

scholars. The Shiite concept of *ijtihad* is different, and it was continually practiced.

The discourse on *reopening the gate of ijtihad* gained new power in the XX<sup>th</sup> century, because of the external challenges that the Western Judeo-Christian and the secularized world presented to the world of Islam. The situation in the last centuries, probably from the times of colonialism, presents many new unprecedented influences and pressures on Islam, which must answer in some way.

How the question of *ijtihad* will be settled is not sure. It is the internal task and challenge of contemporary Muslim scholars. The quality of the relationship between Islam and Christianity, however, is dependent also on the ways Islam will find to reinterpret its tradition in the new globalised world.

What Christians can do in this process is to enhance their own instruments serving openness in dialogue and to find, together with Muslims, an appropriate and suitable (proper and apt) new language for common understanding.

**Suggested Reading**  
 APPLERY Scott R. *The Ambivalence of the Sacred: Religion, Violence, and Reconciliation*. 2000.

ISAACS William. *Dialogue: The Art of Thinking Together*. 1999.  
 Islam. In *Wikipedia: the Free Encyclopaedia*. <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Islam>  
 KROVÁČEK Luboš. *Duchovní cesty islámu* (Spiritual Ways of Islam). Praha, 2005.  
 KÉNG Hans - VAN ESS Josef. *Křesťanství a islám* (Christianity and Islam). Praha, 1998.

MEDEL Miloš. *Islámská výzva* (Islamic challenge). Brno, 1994.

Ján MIHALÍK works for Partners for Democratic Change Slovakia as consultant and trainer in the fields of NGO management, youth work and youth policy, and religion and peacemaking. He has an academic background in social work and social development practice. Prior to joining Partners for Democratic Change Slovakia, he was executive director and later president of DOMKA - Association of Salesian Youth, which is one of the biggest Slovak youth organisations. He is Roman Catholic. His email address is [mihalik@pdcs.sk](mailto:mihalik@pdcs.sk).

BAKOS T. Gergely OSB

## Mystical Theology as a Way to Dialogue?

"It would seem to me a waste of the past if we were content to see in the literature of every bygone age only the reflection of our own faces."  
 Clive Staples Lewis

In the 16 June 2003 issue, *Time* magazine gave a special report on Christianity in Europe with the title: "Where Did God Go?" This attention towards religious-cultural changes from secular print media should not be surprising.

In fact, 37 years earlier, on 8 April 1966, *Time* had already published a similar dossier with a more eloquent and sombre title: "Is God Dead?" This question was set with red letters on a black cover—in order to emphasise its seriousness and tragic importance.

As *Time* put it "Christian history allows the possibility of development in doctrine, and even an admission of ignorance in the face of the divine mystery is part of the tradition. Thomas Aquinas declared that 'we cannot know what God is, but rather what he is not!'"

### ADMISSION OF IGNORANCE

Anyone familiar with the first pages of Thomas AQUINAS' two *Summas* will recognise that this admission of ignorance is a genuine piece of Thomistic thought.

Perhaps this approach—negative theology served in the nutshell of journalism—"would fit comfortably today's pluralist context."

Be that as it may, even if one agrees with AQUINAS' statement, one can still approach the Divine Mystery in a way that does not render it another postmodern platitude—readily accepted with a nonchalant smile of indifference.

Thomas AQUINAS himself seriously considered both the possibilities and the dangers of a rational discussion with heretics, Muslims and non-believers, but he did not make mystical ignorance a positive starting point for dialogue.

His premise was that if we cannot positively know who God is, then, on these grounds, it is at least not clear how to enter into discussion. The Divine Mystery ought to be respected and can be only accepted by an act of faith.



Hence, those people who do not share the same commitment, the same act of faith, cannot be brought to fully understand God. As AQUINAS put it, there exist articles of faith that cannot be proven with necessary reasons. But neither can they be disproved in any way.

The two central doctrines of Christian faith, Trinity and Incarnation, belong to this group. Thus they can be called mysteries of faith. There were some thinkers of the Christian West who did not fully agree with AQUINAS' distinction. They seemed to think that once faith is given, all the rest of Christian doctrine must follow with logical necessity.

There were even some who thought that people of other faiths and commitments can be brought to accept the necessity of the Christian faith. Among these intellectuals, Ramón LULL not only proved to be the most eccentric but also the most original one.

LULL, as a native of the island of Mallorca, was born and raised among Christians, Muslims and Jews—in a multicultural society. Later in life he learned Arabic and made different journeys to Muslim territories.

Both in his own time and in many times to come, there probably lived no other person in Europe who not only realised the disrupted state of humanity, but also had a realistic approach towards this problem.

On seeing the failures of both Dominican and Franciscan missions, LULL thought discussions with non-Christians could not be based on the authorities of sacred texts.

Here only the neutral and universal language of human reason can help us further. This medium would not only make communication possible, but it would also bring about the conversion of the infidels.

### FAITH, RATIONALITY AND THE OTHER

The history of the Middle Ages, insofar as it is a tale telling us about continuous religious controversies, theological debates, heresies and anathemas, is a history of Western culture defining itself against the background of its religious and theological Others.

One of these significant Others was Islam. Islam appeared to mediævals as a strange phenomenon challenging both their cherished values and the ways in which they were thinking about these values and their world.

Hence, many Western intellectuals took up this challenge and tried to solve the problems Islam was posing to their mediæval understanding.

Given both Europe's present ignorance of its cultural past and its apparent inability to understand contemporary Islam, the least one can say is that some of these mediæval answers to Islam may be worth revisiting.

Two such possible answers - AQUINAS' and LULL's - have already been mentioned. Since AQUINAS recognised the fundamental importance of faith for a proper understanding of Christian religion, he was also able to respect the limits of his theological discourse. LULL, apparently, lacked such sensitivity and could not draw the limits of his apologetics properly.

He genuinely wanted to transcend the existing cultural barriers with the help of a rational, neutral and non-religious discourse. The exclusion of important dimensions of



religiosity and LULL's bold trust in the possibility of a rational translation of religious language had a dangerous potential that could destroy the subject thus treated.

If there exists another way of communicating the Divine Mystery to others, this cannot be absolutely external to religious faith. Neither can a strictly Christian theological discourse—in the way AQUINAS envisioned it—be fitting for such a purpose.

Speaking of the Divine Mystery brings one back to the admission of ignorance. Many mediævals were ready to confess this ignorance, but they did not make this recognition a corner-stone of their anti-Muslim apologetics.

LULL's case is all the more puzzling since he combined a rationalistic attitude with a confession of ignorance. Nicholas of CUSA's

own version of mystical theology enabled him to develop a new approach towards Islam, which offers fruitful perspectives for interreligious dialogue even today.

### LEADING BY THE HAND

Perhaps the best way to approach Nicholas' project will be considering a central notion of his mystical theology: *manuductio*.

This can be rendered as *guidance* or *leading by the hand*: one can help a blind person across the street or one can take a child's hand while teaching her or him how to write. Either one guides the Other to another place (a way) or one introduces the Other to a certain practice (a knowing-how).

Roman Catholic liturgy offers an excellent example of such a *manuductio*. The term *manuductor* designates the priest who is standing at the side of a newly ordained minister during his first Holy Mass. His task is to help the beginner in performing his liturgical duty.

This role is, of course, only temporary, since every priest is supposed to become able to lead the holy service by himself.

Thus the *manuductio* is showing a practical way of how things can and should be done. It is a transitory activity, yet it is necessary because of human weakness. A child cannot know at once how to write, just as no one is born as a perfect liturgical minister.

During this learning process one has to be determined to learn, to be ready to accept the *manuductio* of the *manuductor*. The success of such a *manuductio* naturally presupposes that during the learning process the Other puts her or his personal trust in the *manuductor*.

Precisely by relying on this personal trust, one must (learn how to) walk the way by her- or himself. Since the meaning of religious symbols cannot be exhausted by a rational explanation, both the concept and the practice of *manuductio* play a central role in mystical theology.

As Nicholas himself put it in his work *On Learned Ignorance* (I. 2. 8,4-7): "it is necessary to use guiding illustrations in a transcendent way and to leave behind perceptible things, so that the reader may readily ascend unto simple intellectuality."



In this way theological language can lead the reader up from sensible reality through the intellectual realm and further up towards the all-transcending Divine Mystery.

### HOLY TRINITY

Since Nicholas was a Christian thinker, for him God's transcendent reality is necessarily *Trinitarian*. Nevertheless, Nicholas never thought that rational concepts such as the number three can be properly applied to God.

The problem is that because all finite concepts are in the first place devised for treating finite, sensible reality, if they are applied to God's infinite being these concepts will necessarily lose a well-defined meaning.

One important consequence is that taken in itself, negative theology will destroy any positive religious discourse. Nicholas, however, also recognised the fact that if we do not know something with absolute precision, this does not necessarily entail that we cannot know anything positively about it.

Thus mystical theology must be a combination of negative and positive discourse. Because the Trinitarian God cannot be reduced to any finite category of human thought, this Mystery can teach one learned ignorance. This learned ignorance will inspire one to search for ever-newer categories in order to spell out the same Divine Mystery.

This is, in a nutshell, Nicholas's project of *Trinitarian manuductio*. The same concern was operative also in his works closely related to the Muslim question (*De Pace Fidei*, Nicholas's letter to his friend John of SEGOVIA, and the *Cribratio Alkorani*).

In his approach towards the religious Other, Nicholas made constant recourse to the Trinity, because this central Mystery of the Christian faith was theologically misunderstood by Islam and debased in the continuous bloodshed of wars.

Not only his clearly Trinitarian manuductive examples, but also the whole project of giving a new (Christian) interpretation to the Koran should be understood in this light.

Yet, this insistence on the Trinity should not be seen exclusively as a result of an ideological bias, but as a pointer reminding one of the relational Mystery of the Divine Being.

### KNOWING-HOW AND PERSONAL TRUST

Nicholas' manuductive project illustrates well that the problem of religious knowledge must not be reduced to a set of propositions connected as it were through a quasi-scientific theological theory.

Also the particular form of religious 'knowing-how' and the dimension of personal trust have to be taken seriously. The meaning of religious symbols cannot be understood in isolation from lived religion.

After all, religion is in the first place a form of human practice. So, if one is ready to take up Nicholas's perspec-



tive, one will be able to better understand what is at stake in religion.

Without acknowledging the symbolic structure as fundamental to religion and other basic human experiences such as the ethical, the aesthetic, and the relationships of love and friendship, these issues can hardly be treated with any fairness. Hence, any serious dialogue on religious and ethical diversity is intrinsically bound up with the same problem.

In the history of Cusanus-studies, there existed an exceedingly modern reading of the Cusanian corpus, one that was eager to assimilate Nicholas to whatever strain of modern philosophy its author preferred. It is always tempting to misunderstand a thinker from the distant past, and the fact that a temptation is not realised does not

make the temptation less dangerous.

If this is true, then one should become all the more careful in one's reading. One should try to broaden, modify and occasionally even change one's own perspective. Such an exercise would be trying on the lenses once worn by Nicholas and looking through them, as it were.

If the modern reader is ready to learn how a symbolical-ly structured vision works and also wants to perceive the invisible within and beyond the visible, then the mediaeval Nicholas of CUSA will prove a trustworthy guide.

If Nicholas of CUSA is expected to make a contribution to a proper understanding of the problem of religions today, it should not be a surprise that what he can do is something typically mediaeval.

Not only can he help to formulate an answer to *Time's* question concerning the possible permanent address of God, but he can also guide us on our way of dialogue with people of other faiths.

In our realistic and critical age, one cannot ignore the historical fact that Nicholas of CUSA's voice was hardly even heard in his own lifetime. It never reached the Other of Islam.

But in a world where the question of religious plurality is more acute than it has ever been, one can at least hope that his voice will receive the kind of attention it deserves.

#### Suggested Reading

BRECHLER J. E. – BOND H. L. (eds.), *Nicholas of Cusa on Interreligious Harmony – Text, Concordance and Translation of De Pace Fidei*. Lewinston - Queenston - Lampeter, 1990.

BOND H. L. (ed.), *Nicholas of Cusa, Selected Spiritual Writings*. New York, 1997.

DECORTE JOS, *Sapientia: Between Superbia and Vanitas*. In BROWN S. F. (ed.), *Meeting of the Minds. The Relations between Mediaeval and Classical Modern European Philosophy*. Brepols, 1998. 477-506.

GUDDARI H., *A History of Christian-Muslim Relations*. Edinburgh, 2000.

HOPKINS J., *Nicholas of Cusa on Learned Ignorance – A Translation and an Appraisal of De Docta Ignorantia*. Minneapolis, 1981.

HOPKINS J., *Nicholas of Cusa's Dialectical Mysticism. Text, Translation and Interpretative Study of De Visione Dei*. Minneapolis, 1988.

HOPKINS J., *Nicholas of Cusa's De Pace Fidei and Cribratio Alkorani. Translation and Analysis*. Minneapolis, 1990.

BAROS T. Gergely OSB (1970) received his doctorate in philosophy at the Catholic University of Leuven, Belgium. His main interests are metaphysics, philosophy of religion, mediaeval philosophy and mysticism. He teaches at the department of philosophy of the Sapientia Theological School in Budapest. His email address is [gergelybaros@yahoo.com](mailto:gergelybaros@yahoo.com). This essay was written in the memory of Jos DECORTE (1954-2001).

