Theological Issues in Christian-Muslim Dialogue

Edited by Charles Tieszen

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THEOLOGICAL ISSUES IN CHRISTIAN-MUSLIM DIALOGUE

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Muslims, Prophethood, and Jesus

Tariq Ramadan

Prophecy is fundamental to the Muslim tradition. It determines not only the nature of the relation God has established with humanity, but also sets forth a singular conception of mankind and of history. Multiple questions surround the very concept of prophecy: the status of the particular human being who is the Prophet, that Prophet's mission on earth, and more broadly speaking, the meaning of the message transmitted and, ultimately, the higher objectives revealed to human beings. There exist, of course, substantial differences between the three monotheistic traditions: the Jewish conception of prophecy can be clearly distinguished from the diverse Christian interpretations (Catholicism, Protestantism, and the Eastern Christian churches). Likewise, the Islamic tradition does not exactly share the Jewish and Christian conceptions even though, in some areas, it hews more closely to the former.

The subject is of central importance, as it offers us access to the essential characteristics of faith and the hope it generates as illuminated by the diversity of mankind's conceptions of God, of Revelation, and of the role of Messengers. It is here, precisely, that we can locate one of the major differences between Christianity and Islam. The respective status of their Revealed Books and their Messengers has been the subject of countless comparative studies and debates between their respective representatives.

As we narrow our focus, we can single out a certain number of mileposts along our analytical route. First we must clarify the meaning of prophecy in Islam: what is it; what does it represent; what does it reveal?

Taking our answer as a starting point, we can then turn to the Islamic conception of God, of humanity, and of history. Then and only then can we turn our full attention to the role and the status of the Messenger and the Prophet in Islam, and thence reflect on the role of Jesus in the Christian and Islamic traditions. As we do so, beyond the fundamental differences that must, of course, also be underlined and analyzed, we will encounter numerous teachings held in common.

The Meaning of Prophecy

The connection between the Creator and humanity in Islam is directly associated with the notion of Revelation, and of the "messages" sent to mankind. The first two human beings, Eve and Adam, have knowledge of the existence of God. He speaks to them, gives meaning to their lives and establishes both a framework for and imposes limitations upon their behavior. At the heart of creation provided for them, all is permitted with the exception of a tree that, in Islam, is described neither in the Qur'an nor the prophetic traditions (*ahadith*, sing. *hadith*): contrary to the Biblical version, it is not the tree of knowledge (of good and bad) and nothing is known of its essence. But this tree sets a limit, in cognizance of which the two first conscious beings will express dual recognition of the primacy of God, the present and creating Being, and of their own selves, as human beings respecting and adoring the Unique. Adam is a Prophet (*nabi*), the first, as God has spoken to him and caused him to bear the responsibility of faith. But just as clearly he is not a Messenger (*rasul*), the bearer of a Revelation that he must convey to his people or to humanity at large.[1]

From the very beginning then, God speaks to humans, addressing them as monotheists. Contrary to what has been propagated and repeated in history books shaped by certain sociological and philosophical presuppositions (where spiritual traditions and religions are concerned), humans did not come to monotheism by rising above, over time, their primitive polytheistic beliefs toward belief in a single God (as evidenced in Akhenaton among the Egyptians or Platonic intuition among the Greeks). Judaism, Christianity, and Islam agree that quite the opposite is true: human beings began with knowledge of God in His unicity and, over time, "fell"

1. The distinction is critical in the Muslim tradition: all Messengers are Prophets, but not all Prophets are Messengers. Noah, Abraham, Moses, Jesus, and Muhammad are Messenger-Prophets.

or "deviated" toward polytheism. Polytheism is thus historically secondary, the product of human forgetfulness and negligence. Such is human nature: human beings know, recognize, and respect, only to disregard, to neglect, and to forget. The prophetic cycles occur precisely to correct the imperfection that has accompanied humankind, in its fallible memory, from its origins. At irregular intervals God in His grace and His mercy sends to humanity, to certain peoples, or at specific historical moments, Messengers or Prophets whose essential role is to recall the presence of the Creator and the meaning of life.

Prophecy thus constitutes the unbroken link that the Eternal establishes with the temporal, the Creator with the awareness of the created, God with humanity. It has four essential functions:

1. To recall the presence of the Çreator in His being, His eternity, His unicity and his non-representation (rejection of anthropomorphism).
2. To define the meaning of Creation and of life as established by the Creator: "We are from God and to Him is our return" (Q 2:156).
3. To confirm the rituals by which human beings respond to God's call and preserve its memory and the indispensible connection of their relationship as worshippers.
4. To correct that which human beings may have altered or perverted over time, as well as their interpretations of earlier Revelations.

From this perspective, Messengers or Prophets, irrespective of the time or the place where they are sent, will always have the four-fold role of recalling, defining, confirming, and correcting. It is through this prism that the Islamic tradition embraces all cycles of prophecy; all Messengers have exercised the same function, culminating in the last Messenger, Muhammad, the bearer of the final Revelation, which satisfies all four criteria while adding yet another: that the Qur'an brings these cycles to a close.

"Today have I perfected your religion for you, and have bestowed upon you the full measure of My blessings, and willed that self-surrender unto Me [Islam] shall be your religion" (Q 5:3). This verse of the Qur'an should be understood on two distinct levels. Muhammad's mission has ended and the last religion, Islam, is thereby established. But in a broader sense, it affirms the culmination of all Revelations, and Islam—in the generic sense of "entering into the Peace of God," as Abraham, Moses, and Jesus were *muslims* (at peace with the unique God, self-surrendering unto

Him)—is accepted as the religion of truth. This cannot be taken to mean that there will not be more than one religion, for God has willed diversity. But the final Revelation brings the historic recall to an end and declares that there will henceforth be neither Messenger nor Prophet (but only reformers down through the centuries).

Prophecy is thus a response to humanity's need to be summoned and to be reminded, so that men and women follow the Way laid down by the Creator. In terms of their reason, of their hearts, and their bodies, men and women stand in need of guidance so as not to go astray and thus act against themselves. Hence the attested need for Messengers and for a Message standing as an invitation to humility with regard to self, as well as to reverential love (*taqwa*) of God, and to faith and confidence (*iman*) in Him. In their search for truth, happiness, and peace, men and women are called upon to combine independence of mind with ontological dependence upon the Most High. Prophecy, in this light, reveals an idea of a God who accompanies humanity, which is capable of the worst, lest it forget, or of the best, as long as it remains committed to the revealed message, to the exemplary nature of the Messenger, and to the Way that the two together have taught it.

God, Humanity, and History

Islam can be characterized as "demanding monotheism," to use Blachère's felicitous formula.[2] Indeed, the notion of *tawhid* (the unicity of God) is the axis around which all the teachings of Islam are articulated and understood. God is the Unique, the Most High, He who is "near" (Q 2:186), "closer to [to Man] than his jugular vein" (Q 50:16), "Creator of the heavens and the earth" (Q 35:1), "Lord of the worlds" (Q 43:46), of which He is the exclusive "owner" (Q 19:40), "Giver of life and death" (Q 17:58) for all living creatures. Humanity cannot partake of His essence, does not possess the faculties to conceive of His being, nor to conceptualize either what defines Him or what represents Him. "There is none like unto Him" (Q 112:4) that can be imagined, and nothing can be said of God but what God has revealed about Himself. There thus exists a fundamental difference, both in terms of nature and of essence, between the Divine (the Transcendent, and the immanence of the Transcendent in the mystical experience) and the human, irrespective of the form his or her spiritual experience may take.

2. Blachère, *Dans les pas de Mahomet*, 126.

God reveals Himself and offers Himself to the knowledge of humanity through His Revelations, which, down through history, have roused humans' awareness and made them attentive: "within the heavens and the earth are signs for the believers" (Q 45:3). These successive Revelations are the sources of light (*nur*) that form the bond between God, who is Light (one of God's names: *al-Nur*), and humanity, into whose heart the Creator has breathed His spirit (*ruh*). *Ruh*, the spirit, is not God, but can be likened to a spark that animates the human being and impels him or her, ontologically and naturally, to embark on a quest for Light, for God. This natural aspiration is known in the Muslim tradition as *al-fitra*: it provides a specific conception of humanity, whom everything differentiates from God but in whose heart God has placed a breath that invites him or her to the search for self and for the Transcendent, and that lends meaning to his or her life and to his or her presence on earth. The experience of faith thus becomes "light upon light" (*Nur 'ala nur*; Q 24:35), as the qur'anic Revelation so beautifully puts it, describing the meeting of the spark that seeks and the Divine that represents the very object of its search, the ultimate answer to the question of meaning. The meeting, the recognition that flows from it, up to and including fusion, quenches the thirst of whoever seeks meaning; their questions (the original spark) find their response (the Light). That state—the very experience of faith—is best expressed by a sense of peace (*salam*, one of God's names), of calm, and of security (one of the etymological meanings of faith, *iman*).

Humans are by their nature searching, in constant tension, at perpetual risk of imbalance and conflict with themselves, with their fellow human beings, and with the universe that surrounds them. They are needful beings and yet God, who has created them, has never left them to their own devices. God constantly makes Himself known through His Revelations and the signs of His presence in the Heavens, on the Earth, and within humanity. Calling and recalling, God summons humanity to inward peace, to peace with one another, and with all creation. To attain to this state the "children of Adam" must rise fully to their stature as human beings with humility, in recognition of the essential difference in nature between them and God. For it is Revelation, the word of God, that establishes—in making clear its meaning—the link (*religio*) between God, in His infinite and boundless Grace, and humanity, in its finitude, its needs, and its dependency. A qur'anic verse synthesizes the relation: "The Most Merciful/Taught the Qur'an/Created Man [and] taught him expression" (Q 55:1–4). Here,

in the verse sequence itself, "Revelation" falls between "The Most Merciful" (one of God's names, which express His compassion toward humanity with which He communicates) and the creation of the human being.

In the Islamic tradition Revelation, whose ultimate expression, the Qur'an, is the word of God directly revealed "in a clear, understandable Arabic" (Q 16:103), creates a fundamental correlation between God and Humanity. It differentiates between beings Divine and human, and describes in detail the terms of their relationship. God is God, and nothing can be associated with Him. He has given human beings ways of seeking Him, of drawing near to Him, and even of knowing Him intimately but without ever pretending that they possess divine qualities. Humans are humans, with all their limitations.

The history of prophecy represents the unfolding, in time, of God's presence and of His recalling. Precisely those factors that summon human beings to preserve the bond, to remember God, and to draw near to Him in order not to go astray in their humanity, their imperfection, their instincts, and their negligence. The natural state of the human beings is tension, the search for meaning, need. But humans likewise possess the capacity to liberate themselves. Bearing within them a spark, surrounded by the signs of Creation and accompanied, throughout history, by a succession of Revelations—including those of the last three monotheisms—they may strive toward peace and to salvation on the three-fold condition that they assume their status with humility; that they conscientiously search for meaning, and that they deepen their knowledge of themselves and of the world.

The Role and Status of the Messenger

We may now gain a fuller understanding of the role and the status of Messengers and Prophets in the Muslim tradition. Between the Divine, of which there is nothing comparable, and the human being who yearns for light and peace, the Prophet bears a message whose substance can be interpreted in two ways: through the content of the message itself, and through its translation, or more accurately, its full expression in the person of a living witness, through the behavior of the Messenger.

We have already discussed the content of the Revelations that recall to us the presence of the Unique, confirming the essence of faith and correcting what may have been altered or perverted. Messengers, it goes without saying, play an essential role in the understanding, the explication, and the

initial exegesis of the Revelation they bear. They lend it meaning and depth and convey its spiritual, individual, and social implications. They enlighten, educate, and give direction.

On the personal level, Messengers are witnesses for the Message they bear. In this manner, according to the Muslim tradition, the vitality and the power of their function as witnesses derives from the fact that they are and remain human, with all the limitations that this implies. Of course, their lives may be marked by miracles, such as that of Abraham who survived the pyre, or Jesus and his birth, but they never depart from the bounds of their humanity: they live and die, their knowledge is limited, they have needs and instincts and may commit errors of judgment and action in everyday life (but not within the strict framework of their mission). They provide the prime example of the translation into human language of the spiritual message they bring, and it is precisely because they are only human beings like all those around them, as the Qur'an reminds us about the Prophet Muhammad, that their message takes on its full meaning: "indeed, in the Messenger of God, you have a good example" (Q 33:21). All Messengers possess this same status. So it is that the Muslim tradition recognizes Jesus while rejecting the idea that —in contrast to Christianity—he is the son of God and that he possesses a divine constitution that distinguishes him from other humans.

Jesus as Prophet, and Islam

The Islamic position can be understood on the basis of the two fundamental principles that we have outlined. First, Islamic monotheism, which stands closer to Judaism, draws a fundamental distinction between Divine and human; the latter may never lay claim to the qualities of the former. Second, God "neither begets nor is begotten" (Q 112:3). He cannot have a son, and is beyond the temptation of anthropomorphism such as that connected with the idea of incarnation, a wholly foreign concept in Islam. The idea of the Trinity is presented in the Qur'an as a distortion of the original message of monotheism brought by Jesus and which Muhammad came to recall, to confirm, and to correct according to the teachings of the last of the revealed religions.

At the conclusion of Muhammad's prophetic mission, a situation arose that echoed the Christian tradition, but with a fundamental difference. Upon the Messenger's death, his Companion 'Umar was profoundly

saddened and distraught. He could not bring himself to believe that the Prophet had indeed died, asserting that Muhammad was not dead, that he would be resuscitated, and that he—'Umar—would kill whoever dared declare him dead. At that moment another Companion, Abu Bakr, stepped forward: "And now, he who worships Muhammad, [know that] Muhammad is dead. But he who worships God, [know that] He is ever living and never dies."[3] He went on to recite verses that had already been revealed, which retroactively confirmed wisdom and lucid grasp of Islamic teachings: "Muhammad is not but a Messenger. Messengers have already passed away before him. If he dies or is killed will you turn back upon your heels? And whoever turns back upon his heels, he will by no means do harm to God in the least and God will reward the grateful" (Q 3:144). When he heard the verse, 'Umar realized that Abu Bakr was right, that Muhammad was but a man, and that he had departed this world.

According to the Islamic tradition, Jesus, the son of Mary, was conceived without a father. Throughout his life he performed miracles, and ranks high among the most eminent Messengers of the prophetic cycles. He brought the message of the Gospel, which is founded upon the unicity of God and points out the pathways to God's love. Jesus thus corrected the hypertrophy of the judicial and legalistic strictures that had, over time, shrunk the Jewish Torah to little more than a list of rulings and prohibitions. Jesus, too, recalled, defined, confirmed, and corrected. But, according to the Muslim tradition, he never claimed to be the "Son of God," nor God's incarnation, as any of the three hypostases would have it. Nor is he, for Muslims, the obligatory passage to salvation for human beings by way of redemption for the sins of the children of Adam after the fall. In fact, the notion of original sin does not exist in Islam: humanity is born innocent and it is through his unmediated relationship with God that he may find the path that leads to salvation and peace.[4]

Beyond Divergences

Muslims share with Jews and Christians the idea of a single God, Creator of the universe and of humanity, to which He dispatched Messengers whose task it was to recall His presence, to transmit His teachings, and to guide human beings in their thoughts and their spirituality, as in their actions.

3. Reported by Sahih al-Bukhari, 62.19. See www.sunnah.com/bukhari/62/19.

4. For more on sin and the human condition, see chapter 7.

The three monotheisms that Islam describes as "religions of the Book" or "People of the Book" (*Ahl al-Kitab*) cannot otherwise be understood. Each tradition would develop its theological particularities, its rituals, its ethical system, and its praxis. But ultimately, the three monotheisms agree on the fundamental and historical importance of Prophecy and of its Messages. God speaks to human beings, making it possible for them to preserve the connection between the Transcendent and the temporal. Such is the function of Revelation; each of the three traditions was to be determined by a body of practices and ultimate goals designed to keep human faith alive.

We encounter fundamental differences between the traditions when we come to the role of Messengers and Prophets, and more specifically with regard to Jesus. Islam accords him a particular status by virtue of his birth, his miracles, and his return to earth as a sign of end times. But he is nonetheless a human Messenger who could not have been conceived by a virgin nor have performed miracles except by the will of the single God who breathed into him His spirit (but none of His divine attributes). He is—for Muslims—a human being sent to his fellow humans with a Message from God, like all the other Prophets before and after him.

The Christian tradition, in its various manifestations, is at odds with this understanding of the mission of Jesus. He is most certainly a Messenger but partakes, for the believer, of the very essence of God and of the path to salvation. Exactly the same meaning defines Christianity as a religion, in its doctrine and its institutions.

Divergences aside, however, it is indeed possible to point to a number of features shared by the Christian and Muslim traditions concerning Jesus and the meaning of his Prophecy. Once understood, it sets forth an idea of God that recalls to us His concern for humanity, His grace, His mercy, and His compassion. Like Messengers, these Messages are reminders, examples, gifts that show that God is, beyond all doubt, love. Never does He cease to lavish love upon His creatures, so that they turn toward Him in love. For at the core of Revelation lies the expression of God's benevolence toward humanity.

Such too is the role of Prophets. The Bible, which, in the New Testament, reports the life and times of Jesus, transmits to humanity the truth of faith in action. Jesus is a model, an educator, a teacher who illustrates to the faithful how belief can change a heart, transform the world, and lend courage to all those who keep that faith alive in their innermost being. Prophecy, in the three monotheistic traditions, fulfills the worthy function of edification.

Even though Christianity and Islam differ on a significant body of doctrine, common conclusions may be drawn from the life of Jesus in terms of devotion to God, to his mission as well as in his resistance to the powers of injustice, and of the courage of his convictions to the bitter end. The lives of Jesus and Muhammad echo each other. They abound in the same spiritual, social, and even political lessons: how to free oneself from all temporal powers in the name of service to the power of God alone. Jesus' rejection of political action is, in and of itself, an eminently political act, as indeed was his decision to make common cause with the poor and the downtrodden. From this perspective, the political action of the Messenger of Islam was far from the fascination of power, government, or domination but, on the contrary, to resist these things; to emancipate himself from them in the name of justice, of love, and of human dignity. The Prophet's life is itself the expression of spiritual and ethical counter-power.

Contrary to the often-repeated assertion that there exists a natural connection in the Islamic tradition between religion and political activity, between the Messenger and the political leader, Islam shares with Christianity an entirely different conception of political action, as evidenced by the Messenger. The sense of humility in the face of the ultimate power of God, the imperative of service to the poor and the orphan, the struggle against the corruption of power and money, are—each and every one—teachings found in the three monotheisms, and that must imperatively be put forward. The exemplary quality of the Messengers derives from their recognition of the power of God, and of the heart, their resistance to all dictatorial and financial power, and, in a more subtle sense, the power of instincts. Revelation is liberation, and the Prophet is the example of one who has freed himself, in history, from the chains that bound him.

Conclusion

Close study of the role of prophecy in Islam is vital to grasp how its teachings have come to articulate the relation between God, the Message, the Messenger, and humankind. I have attempted to explain the meaning of prophecy both with regard to principles and from a historical perspective. Four functions—recall, define, confirm, and correct—have allowed me to explain why Revelations have followed one upon another, up until the final one, the Qur'an. We have understood that our reflection could not have

been complete had we not examined the conceptions of God, of humanity, and of history in the Muslim tradition.

God, for Muslims, is present and makes Himself known to humankind, which is in a state of permanent tension and of necessity. Sacred history is that instant in time—the duration of a breath—that either brings creatures closer to or drives them further from their Creator. It is given form by the Revelations of which the Messengers and Prophets are living witnesses. They are merely humans, carried along by the power of faith and, on occasion, by those miracles that only God can bring about. They bear living witness to the teachings they have brought. Messengers point to the path of connection with God, with self, with humankind, with nature, and with all living creatures. They lend form and substance to devotion, to compassion, to service, and to courage in close company with God, in the service of humankind. Finally, they mark out the paths to salvation for the believer, of which Jesus is the necessary mediator for the Christian, while being one of the forms of its expression for the Muslim. If there is no salvation without Jesus for the Christian, there can be none for the Muslim if Jesus is not also its Messenger and witness.