

CHRISTIAN-MUSLIM DIALOGUE IN THE LEBANESE CONTEX

This paper examines how Christian-Muslim dialogue is seen in Lebanon, a Middle Eastern country of many religious affiliations and a large Christian population (approximately 30 percent of the population are Christians). There has been a lot of discussion about inter-faith dialogue in Lebanon after the end of the disastrous civil war in 1991. Previously, there has been only little research on Muslims' views about inter-faith dialogue. Also the views of Oriental Christians, who live as minorities in the Islamic world, remain to a large extent unexplored.

The paper focuses on how two Lebanese Muslims and two Lebanese Christians understand dialogue, its aims, methods and different dimensions. It concentrates on the doctrinal dimension of dialogue, examining how the four authors see the central doctrines of each other's communities and what kind of problems and possibilities they see in furthering reciprocal understanding on doctrinal level. The main areas studies are revelation, concept of God, and eschatology.

The four authors studied in the paper are:

Mouchir Basile Aoun (Mushir Basil 'Awn). Greek Catholic (Melkite) priest. He lives currently in Belgium but visits Lebanon regularly and publishes his writings there in Arabic.

Mahmoud Ayoub (Mahmud Ayyub, born in 1935). Shiite Muslim scholar of international standing. He is professor of Islamic Studies at the Temple University in the United States but he also has tight connections to Lebanon where he gives lectures and publishes his writings in Arabic.

Sayyid Muhammad Husayn Fadlallah (Ayat Allah al-Sayyid Muhammad Husayn Fadl Allah, born in 1935). One of the leading Shiite jurist theologians of Lebanon and its neighbouring Arab countries. He is a productive writer on many different topics.

Georges Khodr (Jurj Khodr). The Orthodox Metropolitan of Mount Lebanon. He has written extensively on various issues and some of his writings have been translated into French and English.

OPENNESS TO DIALOGUE: THE MUSLIM AUTHORS

Both Ayoub and Fadlallah take the Qur'an as their starting point when justifying their acceptance of inter-faith dialogue. They see Islam as a tolerant religion that accepts and respects human differences and refer to several different Qur'anic verses to get support to their view. Both of them agree with the Qur'an's words "let there be no compulsion in religion"¹ and they both find justification to dialogue between Muslims and Christians in

¹ The Qur'an, 2:256.

the verse 3:64: "Say: 'O People of the Book! come to common terms as between us and you: that we worship none but Allah; that we associate no partners with Him; that we erect not, from among ourselves, lords and patrons other than Allah.'" "

Fadlallah and Ayoub see also prophet Muhammad's exemplary behaviour towards followers of other religions, especially Christians, as a reason for a dialogical, tolerant attitude. Besides, Fadlallah refers to the example of the Shiite imams as an additional prove of Islam's essentially dialogical nature.²

Fadlallah develops further his idea of Islam's dialogical nature by claiming that dialogue is, in its essence, movement of faith in the self. According to him, Islam is in fact by its nature dialogue that begins from man's inner dialogue with himself. In his inner dialogue man considers different truth claims and chooses by his reason what to believe. Only this kind of a person is suitable for dialogical discussions with others.³

Apart from religious arguments both Ayoub and Fadlallah defend the necessity of inter-faith dialogue by practical reasons. They argue that dialogue is needed to facilitate better relations between Lebanese Christians and Muslims after the devastating civil war that Lebanon has gone through.⁴

Although Fadlallah and Ayoub agree to a great extent concerning the justifications of inter-religious dialogue, their views of aims and themes of dialogue differ considerably from each other. Fadlallah emphasises the cognitive aspect of dialogue. He sees dialogue as an objective process where different truth claims are considered rationally and scientifically, aiming to reach the truth. Fadlallah hopes that dialogue would lead as many persons as possible to the truth which he obviously equates with the truth of Islam. Nevertheless, he sees dialogue as an opportunity also to the others to make known their views. He even considers it possible that some Muslims might convert to Christianity in the process of dialogue. Evidently he does not really think that the traditional interpretation of Islam could change in dialogue. But at least he believes that misunderstandings can be rectified, fear and hatred lessen and the ways of thinking generally find new horizons which are for him good aims in themselves.⁵

The practical aspect of dialogue is also very important to Fadlallah. He thinks that it is easier and also more urgent to discuss practical than theological topics. Fadlallah divides the themes of dialogue into two parts, those concerning theology and those having to do with shared problems in life. The first part contains the doctrinal questions, like doctrines about God, Jesus, revelation and salvation. To the second part belong questions concerning religious law, peace, global justice, legitimate ways of mission work and how to organise plural societies. Fadlallah hopes that Muslims and Christians could oppose together all kinds of oppression and mutual hatred especially in Lebanon and also in other parts of the world.⁶

² DAMI1, 206; AHIM, vii, 10, 14.

³ AHIM, 8-11.

⁴ DAMI1, 9-10, 209; AHIM, xi-xii.

⁵ AHIM, vi, xv, 14, 17-20, 22-23, 29, 35.

⁶ AHIM, iii-iv, vii-viii, 98, 376.

Ayoub's view of dialogue includes cognitive, spiritual and practical aspects. He thinks that Christians and Muslims should discuss doctrinal questions in order to know each other better and to get rid of erroneous ideas about the other. Muslims and Christians should also perceive their shared religious values. On the other hand, he thinks that the doctrinal discussion is only a beginning and the ultimate aim of dialogue is communion of faith. This communion means that believers do not look upon each other as members of different religions competing with each other but members of universal communion of faith. Ayoub finds support to his view of communion based on shared inner experience from Ibn al-‘Arabi⁷ and other sufis.⁸

Ayoub hopes that Muslims, Christians and people in general could learn from past mistakes, stop advocating one's own narrow national interests, work for peace especially in the Middle East and act together to solve the complicated problems of the modern world. But he seems to think that the practical aspect of dialogue is possible only after cognitive and spiritual dialogue have been established. Pursuing communion of faith together creates the atmosphere of mutual trust and ethical courage that is needed to responsible use of natural resources and technology.⁹

Both Fadlallah and Ayoub point out that the Qur'an requires that peaceful methods are used in dialogue: “And dispute ye not with the People of the Book, except in the best way.” Fadlallah emphasises also the importance of accurate knowledge and requires that both dialogue parties have extensive knowledge of both Islam and Christianity, based on original sources. If this condition is fulfilled, discussion is objective and not based on subjective feelings.¹⁰

Both Ayoub and Fadlallah recommend that dialogue should proceed by stages. Ayoub wants to begin by getting to know each other better and getting rid of misunderstandings. He believes that only after that it is possible to create communion of faith between the two religious communities. Fadlallah on his part wants to start by discussing shared ethical principles and Lebanon's nature as a multireligious state. After that he would go on to treat theological questions.¹¹

OPENNESS TO DIALOGUE: THE CHRISTIAN AUTHORS

The Christian authors do not attend to justifications of dialogue as carefully as the Muslim authors. Their texts include very few explicitly religious justifications of dialogue and neither of them tries to find support to dialogue from the Bible. They seem to take necessity of inter-faith dialogue almost for granted. Aoun sees dialogue as

⁷ Ibn al-‘Arabi (1165-1240) has had a major influence on sufism. About his thinking see e.g. William C. Chittick: *Ibn al-‘Arabi’s Metaphysics of Imagination. The Sufi Path of Knowledge*. New York, Albany: State University of New York Press. 1989.

⁸ DAM11, 24, 209-210.

⁹ DAM11, 24-25, 208-210.

¹⁰ AHIM, v, viii-ix, 13, 17-18, 20-21, 29, 31-34; DAM11, 206. The Qur’anic quotation is from 29:46.

¹¹ AHIM, 24-27; DAM11, 209.

essential to Lebanon's future and its possibility of progress¹² and Khodr justifies dialogue by saying that there is an immediate spiritual and human need for it and adding that the historical situation is ripe for Muslim-Christian dialogue.¹³

Khodr sees dialogue as an attempt to enter each other's religious worlds in order to understand them in the way they are understood by their supporters themselves. According to him, true knowledge of each other corrects the dialogue parties' visions and develops them spiritually without them having to give up anything essential of their own religious heritage. To that end, they should try to get rid of wrong attitudes towards the other that are inherited from the past and the human interpretations that here and there distort the words of God. The ultimate aim of dialogue for Khodr seems to be knowing and accepting each other and transcending the dividing doctrines by a mystical vision of belonging to the same Lord.¹⁴ Khodr's view comes quite close to that of Ayoub who also wants to transcend all divisions by communion of faith.

Khodr resembles Ayoub also in his stance concerning practical aims of dialogue. He writes extensively about socio-political and ethical questions but does not consider them an end in themselves but rather some kind of by-products. Khodr combines practical, cognitive and spiritual aspects of dialogue to a concise whole. He talks about "dialogue of life" and "dialogue of thinking" but they cannot really be separated from each other in his thinking. Rather, there is interpenetration between them.¹⁵

Aoun's immediate aim of dialogue is a new relationship between Christianity and Islam, a relationship of perfecting and enriching each other. However, he has also wider aims than that. He wants to proceed from Muslim-Christian dialogue to dialogue between the two religions and modern thinking, combining all their positive elements. His aim in all this is far-reaching: realising the humanness of human beings in all its various dimensions, individual, social, physical, mental and spiritual. Aoun's more specific objectives for the Muslim-Christian dialogue in Lebanon are quite comprehensive too. According to him the Lebanese dialogue has two important tasks. The first of them is to create a plural civil society in Lebanon on the basis of combining the positive elements of modern thinking to Christianity and Islam. If that succeeds, it is possible to go on to the second task which is trying to solve the difficult problems of Lebanon: crisis of national identity, crisis of Muslim-Christian relations, crisis resulting from the struggle in Palestine and crisis of backward government.¹⁶

Aoun's understanding of dialogue resembles that of Fadlallah in that both of them combine rather rational approach to theology with practical aims and neither of them has spiritual dimension in his view of dialogue. But as their starting points are very different from each other, it is not surprising that their aims are widely dissimilar.

¹² MI, 203.

¹³ HA2, 307-308. It should be noted that he made this remark in 1965, before the Lebanese civil war.

¹⁴ AAH, 62-63, 73-76.

¹⁵ AAH, 68, 72, 76-83, 90, 94, 213-214; HA2, 302, 305.

¹⁶ MI, 87-88, 91, 103-105.

Aoun thinks that a tolerant spirit, objectivity and harmonious methods are essential for all comparison between Islam and Christianity. Comparing the other's religion with one's own should not include evaluative judgements because all religions have their own historically determined logic. Khodr advocates the same kind of open-minded, harmonious and objective methods for dialogue as Aoun, adding to them humility towards the other. He further emphasises the importance of accurate information based on original sources. His emphasising the importance of knowledge comes close to Fadlallah's view. However, Khodr differs from Fadlallah in that he considers inner spirituality even more essential than knowledge in inter-faith dialogue.¹⁷

REVELATION IN CHRISTIANITY: GOD'S INCARNATIONAL SELF-REVELATION

Khodr sees a clear difference between Christian and Muslim understandings of revelation. According to Islam, God speaks to mankind through Holy Scriptures given to prophets and the culmination of prophecy is the Qur'an. In Christianity, however, God is believed to have spoken in Christ. God's speech is not a text, but a human life. There is also a difference concerning the contents of revelation. The Qur'an mediates primarily commandments, but according to Christianity God reveals himself. Further, the function of prophets is not similar in the two religions. Khodr is not satisfied with the normative Islamic view that prophets are passive recipients mediating word by word a text dictated to them by God. His idea of prophecy is that human intellectual and spiritual abilities are enlightened by God's Spirit. Prophecy is always ambivalent and remains obscure but in Christ there is no more doubt. That is why, for Khodr, the Bible is secondary to God's revelation in Christ.¹⁸

Khodr emphasises that the position of the Holy Scriptures is completely different in Islam and Christianity and because of that he is not willing to compare the Qur'an with the Bible. Rather, the Qur'an should be compared with Christ, at least with reference to its uncreatedness and pre-existence. Khodr seems to think that wrong comparisons between the two books make it difficult for Muslims to understand the Bible. For example, how to understand that the Bible contains many books written by different writers during hundreds of years when the Qur'an is mediated through one person in less than thirty years. And especially, how to make sense of the fact that there are four gospels in the Bible, since Muslims believe that Jesus received from God only one Gospel. The position of the New Testament letters is a further difficulty because it is totally incomprehensible for Muslims that a certain correspondence could be expression of divine revelation. They do not understand the biblical pedagogical method that reveals the characteristics of the Kingdom through concrete events in human life. In other words, they do not understand the reality of incarnation.¹⁹

¹⁷ MI, 88; AAH, 62, 94-95; HA2, 302, 309.

¹⁸ AAH, 32-38.

¹⁹ AAH, 35-36, 38-40, 125, 127, 146-147, 224.

Khodr also ponders how to read the Qur'an as a Christian. He thinks that there is a Christian way to read the Qur'an and learn from it while remaining at the same time loyal to one's own faith and also to scientific truth. Khodr affirms the finality of God's revelation in Christ and the Bible but believes that God has spoken through the Holy Spirit also outside the church. He thinks that Christ is indeed partly present in the holy book of Islam. By this he seems to mean those parts of the Qur'an where Jesus is described in accordance with the Christian understanding of him. He finds support to his view of the Qur'an from Louis Massignon.²⁰

Khodr thinks that it is important to take into account the specifically Arabic nature of the Qur'an. The Qur'an has been revealed in the Arabian Peninsula in the Arabic language and this is its fundamental and maybe most original feature. Khodr sees Islam as the monotheism of the Arabs that has its own nature and theology. Unlike some researchers, he does not regard it as a religion of Jewish origins or as a Christian heresy. He thinks that Christians should read the Qur'an according to its own self-understanding which is not historical and is totally independent of Muhammad's psyche. In fact, he is not consistent in this suggestion because he thinks that historical study of the Qur'an would be beneficial to Christian-Muslim dialogue. He is clearly annoyed because many Muslims apply critical methods to the Bible but refuse to apply them to the Qur'an.²¹

Even though Khodr studies the Qur'an comprehensively, he does not refer much to Muhammad. However, he approves of the famous statement of the eighth-century patriarch of the Assyrian church, Timothy I, that Muhammad "followed the path of the prophets". Khodr does not see any contradiction between retaining Christian convictions and acknowledging that Muhammad was in some sense a prophet. But on the other hand, he says quite clearly that if Christians accept Muhammad's message in its totality they leave their Christian faith.²²

Aoun points out that according to both Islam and Christianity, revelation is absolutely God's initiative, Creator's enterprise concerning his creation. But in Christianity – and especially in its modern thinking – the relationship between God and human beings is seen as reciprocal. God has bound himself to history and human fate and human beings can freely respond to God's initiative and participate in it. On the other hand, in Islam the emphasis is on God's absolute supremacy and transcendence. Human beings do not participate in God's enterprise but only receive it and surrender to God's will.²³

²⁰ AAH, 126-130, 144-145. Louis Massignon (1883-1962) was probably the most influential Catholic thinker on Islam during the 20th century. About his thinking concerning Islam, see e.g. Sidney Griffith: *Sharing the Faith of Abraham: the 'Credo' of Louis Massignon. - Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations*, Vol. 8 No. 2. 1997. 193-210.

²¹ AAH, 127, 134, 143-144, 224-225.

²² AAH, 93, 155. There has been a lot of discussion about the possibility to acknowledge Muhammad's prophethood among Christian theologians during the 20th century. Louis Massignon was one of the first to discuss the issue. Although Khodr does not refer to Massignon to support his idea of Muhammad's partial prophethood, it is possible that he has been influenced by his statements in this issue.

²³ MI, 21-22.

Aoun states that according to both religions, revelation explains the real nature of existence, human being, and salvation and describes to mankind the general norms of behaviour. However, he emphasises, like Khodr, the difference concerning its form and contents. In Islam, revelation is known as “sending down” and it is considered faultless and independent of human history. But in Christianity, it is connected to the human recipient and his context. The core of revelation is traced to God’s enterprise but its expression to human experience. Further, in Islam revelation contains the divine will and law, disclosed in the Qur’an, but in Christianity it is seen as God’s self-revelation, incarnated in Christ. However, there is a shared methodological problem: how can God, be it in his volition or his self, be transmitted from absolute transcendence to the limited human history? If this common difficulty is perceived, Aoun thinks that Islam and Christianity can assist each other in finding a common explanation to it.²⁴

Aoun sees a further difference between the two communities concerning interpretation of revelation. In Islam, God has an exclusive possession of revelation, abrogating verses and substituting better ones for them according to his will. Therefore, human interpretation of the Qur’an resembles explanatory sidenotes elucidating the right beliefs and behaviour. On the other hand, in Christianity, God has allowed human beings to freely interact with the enterprise of his revelation. The recorded revelation is human experience of the incarnated revelation and this explains Christians’ free interpretation of it.²⁵

In spite of the basic difference of the concept of revelation in the two communities, Aoun finds also many points of contact between them. Both communities recognise indirect revelation in nature that leads mankind to perceive the existence of Creator and some of his characteristics. They also agree on there being a personal revelation that prepares human beings to respond to God. Thirdly, they share a conviction that God has spoken through the prophets although they do not agree on their number and the contents of their messages.²⁶

Taking up the position of Muhammad and Jesus, Aoun points out that, from the Christian point of view, Muhammad cannot be a prophet because the prophets’ preparatory task ended with the coming of Christ. And from the Islamic point of view, Christ cannot be God’s final, incarnated revelation because God only reveals his will in written form. However, Aoun would like to bring the two communities closer to each other in this issue. He refers to the Christian attempts to understand Muhammad’s task as “a negative prophecy” that reminds of the first covenant and confirms the Torah and the Gospel. This terminology derived from Massignon²⁷ does not satisfy him but he suggests that the later prophecy could be studied as a reminder of the incarnated Word. Muhammad’s witness could be included in the chain of fathers and reformers in whose speech the church has experienced an echo of the gospel linked to local culture. He also suggests that there

²⁴ MI, 22-23.

²⁵ MI, 23-24.

²⁶ MI, 25.

²⁷ It is not entirely clear what Massignon meant when he called Muhammad a “negative prophet” but at all events he did not mean that Muhammad was a false prophet. About the different ways Christian theologians have understood the phrase, see e.g. Griffith 1997, 200.

could be new reflection in Islam about the Qur'anic titles given to Jesus: God's word and spirit.²⁸ Here Aoun comes close to Khodr's thinking. Both of them call Muhammad prophet without, however, using the word in its traditional Islamic meaning. Both subordinate Muhammad to Christ whom they see as God's final revelation and see Muhammad's witness as "partial revelation" and "echo of the gospel".

REVELATION IN ISLAM: PROPHETIC MEDIATION OF THE DIVINE TEXT

Fadlallah subscribes to the traditional Islamic view of revelation and sees it as God's message delivered to mankind through the prophets. Muhammad is the final prophet and the Qur'an is the final revelation. He stresses the absolute trustworthiness of the Qur'an as God's word and its position as the primary source of Islamic law and dogma.²⁹

Also according to the traditional view, Fadlallah assures that Islam considers Christians "the people of the Book", that is, having previously received Holy Scriptures. The Torah and the Gospel are acknowledged to be true revelation. However, he does not explain what is the relationship between "the Torah and the Gospel" and the Bible as it is in fact known to us. Fadlallah does not seem very eager to refer to the common explanation that the Bible currently in use is corrupted and not any more the original book received by prophet Jesus.³⁰ He admits that Muslims consider the Gospel in some ways corrupted but he is willing to play down this judgement, emphasising that the corruption concerns only the biblical material about prophet Muhammad and "some other matters".³¹ It is interesting to note that although Fadlallah has his suspicions about the authenticity of the Bible, he nevertheless sometimes supports his views with Jesus' words in the gospels.³²

Closely related to the subject of revelation is the Christian understanding of Jesus as the Word of God. In Christian apologetics, it has often been claimed that the Qur'an itself supports the Christian view because it actually calls him the word of God³³. Fadlallah strives to refute this kind of claims, pointing out that in Islam, the term is only a reference to Jesus' uncommon virginal birth. Jesus is called the word of God because he is created by God's direct command. The first human being, Adam, was created in the same way.³⁴

In the question of prophecy, Fadlallah seems to accept that Christians do not consider Muhammad a prophet. Unlike many others, he does not demand from Christians any positive announcement about Muhammad. Nevertheless, the issue is essential for him.

²⁸ MI, 26-27. Jesus is called God's word and spirit from him in the Qur'anic verse 4:171.

²⁹ IH, 294-295.

³⁰ On the basis of the Qur'anic verses about Christianity, it is natural for Muslims to presume that Christianity has been corrupted in some way. They have offered different theories about how and when this corruption took place since the reign of the Abbasid dynasty (750-1258). In the modern period, Muslims have found support to these theories from Western research. Traditionally, those usually blamed for the presumed corruption have been Apostle Paul and Emperor Constantine. See e.g. Zebiri 2000, 67-69.

³¹ AHIM, 177, 378.

³² See for example AHIM, 44, 153, 222.

³³ The Qur'an, 3:45; 4:171.

³⁴ AHIM, 216-217.

After all, Christians are guilty of unbelief just because they do not believe in the prophet of Islam. Fadlallah recommends that Muhammad's position and all accusations that have been put forth against him should be discussed objectively in dialogue.³⁵

Ayoub's understanding of God's revelation is more original than that of Fadlallah. In accordance with the traditional view, he affirms that the Qur'an is divine word and God's universal revelation. However, he does not see the Qur'an only as timeless revelation but stresses its being bound to the historical context of the Arabian Peninsula of Muhammad's time. Ayoub also wants to take seriously the Islamic tradition that there have been numerous prophets who have not been mentioned in the Qur'an, suggesting that Plotinos should be considered a prophet who appeared in the time between Jesus and Muhammad.³⁶ Further, he stresses that God addresses humanity not only through the prophetic revelation that ended with Muhammad but also through personal inspiration that has been received by pious people of all ages.³⁷

Ayoub states that he wants to pay attention to the specifically Christian understanding of revelation. He encourages Muslims to accept that in Christianity Christ is the final revelation of God and not to force Christianity to conform to the Islamic understanding of revelation as scripture. Accordingly, Ayoub concentrates on Jesus' position and does not study the position of the Bible in detail. However, it is clear that he sees the Bible in a very positive light compared to the traditional Islamic views of it. Like Fadlallah, Ayoub affirms that the Torah and the Gospel are truly God's revelation. But unlike him, Ayoub actually identifies these books with the Bible currently in use. He talks about holy books, in plural, and believes that God's voice can be heard through them all. He thinks that the theological differences between Islam and Christianity are not caused by their Holy Scriptures but by their later theological development.³⁸ Ayoub also quotes the Bible quite often and uses biblical expressions side by side with Qur'anic language.³⁹

Comparing Christ and the Qur'an, Ayoub points out that Christians consider Christ the uncreated Word of God and that most Muslims have the same view of the Qur'an. However, there are also differences. Even though Muslims have not been able to explain how God and his word are related to each other, they do not say that the Qur'an is God. Neither do they consider the Qur'an, like Christians consider Christ, the agent of creation. And of course, "the Word became flesh" but the Qur'an became a book. Concerning the Qur'anic statement that Jesus is the word of God, Ayoub agrees with its traditional interpretation. The term does not mean, like in Christianity, that Jesus is God's revelation but only refers to his uncommon birth. As a common challenge for the two communities, he states that neither Muslims nor Christians have paid enough attention to the human dimension of the divine word, Jesus' human nature and the Qur'an's dependence on its historical context.⁴⁰

³⁵ AHIM, 12, 44, 59.

³⁶ DAMI2, 90.

³⁷ DAMI2, 101.

³⁸ DAMI1, 27, 31, 41, 43, 128.

³⁹ See for example DAMI1, 127, 129, 160, 221.

⁴⁰ DAMI1, 31-32, 124.

Ayoub thinks that in the same way as Muslims have to accept that in Christianity God's revelation is the incarnation of the Word, Christians have to admit that Muhammad was truly a prophet. He is also not satisfied with the attempts to draw a parallel between him and the many prophets of the Old Testament. He insists that Muhammad was like Moses, a prophet who received a new law, established a new community and changed the course of human history. Christians should admit that revelation preceding Christianity was more than just preparation to it and that also revelation coming after it can have an important contribution to make in the world.⁴¹

THE ISLAMIC CONCEPT OF GOD: THE ONE TRANSCENDENT LORD

Ayoub stresses the traditional Islamic concepts of God's absolute unity and absolute transcendence. God's unity is that of the Creator of all, the only one who really exists while everything else exists only because of his holy will. God is one numerically and one in his uniqueness. Referring to the Qur'anic surah 112, Ayoub affirms that God is the only and eternal refuge of all creatures, a simple being who is not affected by birth and death and absolutely sublime over time and change. He also argues that emotions of mystery and fear felt in contact with the holy, as described by Rudolf Otto, are given expression in the most beautiful names of God. Some of these names are attributes of power and majesty, like the King and the Holy, and some are attributes of beauty and grace, like the All-merciful and the Compassionate. Ayoub considers all these divine attributes common to both the Qur'an and the Hebrew Bible.⁴²

Ayoub considers Christians monotheists and points out that idolaters are according to the Qur'an an entirely different community. Regardless of that, Christians' belief in Jesus' divinity and the doctrine of the Trinity are problematic to him. He makes clear that Jesus' divinity is not acceptable in Islam but is, on the contrary, considered "a certain kind of" associating others to God and grave exaggeration in religious matters.⁴³

Ayoub pays special attention to the expression "Son of God" and to the ways it has been understood in the Qur'an and the Islamic tradition. His study does not confirm the traditional accusation made by Muslims that Christians consider Jesus God's son in the literal meaning of the word and Mary his mother God's spouse. From the two Arabic words that mean son, Christians themselves do not apply to Jesus the word *walad* that implies sexual reproduction but *ibn* that can be understood also symbolically. Studying the vocabulary used in the Qur'an, Ayoub affirms that the holy book of Islam does not accuse them of using the word *walad* either. He also compares the descriptions of Jesus' birth in the Gospel of Luke and the Qur'an and states that neither of the texts gives any reason to consider Mary God's spouse or Jesus his physical offspring. Nevertheless, he thinks that Christian theology has gone much farther than Luke in speaking about Jesus as God's real son. The expression Son of God does not seem to be a problem to him if only it was interpreted symbolically. The crux of the matter is Jesus' divinity that cannot

⁴¹ DAMI1, 128.

⁴² DAMI2, 91-92, 212-213, 222.

⁴³ DAMI2, 207, 209, 228.

be accepted by Islam. Ayoub obviously wants to find some way to bring the views of the two communities a little closer to each other concerning Jesus and he finds that way in Sufism. In Islamic mysticism, Jesus has been seen as a representative of perfect humanity in whom divine light is manifested. Ayoub thinks that this view of Jesus comes quite close to that of Christianity.⁴⁴

Although Ayoub does not in any way accept the Christian doctrine of the Trinity, he does not try to refute it, either. He states that the Christian Trinity is not really a doctrine but a mystery and will remain that way regardless of all attempts to explain it. He does not consider fruitful to compare the second and the third persons of the Trinity to God's attributes⁴⁵ in Islam. His own suggestion is that the Trinity could be seen as God's activity in the world. Interpreted like this, its Islamic parallel would be the three roles of the divine word: commandment, revelation and guidance. So Ayoub thinks that God's guidance is the Islamic parallel of Christians' Holy Spirit. It is not quite clear if he accepts the traditional Islamic view that the Holy Spirit mentioned in the Qur'an is in fact the angel of revelation, Gabriel. He only says that the commentators of the Qur'an have had different opinions about the identity of the Holy Spirit.⁴⁶

Fadlallah's view of God seems to be quite traditional. God's unity and transcendence are the most prominent aspects of it but it includes other elements as well, especially God's mercy and guidance. Like Ayoub, Fadlallah considers Christians monotheists, affirming that the Qur'an separates them clearly from the idolaters and confirms their belief in one God.⁴⁷ In spite of this, he finds the Christian doctrines of Jesus' divinity and the Trinity clearly erroneous. He is also more eager than Ayoub to refute them by rational and logical arguments.

Like Ayoub, Fadlallah discusses the expression Son of God and clears Christians of the traditional accusations of attributing physical offspring to God. However, he does it in a different way than Ayoub. He argues that the Qur'anic references to beliefs that God has a son in the literal meaning of the word apply to some ancient Christian groups but not to contemporary Christians. Fadlallah is also aware of the fact that Christians refer to Jesus as God's son by the word *ibn*, allowing a symbolical interpretation, and not the more concrete *walad*. However, Fadlallah does not think that the expression Son of God is in itself very important. The actual point is Christians' belief in Jesus' divinity and incarnation which cannot be combined with the simple monotheism of the Qur'an. Fadlallah maintains that when a mental image of Jesus represents God's image to someone, he has fallen to philosophical unbelief. Fadlallah perceives the same problem

⁴⁴ DAMI1, 38-43, 78-79.

⁴⁵ Comparing the Son and the Holy Spirit to God's attributes has been very common in Christian apologies written in Arabic. Muslims have refuted this comparison either because they could not see any reason to limit the amount of God's attributes to two only or because they accepted the view supported by the school of Mu'tazila that God's attributes cannot be separated from God's essence. Thomas 2000, 374. Shiites have traditionally favored the latter view. Momen 1985, 176.

⁴⁶ DAMI1, 127, 219, 221.

⁴⁷ BHF, 349-350; AHIM, 59-60.

even inside Islam in the view of the eternality of the Qur'an. He says that this view leads to plurality of eternal beings and thus ultimately to unbelief.⁴⁸

Concerning the doctrine of the Trinity, Fadlallah thinks that contemporary Christians do not believe in "substantially plural trinity" referred to in the Qur'an but only some Christian communities in the time of the Prophet believed in it. Nevertheless, he thinks that the doctrine of the Trinity ultimately leads Christians to philosophical idolatry. He does not accept the analogies and comparisons presented by Christians to clarify how the persons of the Trinity are related to each other. For example, he is not satisfied with Khodr's way to compare the Father and the Son with human mind and a word proceeding from it. He does not consider the comparison convincing because mind and word are not in reality one but separated from each other. Fadlallah knows that Christians admit that the Trinity is ultimately incomprehensible to human reason. Still, he thinks that it should be discussed in dialogue in a philosophical manner.⁴⁹

All in all, Fadlallah thinks that Muslims and Christians agree about God's unity and the philosophical idolatry of Christians does not annul this agreement. Fadlallah does not consider idolatry and unbelief absolute concepts but he thinks that they have also relative and symbolical meanings. He finds examples of both not only among Christians but also among Muslims. For example, attributing eternity to the Qur'an and seeking help from a prophet or a saint in every-day needs contain elements that can lead to philosophical idolatry.⁵⁰

THE CHRISTIAN CONCEPT OF GOD: TRINITARIAN UNITY

Aoun affirms that in both communities, God is omnipotent Creator who justly and mercifully provides for the creatures. However, there are also essential differences, caused by the different understandings of God's enterprise in the world. In Islam, God reveals his will to humanity by agents that are separate from the the divine being but in Christianity God cares for humankind in a personal way, entering the human history in his overflowing love. Accordingly, there is fundamental disagreement between the two communities concerning God's lordship, exaltedness and unity.⁵¹

According to Aoun, in Islam, God's lordship is lordship of the omnipotent master who continually passes from justice to mercy in his judgements and management. His mercy does not follow from the human need but only from his sovereign will. On the other hand, in Christianity God's lordship is connected to his fatherhood. In this relationship, father's commandments are closely connected to son's efforts and son understands that he receives God's compassion due to the free gift of adoption. He considers the difference between Christianity and Islam so essential in this matter that they constitute

⁴⁸ AHIM, 99-101. See also AHIM, 167. Unlike Sunnites, who traditionally consider the Qur'an eternal, Shiites regard it as created. See e.g. Momen 1985, 176.

⁴⁹ AHIM, v, 91, 101, 167, 293-295.

⁵⁰ AHIM, 91-92, 100-101, 167, 293-294.

⁵¹ MI, 55-57.

two different theologies: theology of fatherhood and theology of sovereignty. In the former, human being participates in the divine being and in the latter he is appointed as a deputy to the management of earthly matters.⁵²

Concerning God's exaltedness, Aoun perceives in Islam a strong stress on God's transcendence and uniqueness. God's exaltedness is stressed because all resemblance with the creation would diminish God's power and weaken the sublimity of his position. On the other hand, the Christian view of God's sublimity is not based on total separation between godhood and humanity but on the ability of godhood to embrace humanity and deify it. Because human being is the image of God, the unification of human and divine natures does not contradict God's sublimity but carries out his eternal plan and restores the unity of divine love. Aoun considers both views of God's exaltedness in some way problematic. The problem of the Christian view is how to understand God's becoming human in the incarnation. The problem of the Islamic view, on the other hand, is how to understand the final concord between the origin of being and accidental beings because they are strictly separated in this time.⁵³

Aoun stresses that God's trinity is not in contradiction with his unity but confirms it. In Islam, God's unity means absolute divine transcendence and lordship of supremacy but in Christianity it means unity of divine love and shared lordship. The redemptive work of the Father, the Son and the Spirit is one, and so is its aim, embracing humanity to the being of divine love in the end of time. Aoun maintains that although both the nature of God's unity and the way to express it are different in Christianity and Islam, the essence of the unity is preserved by them both.⁵⁴

According to Aoun, the major difficulty in perceiving the unity of the Trinitarian being is caused by the incarnation. Belief in the incarnation makes it difficult to perceive the Trinitarian unity because it separates the incarnated person from the person not incarnated. Belief in the Trinitarian unity, on the other hand, makes it difficult to understand the incarnation because total unity does not allow differentiation between the divine persons. Aoun's response to these difficulties is quite traditional. Firstly, human mental faculties cannot understand in a logical way the dynamics of divine love. Secondly, the unity of the divine will confirms the unity of the Trinitarian being.⁵⁵

Aoun states that the Christian concept of God is characterised not only by God's trinity but also by divine-human duality. As a consequence of the incarnation, God carries in his being the dimensions of godhood and humanity and connects them in his self. Duality is the basis of the Christian theological structure because it makes human being participate in the mystery of the incarnation. In contrast to this, the basis of the Islamic theological structure is unity because it gives to God the widest sphere in managing human affairs and points out to human being his proper place, restricted to the level of human nature.⁵⁶

⁵² MI, 57-58.

⁵³ MI, 58-60.

⁵⁴ MI, 60-61.

⁵⁵ MI, 61-62.

⁵⁶ MI, 62-63.

Khodr stresses God's total otherness, basing his greatness on the fact that nothing resembles him and that he remains forever incomprehensible to humankind. Utilising Gregory Palamas' distinction between God's essence and his energies, Khodr maintains that human beings will never be able to penetrate God's unfathomable essence, not even in eternity, although they will be able to contemplate him and grasp his splendour through the divine energies.⁵⁷ It would seem that on this level of incomprehensibility, Khodr's understanding of God comes quite near the Islamic understanding of him.

Khodr's understanding of God is also markedly Trinitarian. He understands the core of the Trinity as eternal love that circulates between the divine persons. He compares the divine persons to three communicating vessels each of which, as soon as it is full, fills the other two. The love of the persons to each other is a process of annihilation where each one of them denies oneself so that the others can be. This is the same self-giving love that Jesus demonstrated in his earthly life. Following the tradition of the Eastern Church, Khodr stresses that in speaking about God one has to begin discussing the three divine persons and proceed only after that to the unity of the divine essence. Khodr is not satisfied with the Western Church's way to discuss primarily God's unity and perceive the divine persons only inside this unity because he thinks that it leads easily to views that consider only the Unity the true divine reality.⁵⁸

In discussion with Muslims, Khodr stresses that the Trinitarian unity is perfect and it is not a numerical concept. The unity is not divided into trinity and the trinity is not composed of unity. Khodr denies emphatically the accusations that the doctrine of the Trinity is in contradiction with God's unity and that Christians worship three Gods. In his opinion, the Qur'an does not mention the Christian Trinity at all but discusses only pre-Islamic divine triads that consisted of one main deity and two lesser ones forming together divine families. Khodr thinks that because the Qur'an simply does not mention the Christian doctrine of the Trinity, it cannot be said to oppose it. In stead of the Christian doctrine, the Qur'an opposes *shirk*, associating created with uncreated, and this is a grave mistake also from the Christian point of view.⁵⁹

Concerning Jesus' position, Khodr affirms that both Islam and Christianity see him as sent by God and his servant. The difference concerns Jesus' divinity and his title Son of God. Khodr stresses that Jesus' divinity must be seen in connection with the doctrine of the Trinity. God's essence and persons must be distinguished from each other and therefore, it is indeed heretical to make Christ, the second person, an attribute to God. On the other hand, it is quite true to say that Christ is God, according to his essence. If God's Trinitarian nature is not kept in mind, the result is that Jesus and God become synonyms and that means making the divine essence human and is indeed associating partners to God.⁶⁰

⁵⁷ GHG, 3-4.

⁵⁸ AAH, 51, 53, 139-140; GHG, 6, 8.

⁵⁹ AAH, 53, 82-83, 135-138

⁶⁰ AAH, 133-134.

Like the other authors, Khodr discusses the two Arabic words for son, *walad* and *ibn*. His conclusion is that the Qur'an does not really deny the Christian, symbolical view of Jesus' sonship but only a more concrete view entailing sexual reproduction. Likewise, the Qur'anic refutation of those who say that God "has taken to himself a son"⁶¹ does not refer to Christianity. Khodr argues that if Christians took a man called Jesus and raised him to godhood they would indeed associate partners to God. However, this is not what they do. In stead, they take the Word of God and place him in humanity. Khodr stresses that Christ's sonship to God the Father refers to the eternal relationship of God and the Word before he took a human form. He compares this relationship of the Father and the Son to that of human mind and word. Human word that proceeds from mind is not something separated from it even though it can be distinguished from it by a mental birth. Khodr thinks that there is a clear resemblance between the Christian view of Christ's incarnation and the Islamic view of the Qur'an as uncreated speech that took the form of Arabic words.⁶²

HUMAN CONDITION FROM THE CHRISTIAN POINT OF VIEW: FALL AND DEIFICATION

According to **Aoun**, the concepts of salvation and guidance characterise Christian and Islamic anthropology, respectively. In Christianity, the human need of perfection of nature is fulfilled in salvation presented in the person of Jesus Christ. In Islam, on the other hand, the human need of asking for God's guidance is fulfilled in the Qur'an.⁶³

Aoun emphasises that Christianity and Islam have the same understanding of the content of human sinfulness. According to him, it is disobedience to God's commandments, tendency to deify oneself by taking God's position and seeking to determine good and evil. Aoun thinks that because of their common understanding of sin, both religions recognise the human need for salvation and guidance. However, they see the origin and the influences of sin differently. According to Christianity, the original freedom of human being allowed him to disobey God's will. But according to Islam, God guides whom he wills and leads astray whom he wills. As for the influences of sin, Christianity insists on the principle of original sin, a real damage in the composition of the human nature that is inherited from one generation to another. Islam does not acknowledge this kind of inherited original sin but bestows the responsibility of following guidance or being led astray to individuals. Aoun concludes that concerning the origin of sin, Christianity defends human freedom to choose but Islam impairs this freedom by making the divine will participate in determining human choice. Concerning the influences of sin, Christianity rejects the view that human being could free himself from inherited sin. Islam, on the other hand, emphasises the individuality of human choice and restricts the domain of sin to certain individuals, times and places, without recognising the possibility of inherited error.⁶⁴ It should be noted that Aoun's view that in Islam God is somehow

⁶¹ For example the Qur'an, 19:88.

⁶² AAH, 42, 81-82, 136-137, 223-224.

⁶³ MI, 71.

⁶⁴ MI, 71-72.

responsible for the existence of sin, is open to criticism. Even in the traditional Islamic understanding of predestination human responsibility is maintained.

Concerning the means of deliverance from sin, Aoun states that in Christianity, it is returning and in Islam, repentance. Christians believe that Jesus' sacrifice of dying on the cross redeemed the humankind. From this redemption of divine love flows the mercy of salvation in which believers are moved from the condition of sin to the condition of restored humanity, to the condition of mercy, and from the fallen condition to that of justified humanity and acquired divinity. Muslims, for their part, believe that sin can be come over by repentance and good deeds. Repentance means moving from the condition of error and sin to that of guided and pious humanity. Further difference between the two religions' views is that Christianity requires a change of nature. Sinful human condition is changed to perfected humanity and then to acquired divinity. Islam, on the other hand, restricts the possibility of perfection to pious human nature. Regardless of the differences, Aoun sees a basic similarity in the way the two religions understand the human participation in obtaining salvation or guidance because both Christians and Muslims presuppose the aid of mercy or divine grace and do not rely only on human being's own ability to follow divine guidance.⁶⁵

Concerning the end of times, Aoun presents the Islamic view very simply: there will be final separation of the pious and the evil. The Christian view is, according to him, more nuanced because it has to strive to find a balance between absolute forgiveness in divine love and absolute human freedom to reject God's call. So Christianity remains oscillating between the final judgement and the universal restoration of all things to divine love.⁶⁶

Khodr says that the original sin, which is revolt against God's lordship, corresponds to the Islamic view that everybody actually lives in a state of spiritual decay. He finds this Islamic view expressed in the Qur'anic saying "the (human) soul certainly incites evil"⁶⁷. According to Khodr, the core of the Qur'anic concept of evil is that human beings' choice to put God out of their lives influences the whole of creation. Sin consists of falling in the wrong of false absolutes, which results in wrongful acts. Any loyalty that displaces God, even if this loyalty is to religion or law, is *shirk*, associating partners to God.⁶⁸ Khodr evidently finds in all this a basic agreement between Christianity and Islam.

Khodr relies on Maximus the Confessor's interpretation about what went wrong in the beginning of human history. According to him, the first human being was given the task to unite to himself all the creation and attain to a perfect union with God, receiving the gift of deification and granting it to the creation in its entirety. The first Adam, however, refused to accomplish this task and Jesus Christ, the second Adam, had to come to fulfil it. In him, "God became human being so that human being could become god." Divinity is implanted in human nature and what is higher than nature is engraved to nature by mercy.⁶⁹

⁶⁵ MI, 72-73.

⁶⁶ MI, 80.

⁶⁷ The Qur'an, 12:53.

⁶⁸ IHC, 175.

⁶⁹ AAH, 22-23, 43-44.

Redemption is accomplished in the mystery of the cross, the only answer to human sin and anxiety. Although the crucifixion is central in Khodr's thinking, he does not explain in detail what happened on the cross. He thinks that it is not necessary to go into all the theological details when talking with Muslims but to expound the crucified Jesus. He makes clear, however, that he does not consider redemption satisfaction to God's anger and is not pleased with any view that emphasises the centrality of suffering. Rather, he sees redemption as consequence of God's love. In fact, he does not think that redemption is conditioned by sin but that God's sacrificial design is independent of the historical contingency of evil.⁷⁰

Khodr ponders on how Jesus' crucifixion could be made understood in the Islamic context. He presents briefly the Islamic version of the crucifixion story which denies that Jesus was killed on the cross and maintains that God saved Jesus by giving his appearance to another man, probably Judas, who was crucified instead of him. Khodr understands the theological reasoning of this version of the story: in Islamic view God does not let his servants to be put to shame because their failure would be also his failure. Nevertheless, Khodr considers Jesus offered by Islam alien to Christianity. Jesus who came down from the cross and refused the cup God offered to him is not the Jesus of the New Testament. Christians have to explain to Muslims that the God they believe in would not approve of the solution offered by Islam. According to Christianity, God carries the cross himself. Khodr also points out that without the cross there is no meaning in the resurrection – and even Muslims believe in Jesus' future resurrection after he has returned to earth to die. As for Christians, they should assure that the cross confirms the resurrection, which is consequence of God's nature, love. It is not an arbitrary end to what happened but a proof that love conquered death.⁷¹

Khodr shares the Eastern fathers' universal eschatological vision according to which Jesus' resurrection will not only continue in resurrection of human beings but is manifested also in matter that turns into light. This change will ultimately take place in the end of times but it has already begun in the mysteries of the church. Nevertheless, according to Khodr, Jesus' saving work is not restricted to the church but is efficacious also in other religious communities, which all in their ways fulfil God's purposes on earth. Especially, Khodr applies this view to Muslims. He seems to believe that Islam has a certain role to play in God's purposes and suggests, referring to some Orthodox thinkers, that Islam is to guard the secret of God and his oneness until the second coming of Christ. Khodr believes that the Christian and Islamic communities will finally become reconciled with each other in the end of time.⁷²

⁷⁰ GHG, 6, 22, 46, 50.

⁷¹ AAH, 44-46.

⁷² 23-25, 84, 86, 149-150. The Orthodox thinkers mentioned by Khodr are Youakim Moubarac, Olivier Lacombe and Olivier Clément.

HUMAN CONDITION FROM THE MUSLIM POINT OF VIEW: ERROR AND GUIDANCE/REDEMPTION

Fadlallah's understanding of human condition, the nature of sin and human being's relationship to God are traditionally Shiite. He maintains that everyone is born according to *fitra*,⁷³ the pure original nature of human being, which is essentially good. Sin is only an accidental state, a state of imbalance in thoughts and impulses. Fadlallah thinks that no-one sins because his soul is in constant rebellion but rather because of bad education, distorted culture or carelessness and weak will. Fadlallah maintains that all human beings - except prophets and friends of God who are preserved from error - are created weak and commit sin. He emphasises that human being is free to choose his actions and able to correct his ways. Sin is not his curse or fate and Satan is not able to paralyse his will but his whispering can be countered by alertness and exertion of will.⁷⁴

Fadlallah's traditional view of human condition does not include any need for salvation or redemption in Christian meaning. Instead, human being needs God's guidance. In a typically Shiite way, Fadlallah defends human freedom of choice and renounces all views that suppose God's arbitrary predestination.⁷⁵ He thinks that God has laid ways of guidance and error in the natural courses of the world. He has given human beings intellect and senses and wants them to use them in the path of guidance. Besides, he has sent prophets to teach them. So God has left things to go their natural way and if someone chooses error, God leaves him to his own devices.⁷⁶ Nevertheless, Fadlallah emphasises that there is always possibility for repentance. He quotes several verses of the Qur'an⁷⁷ to show that people can, in any time of their life, return to God and straighten their ways. God forgives those who sincerely repent, because he loves them, and he abolishes all their past sins.⁷⁸

Fadlallah discusses only seldom Christian understanding of salvation and Jesus' task as Saviour. He does not see any reason why God should suffer to redeem the humankind and atone for the original sin. He is also reluctant to discuss the different interpretations of Islam and Christianity concerning the end of Jesus' earthly life. He does not present even any Islamic view as the only right one but seems to consider possible both the traditional view that Jesus was taken alive to heaven and the rationalistic interpretation of *Mahmud Shaltut*, the former sheikh of al-Azhar, that Jesus died in a natural way and God took him to himself after that. Fadlallah thinks that Christians and Muslims should not

⁷³ According to traditional Islamic notion *fitra* is God-consciousness that God creates in all human beings. Islam is the perfect representation of this primordial religion of all humanity. See e.g. Waardenburg 1999, 19.

⁷⁴ IH, 344-345, 432-434; BHF, 175, 190.

⁷⁵ Shiites stress each individual's responsibility for his own actions and God's justice in judging them. This was originally the view supported by the Mu'tazila, in the formative period of Islamic theology in the fourth and fifth centuries, against the Ash'ari position that inclined more towards predestination and was adopted by many Sunnis. See e.g. Momen 1985, 176-178.

⁷⁶ BHF, 342-344.

⁷⁷ 42:25, 39:53, 4:48.

⁷⁸ BHF, 190-191.

argue about what happened to Jesus and whether he died or not, because they agree on his being now with God in heaven.⁷⁹

Fadlallah does not write much about eschatology and the afterlife although it is clear that he believes in Paradise and Hell. He stresses that human beings make their eternal destiny themselves. If they use their time on earth wisely, they make it a price for eternal life in Paradise, and if they use it for disobedience, it will lead them to the everlasting fire of Hell. It seems that Fadlallah thinks that only Muslims can reach eternal life in Paradise. However, he rarely discusses this subject and does not refer to it at all in the context of Christian-Muslim dialogue. Fadlallah's preference to the ethical and this-worldly is clearly seen in his firm belief that religion does not just talk about the other-worldly Paradise but it should also motivate both Muslims and Christians to strive to realise "the concrete model of Paradise" on earth.⁸⁰

Like the other authors, **Ayoub** points out that Islam does not have any doctrine about sinful humankind in need of redemption. Sin is, according to Islam, part of the human mentality, so that human beings naturally commit sin. In its deepest meaning, sin is arrogance, human being's presumption that he is God or equal to God. Ayoub thinks that this arrogance is the closest Islamic equivalent to the original sin. The Qur'an attributes it to Satan who also incited Adam and his mate to seek immortality and absolute power that are God's attributes. Although Ayoub makes clear that Islam does not have the same kind of doctrine of redemption as Christianity, he maintains that there is redemption or salvation in Islam. He understands salvation in a very broad way. It is, according to him, spiritual healing and wholeness of human life. It is returning to human being's real nature, *fitra*, and restoration of human life and human being's relationship with God to its ideal perfection.⁸¹

Ayoub perceives two modes of redemption both in Christianity and in Islam. In Christianity, the first is redemption through death and spilling of blood on the cross as the sacrifice fulfilling all the previous sacrifices performed in the temple. The other mode is that of the Eastern church that understands redemption as victory over death by death and deification of human being. It is interesting that Ayoub prefers the Eastern mode and does not seem to have any problem with the concept of deification. In Islam, the first mode of redemption is individual repentance and expiation of one's sins by actions like prayer, fasting and providing for the poor. The second mode is intercession, and Ayoub considers it more important than the first one because it permeates the Islamic life deeply and is close to the concept of salvation of the other monotheistic religions. According to the Islamic tradition, the prophet Muhammad is the greatest intercessor who will intercede on the last day not only for Muslims but the whole creation. In a different context, Ayoub discusses another means of salvation, God's revelation. He emphasises the salvific role of God's word especially in connection with the story of Adam who did

⁷⁹ AHIM, 26, 234. About Shaltut's fatwa and the reactions it provoked see e.g. Schumann 1975, 140-142; Leirvik 1999, 143-144.

⁸⁰ AHIM, 96, 346-347, 385, 387, 159.

⁸¹ DAMI1, 62, 122, 164, 168.

not attain to salvation and forgiveness only through his repentance but also because he received revelation from God.⁸²

Ayoub's understanding of salvation presupposes many different saviours. As examples of them he mentions Tammuz, mythological god who dies and rises again, Isaiah's suffering servant of God, Jesus, Muhammad and Husayn, Muhammad's martyred grandson. He seems to consider them saviours in the meaning that they are teachers, examples and intercessors. In fact, Ayoub thinks that everyone can be in some sense a saviour, everyone who needs salvation and plays some role in realising it. Here, salvation is broadly understood as all action improving human societies.⁸³

Ayoub writes extensively about the crucifixion story. He does not accept the theories of substitution because he insists that it is mocking God's justice to claim that God gave Jesus' appearance to someone else and let him die instead of him. Of the different interpretations offered by the Islamic tradition, he seems to prefer the theory that God did not make anyone look like Jesus but Jews just killed someone else and claimed that they had killed Jesus. Ayoub emphasises that the Qur'an does not deny that Jesus really died. He seems to have a positive view about the modern interpretations that Jesus' raising to heaven means either that only his soul was raised to God after he had died in a natural way or that it is a metaphorical way to refer to the distinguished position that God gave to him. However, Ayoub is not very interested in the historical dimension of the end of Jesus' life on earth. Rather, he prefers all interpretations offered by the Islamic tradition that give to the crucifixion episode spiritual meanings transcending history. This kind of interpretations he finds especially from the mystics who have considered Jesus' death and raising to heaven models of dying to worldly passions and spiritual rising to heaven. In fact, he claims that the Qur'anic denial of the fact of Jesus' crucifixion does not concern history at all. Instead, it is a theological denial of human beings' ability to destroy God's word. Interpreting the Qur'anic denial of Jesus' crucifixion only as a theological denial, Ayoub seems to leave open the possibility of Jesus' real death on the cross, which is an exceptional view for a Muslim. Ayoub concludes that the extreme positions taken by Muslims and Christians about the crucifixion are far from each other. Nevertheless, the difference is above all terminological and not on the level of meaning.⁸⁴

Ayoub is quite prepared to call Jesus saviour if the word is understood more generally than is traditionally done in Christianity. Wanting to develop Islamic Christology, he interprets Jesus' salvific role at least in three different ways. Firstly, Jesus is saviour in the sense that he mediated God's revelation to humankind and helped in that way to save it from error and go forward in the path of God. Secondly, Ayoub connects Jesus' saving role to his miracles, healings and raising of the dead, which he interprets metaphorically. Thirdly, Ayoub sees Jesus as an eschatological saviour. He maintains that the Islamic and Christian views about redemption come together in eschatology because both religions expect final redemption which means getting definitive victory over the powers of evil. Islamic tradition maintains that Jesus has a significant role in the last events. Ayoub's

⁸² DAMI1, 123, 165-166, 168-169.

⁸³ DAMI1, 164-165, 173.

⁸⁴ DAMI1, 89, 95-96, 98-100, 102-104, 106, 111-113.

interpretation of the traditional accounts of the last events is that Jesus will finally destroy all the obstacles between Islam and Christianity, and “this is redemption”.⁸⁵ This view of eschatological reconciliation has some resemblance with that of Khodr.

Ayoub compares in one of his writings the eschatological legends of Jews, Christians and Muslims. He maintains that if legends are not taken as history and poems as logic, the eschatology of the three monotheistic religions can have an important message also for the present time: the assurance that God, the Creator of the world, will not abandon his creation but all suffering will only prepare the way for a perfect restoration. Ayoub believes in the final victory of the absolute good, that is God, over all the powers of evil in the end of times. What it means for individuals, is not clear. He does not discuss the afterlife and individual destinies of human beings. Nevertheless, Ayoub does not restrict salvation to the Muslim community but maintains that there are believers in all religious communities.⁸⁶

THEOLOGY OF RELIGION OF THE MUSLIM AUTHORS

Fadlallah does not accept the view that there is a fundamental unity behind all the seemingly different religions. According to him this view is not acceptable to reason. There are real differences between religions and these differences have to be taken seriously and discussed so that the truth can be found out.⁸⁷ He seems to think that only Muslims can attain to eternal life in Paradise because he points out that People of the Book are not Muslims and quotes immediately afterwards the Qur’anic warning that “If anyone desires a religion other than Islam never will it be accepted of him: and in the Hereafter he will be in the ranks of those who have lost.”⁸⁸ However, Fadlallah rarely refers to this subject and in fact, he finds many elements of truth in Christianity. He even claims that differences between Islam and Christianity do not relate to essential teachings of the two religions but only to details.⁸⁹ In his dialogue with Christians, he is clearly orientated towards practical issues rather than theology and seems to think that there is sufficient truth in Christianity for Christians to co-operate with Muslims.

Unlike the majority of Muslim scholars Fadlallah affirms that Christians are monotheists. Fadlallah stresses the openminded attitude of Islam towards Christianity and Judaism, pointing out that Islam recognises the earlier prophets and the revelation given to them whereas Christians and Jews do not recognise Muhammad as a prophet and the Qur'an as God's revelation.⁹⁰ This claim is problematical because Fadlallah does not in fact accept Christians' own understanding of their revelation and doctrines but supposes their having been corrupted from their original form, at least to some extent.⁹¹ He recognises not only Christianity but also Judaism as a religion founded on divine revelation. Nevertheless,

⁸⁵ DAMI1, 32, 62, 171-172.

⁸⁶ DAMI1, 169, 198.

⁸⁷ AHIM, 193-194.

⁸⁸ BHF, 346-347. The quotation of the Qur’an is from 3:85.

⁸⁹ AHIM, 424-425.

⁹⁰ AHIM, xiv, 59-60, 73, 94, 104, 197, 293-294.

⁹¹ See e.g. AHIM, 377-378.

this recognition is mainly theoretical because due to political reasons Fadlallah has a very low opinion of the contemporary Jews.⁹² Since he only discusses the three monotheistic religions it is difficult to make any definitive conclusions of his views concerning other religions. It is obvious, though, that he evaluates religions according to their conception of God. It seems that his view of religions conforms to the traditional Islamic way of dividing religions hierarchically to three categories: Muslims, People of the Book and polytheists.⁹³ Therefore Fadlallah's rather tolerant attitude to Christianity and - at least in principle - to Judaism does not necessarily extend to other religions.

Fadlallah believes in the unity of the truth and in a possibility to find the truth by rational thinking. Since he also believes that Islam represents this truth, it is only to be expected that he takes an intense interest in Islamic da'wa⁹⁴. Fadlallah does not want to separate dialogue from da'wa but sees the former as a part of the latter. What is interesting is that he takes for granted also Christians' right to missionary activities among Muslims. He just hopes that both religions would compete with each other using peaceful and ethically acceptable methods.⁹⁵

Ayoub bases his theology of religion on Islamic mysticism that has traditionally been quite open towards other religions. Among the religions of the world, Ayoub reserves a special place to Christianity and Judaism alongside with Islam. He sees close links between these three religions that are founded on God's revelation; he even applies the term People of the Book to all of them, Islam included. However, Ayoub's open attitude is not restricted to these three religions. He supports his wide inclusivism with the Qur'anic verse 2:62: "Those who believe (in the Qur'an). And those who follow the Jewish (scriptures), and the Christians and the Sabians, any who believe in Allah and the Last Day, and work righteousness, shall have their reward with their Lord[,] on them shall be no fear, nor shall they grieve." Majority of the Muslim interpreters of the Qur'an explain that this verse means only those Jews, Christians and Sabians, who became Muslims, but Ayoub takes the verse at its face value and understands it as a promise of a reward in the afterlife to all who believe in God and do good, irrespective of their religious affiliation. Thus, Ayoub claims that faith in one God is more fundamental than possession of holy scriptures. He believes that real faith can be found outside the context of the three monotheistic religions, for instance among the representatives of Hinduism and Buddhism. According to him the Sabians in the aforementioned verse of the Qur'an can be taken as representatives of all those communities that believe in one God without

⁹² AHIM, 32-34.

⁹³ This was the typical way of dividing religions in medieval Islamic literature. It was not a very strict division because some religions, like zoroastrianism, were seen as a kind of a subclass of People of the Book and it was also considered possible that there were individual believers in one God among the polytheists. See e.g. Waardenburg 1999, 18-19, 57.

⁹⁴ Muslims usually insist on making a clear separation between Christian missionary activity and their own work aiming at spreading the message of Islam. They want to make this clear also on terminological level, calling the Christian activities mission and their own work da'wa, "call (to Islam)." All the authors studied in this research have adopted this terminological distinction.

⁹⁵ AHIM, vi, xiv, 24, 92.

having received holy books. They have received another kind of revelation in the form of legends, mythology and philosophy.⁹⁶

Ayoub claims that there are many ways to the one and same God. Unlike Fadlallah, he does not believe that the truth could be defined by using rational methods. Instead, he insists that it is greater than all human notions, doctrines and philosophies. Doctrinal systems narrow down dynamic faith experience and lead to strife. Instead of following doctrines, people should follow the prophets, the wise and the saints of different religions. In spite of his tolerant attitude to different religions, Ayoub does not accept everything in them. He seems to understand different doctrinal systems as a kind of fall from an original relationship between God and human beings. This resembles the widespread notion of Muslims that different religions are corruptions of pure primordial monotheism. According to Ayoub, prophets and saints are important exactly because they lead people back to God and to a realisation of their original nature, *fiṭra*. Although he criticises doctrinal systems, Ayoub bases his own evaluation of religions on certain doctrines. Monotheism and God's transcendence are among the most important of them. However, his ultimate criterion for real faith is that it has to be faith in a personal divine being. Accordingly, those Buddhists, who put their trust in Buddha's saving grace, and Hindu mystics, who believe in a personal deity, are real believers, for him, even though their conceptions of God might be somewhat erroneous. Instead, Zen-Buddhism and Vedantic philosophy do not fulfill his criterion of real faith.⁹⁷

It might be argued that in spite of its unusually wide inclusivism, Ayoub's theology of religion retains the basic frame of traditional Islamic classification of religions. Islam is, after all, the purest religion to him and Christianity and Judaism do come next in the hierarchy before the other religions. His originality lies in the fact that he considers not monotheism as such but a faith and trust in a personal being as the ultimate criterion of true faith.

Ayoub's belief that there are many different paths to God leads him to refute the necessity of either mission or *da'wa*. What is needed, according to him, is inter-faith dialogue. Dialogue should not include attempts to convince others of the truth of one's own religion but it should aim at communion of faith. Nevertheless, Ayoub's vision includes elements of a certain kind of *da'wa* because he calls representatives of all religions to return to Abraham's faith, faith that existed before Judaism, Christianity, Islam and all their doctrines. All people including Muslims should return to this primordial faith.⁹⁸ Obviously Ayoub means that they should strive for this in the context of their own communities.

THEOLOGY OF RELIGION OF THE CHRISTIAN AUTHORS

Khodr's theology of religion is clearly inclusive. He believes that salvation is through Christ alone but Christ is present as it were incognito also in other religions than

⁹⁶ DAMI1, 24, 163-164; DAMI2, 9, 20.

⁹⁷ DAMI1, 11, 15-17, 22, 24.

⁹⁸ DAMI1, 23-25, 209.

Christianity. According to him, Christ's resurrection produces salvation and fills everything with his plenitude. The church mediates this salvation but God's freedom is such that he can raise prophets also outside the sociological frontiers of the church. This is done by the Holy Spirit who makes Christ present even in other religions than Christianity. It is not significant if some religions consider themselves incompatible with the Gospel because Christ can act even where he is degraded. When Brahmins, Buddhists or Muslims read their scriptures they receive Christ himself as a light and when people die defending what they believe to be true they are in union with Christ. Khodr finds support to his views from certain biblical passages and patristic writers.⁹⁹

There is a certain ambivalence in Khodr's attitude to other religions as theological, ritual and ethical totalities. On the one hand, he seems to regard them as God's plan for certain peoples. Thus he speaks, for instance, of Muslims fulfilling their pilgrimage rites and remembering God "the way he guided them". He also believes that all religions have some special contribution to make in preparing the humanity to meet their Lord in the end of history. Plurality of religions is a secret and part of God's pedagogical plan to lead humanity. On the other hand, Khodr does not consider other religions ways of salvation in themselves. They do not form "divinely legitimate spiritual economies". Khodr suggests that they might be comparable to the old covenant and relativises the position of the old covenant, at least to a certain extent, by affirming that there are messianic elements also in "paganism" and that they are legitimately linked to the coming of Christ.¹⁰⁰ On the whole it seems that he does not value other religions as totalities but only to the extent to which he discovers the hidden presence of Christ in them.

Referring to Paul's symbolical interpretation of the veil that covered Moses' head¹⁰¹ and applying it to followers of other religions, Khodr explains that they cannot admit the temporary nature of their religions because their minds are clouded. He clearly sees other religions full of potential but still lacking compared to Christianity. He expresses this in an interesting way when he suggests that the Qur'an might be called the Gospel's "antitype". That is, it could be considered as a picture of the Gospel like bread and wine are only pictures of the Lord's body and blood before their transformation.¹⁰² The implication is that just like the bread and the wine need the Holy Spirit to transform them Islam needs the touch of the same Spirit to see clearly without a veil.

Khodr's ultimate answer to the question of religious plurality is eschatological. As different religions prepare in their own special ways humanity's meeting with the glorified body of Christ, Christians should patiently wait for the fulfillment of God's plan in the second coming of Christ when everything is recapitulated to him.¹⁰³ All in all, Khodr's theology of religion has a lot in common with Ayoub's views. Both solve the

⁹⁹ CMP, 198-200; AAH, 145. Khodr refers e.g. to Paul's speech to the Athenians (Acts 17:22-24), Noah's covenant, Justin Martyr, Clement of Alexandria, Origen, Gregory of Nazianzos and Augustine.

¹⁰⁰ AAH, 16, 24, 135, 145-147.

¹⁰¹ 2. Cor. 3:12-15.

¹⁰² AAH, 146-147.

¹⁰³ AAH, 24-25; CMP, 199, 201.

problem of religious diversity by appealing to a spiritual reality that transcends the differences and for both God's oneness is a unifying factor behind all human diversity.

Khodr's conception of Christian mission is in line with his inclusive theology of religions. He does not consider it necessary to try to get new members to the church because people will come there themselves when they feel like being at their Father's home there. Instead, he understands mission as "waking up Christ who sleeps in the night of religions" which means releasing the Christlike values of other religions. In realising this, Christians' attitude should be characterised by peaceful, patient obedience to God's plan and humbleness free from all confessional and cultural arrogance, as well as readiness to learn from other religions. Khodr refutes all attempts to convert the other but he claims, nevertheless, that all Christians have a responsibility to bear witness of the Truth. He seems to think that this witnessing can best be done in inter-faith dialogue, a task Khodr considers given to him by God.¹⁰⁴

Aoun accepts religious plurality as a secret of God's will and argues that Jesus in whom Christians believe is a challenge to all who attempt to monopolize him according to their own expectations and limited experience of God. If Christians believe in Jesus, they cannot dominate other religions and look down on them but they have to accept the others inspite of doctrinal disagreements they have with them.¹⁰⁵

Aoun maintains that the differences between Islam and Christianity concerning the concept of divine grace are on the level of theological expression. Christianity and Islam form distinct theological structures that have different conceptions of how God manifests his grace and how these manifestations affect people, even though on the level of experience people are not aware of doctrinal distinctions but receive the same grace in the same way. Somehow, he understands religious plurality as God's will but he does not say directly that God has some kind of plan that demands it. However, even if Aoun might not see God as the initiator of religious plurality, he believes him to be its preserver.¹⁰⁶

According to Aoun, Muslims and Christians have to face a contradiction between affirming the truth of one's own religion and admitting, even if only relatively, the worth and legitimacy of the other's religion. This means a relative and conditional admittance of the elements of truth in the other's religion. The admittance is relative because a total acceptance would nullify the truth of one's own religion and it is conditional because neither party can accept those elements in the other's religion that abrogate their own. Members of both religions believe in the superiority, universality and finality of their own religion. Therefore their openness towards the other is actually openness towards themselves. Thus Christians are open towards what they consider as an Arabian version of Christianity and Muslims are open towards what they consider as a version of Islam excessive in its respect to one of the prophets.¹⁰⁷

¹⁰⁴ AAH, 57, 73, 200-202.

¹⁰⁵ MI, 5; ML, 100.

¹⁰⁶ RR, 239-240, 243-244.

¹⁰⁷ MI, 81-84.

Aoun thinks that the tension between certainty of the truth and affirming the plurality of means to achieve this certainty is a perpetual element in the Christian-Muslim dialogue. He considers it problematical that the representatives of the two religions believe in the unity of the truth in an uncompromising way. Their conception of the unity of the truth makes them justify religious plurality by referring to humanity's original unity and expecting a final fusion of all different views in the end of history. In other words, they justify the plurality by nullifying it. Aoun's solution to this dilemma is that Muslims and Christians should adopt a more open understanding of the truth from the modern western thinking. That would correct Christian and Islamic conceptions of the truth in two ways. Firstly, they would accept plurality as an original and permanent state of affairs. Secondly, they would understand the truth as an object of continual search and would not invalidate either the diversity of contents given to it or the saving embracing of some of these manifested contents.¹⁰⁸

All the other authors studied in this research solve the problem of religious plurality in the way criticised by Aoun, that is, either by explaining it as some kind of fall from an original unity or expecting an eschatological reconciliation. On the other hand, it might be argued that Aoun's own solution does not really explain religious plurality but only demands that it has to be accepted as a given fact. Besides, Aoun is not entirely free from unifying explanations himself since he sees the one God and his mysterious will behind human diversity. His position could be classified as a kind of wide inclusivism that borders on theocentric pluralism.

It is hardly surprising that Aoun's theology of religion leads him to oppose activities aiming at the other's conversion. This does not mean, however, that he rejects mission. According to him, the real evangelisation in today's Lebanon is living according to Christ's message and calling Muslims to dialogue and mutual edification. Christians should not try to convert Muslims but to live their daily lives demonstrating Christ's lordship in their thinking and behaviour. Christ himself will call whom he wills.¹⁰⁹ This understanding of mission as Christian presence and dialogue has many points of contact with Khodr's and Ayoub's views.

¹⁰⁸ MI, 84-85, 100-102.

¹⁰⁹ ML, 148-149.

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