

# Salvation or Right Guidance?

## Some reflections on the »Theological Forum Christianity – Islam«

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It is a false alternative for both Muslims and Christians to characterize their own or their neighbours' religion in an either/or contrast between dependence on Law or Grace. Both religions are enriched by a sense of God's gracious dispensation of mercy and justice, of right guidance and offer of responsibility.

It is also a false alternative to suggest that the deepening of understanding about one's neighbours' faith must be done in critical and objective detachment alongside one's co-religionists and without the challenge of sensitive and effective communication required by inter-religious dialogue. There is room for solitary study, but there is also need for the context of dialogue to sharpen – or blunt – language and to check predilection or prejudice.

In the past many Muslim-Christian dialogues have started with social or political issues, but the conversation has often been drawn beyond efforts at human justice or compassion to a realization of human dependence upon Divine justice and mercy. A desire to be realistic and pragmatic about human crises has sometimes been tempered by a pessimistic admission of human weakness or an optimistic conviction of God's guidance and grace. Especially when appropriate comparisons are made of like with like, failure with failure, ideal with ideal, there is hope that the dialogue will lead to understanding and co-operation. One must avoid at all costs the tendentious and polemical comparisons of the best in one's own tradition with the worst in one's neighbour's tradition. Both Christians and Muslims have been guilty of this.

It was good that Dr. Eisler drew attention to Professor Izutsu's exploration of semantic fields in Qur'anic terminology<sup>1</sup> where opposite concepts can help mutual definition and where clusters of synonyms or similar concepts can shed new light on a particular word. While »salvation« may be an unfamiliar expression in Qur'anic vocabulary there are so many indications of the need to escape human weakness and wilfulness, oppression and self-sufficiency that the quest for guidance and grace is impressed upon the reader. This can be illustrated by the following quotation from the Qur'an:

»Whosoever is guided, is only guided to his own gain, and whosoever goes astray it is only to his own loss; no soul bears the load of another.« (Sura 17,16[15])<sup>2</sup>

Beyond the inspiring examples and challenges of Scripture, there are also, for both Muslims and Christians, the testimonies of communal solidarity, of mystical experience, or of devotional piety which allow the believers to seek guidance not only along the path of *shari'ah* but also along the path of *tariqah*. The believer seeks salvation by an observance of law or pious practice made possible only by the gifts of grace. The riches of Sufi poetry and prose and the »secret whisperings« of the prayer manuals<sup>3</sup> are important sources for understanding Islam; similarly Christians would hope that Muslims would explore not only Augustinian doctrines of original sin but also other theological and devotional interpretations and experiences across Christian history. The famous prayer of Rabi'a urges us to worship God not from fear of Hell or hope of Heaven, but for His own sake: »O my Lord, if I worship Thee from fear of Hell, burn me in Hell; and if I worship Thee from hope of Paradise, exclude me thence; but if I worship Thee for Thine own sake, then withhold not from me Thine Eternal Beauty.«<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> For example *Toshihiko Izutsu*, *The Structure of the Ethical Terms in the Koran* (Studies in the humanities and social relations 2), Tokio 1959.

<sup>2</sup> Translation of *Arthur J. Arberry*, *The Koran Interpreted*, Oxford 1964. Cf. also Sura 96,6–7.

<sup>3</sup> Such as those described and analysed in *Constance Padwick*, *Muslim Devotions*, London 1961.

<sup>4</sup> Translation of Margaret Smith. Cf. *Margaret Smith*, *Rabi'a the Mystic & Her Fellow-Saints in Islam. Being the Life and Teachings of Rabi'a al-Adawiyya Al-Qaysiyya of Basra together with some Account of the Place of the Women Saints in Islam. With a New Introduction by An-nemarie Schimmel*, Felinfach 1994 (reprint).

It seems a mistake to rely too heavily on credal statements that reflect only one early school of thought. The third century (A.H.) creed of Al-Razi can be a point of departure for a seminar like this,<sup>5</sup> but one must move forward for example to the no less influential eighth century (A.H.) commentary by Al-Taftazani on the creed of Al-Nasafi<sup>6</sup> or to the fifteenth century (A.H.) confession of a modern Muslim like Farid Esack in his »On Being a Muslim«<sup>7</sup>. Fakhr al-Din al-Razi was one of the first commentators to insist that the prophets were preserved from error and falsehood but that their guidance and example could help other men and women to find the right path. Al-Taftazani in his chapter on »The Creature's Legal Responsibility and Allah's Sustenance and Guidance« emphasizes that responsibility is dependent upon ability and capacity of each man or woman so that one is not answerable for errors that are beyond one's power to redress.<sup>8</sup> Farid Esack insists: »Allah's story is being written and He wants us to be the cast. As Allah's scheme for the world is unfolding, He invites us to participate in it when He calls upon us to be His representatives on the earth.«<sup>9</sup>

The classical creed struggles with issues such as responsibility and guidance and connects duty with ability; the modern »confession« seeks to »find a religious path in the world today« and addresses many modern issues such as pluralism and sexuality. The varieties and paradoxes of Islamic credal statement on issues like predestination and human responsibility are as rich as is the heritage of Christian ecumenism. However just as Christians may strive towards »doing theology«, so Muslims often give expression to their most basic convictions through the jurisprudential requirements of »orthopraxy« rather than through scholastic reflections on or aspirations towards orthodoxy.

The future direction of the present stimulating and exciting deliberations of this group may accordingly include a dimension of actual dialogue with Muslim partners, and a widening of the agenda

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<sup>5</sup> It was referred to by *Claude Gilliot* during the conference. Cf. also his paper in this volume.

<sup>6</sup> Cf. *Sa'd al-Din al-Taftazani*, *A Commentary on the Creed of Islam*, translated by *Earl Edgar Elder*, New York 1950.

<sup>7</sup> *Farid Esack*, *On Being a Muslim*, Oxford 1999.

<sup>8</sup> Cf. *Sa'd al-Din al-Taftazani*, *A Commentary* (cf. note 6), 88–98.

<sup>9</sup> *Farid Esack*, *On Being a Muslim* (cf. note 7), 100.

beyond the »theological« to the »social« and the »spiritual«. It is good that the exploration has started on a fully ecumenical basis on the Christian side, but there may be a need to engage the scepticism or hostility of some more »conservative« Christians. The wide variety of tendencies and even sectarian allegiances in our world-wide Islamic neighbours need to be taken seriously so that Arab or Turkish models are set alongside Asian, African and European manifestations of Islam. The perspectives of Muslim and Christian women need to be further high-lighted and the questions and convictions of young people need to be given appreciative attention.

The guidance which both Muslims and Christians seek is not simply a private or confessional, spiritual or intellectual exercise, however legitimate those dimensions may be, but it has great practical implications for upholding justice, dispelling ignorance and building shared communities in the modern world. While politicians seek for common security and confidence building measures, people of faith must look self critically to where their sometimes too narrow and exclusive expressions of faith and belief have created or allowed discriminations, inequalities and enmities. The image of Islam but also the image of Christianity, as others, very often secular and disillusioned, see us, can motivate us to rediscover in our own faith, and to admire in our neighbours' faith, values and responsibilities of freedom of choice, of tolerance, of openness, of human interdependence and of dependence upon God which can help to rebuild peace with justice in this world and anticipate the promises of the next world.