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Nurt SVD 49/2 (138), 429-448

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2015

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## Approaches to Islam: faith, religion and politics

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Among the great religions of the world, Islam occupies a “unique” position: first of all, in contrast to Buddhism and Hinduism, it is one of the three monotheistic religions. The Abrahamic faith commonly professed by Judaism, Christianity and Islam places them in a *sui generis* group allowing to highlight deeper commonalities which, however, due to the modalities of their expression, seems to sharpen the differences among them. Whereas this fact is in itself worth further scholarly investigation, the type of religion represented by these three monotheistic faiths contrasts arguably with the Indic, Chinese or other religious traditions. While what is often referred to as the core of religiosity, namely the *needy need* (Barth 1994: 118), may well be expressed differently in different world religions, the specificity of human dependence on the divine transcendence plays out in a markedly *unique* socio-political manner in Islam (Benthall 2014). Hence, among the Abrahamic religions Islam stands out in claiming the public sphere all for itself, apparently negating the validity of any *reasonable* separa-

tion between the state and the Church. These characteristics within the aforementioned categories – faith, religion, and politics – call for reflection and assessment especially when jihadist perspectives seek to assert a *homogeneous*, religious and political Islam. What we think of Islam depends very much on how broad or narrow our perspective is.

This essay engages with the question by highlighting three areas of interest: in discussing select aspects of the Christian approach to Islam, it calls attention to some of the challenges to be faced in inter-faith dialogue and beyond. Within the categories, namely faith, religion, art, culture and politics, the *prophethood* plays a central role in this discussion (I). By introducing the perspective of a contemporary academic, Tariq Ramadan, the essay deals with *changing perspectives* especially on the Islamic front. This should also be an occasion to take into account the grievances Western Muslims raise, and to differentiate the claims of the jihadists from the dominant common self-conception of Islam (II). Taking stalk of the dialogical incentive emerging since the Vatican II, this essay examines briefly the *domains of dialogue* explored and still engaged in especially between Catholics and Muslims: the areas of common initiative, collaboration, dissension, conflict, etc. on the one hand, and the *centrality of women* in discourses about Islam on the other hand (III). Whether they are on the theoretical realm or on the pragmatic implementation of *human equality* based on religious freedom, the Abrahamic faiths do possess resources still not yet sufficiently exploited.

### I. Aspects of Christian approach to Islam

Alike any encounter with the other (Bitterli 1989), Western encounter with Islam has been marked by ignorance, confrontation and collaboration (Southern 1962; Bennett 2008: 1-13). This pattern is not homogeneous especially if we take into account the perspectives of Christians within Islamic nations or of those in close contact with the Muslims (Sarris 2011). The salient paradigm here is John of Damascus who engages Islam with a specific Christological emphasis (Igrave 2003: 206f.). But before entering into any details, it is important to distinguish between the self-conception of Islam and its hetero-interpretation, the emic and etic perspectives. Further Western Christian engagement with Islam revolves mostly around two dominant thematic concentrations: faith/religion; and culture/politics, art being the expressive common link between them. Following some general remarks, this essay highlights, for brevity's sake, the dimension of faith, placing special emphasis on the *role of the prophet* as conceptualized within Islam and by its outside observers.

Since its emergence, Islam understands itself as a monotheistic *faith*, a historic *religion* with a revealed system of *belief* and *practice* proclaimed through the prophet Mohammed. According to the Qur'an, Islam is not only the name of the new religion but is also identical with the *ideal state* of humanity. The Qur'an talks about the *ideal person* who *submits* to the will of Allah, and fulfills the obligations revealed in this text (Saeed 2008: 22, 73). With respect to other religions, Islam understands itself as the *right faith/religion* without which one would not be accepted by God. This is so because Islam is a *substantive part* of the creational order established by God. It is important to note that this self-conception of Islam conjoins various dimensions – faith, belief, ritual, attitude and origination – which scholars of religion hold discrete<sup>1</sup>. Pursuant to this faith, the community (*umma*) of believers lives in a *world governed by* divine precepts. In this world (*dar-al-Islam*) a social or political system has its legitimacy based on the will of God expressed in the *Qur'an*, concordant with the Islamic law (*shar'ia*), and supported by the prophetic *tradition* (*sunna*). The Islamic self-understanding denotes a performative *form of life* intent on human fullness in submission to Allah. Hence Islam becomes a *totalizing concept of the true religion* which has existed since creation, has been proclaimed through the prophets, restored and brought to completion through the last messenger of Allah, Mohammed (Zirker 1994: 349-351).

This is a significant part of the Islamic self-conception wherein the *prophethood* constitutes a definitive dimension of its faith (Hageman 1994: 13-23). According to the Qur'an, Mohammed is a man like any, inspired by the One God (18:110), a warner and a bearer of glad tidings (35:23), who despite opposition requires *only* the witness of God (29:52). In all this he is alike the "25 prophets" (Saeed 2008: 66) mentioned in the text. Consequently the criteria to ascertain the veracity of a prophet (a later theological development) are linked directly to the *efficacy* of the prophetic message. In the case of Mohammed this consists in the confession of a *monotheistic faith*, which explains the enormous importance attached to the oneness of Allah, defended from any fac-

<sup>1</sup> The above mentioned discrete dimensions correspond to: *aslama*, *īmān*, *dīn*, *'ibāda* and *dīn al-ḥiṭra*. The tri-literal, consonantal root s-l-m plays a part in unifying the discrete dimensions: "Thus, *salam* means «peace» and *muslim* means «one who submits to» (to the will of God) and specifically one who is an adherent of Islam" (Wright 2009: 11). For a concise discussion of the topic with textual references to Qur'an, see: Chittick 2008: 218-235; Zirker 1994: 345-349. All references to Qur'an are given *only* in numbers (e.g. 12: 10) indicating the *sura* and the verses.

tual or imaginary false conceptions, and *shirk*, “usurpation of divine right” (Cragg 2008: 133) becomes the gravest *wrong* thinkable (Khoury 1991: 301-303). Though success of the message does not constitute a criterion, it is valued. With regard to the People of the Book (2:105) the prophet’s message is one of *continuity* (Hageman 1994:21-22), but the singularity of Mohammed consists in his *perfecting* the messages of Moses and Jesus, by introducing a faith not strict as that of Judaism, nor loose as that of Christianity; it is the *middle path*. Further the Qur’an understands Muhammad as the *last* prophet, “the Seal of the Prophets” (33:40). Called and sent by God, the prophet redresses the monotheistic faith, ensures its continuity with Judaism and Christianity as well as enhances their message and establishes a social order corresponding to this belief (Bsteh 1994: 24-34).

How do observers of Islam understand and evaluate this claim? Two perspectives are highlighted below: one reads the emphasis on monotheism and the denial of the “Son of God” as an issue of power (Mooren 1991), human as well as divine; the other attempts to interpret the prophethood as a significant trait of human-divine relationship since creation, conceived in a unique manner by Islam. In both cases two Qur’anic concepts stand out: “the nature of God and the essential relationship between the creator and his creation” (Saeed 2008: 62).

Although during the Meccan period the prophet’s message of monotheism was unequivocal, it was framed within the motif of creation. Hence the notion of occupying the middle, symbolized by the “olive tree of the midst” (Mooren 2000: 67 italics in the original; 24:35) distinguishes the Islamic faith from the “God’s chosen people” status claimed by the Jews and the “Son of God” title attributed to Jesus by the Christians. Since the Medina period, it was more pragmatically expressed in which the Muslims constitute a “monotheistic tribe” ... “with God as the real commander in chief, whose true vicar was Muhammad himself” (Mooren 2000: 72). Would this then mean that they understood themselves as a *society of contrast* (Theissen 1979: 33ff.) whose ultimate leader is the prophet both in terms of *nabī* (messenger) and *rasūl* (emissary/apostle)? A sort of; for, “the Prophet functioned at the same time as both a religious and a political and military leader” (Mooren 2000: 72). According to this perspective, the community founded by the Prophet provides the frame where under the guidance of God’s *merciful* law the believer can *pay back* to God (in Arabic *dana*; thus the term *dīn*, “religion”) his or her debts through a life of obedience and thanksgiving for God’s great gifts bestowed upon humankind. In this way the realm of the Islamic community naturally constitutes a zone of *protec-*

tion, and this in a triple sense: against attacks from the outside, against attacks from the "father of evil", Satan, from within, and finally against God's wrath when the "Hour" will come, the eschatological end of time and history (Mooren 2000:72, *italics in the original*).

The real task of the prophet would then consist in *reconnecting* the humanity to the original monotheistic belief exemplified in and by Abraham as well as in presenting it *universally* beyond the narrow confines of Israel to whom Jesus was sent. This claim of rehabilitation is illustrated in the story of the Ka'aba shrine (2: 121-129), reenacted annually in the pilgrimage of Haj, as well as in the Ramadan (2:185) celebration where the descent of the Holy Qur'an on the 27<sup>th</sup> is preceded by that of the gospel and of the Torah on the 13<sup>th</sup> and the 6<sup>th</sup> day respectively (Mooren 2000: 74-75). It is this specific sort of "salvation history" where the prophethood of Muhammed completes the monotheistic revelation – "the only content of God's revelation to humankind" (Mooren 2000: 74) – that Islam acknowledges despite highlighting the continuity with other Islamic faiths. For Islam suspects a "distortion" with Jewish and Christian scriptures (Saeed 2008: 147).

What does then the profession of faith, *shahada*, amount to? Interpreting *sura* 112 (and other passages) which affirms the unicity of God and denies any association or generation in God, Mooren argues that the issue of *filiation* is central to the prophet. Whereas "a man *needs* a son in order to survive decently" (2000: 76, *italics in the original*), God does *not* need one at all: "God alone is truly and really *self-sufficient*" (2000: 77, *italics in the original*). This self-sufficiency is demonstrated in his "being *creator* and *ruler* of the world" (*italics in the original*). And all this would mean that what is at stake in Islamic monotheism is not the number game of "one versus many" as such (as in monotheism versus polytheism), but the question of power versus powerlessness. Only God's potential constitutes a warranty for his being Creator and only this can give force to the argument that God will also be able to raise up humankind and rule over again, i.e. create them for a second time, namely for the final judgment (2000: 77; 31:27).

Further having lost his own sons shortly after birth, the Prophet might have come to appreciate the Sonless God (which is ridiculous for the human condition), who did reverse the prophet's role by making him the father of the multitude of believers. Sonlessness becomes hence the counterpart of the power of self-sufficiency (2000: 78; 1991: 95f.).

For Cragg (2008) too, the issue of "Jesus' Sonship to the Father" constitutes a crucial link with Islam. If read within the Abrahamic tradition as well as within the Qur'anic literacy... it cannot be denied that,

given the Hebraic antecedents, the defining Christhood of Jesus as the well-spring of Christian identity came via a context of things prophetic with which Islam could have no possible quarrel. For they were squarely inside the parameters of that "language tradition" which, "for the Qur'an, is Allah's way with the human world" (2008: 17).

From this perspective, the Islamic suspicion with regard to the Son of God or Christhood is legitimate<sup>2</sup>; it challenges the sovereignty of Allah; however, can it not be seen as "a *self-limitation*, a capacity inside the very being, possibly of power – manifestly – of love?" (2008:18). The argument is based on the creative sovereignty of Allah to whom *cannot* be attributed a *deus otius* status or any "divine disinterest in the world". Further, *shirk* being the withholding of what is due to God, it is *within*

"human power to alienate from Him and pay to pseudo-gods the worship, honour, status, and devotion due alone to Him. Thus, by the very insistent rubric against all idolatry, Allah is perceived to *suffer* in His creation and at His creature's hands" (2008: 18; Sirriyeh 1990).

The point shall be further pursued with respect to the Muslim confession of faith. Despite its nominal grammatical form, the Muslim confession of faith, *shahada*, "La ilaha illa Allah: Muhammadun Rasul Allah claims and enjoys a self-evident veracity" (Cragg 2008:68), the impact of which affects directly the non-believer and the apostate, as the raids during the Prophet's life-time, and the *Ridda* Wars under the first caliph Abu Bakr (who died in 634 CE) clearly demonstrate (Saeed 2008: 10-11; Wright 2009: 19-31). The *shahada* unites inalienably the monotheistic faith and the apostolate of the prophet. But what is affirmed in the *shahada*, what is confessed as faith, has a linguistic and cultural context. Read as it is expressed in "An Arabic Qur'an", the faith proclamation is "nominal and an absolute negation" (Cragg 2008: 67); it expresses a fact. Yet:

"Without the use of *is* there is a lack of exclusive affirmation. *Rasul-Ullah* is definite, as grammarians say, by *idafah* (*possession*) and must be translated as *the apostle of God*. But, in nominal sentence terms, this has to be inferred" (Cragg 2008: 68).

*Willful* doubting of the affirmation comes with the grammatical apposition of the expression, which in fact is constitutive of faith. That

<sup>2</sup> One might see herein the wisdom of John of Damascus in "shifting the debate from Christ as *Son of God* to Christ as *Word of God*" (Ipgrave 2003: 208), despite failing rapprochement.

is to say, faith *as* faith acknowledges a “negative capability”<sup>3</sup> without which it would be dogmatic, propositional and might lose its core-sense (“meaning inside *meantness*” Cragg 2008: 72). In other words, *questioning* and *self-critique* ought to be part of any faith or faith-perceptive.

All this would then mean that the prophethood of Mohammad as professed by Islam constitutes the counter side of monotheistic faith on which is grounded the elementary religiosity (*homo religiosus* chez Eliade) though expressible in diverse ways. The Qur’an condemns definitively and rigorously all expressions of polytheism, and asserts the unicity of Allah which the prophet repeatedly proclaims to his compatriots. In all this severe attack against polytheism, the crucial issue is expressed in two interrelated conceptual arguments: Allah alone is the creator of the whole universe for which humans owe him gratitude, and any association of whatsoever being to Him amounts to challenging His right of authorship, of due worship and of full submission. From the Islamic perspective, polytheism consists essentially and ontologically in denying the most obvious truth: the universe and all it contains, including the humans, is Allah’s. It is hence equal to falsehood about humans, about the world and about God. So much seems to be unproblematic for the Christian; the difficulties which arise on the theological/philosophical front require still further investigation (Bsteh1994: 24-42; Mooren 1991: 53-61). The issue shall be further pursued, though not directly, from the academic Islamic perspectives of *living the Muslim faith* in the West.

## II. Being a Muslim in the West

Though a controversial figure within Islam and for its observers in the West (Carle 2011), Tariq Ramadan is misunderstood by both, argues Gregory Baum, especially because his innovative theology is often ignored. Following Baum, we shall highlight the central features of Ramadan’s *new* conception of living the faith in the West, and shall add to it some alternative as well as critical perspectives.

<sup>3</sup> In reference to *Letters of John Keats*, p. 53 & 59, quoted in: Cragg 2008: 70. Charles Taylor’s (2012: 128-129) observation on the distinction between faith and belief might clarify the point: “Faith (or belief in, rather than belief that) incorporates an anticipatory confidence or hope in some further transformation. ... Faith, even confident faith, doesn’t exclude doubt. ... A confident, strong faith is one which can live in doubt”. Note, however, a different emphasis from an Islamic perspective: “The very word for faith - *imân* - expresses not the idea of *faith*, but a state of security, well-being and peace (*al-amân*)” (Ramadan 2010a: 10).



According to Baum, the features that distinguish Ramadan's theological undertaking shall be better set in the context of the Catholic reaction to modernity or more precisely to

"the emergence of political liberalism...[understood as] the recognition of popular sovereignty, the separation of Church and state, the equality of citizenship, the democratic form of governance, and the defense of human rights, in particular religious liberty" (2009: 20).

For alike Catholicism till the Second Vatican Council, the Muslim faith has been and is struggling to cope with modernity. The tools employed by the Church to accommodate with the political modernity, namely *universalism*, *contextualization* and a *kairological* reading of the "signs of the times", exemplified by Jacques Maritain and John XXIII, shall be seen as, *mutatis mutandis*, the "intellectual strategies" (2009: 31; 34f.) employed by Ramadan. This would first of all mean that his return to the Quranic sources affirms a *faith* perspective, but critical, and is in consonance with the 19<sup>th</sup> century reform movement *al-nahda*. Consequently, his is a theology of Islamic renewal alike that of the 18<sup>th</sup> century Wahhabism, but radically opposed to it in emphasizing the continuation of *ijtihad* with a "reformist approach" (Ramadan 2010: 3), and the integration of Muslims in the politically liberal and modernist West (Baum 2009: 37ff; Ramadan 2010: 41-45). Return to the Islamic sources does not connote, hence, a blind submission to the original text nor does the acknowledgement of political liberalism a total uncritical reception of it (Mooren 1991: 176f.). The nuances are crucial, and to these we turn now.

Acknowledging that the Quranic message is both particular and *universal*<sup>4</sup>, Ramadan argues that the latter dimension has been ignored in the Islamic history as it was more preoccupied with establishing communities in conformity with institutionalized legal systems. Crucial to this universal dimension is the revelation of the oneness of God (*tawhid*), which is part of human heritage (thanks to Judaism and Christianity) as well as admissible to any *reflective* person. Besides the fact that reason would resist polytheism, Ramadan's argument rests also on the *natural inclination* of humans to be monotheistic. "Divine persuasion relies on human intelligence. To the reflective person, the experience of being human and situated in the universe gives witness of God's authorship"; hence nature may be referred to as "the second

<sup>4</sup> Ramadan follows here the tradition attributed to al-Wahidi, on whom also other modernist and feminist interpreters rely. See: Hidayatullah 2014: 65ff.

sacred book, the first being the Quran" (Baum 2009: 64, 65). Quranic concepts and images corroborate this understanding. Thus the "inner orientation toward God" (*fitra*) shall be described as the "divine breath" indwelling and guiding the humans. Thanks to *fitra* humans are enabled to recognize the One God, "and strive to become brothers and sisters in a single family" (Baum 2009: 65, 66).

The emphasis placed here on the *universality of the monotheistic faith* worth attention. For it not only highlights a commonality of the Abrahamic faiths, but also links it to human rationality, and thus seemingly goes beyond any phenomenological explanations hitherto provided with respect to Islam. Without denying the relevance of sociological and philosophical factors, Ramadan concentrates on modernity's keen interest in rationality and agency both of which are now brought closer to the Islamic faith (Baum 2009: 67f.). Hence Ramadan would advance the argument that Islam is the faith *best suited* in the modernity, a fact Western Muslims shall witness and demonstrate. This claim of Islam's supreme relevancy addressed to the *umma* is based not only on the *new* interpretation of human condition but also on the inadequacy of existing religious-political conceptions in the West. Three concerns/issues are brought together here: the issue of faith/reason; the issue of stewardship; and the issue of science and technology. Understanding the cosmos itself as Muslim, "surrendered to God's will" (Baum 2009: 78), Ramadan's perspective promotes contemporary ecological concerns, condemns the *exclusive* emphasis on instrumental reason and highlights the divine call of humans "to do His will and enter into His blessedness" (Baum 2009: 70). However, in responding to this call, the Muslim does not acknowledge the condition of *original sin* as Catholics do; for the world is and continues to be *graced* in the creation; and for Ramadan this counts as an instance of better confidence in living in the world. Herein shall be seen a fine distinction brought in with respect to Goethe's observation: "If *Islam* mean submission to God's will... we all live in *Islam* and all die"<sup>5</sup>. However Ramadan's (2004: 113-14) acknowledgement of the human vulnerability and the universal expediency of the great *jihad* place the stewardship of the world common to all believers (Pandimakil 2007: 167f.). In arguing for a harmony between faith

<sup>5</sup> The full text reads: The folly! Everyman in turn would still/ His own peculiar notions magnify! / If *Islam* mean submission to God's will, / May we all live in *Islam* and all die. [Närrisch, daß jeder in seinem Falle/ Seine besondere Meinung preist! / Wenn *Islam* Gott ergeben heißt, / In *Islam* leben und sterben wir alle.] See: <https://archive.org/stream/westeasterndivan00goetuoft#page/86/mode/2up; www.textlog.de/18090.html> [accessed: 4.12.2014].

and reason, Ramadan addresses the dualities attributed to Christian thought, and re-introduces the traditional concept of the *middle path* discussed above.

According to Ramadan, Islamic thought perceives harmony between faith and reason; it recognizes the unity of persons, refusing to assign inferiority to the bodily parts; it sees no conflict between personal life and the common good; and it balances the attachment to earthly life and the desire for the world to come. Islam inspires the search for the middle, the avoidance of one-sidedness, the balance among human capacities (Baum 2009: 72).

Baum also points out that the search for the middle is typical of the *al-nahda* reform movement, but not of all currents in Islam; Ramadan's "critical openness to modernity" constitutes a trend akin to the perspectives of "contemporary Catholic theology" (2009: 73).

A second field wherein the reformist approach is employed is that of the Islamic law (*sharia*). Alike the traditional interpretation, Ramadan too understands it as the praxis dimension of Muslim faith corresponding to the "*particular* message addressed to Muslims" (84), expressed in the laws interpreted by the jurists (*ulama*). Thus the *sharia* enjoys Quranic grounding, authority and institutionalized status within the community. However, *sharia* is not simply Islamic law, it

"refers to the Muslim way of life: Muslims practice *sharia* when they give witness to God, say their prayers, offer alms and observe the fast. They practice *sharia* when they worship God and follow the Islamic ethos. *Sharia* includes rules and laws, yet it refers to a wider reality, the entire path that leads to God" (2009: 86; Ramadan 2010: 57).

This specific way of conceptualizing *sharia* is *innovative*, argues Baum, although Ramadan reads it as traditional. In fact, Ramadan performs a *deconstruction* of the traditional notion which praxis produces some significant results. Whereas the Qur'an seems to legitimize slaying the enemy (2: 191), permits polygamy (4:3) and the Sunna wants to prohibit pictures on account of idolatry, a contextualized, deconstructive reading may relativize and challenge these established meanings (Baum 2009: 89-91; Ramadan 2002: 269-275).

This being said, the deconstructive and classifying approach adopted by Ramadan comes with some significant constraints. The first among them is his insistence on interpretative authority; competence in the Islamic sciences is a *sine qua non*; no private interpretation is promoted. This is "because he regards the reading of the Quran offered

by the literalists and, more especially, by the politicized literalists as arbitrary and irresponsible" (Baum 2009: 94). For they offer an anachronistic model for Muslims in the West, obliging them to leave at the frontiers of society, or they disregard the "thick" living of faith, uncritically embracing the modernity. The tradition-continuous and legalism-transcending hermeneutics (*ijtihad*) proposed by Ramadan is complex<sup>6</sup>, but its three elements discussed by Baum (2009: 97-101) worth attention. These are: permissibility, intentionality and common good. With regard to permissibility, what matters to Western Muslims is the fact that cultural differences in the Islamic way of life do not threaten the authenticity of faith/religion. A practical instance of the second feature is exemplified by Ramadan's *rejection* of the introduction of Islamic courts in Ontario:

"Ramadan argued that the present law of Ontario offered sound protection for families and people in business and thus merited the respect of Muslims living in Ontario: they had no need of independent courts" (Baum 2009: 100).

The call for responsible citizenship in the West constitutes for Ramadan an instance of the third feature. Finally, the insistence on continuing such contextual interpretations of *sharia* amounts for him to a radical Muslim right. For... the doors of *ijtihad* have never been closed; no scholar would have the right to make such a decision in the name of Islam because a declaration such as this is, by its very nature, against Islam. In fact, *ijtihad*, as the third source of Islamic law and jurisprudence, is *fard kifaya*, a collective responsibility (Ramadan 2004: 48).

The above discussed *new* approach to Islamic universalism and *sharia* has a very concrete addressee: the *Muslim community in the West*, or more precisely the increasing number of Muslim immigrants especially since the end of World War II. Since these immigrant communities live in *liberal, secular, and democratic* nations of the West, they do face various challenges hitherto unknown to them religiously, politically as well as socially. Ramadan (2010: 51-55; 2002: 255ff.) addresses these challenges with great *pastoral* concern, that is, answering the question of what does *sharia* demand, and we shall highlight three crucial

<sup>6</sup> The sciences of *fiqh* (Islamic Law) are classified into: (1) general rules and methodologies for the codification of *fiqh*; (2) science of worship dealing with God's oneness, prayers, etc.; (3) science of social affairs dealing with marriage, custom, penal codes, etc. It is the application of the universal principles of *sharia* that *ijtihad* (interpretation) is concerned with. And the elements (possibility, intentionality and common good) discussed refer only to *ijtihad*.

notions, namely Islamic abode, immigrant integration and responsible citizenship, taken up by him.

Fully in agreement with the hermeneutic strategy hitherto followed, Ramadan argues that the classical concepts of *dar-al-Islam* (abode of Islam) and *dar-al-harb* (abode of war) still hold for most of the Muslims, despite lacking common agreement on their sense. Whereas the Salafi literalist scholars continue to adhere to these categories in referring to majority Muslim nations practicing sharia, and minority Muslim communities in non-Islamic nations, Ramadan considers these categories as antiquated, and do not correspond to the contemporary realities especially of the Muslims living in the West. For the Western Muslims do enjoy religious liberty, their faith is respected, their rights of practice and proclamation are legally protected, and they are free to participate equally in the society; and consequently even the accommodated term *dar-al-ahad* (abode of treaty) adopted by some *ulama* would continue the bifurcation of the world not supported by Qur'an and Sunna. The best term to refer to Muslims irrespective of the place they live would hence be *dar al-shahada* (abode of witness), and this reflects the divine calling communicated by the prophet as well as expressed in the Oneness of God, *tahwid* (Baum 2009: 107-111).

It is this deconstructed reading of the traditional categories that grounds the issues of integration and social responsibility. For, the calling to witness the faith constitutes the basis of all social life anywhere and at all occasions. In doing this, Muslims can recall the example of the prophet living among non-believers respecting contractual agreements as well as promoting the common good. Ramadan highlights the importance of not opting for isolation or caving in to assimilation; the middle path of self-respect and social concern is that of integration. However, he places emphasis on collective identity defining it by four engagements involving their faith: 1) The spiritual dimension: testifying to the One God, practicing the pillars of Islam, enjoying membership in the *umma* and exploring the spiritual life. 2) The intellectual dimension: studying the Islamic tradition, recognizing its contemporary relevance and being ready to keep on learning. 3) The communicative dimension: handing on the faith to the next generation and explaining the faith to the wider society. 4) The practical dimension: promoting justice in society and serving the common good in other ways (Baum 2009: 116).

Baum (2009: 118-120) reads this emphasis on integration and responsibility as very positive, for it is a call to solidarity in consonance with the central faith of Islam. Further, he argues that Ramadan is of-

ten misunderstood, especially in France, for mistaking his community-promotion as *communitarianism*, in the contemporary sense of exclusive defense of community interests in detriment or indifference to the rest of the society. In fact, Ramadan is not pursuing the promotion of a sub-culture, but the attainment of *denomination* status as Catholics finally did with the Second Vatican. All this would lead to a *vigorous defense* of democracy, social ethics, rights of women and religious pluralism (Baum 2009: 121-139), which makes Ramadan's perspectives similar to those of the mainstream Catholic thought. We shall take up this issue after examining briefly the dialogical encounter between Christians and Muslims since the Vatican II.

### III. In dialogue with Islam

Coinciding with her rapprochement with modernity, Catholic dialogue with Islam has taken a new turn since the Vatican II. Without entering into its history, we shall briefly discuss two actual challenges/opportunities which result not exclusively from *the interreligious engagement*, but also from the globally changing *political and social scenario*. Whereas the first issue calls for "clarity in Christian-Muslim relations" (Troll 2009), the second corresponds more to the socio-political Islamic *resurgence* alluded to above. For any dialogue to succeed, it needs to be utterly honest as well as realist. These are the issues briefly taken up below.

Cragg argues that any inter-faith dialogue faces at least two initial constraints: first with regard to the faiths entering into dialogue and second with respect to the recognition of what might be *unachievable*. This is doubly true in the case of Islam exemplified by the life of the prophet, and expressed in the political and religious dimensions. In the former case, the Meccan phase of the prophet's life denotes a dialogue of thirteen years with the polytheists, which thanks to his "tenacity and patience" (despite eventual armed confrontation) brought home the concept of *Dar al-Islam*:

"*Dar al-Islam* ... is territorial, power-based and necessarily self-centred in its ambition for exclusive statehood. For authentic dialogue must imply a co-existent citizenship for which its Muslim elements have their *Dar al-Islam* in the free expression of their *Shahadah* and the practice of their religion in rite and ritual. Thus the very concept of dialogue penetrates into the very ethos of Islam institutionally in the way that would have been true when Christianity had a Christendom" (Cragg 2008:78).

In the latter case, after the long impasse followed by “arm-sanctioned persuasion”, when the Meccans come to the prophet saying “*Amanna We have believed*”, they in fact “only meant *Aslamna We have submitted to become muslims*. For them persuasion as by dialogue was still to come – faith has not entered (yet) your hearts” (Cragg 2008: 80-81; 49.14-18).

It is in contrast to these *facts on the ground*, that the episode of Nicodemus’ encounter with Jesus makes any sense for dialogue on the Christian side. Cragg shows that despite his coming to Jesus with “discretion”, this rabbi was not only shocked but also had to settle for “an entirely new perspective on all that he most surely cherished. Jesus was calling Nicodemus into a private revolution of mind, a risky new venture of will” (2008: 84). What does this mean to Christian-Islamic dialogue is above all clarity regarding where the faiths stand on crucial issues and the possibility of moving farther. Here are two examples: given the monotheistic, creational conception of Allah, it is “not an impossible one” for Christians to recognize in Mohammed “a teacher come from Allah”. Further the omnipotence of God would mean “the undefeatedness of love at the Messianic task, which is both our human situation and the divine self-employ” (2008:87). Second, the abolition of *lex talionis*: From the Christian perspective, retaliation does not have absolutely any place in the individual realm, whereas in the social sphere it has to be read as “Overcome evil with good ... seeing that violence breeds its own excess” (2008: 89). The more overarching central point implicit herein is that of ethics: acknowledging the wrongs perpetuated in history whether by the prophet, Jews, Christians, Turks, etc. For: “The compromises of an ethic are only deplored aright if its writ still holds. It matters that any ideology holds us to account” (ibid.). This seems to be the point Pope Francis has been making in recalling to mind the genocides of the twentieth century, that of the Armenians being the first<sup>7</sup>.

What implications do these two central notions, namely human creaturehood and the abrogation of *lex talionis*, have for an interfaith dialogue between Christians and Muslims? How shall one proceed with these core perspectives of Islam and Christianity in encountering each other in faith (Troll 2009: 23f.)? For despite commonalities, the universalistic trait of both faiths makes them competitive too in mission.

<sup>7</sup> [http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/homilies/2015/documents/papa-francesco\\_20150412\\_omelia-fedeli-rito-armeno.html](http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/homilies/2015/documents/papa-francesco_20150412_omelia-fedeli-rito-armeno.html) [4/16/2015]; see also: [www.lemonde.fr/les-decodeurs/article/2015/04/13/genocide-armenien-une-si-lente-reconnaissance\\_4615209\\_4355770.html](http://www.lemonde.fr/les-decodeurs/article/2015/04/13/genocide-armenien-une-si-lente-reconnaissance_4615209_4355770.html) [accessed: 4.12.2015].

The Islamic conception of “the *Tawhid* or sovereign unity of Allah” encompasses “creation, creaturely *dominion* and prophethood” (Cragg 2008: 203). This would serve as “an inter-text” between Islam and Christianity. Despite the dissenting voice of the angels (Q 2:30), humans are accorded the dignity of *khalifah* (dominion-holder)... on whom is conferred a *khilafah*. ...Allah delegates to us a limited but real custody of things that through it, in our hands, His abiding sovereignty may be fulfilled. Our earth-bound status carries this God-related dimension of a *servare* through a *regnare*. Each is only right in the reality of the other. This status belongs alike to male and female. Indeed our sexuality is a major measure of its real conferment. The *khalifah* word has no other role in the Qur’an than this universally human one and is often in the plural... It is closely akin to the word for creature, *khaliqah* ... in which ... we can discern this double truth (Cragg 2008: 27-28).

Whereas creation stands under divine sovereignty, which knows what is unknown to humans, it “is the *submission* of our selfhood to its true identity, because that selfhood has been constituted by the very capacity to know itself this way”, that entails the *mutuality* between the divine and the human. This perspective corresponds to “the parable of the vineyard with human husbandmen liable for its fruits but these fruits turning on their toil and skill”; and further to “the sacramental and the sacrificial” in Christian thought (205). This life of submissive service corresponding to our creaturehood entitles us to a *managerial agency* which is ensured by the sending of messengers. However, prophethood also vindicates “the human mediation” despite Allah authoring the Qur’an. Though this may not correspond to any Christian way of explaining the divine involvement in the human world, which is incarnational, Christians shall learn thanks to such inter-text a different modality of “how God *associates* with man, how man is *enterprised* by God” (209).

This reading of *khilafah* (human entrustment) highlights an *islam* contrasting it with the Islam written with the Capital “I”. “Islam is the *cause*, the campaign, the entire institution with its ritual and its *Shari’ah*: *islam* is the believing *submission* of the heart” (Cragg 2008: 66). The latter would then be the sense meant in the Qur’anic texts such as 3.19: Truly religion according to Allah is *islam*. And the lack of a *submissive heart* occurs within all religions including Christianity and Islam. This would lead one to assert human self-sufficiency, an unwillingness to surrender, as 2:30 clearly notes. This human error/sin is atoned in the Christian understanding thanks to Jesus’ crucifixion. “It was the sacrament ... of grace, wherein to win our wills – more than their na-



ture could – to love. In love of Him this way, his law becomes our love” (210). Islam would not employ this “love-language” of redemption, but as Cragg rightly points out, does not this Christian perspective highlight the counter side of *khilafah* wherein human debility is reciprocated with *divine mercy*, not solely by just divine punishment? “For by the granting of *khilafah* He has already made Himself the subject of our obedience and, thus, of our disobedience” (37). This opens up the issue of the law of retaliation (21:45-46) which shall be overcome by the will of pardon. For: “The forgiving ones are the forgiven ones” (41), but “a suffering love that bears and so doing bears away, as Christians find it, is ruled out as both immoral and unnecessary” (45).

Similar disparity bears out regarding women in interfaith dialogue as well as in the interpretation of the sacred texts and tradition. If reading “the traditional inferiority of women in Islam” (38) as cultural would not exonerate the religion, it shall be better understood – as far as marriage is concerned – in the context of differentiated social conceptions of sexuality: “with the difference between the contractual in Islam and the sacramental in Christianity, the law and theology of marriage” (112). This might serve as an inter-text between Islam and Christianity. The Christian sacramental sense of marriage may correspond to the Islamic conception, if the sexual act is set among “*signs (ayat)*, meant to evoke thoughtfulness and gratitude” (113). However a full sense of the Christian conception would challenge the Islamic perspective of divorce; but a re-awakening of “the sacramental principle [of sexuality] ... in the Qur’an” might “enable a novel re-appreciation of female capacity for independent personhood” (119).

This seems also to be what Ramadan (2010: 62-66)<sup>8</sup> proposes to the Western Muslims as he argues with the Islamist feminists for “complementary roles in the family and society” (Baum 2009: 131). However, the feminist perspective has a more radical agenda as it defends a model of “dynamic interdependence between the sexes” (Hidayatullah 2014: 187). The rationale may be explained as follows: in the traditional understanding of the sexes/genders a polarity between male

<sup>8</sup> Ramadan’s stand to “the issues of women” appears to be much nuanced, despite/thanks to his commitment to “determine and identify the feminine universal’s role in constructing the universal common to all human beings. ... What we now require is a certain feminization, but not that of the cult of youth, fashion or aesthetics, but one that promotes a more feminine relationship with communications, the preservation of life and the resolution of conflicts”. Any threat arising from male/female difference will be dispelled by “their shared humanity” (Ramadan 2010a: 88, 94-95).

and female has been defended on the basis that these are fixed/natural entities. This perpetuates the difference between them without taking into consideration neither the context nor the subjects concerned, and hence facilitates a hierarchical arrangement with some salutary, occasional corrections. Acknowledgement of difference leads thus to a *defense of inequality*, as for example the discrimination of "nursing mothers in the workplace" (188). Employing the *dynamic interdependence* model changes the perspective totally. For the differences are seen as context dependent, not transcendent; historical as well as social conceptualizations. The example of the-nursing-mothers-in-the-workplace, illustrates that sex differences are relevant, but "situational", roles are substitutable (by hiring a wet nurse, known also to Qur'an 2:233, or by advanced technology), and identities are fluid. A broader than biological understanding set within the "context of human relationships of dependency" would hence permit the re-conceptualizing of sex differences.

Relations of dependence are not necessarily or only relations of subjugation or loss; they may also be productive of the self. The primary exemplification of this for Muslims is, of course, the divine-human relationship which produces the human being. This dynamic is captured by ... [the] notion of "engaged surrender", whereby one gains one's agency precisely through one's surrender to God. Through one's submission to God, the human being becomes a *khalifah*, an agent responsible for enacting God's will on earth. As a mirror of this relationship of dependency on the human level, human beings rely on their relationships to others for their being. Social relations shape how one understands oneself; we become our "selves" through being in relation to another. We find that "the only way to know oneself is through a mediation that takes place outside of oneself, exterior to oneself". Thus, we are "beings who are formed in relations of dependency". That is, our dependency on others is productive of our being. A conception of agency based on this notion of being-through-dependency might help us disrupt the dichotomies of male control and female passivity (191).

This theoretical stand represents a radical resurgence in Islamic thought especially within Western Islam, which is not mainstream, nor without challenges from the orthodox global Islam or the political Islam, recently brought to media attention by the Islamic State (IS).

Although the Vatican has hitherto engaged in intensive dialogue with the Muslim World on various fronts (Pratt 2010), there has not yet been an opening towards the militant wing of Islam. "It must be conceivable" (Cragg 2008: 149), for the premises on which such an

encounter may take place already exist within both Christianity and Islam. Two of these, self-scrutiny and “being peaceable with power” shall be briefly mentioned. The rationale for any engagement with militant self-sufficiency consists in the fact that we all inhabit the same earth, and the recognition of “the vast diversity of Islam” (151), which though heralds its “doctrinal self-sufficiency” serving “a single *Dar of Din qua Dawlah*” (152), has been for a time “non-combative both in content and in temper. It could, therefore, be so again” (153). This argument holds water only if the foundational notion of *peace* is re-aligned with a critical re-interpretation of *power*; or, in other words, the religions “care for binding moral criteria by which society is righteous” (134). Their “mandate” would be to hold “the power that ministers to peace that is maintained by power” (137). This seems to be a perspective that fits with any engagement with IS, for as Napoleoni (2014: 107) argues it is an “ethno-religious” nation state which it fights for, and a religious critique would weaken its ideological grounding. The inter-text between Christianity and Islam is hence called for in the political realm (Cook 2009; Cook 2002; Cragg 1998) despite depoliticizing the religion.

### Conclusion

Christian approach to Islam has been, as indicated at the outset, non-productive for long due especially to a lack of foundational scholarship; this has now changed (Hewer 2008; Marshall 2013; Largen 2014) thanks also to the increased presence of Muslims in the West and their attempt to integrate Islam within western secular democracies (Bilgrami 1992; Takim 2004). In a certain sense, the challenges that Muslims face in the West seem to be similar to those encountered by peoples of other faiths, namely the challenge to make sense of one’s belief in a pluralist society, in *A Secular Age*, as Charles Taylor would characterize it. However, the challenges are quite different for Muslims for specific reasons: they constitute a *minority* in the West despite being the second largest religion of the world; the Islamic faith perspective subscribes to a comprehensive, *seemingly* totalitarian appropriation of the public sphere which, if unchallenged, has the potential to eventually abrogate the liberal political discursive democratic sphere of the West, alike the *coercive* secular policies currently attempt to do (Pandimakil 2014); and the long-standing rivalry between Christianity and Islam (Cragg 1980). The above discussion highlighted however the alternative potential within Christianity and Islam to engage with each

other in trust (Fitzgerald 2005)<sup>9</sup>, not to succumb to any “reductive approach” (Ramadan 2010: 83), but to re-enhance commonalities based on monotheistic faith, divine creation, transcendental responsibility and prophethood without ignoring crucial differences. It is especially the latter which call for further dialogue.

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PANDIMAKIL G. PETER AA

**Approaches to Islam: faith, religion and politics**

**Abstract**

Christian encounter with Islam has a long and tortured history which continues to affect not only interfaith dialogue, but also political and social rapprochement. However, the situation seems to take a positive turn thanks especially to increased scholarship and knowledge of each other as well as to the still growing Muslim presence in the West. In highlighting both these aspects, the present essay introduces some of the commonalities, such as monotheism, creation, responsibility, prophethood, etc., discussed and debated in academic circles without ignoring their implications for any interfaith dialogue and shared citizenship in a democratic liberal and secular society. Whereas the beginnings of a new hermeneutics in Islam shall be discovered by T. Ramadan as well as among Muslim feminists, a creative and faithful engagement with Islam from the Christian front is offered by K. Cragg. The essay calls attention to the possibility of moving beyond theological discourse, especially if the notions emphasized by Islam, such as power, sovereignty and stewardship, are taken seriously without ignoring their shocking impact on non-Muslims, as well as proposing alternative perspectives from the Christian side. The envisioned outcome is a dialogue *in trust*, re-building some of the shared confidence which the faiths’ communal living together did enjoy, though for brief periods, in various parts of the world. These resources of peaceful co-existence need urgent deployment today.

**Keywords:** prophethood, critical dialogue, creaturehood and responsibility, abode of witness, politics and violence, and faith.

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<sup>9</sup> The experience of teaching Islam to Muslims recounted in Fitzgerald 2005: 11, does constitute a central point in dialogue; only on the basis of such *signs of mutual trust* would a spirituality of dialogue (ibid: 186-198) flourish.

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**Islam w wymiarze wiary, religii i polityki**

**Streszczenie**

Chrześcijańskie spotkanie z islamem ma długą i bolesną historię, która nadal wpływa nie tylko na dialog międzyreligijny, lecz także na zbliżenie polityczne i społeczne. Wydaje się jednak, że sprawy zaczynają przybierać pomyślny obrót dzięki intensyfikacji badań i wzrostowi wiedzy o sobie nawzajem, jak też wzrastającej liczbowo obecności muzułmanów na Zachodzie. Poprzez uwydatnienie tych dwóch aspektów, niniejsza praca ukazuje pewne cechy wspólne, takie jak monoteizm, stworzenie, odpowiedzialność, profetyzm itd., o czym dyskutuje się w kręgach akademickich przy uwzględnieniu implikacji, jakie stąd wynikają dla dialogu międzyreligijnego i prawa obywatelstwa w społeczeństwie świeckim, liberalnym i demokratycznym. Z jednej strony trzeba dostrzec nową hermeneutykę Islamu powstałą dzięki T. Radamanowi i muzułmańskim feministom; z drugiej strony zaangażowanie się w dialog z Islamem proponuje K. Cragg. Praca zwraca uwagę na możliwość wyjścia poza dysputy teologiczne, zwłaszcza, że zagadnienia akcentowane przez Islam, takie jak władza, dominacja i zarządzanie, traktowane są poważnie, chociaż nie ignoruje się ich szokującego wpływu na nie-muzułmanów. Jedynym rozwiązaniem wydaje się dialog *nacechowany zaufaniem*, odbudowa postawy wzajemnego zaufania, czego dowód może stanowić życie obok siebie przedstawicieli obu religii w różnych częściach świata.

**Słowa kluczowe:** profetyzm, krytyczny dialog, stworzenie i odpowiedzialność, prawo dawania świadectwa, polityka, przemoc i wiara.