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Church teaching about Islam

Theological Inventory and Discernment

What does the Roman Catholic Church say about Islam? And what should it say, and do?

I Looking back: Milestones

What are the milestones of the past decades in Christian teaching concerning Islam?¹ I will focus on the Catholic Church's universal magisterium; in other words: what does "the Vatican" say about Islam?² Let me begin with three introductory remarks.

- (1) A study of ecclesial teaching on Islam will not only make us re-read words but also actions; and of course words are actions, anyway!
- (2) Can one have relations "with Islam"? Is it not always "with Muslims"? Well, no! Throughout the centuries, some Christians and Muslims were on good terms, in personal relations.³ We even know of life-long friendships; but the Second Vatican Council moved things to an official 8|9 level: from mere encounter to dialogue. That is to say, from the individual or occasional event to an institutional process among representatives of whole communities, patiently continued in spite of personal failures, in the hope of long term mutual transformation and in view of the common good.
- (3) We will be focusing on Popes. That sounds like reducing dialogue to individuals again; but of course a Pope is meant to be the face of a whole community, and can even become the face of an era. In that sense, let us dare to present a "pontifical history of Catholic–Muslim relations."

A. John XXIII was the pontiff who launched the Second Vatican Council. We may call him the "Pope of Respect." He was able to speak *cum aestimatione* ("with a sense of appreciation") with all people of good will. It was with remarkable reverence that he mentioned the "others," that is, unbelievers, believers of other religions, of other denominations. It is in his spirit that the relevant document of the Council spoke explicitly with respect about the adherents of Islam. As is well known, *Nostra aetate* will then speak of Muslims precisely *cum aestimatione*.⁴

¹ The text is the revised version of a lecture prepared for an international meeting in Antwerp, Belgium: "Milestones and Stumbling Stones in the Current Dialogue between Jews, Christians and Muslims." The event was held online at the occasion of the 20th anniversary of the Catholic journal *Tertio* (<https://www.tertio.be>) on 28 October 2020 and was co-organized by the Catholic thinktank UCSIA (Universitair Centrum Sint-Ignatius Antwerpen, <https://www.ucsia.org>).

² Cfr. already, Felix Körner, »Was ist aus Nostra Aetate geworden? Relecture des römisch-katholischen Islamdialoges 2005–2015«, in: *CIBEDO-Beiträge* 3/2015, pp. 101–108.

³ Cfr. on this, Felix Körner, »Das Dialogverständnis der katholischen Kirche. Eine theologische Grundlegung«, in: *Zeitschrift für Missionswissenschaft und Religionswissenschaft* 101 (2017), pp. 78–93.

⁴ Cfr., Anja Middelbeck-Varwick, *Cum aestimatione. Konturen einer christlichen Islamtheologie*, Münster 2017.

B. Paul VI became John's successor when the Council was in full activity. Would Vatican II prove successful with its huge reform agenda? We should call him the "Pope of Realization." Why? Because he understood that the Council was a groundbreaking challenge to be implemented in theology and ecclesial structure. Paul subsequently made key steps in this, for example by founding the Secretariate for Non-Christians.

C. John Paul II was elected Pope in 1978, the first ever Pole. He took the programmatic name of his predecessor John Paul—who had been in office too short to live up to that name: combining the contemplative concern of St. John with the theological zeal of St. Paul, but also uniting the attitudes of his two great pre-predecessors: Pope John's "respect" and Pope Paul's "realization." John Paul II turned out to be staunch in his stances but mobile in his manners; and he was surprisingly open to other religions. Isn't that surprising? Well, no, if you consider two features of his life; for one, John Paul II was a philosopher; so, a search for truth beyond the Bible was familiar to him by default. But even before that: he had strongly suffered under two practically atheist regimes, namely, Nazism and Communism. So the importance of religion in general was obvious to him: without faith, humanity cannot become humane. We might summarize the historic meaning of his many journeys, invitations, gestures and messages under one tag again. John Paul II was the "Pope of Relationship." **9|10**

But speaking concretely, what happened in terms of interreligious progress *during* his papacy—and probably because of him? We need to see one structural step and three developments in terms of doctrine.

Structurally: PCID. John Paul II upgraded, in 1988, the Vatican "Secretariate for Non-Christians" to the now famous "Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue."⁵ The Polish Pope wanted to underline the importance of interreligious dialogue, as concept and as activity.—But what were the *doctrinal* developments? The first two concern not only Muslims but followers of all religions; the third, however, was specifically said in relation to Islam.

Doctrine (1): Purification and Enrichment. Already in 1984 the—not yet upgraded—Secretariate issued an impressive document called "Dialogue and Mission."⁶ It says that persons from different faith traditions receive, when honestly encountering each other, purification and enrichment (n. 21). This is well said. Let us ponder on this formula for a moment.

We are being purified: because we get rid of much prejudice, because we are humbled by the serious dedication of others, and we are also disillusioned when we see that many of our hopes are not coming true, because God's plan can be different from ours.

We are being enriched; but is that theologically conceivable? After all, we confess that our own religion is complete; so, speaking as Christians, we confess that Christ is fullness—we say that he contains "all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge." Then, how can we be enriched by others? The letter to the Colossians offers a solution when it says that in Christ "are hidden [!] all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge" (2:3). So, we need time and experience to discover, uncover what is already present in Jesus Christ.

Doctrine (2): Pneumatology. In 1990, John Paul II was able to teach in a prominent place, in an Encyclical, that the religions (!) are effects of God's spirit at work in human history (*Redemptoris missio* 28).

Doctrine (3): Same God. One famous theological question is, do we have the same God, we Christians and Muslims? The II Vatican Council had already made explicit in 1964 that Muslims "along with us adore the one and merciful God" (*nobiscum Deum adorant unicum, misericordem ...: Lumen gentium*, 16). Now, John Paul called out, in 1985, to the young Muslims

⁵ Apostolic Constitution *Pastor bonus*, 1988: http://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/apost_constitutions/documents/hf_jp-ii_apc_19880628_pastor-bonus-index.html.

⁶ <https://www.pcinterreligious.org/pcid-documents> (accessed 10 September 2020).

in Casablanca that “Nous croyons au même Dieu, le Dieu unique, le Dieu vivant, le Dieu qui crée les mondes et porte ses créatures à leur perfection—We believe in the same God.”⁷ We need to discuss this later. Before that, however, let us continue our pontifical history of dialogue. In 2005, came a new pope and, it seemed, a new phase in Catholic–Muslim relations. **10|11**

C. Benedict XVI first seemed to tear down the bridges that the Popes of “respect,” “realization,” and “relationship” had built. It all started in his home university. In Regensburg, Benedict quoted the Eastern Roman Emperor Manuel II Palaeologus. The ruler provoked a Muslim interlocutor in 1391 by claiming that all the prophet of Islam had brought about was violence. Benedict slightly toned down the quote by marking it out as “surprisingly harsh.” For the published version of his speech, the pontiff took the quote practically back, by now qualifying it as an expression of “a startling brusqueness, a brusqueness that we find unacceptable.”⁸ But what remained was Benedict’s claim that Christianity is fundamentally more rational than Islam. That, however, cannot be upheld if one studies Christian and Islamic theologies. A correct presentation would have to say that the Islamic understanding of truth is more conceptual. It is closer to theoretical philosophy than the Christian understanding of truth. For the Christian faith, rationality is historical, truth is discovered in history. Christianity hinges on God’s revealing Himself in events, more specifically, in the history which culminates in the Easter events. So the core claim of Regensburg was highly problematic. Though never correcting this doctrinal weakness by misevaluating the role rationality has for Christianity, Benedict XVI later gave signs of humility and willingness to work for reconciliation; signs which were well received by many Muslims. I am especially thinking of three moves.

1. Adoration. During his visit to Turkey in November 2006, Benedict gave what should be called his “Ankara address.” In the Turkish Presidency of Religious Affairs, the then Pope said: “As an illustration of the fraternal respect with which Christians and Muslims can work together, I would like to quote some words addressed by Pope Gregory VII in 1076 to a Muslim prince in North Africa who had acted with great benevolence towards the Christians under his jurisdiction. Pope Gregory spoke of the particular charity that Christians and Muslims owe to one another ‘because we believe in one God, albeit in a different manner, and because we praise him and worship him every day as the Creator and Ruler of the world.’”⁹ The quote is interesting; it was in the background of the Vatican II teaching on Islam. The Conciliar texts, however, only *alluded* to Pope Gregory’s expression (*Nostra aetate*, footnote n. 5). As already mentioned, we will have to return to the “same God” affirmation in the discussion section.

2. Forum. Due to Muslim patience, the insulting formulation of Regensburg was transformed into a promising process of profound dialogues, in the so-called Catholic–Muslim Forum.¹⁰

3. Side by side. Benedict’s visit to Great Britain was, it seems, a fruitful contribution to the growth of the Kingdom, also in terms of understanding **11|12** among the religions. In London, he used a beautiful formula to describe the “dimensions” of interreligious dialogue. He spoke of

⁷ http://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/fr/speeches/1985/august/documents/hf_jpii_spe_19850819_giovani-stadio-casablanca.html (accessed 4 April 2020).

⁸ http://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/speeches/2006/september/documents/hf_ben-xvi_spe_20060912_university-regensburg.html.

⁹ http://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/speeches/2006/november/documents/hf_ben-xvi_spe_20061128_pres-religious-affairs.html (accessed 9 September 2020).

¹⁰ One of its final communiques is to be seen here: <http://press.vatican.va/content/salastampa/it/bollettino/pubblico/2014/11/13/0846/01813.html> (accessed 11 September 2020).

the face-to-face dynamics (that is, mutual enrichment and purification), and of the side-by-side dynamics (witnessing together, working together).¹¹

So, Benedict should not be called an anti-dialogue pontiff; he is, rather, a theologian who wants to go, beyond the superficial agreement, into scholarly encounter; he was, I suggest, the “Pope of reflection.”

D. Pope Francis finds much credit among Muslims. They regularly see him, not so much as the spokesperson of the Church only but of all believers, indeed of true humanity. So in terms of interreligious development he deserves to be called the “Pope of representation,” a model for every person of good will, as a Muslim once told me. Francis uses the aforementioned formula of dialogue as “purification and enrichment” (*Evangelii gaudium*, 250); and he wisely quotes it in the way Benedict had also used it.¹² Francis’ doctrinal contributions to the Church’s view of Islam can be summed up in five points. Each of them is more than mere conceptualization. Rather, each of them is a “speech-act.”

1. Fundamentalisms. It is easy to point at your neighbour’s problems; it is convenient to say that Muslim militancy endangers dialogue, indeed humanity; but militant aggression is not only to be found on the Islamic side. If one thinks of the U.S. war crimes committed with the Bible in the leaders’ hands at the beginning of this millennium, one understands well the wisdom and justice of Pope Francis’ words in his programmatic exhortation *Evangelii gaudium*: “An attitude of openness in truth and in love must characterize the dialogue with the followers of non-Christian religions, in spite of various obstacles and difficulties, especially forms of fundamentalism on both sides” (250, *fundamentalismos*, in the Spanish original). To point at a problem by simultaneously admitting that we share in the problem is a constructive path towards the solution.

2. Appeal. In 2014, Pope Francis travelled to the Holy Land, to Jordan, Israel, and Palestine. He had invited two friends from Argentina to join in his pilgrimage, Abraham Skorka and Omar Abboud: a Jew and a Muslim; and in the holy city of Jerusalem he sounded four lines; an appeal to all Abrahamic believers, a call full of both intensity and empathy: “May we respect and love one another as brothers and sister. / May we learn to understand the sufferings of others! / May no one abuse the name of God for violence! / May we work together for justice and peace!”¹³ Another key to solving our impasses is expressed in this. Namely: do not think that it is only “our” side that is suffering. **12|13**

3. Prayer. It was an almost prophetic act when Francis’ pre-predecessor John Paul II invited representatives of all religions to Assisi in 1986. The formula then used to describe what they were about to do was that they had come together to pray, not that they had come to pray

¹¹ https://w2.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/speeches/2010/september/documents/hf_ben-xvi_spe_20100917_altre-religioni.html (accessed 9 September 2020).

¹² http://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/speeches/2012/december/documents/hf_ben-xvi_spe_20121221_auguri-curia.html (accessed 20 September 2020).

¹³ https://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2014/may/documents/papa-francesco_20140526_terra-santa-gran-mufti-jerusalem.html (accessed 20 September 2020).

together. At the time, it was especially Cardinal Ratzinger who was worried about syncretism.¹⁴ So prayers should, according to official instructions, not be said *along with* members of other religions but only in their presence. When in 2015, however, Pope Francis visited the “Jerusalem of Europe,” as he called it, Sarajevo, the city long-suffering from religiously motivated conflict, he invited the Jews and Muslims present to pray along with him a prayer he had written.¹⁵

4. Orientations. In Cairo, Francis articulated an intriguing triple list of orientations to reflect his own way of moving ahead in interreligious encounters. Fundamental are, according to the pope, “the duty of identity, the courage of otherness, the sincerity of intentions.”¹⁶ So it is by no means required, indeed it isn’t helpful, to hide your own faith. Do witness to your belonging, to your grateful joy in your own religion, and do express also the difficult things, just like Francis does. He does mention, for example the problems of Christians in majority Muslim countries (*Evangelii gaudium*, 253).

5. Fraternity. In his new Encyclical, Francis points out that all human beings are brothers and sisters: *Fratelli tutti* – the key motif already in the “Document on universal brotherhood” co-signed in Abu Dhabi in 2019.¹⁷ Of course, there is much to be disputed in all this theologically. So we should now turn to a discussion of the open questions in Christian–Muslim dialogue.

II Looking ahead: Touchstones

There are seven theological themes in Muslim–Christian dialogue which need new attention and precision. The first four also apply to dialogue with other religions. Only the last three are specifically Islamic.

1. Why dialogue? The official Church has been in dialogue with Islamic representatives for decades; but the question is still being asked: why dialogue in the first place? The classical answer says that dialogue is faithful to Christ: he was mild (*Ecclesiam suam*, 81). But we might say more than that. First of all, by dialogue, the Church is not abandoning its mission to proclaim the Gospel. Dialogue is not the opposite of “mission.” As a Christian, you must not say that you can only either be missionary, or dialogical.¹⁸ Rather, we should clarify that mission is the *reason* why we do what we do: we are missioned, sent by Christ to be his witnesses. Dialogue is the *style* of what we do; and the *point* of that is evangelization. Evangelization, in the Catholic **13|14** understanding, however, does not mean making others Christians. Conversion is not up to us but to the Holy Spirit. To evangelize means, rather, to shape this world in the spirit of the

¹⁴ In 2011, Benedict XVI wrote to a friend, a protestant missiologist and former Tübingen colleague of his, Peter Bayerhaus, “Thre Sorge angesichts meiner Teilnahme an dem Assisi-Jubiläum verstehe ich sehr gut. Aber dieses Gedenken mußte auf jeden Fall gefeiert werden, und nach allem Überlegen erschien es mir als das Beste, wenn ich selbst dort hingehge und damit versuchen kann, die Richtung des Ganzen zu bestimmen. Jedenfalls werde ich alles tun, damit eine synkretistische oder relativistische Auslegung des Vorgangs unmöglich wird und klar bleibt, daß ich weiterhin das glaube und bekenne, was ich als Schreiben Dominus Jesus der Kirche in Erinnerung gerufen hatte.” Quoted after: Manfred Hauke, Assisi III. Anliegen und Problematik“ in: *Theologisches* 41 (2011), coll. 541–558, col. 542.

¹⁵ https://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2015/june/documents/papa-francesco_20150606_sarajevo-incontro-ecumenico.html (accessed 20 September 2020).

¹⁶ http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2017/april/documents/papa-francesco_20170428_egitto-conferenza-pace.html (accessed 20 September 2020).

¹⁷ http://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/travels/2019/outside/documents/papa-francesco_20190204_documento-fratellanza-umana.html (accessed 20 September 2020).

¹⁸ At more detail: Felix Körner, »Missionsbefehl und interreligiöser Dialog: Wie geht das zusammen? Zur Klärung der grundlegendsten Missverständnisse«, in: Michael Sievernich, Klaus Vellguth (eds.), *Christentum in der Neuzeit. Geschichte | Religion | Mission | Mystik* (Festschrift für Mariano Delgado), Freiburg 2020, pp. 397–410.

Gospel (*Apostolicam actuositatem*, 2). Secondly, interreligious dialogue is not another word for ecumenical dialogue. The hope of ecumenism is that the separated Churches become one Church again, that is, first of all, that they recognize each other as different forms of living the Gospel faithfully. So, thirdly, if one wants to say at more detail why we engage in interreligious dialogue, the answer is: we hope it serves *understanding*; understanding, that is, on five levels: (1) agreement in practical questions like how to handle the call to prayer in majority non-Muslim places, (2) insight into the vision, conviction, the traditions and traumas of the other; (3) discovery of our own faith in the light of the others' difference and similarity, misunderstandings or perplexities; (4) testimony to the Risen Christ that may allow others to sense what Easter is about; (5) finally, collaboration according to the shared orientation of Catholic Social teaching, that the world may become a more truly human place. That is, oriented towards solidarity and personal rights, participation and rule of law, freedom of faith and conscience. *distinction-cum-collaboration of religions and state.*

2. Levels of dialogue. The classical description of interreligious dialogue identifies four "levels" (*Dialogue and Mission*, 28–35). (1) Dialogue of life: sharing the same minibus every morning is already a form of dialogue, the Church stresses. (2) Dialogue of action: working together for the common good is dialogue, too. (3) Dialogue of religious experience: the sharing of spiritual, indeed mystical movements is set before the (4) Dialogue of theological experts. In this oft-quoted list, a fifth, very common level seems to be missing, which also needs attention, reflection, and formation: (5) Dialogue of lay debate. Non-experts are often disputing their faith in a way that sounds polemical, intrusive, monopolizing; but it can be the beginning of a deeper appreciation of others in their enriching difference.

3. Dimensions of dialogue. We have heard that the then Pope Benedict distinguished the face-to-face dimension (sharing on questions of religious belief) from the side-by-side dimension (co-operation). But there is a third dimension to that. It becomes visible in European universities today. We have a **14|15** growing number of institutes of what is aptly called "Islamic theology." Some of the professors and students there are doing impressive academic work. Typically, a lot of face to face and side by side is going on with theologians from other religions, especially with Christians, sometimes also with Jewish thinkers. That is good news; but there is also a need of spaces for confessional theology. That is to say, future imams, future pastors, future Rabbis need classes also amongst themselves. With all the questions and inspirations they get from interreligious encounters, they also need to dedicate time to their very own traditions, their classical methods, their specific internal problems. We are not on the verge of creating a unitarian religious thought, but we see the different faith traditions now entering theological interaction. In short, interreligious dialogue does not only have two dimensions but three: face to face, side by side, and: back to back!

4. All brothers. On 3 October, Pope Francis presented his new Encyclical: *Fratelli tutti* ("All brothers"). In it, he is continuing the theological line already sketched out in the document he signed last year together with the Sheikh al-Azhar, Ahmed at-Tayyeb.¹⁹ Francis' point of departure is the view that Christians can, indeed should consider all human beings as brothers and sisters. That is a strong foundation of an ethos of reconciliation, a culture of encounter. There is much Muslim agreement on this; but that universal vision has also been criticized; both

¹⁹ More on this, Felix Körner, »Rücken an Rücken. Die dritte Dimension interreligiöser Miteinanders«, in: George Augustin, Sonja Sailer-Pfister, Klaus Vellguth (eds.), *Christentum im Dialog. Perspektiven christlicher Identität in einer pluralen Gesellschaft*, Festschrift Günter Riße (Theologie im Dialog, vol. 12), Freiburg 2014, pp. 235–242.

Catholics and Evangelicals object: as we can see in the New Testament, at the beginning Christians only called other Christians their brothers and sisters.²⁰

Since the objection quotes the Bible, a response will not help if it only points out that all the recent Popes have followed the line of universal fraternity expressly; or that it is in the tradition of Francis of Assisi. One needs Biblical arguments to convince the objectors. The key to solving the problem is, to distinguish: all people are children of God and thus brothers and sisters; but so far not all acknowledge their filial status. So, in speaking universally, we are using a type of discourse that we might call “yeast language.” We know that not all share our view yet, in their thoughts and in their actions. But it is precisely the point of the Gospel proclamation to put the yeast into the dough in order to transform all of it (Matthew 13:33; Luke 13:21). Francis is not following a kind of Enlightenment universalism. That might in fact end up as an atheist type of humanism. He is, rather feeding into the world’s discourses the view, which all human beings are invited to discover: that they are sons and daughters of Jesus’ Heavenly Father and thus joined together as the one human family. **15|16**

5. Same God. Do Muslims and Christians believe in the same God? The Church has been affirmative on this. But the reasons that were given are rather unconvincing. Why is this an important question?²¹ Let us look at the proposition “We believe in the same God.” The proposition needs to be seen from two fundamental aspects, viz., who is the one we turn to, and what are we doing when turning to him? More technically speaking: there is the referent (God) and the reference (believing). The referent of both Muslim and Christian worship and trust is indeed the one and only God. If you compare a Christian believer with an adherent of Roman gods, that would be different. If someone is a worshipper of Mars and calls him god, there is an abyss of difference between us. We, Muslims, Christians, Jews, understand by “God” the creator, governor and fulfiller of the universe. That is beyond discussion among all who refer to the God of Abraham. In that sense, Abrahamic monotheists agree on what it is to be divine. And more than that: many of the properties we ascribe to God are even literally equal. E.g., we all confess that God is “merciful.” Still, the contents we ascribe to God—even if often expressed by the same words—are not identical. Jews, Christians and Muslims hold that the fulness of God’s revelation is to be found in *different* moments of history: in the Exodus, in the Easter events around Christ—or, in the proclamation of the Qur’an. But this is not taking back the “same God” affirmation, as if the aforementioned identity were mere equivocation, some misunderstanding. No, it is indeed important to say that we “believe” in the same God in the sense that we “turn to” the same divine Creator, that we “revere” and “trust” the same judge and fulfiller of all reality. Why is it theologically important to say that? Only if we want to believe in the same, if our intended referent is the same, we are able to enrich and purify each other. Our worship is, of course, aware of the incompleteness of our present understanding; but we are looking for the same. That is why we can have fruitful dispute, theological debate. If you want to debate theologically with an adherent of Mars, your discussion will soon be over, namely when saying that by God you mean the Governor of everything—which is not true of Mars. So, the reason why it is correct and even important to say that we believe in the same God is that only then it is meaningful to discuss why that God would want to become a human being, etc. Even if the reference—the contents of our belief—is of course different depending on whether you have Trinitarian faith or not; even though it is different, however, the one we believe in—in the sense

²⁰ More discussion on the theological issues can be found here: Felix Körner, »Das Dokument von Abu Dhabi. Eine politisch-theologische Debatte«, in: *Internationale Katholische Zeitschrift Communio* 49 (2020), pp. 312–326.

²¹ For further discussion, see: Felix Körner, »Glauben Christen und Muslime an denselben Gott?«, in: Thomas Marschler, Klaus von Stosch (eds.), *Verlorene Strahlkraft? Welches Glaubenszeugnis heute gefragt ist*, Freiburg 2018, pp. 41–51.

of “looking for, turning to, trusting in,” is the same. So the classical formula from the 1076 letter that “we believe in the same God, be it in a different manner” is true but not very clear. We believe in the same God because we both turn to the Governor of the universe; and because of our different historical points of key orientation, we can have faith dispute. We Christians can say: It is out of the fulness of God’s love that He wants Jesus to be worshipped as his Son and as the unique starting **16|17** point of His kingdom. Only we Christians are convinced of that. Non-Christians would not share this view; but with them, we can have a meaningful debate on such issues—under one condition. Namely, if there is an at least vaguely shared understanding of what we mean by the word “God”; say, the Origin and Aim of everything.

6. Praying together. We should not pray together with people of other religions, teaches the Church. The reason stated in the official texts to justify this prohibition is unfortunately deficient. There is a fairly recent Church document on inter-religious questions. It was published under Pope Francis; but it was written during the era of Pope Benedict. It is disappointingly shallow and surprisingly alarmist. Its title is *Dialogue in Truth and Charity*. It allows for so-called multi-religious prayer (presence during the worship of another religion); but it forbids inter-religious prayer (believers of different religions praying with the same words). The reason stated for the prohibition is this (n. 82): “being able to pray in common requires a shared understanding of who God is.” It would be better to say: Prayer in public is also a public manifestation of belief; we want to manifest that prayer in the full sense, trusting divine communion, is a gift we received from God personally through the events as recounted in the Bible. There should, however, be exceptions. “Inter-religious prayer” should officially be declared possible, indeed necessary in certain circumstances: in personal encounters in which non-Christians ask us to help them with their prayer—and publicly, at times when we hope (and hope to show) that the memory of religious rivalry will be healed. As did Pope Francis in Sarajevo.

7. Prophecy. Can Christians say Muhammad is a prophet? If that means that the Qur’an gets canonical value as the criterion judging the correctness of the Biblical witness, then: no! But Christians can see God’s Spirit at work in all of history, can see revelation in everything as long as the key to all understanding of God and his world are in the Easter events.

Still, Christians can consider Muhammad to be a prophet in a normative—not only descriptive—sense. What is that to say? We can define a prophet as a person who, with a new message, helps prepare the arrival of Christ in people’s lives.²² If you hear converts from Islam to Christianity, you sometimes hear that Muhammad actually had a preparatory role in their lives. We can, therefore, say, even as Christians, that Muhammad has, within history, a prophetic function. More should not be said, because it would be adopting the Qur’anic position that all religions which have a scripture are principally equal. That is not a Christian point of view; because Christianity comes from the irreplaceable Easter message. It starts in people being seized by the joy that “Christ is risen.”

²² Felix Körner, »Das Prophetische am Islam«, in: Mariano Delgado und Michael Sievernich (eds.), *Mission und Prophetie in Zeiten der Transkulturalität*. Festschrift zum hundertjährigen Bestehen des Internationalen Instituts für missionswissenschaftliche Forschungen 1911–2011, St. Ottilien 2011, pp. 234–248.