

THE RELATIONSHIP OF ISLAM TO JUDAISM AND CHRISTIANITY

Wanis Semaan

A typical, traditional Muslim self-understanding is that Islam offers the fullness of God's revelation in a very special and unique way. God's revelation in Islam is special and unique, in so far as God spoke through the archangel Gabriel. Muhammad heard, and repeated what he had heard. In this manner, the difference between revelation in Islam, and revelation in both Judaism and Christianity, lies in the fact that, here, God acted directly, and that the human dimension in revelation was merely that of a medium, which carried the revelation, as he heard it, without making any contribution, or taking anything away from what God Himself transmitted.

W. Montgomery Watt posits three points as Islam's understanding of itself. 1) Islam, he says, owes nothing to any system of thought or religion that preceded it. 2) Islam is superior to both Judaism and Christianity. 3) Islam possesses, furthermore, all the answers to the most-perplexing question of life. Watt goes on to say that such a self-understanding is sometimes exaggerated beyond limits that may be warranted.¹ Despite Watt's conciliatory, and irenic reservation, these points remain the essential self-understanding of Islam that we may deduce from the Qur'an itself.

These three points are directly related to Islam's understanding of revelation. The Qur'an is the direct revelation of God to humankind. In the formation of the Qur'an, and its authorship, the human element played no role at all. The archangel Gabriel carried God's message, the illiterate Prophet Muhammad heard, and repeated what he had heard, faithfully. Later, actually after the death of Muhammad, the text was written.

[N.B.: The footnote numbers in the original printed edition were incorrectly numbered. They have now been numbered correctly. –Revising ed.]

¹ See W. Montgomery Watt's essay in R. G. Hovannisian, and Speros Vryonis Jr, eds, *Islam's Understanding of Itself*, Malibu CA: Undena Publications, 1983, pp. 5ff.

Many a Muslim scholar would suggest that revelation, as Christians understand it, is the incarnate Word of God. The Word of God became flesh in the person of Jesus of Nazareth. For Muslims, on the other hand, revelation is the Qur'an, itself, in other words, the Word of God for Muslims became a book. It came directly from God, and the Arabic language. Gabriel, in the Muslims' sense, read from the original Qur'an that is kept by God Himself.

I have purposely begun here with the unique self-understanding of Islam, and did not begin with the typically-Western proposition that Judaism, Christianity, and Islam form the three monotheistic, Abrahamic religions. If we begin with such a statement, then, as in all logical statements, or syllogisms, the conclusion is already inherent in the proposed axiom. Then, the conclusion would be: "Hurrah, we are one, big, happy family!" That is more the wishful thinking of well-meaning, but sometimes naive, Orientalists, to whom I do not belong.

By training and discipline, I am a sociologist of religion. Sociologists of religion propose that religion, especially for those who fall in the Durkheimian school, is a collective product of society. For Durkheim, "religion is a unified system of belief and practices, relative to sacred things, which is to say, things set apart and forbidden – beliefs and practices, which unite one, single, moral community called a church, and all those who adhere to them".² Here we see what Durkheim meant with the statement that religion is an "eminently social thing".³ Such teaching would immediately provoke a negative stance from Muslims, since religion is something that God gives, and whose development has nothing to do with the practices of any society.

The Prophet Muhammad was born in the year 570 AD in Mecca. At the time of his birth, Arabia did not have a religious vacuum. Jews,

² Emile Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*, New York NY: The Free Press, 1965, p. 62.

³ *Ibid.*, pp. 62f. See J. Spencer Trimmingham, *Christianity Among the Arabs in Pre-Islamic Times*, London UK: Longman and Librarie du Libon, 1979, the first five chapters.

Christians, polytheists, as well as a wide variety of heathen practices, were present. The Arabian society was a “religious” society, if we mean by religious, that people sought and found the answers that most stilled their thirst for satisfying explanations of the complex and bewildering nature of their universes. The Jews, who were in Arabia, were in diaspora, and separated from the land, in which Jahweh chose to take up His residence. In Psalm 137, we read of the mournful cry of the Jew in exile: “How can I sing the Lord’s song in a strange land?” This was the mournful cry of Jews that were in exile. The connection between Jahweh, and the land of Palestine is clearly seen in the Old Testament. Jahweh is the God, whose residence is the mountains and hills of Palestine. In Psalm 122, we read: “I lift up my eyes to the hills from whence comes my help; my help comes from the Lord, who made heaven and earth.” The Jew in exile felt cut off, and isolated, from Jahweh. The Jew in Arabia was not any nearer to Jahweh than his brother that was in exile. But, nonetheless, he was a Jew, and was in Mecca, and in Medina. No doubt, we are aware that the first five centuries in the history of Christianity were resplendent with doctrinal controversy. The church, in its first centuries of formation, was undergoing traumatic experiences in training to understand its faith. It was a long, painful, and tedious process, through which the church went, as it sought to define its doctrines. The main seats of the church then were Antioch and Alexandria. Often calumny accompanied the discussions. Those not orthodox in their thought were forced eastward into the desert – into Arabia. Obviously the Arabia, of which we read in Paul’s letter to the Galatians, is not the Arabia of Mecca and Medina, but more of the Syrian desert. Nonetheless, one could meet in Arabia, the Docetists, the Arians, the semi-Arians, the monophysites, and the Nestorians.

So long as my task is not to present a history of the Christological controversies, I shall be satisfied with giving only as brief a definition of these controversial teachings as possible, and hopefully remain intelligible. Docetism taught that Jesus Christ only “appeared”. The Christ did not take on human flesh. By so teaching, Docetists denied the incarnation. The Docetists were genuinely saying, “God cannot become man.” God was in Jesus, the man, only in appearance.

The Arians, as well as the semi-Arians, denied the divinity of Jesus. He was just a man. The monophysites, in their turn, denied the possibility that, in the human person, Jesus of Nazareth, God and man, reside. That Jesus was, at one and the same time, both God and man was not possible for them. They suggested that the divine was assumed in the human, but that Jesus was thoroughly human. He had one nature only.

The Nestorians were also present in Arabia. Nestorius had taught that the virgin Mary could not be the mother of God, as the Fathers of Antioch had taught, since Jesus was essentially a man. For him, she could, at best, be the mother of Christ, and not the mother of God. The Nestorian problem was also a Christological problem.

All these forms of unorthodox teachings were present in Arabia at the time of the rise and development of Islam. By saying this, I am also saying that the development of a religion cannot happen in a vacuum. I am aware Muslims would not be pleased to either hear or read such a statement. I am also aware of the Islamic teaching that the Qur'an is the direct revelation of God's will. It is, for Muslims, that full and perfect revelation. The author is God, and God cannot be subject to societal influences. If we take the subject, which we have at hand, scientifically, seriously, and do not approach it only from the perspective of faith and piety, then we must grant that ideas and understandings of reality do, in fact, reflect the surroundings, in which they arise and develop.

Islamic teaching grants that there are other legitimate revelations of God. These are the Torah and the Injil, namely, the Mosaic law and the gospel. They remain, however, partial and imperfect revelations. Islam believes in a progressive revelation that moves from the partial and incomplete to the full and the perfect. The Qur'an was given to humankind by Gabriel, through the prophet medium of Muhammad, who was illiterate, and with no ability to read or write. Thus, no human agency was employed in the formation and development of the text of the Qur'an. Muhammad heard, and repeated what he had heard. It was after his death that the Qur'an was written. The final form, which is the form in which we have the Qur'an

today, was completed in the reign of the third Caliph Uthman. This was only 20 years after the death of Muhammad.

This is what Muslims believe. To be a Muslim means: to believe that there is no God, except Allah; to believe that Muhammad is his messenger; to believe in angels; to believe that there is a day of judgment; to believe that there is a life to come; to believe in the prophets, whom God has sent; and to believe the revelations, which God sent down on His prophets. Here is the starting point of faith's journey. It is, however, not incumbent on a non-Muslim to believe what Muslims believe. For, if a non-Muslim were to believe what Muslims believe, then he would be a Muslim, and no longer a non-Muslim. The non-Muslim's duty is to respect the fact that Muslims believe what they believe, and to honour their belief as their belief. In respecting the Muslim in his belief, and in honouring him in believing what he believes, it does not mean that the non-Muslim must surrender his critical faculties, and be satisfied with the stance of piety and of faith.

The issue here would probably be simplified, were we to consider that it is possible for a scientist to differentiate between closely-related phenomena without injuring either of them. To say that God speaks to people is an acceptable statement. To say that human beings react to that which God communicates to them, and construct structures that speak to them, and satisfy their longings, is also an acceptable statement. When sociologists suggest that religion develops in society, they are saying that religion is the human reaction to God's intervention in human history. This is what Rudolf Otto referred to in his book, *The Idea of the Holy*, where religion is understood as the encounter between the *mysterium tremendum* and the *mysterium fascinans* with human persons in society. Religion, then, develops as a result of that encounter between God and mankind, but it is mankind which constructs forms, which make sense to them, and which stem out of their experience, and God gives the content.⁴

⁴ I am aware of the Aristotelian discussion on form and content, and that the two cannot be so easily separated one from the other. But I am certain that, for the purpose of clarity, it is legitimate to differentiate the one from the other. Man, in society, chooses that which is

If we were to take the Qur'anic text and study it very carefully, we would find a great deal that the Old Testament backgrounds. The prophets of the Old Testament are referred to – some 20 such prophets from the Old Testament are referred to in the Qur'an. New Testament backgrounds can also be detected. Does this mean that someone sat there in a library and copied from these books? By no means! Muslims answer this accusation by suggesting that the similarity stems from the fact that God is the author of all three texts. All three are revelations from God. Muslims go further and call Jews and Christians, the people of the book, *ahl alkitaab*.

Whether we accept the Muslim point of view, or the critical point of view, with regard to the rise and development of religions, one sees definite similarities and relationships, and, without doubt, also differences. Let us look at some of the similarities. Common to all three religions is the belief in one God. All three religions are recognised as monotheistic, but the monotheism of Judaism and of Islam is regarded by many as stricter than that of Christianity. Christianity's monotheism is seen as less strict than that of Judaism and of Islam, because of the doctrine of the trinity. Evidently, from the perspectives of Christian theology, it would be viewed as a misunderstanding of Christian teaching if the doctrine of the trinity were to lead to non-monotheistic perceptions.

All three religions affirm strongly that the one God is the Creator God. He is the Creator of all that is; without Him was not anything made that was made. As Creator, God is also perceived as sustainer and provider. God is understood by all of the three religions as the righteous and holy one, and who, therefore, will judge all of His creatures. This clearly presupposes a day of judgment, when all human beings will have to render an account of their lives before God's throne.

Judaism, Christianity, and Islam believe that God is a God who speaks to His creatures through prophets. The Old Testament is evidence that Judaism believes and affirms that God speaks through prophets, in different

familiar to him, in order that he may express that which God communicated through the prophetic medium.

times and places, but the message has to do with God's righteousness, love, and mercy, and with human beings' response to God and His righteousness, love, and mercy. The New Testament affirms the fact that God does speak with His people. In the Letter to the Hebrews, we read that God, in previous times, spoke through the prophets, but now, in a very special way, God speaks through Jesus Christ His Son. The Qur'an repeats the teaching that God sends prophets to different peoples at different times. To each people God sends a prophet. No people are left without a prophet. This means that God would not leave His creatures unguided. If they are to render an account for their life, then they must have a prophet, who should guide them into the ways that please God.

From this very short excursion, we notice that there are many similarities and common elements among the three religions that we are considering. However, the common elements do not, and, indeed, cannot, overshadow the differences. Judaism and Islam share more common elements than do Christianity and Islam. Both Judaism and Islam are religions that are based and founded on law. In Judaism, it is the law that was given to Moses, and, in Islam, it is the shari'a, which is based on the Qur'an, the Sunna, Analogy, and Consensus.

The chief point of difference between Judaism and Islam is the expectation of the Messiah. The Qur'an speaks of the Messiah, Jesus the Son of Mary, but He is neither the Messiah that Judaism hopes to receive, nor is He the Messiah, who is understood as the Saviour by Christians. The Messiah of Islam does not have the eschatological significance as that of Judaism and of Christianity. He does have some function to play in the last day. That function, however, is very different from the functions that Judaism and Christianity ascribe to Him. The Messiah, for the Jew, is the political deliverer of His people. In Islam, he is essentially only a man, and a good prophet.

The chief point of difference between Christianity and Islam centres on the person of the Messiah, Jesus the Christ, the man from Nazareth. For Christians, He is the eternal Son of God, born before all time, in Him all things were made that are made. He was not accepted by the Jews of His

time because He did not fill, or fulfil, the understanding of and the role the Messiah was to play. He was crucified; He died; He was buried; and God raised Him on the third day from the dead. He sits at the right hand of God the Father, from whence He shall come to judge the living and dead. He shall also raise us up from the dead, because He lives and reigns in honour.

Islam denies this. Islam posits strongly the belief that Jesus was a mere man, although He is believed to have been a very good man, but still He was only a man. He is not divine; He is one among the many prophets whom God had sent at different times to different peoples. Islam denies the crucifixion. Someone who looked like Jesus did, in fact, get crucified. God would not permit such a person to be so brutally killed. God raised Him to Himself. In other words, Jesus, even today, still lives in the body somewhere, and that, some day, He shall die, and, on the day of the general resurrection, He will be raised with all the others. And since He was not crucified, He cannot have been raised from the dead, as Christians claim and believe.

The Jesus of the Qur'an resembles the Jesus of the New Testament in name, in manner of birth, but, in no other ways which are essential to His identity, as Christians perceive Him to be. There are strains of Arianism, strains of Docetism, strains of monophysitism, and strains of Nestorianism in the Qur'anic understanding of the person of Jesus.

In a world, which is growing smaller day by day, and in which people of different cultures and religions are coming closer to each other day by day, it is important that adherents of the different religions ought to get to know what each believes, so that ways for a common life may be found. Dialogue, as Raimon Panikkar says, "is a necessity for life, and for survival".⁵

⁵ Raimon Panikkar, "Begegnung der Religionen", in *Dialog der Religionen* (1991), pp. 11ff.

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