

Christian Lives Given to the Study of Islam

Edited by

CHRISTIAN W. TROLL, S.J., AND C. T. R. HEWER

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Over the centuries, many Christians, too many to mention, have trodden this path before us. This work is dedicated to them all. In the modern period, amongst many others, we mention the following:

<i>Jean-Mohamed Abd-el-Jalil</i>	<i>Jacques Jomier</i>
<i>Georges Anawati</i>	<i>David Kerr</i>
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<i>Redmond Fitzmaurice</i>	<i>Benvenido (Benny) Ttudud</i>
<i>Louis Gardet</i>	<i>Afif Usayran</i>
<i>Peter Gowing</i>	<i>William Montgomery Watt</i>

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“From the brook by the path”

Formation and Transformation in Meeting Muslims

Felix Körner

Reviews, especially those on one's own life, are rather hypothetical in their attempts to point out reasons, threads, and meaning. Why and how did I come to be a Jesuit in dialogue with Muslims and a theologian of witness? What influenced me, what drove me, what helped me? These are good questions. My answers, however, are an attempt only to discover consistency.

Offenbach

“How can a church possibly claim to be the only saving community?” Questions like this were usual topics around our family table in Offenbach, Germany. Our home was shaped by the encounter of our father's legal culture and our mother's poetic imagination. Father was a Lutheran. On his deathbed, in 2007, I read some verses to him by the seventeenth-century poet Paul Gerhardt, another Lutheran. At one point my father said, “Gut,” which came to be his last word. I am quite sure that he did not only want to say, “These are good words,” and “This was a good life,” but also, “That will do; you might as well stop reading this pious text now.”

Taking religious matters seriously but never slavishly was part of our family tradition; faith was food for dispute. After all, quite a few of our ancestors were pastors and lawyers.

My mother and her background, in turn, brought in a love of Jewish friends and thought. She was an intelligent Catholic, identified with the Church, interested in reflection, inspired by the Second Vatican Council; and she was never content with definitions or demarcations. Mother devoured classical and contemporary literature, and she kept questioning. When I gave her a book *Let's Learn to Pray* she said: "Do you think one can learn it?" (I only later discovered this to be a wise remark. Prayer is no technique, it is risking oneself.) My friends, and those of my brother and sister, loved visiting our home for an inspiring discussion; they even came after we had moved out.

I should therefore not be overly surprised about my interest in what is beyond traditional doctrines. Our high school, the Leibnizgymnasium, was similar in this respect. As opposed to most of my peers, I enjoyed going there. I remember our teacher of Greek, Dr. Günter Heil, whom I only later discovered to be the editor of a mysterious Church Father, Pseudo-Dionysius. Dr. Heil kept challenging our convictions with fundamental attacks. "What is it really, our Leibnizgymnasium?" he would ask, pointing out that it could neither be the building, nor the teachers, nor the pupils. Apart from textbooks and teachers, there was an even more enjoyable source of questions and attempted syntheses in school—my classmate Biagio Morabito from Messina, Sicily. An Arab name, an Italian background, an impressively deeper understanding of German thought than his indigenous peers. Biagio and I started off designing castles for our future kingdoms, then we visited last year's teachers at their homes to see them in other contexts; later we shot black and white pictures of ourselves reinventing clothing fashions. For me, Biagio represented the cultural integrity of Europe as the reflective readiness to rethink our identity by integrating the new.

Between 1979 and 1984, the questioning plurality of my cultured middle-class youth received several impressions that shaped the decision to become a Jesuit and scholar of Islam. I record three such experiences.

King's Canyon

My life received an unexpected spin when I was sixteen. Upon visiting relatives in California, I came to know a Presbyterian youth group. Their first

questions were whether I was reborn and regularly read the Bible. On a backpacking tour through King's Canyon with the Presbyterians, I realized that I did not want Christianity to be one element of my life, like the cello I play; I wanted faith to become the form of my life. The hope to help others discover the source of the joy I feel, has been alive in me always since that day.

Katharina

At the age of nineteen, when I graduated from high school, I was unsure what to do next. So I was quite happy to be summoned for compulsory military service. I served as a medical soldier for two months and then worked for handicapped people as a nonmilitary community worker (*Zivildienstleistender*). One day, the director of the care center asked me to spend an afternoon with two women in wheelchairs. They had managed to escape legally from communist East Germany for three weeks. They asked me to drive them to, of all things, a sex film. I arranged it in downtown Frankfurt but waited for them in a nearby church, the Lutheran Katharinenkirche. What I experienced there is hard to describe. I was kneeling in a church that was lacking the focal point of the reserved Blessed Sacrament. My presence to God and God's presence to me appeared to be correlated. I left the place with a deep respect. The experience has ever since maintained its intriguing inexpressible quality. This may be the reason why I have always sensed the insufficiency of theist conceptual systems that put Creator and creation vis-à-vis each other.

Calligraphy

A third formative moment, after the Californian conviction and the German correlation, was Israel in 1984. In search for my personal call, I attended a Jesuit-run Bible School in Nazareth with twenty other searchers. Witnessing to Christ in a rather evangelical manner was part of the program's pedagogy, that is, telling others how the Gospel dynamics occurred in your own life.

It was in this context that I visited my first mosque: Jerusalem's al-Aqsa. With three fellow Bible students, I took off my shoes and entered. There I experienced attraction and repulsion. Why attraction? It was the time when my faith was more philosophical than historical. That is to say, with

all my interest in Jesus and first-century Judaism growing during our studies in the Holy Land, I could not make sense of Christ's unicity. Calling Jesus God was, for us participants in the Bible School, "the language of love." We explained it as the crazy way lovers sometimes speak, but one need not and cannot make sense of it in the face of rational questions, we thought. So, in our Holy Land liturgies, we would praise Jesus as God with the whole Church; but in our reflections we declared it as enchanted exaggeration. We were unable to see the rationality of Trinitarian theology. We did not risk thoughts like: 'God does not impose himself, and therefore puts his divinity in the hands of his counterpart.' On the other hand, the Bible School was designed to make us discover and respect forms of religious life that were both familiar and strange: namely Judaism and Islam. Entering al-Aqsa with this mindset was bound to create a striking impression; and I was struck with the clarity of the architecture and of the theology that comes thus to expression. Shaped space and written quotations as the only means of artistic articulation appealed to me. I did not want representations to come in the way between God and myself. What also fascinated me, wandering on the carpets of al-Aqsa, was the immediate readiness of even young Muslims to practice their ritual obligations in public. It corresponded to an intuition of mine: believers should inspire their societies through the beauty of their liturgies. Besides attraction however, my first visit to a mosque was also a moment of repulsion. Moved with the new piety we encountered, it was natural for us to express recollection and respect by keeping our hands together in front of us as we walked about in silence. A bearded official came up to us shouting in Arabic and making gestures, both of which we did not understand. He therefore increased the intensity of his shouting and gesticulating, until we realized that he wanted us to keep our hands apart. The folding of hands was too Christian for him. So what I felt in my first encounter with Islam was an attracting and repelling authority.

Semitic Semantics

Would I be able to become a Jesuit, authentically? What had helped me overcome my fears was the example of Jesuits whom I found to follow Christ as liberated personalities. All through our basic formation, Judaism and Islam accompanied my theological explorations. I was eager to attend synagogues and mosques. I was looking forward greatly to learning Hebrew and, once I was able to start during my first year of philosophy, I discovered

that I also wanted to learn Arabic as soon as possible. I found two great teachers to guide my first linguistic steps in Semitic languages. They were my fellow Jesuit, Michel van Esbroeck (d. 2003), an astonishing polyglot Belgian scholar in the Bollandist tradition, and a Protestant woman, Dr. Ruthild Geiger, who taught at the Jesuit philosophical faculty in Munich. Both invested precious time in Arabic tutorials with me. I wonder why I was so obsessed with Hebrew and Arabic, with Judaism and Islam. I was observing Christian theology from a distance. I thought that Christians had complicated Jesus's obvious message, the call to acknowledge the reality of God. In my studies of first-century Judaism, of the Hebrew Bible and of the Qur'an, I hoped to be closer to Jesus himself. I read the Qur'an in Arabic. My first Arabic copy was a Saudi Arabian gift by a German convert wearing a headscarf in Munich University's Arabic classes. I also started studying books on Islam: my first was William Montgomery Watt's in the Kohlhammer series *Die Religionen der Menschheit*. Funnily the Jesuit superior who gave me the book for Christmas 1989, following my request, used the same words my uncle Peter had said upon giving me Rudi Paret's Qur'an translation and commentary the year before: "Hopefully, you won't become a Muslim!" I thought to myself that somehow I was one already. On the other hand, I felt much of what I read to be unnecessarily brutal.

London

Reading theology at the Jesuit Heythrop College, London, was perfect for me at that time, because my linguistic, philosophical, and interreligious interests were lead on by experts. There were four encounters within the College that shaped my future, and five outside.

The first formative meeting was with the philosopher Peter Vardy. He helped me with a problem that I had acquired at the end of my undergraduate studies in Munich, where analytical philosophy was becoming fashionable. I had come to doubt that God could be a reality beyond our own concepts. Vardy pointed out to me that I should at least be consistent enough to accept that if God is not real, petitionary prayer and eternal life are pointless.

The other philosopher was Gerard Hughes, S.J., whose course not only attracted Christian students but also Bilal from Pakistan, my first Muslim peer. The course on Aquinas's doctrine of God was brilliantly clear but never questioned language that seemed to make an object of God; we

despised as muddled thinking, ideas like the one that God might be a community in which we are taking part.

The great New Testament scholar Tom Deidun of the Rosminian Fathers introduced me, through specialized Greek classes, to Paul's dealing with his own experience: the experience of weakness and of Christ's work.

It was under the direction of Ann Jeffers, a Swiss Calvinist, that I wrote my essay on the Fourth Gospel. She generously accepted my proposal not to follow the set task to reconstruct John's presumed community. I rather wanted to understand the message of the gospel text. Perhaps it was, after all, more than the exaggerated language of the lover? I found the Johannine message to be the challenge to believe in Christ. In my reflection on faith, this was an important step away from an unreal God; but the point I had reached was merely that believing seemed now to depend on my own decision. Dr. Jeffers's interests were not in fundamental theology. As a scholar of Early Judaism, her research corresponded, however, to my fascination with Hebrew and intertestamental studies. I was at the point of becoming a researcher in Philo, Josephus, and Qumran. I found, however, that too many minds were already working in the field and I was angry because I didn't get the highest mark for my exam essay on Josephus, which I myself found insightful. In those months, my decision to go for Islamic studies matured. One fellow student, now a Benedictine monk, asked me about the turn from Qumran to Qur'an. He wanted to know what Islam meant to me and challenged me to use a metaphor. I said, "Islam is the castle I want to enter. I'm not sure whether I want to conquer or inhabit it."

During my London days I started a Zen formation with *kō'an* training. I kept it up from 1992 until 2003. The *kō'an* is an apt occasion to understand everything anew in one moment's formulation. Zen challenges the individual to get beyond categories of "I versus Thou." Zen, however, does not offer a constructive language to express where one is going upon leaving that dualism. Zen rather offers provocative paradoxes.

Five encounters outside Heythrop College became waymarks during this time of reorientation.

Christian Troll was the first Jesuit Islamicist I was able to meet. He was at that time teaching at Selly Oak, Birmingham, and proved to be a wise advisor. Probably the most important counsel I received in these years was from him. He told me, "If you want to make a valid contribution to inter-religious dialogue, you need to be a good Christian theologian."

It was Fr. Troll who encouraged me to contact an Anglican theologian and priest of my own age, a doctoral student of his, David Marshall. He opened up the doors to his growing family but also to the workshop of his

developing thought on the Qur'an. A decidedly biblical theologian, he was trying to do justice to Muslims' lives and Islam's texts. His attitude of respectful and serious thinking has always been exemplary for me.

Fr. Marshall also made it possible for me to be present at liturgies celebrated by Bishop Kenneth Cragg and at a seminar he held on the first *sura* of the Qur'an. Cragg's way of doing theology, his ever-new discoveries when closely studying the Qur'an, keeps shaping my own endeavors.

Our Jesuit provincial superior at the time was Bernd Franke. He brought the good news to London that the Society of Jesus wanted to see me ordained a priest; and he asked what I could see myself doing after ordination and pastoral work. I did not dare to say outright "Islamic studies." Would he not consider such a wish to be an attempt to escape from the urgent need for professors in Christian theology? So I responded, "I'd like to do biblical studies, with a perspective towards the Qur'an." Surprisingly he said, "I was expecting you to say Islam and that is exactly what we need!" He wisely added, "I do not know where you should pursue your studies. Get informed, and then present me your suggestions."

The Jesuit Islamicists that I asked all advised me according to the same principle. They all recommended as my place to study, those places where they had studied or taught. I found those answers rather frustrating and got in contact with the great scholar of classical Islamic theology, Josef van Ess of Tübingen. He was at the end of his academic career and in the middle of the production of his *magnum opus*. He would hardly have time for my question; but one day he appeared in the United Kingdom and spent an exhausting nine hours with me, talking and walking through London. At the end, his recommendation was clear: neither the United States nor the United Kingdom but Germany; not Tübingen, however, but rather Bamberg; a South German town I had never visited.

Bamberg

The young department of Islamic studies, with good scholars of Arabic, Iranian, and Turkish Muslim thought, and a focus on contemporary reflection, proved to be the right place for me. My supervisor was Rotraud Wielandt. Her thinking is characterized by the highest linguistic demands of Arabic and Turkish, and highest philosophical precision in thought and expression, but at the same time deep theological empathy. I had to attend introductory seminars once again and was able to produce my Master's thesis on Muhammad Shahrur's hermeneutics in 2001. How Muslims

interpret the Qur'an today became my guiding question, but Bamberg offered many other inputs that shaped my understanding and theology of Islam. The lecturer in Arabic was an Egyptian Muslim, an Azharite; it was touching to see him entrust his own spiritual struggles to me, the young Catholic priest. He seemed to look on me as a man of God, rather than of the Church.

Many of my fellow students were Muslims. Discussions with them and my Christian or nonreligious peers were our daily bread but the greatest insights of my Bamberg years (1997–2002) I owe to three other sources. Surprising moments of theological discoveries were the Sunday excursions with Rotraud Wielandt. We used them for faith explorations that became more and more influenced by the other two sources. First, I was obliged to preach regularly, and I enjoyed it because the congregations of Bamberg challenged me to reflect and express our faith freshly; and secondly, when I started full-time encounters with Muslim thinking, I felt that I needed a Christian theologian to help me shape that new thinking apparently developing in me. I tried a regular reading of von Balthasar but gave up on him after two hundred pages of *Herrlichkeit*. I had the impression that he was speaking as an insider to insiders and did not want to make himself understood to someone asking the critical questions Muslims ask. It was Berthild Sachs, a Lutheran, then in her last years of formation for ministry, who recommended me to try her own theological teacher, Wolfhart Pannenberg. This suggestion proved to reshape my whole way of thinking and believing. I started reading his *Systematische Theologie* and decided to get hold of all of his texts. I kept a regular Pannenberg *lectio* up until I had read everything published by him. I wanted to know his thought as a whole and I also felt an urge to come to know the man himself, with whom I spent so many hours through reading. He and his wife received me generously. What is so important in Pannenberg's theology? It was when reading him that I was able to see Christian faith not as depending on my decision but on Jesus's life, death and resurrection, and thus on an anticipation of the completion of history, into which we can enter.

In 1999 I met another prominent Jesuit Islamicist, Fr. Tom Michel, who had called all young Jesuits in Islamic studies to Istanbul for a meeting. Fr. Michel asked me whether I could see myself as a partner in academic encounters in Ankara, where the Society of Jesus was about to found a community. I hesitated knowing that the German Jesuits expected me to work in Germany with its growing Muslim presence. But I liked the idea, and half a year later it was an open secret that the Jesuits wanted me in Turkey. So I quickly moved to finish my Bamberg studies with a doctorate

on contemporary Turkish Qur'an exegesis. Initially Prof. Wielandt was reticent when she heard about the proposal put forward by Christian Troll. But one day she returned from a research tour in Turkey enthusiastically saying that she had found surprising movements of Muslim intellectual life there, especially at Ankara's theological faculty. She became a demanding director and solid supporter of my thesis, which I was able to write already in contact with some Ankara Qur'anic exegetes. I think I was as demanding in criticizing my Muslim counterparts as the director of my thesis was towards me but I still think that any dialogue requires one to say what one sees to be wrong with the other.

Ankara

I spent almost six years in Ankara. I had many friendly relations with Muslim theologians, but also in the workshops of our neighborhood. A young sociologist, Hasan Karaca, now working for the Religious Affairs Directorate, became my teacher; he had grown up in Berlin but returned to Turkey to start a family in the country of his parents. The most exciting thing I did in Ankara was teaching Philosophical Anthropology at the Middle East Technical University. I found interested students and interesting colleagues there, but the former dean, desperate to rebel against the rural Kurdish Islam of his youth, was suspicious of the religious man in the philosophy department. So they discontinued my contract after one term, claiming that I had been reading the Bible instead of philosophy. The claim is grotesquely false, but in one class I had actually read with the students a passage from the book of Ezekiel, explaining the concept of history. The lectures were creative presentations of basic concepts of European reflection. Once they were cancelled, I had time to fulfill a rather surprising new academic task. The Frankfurt Jesuit faculty had invited me to teach a regular course on Islam. I asked also to be accepted as a supervisor of academic theses. That, I learned, was impossible with only a theological degree from Heythrop and a doctorate in Islam. What I needed was an ecclesiastical doctorate. I was disappointed, but once again the shocking message proved to be the key to a greater future. From Ankara, and out of my work there, I wrote a second doctorate, for the University of Fribourg, Switzerland. The director I found (through the internet) was Prof. Barbara Hallensleben. When I googled her, she had just been elected the first woman in the pope's International Theological Commission. I was looking for solid dogmatic theology to guide my theology on Islam, so I proposed the project to her.

I did not know at that time that she is one of the leading theologians of Ignatian Spirituality, the ferment of my own life as a Jesuit! After a theological licentiate, I was able to produce under Hallensleben's supervision a new approach to dialogue between religions. It was, of course, strongly influenced by my experience in Ankara, from where I wrote the book.

I should mention three backgrounds to my interreligious theology. The first is the product of my Muslim contacts: I found that the Muslim questions put to Christianity are valid and fundamental challenges. The second background was my companionship with traditional Middle Eastern Christians: Syrian youth groups, Egyptian high school students and Lebanese Jesuits. They all sense that their presence is meaningful although they often cannot name what is the point of Christianity. Finally I was able to accompany a small group of Turks from Muslim families on their spiritual and theological journeys towards baptism; it was not me who had converted them, but I was able to help them shape their understanding of the Good News. The train of thought I developed was this. In the encounter with believers of other religions, I am challenged to witness. What is witnessing? Christian witness is the integration of a historical event in which you are taking part, of my own experience of imperfection that leads to transformation, and the incapacity to make others into convinced Christians by rational arguments: defeat in dispute is no loss for the growth of God's Kingdom but a decisive moment in which God's capacity to act in surprisingly different ways becomes visible.

My systematic theology was shaped by biblical studies; witnessing to God, who is electing his people, became formative for me in presenting and representing Christ. This is perhaps why I am rather allergic to equalizing attempts of natural law thinking or the claim of different revelations. The challenge of Jesus's call is that divine communion depends on our decision for him. This decision, however, is reasoned. Its basis is history opened up for participation in the anticipation of the fullness, in Christ's resurrection.

I am grateful for the initial conditions my family provided but I think I haven't lived only on the provisions they gave me. They rather taught me to find sustenance and redirection from the unexpected interruptions along the road: as Psalm 110 has it, "from the brook by the path."