

# ISLAM AND CHRISTIANITY: A COMPARATIVE STUDY

Maurice Eminyan S.J.

Quintus Aurelius Symmachus, a spokesman for the ancient Roman Senate, was an eloquent apologist for the moribund culture-religion of his ancestors. He is remembered today, and briefly mentioned in manuals of church history, for having exchanged theological debating points with a better known contemporary of his, St Ambrose of Milan. Well before his death, Christianity had become the official religion of the Roman Empire, with all other religions being proscribed. Shortly thereafter non-Christians were excluded even from holding public office. But one of the points made by Symmachus remains with us still. Concerning the mystery of the universe and of human destiny, he inscribed these words on a long-lasting parchment: "It is impossible that so great a mystery should be approached by one road only"<sup>1</sup>.

Christians, at any rate, have not yet considered deeply, extensively, positively, and in the light of their own faith, the significance of the religions that have always served the majority of human beings, and will evidently continue to serve an ever-increasing portion of humanity, possibly even until the **eschaton** or end of the world. The initial efforts and the major contributions in this field of study have been made more by social scientists than by theologians. But things are changing. Christianity is now more than ever facing the question raised more than fifteen centuries ago by the Roman senator: "God is one and the same for all: but there must be more than one road leading to Him"<sup>2</sup>.

## PROPHETIC RELIGIONS

Here we propose to make a comparative study between two of such roads, or avenues, which lead to God: Islam and Christianity. These religions are, no doubt, among the greatest religions the world has ever known: they are, in fact, the only two "prophetic" religions which transcend every restriction of race or nationality and which have as a matter of fact today reached universal proportions. There is no part of the world, no country, where Christians of some denomination or other are not to be found. As far as Islam is concerned, we can say that from Indonesia,

1. Cfr. Arnold Toynbee, *Christianity among the Religions of the World* (Oxford Univ. Press, London, 1958), pp. 111-112.
2. Cfr. *ibid.*

where we find the largest national group of Moslems, a great arc stretches almost continuously all the way over Asia, the Near East and Africa, down to Senegal. It has been called the "Crescent of Islam". This vast expanse includes peoples of many races and tongues, with a greatly varied role in the history of the world. But, whatever their divergencies, they profess, each and all, to be fundamentally united in a religious faith from which there springs a common attitude towards God, the world and mankind.

Islam and Christianity: two types of universal religions offering themselves to all men. What are their main tenets? What are their characteristics and main differences? Is there any relationship and interdependence between them? These questions we shall attempt to answer here modestly and briefly.

Some six hundred years after the birth of Christ a new religion arose in Arabia. For the first time in the history of the Semitic peoples a prophet had arisen outside the Jewish world. This prophet was Muhammed, who also described himself as the "Apostle or Messenger of God". Though an Arab, Muhammed saw himself as the last one in the long line of prophets stretching from Adam through Noah and Moses to Jesus Christ: he was the "Seal of the Prophets" and with him revelation came to an end. Thus the religion he proclaimed, Islam, claims to be the final and definitive revelation of God to man. Muhammed accepted both Judaism and Christianity as true revealed religions — "Religions of the Book" — and as such the valid precursors of Islam. Both religions had at their inception been true, but in the course of time, so he claimed, the true message had been falsified by unworthy followers, or at any rate deteriorated by the passage of time.

The truth of Islam was guaranteed by the fact that its holy book, the Koran, was directly revealed to God's Apostle by God himself speaking through the Angel Gabriel, and these inspired words were later recorded by the Prophet's immediate entourage. This was very different from the case of the sacred books of the Christians and Jews, which constitute the Bible, and which took centuries to assume their final form. It is true that God had revealed himself both in the Jewish and the Christian dispensations, but he had done so through human agency, for the books of the Old and New Testaments have human authors as well as a divine author, whereas the Koran has no author but God. Hence where there is a discrepancy between the Koran and the Bible, a Moslem must prefer the version of the Koran, for in it God speaks directly and the words recorded there are for him quite literally the words of God.

At the beginning of his mission Muhammed had believed that the messages he received did no more than conform with the Jewish and Christian Scriptures, and he was therefore baffled when he met with stubborn opposition from the Jews, and with benevolent (and sometimes not so benevolent) incredulity from the Christians. It is not then surpris-

sing that in the latter part of the Koran his attitude towards both the earlier religions hardens. He was, moreover, conscious, that there were deep differences between the Jews and the Christians in the matter of Jesus as the Messiah, whom he regarded as his immediate precursor in the prophetic succession. Muhammed had, then, to declare where he stood in this thorny matter; or, as the Muslims would say, God was to settle the status of Jesus, so hotly disputed between the Jews and the Christians, through the mouth of Muhammed.

### STRICT MONOTHEISM

It would be no exaggeration to say that, apart from the honour accorded in the Koran to Jesus Christ, Islam is a re-affirmation for the Gentiles of the Jewish Law. For the first time in their history the inhabitants of the Arabian peninsula were told in words of fire that there is no god but Allah — one, indivisible and holy: "Say: He is God, the One God, the Eternal: he hath not begotten, nor was begotten. Never has there been any equal to him". This was probably an attack on Arab paganism before Muhammed, rather than on the Christian doctrine of the Trinity; but it is also a fact that Muhammed later on did deny that doctrine with great vehemence, probably because he misunderstood it; for the message of the Koran is that God is absolutely one and that multiplicity in any form is unthinkable in him. This being the main burden of the message, it was impossible for him to accept the full divinity of "Jesus the Messiah" or to accept the claim made for him by his followers that He was the Son of God<sup>3</sup>.

Just as it is difficult for a Moslem to accept Christian doctrine, mainly for the reason outlined above, so it is also difficult for a Christian to accept the Muslim claim that in the Koran there are the very words of God; first because it is for them not easy to see what God's purpose could have been in sending a prophet, some six hundred years after the Incarnation of His Son, who was to ignore his redemptive mission; secondly because, humanly speaking, the contents of the Koran can be paralleled in almost all cases in the Old and New Testaments and the apocryphal writings.

Yet, though it must be difficult for a Christian to accept that in the Koran are preserved God's own words, it is not at all impossible to understand how far Mohammed went towards accepting the mission of Jesus Christ, if not as the actual Son of God, at least as the greatest of the prophets before himself. Muhammed never claimed to be more than a man, inspired though he was by the One God to proclaim the divine unity. Moreover, he was not a worker of miracles. Jesus, on the other hand, is credited in the Koran with all manner of miracles, including the

3. G. Parrinder, *Jesus in the Koran* (Faber and Faber, London, 1965) p. 85.

raising of the dead "with the permission of God". Muhammed is Prophet and Apostle, the Seal of the Prophets, a warner and a herald; Jesus in the Koran is the Messiah (the Christ), the Word of God cast upon Mary, the Word of truth, a Spirit from God, an Apostle and a Prophet from God, his servant "illustrious in this world and the next".

### JESUS IN THE KORAN

It is the idea of divine sonship that appears outrageous to the Muslims, and this is often attacked in the Koran: "He hath not begotten, nor was he begotten". Or more explicitly still: "The Christians say that the Messiah is the Son of Allah; that is what they say with their mouths, conforming to what was formerly said by those who disbelieved"<sup>4</sup>. And yet the Koran itself admits that Jesus was born of no earthly father from the Virgin Mary: "And remember her who guarded her chastity; we breathed into her our spirit, and we made her and her son a sign for all peoples"<sup>5</sup>. There are other references which clearly defend the Virgin Birth in the Koran<sup>6</sup>, as the following description of the Annunciation: "Behold, the angels said: 'O Mary, God has chosen thee above the women of all nations. God giveth thee glad tidings of a Word from Him: his name will be Christ Jesus, the son of Mary, held in honour in this world and the Hereafter, and of the company of those nearest to God; He shall speak to the people in childhood and in maturity, and he shall be of the company of the righteous'. She said: 'O my Lord, how shall I have a son when no man hath touched me?' He said: 'Even so, God createth what he willeth; when he hath decreed a plan, he but saith to it 'Be' and it is"<sup>7</sup>.

What is rather striking, however, is this: in the Koran there is an explicit reference to the death and resurrection of Christ: "Allah said, I purpose to cause thee to die and to raise thee up to myself and to purify thee from those who have disbelieved"<sup>8</sup>. The clear sense of this is that Jesus died and rose from the dead. The Ascension of Jesus too was confirmed and wholeheartedly accepted by the Koran, and in testimony to this the chapel of the Ascension on the Mount of Olives in Jerusalem is to this day in Muslim hands.

In the course of time Islam developed creeds much as Christianity did, but they never had the binding force of the Christian creeds. All that is absolutely required of the Muslim is that he should pronounce the **Shahada**, the "testimony" that proclaims his faith in the One God and his Prophet Muhammed: "I testify that there is no God but Allah and that

4. *Koran*, Sura 9,30.

5. Sura 21,91.

6. Sura 66,12; 19,28-34.

7. Sura 3,42-47.

8. Sura 3,55.

Muhammed is his Apostle". This is enough to make a man a **Muslim** (The word: **Muslim** means "the surrendered one", and **Islam** means "surrender"). The essence of his faith, however, is contained in the **Fatiha**, the opening chapter of the Koran: it corresponds to the Christians' Creed or Profession of faith.

"In the name of God, most gracious, most merciful. Praise be to God, the Cherisher and Sustainer of the Worlds; Most Gracious, Most Merciful. Master of the Day of Judgement. These do we worship, and Thine aid we seek. Show us the straight way, the way of those on whom Thou hast bestowed thy grace, those whose portion is not wrath, and who go not astray"<sup>9</sup>.

The God of Islam is substantially the God of the Old Testament and of the New One: Allah, Eloim, Jahweh, or the Father in Heaven. For the Koran too Allah is the absolute Lord, and man is his slave or servant. Nothing is eternal but He, for "everything perishes, save his face"<sup>10</sup>. He is the living God, self-subsistent, glorious and holy. He is the Merciful, the Compassionate, and this aspect of the divine nature is continually stressed, for practically every **Sura** of the Koran starts with the words: "In the Name of God, the Merciful, the Compassionate". At the same time he is overwhelming power: he is the Creator, and when he wishes a thing to be, he simply says "Be" and it is. He is the Reckoner, Judge and Bringer of life and death — merciful to believers, but fearful in his anger to those who disbelieve.

#### DAY OF JUDGEMENT

The vision of the day of judgement which, for Muhammed, as for the early Christians, was expected to come at any moment, possibly in his own lifetime, returns again and again in the Koran like a sombre and awful refrain. It is referred to by various names: the day of judgement, of reckoning, of separation, the encompassing day, the day of standing up and of awakening, or simply the Hour:

"So when on the trumpet shall be blown a single blast, and the earth and the mountains shall be moved, and shattered at a single blow, then will happen the thing that is to happen, the heaven shall be rent asunder, for then it will be weak; the angels will be on its borders, and, above them, eight shall then bear the throne of the Lord. That day ye shall be mustered, not one of you concealed; as for him who is given his book in his right hand, he will say: 'Here, read my book, verily I thought that I should meet my account'. He shall be in pleasing life, in

9. Sura 1,1-7.

10. Sura 28,88.

a garden lofty, with clusters near: 'Eat and drink with relish, for what ye paid in advance in the days gone by'. But as for him who is given his book in his left hand, he will say: 'Oh, would that I had not been given my book, and had not known my account... my wealth has not profited me'. 'Take him and bind him, then in hot hell roast him, then in a chain of seventy cubits' reach fasten him'<sup>11</sup>.

It is not hard to see how this description of the Last Judgement in the Koran is reminiscent of the one in the Gospel and in the Book of Revelation or Apocalypse.

The idea of the resurrection of the body, which is found both in Islam and in Christianity, seemed as strange and unreasonable to Muhammed's contemporaries in Mecca as it does to rationalists today. For them death was the end, and Muhammed's passionate insistence on the reality of the judgement and the fearful and eternal pains of hell that were in store for the unbelievers must have shaken many out of their complacency. Man, however, is not really and altogether master of his destiny, for God guides whom he will to Himself.

While the unbelievers, the idolaters, the covetous who have neglected prayer and almsgiving, are condemned to eternal torment in the fire of hell, all true believers, and particularly the humble, the charitable, the persecuted, and those who fought "in the way of Allah", will be welcomed in the gardens of Paradise. The essence of the Paradise depicted in the Koran is that it is a cool place: a garden with plenty of water flowing through it. And this is quite natural when one thinks that Islam arose in a torrid desert in which water not only brought relief but was precious almost as much as life itself. At first sight this description of eternal happiness might seem to us, as it did seem to Muslims of a more mystical tendency, rather too materialistic. For the early Muslims, however, whose faith was simple and who accepted the words of the Koran in their literal sense, since these were the very words of God, the Gardens of Paradise, with their trees and houris or nymphs and the promised drafts of wine which the Prophet had forbidden on earth, must have seemed a sufficient reward.

Islam is the religion of the "threat" and of the "promise", the threat of everlasting fire for the wicked and the promise of "Gardens of Delight" for the believer. God is absolute power, yet merciful and compassionate; he rewards and punishes whom he will and as he will, for he is not subject to any law. Man may not question his judgements, for they are just, however arbitrary they may seem to man. God is nonetheless ever willing to relent and to pardon the sinner who repents. But there is one sin which the Muslims consider unpardonable, and that is **shirk** — association with a god who is other than the One true God — or **idolatry**

11. Sura 69,13-32.

Islam is the most rigidly monotheistic of all the great religions and the most zealous in guarding God's absolute unity and transcendence.

### REPENTANCE

The Muslim notion of repentance closely resembles the Christian notion of contrition. The measure in which such a repentance is necessary for salvation is, as it were, relative. It is only absolutely necessary in the case of "grave faults", especially those against faith. This doctrine is somewhat mitigated by the belief in the existence of "intercession". It is, in fact, claimed that Mohammed will intercede for his Community and each Prophet-envoy for his own people, that is, will free even those who have not repented from final condemnation. This is only intercession, and not mediation, and depends entirely on the benevolence of God, although the records picture the "bronze portals of intercession" opening at the prayer of the Prophet of Islam<sup>12</sup>. It remains still true, however, that the only sin that is irremediable and beyond any power of intercession is an obstinate denial of faith in the One God and in the mission of his Prophet.

Certainly, every sin of which a man validly repents is thereby "effaced" and there is in Islam no real equivalent of Purgatory. But if there is no repentance and yet faith in God remains, the punishment, by reason of that faith, will not be eternal. In the end, the sinner who remains a believer will eventually come to the joys of Paradise, after having been chastised after the resurrection in hell. Hence, strictly speaking, Islam holds that faith alone saves, a jealous and exclusive faith, which is the only gift worthy to be offered to God. Compared with this total gift offered as witness to divine transcendence, "good" or "evil" acts, commanded or forbidden, are dwarfed and assume a very relative value, enveloped as they are in the benevolent pity of the Most High towards this frail being "composed of blood and slime", whom God design, notwithstanding, to call to proclaim him as Lord.

God, says the Koran, is at the same time inaccessible and very close to man, his creature: "No vision can grasp him, but his grasp is over all vision; He is above all comprehension, yet is acquainted with all things"<sup>13</sup>. And this view is very similar to the Christian one about God, who is the "entirely-other", the transcendent one, but at the same time near to the creature because of his continued creative activity, and also near to man's mind, because by means of analogy man can have a true though incomplete understanding of the infinite. For the Christian there is, furthermore, the teaching about grace, which is understood as a participation in the divine nature or self-communication of God to man al-

12. Islam is opposed to any idea of sacrifice. See J. Jomier, *The Bible and the Koran* (Desclée, New York, 1964), p. 87.

13. Sura 6,103.

ready here on earth. This seems to be unknown to the Muslim, although for Islam too the doctrine of salvation is understood as friendship and free commitment to God, which here on earth is expressed by giving witness to the One God and his Utterance and in Paradise finds its ultimate completion in eternal beatitude with God.

#### BASIS OF MORALITY

This witness to the One God, which secures salvation for the follower of Islam, is understood, however, not just as an intellectual acceptance of the One or as a manifestation of such an acceptance but has to do with good moral behaviour and the acceptance of moral values very much alike those of Christianity. When the Koran, in the Medinan Suras, sets out to sketch the Muslim Community in a few bold lines, it simultaneously emphasizes witness to faith in God and a moral code for man's acts. "Ye are the best of peoples, evolved for mankind, enjoying what is right, forbidding what is wrong, and believing in God"<sup>14</sup>.

What does this "commandery" of rectitude imply? In his book "**The Theology of Unity**", Muhammed Abdul, who is considered as the father of 20th century Muslim thinking, says: "To order that which is good means to see that Muslims, besides professing the One God, say the prescribed prayers, give the legal alms, keep the fast and make the pilgrimage (which are the five Pillars of Islam); to see that they are sincere and loyal to their parents and that they keep on good terms with their neighbours"<sup>15</sup>. This enumeration, however, is by no means exhaustive. There are other duties imposed by the Koran: hospitality, protection of the feeble and the orphan, shunning debauchery and, to sum up, fidelity to the given word. However much their views on the nature of the Koran may differ, all Muslim schools of thought are at one in acknowledging its text as the criterion of morality. Thus, the good consists in obeying God by conformity with his commandments; evil consists in disobeying him. The evil act, prevarication — **dhanab** — is essentially disobedience; which recalls to mind the description of the first sin of Adam and Eve, in Genesis 3, who disobeyed God's command not to eat of the forbidden tree.

Muslim morality, at first sight at least, does not seem to turn around the theological virtue of charity, as Christian morality explicitly does. Nevertheless love for God does enter into its formal motive. What makes a thing morally good or bad is determined for the Muslim in terms of obedience to divine law. But this law is not first and foremost understood as a natural law, but as a positive law in the hands of the inscrutable will of God. Hence obedience to God's law will not be possible without love for Him. But for all that, the content of this positive law tallies very

14. Sura 3,110.

15. Mohammed Abdul, *The Theology of Unity* (George Allen, London, 1966).



largely with the natural moral law, which is a reflection of divine wisdom written in creation in the heart of man and which is, for the Christian, the universal basis for the Law of Christ and Christian Morality.

### THE PILLARS OF ISLAM

One cannot speak about Moslem living and Moslem morality without more specific reference to the so called "Five Pillars of Islam". These are: Profession of Faith in the One God (about which we have already spoken), prayer, almsgiving, fasting, and the pilgrimage.

Muslims are urged to pray five times a day, and the ritual, both in word and gesture, follows a rigid pattern designed to emphasize the immense distance that separates man from God. Thus in each of the five prayers the worshipper prostrates himself twice, his forehead touching the ground. The Almsgiving was originally an obligatory contribution for the support of the needy in the community, but is no longer of obligation. The Fast is still rigorously observed, especially in the countryside, in Muslim countries. It is far more rigorous than anything the Catholic Church has ever imposed, for a pious Muslim may neither eat nor drink nor smoke from sunrise to sunset during Ramadan, the month of the Fast. Since Muslims follow a lunar year, Ramadan rotates in the course of the years throughout all the seasons, and as anyone knows who has lived in the East, to be deprived of water throughout the scorching heat of the day in summer is a very tough penance indeed. At night, however, one may eat and drink.

Of special importance is the Pilgrimage to Mecca, in Arabia, the Prophet's birthplace and scene of his ultimate triumph. It emphasizes more than anything else that Islam is a communal religion. Every able-bodied Muslim should, if he can afford it, make the pilgrimage to Mecca at least once in his lifetime. The Pilgrimage might be described as the "Sacrament of Unity" for Islam; it is the Muslim's expression of the unity of all Muslims throughout the world in the faith which has its centre in the holy city of Mecca to which all Muslims, wherever they may be, turn when they perform their ritual prayers. Here every year in the month of **Dhul-Hijja**, Muslims assemble from all over the world to perform an elaborate ritual in and around the Kaaba, the "House of God", as the great mosque at Mecca is called.

Ritual, as we all know, is liable to degenerate into mere formalism. This is true of all religions; it is true of Christianity and to some extent it was also true of Islam. To the outside observer, moreover, there seems to be a certain rigidity in Islam which might have paralysed even the tremendous vigour it had shown in the first century of world conquest. Moreover, after the glorious days of the first four orthodox Caliphs had come to an end, the huge empire which the Muslims had conquered somewhat infected their pristine faith (except perhaps in Arabia itself) with secular involvement, the inevitable price every religion, even Christianity,

had to pay when it became entangled in the meshes of secular power. It is then conceivable, as scholars like Geoffrey Parrinder<sup>16</sup> and R.C. Zaehner<sup>17</sup> say, that Islam might have died of sheer spiritual inanition, had it not been saved by a movement which sought to find God not so much in the ritual prayers and the other obligatory duties demanded of all sincere believers, as in the inmost recesses of the human heart. This movement is known as Sufism. Its tendency was one of religious mysticism, interpreting the Koran in a less rigid way and teaching that God is also to be found in the human heart.

### DIVINE REVELATION?

In Islam, as we have already stated, the Koran is the primary source of revelation. It is the "Book" par excellence, the words of which, when the meaning is clear, are not open to dispute. It comprises 114 chapters, or **Suras** unequal in length. Altogether the book has about 6,200 verses; therefore it is somewhat shorter than the New Testament. It is written in Arabic, in a magnificent style which is still studied in any course on Arabic literature as the first masterpiece of the language. The biblical revelation, by way of comparison, is spread over many centuries and has found expression in a multitude of books which are considered as divinely inspired by Christians and which differ considerably among themselves in character. The preaching of the Koran, on the other hand, lasted only 20 years and was collected into one single volume. The first redaction took place shortly after Mohammed's death, which occurred in 632. Thus it can be said that the Koran is the primary source of Islamic dogma, morals and jurisprudence for all followers of the Prophet.

A second source consists of the corpus of **Hadith**. These are sayings and actions attributed to the Prophet, preserved by a proven chain of reliable "transmitters", starting with one or more of the Companions of Mohammed who handed on by word of mouth what they had heard and witnessed. It is generally believed that when Mohammed had to take a decision he was prophetically inspired<sup>18</sup>. Thus, in the eyes of Muslim tradition, the **Hadith**, provided they are shown to be genuine, enjoy the authority of revelation. It may happen that some particular one of these sayings throw light on the Koranic text itself, sometimes even correcting it. This corpus of the **Hadith** is called **sunnat al-nabi** (the practice of the Prophet), or simply **Sunna**. There are also other less important sources, comparable to tradition in Christian theology, which however we need not go into now.

16. G. Parrinder, *op. cit.*

17. R.C. Zaehner, *The Catholic Church and World Religions* (Burns and Oates, Faith & Fact, London, 1964).

18. Cfr. L. Gardet, *Mohammedanism* (Burns & Oates, Faith & Fact, London, 1961), p. 83.

From the foregoing it is clear enough that, in spite of the many differences, Christianity and Islam are very close indeed to each other, or at least they are not so far apart from each other as we might have thought. The question now is: how can Islam and Christianity be brought even closer together? Michael Hayek, in his study of the Christ of Islam, refers to the major differences between the Church and the Mosque, and says that there is not even the same faith; for Christian faith puts love as the starting place and the goal, whereas Islam rejects the communion of love with God and neighbour. It is a pity that these provocative and untrue statements come at the beginning of what is otherwise an attractive and erudite work, for they are bound to defeat Hayek's professed purpose of rallying Christianity and Islam "around the same notion of God... personal, creator, master of history and guide of salvation" (p. 26) Christians, no doubt, hold strongly to belief in the love of God, but so have many Muslim Sufis who sought justification in those very words of the Koran which spoke of God as "compassionate and loving"<sup>19</sup> and "nearer to man than his jugular vein"<sup>20</sup>. As for the love of neighbour, one will not exaggerate if one says that brotherhood is one of the most striking sociological realities of the Moslem world. In 1953, the French review *La Vie Spirituelle* published the notes of a priest who had sojourned a long time in the Sahara. He confessed that his contact with Moslems had led him to change his views on some points. He had hoped to find in them the sense of God, and he found it. He had found the "Moslem Brotherhood". The tone of his notes seemed to indicate that he had not suspected before the strength or charm of that brotherhood for one who passes as a guest<sup>21</sup>.

What might seem to be an unsurmountable barrier for closer understanding between the two world religions, is the Christian belief in Christ as God and man and his central position in the Christian religion. In the New Testament, the Gospel, the Good News of Jesus, is not only a message or a written word, but it is inextricably bound up with a person. The importance of Jesus is not only in his moral maxims, such as the Sermon on the Mount, which even an agnostic might try to follow. It was not because of the words of Jesus only, but through his life and death, that Christians came to say: "God is love".

#### BASIC DIVERGENCES

Such a view of Christ may be hard for a Muslim to understand, but it is at least worth the effort at making it understandable. And in modern times a great deal of rethinking of traditional doctrines and their expression is being done, so that dialogue between the religions is now much

19. Sura 11,92; 85,14.

20. Sura 50,16.

21. See Jomier, *op. cit.*, p. 97.

easier than for centuries past. Some Christian doctrines, at least, have been expressed in a language that is out-dated and often incomprehensible to the average Christian. No wonder that even non-Christians should find it so. Whatever the term "Son of God" may have meant originally to Jews and Gentiles, it is liable to misunderstanding today, not only to Muslims, but also to many Christians. Modern debates over the presence of symbolism, metaphorical language and literary forms in the Bible have led to a process of demythologisation, which has only lately found the approval of the Church's Magisterium. Ideas that Christ came from "up there", and the prolonged monophysitic tendency in Christian theology and devotion, need changing to fit conceptions of God as ever-present in the world and of Jesus as fully human and historical besides being fully divine. Islam may share with Christianity in this process of rethinking.

It is sometimes said that Islam does not do sufficient justice to Christ and to what the Koran itself says about him. But Christianity itself has often not done justice to Christ and what He stands for. The divisions of Christians were a scandal from the early days. "The sects differed among themselves", says the Koran continually and sadly. A later Arab historian remarked acidly: "Where ten Christians met, they formed eleven different opinions". Clearly many differences arose in the early centuries, when the Christian faith of semitic origin was expressed through a Greek medium. The search for uniformity rather than unity led to heresy and division, and there has never been complete unity. "Early Islam, thanks to its semitic background and original isolation", so writes Geoffrey Parrinder "was more free than Christianity from Greek speculation. Its prophetic witness to the unity of God, and in general to the full humanity of Jesus and his Mother, was a needful corrective which the Church largely ignored. In the rethinking of doctrinal expression today Islam and Christianity can learn from each other"<sup>22</sup>.

#### ERA OF DIALOGUE

How can then Islam and Christianity be brought closer together? This question, which is now before us, was also before the Fathers of the Second Vatican Council, which was started by good Pope John XXIII and brought to completion under Paul VI just ten years ago. In a spirit of wider ecumenism, and in the face of the widespread phenomenon of materialistic atheism, Vatican II appeals to all men of good will, and especially to all those who believe in the One True God, to open a sincere and fruitful dialogue between them in order to be united in their struggle against the common adversary of mankind.

Many are the utterances of Vatican II where such an appeal is to be found. In the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, **Lumen Gentium**, for instance, the Council says:

22. *Jesus in the Koran*, p. 171.

“But the plan of salvation also include those who acknowledge the Creator. In the first place among these there are the Moslems who, professing to hold the faith of Abraham, along with us adore the one and merciful God, who on the Last Day will judge mankind”<sup>23</sup>. And more explicitly still in the Decree on the Church’s relationship to non-Christian Religions, *Nostra Aetate*: “Upon the Moslems too the Church looks with esteem. They adore one God, living and enduring, merciful and all powerful, Maker of heaven and earth and Speaker to men. They strive to submit wholeheartedly even to his inscrutable decrees, just as did Abraham, with whom the Islamic faith is pleased to associate itself. Though they do not acknowledge Jesus as God, they revere Him as a Prophet. They also honour Mary, his Virgin Mother; at times they call on her too with devotion. In addition they await the day of judgement when God will give each man his due after raising him up. Consequently, they prize the moral life, and give worship to God, especially through prayer, almsgiving and fasting”<sup>24</sup>. Then this same document goes on: “Although in the course of the centuries many quarrels and hostilities have arisen between Christians and Moslems, this most sacred Synod urges all to forget the past and to strive sincerely for mutual understanding. On behalf of all mankind, let them make common cause of safeguarding and fostering social justice, moral values, peace and freedom”<sup>25</sup>. And further up, the same document declares: “The Catholic Church rejects nothing which is true and holy in other religions. She looks with sincere respect upon those ways of conduct and of life, those rules and teachings which, though differing in many particulars from what she holds and sets forth, nevertheless often reflect a ray of that Truth which enlightens all men... The Church, therefore, has this exhortation for her sons: prudently and lovingly, through dialogue and collaboration with the followers of other religions, and in witness of Christian faith and love, **acknowledge**, preserve and promote the spiritual and moral good found among these men, as well as the values in their society and culture”<sup>26</sup>.

In order to keep these ideas alive and to execute the decisions of this last conciliar decree, the Vatican has set up in Rome a permanent Secretariat to ensure that the dialogue between the Catholic Church and the various non-Christian religions should go on and make further progress. The President of this Secretariat has time and again called for col-

23. *Lumen Gentium*, n. 16.

24. *Nostra Aetate*, n. 3.

25. *loc. cit.*

26. *ibid.*, n. 2.

laboration in depth, specifically between Catholics and Moslems, in the struggle for basic human values such as justice and peace. Collaboration between the two religions must be in depth, and not merely on the occasion of meetings. This dialogue should enter into the spirit of the two religions. The one should not be against the other. Rather, there should be unity, and all the more so since we are united in faith in a single God. Today faith in God and the idea of God are necessary for the solution of problems tormenting humankind. These two religions need unity to confront the fundamental values of life. It is indeed the weakening of such values that has caused all the crises in which we are today involved, such as hunger, injustice, lack of freedom. Today we are meeting on the scholarly level. Instead, relations should be transferred to a more popular level. Religion is of the people and not of the state, not of an aristocracy or of an elite.