

18. **HIRVONEN, Heidi**, *Christian-Muslim Dialogue. Perspectives of Four Lebanese Thinkers*. (History of Christian-Muslim Relations; 18). Leiden - Boston, Brill, 2013. vi+349 pp.

“The Lebanon is more than a country: it is a message.” These were the words of St. John Paul II when he visited the country in 1989. Our author quotes the Pope when she justifies her choice to study precisely Lebanese thinkers (p. 36). Before (p. 3), she had already given two other reasons: the high percentage of Christians in the country (30–40 %) and the high density of dialogue activities there. One might have added a fourth. There is hardly any other Arab country that has both Muslim and Christian academic institutions for religious studies; Egypt might be the only other candidate.

Heidi Hirvonen wanted to find out what Muslims and Christians who feel themselves heirs to a century of living together think about interreligious dialogue. After a sketch of the *status quaestionis* in both religious communities, Hirvonen gives a six page background of the sociopolitics of religion in the Lebanon yesterday and today, mostly a survey of the various faith communities.

For the body of her research, she selected four authors, two of each religion, viz., Muhammad Husayn Fadlallah (d. 2010), a Shiite jurist-theologian; Mahmoud Ayoub (b. 1935) a historian, likewise of Shia background; Georges Khodr (b. 1923), the Eastern Orthodox Metropolitan of Mount Lebanon; and Mouchir Bassile Aoun (Mušīr Bāsīl ‘Awn, b. 1963). Hirvonen has taken into account texts in Arabic, French and English which have been published between 1990 and 2006. Only in George Khodr’s case she also looks at a 1971 and a 1981 article. Why pick those four of all Lebanese thinkers? Through her research, Hirvonen explicitly (p. 3) wants to identify “tools to promote dialogue”; therefore, she selected writers whom she sees open, first, to dialogue, and, second, to a reflexion on its socio-political scope. She does not present each of her authors in his own right. She rather follows a methodology she calls “systematic analysis” (p. 8). This means, practically, that she arranges what she finds her authors say on the grounding, doctrine and ethics of dialogue. In other words, how do they respond to the three questions: What is dialogue? What is its theological outcome? How to do dialogue? – This method has the disadvantage that we do not see the historical development of each author, and we do not get much contextualisation of their statements; it makes a great difference, for example, when they write for fellow believers or speak in front of “the religious other.” What Hirvonen thus paints, however, is a thematic picture of great clarity.

*First*, then, what is being said on the grounding of dialogue? The Ayatollah Fadlallah has a rationalistic (p. 41) conception of faith, and consequently proclaims that dialogue is debate (p. 49) and invitation to Islam (p. 53), but when it comes to discussing theological themes (rather than professing what such discussion is), he stresses cooperation, condemns aggression (p. 51), and rejects the reduction of Muslim knowledge on Christianity to Koranic information (p. 52). – The historian Ayoub, who likes mysticism and works in the Western academic tradition, holds a contrary view; a view that may not be widely shared, but which can serve to see a wider picture of Islam (p. 63). He pleads for a two step encounter: first, a well informed “dialogue of beliefs” in which each tradition should recognise the other religion as inspired from God, equally human and dignified, and as a way to salvation (p. 60). The second step is a “dialogue of faith”, that is, an occasion to mutually deepen one’s spirituality by coming to know the others and their tradition. Ayoub excludes mission from dialogue (p. 61). – Metropolitan Khodr, too, is a highly original, clearly not mainline writer. He starts from a double experience: the trauma of war and the mystical view of the unity of all believers (p. 74). From there, he is able to distinguish two interpenetrating levels of encounter, viz., dialogue of life and dialogue of thought (p. 66). He pleads for spiritual encounter and recommends charity collaboration as the “language of divine love” that might, subsequently, lead to more discursive moments (p. 72). – Father Aoun’s basis is Roman Catholicism. His theology of dialogue can be praised to be the most systematic and criticised for being the least spiritual (p. 84) of the four voices, indeed as “rather unoriginal, as well as overly optimistic” (p. 80) in his appreciation of modernity. He grounds dialogue in God and, then, in the human person as dialogical beings. His fourfold typology of dialogue is: theological-intellectual, political-national, social-cohabitational, and cultural-educational (p. 78). Religions are, for him,

“diverse ways to communicate God’s revelation of himself” (p. 83).

The book’s *second* section collects the four authors’ views on three core theological themes. First Hirvonen presents what they think on revelation, then, on God, and finally on the human condition and destiny. Expectably, a central point of discussion is whether or not God is Trinitarian—if one sees the question in an apologetic point of view; or, hermeneutically put, what Christians want to say when they confess a triune God and Jesus’ divine Sonship. A question equally worthwhile is: what do Muslims want to say when they reject those statements? Metropolitan Khodr gives a classical Christian account, though—as an Easterner—with an apophatic ring to it (p. 176). To sum up, he makes three helpful affirmations. First, the Word of God parallel: what Jesus is for Christians, for Muslims the Koran (p. 174). Second, do not discuss the ontological status of the “Son of God” but present the task of Jesus, “new Adam” (p. 171). Finally, doctrinal agreement is not important; what counts is the ability to share life in orientation towards the mystery of God (p. 176). – While the Metropolitan tried to read the Koran in a Christian way (p. 173), Aoun has no problem with acknowledged differences (p. 183). He points the finger to an important distinction: rather than overdoing ontological affirmations on the immanent Trinity, the difference between Islam and Christianity can be studied by looking at how God interacts with the world (p. 182). – This is precisely what Ayoub does. Christians are no tritheists, he says; rather, the Trinity can be understood as three activities of God’s word in the world, as commandment, revelation and guidance (p. 202). Coming from a Sufi background, he understands the Christian view of Jesus through the concept of *tajallī*: “divine self-disclosure” (p. 205). Perfect human beings, like the prophets, become manifestations of God’s attributes. Hirvonen correctly points out one of the three reductions in Christologies of manifestation. She says “a human self-disclosure of God is not God himself” (footnote 343). On top of that, manifestations are repeatable, Christ is *ephapax*: once for all times (Hebrews 7:27); and manifestations do not allow others to enter, while Christ lets the faithful join his salvific body. – How will a Shiite thinker with a rationalist approach and, therefore, a denial of any visibility of God, react to Christian theology? The Ayatollah Fadlallah rejects the confession of incarnation as “philosophical unbelief” (p. 192): it leads us to take our “mental image of Jesus as God’s image” (p. 191). Christians could, of course, at this point remind their Muslim counterpart that they do not think they possess the one God definition now. Christ is not the theological formula that ends all questions and future discovery. Rather, God revealed himself in a human person. Christians recognise Christ as God’s mystery (1 Timothy 3,16). In order to explore what has thus been entrusted to the world, they find ever new expressions.

In the *third* chapter, Hirvonen looks at the ethics of dialogue, not only in the sense of how it should be conducted but also as the question to which forms of living and acting together dialogue should lead. The Christian authors are, she finds, more reticent in accepting that the value systems of both religions are congruent (p. 251 etc.).

In a final chapter, Hirvonen gives her own view on “possibilities and limitations” of Christian–Muslim dialogue. As possibilities in dialogue she shows five paths, mostly referring to doctrine: counterchecking whether the belief we reject is really what the others hold; examining the usage of religious language which may be metaphorical; considering God’s activity in the world rather than debating his inner essence; seeing the human being as relying on God’s mercy; and formulating common values. Our author is an Islamic scholar and Lutheran theologian from Finland. Ecumenical intuitions and methodologies may sometimes be in the back of her mind. Does one really need a common theology to constructively inspire and shape the world together? Are doctrinal differences, especially in dialogue with another religion, not just as welcome and fruitful as agreements? Why is doctrine so important? The author is realistic enough to stress several times in her final reflection (pp. 305–321) that the possibilities of rapprochement are limited.

Hirvonen’s doctoral thesis, written under the supervision of the systematic theologian Miika Ruokanen in Helsinki, is beautiful in typography, helpful in scope, clear in structure, sharp in analysis and mature in judgment. - *Felix Körner*, SJ.