

6. ***A Christian View of Islam. Essays on Dialogue*** by Thomas F. Michel, S.J. Edited by A. Rashied OMAR. (Faith Meets Faith Series). Maryknoll, NY, Orbis Books, 2010. xxiv+214 pp.

Thomas Michel ([www.thomasmichel.us](http://www.thomasmichel.us)) was born in St. Louis, Missouri, in 1941. He worked as a diocesan priest in Indonesia and became a Jesuit there in 1971. In 1978, he earned his doctorate under the guidance of the eminent Islamic scholar Fazlur Rahman in Chicago. In his dissertation, Michel studied Ibn Taymiyya's *Correct Response to Christianity*. From 1981 to 1994, Fr. Michel was a member of what became the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue. After that, until 2008, he served as secretary for interreligious dialogue of the Society of Jesus. He has visited many countries of Muslim majority and lived in several of them, most recently in Turkey, where he is an esteemed lecturer, notably at the country's Muslim theological faculties. Michel has authored ten books; famous is his *What Muslims should know about Christianity*, which was translated, among other languages, into Turkish, Arabic and Indonesian.

The present book has an original birth story. Three academics were probing at the same time the possibilities of publishing Michel's essays in one volume. The intuition was obviously right; Michel's scattered texts needed to be made accessible like those of his contemporary Christian W. Troll, S.J., in the same Orbis Series one year earlier (*Dialogue and Difference. Clarity in Christian-Muslim Relations*). *A Christian View of Islam* became an interreligious project in itself because the editor is a Muslim. He did

an expert job. From Michel's articles, Irfan A. Omar (Marquette) selected the 15 most pertinent to today's Christian-Muslim relations. The book moves from the fundamental to the specific. It grounds the encounter with four principal reflections on interreligious dialogue (Part I). The first is theological, the second considers pedagogy, the third surveys a variety of present activities, and the last one studies Muslim approaches to interfaith dialogue.

Part II provides five comparative studies on focal topics: social factors affecting Christian-Muslim relations; liberation theology; Hagar; fundamentalisms; forgiveness. The final six essays (Part III) are Christian views on Islam. They deal with terrorism, ecology, holiness and ethics respectively; but two of them also offer new historical material. In the historical studies, too, one of Michel's guiding questions shines through: how can human beings live together in different religions without resorting to violence? One article reminds its readers of the Afghan emblem of nonviolence, Abdul Ghaffar Khan (d. 1988; pp. 156–166). The portrait is, at the same time, an impressive attempt to show how Islam can be read as a "moral code with pacifism at his center" (p. 161). In another article published here, Michel exposes the work of the Kurdish Turkish spiritual reformer Said Nursi (d. 1960). Michel confronts his *Treatise of the Light* with John Paul II's writings and attests to Nursi that he "must be seen as one of the twentieth century's great exponents of nonviolent resistance" (p. 115).

The other article that offers source material otherwise hardly treated is a 1989 paper on *Jesuit writings on Islam in the Seventeenth Century* (pp. 123–148). Even before the era studied in Michel's paper, there had been Jesuit intellectual interaction with Muslims, viz., in the Society of Jesus's first generation: J.B. Eliano, an Alexandrian Jew who had converted to Christianity and joined the Jesuits, employed a novel technique within the genre of Christian refutations of Islam. He had two Muslims discuss with each other in his book. Their inability to agree becomes a proof, thinks Eliano, of Islam's inconsistency. A certain Ignatius de las Casas, S.J., (d. 1608) produced a report for the Pope on the beliefs, religious practices and traditions of the Spanish moriscos. Ignatius de las Casas was the right man for the work: he was from a morisco family himself; his expertise turned out fair-minded and sympathetic (p. 126). The Jesuits' educational programme for colleges, the so-called *Ratio Studiorum*, contained a long and influential text on Islam, too. It had been written by a certain Father A. Possevino (d. 1611).

But how did the second generation of the Society of Jesus interact with Islam? They were writing in a particular, new situation. First, they were more heavily influenced by baroque philosophy, palpably already under the radiation of Enlightenment, they were inclining towards a highly argumentative gesture in their writings (p. 124); and they were reflecting on an Islam that had, in the last decades, become defensive.

The four treatises Michel studies will be presented here in some detail following their review in the present book since they are otherwise scarcely mentioned. The oldest of the four is Thyrso Gonzales's *Manducatio* of 1689. The author became superior general of the Jesuits right before his book's publication. The treatise is an information of both the Catholic and the Muslim faiths; its intention is conversion and baptism, its method is rational justification. The so-called *Breve Trattato* of Emmanuel Sanz was published in 1691 and seems, in its lively style, to be a transcript of real encounters; but then Sanz offers a model for step-by-step conversion which sounds rather artificial. Michel's criticism is to the point: "The argumentation being such that would not convince anyone who was not already a believing Catholic Christian, it is difficult to imagine that these dialogues could have been drawn from Sanz's personal experience, but seem, rather, to reflect discussions among Christian theologians" (pp. 136–137). The third book is more political; it is N.M. Pallavicino's *Moderne prosperità* of 1688. The triumphalist text sees Islam as "a great sea of heresies, greater even than Calvinism, to which, of all the

modern sects, it is closely similar” (p. 137). Michel observes that Pallavicino speaks of the “‘mystical body of Christ’ in a highly militant sense” and labels the treatise “wartime propaganda” (p. 138). Still, it deserves note that Pallavicino is able to see the Ottomans as capable governors, granting wide freedom of conscience (p. 139). The fourth and last book presented by Thomas Michel’s article is a certain Michel Nau’s *Religio Christiana* of 1680. Nau was a Frenchman who wrote in Aleppo. There was a tendency to instruct Jesuits in majority Muslim regions “to refrain from proselytizing or entering into polemics with Muslims” (p. 142); still, Nau would discuss theology with Muslims. In his experience, controversy is not necessarily a source of conflict; Michel summarizes Nau’s view: “if dialogue is carried out in the context of love and friendship, with respect and humility, without denigration of or hatred for Islam, such discussions need not lead to rancor or division” (p. 142). Among the well thought-out arguments is, in a fictional dialogue, the Christian’s point that the Gospel cannot be a product of later alteration because it is so difficult to live, and no-one would invent such an over-challenge (p. 143). The Muslim in the end praises the Christian for having explained so well all the “moments of religion”; but Michel writes that “against the reader’s expectations, the Muslim does not finally embrace the Christian religion” (p. 143). Fr. Michel praises the “humble and deferential” tone of Nau’s “intelligent and perceptive” book. What Michel writes about a fellow Jesuit who lived 300 years before himself can serve, without Michel’s intention, as a description of his own life: “a work that has grown out of the personal experience of many years of shared life and thoughtful dialogue with Muslims” (p. 143).

The Foreword was written by Georgetown’s John L. Esposito, who reiterates that “Islam and Christianity have shared beliefs that provide basis for mutual recognition and cooperation” (p. xi). Do we need shared beliefs in order to be able to recognise others and to work with them? Do we need simplistic categories like the claim that the Catholic Church “has come from a position far behind that of mainstream Protestantism to a robust encounter” (Esposito, p. xvi)? We do not, and Thomas Michel shows us in his life work and in his texts that there is much more to be discovered in Muslim–Christian encounter. He does not promise a “rose-garden” of facile solutions to conflicts and tensions (p. 13). His project and his experience are a “mutual witness” (p. 21). “In real life, there is no conflict between dialogue and proclaiming the Gospel” (ibid.). The book is carefully edited, with updated notes, a list of Fr. Michel’s publications (to which his research on Jesuits in Ottoman Turkey might be added) and a detailed index. – *Felix Körner, SI.*