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Catholic-Shi'a Dialogue: A Christian-Muslim Engagement

This article initially considers a diverse set of contextual issues which impact on the relationship between Christianity and Islam in the world today. It then provides a concise survey of themes central to Shi'a Islam, and concludes by considering shared aspects of Shi'a Islam and Catholic Christianity which can form the basis for Catholic-Shi'a dialogue.

Christian-Muslim Encounter: Contextual Issues

We experience Christian-Muslim engagement at many levels: theological, political, cultural and global. Today, looking at the world as a whole, Christians and Muslims together make up half of the global population. Statistics are almost inevitably estimates; however, Christians make-up 33 per cent (approximately 2 billion) and Muslims 18 per cent (1.3 billion) of the world's population.

Religion and politics

Christian-Muslim relations increasingly must be set within a context of global religious resurgence. This religious-political context is opening up dynamic encounters which go far beyond the classic historic relationship between Europe and Islam across the Mediterranean or in the Balkans. It also goes substantially beyond the European discussion on the relationship between church and state and on religion and politics in the public square.

Today Christian-Muslim relations take place in a multiplicity of contexts. For example, in Asia both Christians and Muslims form majorities and minorities, or share a minority situation such as in 'secular', but 'Hindu' India. In Africa, in some states such as Nigeria, Sudan or in Ethiopia and Eritrea the Christian-Muslim divide is of determining political influence. The nature of Christian-Muslim relations in various states is also determining the scope of these states' international relations and alliances. We increasingly see external 'Islamic' finance been given to local and regional Muslim groups to aid development politically and materially, particularly in Africa and Asia, so that Islam has a more powerful and higher profile in relation to political culture than previously held. This can be in the funding of Muslim political movements, the building of mosques, and the funding of *Da'wa*/Mission. In western European states and increasingly in North America, Islamic religious and cultural *Da'wa*/Mission are particularly strong themes.

Other 'religious' contexts are informing Christian-Muslim relations: the encounter between China and Islam, at home and abroad; the Thai 'Buddhist' state and the Muslim minority in the south of the country; Hindu-Muslim relations in South Asia; and Jewish-Muslim discussions, and their implications for Christianity. The significance of the scale and importance of the Christian-Muslim engagement is not lost on other faiths, so we are increasingly finding that other traditions, particularly Judaism, but also Hinduism and Buddhism, are taking an active interest in the developments in the dialogue between Christianity and Islam.

We also witness a reconfiguration of Christian-Muslim relations in Russia. In some of the former Soviet Central Asian states a growth in Islam represents another layer of the complexity of Christian-Muslim relations. There is little understanding in western Christian circles of the political and religious encounter between the Eastern Orthodox Churches and Islam, as majorities in Russia and some Balkan states, or as minorities in the Middle East, such as the Patriarchates of Antioch, Constantinople, Alexandria or Jerusalem. In the West we also generally have a weak knowledge and understanding of the Oriental Churches – Armenian, Coptic, Ethiopian, Syrian – that have historically experienced Islam over many centuries and their contribution to understanding the Islamic tradition. For sustaining a more robust historical and theological reflection of the Christian-Muslim encounter we must expand our 'canon' of understanding.

We must also notice a growth in transitional ideology through the influence of Sayyid Qutb across the Muslim world. This is especially seen in Qutb's wish to delegitimize states governed by non-Islamist Muslims. His focus was on the eternal combat between Christians and Muslims, as found in a Quranic exegesis on their early relationship, and on the identity of the Christian tradition in relationship to the corrective of Islam. Also significant is the portrayal of the State of Israel as a modern reflection of the Jewish rejection of Muhammad, and the early Muslim overthrowing or destruction of the Jewish community in Medina which led the way to the establishment of the first Islamic state. Both radical Islamists and 'moderate' Muslims put forward the 'Constitution of Medina', which defined the relationship between Muhammad and both Arab and Jewish tribes in 624 AD, as setting the correct relationship of Muslims to Jewish and Christian believers today.

Religion and theology

Christianity further experiences Islam as a religious and theological challenge. Since the earliest period in its history, the Islamic tradition has been conscious of the religious diversity of the human race and considered it an issue of importance. Muslim tradition maintains that diversity of religions has been the hallmark of human society for a very long time, but it had not been its primordial condition.

We can learn from this that, according to the Islamic tradition, Islam is not only the historical religion and institutional framework which was brought into existence by the Muslim prophet Muhammad in the seventh century. It is also the primordial religion of mankind, revealed to Adam at the time of his creation. This is intimately related to the conception that Adam was a prophet, and to the notion that Ibrahim/Abraham was a Muslim in a metahistorical sense.

At a certain stage in their development, however, Judaism and Christianity deviated from their pristine condition and became hopelessly corrupt. A prophetic mission would have been required to ameliorate this situation. However, no prophets were sent to accomplish this task between the missions of Jesus and Muhammad. Consequently, true religion ceased to exist. Only with the emergence of Islam in the seventh century was the situation transformed.

It is thus that we locate the challenge of Islam, not just as a historical encounter, which is of importance, or as a political force in the modern world, but also as a theological challenge. There is an intimacy to the Christian-Muslim encounter which offers a familiarity, but allows for no sentimentality. Thus, throughout the centuries since the rise of Islam, Muslim-Christian relations have revolved around this double axis of familiar, biblical appeal and strenuous, religious critique.

Christianity and Islam

Within the long history of polemics between Muslims and Christians, the most persistent Christian response to the assertion of abrogation has been a straightforward rejection of how Muslims understand Christianity. Christian apologists have repeatedly insisted that the Qur'anic and post-Qur'anic comprehension of Christian doctrine is seriously flawed. The conflict centres on three issues: the reality of Jesus' crucifixion and death; the doctrine of the incarnation; and the Christian understanding of God as Trinity. The Qur'anic accounts of all three of these, as well as subsequent interpretations and elaborations, stand in sharp contrast with mainstream Christian self-understanding.

Christian accounts of Islam vary, but they nevertheless generally draw attention to how Islam is expressive of a kind of natural law, given with the creation. Louis Massignon, an extremely influential Christian scholar of Islam, for example, writes as follows:

The goal of the Qur'anic revelation is not to unveil and justify previously unknown supernatural gifts but, by calling back intelligent beings in the name of God, to make them rediscover the temporal and eternal laws – natural religion, primitive law, the simple worship that God has prescribed for all time – that Adam, Abraham and the prophets had always practised in the same way.¹

Jacques Jomier, another great Catholic Islamicist and Dominican scholar, complements this account:

Islam is a natural religion in which the religious instinct which is present in the heart of each person is protected by a way of life, with obligations and [religious] observances imposed in the name of the One who is, for the Muslim, the [source of the] Qur'an revelation. It is a patriarchal religion, spiritually pre-dating the biblical promise made by God to Abraham, but which conserves the episodes of the life of the Patriarch involving his struggle against his fathers' idols and his voluntary submission to God, even his sacrifice of his own son. Islam re-presents Abraham (Father of the Prophets) as its great ancestor.²

1 Louis Massignon, *Examen du "Présent de l'Homme Lettré" par Abdallah ibn Torjoman*, Pontifical Institute of Arabic and Islamic Studies of Rome, Rome 1992, p 10.

2 Jacques Jomier, 'Le Coran et la Liturgie dans l'Islam', *La Maison-Dieu*, 190 (1992), p 121.

These questions touch on the very identity of Islam, since Islam's self-understanding essentially refers to how it abrogates or supersedes Christianity. Even though, then, Islam may traditionally have set itself in confrontation with Christianity, it must face questions about its own identity that it cannot settle without involving authoritative representatives of Christianity.³

Christianity and Islam are also 'transnational' religious systems that are relating to each other increasingly as religions in encounter in dialogue and international diplomacy. This is particularly evident with regard to the Holy See and Shi'a authorities of the Islamic Republic in Iran, and the recent dialogue between the Anglican Church and the Sunni Muslim world. Indeed, whilst Christians have encountered Islam in history, as a religious and global challenge, the Christian churches have also taken up a dialogue with Islam. This has taken on the character of particular and distinctive dialogues and encounter. One example of this has been the growing relations between the Catholic Church and Shi'a Islam.⁴

Shi'a Islam

Shi'ism exists as a faith within the faith of Islam, as a set of beliefs held by perhaps two in ten Muslims today. Only Iran is overwhelmingly Shi'a in population. In two or three other countries, Shi'is constitute majorities (Bahrain), or bare majorities (Iraq). In the rest of the Muslim world they live as minorities or are not found at all. However, whilst the Shi'a was thinly represented globally, they form approximately 30% of the Muslim population of the middle east region. But this simple accounting belies the profound influence of Shi'ism upon contemporary Islam and perceptions of Islam. For there are Shi'is intent upon altering the intellectual and political course not only of Shi'ism, but all Islam.

Origins and identity

Can one explain this outpouring of energy through direct allusion to the past? The usual way to describe the essence of Shi'ism is to say that its adherents have always championed the claim of 'Ali. All Shi'is believe that the legitimate successor of the Prophet Muhammad was his cousin and son-in-law, 'Ali b. Abi Talib, and that rule over the Muslim community must rest solely with 'Ali's descendants. (Shi'a in fact stands for *Shi'at 'Ali*, 'Ali's faction.) After Muhammad's death, Muslims who favoured other candidates repeatedly blocked the accession of 'Ali to the caliphate. When he finally did come to rule, they withheld their allegiance. Later they crushed a nascent movement with his son Husayn, family and followers on a desolate plain at Karbala in Iraq in the year 680. This event, which is commemorated annually by Shi'is through the observance of a period of mourning, provided Shi'ism with a deeply emotive drama of martyrdom.

Differences as to the identity of 'Ali's descendants arose among the Shi'a at an early stage. Disagreements over questions of doctrine, religious law and theology also developed in the course of time. Thus it was that a number of Shi'i sub-sects arose in the Middle Ages, many of which have since disappeared without trace.

3 A. O'Mahony, 'Islam Face-to-Face with Christianity', *The Way Supplement*, 104, (2002), pp 75-85.

4 Anthony O'Mahony (ed), *Catholics and Shi'a in Dialogue: Studies in Theology and Spirituality*, Wulstan Peterburs & Mohammad Ali Shomali, Melisende, London 2004.

The main branches which have survived until today are the Zaydiyya (concentrated chiefly in the Yemen), the Isma'iliyya (whose various offshoots are to be found on the Indian subcontinent and in East Africa), and the Imamiyya (who constitute a majority in Iran and in southern Iraq, and who are also to be found on the Indian subcontinent, in Afghanistan, Lebanon, and elsewhere). We might now also include the ruling Alawite minority of Syria.

A line of 'Ali's descendents, the Imams, were persecuted and allegedly martyred in their turn for representing a living challenge to illegitimate and tyrannical rule. It is this sense of suffered injustice that came to pervade Shi'ism. The fate of martyrs was all the more poignant for the tragic truth that they had been slain by fellow Muslims. To mourn them was also to grieve for the lost unity of Islam. However, even today, Muslim 'ecumenism' remains an intellectual exercise, with almost no place in the intimate dialogue between Shi'i ulama (who are involved to some extent with ecumenical outreach to Sunnis) and Shi'i believers (who have no such ecumenical experience). What began as a dissident position on the matter of succession in the seventh century blossomed in time into a full religious tradition, distinguished from Sunni Islam by its own reading of theology and sacred history.

Mapping the world

In most times and most places, Shi'is constituted minorities occasionally persecuted and at best tolerated by a Sunni Muslim ruling establishment. To resolve their dilemma as a minority, Shi'is employed a wide range of strategies in different times and places. Islamic history is strewn with Shi'i uprisings. By its very nature, the doctrine of rejection raises the issue of the attitude to be adopted towards the Sunni world. On the one hand, it is difficult to regard the Sunnis as unbelievers of the same order as the Jews or the Christians. On the other hand, since the Sunnis do not believe in the Imams, they cannot be regarded as believers. This problem is resolved by dividing mankind into three religious spaces: believers, Muslims and unbelievers. It was not the Imamis who devised this distinction; it is based on Quranic verses which imply a certain difference between believers (*mu'minin*) and Muslims (*muslimun*). The question as to whether or not these two terms are identical occupied Muslim theology from its outset. What sets the Imamiyya apart is the assertion that the believers are the Imamis, whereas the Muslims are those who acknowledge God's unity and Muhammad's message, without however adhering to the principle of devotion to an Imam (*waldya*). The difference between Imamis and Sunnis regarding this topic is not restricted to their definitions of the two terms. Their conceptions of the religious and legal status of believers and Muslims also differ. The Sunnis regard both as one bloc confronting the world of unbelief.

According to this view, the world is divided into the abode of Islam (*dar al-islam*), where Islam is dominant, and the abode of unbelief (*dar al-kufr*), which Islam must conquer. For the Imamis, the difference between believers and Muslims is too substantive for them to form one cohesive bloc. This is reflected in the division of the world into three kinds of territory: the abode of faith (*dar al-iman*), which is under Imami rule, the abode of Islam, and the abode of unbelief. Significantly,

the Imami doctrine of *jihad* gives priority to the struggle against the abode of Islam, with the aim of transforming it into the abode of faith; only when his stage has been completed must the struggle against the unbelievers be undertaken.

The principle of concealment as a minority

Theory, however, was not always consistent with reality. For nearly nine hundred years there in fact existed no territories which could be considered as forming part of the abode of faith. The overwhelming majority of Imamis lived in the abode of Islam as a minority, sometimes tolerated and sometimes persecuted. Under such conditions the expression of radically anti-Sunni views was often a risky matter. It is therefore not surprising that the principle of concealment (*taqiyya*, literally 'precaution') came to occupy a key place in the Imami doctrine. According to this principle, an Imami in times of danger may, and in certain cases must, conceal his true belief. The Imamis justify their adherence to concealment by pointing out that various prophets also practised it in times of distress. The Imams often resorted to concealment when they were called upon to deliver a ruling before an assembly whose reliability was in doubt. They revealed their true position only to their close supporters. This led to serious difficulties in Imami legal literature, for it contains divergent and sometimes contradictory replies given by the Imams to the same question. It was the task of the religious scholars to determine, in cases of conflict, which tradition expressed the Imam's true opinion. One of the rules they established was that the believer should follow that tradition which contradicted the Sunni practice (the assumption being that in such cases traditions consistent with Sunni practice were the result of concealment).

Shi'ism today

Contemporary Shi'ism shows the marks of these centuries of persecution, and the dual legacies of resistance and compromise. Shi'is were doubters in the manifestly successful enterprise of Islam. The essentials of Shi'ism have been interpreted in widely differing senses by Shi'is themselves, sometimes to challenge the state, at other times to exalt it.

Shi'a Islam had until recent times escaped the scrutiny of the West, scholarly and religious. One widespread misattribution held Shi'ism to be an expression of Iranian national identity, a notion then projected upon early Shi'ism. The distortion arose from the decisive centrality of Iran in Shi'ism from the sixteenth century. Shi'a were historically distributed across a wide geographic region. The more remote areas which had sheltered the Shi'is from persecution – secluded Jabal Amil in Lebanon, the marshy south of Iraq, the highlands of central Afghanistan – were little affected by the winds of change which swept the region in the modern era. Such changes, despite associated dislocations, still raised the material level of life in cities with their predominantly Sunni populations. Shi'is in turn began to leave their redoubts in pursuit of material betterment and flowed into urban centres in ever greater numbers. Poor Shi'i neighbourhoods grew up around cities such as Beirut, Baghdad and Kabul. There it became painfully obvious to Shi'is that the religious stigma they had long borne had been transformed into the most glaring social and economic disadvantages. A sense of deprivation among these Shi'is

provided much fertile ground for ideologies of political dissent, first of the Left, and later of radical Islam.

The present period has also witnessed the politicization of the annual Ashura rites, which mark the tragedy of Karbala in 680. This is a prime example of a utilitarian reinterpretation of basic symbols. In the traditional Ashura observances, the mourning for the martyred Husayn is intended to win his intercession. The participants lament in sorrow and self-flagellation, as a sign of mourning, is customary. The traditional Ashura is a demonstration of pity for the martyred Husayn and a bid for personal redemption through his suffering. But, in recent decades, Ashura has been politicized, and its leading characters, the martyred Husayn and his tyrannical opponent Yazid, have been recast as antagonists in an ongoing struggle between liberation and oppression. Every age brings forth a new Yazid, and resistance to tyranny is incumbent upon every believer. Husayn is no longer to be pitied; he is a hero to be emulated for his willingness to battle against all odds and offer his life as a martyr for the just cause. The paradigm of Karbala is still widely employed by the Islamic republic of Iran in attempts to influence Shi'is in other countries where the revolution has yet to be raised. For example, Ayatollah Khomeini's emphasis upon the Shi'i belief that Husayn went knowingly to his death at Karbala even sanctions a form of martyrdom which can only be regarded as intentional. Yet while the paradigm of Husayn at Karbala inspired a revolution, there is little in it to guide those who seek a blueprint in history for the just Islamic order which the revolution promised. For Husayn's revolution was crushed, and its chief protagonists perished.⁵

Iran and Khomeini

The uneasy relationship between the Shi'a clergy and the authorities did not undergo any significant changes with the advent of the Pahlavi dynasty (1925) in Iran. Attempts at Westernization undertaken by Reza Shah (ruled 1925-1941) and his son Muhammad Reza Shah (ruled 1941-1979) met with varying degrees of resistance. Many religious scholars (*ulama*) who openly voiced their opposition were jailed or forced into exile. The major significance of the Iranian revolution from a religious point of view is not merely that it catapulted into power those very forces of opposition, but that in so doing it has turned Iran into the first country in history which is led according to the tenets of Imami Shi'ism by those who consider themselves the legitimate guardians of the faith pending the return of the messianic hidden Imam.

The doctrinal basis for this momentous event is to be found in the principle of guardianship by the clergy (*walayyat al-faqih*), whose best-known exponent is Khomeini himself. His ideas are set out in his book *al-Hukuma al-islamiyya* ('Islamic Government'), based on a series of lectures he delivered while in exile in Iraq.

5 A wider Shi'a-Christian perspective is developed by the Anglican scholar, Toby Howarth, 'Karbala and Cross: Christian-Muslim relations from the perspective of Indian Shi'ite preaching', in David Thomas with Claire Amos (ed), *A Faithful Presence: Essays for Kenneth Cragg*, Melisende, London 2003, pp 307-318.

Khomeini asserts that among the various religious scholars it is the task of one to serve as representative of the Imam. This scholar (*faqih*) is indeed even claimed to be in some sense the successor of the Prophet as well as of the Imam, though he is not alleged to possess any of the attributes peculiar either to prophets or to Imams. He must be honest and learned; and the believers for their part must obey him as their forebears obeyed the Prophet and the Imams. Unlike the Prophet or the Imam, however, the *faqih* is not appointed by virtue of a divine commandment; he cannot dismiss other *faqih*s from their posts, and the opinions of all those who are equally qualified as scholars must be given, more or less, equal weight. The upshot of this, although this is not stated explicitly, is that the representative of the Imam is *primus inter pares*.

While Khomeini refrains in his treatise from using strongly anti-Sunni language, he stresses the uniqueness of Shi'i Islam. In contrast, the last hundred years have witnessed the rise of Imami thinkers who have sought, because of a pan-Islamic ideology or a desire to gain legitimacy in the eyes of the Sunni world, to underline those elements which are common to Shi'i and Sunni Islam and to minimize the importance of the differences separating them. Sporadic efforts at rapprochement have also been made by Sunni thinkers. But given the substantive differences between Shi'a and Sunnis, it appears that the gap between them will remain unbridgeable unless one of the sides changes almost beyond recognition.

Shi'a relations with Christians

One of the most recent distinctive elements of the Shi'a tradition, especially of Iran, has been to reach out to the Christian churches as a way of gaining a hearing for an alternative voice of Islam. Since the late 1990's the Shi'a authorities in Iran have held four meetings with the Russian Orthodox Church mainly dealing with social and political matters. They have also met with the Armenian Orthodox Church based in Lebanon, the American Presbyterian church and the Anglican church in 2003 and 2005. In addition there have been four significant exchanges with the Vatican and catholic religious authorities of the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue, headed by Archbishop Michael Fitzgerald. This recent experience of dialogue with Shi'a Islam should now lead to a reflective coming together of the different Christian churches' experience of Muslim-Christian relations and Islam. What is increasingly required is a greater degree of dialogue amongst the churches and their theologians vis-à-vis Islam.

Ingredients for Catholic-Shi'a Engagement

In this last section I will sketch out some of the areas of possible similarity and exploration between Catholic Christianity and Shi'a Islam.

A sketch of Catholicism

What is Catholicism? Catholicism is not a reality that stands by itself. The word *Catholic* is a qualification of *Christian*, and *Christian* is a qualification of *religious* and *religious* is a qualification of *Human*. Catholicism is a configuration of values that enjoy a normative character in discerning the Christian tradition as a whole. There has been throughout Catholic history a drive toward rationality, the insistence that

the divine mystery manifest in tradition and sacramental presence be, insofar as possible, penetrated, defended, and explicated by the most acute rational reflection.

Catholicism is a rich and diverse reality. It is a Christian tradition, a way of life, and a community. That is to say, it is comprised of faith, theologies and doctrines and is characterized by specific liturgical, ethical and spiritual orientations and behaviours. At the same time, it is a people, or cluster of peoples, with a particular history. These values include Catholicism's

- sense of sacramentality: God is present everywhere, the invisible in the visible, within us and within the whole created order;
- principle of mediation: the divine is available to us as a transforming, healing, renewing power through the ordinary things of life: persons, communities, events, places, institutions, natural objects, etc;
- sense of communion: we are radically social and so, too, is our relationship with God and God's with us;
- drive toward rationality and its critical realism: reality is neither self-evident nor confined to the realm of ideas;
- corresponding respect for history, for tradition, and for continuity: we are products of our past as well as shapers of our present and our future;
- analogical imagination: the divine and the human are now more alike than unlike;
- conviction that we can have as radical a notion of sin as we like so long as our understanding and appreciation of grace is even more radical
- high regard for authority and order as well as conscience and freedom
- fundamental openness to all truth and to every value – in a word, its *catholicity*.

Catholicism and Shi'a Islam: similarities

The similarities in religious tradition between Catholic Christianity and Shi'a Islam have caught the attention of many observers. Indeed, as part of the historical encounter between the two great faiths, Christianity and Islam, Catholicism and Shi'ism have sought and engaged in dialogue with each other over many centuries. Whilst similar religious and structural parallels between Catholic Christianity and Shi'a Islam have been noted, these religious systems have fundamental differences. Each has its own history and enduring and essential characteristics, although both traditions have certain characteristics that are strikingly similar; for example, the matter of the nature of religious authority in both traditions.

Catholics believe in the primacy of Peter among the apostles, and in the primacy of his successor among the bishops. Religious authority for them is thus centralised and articulated in every age. Islam is divided by two dominant traditions – Sunni and Shi'a – and both locate religious authority differently. The Shi'i position, however, is that the Community can only be infallible when it is led by the legitimate descendant of the Prophet. Various Shi'i sects have differing views as to which descendants of Muhammad led the Community. The last of these Imams was taken into occultation due to the harassment of the Sunnis, but even in his absence, he

is the true leader of the Community. He will reappear at the end of time, along with the Messiah Jesus, in order to slay the Antichrist and usher in the triumph of true religion in the messianic age.

Among the several parallels that we may observe between mainstream Twelver Shi'ism and Catholicism, three are perhaps most telling: meditation upon the significance of the passion of an innocent victim who took upon himself the sins of the community and atoned for them; belief that God's grace is mediated through earthly and heavenly hierarchies; and faith in intercessors. In Sunni Islam by comparison, the dominant view is that only Muhammad is the intercessor or even that the intercessory function has now been performed, and that therefore each believer must now 'carry his own weight'.

Mother-figures

Shi'ism, in common with the *sufis* (the mystics of Islam), places great value on the model, the intercession, and the accessibility of the 'friends of God', the saints. In particular, both Catholicism and Shi'ism emphasize an overarching mother-figure as a leading intercessor, a pattern for women, a refuge for those in trouble, a radiant 'mother of sorrows' and hope for the sorrowing. Both emphasize the great value of martyrdom and of redemptive suffering, even to the extent that individual suffering can become part of a 'treasury of grace' upon which co-religionists can draw. And finally, each community believes and proclaims that it is led by a charismatic leader who is guided by God and hence preserved from error and, further, that there is a religious hierarchy that shares his authority and upholds and diffuses his teaching. This enables that hierarchy to speak with great confidence and authority, upheld as it is by the accompanying belief that God would never leave the faithful without such an infallible guide through the complexities of its religion.

Mary, the mother of Christ, is a central figure and symbol for Catholic Christianity. Especially blessed and immaculately conceived, she was privileged to be the virginal mother of the *logos*, through whom the world was created. Hence, truly *Theotokos*, Mother of God. As the mother of the prophet and promised Messiah, Mary is recognized as well in the Qur'an as 'purified' and 'chosen above all women' by God, who himself ordained the virginal birth. The Virgin Mary is thus a sacred historical and theological link binding Christians and Muslims. Catholics and Orthodox Christians view her as mother of Christ the divine *logos*, and therefore the mother of God; Muslims consider her mother of the Messiah selected by God for this very special role.⁶

The two American scholars James A. Bill and John Alden Williams in their imaginative, and at times magisterial, account of the encounter between Catholicism and Shi'a Islam make some very important observations.⁷ The linking of the Catholic believer with God through Mary is strikingly similar to the relationship that Shi'i Muslims

6 Tim Winter, 'Pulchra ut Luna: Some Reflections on the Marian Theme in Muslim-Catholic Dialogue', *Journal of Ecumenical Studies*, 36, (1999), pp 439-469; David Marshall, 'Mary in the Qur'an', in Thomas with Amos (ed), *A Faithful Presence*, pp 155-165.

7 James A. Bill & John Alden Williams: *Roman Catholics and Shi'i Muslims Prayer, Passion and Politics*, Chapel Hill & London, The University of North Carolina Press, 2002. See my review in *International Journal for the Study of the Christian Church* (Special Issue on Christian-Muslim relations), Vol. 3, no.3, 2003, pp 107-110.

hold with respect to the imams. The emanating chain of the imams links the divine and the human. Shi'is bind themselves directly and totally into this chain. The Catholic-Shi'i parallel here, however, is more than one between the Virgin Mary and the imams. Rather, it is one between Mary and Fatima, the daughter of the Prophet Muhammad, the wife of Imam Ali, and the mother of imams Husayn and Hasan.

Both Fatima and the Virgin Mary stand as female members of a central holy family. Both are considered to be immaculate and impeccable and both are emanating extensions of their fathers and sons. While Mary's personality is completely contained in that of her son Jesus, the figure of Fatima emanates forth from both her father Muhammad and her son Husayn. Mary and Fatima pass along the special grace derived directly from Christ and Muhammad, respectively, to Catholics and Shi'i Muslims. The important symbolism of a linking and emanating source is seen in the images of radiant light that dominate the stories of both the Virgin Mary and of Fatima. Fatima is usually referred to as *al-Zahra* (The Shining One). At the moment of her birth, light is said to have spread over the sky and the earth, to the west and to the east. According to Shi'i believers, Fatima, like Muhammad and Ali, received a special light from God and passed it along to all mankind. Mary is also believed to have emanated a special holy radiance, and is referred to in Catholic prayers as, variously, 'Morning Star', 'Our Light in Uncertainty', and 'Radiant Mother'.

Suffering and martyrdom

Suffering and martyrdom are central themes in both Islam and Christianity. These themes are most clearly stressed and emphasized in Shi'ism and Catholicism, where they dominate both belief and practice. In both cases, there is a critically important redemptive aspect to this suffering. In Catholicism, the doctrine of redemption is sharply and formally defined as part of Church teaching. It stresses the great offence of sin to God and the need to satisfy his justice, something man unaided by Christ could not accomplish. Although Shi'ism has no such formally defined doctrine of redemption, suffering clearly helps to cut a path through to salvation. This occurs not only through the suffering of the individual Muslim, but also through the assistance and intercession of the martyred imams.

Both Catholicism and Shi'ism view suffering in the context of intercession and salvation. Both Jesus Christ and Imam Husayn stand as central suffering figures, whose violent deaths at the hands of powerful temporal adversaries are revealed as pre-eminent, purifying, universal redemptive acts. Both deaths represented the climax of a terrible period of passion and suffering that helped cleanse the world of injustice, tyranny, and corruption, and opened the way to salvation. In their physical destruction and temporal defeat, both Christ and Husayn achieved major spiritual triumph and everlasting victory. In addition, their act of ultimate sacrifice spawned a long history of similar acts of martyrdom by Christians and Muslims alike. In Roman Catholicism and Shi'i Islam these acts of martyrdom have been historically viewed as a form of blessed heroism that stands as continuing proof of the power of faith.

Saints

Both Catholicism and Shi'i Islam emphasise the central importance of sacred chains of saintly personalities who serve both as models and intercessors for the faithful.

These individuals, whether saints or imams, are ultimately links to the Divine. In Catholicism, the saints 'who have put on Christ' have become images of Christ himself. When Catholics devote themselves to these saints, they are held to connect themselves with Christ. In Shi'ism, the imams represent a chain, with each imam existing as the emanation of the ones before him. Ultimately, they are extensions of the spirit and personalities of Imam Husayn, Imam Ali, and the Prophet Muhammad, who was himself of course the receptacle for God's revelations. These sacred chains of saintly intermediaries are reinforced by a special spiritual strength that is the product of great suffering, travail, and pain. The chains have been fashioned and fired by the flames of suffering, and the major links are martyrs who consciously chose death and thus demonstrated the depth of their commitment. The stories of the suffering and death of Imam Husayn and his companions and the passion and death of Jesus Christ and his followers permeate the consciousness and beliefs of Shi'a and Catholics, respectively. This reality of suffering and martyrdom both strengthens the power of these sacred chains of saints and deepens their appeal to the faithful, who seek to link themselves into these powerful systems of emanation. Catholics and Shi'is alike believe that it is here that they are likely to find assistance in their quest for redemption and salvation.

Politics

Although neither Catholicism nor Shi'a Islam can be said to have simple, universally accepted models of politics and the state, there are certain accepted principles in these areas that are identifiable in the teachings of both faith systems. These include an emphasis upon normative foundations of political systems and the pre-eminence of divine and natural law over human, man-made law. The goal of the ideal state should be to further the moral and spiritual fulfilment of the human being and the human community. In short, the form of the state should be such that it assists men and women to pursue lives of a quality that will enable them to attain everlasting union with God. Within this general framework, both Shi'ism and Catholicism have historically indicated a willingness to accept and to live within a wide variety of specific political systems.

Conclusion

In conclusion, since Catholicism and Shi'ism bear certain important doctrinal, structural, and socio-political similarities, and since both face similar problems in the world today, they could do well to communicate with and to try to learn from each other. In this way, both religious traditions could increase their chances of meeting successfully the challenges that they will inevitably confront.

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[Editor's Note: For a description of Catholic-Shi'a dialogue in practice, see the review in the book review section of *Catholics and Shi'a in Dialogue: Studies in Theology and Spirituality*, edited by Anthony O'Mahony, Wulstan Peterburs & Mohammad Ali Shomali, London, Melisende, 2004.]