



Religion and Politics in Islam: Challenge to Christian-Muslim Relations

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HISTORICALLY, OF ALL THE RELIGIONS, IT IS ISLAM THAT HAS MOST THRUST ITSELF on the consciousness of Christianity as “the other.” Unfortunately we have usually responded to this other in negative terms. It is very clear that we need a new theological discourse for a new relationship; one which is no longer based on an internal discussion within the west itself but rather on a relationship between our idea of what it means to be Christian and our existence within a fundamental plurality of values which are located in multiple religious systems. In this context, however, we must make sure that we do not sacrifice those elements which are native to Christianity. At the same time we must also safeguard

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Muslims have a broad range of views on the relation of religion and politics, but all Muslims agree that there is an intimate relation based on the principle that God rules all of life. The author provides a window on the intricacy of Muslim society, its debates on the public role of faith, and the challenge implied for Christian theology.

that we do not become so provincial that the universal implication of creation and salvation is lost in a polemical zeal.

I. CHALLENGES TO CHRISTIAN THEOLOGY IN THE CONTEXT OF ISLAM

The quest for a Christianizing mission among Muslims is well known for its ultimate failure in spite of the romantic statements defining the brilliant initial efforts of people such as Zwemer, Henry Martyn, Muir, Sweetman, MacDonald, and so on. Attempts at operating in the shadow of these earlier efforts have in recent years raised the question of how we as Christians can envisage a relationship with people of other faiths, Islam in particular, with its past history and future direction, especially in light of the strong and growing hostility in the west.

The struggle in developing a theology in the context of Islam is jeopardized by two very important and very difficult problems. On the one hand we have the difficulty of overcoming the political and social legacy of western Christianity and its close association with the colonial and expanding western hegemony; on the other hand we have the related problem of overcoming the theological and epistemological legacy of western Christianity.

First is the close association of Christian mission with western imperial power over the last five hundred years and especially since the emblematic date of 1884—the year of the Berlin Conference, which parceled Africa out among the so-called “advanced powers.” The largely uncritical approach to the colonial expansion by the western churches and missionary structures has left us very vulnerable to the critique of collusion. Related to this is the fact that the local Christians in the Muslim world, who are a product of the missionary enterprise, were neither allowed nor attempted themselves to develop any ecclesial or theological independence. This has left a gap that is hard to bridge.

The second problem, related to the first, is the adoption of the theological epistemology of western theologians, who were largely concerned with the issue of facing the emerging challenge of enlightenment epistemology and the secular political order, either in a polemical mode or an apologetic one. The questions that western theologians faced were largely within a religiously homogeneous environment and with a particular kind of evolution within this religious environment. The debates with enlightenment, secularism, atheism, liberal and utilitarian political theories, capitalist, socialist, and communist economic approaches were all within the same sphere. Since this epistemology has been the determinative basis for all theology, the religiously pluralistic context of the theological enterprise that was a part of the foundational basis of Christianity has been lost. On the other hand, when the missionary enterprise struggled with these debates it almost invariably adopted the more conservative articulation of this theology as its theological foundation. Even when other religions were studied it was either for a better equipping of the missionary, or for knowing the “enemy” better for more efficient mission, or for showing the weaknesses of other religions and the superiority of Christianity.

There were critical voices that kept emerging, but they were silenced—as

were the critical voices of the local Christians who attempted to incarnate Christianity in their own context. All such attempts by local Christians suffered the stigma of syncretism, and all such attempts by western Christians were accused of lacking a concern for mission and the saving of souls. Under these circumstances, doing theology in the context of other faiths was hardly possible.

This changed in the west after the Second World War, when a large number of emigrants were allowed to come to the west as the human fodder necessary for rebuilding war-ravaged Europe. For the first couple of decades these emigrants did not demand recognition in their new homes, but in the 1960s they began to demand not only a recognition of their identity but also their religion, which was an essential part of this quest for identity. The churches, now themselves no longer a part of the public sphere, took up these challenges and have done on the whole a very noble task, despite recurring problems of racist attitudes.

Thus, these theological challenges have a more or less political dimension. But this is exactly the dimension that theology in the west has usually shunned. When the Latin American liberation theologians adopted a political character in their theology they lacked the dialogical approach and the recognition of a religiously pluralistic context, and instead operated largely within the symbol of christendom. In order to develop a theology in the context of Islam, therefore, our theological approach will have to be political, critical, dialogical, and constantly conscious of religious pluralism. We must attempt, as Michel Foucault has so profoundly stated, "to show that things are not as self-evident as one believed, to see that what is accepted as self-evident will no longer be accepted as such. Practicing criticism is a matter of making facile gestures difficult."¹

In order to understand the contemporary challenges to Christian-Muslim relationships we must try to see where the problems have their roots and foundations. We must do what Nietzsche called the genealogical task of locating the parentage of this problem. Since it is impossible to articulate all the issues here, I shall try to indicate only some of the most salient features of the contemporary challenge.

II. RELIGION AND POLITICS IN ISLAM

Most of us know that what is popularly called "Islamic fundamentalism," and seen by some as the most serious challenge today, is more often a demand to recover and refound some notion of an Islamic state. That this is largely a very confused issue is what causes the vain fluttering between the certainty of some presumed past and the democratic quality of participatory and rights-oriented politics. Since the certainty is not as easy to come by as some would like to claim, and the democratic quality on the basis of their particular interpretation of the past is not possible, they are left in a profound quandary. Actually, Islamic polity seems

¹Michel Foucault, "Practicing Criticism," in *Politics, Philosophy, Culture: Interviews and Other Writings, 1977-1984*, ed. Lawrence D. Kritzman (New York: Routledge, 1988) 155.

to me to be in search of a subject matter. Lacking this, there is a tendency to arm-twisting coercion and brainwashing of dislocated, lower middle class city dwellers at the more gentle level, and the fomenting of some kind of violent, anarchic *jihād* at a more extreme level. Though this is how Islam is portrayed regularly in the west, this same attitude is present in all religious bodies today which we are fond of calling “fundamentalist” for lack of a better term (because of sheer laziness as well as because of the power of western media). This is equally true of Christianity in its various manifestations such as anti-abortionists or anti-feminists; in Judaism, especially in the settler communities of Israel; and in the Hinduism of the Bharata Janata Party in India.

In order to understand this phenomenon we have to look at the contemporary struggle by religious communities to capture at least a part of the public space, that is, to move from their externally determined private sphere to a more public presence. This, I believe, is one of the central theological tasks confronting both Christians and Muslims in the contemporary world. Within the development of secularism in the west, religion was privatized for the proper functioning of the state. In Islam, in contrast, right from its very inception and development over the next 800 years, religion was to form the *grundnorm* for the polity and for the *umma* (Muslim community)—an ideological rather than geographical state. While the idea of Muslim nationhood along this line was established in Islamic political discourse from its very beginning, the identities of its citizens defined by ethnic, linguistic, or other similar bonds were not subsumed but were seen as a sign of God’s mastery and creativity (Qur’ān 30:22). This creativity was in order that people might be distinguished into tribes and nations and in this way identify themselves to one another. Compare this to the traditional Jewish and Christian hermeneutics of the biblical account of the Tower of Babel (Genesis 11). So while the emergence of secular, liberal bourgeois politics in the west demanded social homogeneity and multi-party systems within the state, Islam asked for homogeneity in following Islamic law while allowing for heterogeneity in cultural and social life.

Almost all the major theories in the west might have argued the necessity of this homogeneity as a prerequisite for state formation. Islam kept claiming this homogeneity on the basis of Islam itself. Since Islamic political theory developed during the heyday of the existence of such an Islamic state with multi-cultural, social, national, and tribal affiliations, it has had difficulties with the “modern” concept of *nation-states*. Islamic emphasis has always been on “*state-nations*,” i.e., a single Muslim state encompassing the entire *umma*, with many nations within it. In this context, to compare geographically characterized states to an ideologically characterized state does not make sense.² The geographical character only

²The early history of the Muslim state is as follows: Between 622 and 661 A.D. (i.e., after the *hijra*—migration—of the Prophet from Mecca to Medina, and only for 39 years) the Prophet first, and after his death the four rightly guided and pious caliphs headed all three branches of the government (executive, legislative, and judiciary) on the basis of their religious standing. If we take away the rule of the Prophet in Medina from 622 to 632 (i.e., only 10 years), then we have only a period of 29 years for

emerges as a demarcation of the ideological state's most general boundaries, i.e., the Muslim state (*dār al-islām* – “abode of Islam”) and the non-Muslim states (*dār al-harb* – “abode of war or struggle”).

The problem with this anachronistic theological position is the sheer fact of the existence of a number of Muslim nation-states rather than the ideal (or the eschatological utopia) of a “state-nations.” So one of the greatest difficulties Islamic theorists face is how to deal among the Muslim states themselves, as this falls outside the pale of their doctrinal structures. This in a sense is an even bigger theological challenge than how to deal with non-Muslim states. This is not a new problem, but one which Muslim scholars tend to overlook or shy away from because of its complexity.

The disintegration of the Muslim concept of “state-nations” can be seen to begin with the assassination of the third caliph, ‘Uthmān,³ who died in 656. It was somewhat restored under the Ummayyad rule (661-750 A.D., i.e., 89 years) but this in itself has remained a major bone of contention within Islam.⁴ Since the Ummayyad period the fragmentation of this concept of “state-nations” has continued unchecked. After the comprehensive Ummayyad rule of 89 years, the Islamic “state-nations” was divided into three caliphates with their respective spheres of influence: the Abbasids in Baghdad, the Fātimids in Egypt and Syria, and Ummayyads in Spain. There was even further internal fragmentation within these caliphates. After the middle of the ninth century, the Abbasid caliphate lost its central authority within its already limited corner of the *umma* (the “state-nations”) to the provincial governors and generals who had revolted and established themselves as independent amirs and sultans. While these independent principalities acknowledged the caliph as the spiritual head of the Muslim community, they denied his political authority over the *umma*.

So the caliphate underwent a separation of religion and politics, with politics localized (the nation-states) and religion still left at a catholic level based only on a symbolic “state-nations” either as a utopian or eschatological hope, or on the

the rightly guided and pious caliphs. But the fact that the last three of these four caliphs (‘Umar, ‘Uthmān, and ‘Ali) were murdered by Muslims themselves and only the first (Abū Bakr) died a natural death, goes to show that even here the power was challenged by those within the earliest *umma*. There is also a claim in some Muslim traditions that the Prophet himself was poisoned. The still continuing debates on the priority of one caliph over another and the process of succession (or usurpation as some still see it) were present from the beginning, leading to a very early schism between the Shi‘a and the Sunni factions and, still within the first 39 years, to a further division in the Khārijites.

³This event has been given a special name: *fitna* or “mischief,” which has evoked in the past, and continues even now to evoke very hot passions between the Sunnis and the Shi‘as.

⁴It is not surprising that since the Ummayyad rule in 661 no Muslim state has qualified as being truly Muslim. This is universally accepted by all Muslim scholars and Muslims in general. That is to say that from the death of the Prophet in 632 until 661 (29 years) there were the rightly guided and pious caliphs, and since then there has been no real Muslim ruler as such – though at times one hears various justifications for the comparatively better quality of different caliphates, depending on one’s denominational affiliation, e.g., the Sunnis for the Ummayyads and the Shi‘as for the Fātimids. In spite of this the use of Islamic *shari‘a*, which is a product of the post-661 period, is still the most articulate demand of the conservative Muslims in contemporary Muslim states.

ground of some *in illo tempore* (i.e., a “golden age”). Finally, in 945 A.D.,⁵ Muizz al Dawla Ahmad (the establisher of the Buwayhid dynastic control of the central caliphate) actually marched to Baghdad and put an end to the independence of the caliph. There was still a caliph, but he was not independent but subject first to the Buwayhids and then from 1055 to the Turkish Seljuks. This subjugated caliphate finally came to an end with the sacking of Baghdad and the killing of the caliph in 1258 by the Mongols under Halaku Khan.

So from 750 to 945 (some 195 years) there was an independent caliph, but with his power as political sovereign in the provinces already challenged. Then from 945 to 1258 (some 313 years) he was a vassal with religious symbolic power under the hand of the provincial princely dynastic power of the Buwayhids from 945 to 1055 (some 110 years) and then under the Seljuks from 1055 to 1258 (some 203 years). During this period the caliph was the spiritual head of the *umma* (and in our terminology, “state-nations”), but the political power was in the hands of amirs and sultans who needed the caliph for their power beyond just the provincial structures they actually represented. With the support of the caliph the “state-nations” could be controlled even though both the Buwayhids and the Seljuks represented just the nation-states from the provincial boundaries of the Abbasid caliphate. Here was the use of the caliph’s religious stature for political legitimation.

The Muslim jurists had to deal with both the multiplicity of the sources of authority and the personal moral proclivities of the various caliphs, sultans, and amirs, who may have performed the rituals of a head of state such as leading in prayers and enforcing Islamic injunctions and prohibitions, but fell short in most cases of the standards required from them (except ‘Umar bin Abdūl Aziz, who ruled briefly between 711-720). The simplest formula followed by some faced with this dilemma was to invoke the law of necessity.

In dealing with this dilemma Islam faced some of the same issues that surfaced during the reformation in Christianity. In Islam the problem involved both the rule of princes over against the emperor, and against the pope (to use Christian-history categories to define this feature of the reformation in Islam, for in the case of Islam both these powers lay in the hands of caliph-imām). On the other hand, the possibility of revolt, anarchy, chaos, etc., was equally before their eyes, similar to the issue faced by Luther vis-à-vis the peasants. So some jurists (some 600 years before Calvin) came up with the Calvinist answer of focusing on the third use of the law as well as the right of dethroning the king if he failed to meet covenants of justice, and some came up with the Hobbesian answer of a Leviathan some 700 years before Hobbes.

⁵That is some 312 years after the *hijra* of the Prophet to Medina and the establishment of the city state which acted as the foundation of Islamic political thought. This may be seen as the final destruction of the Islamic centralized caliphate and its subjugation in the hands of whoever became politically and militarily powerful. It is ironic that it took almost the same period for Christianity to move from its existence on the periphery of the Roman empire to become the religion of the empire after the conversion of Constantine.

The *'ulamā'* (religious teachers/leaders) were satisfied that even if religion and politics were separate, church and the state (understood in a particular Islamic way) would continue to be linked. This was a different conclusion from that reached by the reformation in Christianity. We can even say that to some measure the *'ulamā'* endorsed the secularization of politics in return for a pact of mutual assistance between the state and the *'ulamā'*. The *'ulamā'* would leave the determination of how Islamic or un-Islamic the professional conduct of the head of state would be, that is, leave it to his private Muslim conscience. In return, the head of state would enable the *'ulamā'*, as jurists and judges, to ensure that Muslims at large honored the required observances, practices, and prohibitions of the faith. So just as the Latin mass and ritual and Latin as *lingua ecclesiae* acted for the catholicity of the church, so the legal (justice) structures of Islam along with Arabic as *lingua franca* acted as the catholicity for the *umma*. Thus wherever a Muslim went, he experienced more or less the same law operating with little variation because of the different schools of *fiqh* ("jurisprudence"). In this way the more the central caliphate of Muslim "state-nations" disintegrated the more the *'ulamā'* acquired the role of central upholder, preserver, and enforcer of Islamic law as the bedrock of Muslim unity. This unity, while acquiring a higher status than that of the central and uniting "state-nations" under a single caliph, failed to achieve political unity but remained religious in a largely secularized context.

This difficulty plagues Islam even today and causes a major theological dilemma. If we are to develop a vibrant Christian theology in the context of Islam we have to deal with this dilemma as one of the central issues. But we as Christians are equally confused on the issue of Christian catholicity and multiple nation-states, and the larger issue of the public role of faith, and unlike Islam we have more or less abdicated this debate. ⊕