisters, even though the exigencies of the Muslim-Christian controversy during the Middle Ages led quite a number of Muslim scholars to take a close interest in Christian dogma. The fact is that all too often the other's religion has been judged on the basis of the "practice" and everyday behavior of its followers, and not according to the ideal proposed or to the precepts revealed. Each one knows that there is a fundamental injustice here, even as it is unjust to appraise the other's religion solely on the basis of personal criteria. If, indeed, sincere efforts were made in the West at various times to comprehend the Muslim religious experience "from the inside," they enjoyed but a fleeting existence and hardly disturbed the accumulated mass of

prejudices. It is of these prejudices, therefore, that the Christian of today is asked to become aware. The Second Vatican Ecumenical Council was pleased to repeat that "although in the course of the centuries many quarrels and hostilities have arisen between Christians and Muslims, this most sacred Synod urges all to forget the past and to strive sincerely for mutual understanding."⁸ To forget the past does not mean that one ought to ignore the present consequences of it-on the contrary; pardon for past errors cannot be exchanged between Christians and Muslims unless they are of a firm mind to "convert" their mentalities and attitudes. As Professor Abd al-Rahman Badaoui has said: "We must do our best to see to it that every false concept and all the lies attributed to the one or the other religion disappear. By this joint effort at profound and sincere understanding, we could dispel all misunderstanding growing out of religious differences."⁹

There is an issue that disturbs the Muslims more than any other 'in their approach to Christians: it is the silence and reserve of Christians regarding Mohammed. He is, for Muslims, of course, the last and the greatest of the Prophets. Our reticence on this subject surprises and scandalizes them. They do not understand why we refuse to grant Mohammed the respect they themselves grant to the person of Jesus.

The question is difficult and deserves to be treated by competent and discerning experts who know the exigencies of both the Christian and the Muslim faiths-experts who know as well the dimensions of heartfelt respect (and not just out of courtesy or politeness) that we owe to each other. The fact is that for many years among us Christians there has been a tradition or an ingrained tendency to disparage and judge severely Islam's Prophet. We Christians ought to become fully aware of what we have said and written in the past (and even recently) about Mohammed. There has been inexcusable subjectivity in our harsh judgments, not to mention the written errors regarding Mohammed, the respected Prophet of Islam. As we are well-informed about these unfortunate attitudes, let us express at the opening of a dialogue with Muslims our sincere and deep regret for these erroneous judgments and abusive expressions, such fruitless and inappropriate utterances for a Christian. This small step is a prerequisite to any endeavor toward friendly and confident relations with the Muslim believer.

II. Weighing the Importance of the Prejudices to be Combated

In an interview given to the Lebanese daily, *L'Orient*, Father Joseph Cuoq said: "The past was the past. Let us file it away in the archives and together, now, write a new history in which brotherhood will replace opposition, and mutual love, indifference. Come and see: we have rebuilt our house."¹⁰ Though, it must be added, the great mass of Christians have yet to learn from those responsible what is this renovated outlook with regard to the Muslims which the Second Vatican Council bids them develop in the spirit of the Gospel. Owing to historical analyses and to the efforts of conversion realized in recent years, the Christian authorities are quite aware for the future of the various prejudices to be combated. Thus the *Guidelines* of the Secretariat for Non-Christians acknowledges that "we have to make a thorough re-evaluation of our way of looking at things. We are referring in particular to certain 'ready-made' judgements often proffered to the detriment of Islam. A fundamental point would seem to be to avoid harboring in our innermost hearts hasty or rash judgements which would appear ludicrous to any sincere Muslim." It would not be a waste of time, therefore, to list some of these "ready-made" ideas on Islam "so that we may have the matter straight in our own minds before engaging in dialogue."¹¹

The same directory applies itself to a rapid enumeration of those prejudices which, on the level of language, behavior, and written judgments, are constant in the way they present themselves. Its interest in doing this is not merely to denounce them, but to provide immediate proof that they do not correspond in reality and truth to authentic Islam, even though they have been encouraged at times by certain failings or decadent aspects which Muslims are the first to denounce in their own history. It is a fact that many Christians with little education too often imagine Islam to be the religion of fatalism, legalism, and fear, of laxism, fanaticism, and opposition to progress. These are false accusations which continue to be directed toward Islam by numerous Christians.

But people of knowledge and experience know very well that “if Muslims believe in the Divine Decree and accept without questioning the inscrutable Will of God,” developing in its regard perfect obedience and admirable patience, the individual is aware too of the need to make a personal effort of reflection (*ijtihad*) since one also creates or invents one’s own acts and is denied all passive resignation and fruitless abandonment by the present Reformists. Likewise, if Muslims love the Law, the perfect expression of the will of God, they know that “actions are only worth the intentions behind them,” and that “piety” is also reverential fear and confident expectation before the mystery of divine mercy. one cannot therefore accuse them of legalism, just as it would be unjust to assert that Islam is the religion of fear. “There is no question of a ‘religion of fear; it is a matter of obeying God because one trusts in his Mercy and one loves his Commandments.” Furthermore, “in 1965 one of the principle daily papers of Cairo published an article by the *shaykh* of al-Azhar, entitled *al-Islam, din almahabba* (Islam, religion of love). It was mainly a question of the love of one’s neighbor, but based on faith in God.”¹²

To correct more decidedly the “false notions” prevailing with regard to laxism in Islam, the same directory stresses that “there is a moral code in Islam based on the Qur’anic *akhlaq* (customs) and it is very strict.... It would be quite wrong to say that there is no family morality in Islam. It does exist and it has many fine points.... [And] an act of disobedience... deserves punishment....” It goes on to explain that it is Muslim zeal which have led many to see there a fanaticism too easily sustained by fairy tales and ridiculous formulas. As for opposition to progress, this is a social defect which some Christian societies have also suffered; it is to confuse particular historic situations with the religious message which attempts to give them life and meaning. “It is really very difficult to see anything in Islam itself that opposed to the findings of modern science... [though] it is quite true that there are communities in certain parts of the Islamic world whose social structures, dating from the Middle Ages, give the impression of being completely static.... The Christian must be on the alert to discover the sincere efforts at renewal being made in contemporary Islamic thought.”¹³

Other prejudices are still expressed or implied in certain socio-political attitudes. Too often, Christians have the idea, rightly or wrongly, that the distinction between religion and the state does not exist in Islamic countries. Basing themselves on particular situations or dramatic events in which religious factors alone are taken into consideration, they conclude that there is no room in Islamic society for anyone who is not a Muslim, just as it is impossible to guarantee freedom of religious choice or to maintain there the free exercise of their religious worship. Certain competitive methods of presenting the religious challenge to non-believers, in Asia and Africa, sometimes encourage such prejudices, as does the rejection by some predominantly Muslim countries of a certain cultural or religious pluralism. The Secretariat for Non-Christians gives particular attention then to this question, showing that Islam also recognizes a distinction between religion and the state, though the two sides may approach it from different angles,¹⁴ and that many modern states now have a different understanding of it.

There is yet another domain in which incomprehension is almost total, though it involves the highest forms of charity and of mutual aid. Christians and Muslims throughout the world are far from respecting one another when they dedicate themselves to the aid of disinherited populations; work to educate new generations in the schools, colleges, and universities; or serve the sick and dying in hospitals and dispensaries. Very quickly, the most violent accusations of treacherous proselytism are exchanged and amplified instead of concentrating on healthy religious “competition” in the realm of respect of persons and societies. The duty of the apostolate as conceived by one or the other religion is often expressed by strife and the expending of energy in which the glory of God is no longer assured.¹⁵

III. Efforts Made by the Christians

What is important for the subject here treated is not the more or less exhaustive enumeration of the prejudices and misunderstandings that still exist, but rather the presentation of the efforts

made by both sides to suppress and diminish them. In what concerns Christians, they can here affirm that their efforts in the last quarter century have been sincere as well as immense and varied. It is not possible to give a full account of what has been done, though the highlights will be recalled, since such a survey necessarily encompasses the areas of thought and action, at the level of both persons and societies, in secular as well as religious domains. And it should be stressed here that if the texts of the Second Vatican Council represent the happy outcome of the courageous research of a few brave pioneers, since 1962-1965 they constitute for Christians the essential charter for renewal of relations with Muslims.¹⁶

Encouraged by the Council, the various local churches inaugurated a new mode of behavior; for this they attempted to secure the collaboration of some special "secretaries." At the Vatican level, Paul VI established, on Pentecost of 1964, the Secretariat for Non-Christians, which had as successive presidents and animators Cardinals Marella and Pignedoli. On March 1, 1965, an Under-secretariat for Islam was added to it, with the essential task of promoting a Muslim-Christian dialogue in all its dimensions, directly, while working at the same time to bring about a change in the mentalities of the Christian populations. A diligent reading of the *Bulletin* of the Secretariat¹⁷ gives one an idea of its undertakings and initiatives, just as the introduction to its *Guidelines* provides some notion of the spirit of its interventions. "The aim of such dialogue is not to 'convert' the other party, nor to make them doubt their own faith. It should quite simply stimulate those taking part not to remain inert in the positions they have adopted, but to help all concerned to find a way to become better people in themselves and to improve their relations with one another, so as to make the world as a whole a better place in which to live."¹⁸

Numerous have been the Christian theologians, historians, exegetes, and legal scholars who have tried in the last half century to update the knowledge of the Christians world with regard to Muslim religious experience. There has been no lack of books and reviews on the subject, in which such men as Massignon, Montgomery Watt, Asin y Palacios, Gardet, Anawati, Jomier, Hayek, Moubarac, and many others have placed their learning and skill at the service of better dialogue. Is it not first necessary, after all, to provide Christians with a scientifically exact and religiously sympathetic acquaintance with Islam and Muslims? Several Catholic theological faculties, especially in Rome at the present, include instruction at university level on "the religious reality" throughout the world, with a more or less important place given to Islam. The professors strive to present the Islamic religion to Christians in a way recognizable to Muslims by having recourse to the Qur'an and to the classical works of the Muslims themselves.¹⁹ (At Temple University, Philadelphia, Christians, Jews, Muslims, and others are instructed in Islam by Muslim professors-who are also engaged in dialogue by their Christian, Jewish, and other professorial colleagues. J.E.S. editor]

If scientific publications have multiplied in number, studies more specifically consecrated to Muslim-Christian dialogue have also appeared on the scene to attack head-on the prejudices mentioned earlier and to propose new ways of acting. Thus *The Guidelines for a Dialogue between Christians and Muslims* has gone into successive editions in many languages.²⁰ It is a small booklet in which the authors do not try "to fix definite formulae for such a dialogue, but rather to define the spirit in which it should take place. We should be animated," the authors go on to say, "by a deep respect and a disinterested love for those who are taking part in this dialogue with us. This does not mean that we must agree with our partners all along the line, but what it does exclude is merely expressing disapproval or indulging in polemics" (P. 9).

The diffusion of documents such as this has made possible an increase in the number of new initiatives to remedy former attitudes; for instance, the revision of certain catechetical manuals and textbooks for young Christians in which the faith of their Muslim friends is presented with respect and understanding,²¹ regional meetings between those in charge of local churches-Catholics and Protestants-to put into practice the "new spirit," share experiences of dialogue, and resolve problems and conflicts in which the religious factor appears basic; where local situations permit, Muslim-Christian conferences or seminars,²² temporary loan or permanent transfer of places of worship from one community to the other,²³ participation in the formal opening of new

mosques and churches (whether in the Middle East or in Africa);²⁴ exchange of messages on the occasion of special celebrations, in particular at the end of the month of Ramadan;²⁵ and reciprocal visits of delegations from Cairo or Riyadh and the Vatican for the purpose of improving mutual understanding.

It was the desire of Pope Paul VI that there be in Rome itself an institute staffed by specialists in Islamics where the Arab language could be studied and scientific research could be carried out into Islam and the culture arising from it. This investigation is pursued with the regular collaboration of Muslim scholars, and on the basis of texts and books which Muslim religious tradition has developed from early centuries down to our own times.

Meanwhile, a renewed Christian theology of non-Christian religions, already given expression in the texts of the Council, enabled each of them, and Islam in particular, to be more clearly situated in the history of salvation. The "religious value of the Muslim faith" no longer needs to be proved; it "bears... on great religious truths-strict monotheism, God's Word spoken to men by the prophets, the origin and end of the world, the resurrection and the Judgment...." Even though "*on the level of doctrine*, the two faiths [Christian and Muslim] are formally different, despite many common elements.... *on the level of religious attitudes* determined by the motive of faith, the essential characteristics of the Muslim faith give it a high religious value in itself and can even open it up to the economy of salvation which God has Willed" because it is "a theocentric, personal, supernatural faith."²⁶ One may better understand, then, the declaration of the Second Vatican Council in its Dogmatic Constitution on the Church: "The plan of salvation also includes those who acknowledge the Creator. In the first place among these there are the Muslims, who, professing to hold the faith of Abraham, along with us adore the one and merciful God, who on the last day will judge mankind."²⁷

Always in the same spirit of clarification sought by Pope John XXIII, the Second Vatican Council wished to affirm at the same time the requisites of religious freedom and to condemn all forms of religious proselytism. And we know that very strict instructions on this matter were conveyed everywhere. Thus, with regard to the missionary activity of the Catholic Church it is stated that "Christian charity truly extends to all, without distinction of race, social condition, or religion. It looks for neither gain nor gratitude. For as God has loved us with a spontaneous love, so also the faithful should in their charity care for the human person himself...[by] taking part in the strivings of those peoples who are waging war on famine, ignorance, and disease, and thereby struggling to better their way of life and to secure peace in the world."²⁸ And as the Vatican Council "declares that the human person has a right to religious freedom," it also asserts that "religious bodies have the right not to be hindered in their public teaching and witness to their faith, whether by the spoken or by the written word. However, in spreading religious faith and in introducing religious practices, everyone ought *at all times* to refrain from *any* manner of action which might seem to carry a hint of coercion or of a kind of persuasion that would be dishonorable or unworthy, especially when dealing with poor or uneducated people."²⁹ Absolute condemnation of all proselytism and a reminder of the duty of the apostolate, that is "to present one's faith," such are the two pillars of an exacting "religious freedom."

It is clearer than ever before, to the whole world, that Christianity should not be confused solely with the fate of the traditionally Christian countries of the West. In every corner of the world, Christians consider themselves full-fledged citizens of the city in which they live and of the country the love, without any discrimination, adopting as their own the words of Gamal 'Abd an-Nasir (then President of the Arab Republic of Egypt), spoken at the laying of the cornerstone for the new Coptic-Orthodox cathedral in Cairo: "The equality of opportunities is one of the first principles proclaimed by revealed religions, because by brotherhood, and equality between citizens and their opportunities, we can build the type of healthy community that religions aim at.... Over the centuries, Christians and Muslims have always been brothers.... God has never called us to fanaticism but to love... [so] no distinction is made between citizens [though] we may encounter difficulties We must invite the fanatics to wisdom, whether they be Muslims or Christians.... This is a problem that concerns the whole nation,"³⁰

IV. Hopes and Regrets

Let me confide to the reader certain mute sufferings. Both sides want so much to be recognized for what they are and above all for what they wish to become in the fullness of their faith. Christians experience deep suffering whenever their friends cast doubt on their belief in the One God. On this point, did not Professor Mahmud Abu Rayah himself have to fight his coreligionists who regard Christians as unbelievers, having no God and "Associationists"-in brief, creatures automatically condemned to the fires of hell?³¹ Christians run the risk at times of being deeply offended by this doubt hurled at their monotheistic belief, a monotheism which is just as unbending as that of their Muslim brothers and sisters. The Christian mysteries do not run counter to the unity and uniqueness of the divine *nature*. This will have to be demonstrated to them continually in the manner of Cardinal Koenig when he presented his theological conference on March 31, 1965, at the University of al-Azhar on the subject of Christian monotheism and the Christian struggle against every form of atheism, ancient and modern.³²

We are just as sensitive, if not more so, to the constant refutation of our Sacred Scriptures. The wish is often expressed that we Christians might produce an "authentic Gospel" (*injul sahih*), which, we are perfectly well aware, signifies that the Gospel we are presently using is unauthentic (*ghayr sahih*). An assertion of this sort does not so much offend our intelligence, which is inclined to be humble before historical science and the requirements of textual criticism (which is highly developed and carefully defined); rather, it is in our hearts as believers that such a repetition of unsubstantiated legends, injurious to our faith, leaves its wound.

Furthermore, Christians too often hear talk of a Holy Alliance against the growing forces of materialism or of communism, and they fear then-are they right or wrong in this?-that Muslim-Christian collaboration has only negative aims. Cardinal Duval of Algiers has said that "one must not seek in this dialogue a closing of the ranks aimed at uniting Christians and Muslims against a common enemy. The basis of dialogue between Christians and Muslims is the action of God in the lives of both. It is not for me to say whether Muslims can profit from the example of Christians; but many Christians-and this involves a requirement of their faith-are aware of having received help from sincere Muslims to affirm, in all areas of their life, the transcendence of God, by prayer, the sense of his presence, and the thought of his judgements, and a human conception of the duties of almsgiving and hospitality."³³ A dialogue of action, composed of a convergence of interests of values, would not satisfy the Christian who expects a fraternal sharing of religious experiences in which each may speak of God to others. It is faith in God that must reunite us and urge us to serve our brothers and sisters. It is because we believe in the living God, who is just, who gives love freely and is merciful, that our "common commitment" to the service of humankind has as its aim to promote and defend life, justice, freedom, and mutual love.

For this reason, Christians would like to be better understood in their current efforts. Let us make a distinction between their efforts and witness, and the deeds of the nations-lay-States, and sometimes atheist-whose free citizens they are. Faith in God is first and foremost an intimate and personal reality. It is submission to God alone and to no one else. This is the basis of its strength to resist all the modern new idols and its weakness as well since it refuses to use the means of "Human force." Today's Christians have rediscovered the significance of prophetic behavior through a conversion whose dimensions are ill-appreciated by their friends. They are often accused of collusion or political intent when what they are really trying to do is to hold to the level of a strictly religious affirmation, in pure faith and without relying on any material support. Was this not the case, in fact, with the conciliar declaration on Judaism? Hassan Saab, a Lebanese Muslim, could write: "It is regrettable that fear of zionist exploitation of the Declaration has prevented the Arabs from closely examining it in its totality. The Catholic Church, focused on its own truth, turns for the first time to look at the reflections of truth in other religions. Islam is presented as a sister religion. The Christian is exhorted to cease all discrimination, not only against Jews but against all non-Christians. In this new attitude, the Church deserves to be imitated rather than criticized."³⁴

Thus, has the time not come for both sides, whenever they have a choice between various theological schools on a point of doctrine or practice, to prefer that school which more clearly favors encounter with the other party and mutual existence in peace and friendship? Though Christians and Muslims envisage differently the difficult distinction between “religion” and “state,” is it so hard to imagine them opting for doctrines which protect pluralism and reject every sort of privilege hidden behind denominationalism, feudalism, and provincialism? In the modern world there are many countries whose citizens belong to different religions. Over and above simple peaceful co-existence, must not believers seek together criteria for work and culture based exclusively on the personal worth of individuals, without any privilege being attached to their confessional adherence? This would solve many conflicts and would help to avoid others in many African and Asian countries.³⁵

Conclusion

It is difficult, of course, after centuries of polemical combat or in the horror of certain present-day dramas, to trust in the complete disinterestedness of the interlocutor. Christians are well aware of this difficulty, and, yet, they would like to hope that their friends will believe them more after this conference in which they have presented the sum of their efforts, endeavoring to do so in truth and humility. ‘Our mistakes of the past and of the present have been and are at once acknowledged and denounced in what remains of them today: prejudices and misunderstandings which can only be suppressed little by little through a long effort of clarification, conversion, and sensitization. The hope of Christians is their certitude that some of their Muslim brothers and sisters are bent on doing as much from their side to make themselves better known in the fullness of their faith and the totality of their tradition, including their Sacred Books. The discussion to follow should throw further light on our common road, uncover yet a thousand more obstacles along the way, and give us the courage to help one another as brothers and sisters to overcome them one by one’. For their part, Christians know they must persevere by means of protracted patience, comforted by these words of Pope Paul VI: “May your work make the light of God’s glory ... shine ever more brightly in the world. And may Christians learn in their turn to know and properly esteem ‘what treasures a bountiful God has distributed among the nations of the earth’ (*Ad Gentes*, 11). Thus do you lend your personal collaboration to the plan Of God in history. conscientiously and humbly, even though you do not yet see its fruits or success here below. We must give witness of patience, faith, and detachment....”³⁶