

The martyr plays an important role in the Intifada. One can see it easily when at a demonstration in Palestine. Many mothers and fathers have pictures with them of their loved ones who had been killed in the struggle.

Even though some think that blowing themselves up will bring them to heaven, ABU-NIMER shows that the thinking about martyrdom varies a lot between different Palestinians themselves.

Everybody sees them as witnesses to the Palestinian struggle, but whether the *shahid* (martyr) went to heaven was “a matter for God to decide.” This attitude has the very practical effect of religious tolerance and political flexibility.

It does not judge the outcome for a Christian Palestinian who died in the struggle. It allows religious Muslims to honour them equally. Before the Intifada, a primary symbol of the occupation was the armed guerrilla. Now, in place of this symbol of heroic armed aggression, stands a symbol of innocent suffering.

It should be said, however, that posters of martyrs in Palestine almost always contain weapons. I can testify myself that even if unarmed children have been made into martyrs, they are often pictured with weapons in the posters.

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The Garden of God

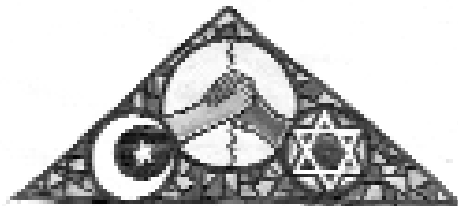
No person can stand in front of another without having something to give and to receive. This is life as it is given us. If I as a Christian stand in front of a Muslim, she or he has something to give me and to receive from me. This is true not only in terms of philosophy or theology as expressions of faith; but also in terms of the life given this particular creature of God.

The dynamics of interpersonal and intercommunitarian relations in life throw us in the arms of the one standing in front of us—not only because the person in front of us is created by God, but also because God's presence in this person's life is given expression through philosophy or theology in this particular person's faith.

DYNAMICS OF DIVERSE CREATION

God did not create us alone as individuals or as groups; we are all a part of God's creation as God has created it. This diversity is an ultimate expression of the dynamics of God and the dynamics in which God created, and for this we owe God praise.

We could choose to ignore this diversity; we could even try to combat it. But we must know that if we succeed, we will lose the dynamics of diverse creation which God obviously intended for God's creation.



RELIGIOUS RESPONSIBILITY IN PEACE-MAKING

In conclusion, Mohammed ABU-NIMER says that Islam can reinforce both violence and nonviolence, and it has been doing both during the course of history. Pretty much like Christianity, we can say.

Islam has not developed an explicit ideology of nonviolence, and Muslims have done little preaching or teaching about nonviolence as a way of life, but the roots and the traditions are all in place creating a fertile ground for nonviolence.

ABU-NIMER's wish is clear with one of his last statements in the book: “Every religion can foster either violence or nonviolence. It is the responsibility of those who follow a particular faith to cull these resources for nonviolence from their religious scriptures.”

Nonviolence and Peace Building in Islam has helped me tremendously in understanding the tradition of nonviolence and conflict resolution in Islam, and ABU-NIMER is to be thanked for this. I can recommend this book to anyone interested in religion and peace issues.

Religion is a mighty power. Our future could depend on us treating it right. This book gives us tools and knowledge to make Islam a powerful force for peace in co-operation with other peace-loving religions in the world.

If we look around us we see an abundance of diversity; and when we appreciate the beauty of this abundance, let us look at each other and start to enjoy the beauty which God has given to each one of us.

Let us first look at the person in front of us: not as a reflection of ourselves, but as an image of God. Let us take part in the beauty God has given this person and appreciate God through this person, and let us invite the person in front of us to do the same with us.

Let us speak of how God has revealed Godself to us. I am Christian, and therefore I will try to restrict myself to delivering what I have heard from Muslims as honestly as possible. The truth of God should be whispered in friendly intimacy, conveyed from one creature to another before it is exclaimed from the rooftops.

It is theology based on the faith of persons with an intimate relationship with God and must therefore be received with the utmost sincerity, even though it can at

times seem very far from the place which we are given in this diverse creation of God.

I pray that I would be able to convey this in the text even though my vocabulary is Christian; and I pray I will make it accessible by comparing it with the revelation given to me as a Christian.

The goal is not to assimilate Islam or Christianity. The diversity of creation is much too precious for that. The goal is to make this expression of faith understood in the context of another expression of faith.

I will in this text focus on some basic elements of the Muslim and Christian faith connected to revelation: most of all the Qur'an, Muhammad and the Sunna; Jesus Christ, the Holy Spirit and the Bible.

The aim is not to give a complete account of the issue, but to deliver a basic foundation of understanding. There are a lot of different ways of understanding these issues, but here we find space only for a brief acquaintance.

THE GLORIOUS QUR'AN

The Holy Qur'an is a whole. It is given to Human through the Prophet Muhammad. Some issues of the Qur'an are elaborated in the Sunna, where elaboration is needed, but the Sunna can never contradict the Qur'an.

According to the Sunni tradition, to which ninety per cent of Muslims belong, the Qur'an is the Living Word of God, and it was with God even before creation and is as such not a created thing.

It should rather be seen as a living thing, which talks to humans in their lives at the time of the Prophet, in history and in the lives of Muslims now.

The Qur'an is not a mere book, but The Word of God; a part of God, which humans can refer to in their lives to know the will of God. Humans can of course not change the Word of God; they can only try to understand it. The revelation of the Qur'an is closely connected to the Arabic language, and therefore there are no translations, but only explanations of the Qur'an.

The Prophet Muhammad was human, he possessed an extraordinary constitution as a human, but the Qur'an itself states that even he could be wrong. Only God cannot be wrong, and therefore the Living Word of God is not an invention of Muhammad.

He did not have anything to do with its content, but was only a catalyst of the Word of God. There are commands and sayings in the Qur'an which need elaboration to be carried out: the Qur'an states that Muslims must pray every day, but it does not specify exactly how.

To have this specified, Muslims look at the life of Muhammad, what he did and said, as he possessed this very special constitution as a human. The account of the life of Muhammad can be found in the Sunna, of which the *hadith* (the sayings of Muhammad) is a part.

The Sunna is to a large extent open for interpretation. This was done mainly at the beginning of Islam, and there were formed then four major schools of interpretation in the science of *kalam* (theology). The doors of the *kalam* were closed about one thousand years ago, and now there are lively discussions about whether to open them again to embrace new methods of interpretation.

JESUS CHRIST AND THE HOLY SPIRIT

Jesus Christ is the Son of God. He came to humans as the Living Word of God. Christians experience Him (or: meet God) now through the Holy Spirit. And it is in the Holy Spirit that Christians interpret the Bible, which is a collection of scriptures on the life of Jesus and the time before Jesus, where Jesus was anticipated as the Christ, according to Christians.

Jesus is God incarnate. He is the Living Word of God on Earth. His speech and acts are God expressing Godself to

humans. Jesus is nothing apart from God, but is God on Earth, pressing to be close to God's creation.

Since Jesus became incarnate in history, it occurred within a specific time in history, and now Christians experience God in the Holy Spirit, which is God, just as Jesus is God. To learn from God entering history, Christians read the Bible guided by the Holy Spirit.

The Holy Spirit renews the reading of the Bible and connects the person in her or his time of history with the time when Jesus walked the Earth. The Bible is a book, and is not in itself divine, but it is a special book, as it tells Christians now what Jesus did and said; but since the Bible is not in itself a revelation, it is open to interpretation.

Of course the views on interpretations are very much discussed, and Christians are divided into denominations according to interpretations and worldviews, but by far most of the denominations accept each other as genuine Christians and believe they share in the same body of Christ.

JESUS AND THE QUR'AN

Revelation:

Glorious Qur'an	Jesus Christ Holy Spirit
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Essential to revelation, but not revelation itself:

Prophet Muhammad Sunna	Bible
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This article is not aimed at unravelling the mysteries of revelation. It is just stating the simple point that the basics of revelation differ between Islam and Christianity. While Christians are oriented towards a divine person, Muslims are oriented towards a divine word in revelation.

It is vital to be aware of this in dialogue, as similarities are not always where you expect to find them with only a brief experience of the other religion. This does not make one religion better than the other; it just makes them different.

If Christians are not open to the Qur'an as the Living Word of God for Muslims, we would obviously reach the conclusion of Ng Kam WENG, when he states regarding the divine revelation in the world:

“The logical outcome is the incarnation of the Word of God as a personal agent acting in relation to creation. In this light, we see immediately the inadequacy of any talk of revelation that comes only in the form of a holy book.”

If Christians want to understand Islam in the meeting with Islam, we have to take the Qur'an seriously as the Living Word of God for Muslims. When we understand this, we will have the basis for understanding why Muslims are Muslims.

If we do not understand this, all we will understand from the meeting with Muslims is why Christians are not Muslims. If Muslims are not open to Jesus as the Son of God in the revelation for Christians, understanding that the sonship is not as a human sonship, Muslims will not understand why Christians are Christians—only why Muslims are not Christians.

It is essential for Muslims who want to understand Christianity that they see that God in Christianity is the One, and not the least among three. Christ does hold a very special position in Islam though: a virgin gave birth to Him, He is the word and He is the Messiah (Hebrew for Christ).

He is one of the four most important prophets for Muslims, and no Muslim would talk negatively of Jesus

without going against Islam. Also, Christians should recognize this and not use the words of Samuel M. ZWEMER, when he states:

“There is hardly an important fact concerning the life, person and work of our Saviour, which is not ignored, perverted or denied by Islam.” Rather we should listen to people such as the Egyptian Muslim author Abdel Mo’i BAYOUMI, when he writes:

“When the Qur’an says: ‘They surely disbelieve who say: Lo! Allah is the Messiah, son of Mary... they surely disbelieve who say: Lo! Allah is third of three...’ [Sura 5,72-73], it does not mean the Christian belief. It just speaks about a group of people and about some human beliefs that can be altered. The accusation of *kufir* [in these verses] is not directed to divinely revealed beliefs but to human beliefs.”

THE MYSTERIES OF REVELATION

Christians have to accept the revelation given to Muslims as revelation for Muslims, and Muslims have to accept the revelation given to Christians as revelation for Christians. These revelations are the gates to the Garden of God; it is not up to us to close them, as God with God’s own hand placed them there for humans to enter.

Instead of focusing on the door we entered from, we should focus on the beauty which God has given all of us in the Garden of God. The history of Christianity and Islam is filled to the point of bursting with extraordinary poetry, philosophy, literature and theology praising the greatness of God.

We have so much to learn from each other, that fighting each other can only be an atrocity to any sane believer who has had only a small taste of how God can be praised by the other. The problem is, though, that history is also filled with fear, hostility and distrust.

Before us is a great chasm which can only be crossed with the help of God. Both Muslims and Christians have to see how their fellow believers have committed acts of brutality screaming to the heavens in history.

Both Muslims and Christians have to carry this burden of history into dialogue. Only then can it be removed by the other. History has left scars in the mind of us all, which we have to overcome.

These scars are kept fresh by apologetic writing of history and theology spawned by centuries of alienation, and it is essential that these are rewritten in the light of an ongoing dialogue, where we are exposed to the other as true images of God.

VENTURING BEYOND APOLOGIES

Ng Kam WENG seems truly a good Christian, but his theology is based on a chasm between any other expression of faith and Christianity. He is open to dialogue, but our main task in dialogue, according to him, appears to be criticising the other in dialogue based on the fact that she or he is not Christian.

It seems that the revelation from God in his theology loses expression if he accepts God’s constant self-revelation in God’s creation to any but Christians. A theology such as this falls in the category called apologetic theology, where meeting with the Absolute cannot be expressed as the Absolute if it is open to the possibility of any other revelation—that we as Christians cannot actually learn something from Islam and still be Christians.

In the Garden of God, I am sure also apologetic theologians like Ng Kam WENG are beautiful flowers. They are sincere in their devotion to God and strong in their theological work. They often dig directly into the core issue of being Christian, and show us clearly the beauty of Christianity. But if we are too self-assured in the beauty which God has given us, we might miss the beauty of the rest of God’s creation.

If we feel our beauty is superior to anything else in creation, we run the risk of wanting to be separated from the rest of the creation. If we were to ask God to place us on a pedestal apart from creation, we would be rooted up from the life-giving soil of the Garden of God.

We might be in the centre of attention for a brief moment, but we would quickly dry out and leave an empty withered shell of dogmas and rites. The soil of the Garden of God is rich and more than sufficient for us to flourish fertilised by Christ, but we need to be in this soil sharing the diversity of God’s creation, where God has made space for all of God’s creation. We need to be where God planted us.

It is hard for age-old religions like Christianity and Islam, with both their apologetic theologies, to accept a truth of the other religion, especially because both religions have a strong commandment for mission. We are both obliged to present our revelation to the world.

The mixture of apologies and mission does not leave much space for open dialogue. But exactly the commitment to mission can also be seen as the starting point of living and growing together, if we root out the apologies from our theologies.

We have in dialogue the possibility to present our faith in an open way, to share with each other. The Anglican bishop of Egypt and North Africa, Mouneer ANIS, a true pioneer in applying interreligious dialogue in Egypt, speaks along these lines when he states:

“Dialogue helps us to listen and share with Muslims in a friendly atmosphere, and this is very different from aggressive evangelisation.” In the end God is God and human is human. We can choose to wage war on each other in the sight of God, or we can choose to bow down before God side by side.

Suggested Reading

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