

# English Summary

of

Felix Körner, *Kirche im Angesicht des Islam. Theologie des interreligiösen Zeugnisses*, Stuttgart 2008

## Theology of Interreligious Witness

### I

Here, the above mentioned book's method and results will be summarised in English. Its method will itself prove to be part of the results. Still, one should be able to spot a methodological starting-point. It can be seen by looking, for a moment, at the author himself. He is a Jesuit in Ankara.

1. A Jesuit *in Ankara*. The author lives in a country with a Muslim majority. For a priest and Islamicist, this makes for three different types of involvement.

- He is an academic partner in scholarly dialogues with Muslim theologians.
- He is a catechetical teacher to the—few—traditional Christians who remain in Ankara and for the—even fewer—Turks interested in becoming Catholics.
- He is, without looking for it, constantly involved in discussions of faith questions with Muslims of no formal theological formation.

In such situations, the Islamic faith might be reduced to three basic propositions.

- α. God is God from eternity to eternity.
- β. Through revelation God provides human beings with guidance which they should and can fulfil.
- γ. Created life attains its destiny by surrendering to God.

2. A Jesuit *in Ankara*. The author belongs to a community in *missio*. It proceeds from the acknowledgement that human beings are, for others' and their own sake, sent into foreign, strange, unknown places. Christian mission is based on this insight, and on the view that the Gospel is of universal relevance. But the Jesuit view of mission as participation in Christ's mission is based on another insight as well. It includes the experience that every single encounter is different and thus cannot be generalised. Human relations are always new and they change both partners. Therefore, mission cannot be a planned strategy. It rather requires that we overcome all our pre-existing images of the other; it also requires that we go beyond the three basic Islamic propositions formulated above. The present work, therefore, first surveyed its own environment; by asking how do Turkish text-books, Friday sermons, politicians and journalists see Christianity? The results of this survey can be summed up as follows.

- (i) Christian mission is being perceived as a threat to Turkey's national unity.
- (ii) Christianity is seen in the framework of the Islamic idea that all prophets had a similar task and fate.
- (iii) Christianity is seen to stand in need of a purification that will free it of its 'associating', that is, polytheist, blasphemies.

## II

In order to find an appropriate way of dealing with these perceptions, we first analysed how, through history, the Latin church has handled the Islamic challenge. All authors studied desire a form of unity. For some of them, however, unity means (1) agreement on certain questions; for others (2) complete union; some of them want to reach unity by (i) finding a shared foundation; others want (ii) Muslims to become Christians.

1.i Thomas Aquinas' reaction to Islam is defensive. His aim is to demonstrate that it is not irrational to hold a Christian view. His method is an epistemological division of reality into two. On the one hand, there is the natural. It can be known by all human beings and is therefore also a point of agreement between Christians and Muslims. Beyond that, there is the supernatural. It has to be revealed, through the Bible. Aquinas does not yet see the possibility and necessity of checking whether individual events have actually happened. That is why he needs, rather than history, another foundation, which also offers a different security: cognitive revelation, the universal claims of which cannot be realised other than by believing acceptance.

Richard Heinzmann shows us the interreligious potential of Aquinas' approach. He proposes secular reason as the platform for Muslim—Christian discourse. His procedure however prompts the question whether he is inventing a rationality of general availability, universal acceptance and given existence.

1.ii Nicholas Cusatus tries to show, by a 'sifting' (*cribratio*) of the Koran, that it can only be understood correctly in the light of the Gospel, indeed that the Koran leads to the Gospel. Before his *Cribratio*, he had already explicated his theology of religions in a heavenly dialogue: During this conversation, Christianity—considered as doctrine *minus* its form of life—was understood by representatives of other religions. Nicholas' claim is, thus, that Christian faith is something everyone can realise. This claim, however, turns faith into a cognitive achievement to be performed. Thus, there is no recognition of faith to be the acknowledgement of election, a relying on God, who disempowered himself by giving himself to creation through mediating creatures.—This is related to the following view.

2.i Ramon Lull combines two goals, viz., the other's conversion, and his preservation as other, into a philosophical harmony of religions. He thus assumes that the point of religions can be turned into abstract formulations and agreed upon by adherents of different religions.

2.ii Peter the Venerable is looking for dialectical weapons to be used by Christendom against Islam. When, however, he himself enters into discussion *coram Saraceno* he becomes milder. It is no longer a debate he wants to win for Christianity. He now wants to win human beings for Christianity.

Pius II writes a letter to Mehmet the Conqueror in order to invite him to become a Christian. The humanist and Pope poses crucial questions when he asks what Christian faith presupposes and what is controversial between Islam and Christianity. He succeeds in pointing out a core difference. It is, according to Pius, the relation between God and what happens on earth. According to the Pope, God has, in his providence, *cura* of human beings.

The study of Latin thinkers on Islam leads to a surprising result. The higher the Christian theologian's claim, i.e., the more he wants confessional unity through conversion, the sharper is his theological explication of what it is to be a Christian. The acknowledgement of the other as other thus proves to be a source of new insight. How can the other, the unexplored, the alien be used in theological research?

## III

Aristotle can be described as seeing three different types of argumentative scenarios.

- a. The primary setting is the school situation, where the listener is inclined to agree, i.e., to echo the teacher's presentation: the atmosphere is *catechetical*.
- b. What is beyond this 'philosophical' situation? When the discussion becomes controversial but

shared premises are in sight, the situation is *ecumenical*. From the common presuppositions new agreements can be deduced in syllogistic dialectics.

- c. If no shared ground is in sight, the interlocutors are in an *inter*-situation. What is now needed is an art, which cannot be defined by rules. It is the art of finding each time the appropriate point of view from which an argumentative progress is possible. Aristotle calls this art *topos*.

This description follows Rüdiger Bubner's presentation of Aristotle. Bubner wonders how a rational progress can be attained in conversation with a person holding a different view on things, if the difference is accepted as contradiction. Bubner pleads for an integration of our lifeworld into the dialogue. Lifeworld is that part of our environment which has not been rationally processed. It offers the stock of rational object relations which have to be found and adjusted anew in each encounter. It is in the hope of gaining a more rational view of reality that one becomes interested in the other's view. This is the objective of dialogue.

Interreligious dialogues are, however, marked by two particularities.

- i. It is not obvious that between Muslims and Christians there really is dissent. The proposition 'we believe in the same God' postulates fundamental agreement, insinuating that only some historical and therefore distorting forms need to be overcome.
- ii. On the other hand, religious people are not ready to give up their view of reality easily. This need not indicate the lack of a rational approach to reality. Their insistence, even concerning formulations, may be an expression of their awareness that what they confess means more to them than anything else.

If interreligious encounters are seen topically, that is, as unpredictable, situational and rooted in a lifeworld, six characteristics of any presentation of one's own understanding of reality can be pointed out. The presentation has to be

- 1) confessional (as obliged by one's own lifeworld),
- 2) based on arguments (so that the interlocutor can follow)
- 3) witnessing (in being based on a person's reality contact)
- 4) liberating (because its aim is not victory but the other's autonomous relation to reality)
- 5) creating new relationships (by enabling the other to have his or her own access to reality)
- 6) open to conversion (in that it may be modified by the other's perspective and experience).

#### IV

These characteristics should also inform any presentation of Christianity to Muslims. The six designations can be seen as *notae theologiae* shaping any Church action as Christian witness. This insight enriches the *notae* with new meanings, which can however only be formulated after a constructively critical review of the state of research on the theology of witness.

- a. Johannes Beutler retrieves the Johannine theme of witness for fundamental theology. He thus overcomes the rationalist tendency to prove faith. Beutler shows the act of faith to be an event in its own right. Faith is a relation; a relation to that reality which cannot be verified in the same way as particular events can, and whose acknowledgement, therefore, requires a personal decision.
- b. Contrary to Klaus Kienzler's phenomenology of witness as dark talk of the Origin, one can see that the believing person confesses a wholeness. It is that wholeness into which God wants to unite the course of history and which is anticipated and thus can be experienced. This is why it can and needs to be witnessed.
- c. Edmund Arens studies the linguistic pragmatics of witnessing and confessing. He separates them sharply. Their reference to a reality through which they are justified is being blurred. Thus Arens in fact poses the question what theology does. It neither claims merely to describe what is there, nor to create reality. Theology is, rather, something sacramental. Divine and human action unite in it. This holds true of witnessing and confessing, too.
- d. Karl Rahner interprets witnessing as self-giving. Every human being can—as witness—join in Christ's surrender. Rahner claims that witness is self-evident. Why? Because real witness involves every addressee according to his or her own desire. In that, it is God's own

reconciling action. For witness is God's only way of being present within creation without depriving it of its freedom. Rather, since witness is open to free acceptance, through it God gives everybody the opportunity to be liberated from his or her own self-centeredness.

- e. Barbara Hallensleben's theology of Ignatius of Loyola's Spiritual Exercises takes the overwhelming experience of the individual's 'election' as paradigm for witnessing. The rationality of what is realised in this experience is not its verifiability in terms of general concepts. What is witnessed here is, rather, the experience of being incorporated into God's reality through a way of life, which is distinct but can only vaguely be anticipated in confidence.

## V

The six dialogical *notae*, discovered philosophically, can in a double inflection be charged with new meaning. On the one hand, they can be rooted in the Christian faith. Thus, any authentic presentation of Christianity is

- witnessing; because it relies on the particular history of Israel and Jesus.
- open to conversion; because this history goes on.
- based on arguments; because it wants to gain the individual as freely approving.
- liberating; because it discloses sin, the basic problem of humanity, as captivity.
- confessional; because it takes place by entering the paschal mystery.
- creating new relationships; because it institutes the faithful communion with God.

On the other hand, the limitations of our knowledge, as unveiled philosophically, can now be made to bear theological fruit in characterising a theology of weakness. Christian life is

- based on arguments; by revealing the foundational attitudes which cannot be deduced.
- witnessing; by representing what is being presented.
- confessional; by entrusting itself to the chosen community.
- creating new relationships; by accepting to be neglected after making the vital encounter possible.
- open to conversion; by starting from and enabling awareness of one's own incompleteness, but still:
- liberating; by disclosing the individual's call to participate in salvation.

## VI

The six *notae* can now support the evaluation of—written—answers given to Islam's fundamental challenge by Christians in direct contact with Muslims. The *notae* can however not be used as a ready-made grid. Rather, they were shaped, or re-shaped, in the first place in discussion with the authors.

- a. John of Damascus presents the faith of Muslims correctly, but then he argues on a vague textual basis when he claims: 'Muhammad's scripture' is, albeit subconsciously, a Christian text.
- b. Theodore Abū Qurra makes the criticism that Muslims could not honestly 'witness' to Muhammad as being God's apostle since they were not present when he was commissioned. Theodore thus calls for eyewitness, which is a polemical move; but he could in fact have appealed to a comparison of how witness is understood in the two religions, with the Christian concept of witness being more strongly shaped by personal experience: Christians witness to the resurrection of Christ, not only by mentioning it, but by celebrating it.
- c. The Catholicos Timothy I stresses the Old Testament's being open to the New, namely to the eternal covenant. The New Testament, in turn, envisages no further transition. Timothy's thought can be expanded. The eternal covenant that was initiated in the New Testament is again open; but not open to a revealed purifying confirmation. The New Testament is, rather, open to human acceptance. Thus two discoveries can be made. On the one hand, openness is a common feature of Old and New Testament; and, on the other hand, the Koran cannot be the

New Testament's continuation. Timothy considers Muhammad to be walking in the ways of the prophets, i.e., he has an ethico-theological message but is not, in the Biblical sense, living after Christ.

- d. In his moral doctrine the Aristotelian Yaḥyā ibn 'Adī exposes to an 11<sup>th</sup> century Muslim audience an ethos that, for acceptability's sake, leaves aside all Christian specifics. He avoids mentioning love of enemies or the insight that the ethical claim reveals one's need of grace. What looks like a missed opportunity might, in his situation, be the only possible way of presenting his message.
- e. The Byzantine Emperor Manuel II gives a brilliant account of how he converted an erudite Muslim. The dialogue takes place in an upside-down world, since the Emperor is in fact the Sultan's vassal, servant and guest in his own land. The Muslim reaches his turning-point when he sees and feels two different types of securities. One can either live in the scholar's equidistant security, or in the security of the believing witness, who risks himself.
- f. The presentations by evangelical authors presuppose that the Christian faith can be proven. The logical step from historical evidence to personal salvific relevance, however, remains unclear. These presentations lack an anthropological approach. This is also why individual experiences of faith and doubt are not drawn upon for a possible re-formulation of theology. Dialogue on faith becomes, in this way, strategic. The Christian faith encountered here is, in its claim to be based on unambiguous proof and its static formulation, similar to Islam.
- g. The present Archbishop of Canterbury, Rowan Williams, declares in front of Muslim scholars the Christian doctrine of God to be essentially congruent with Islam. According to Williams, God is the self-sufficient. God's will, therefore, here is unchangeably peace and justice. In the Archbishop's exposition, static concepts seem to be more important than history. Thus a difference in the Islamic and Christian relation to God remains out of sight. Such a difference might be named submission *versus* faithfulness. The latter requires an ever-new commitment and communion. Just over a year later Williams chose a fundamentally different approach. This may be seen as an example of a presentation 'open to conversion', i.e., of a readiness to change one's exposition in the light of what one has learned in the dialogue. Williams now speaks experientially, which makes his account anthropologically comprehensible. Thus his exposition becomes 'open to conversion' in the transitive sense. At the price of acceptability to Muslims, however, he does not allow for concepts like 'person' to be comprehended anew in the light of Christian witness.
- h. Thomas Michel's account of Christianity written for Muslim students of theology in Turkey expounds what Christians confess in its internal connectedness but he does not demonstrate its general anthropological relevance. Thus he avoids missionary offensiveness.
- i. Salah Aboujaoudé's text-book offers the facts of Christianity. Writing within a precarious balance of parallel social entities, he prefers to leave their existential conclusions open.
- j. Christian Troll demonstrates the contents of the Christian faith both in its own context and in the context of the human experience of guilt. Troll does not, and does not want to, show how the Christian witness becomes sacramental as it transcends the conceptual.
- k. Writing from within a Muslim majority, Pierre Clavérie and the Catholic bishops of the Maghreb explain Christianity. In their explanation they also reflect on what it is to explain Christian faith. Their presentation interprets Christianity as a word event. What is, according to that book, the transmission of the faith? Rather than 'Witnesses proving to an unbeliever the recognition of Christ,' it is, 'Human beings prove to be believers by recognising Christ in the witness.'

## VII

One question remains unanswered. What exactly is controversial between Islam and Christianity? What remains blurred when formulae of unity are pronounced like, 'We believe in the same God,' or 'Jesus is only metaphorically the Son of God'?

An answer may be found by reviewing the making of the present book. The starting-point was the

will to help Christians in interreligious discussions, in which they saw their faith refuted by Muslims. Church reflections on interreligious dialogue have so far not taken into account this level of encounter. Reflection on these debates had three phases, each of which introduced the same key-word into the discussion, though each time in different signification. The key-word is 'experience.' How can Christianity be presented in a Muslim—Christian encounter?

- i. Historical experience. One should appeal to those events which can be studied methodically and thus be shown to have actually happened; especially Jesus' dying on the cross. What research demonstrates to be historical, however, remains weak over against an antithesis that claims revelatory authority.
- ii. General human experience. One should appeal to the human inability to be good through one's own strength. Muslims will however point out that the Christian imperative of love is exaggerated, while the Koranic imperative of justice can be lived.
- iii. Experience of defeat. When these methods of premeditated refutation fail, one can reflect the giving of witness itself as a moment of weakness. Christian faith cannot be presented through cogent argumentation, but rather through the exposition of its *scandalon*. Christian faith can only deploy its transforming power where it shows its own weakness. It thus calls the addressees to accept their own weaknesses. Christian faith does not provide discursive contributions that strive to be plausible *coram publico*. Resort to an existing authority—reason—is impossible because it is exactly this authority that is at stake. Rather, everyone must consider personally the *scandalon* at the heart of the Christian faith.

The *scandalon* can be formulated as follows.

- α. God risks his divinity within history.
- β. Human beings have a destiny which they cannot realise through their own strength.
- γ. One realises oneself by giving oneself to the other.

Since God commits himself to particular events in history, Christianity, speaking of these events, needs to be presented as witness.

Since God makes himself dependent on our acceptance, the converting acceptance called for is decisive for the course of history.

Since God commits himself to a community of election, the acceptance cannot be a private approval but needs, rather, to be the confession to the Church and confession of the Church.

Since a person can, in the light of the *scandalon*, see his or her own need for salvation, the *scandalon* can become converting.

Since a person, when committing himself or herself to the history to which the Church testifies, is relying on God's action, this history becomes liberating.

And since—as this series of justifications shows—the Christian witness presents the basic options of life as an election with comprehensible implications, it is based on arguments.

An apt expression of the Christian witness is devotion to Mary. In venerating her, the Church is celebrating God's incorporating his creation into his glory. Also, addressing God as *Abba* is a summary of the ecclesial confession. In it, we are taking up Jesus's own word and obedient filial confidence; which is life in the Spirit.