

The Meeting of Muslim and Christian

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In 1948 in Algiers there appeared a French novel by Malek Bennabi, one of the most articulate of Algerian Muslim writers. It concerned the conversion to the state of Islamic 'Falah' or good-in life, of a drunkard youth from Bone in Algeria, where the story opened. Pilgrims from the Maghreb had gathered in the seaport and the boat for Mecca was leaving on the morrow. The harbor-town had been busy with farewells and a festive air hung over the evening. Those not fortunate enough to go on pilgrimage had petitioned the happy ones to remember them at the well of Zamzam. Brahim, the hero of the story, had been oblivious of these pious aspirations all around him. He staggered home at midnight -- drunk as usual. Unable in his stupefaction to turn the key in the lock, Brahim had roused his uncle Muhammad in the midst of the night prayers. Remonstrating with his nephew, as often before, the uncle recalled the pious parents of the youth whose memory was now so wantonly desecrated.

Mumbling that his lot was 'Maktüb' Brahim stumbled to his bed and fell into a heavy sleep. But in the early morning he awoke after a dream of the Ka'bah where he had seen himself in the *Ibrām* garment of the pilgrim throngs. In a reverie he surveys his past life -- the drunken charcoal-seller of Bone. Into his reflections breaks the raucous *Hayyā' alā-l-Fālah* of the morning muezzin. "Come ye unto the good," Brahim impulsively decides to go to the mosque and in his unaccustomed prayers he resolves to make the pilgrimage. Since the boat is to leave that very afternoon rapid action is called for. But uncle Muhammad, overjoyed at the strange turn of events, aids him with the necessary papers and the sudden resolve becomes a reality.

Bennabi describes life aboard the pilgrim ship with insight. But his main theme is the regeneration of a soul, Brahim befriends a street urchin

who has stowed away on the ship and his solicitude for this lad plays a part in his own transformation. After the pilgrimage Brahim decides to stay in Medina, where the story leaves him as a cafe-waiter reconciled with his former wife, who had divorced him for his drunkenness, but who now comes to the Prophet's city to rejoin him. The title of the novel, significantly, is *Labbaika*, the word with which the pilgrim repeatedly announces his advent to the *Haramain*, "Here I am before thee O God," The study behind the title is a study of a man's reclamation by the good to which, in God, Islam bears witness.

We begin with Bennabi only to leave him at once. Our purpose is not to evaluate his thinking, nor to suggest that Brahim's remaining in Medina is perhaps regrettable if Bone is where he lived in wrong. Nor do we want here to explore the question whether the novel does not suggest somehow that it is easy to be good or that a man's retrieval need not involve redemption. The sole purpose in using Bennabi here at the outset of our theme is the assurance his novel provides that the things the Christian Gospel means and says have an immediate relevance to universal man. Indeed that there is a commonness about humanity and that the significance of the Gospel is an inclusive significance, since it is about precisely those things which are the burden of all existence and the ultimate concern of *all* religion.

These truths may sound trite and indisputable. Yet such has been the general course of Muslim-Christian relations that it is often this very confidence in the relevance of the Christian thing to the Muslim best which has been doubted or obscured. The encounter has too often looked like an academic barter, or banter, of competitive metaphysical systems or a kind of abstruse theological exchange of total alternatives where we have seemingly conceived that what we had to gain was a debating victory, rather than a spiritual awakening and that we had to work against rather than through Islamic concepts. Because, however, of the long legacy of Muslim-Christian relations it is good that we should be fortified at the beginning with the realization that beneath all that may have seemed barren and tedious there abides a real and an attainable mutuality of significance. He who goes into the world with the Gospel of Christ need never fear that what he takes is not already in positive relation to the religious meanings he encounters, however much he himself may fail in serving that relation. Nor, in the same world as God, need we ever lose heart.

A hopeful attitude, then, even despite the legacies and precedents of the past is not only our first need but our proper right. No implication is meant here against the massive loyalty and dogged erudition with which

the great Muslim-Christian controversy in earlier centuries was served. Every generation owes much to its position in the sequence and none has right to graceless reproach of those that went before. Our debt to past controversialists is immense -- and not only for the lessons of mistakes. Moreover, Islam itself has been transformed and the visage of much of Islam today differs profoundly from that which scorned Henry Martyn's mission or expressed itself in Ibn Hazm. If we are to be rightly critical of the history of Muslim-Christian controversy we must be rightly grateful for what by its painstaking it exempts us from, for what by its concentrations it frees us for.

No attempt is to be made here to examine in detail the course or content of that long controversy. I hope I am interpreting aright your wishes in trying to concentrate on the contemporary scene. But a few general remarks on the historical may perhaps be made as a prelude to our main concern. The story itself has been well traced by Harry Dorman in his doctoral study at Columbia *Towards Understanding Islam*. Professor Sweetman's volumes, especially the third in the series *Islam and Christian Theology*, offer a wealth of detail on the themes and pre-occupations of Christian writers and polemicists vis-a-vis Islam from John of Damascus, through Ricoldo of Monte Crucis and Ramon Lull. More recently, Gottfried Pfander's monumental *Balance of Truth* is still available, the number of its editions bearing witness to its esteem.

But through all these classic exponents of the Christian controversy with Islam, -- in Abu Qurra, Al-Kindl, Peter the Venerable and Nicholas of Gusa -- we find recurring patterns of argument that dominate the course of thought. And the Muslim reaction, though it varies in tone profoundly, as between Ibn Hazm for example and Al-Ghazali, revolves around the business of reciprocating defense and is not really sent self-critically into the heart of its own inward heritage. It is provoked, or inspired, to find Muslim resources for Christian antagonism, but rarely Muslim reasons for Christian openness. It is these latter surely that we must seek to explore as they lie latent in such thoughts as those of Malek Bennabi, and other Muslim self-expression to which we shall turn below.

The classic Christian controversy seems, however, to have left the Muslim much as he was inwardly and more vigilant outwardly. There are three important characteristics of the great controversy which may perhaps be noted: its scriptural pre-occupation, its comparative history and its metaphysical abstraction. The word 'scriptural' is purposely used here with a small 's' to indicate the competitive authorities of recorded revelation. There is a clash of the Biblical and the Quranic. Pfander, to take

a late example, explores what should be the criteria of the true revelation, then finds them vindicated ideally in the Bible and dismally unvindicated in the Quran. Henry Martyn ventures on a similar argument. The very earliest writers on the Christian side emphasize the prophetic fulfillment of the Bible and the lack of prophecy for Muhammad. Rarely does the discussion penetrate into the basic issue of the appropriateness of the auricular revelation of Muhammad's experience over against the concept of personality as the supremely proper vehicle of the self-disclosure of God. Rather the disputants assert the authority of their traditional volumes and when their claims are returned in kind, they develop more and more acumen in discovering flaws in the other's book or rebuffing allegations which their own provocation has done something to sharpen. Was it not in part the form of Christian controversy over Muhammad as the non-prophesied Prophet which engendered the complicating Muslim habit of searching curiously for Biblical precedents and parallels for the Arabian founder of Islam? It is true that certain features of the Islamic notion of the inter-relatedness of *Taurah*, *Zabür* and *Injil* explains this in part. But much of the liability of this kind of discussion, still with us in the Ahmadiyyah movement, we owe to the ineptitude of much Christian custodianship of Biblical faith.

Then there was the instinctive comparison of histories, touching to the quick the Muslim susceptibilities about the nature of Muhammad and his role in history, sacred and mundane. All too often those comparisons gravitated to the least important areas having to do with wars and marriages, more than anything else. Not that these do not have their place. The trouble was that they tended to monopolize debate and so to obscure the deeper questions of which they formed only part. Muhammad was taken to task, at once too much and too little, castigated on the one side and so in turn vindicated on the other by criteria that had not plumbed the depths of their duties to the absolutes of every age. At its worst this kind of controversy provoked Muslims into wild and sometimes irrelevant discussions of western patterns of sexual behavior, or at other times it stimulated certain Muslim minds to condemn as weakness, or even effeminacy, the qualities of the Jesus of the Gospels. When this happened Muslims had been carried far from the traditional veneration for Jesus which, looking upon Him as the prince of pilgrims, or the Imam of the homeless (*Imām al-Sā' ihīn*), did not normally associate Him with any compromise of manliness. In this way the form of Christian controversy in some sense contributed to the obscuring of the very Gospel picture itself, in a way that cannot wholly be attributed to malice on the other side.

Since all religious systems, being, as Martin Buber finely said, molds into which the spirit of man is poured, tend to react defensively to alternatives that present themselves aggressively. The Christian concentration on the reprehensibility's of Muhammad and of Muslim history frequently evoked a self-vindicating reaction of the 'tu quoque' kind, or else a hardening of alienation. Only rarely did they lead the Muslim mind back into an examination of its own heritage. It is not without significance that the Aljmediyyah Movement as one of the most expressive and assertive elements in contemporary Islam was largely generated in a context, at Qadian, of conscious anti-Christian militancy. The areas in which it has been ready for compromise of Muslim orthodoxy have been areas involving a sharpened resistance to the Church, in an effort to render Islam -- even at the price of unorthodoxy -- more independent of Christian eschatology. It is this defensive reaction against missions which largely explains why Mirza Ghulam re-interpreted the Quranic account of the crucifixion to allow of Christ's being nailed on the Cross without dying, and then buried Him in Kashmir. In this way, his heavenly 'rapture' was eliminated and Islam is emancipated- from any further expectation vis-a-vis Christ. In this way, it would appear, Mirza Ghulam Ahmad wished to fortify a Muslim sense of distinctiveness and self-sufficiency. But the immediate point is that he was responding negatively to Christian mission. This is a paradox we do well to ponder. It returns in part to that sense of menace to Islam which Christian expression aroused when it centered itself so much on historical controversial assessments of a delinquent Muhammad.

When this emphasis on history was extended into comparative discussion of Muslim Empire it was always in danger of being forced into the role of the Devil's advocate, in the sense that it was necessary to dwell on the sinister and unsavory aspects of historic Islam in order to prove the point. This of course is not a situation unique to missionary writing. Politicians have been guilty too. When Lord Cromer, for example, wrote that "Islam reformed is Islam no longer" he coined a foolish phrase which really meant that he wanted the essential Islam to remain the atrophied thing he thought it was. This may have been an easy way since it obviates the need to reckon with change and the unfamiliar. But it is entirely inappropriate to its subject. Temple Gairdner of Cairo in his writing on Islam was always acutely aware of this danger of seeming to want Islam at its worst just in order to have a readier, more devastating case to make for an alternative. He always sought to avoid it, since it invariably provokes from the other side some form of the retort: "But this is not that: Islam is not the thing you accuse it of being." It is a very obvious further step to dismiss the interpreter of the Gospel as the calumniator of Islam. Such

is the dilemma to which an over-controversial historical pre-occupation seems often led.

An undue confidence in metaphysical debate was the third point in our analysis. This need hardly be illustrated here. One can find documented in Sweetman with more fullness than one can readily digest the Christological niceties and minutiae of Muslim-Christian controversy. Doubtless numerous factors made for this. But alike in Ramon Lull and Henry Martyn we find this -- to us -- strange confidence in the power of dialectic, this excessively logical and terminological approach. When perpetuated into our times it sets many inter Muslim-Christian themes in areas where they have no meaning for the average devotee on either side, or in realms that are abstrusely remote from the business of the new social and national context.

Yet having assessed the classic exposition of Christian truth for Muslims as unduly 'scriptural,' historical and ontological, in the senses indicated, we must beware the impression that these areas of meeting are dispensable or avoidable. When Professor Christy Wilson, in his *Christian Message to Islam* a few years ago, wrote that the whole Muslim-Christian controversy had passed into the limbo of forgotten things, he surely overstated the case. It is not so much *Whither* controversy?, since the Gospel in the profoundest sense is always controversial. The question is perhaps rather *Whither* controversy? or How? and Whence? It may be said that the most ultimately controversial is never provocatively so. The controversy of Christ with the soul is not always in or through the controversy of the Christian with the system. Yet it is through Christians, concerned about systems, that Christ works. Here is the heart of our problem. It is no use calling for things like Biblical realism and assuming that by a phrase we have banished the besetting needs -- or sins -- of controversy. When the Madras report on evangelism appealed in the Near East section for "the winning way to the Muslim heart" and identified it as the way of witness and the sharing of experience it was profoundly right. But the accompanying implication that thereby all sharpness of issue could be eliminated was mistaken. We may rightly desire to escape Christological subtleties as an exercise in scholasticism. But personal witness to God in Christ cannot be sincere without also being doctrinal. This then is the inescapability, and yet the liability, of the controversial. How to transmit, without compromising the mood of hospitality without which no transmission is likely, how to join issues without separating contact, how to be adequately Christian in terms both of truth and love: these are our needs.

We are of course seeking in these paragraphs a valid contemporary form of Muslim-Christian meeting. We are doing so in implicit recognition that only the Holy Spirit guides and only by His wisdom is ours not foolishness. But the Apostles themselves wrote on one occasion about matters seeming “good to the Holy Ghost and us.” We should not pretend to that claim but at least the apostolic precedent for it encourages the belief that the Holy Spirit may be working in the instrumental thinking of such as we are, provided we are humble enough to be just instrumental. Such at any rate must be the aspiration in all such discussion as we are engaged on here. In that understanding let’s turn to the present, fortified as we are by the long and probing lessons of many precedents.

Back for a moment to Malek Bennabi and his ‘converted’ charcoal seller. Must we not strive to address our ministry to felt needs within Islam and to deepening their feltness? Can we leave aside for the moment the question whether ‘conversion’ *has* to be patterned as we know it in Christ, through the Cross and unto the Church, and gratefully explore with any Muslims who will join us the corollaries of men’s remaking as they see it from the minaret and through the muezzin’s call? Let us strive to open up the whole rich meanings of the Christian understanding of man on the basis of where alert Muslims already find him. Let us mediate the Christian understanding of Christ from the starting point of the Muslim understanding of God, for there are so many points in the latter, which argue up into the former. Indeed, how often in studying Islam does the awakened Christian mind find itself saying in the words of Jesus: ‘Ye believe in God, believe also in Me.’ How can we interpret the force of this ‘also’ -- the necessity of somebody like Christ to any valid sense of a good omnipotence?

These are only a few of the queries that have to do with the vistas opened up by a mission to Islam that begins with what Muslims already believe and goes forward in terms of Muslim concepts -- their implications and their corollaries, it may be inconsistencies. “Let the word of Christ,” said St. Paul, “dwell in you richly in all wisdom.” Let the Christian message, he surely implied, be so deeply implanted in the mind that it controls all thinking and inspires all responses. Let it so enter into the collective body of the faithful that it really makes a home for itself in their minds, secure enough to be hospitable to all that need it in the context and as expressive, by that very hospitality, as any true home is, of its inmost nature. This, in Pauline metaphor is what we have in mind. Not, that is, to think of the Christian mission as going out to do battle, but going out to take in guests, to give itself and so its message in a genuine openness to all the aspirations and dilemmas of the world, not holding them indubitably because they start

outside the Church, but ripening them by ministry to the maturity of their promise.

We will not stay here to discuss the agencies through which this can be done, the institutions, publications, forms, through which this hospitably dwelling word of Christ in us invites men to its wealth of wisdom. In the end all those means turn on persons, people in whose hearts Christ Himself has taken up His abode. Instead our duty here in the time that remains is simply to try to illustrate a few out of many central ideas in contemporary Islam in terms of which we may hope that “the word of Christ might dwell in us richly.”

Let us take first what we will risk here calling the problem of evil, not however in the sense of a theological discussion as to its origin, nor yet a theodicy in face of it, still less an evaluation of human freedom and Divine responsibility. Rather take the problem of evil as a dilemma of the new Muslim societies. May not some people come into a sense of the wrongness of the soul through the wrongness of the soul through the wrongness of society? The second at least is a phenomenon that events and thoughts in some circles in Islam are making paramount. Consider for a moment the obvious fact of new political self-responsibility through most of the Muslim world. This development is a feature of our own generation too familiar to require elaboration. But notice how, for the thinking person, the new independence is obliged to turn the human diagnosis inward. The old external alibis are no longer convincing. It is true that some features of the Pakistani or the Egyptian or the Indonesian scene may still be blamed on the lengthening entail of British or Dutch occupation. A balanced view of imperialism is not something to be looked for in the present mood of self-awareness. But the range and validity of these alibis are steadily diminished as the years recede. Not only independence but wrongness is more and more seen to be one's own. The negative cast of mind, the external militancy necessary to oust the foreigner, these must gradually give way to self-constructiveness. The transference is not easy. But all that is necessary for our point here is that it has to be made. The more people become responsible for themselves the more the minds of their thinkers are confronted by the puzzles of their human nature – puzzles which were formerly veiled in measure because the inclusive diagnosis of the ills about men went indubitably and unerringly to the foreigner. The problem of evil is now a more domestic problem. Moreover, it is one which Islam in its new recovery of destiny believes itself not only competent, but designed, to solve.

So it is that we see religious ideology in measure underlying new movements of social reform sustained by the new nationalisms. It is true that in most Muslim countries the forces in power are not representative of conservative Islam. But they are surely in temper and intention deeply Muslim. The Egyptian Regime offers the most obvious and instructive example. It is dealing in effect with the problem of evil -- the evil of debauched monarchy, of corrupt politics, of social injustice and inequality, of national compromise with selfishness. Hence its internal revolution, while inspired in measure by Quranic concepts, is also deeply concerned about one sorry aspect of the earlier 'evil' in Egypt, namely its tolerance of a state of gross self-interest that led directly to the Arab defeat in the Palestine War of 1948-49. Indeed it is just this Arab view of that Arab debacle, as a part of the evil of its past, that underlies the impermanence in the Arab mind of the present state of truce. Israel, so to speak, bettered itself territorially and now wants to perpetuate that advantage, -- all as a concomitant of a tragic Arab political compromise of the true virtues of Islam. However this may seem to us, it is the way the Arabs see it. Palestine becomes a kind of symbol of what ought not to have been, not simply in the sense that peoples ought not to get defeated, but that they should not have gone into it already self-defeated by their own wrongness. So the problem of evil is real to the thinking Arab in the Near East, even if he passionately merges the one awareness with the other antipathy to Israel, into whose hands the deeper maladies actually played. But how many peoples before in history have always been able to distinguish clearly between the occasions of their failure and its causes?

Internally, then, and externally, this problem of why men are what they are, themselves their own worst foes, is present or latent in many Muslim minds. Nor is it a theory that is wanted but a remedy. It is worth pausing to remark that the problem of evil is all the entire sharper in a system like Islam which believes in the givenness of the good. Men's recalcitrance cannot be credited to ignorance. For the perfect revelation is in hand. Nor does exhortation to the revelation provide the answer, for such exhortation goes on all the time. The mystery is man's competence to ignore it. His recalcitrance *is* recalcitrance, not weakness or ignorance. And how does this non-submission, this non-Islam, this won't-power, this insubordination, relate itself to God, who is presumably deified, at least by implication, when the law of which He is the source, is flouted? Here are doors wide open to the Christian meanings of redemption, insofar as the word of Christ dwells in us sensitively.

Glance sometime at Abd al-Nasir's little book *Falsafat-al-Thaurah* (English translation: "Egypt's Liberation.") He refers there eloquently ' to

the need of a remaking of human nature, beyond a change of political regime. What he sought for, he writes, on the morrow of the revolution was for a single Egyptian who was not asserting his 'I' and scheming to make personal advantage out of the new occasion. But how does one come by these new men? How does one inject into the body social the inestimable benefit of disinterested unselfish souls, the stuff of national recovery and the sinew of social action? These are the questions to which the Church must speak, and speak as it must in the assurance that what it has to say is not a depredatory thing against which Islam does well to be guarded, but a meaning central to man's deepest hopes.

How, again, does one properly correct a situation like that of Israel as the Arab sees it? How does one react to the sense of being wronged? With destructive recrimination in which one also involves and blights oneself? Or with a recognition that only good, positive good, casts out evil, and only love builds and redeems? "Can Satan cast out Satan" is perhaps the profoundest of the Gospel sayings. To get to rights the situation as it is in the Middle Eastern world is infinitely costly because it cannot be repaired without its acceptance as it is. It is just this costliness of setting the world to rights which the Cross so eloquently proclaims, not as some arbitrarily constructed scheme of atonement, but as the central and inclusive expression of the forgivingness that assures forgiveness. So in being lifted up Christ draws all men unto Himself, gathers into His own passion the clue and the cost of their redemption. I do not suggest that all men can see this, now or soon. Still less that the Arab world is poised for a great act of magnanimity such as would retrieve the entail of its own and other's wrongs and make reconciliation a door of hope. But what we must say is that these are the real meanings of the place where men find themselves and that this is what Christ says to their situation. This is the true shape, surely, of His controversy with men. For all occasions, if only we interpret their fullness, are schoolmasters to bring us unto Christ.

I am not, of course, suggesting here that the Western ministrant can broach evangelism among Arab Muslims from the starting point of co-existence with Israel. Nothing so inane. At best he will only win the retort that as a Westerner he is anxious to see the liquidation of a situation that troubles his conscience. At worst much else. But what is meant here is that we must help the minds of men to think into the deepest meanings of their own dilemmas and that as they do so they will be learning the mind of Christ.

Are there any signs that these dilemmas are really searched? I think so. It is hard to know how much weight to attach to Abd al-Nāsir's little book. But taken at its face value it goes deep into these realms of man and evil, as all sincere political reformers must. There is some evidence also in Arab circles of a new interest in the person of Christ and not least in the Cross. One striking item here is the recent study by Muhaammad Kāmil Husain, a member of the Arab Academy, called *Qaryah Zālimah*, "City of Wrong." There is no time to discuss it fully here and perhaps no need since a contributor to the April and July issues of *The Muslim World*, 1956, has analyzed it carefully. Let me simply add that the orthodox view of the Quran on the Cross not only allows but requires the antagonism of the Jews to Jesus, which *willed* He should be crucified. What it disallows is the consummation of that purpose, which God thwarted by having the Jews crucify mistakenly a likeness to Jesus, while He escaped from the Garden to Heaven but the Passion, so to speak, up to Gethsemane, is all there, even in the Quranic denial that Jesus was crucified. He was at least One whom men intended to crucify. Even Abbās al Aqqād in his 1952 study on "The Genius of Christ" referred to the opposition suffered by Jesus as the bitterest accorded to any Prophet. So Muhammad Husain finds in the passions and reasoning's of Jews, and Romans, culminating in the sentence against Jesus, an index to the wrongness of humanity. These sins, he says, are re-committed day by day across the world. They were not isolated or confined to Jews and Romans. Indeed that Friday when Jesus was sentenced to suffer, men willed to crucify the conscience of mankind. Let me commend to you this book, as one of the most penetrating expressions of Muslim openness to the meaning of the Gospel that I have ever encountered. Nowhere of course does the author explicitly state that the Cross happened. But all that he writes is destined to shattering anti-climax unless he is prepared to concede that there was a self-offering of Jesus in a situation of contradiction (as Hebrews calls it) whereby men are shown to themselves for what they are. Surely to grasp this truth of the Cross as an index to humanity is to be on the way to a sense of its meaning as an index to God. One has only to pass beyond Jesus teaching by what He said (so as to arouse the enmity that made the Cross) to Jesus teaching by what He did with that enmity. Here surely the clues go together. To have seen the one is to be on the way to the other. We may be coming to a time in our missionary lifetime when the historicity of the Crucifixion will cease to be merely a matter of academic debate and become a theme of genuine understanding. If that happens we will be a long way to turning the flank of lots of the old Christological and Trinitarian controversies. For in the end the meaning of the Trinity is that God cares enough to redeem.

There is perhaps space for one other, somewhat different illustration of how we may search for a new and active Muslim awareness of what is distinctive in Christianity -- the sort of awareness that stays to ponder before it moves to disprove. Let me refer briefly to the basic Muslim concept of *Shirk* on which I ventured to write in a short discussion in the January issue of *The Muslim World* (to which I refer only to excuse the present brevity). *Shirk* as you remember is the deadly sin of association with God, the associating, rather, of anything with God so that it receives worship, attributes, functions, or ascriptions proper only to the One God. *Shirk* is the antithesis of *Taubid*. The One God is militantly so, intolerant of all usurpation, implied or actual, of His uniqueness. It may take many forms, but the one most popularly in mind when the term is used is of course idolatry, or plurality of deities. It is under the invalidity of *Shirk* that Islam condemns the Christian faith in the Divinity of Christ. It reprobates the classic Christian doctrine as a piece of idolatry it was designed to destroy. Yet nothing could be more polar in its contrast than idolatry is from Christology properly understood.

This business of association, as the Quran forbids it, is of course, association by men with God. It is deifying it deplorable, it does not (though the average Muslim does not stay to think this out)-- it does not exclude an association which the Divine wills with some human place, agent or time. Indeed revelation and religion alike would be impossible if God had no access to, no instrumentalities in, the world of men. Islam itself has many such loci of the Divine action -- Muhammad and Mecca in particular. These are the focal points, historically and geographically, of a Divine enterprise of revelation. In pilgrimage the Muslim comes to greet them both and says as he does so: "Here I am O God before Thee." In this revelatory sense the Divine is emphatically 'associated' with the human, though not of course so as to make the human Divine. But the human is certainly caught up into the counsels and intent of the Divine. Now of course the Christian understanding of Christ arises in just this realm of the Divine action. The great difference is that there are certain Divine purposes which the faith understands to be so rich and real that only God can truly undertake them. They are incapable of delegation. It takes God, we say, to reveal God, so when God is revealed it is God also Who is revealing. Man's redemption, being a deed of love such as only God has, must necessarily be God's deed. The crowning of prophetic revelation in the Son, the crowning of the Divine Compassion in the Cross, these are tasks so tremendous as to be inalienably Divine, both in their concept and their doing. So properly seen, the Christian understanding of Christ is not a part or an instance of the *Shirk* Islam decries, but a part -- the

instance -- of that Divine involvement in the human which the Quran posits only through *tanzil* to the Prophet. Christian faith about Christ is not deification. The direction is all the other way. Essential man is not made God by human superstition. The Word is made flesh. We on our side are recognizing a Divine involvement in our world that is inalienably Divine precisely because in its Self-giving it has no limits that withhold it.

Islam in effect 'withholds' God from such totality of involvement and does so in the interests of what it understands to be the Divine transcendence. But the Divine coming is no compromise of the Divine majesty, so long as it is Self-willed and so long as one obeys Divine, and not human, criteria, of what is fitting to God. These reflections merge into many more themes upon which there is no space here to enlarge: how the Divine prerogative of forgiveness, in which Islam believes, should be conceived to be at work: how the *Rahmān* becomes the *Rahīm*, how the revelation of a sovereign law involves the action of a sovereign grace, unless evil is to leave us with an unresolved dichotomy. There is also the question whether idolatry, which errs mathematically, is as heinous a form of *Shirk*, as men's defiance, which errs morally. Men who make themselves, their systems or their races, into ultimate's do more to flout the Oneness of God in ways that matter than does the simple pagan, who often multiplies deities out of a sense either of worshipfulness or fear.

But these questions we must leave. My purpose in raising the query about *Shirk* is simply that I feel a proper understanding of what it does, and what it cannot, mean helps to pave the way for a Muslim understanding of Christ from within his own sense of Divine sovereignty and activity towards man. There are signs in some quarters both in the Arab world and Pakistan that Muslims themselves are aware of the deep significance of the Muslim idea of *Shirk* as something much more inclusive than anti-idolatry in its Arabian form. Indeed they say there are conceivably senses in which even Islam itself in some forms is a kind of *Shirk*, if and when nomocracy, or community, or Islam for its own sake, usurp the role that only God should play in the lives of His creatures. But all that I mean to say here is that the more Muslims explore the feasible connotations of this most basic of all Muslim concepts, the further they will get from devalidating Christianity on such score. And positively, they may learn the Christian form of that Divine human inter-relatedness without which all religion would be farce and fantasy.

Many thanks for your patience. I do wish a more normal situation allowed me to be with you. The foregoing is a poor gesture towards a vast problem, but as long as men are men and Muslims are Muslims and Christ

is Christ we'll be putting our minds and wills to these themes. God be with you.



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