

THE JESUIT TASKS IN MUSLIM-CHRISTIAN DIALOGUE

Felix Körner, S.J.

Three preliminary remarks:

(i) Meetings of Jesuits are possibilities for discernment in community. I use this possibility with gratitude.

(ii) I claim that my list of “Jesuit tasks in Muslim–Christian dialogue” is exhaustive. This is not arrogance but a request. If you think I have left out a task, explain me what it is and why it should be on the list.

(iii) Much of interreligious reflection and theology of religions is useless for me because I do not know what exactly people are talking about. It is simply too general. Just like this last sentence. In order not to commit the same mistake again I will from now on, at least in this contribution, tell you exactly of what, rather, of whom I am thinking when I propose my

Five Theses:

1. Meryem Çiçek

Meryem is a 60 year old Armenian Apostolic widow with two children, who are well integrated into our multi-denominational community in Ankara. Meryem has started to work as the Ankara Catholic Church’s receptionist. I was recently present when she explained our chapel to a group of Muslim visitors. She said: “Here is the book—you know, it’s like the Koran. And here is the altar—it is pretty much the mihrab. And here is Mother Mary, whom Muslims also revere. You can light a candle in front of her.” I was quite amused about what I heard. Meryem was explaining Christianity as another form of Islam. The Turkish textbooks of religious education do precisely this.

The first task Jesuits have in interreligious dialogue is to help Christians in their ‘lay discussions’. This is the most frequent level of dialogue, although it strangely does not feature in the Church’s reflections on dialogue. When the visitors, lead by Meryem, were still pausing in front of Mother Mary, I asked whether I might add something, which they accepted. I said: “When you publish a baby picture of Prime Minister Erdoğan, he is likely to sue you. And a baby Muhammad in the newspaper may have even more severe consequences. But why is it not ridiculous to show Jesus as a baby?” One of the visiting women said “Saflık!” (purity!). I continued: “Recently I discovered how the atmosphere in our house changed when we had a new born canary bird. And I remember my brother, who spoke a totally different language when his first child was born. Children change us because they are weak. Jesus’ power is that power of the weak which changes our hearts.”

Here is my first thesis:

We have to provide theology for the lay discussions. These discussions need

- *touching formula which express the core of Christianity*
- *not win*
- *personal testimony.*

2. Mehmet Paçacı

Mehmet is one to the most promising Koran exegetes of Turkey in that he has, in addition to his standard theological and tafsîr formation, academic experience with New Testament

scholarship and hermeneutical philosophy. For Turkey, Mehmet was one of the heads of 'Islamic Modernism', as the Ankara school of theology used to characterise itself. In my doctoral thesis I spoke of an hermeneutical revisionism—and I suggested that a theologian of Mehmet's quality should lead his exegetical thinking on to systematic revisions. I do not really think that these two impulses of mine—"revisionism" and the call for fundamental theology—were vital in it, but: In the last couple of years Mehmet Paçacı has turned. His turn may not be 180°, because one much more probable influence than my own on Mehmet is Hans-Georg Gadamer. He was important for the old, the Modernis Paçacı already. The new Mehmet Paçacı simply seems to take more seriously than before Gadamer's call for a "rehabilitation of the tradition". Paçacı now makes three points.

- a. He declares exegesis as a purely technical discipline, whose research will always end in a descriptive sentence of the type 'What the Koran says in the passage referred to this and that situation and, then, meant this and that.'
- b. Modernism has been obsessed with exegesis. It was a "textualism", an unnecessary, indeed fatal import from Europe, i.e. from Reformation.
- c. Islam must be put back into its classical role as producer of norms for people; and Islam does this only through kelâm (kalâm) and fikh (fiqh).

In thinkers like Mehmet Paçacı we can already find plenty of fruits of patient and professional dialogue, ventured by men like Tom Michel, Christian Troll and Dan Madigan. Paçacı's interest in Western methodology *and* his criticism of it owes much to his Catholic contacts. Our Muslim-Christian task is here to search together—which has an element of learning from each other—how to tackle the present life questions.

Mehmet is seriously pleading for a re-introduction of the Ottoman millet system, and in dialogues with him—both private, in his office, or in Munich, where we recently organized a meeting through Eugen Biser foundation—I cannot say that I already have a solution which I only need to convey to him. Christian views on post national state power are still to be clarified.

Here is my second thesis:

We have to support the formation of theologians and other opinion leaders within Islam, so that they can

- *get top quality tools and resources*
- *find an authentic synthesis for scientific and spiritual lives*
- *transport their ideas into their own identities and communities.*

3. Çağrı Can

Çağrı is 23 and has just graduated from an Open University course in economics. He has been a member of an American-Turkish evangelical group, which baptized him 3 months after their first contact. Now, for the last one and a half years he has been interested in—and in sincere contact with—Catholicism. He is one of our catechumens. (Of course, we will not rebaptize him, but he will undergo the at least three years of training like anyone else from a non-Christian background who wants to be a Catholic Christian in Turkey.) A theologically rather promising reflection needs to be set in here. We are dealing with a large religious entity that has come about after the centuries in which Christianity defined its canon and basic theological terminology. We are dealing with a religious entity which shares a lot with us – it is in serious deviation, because it does not accept the sacramental authority of the Church.

I have deliberately formulated the last sentences ambiguously. I wanted you to think I was talking about Islam. But I am talking about evangelical Protestantism. I do not intend to mislead you - I only want to invite you to take Evangelicalism as a help for casting a fresh look on our task as a presence among Muslims. I took Çağrı to World Youth Day 2005 in Cologne. The feeling of World Church with its identity markers plus the non-pompous reflectiveness of Benedict XVI as well as the thoroughly Ignatian pre-programme [‘magis], prepared by young Jesuits in Germany, have changed Çağrı’s life. Therefore, here is my third thesis.

We have to live and make liveable for others a clearly recognizable Catholicity, not as the appeal of the crowd and seductive pseudo-liturgy. But, rather, in the Ignatian sense of mystical experience: The individual creature put before the Creator to be transformed into the body of the mission of Christ.—I think this also means that we need to open a church in the centre of Ankara so as to be able to witness Catholic spiritualities and mentalities.

4. Hansjörg Schmid

Dr. Schmid works for the Stuttgart Catholic Academy, which has a focus on Muslim-Christian understanding. Mr. Schmid prepares meetings of Muslim and Christian thinkers. When preparing a new academy conference he sometimes asks me whether I have new Muslim intellectuals to recommend for the respective subject they are preparing. This brings me to my fourth thesis:

We have to feed our knowledge of Muslims and their Islam into our Western societies, in order to:

- *promote mutual understanding and its intellectual processing for a development of our self-understandings.*
- *provide discernment services for our home Churches in Islam related questions.*

5. Alper

The largest department of philosophy in Turkey—that of the state run English language *Middle East Technical University* (METU)—has invited me to start teaching philosophical anthropology from September 21 onwards. The university knows that I am a Jesuit. Since classes haven’t started, I do not know my students yet. I can only extrapolate from a sociology student of the same university who taught me Turkish a couple of years ago, Alper. METU is not a very Muslim place at all. But I won’t hide the religious inspiration of what I’ll say, though I will clearly and only teach philosophy. What I’ll in fact do is present a view of what it is to be human, in the light of a series of crucial concepts of German anthropological philosophy. A person (!) has a job. That is not only work, it is *Beruf* (profession). *Beruf* actually means vocation. It was Martin Luther who claimed that not only the religious has a *Beruf* but every person in their worldly work, too. That implies a striking change of perspective. Your work is what you individually are called to do. But only when it is taken in the Ignatian sense, it reaches its punch line. You can be incorporated into the mission of Christ, that is human and Divine work as sacramentally intertwined. So, an anthropological philosophical reflection on “Beruf” is the source for rediscovering the value of your job and life. Thus, here is the fifth and last thesis.

We have to demonstrate the plausibility of the Christian treasures even to those whom we do not expect to find their ways to baptism.

Let me sum up. Our five tasks are

- theology for lay discussion
- resourcing Muslim opinion leaders
- Ignatian catechesis
- discernment for the Church
- sharing the treasures.

All other tasks I cannot but see as a waste of time. Maybe, however, you convince me of something else.

Concluding remark: Considerations by Jean-Marc Balhan, Dan Madigan and Christian Troll from the discussion after the talk are already included in this text.