

The importance of a paradigm shift in understanding Christianity and Islam

This article is developed from a contribution to a *Festschrift* for Paul Jackson,¹ an Australian Catholic priest and member of the Jesuits, who has devoted his life since 1976 to studying and making better known the spiritual teachings of Sharafuddin Maneri of Bihar (d.1381), the author, amongst other things, of the acclaimed *Maktubat-i Sadi* (The Hundred Letters), “a whole exposition of the Sufi path” written during 1346-1347. Jackson, a Christian trained in the spiritual path of the Society of Jesus, has written about the way in which his own spiritual training and journey had enabled him to penetrate deeper into the teachings of Maneri. He noted, “Time and again I was confronted with a real challenge to understand something Maneri was saying until an insight, based on my own experience, shed instant light on what he wanted to convey. Nowadays, we have synchronised swimming events in the Olympic Games and elsewhere. It seemed to me that Maneri and I had what might be termed ‘synchronised spiritualities’”.²

This is a profound insight into Christian-Muslim relations, and indeed relations between all those who worship God: the patterns of worship vary and the spiritual paths have their own specificities and character, but the object of worship is the same and therefore there should be a reverberation within the heart of the believer when encountering another authentic spiritual path. The heart of the believer, through which the loving relationship with God flows, is both the open receptacle and the transmitter of that relationship, and thus two hearts, formed by different spiritual paths but in service of the one God, have a natural affinity and capacity for mutual spiritual insight. “Heart chattering to heart”, as we might translate the well-known Christian aphorism, *cor ad cor loquitur*.³ The heart, of course, understood as the dwelling place of the Spirit of God, who “cries out for us with sighs too deep for words”.⁴

Reflecting on this from a Catholic perspective, one might be reminded of the words of Pope John Paul II in relation to the World Day of Prayer for Peace at Assisi,⁵ which attracted much comment and media attention, and on which he expounded his approach in his Christmas Address to the Roman Curia that same year.⁶ Here he said, “Every authentic prayer is under the influence of the Spirit... We can indeed maintain that every authentic prayer is called forth by the Holy Spirit, who is mysteriously present in the heart of every person”.⁷ If then, just like the breath that quickens every human life, the one and only Spirit of God indwells every human heart, we can see the underlying thrust of Paul Jackson’s experience of “synchronised spiritualities”, but what of a wider context for those who seek to grow in a deeper understanding of the faith of another?

¹ *Lord the air smells good*, Bangalore, 2018 isbn 978-93-86516-41-1

² “Synchronised Spiritualities”, Paul Jackson, in Christian W. Troll and C.T.R. Hower (eds), *Christian Lives Given to the Study of Islam*, New York: Fordham University Press, 2012, p. 110

³ With due acknowledgement to St Augustine, St Francis de Sales and John Henry Newman.

⁴ Romans 8:26

⁵ 27 October 1986

⁶ Held on 22 December 1986 and reported in *L'Osservatore Romano* (English edition) on 5 January 1987.

⁷ See text also in *Interreligious Dialogue: the official teaching of the Catholic Church (1963-1995)*, ed. Francesco Gioia, Boston: Pauline Books and Media, 1997, p. 359-367, here: p. 366.

The experience of faith, the commitment of the heart, demands in the human *psyche* a growth in rational understanding (*fides quaerens intellectum*), therefore we might ask how the Spirit moves us to deepen our intellectual grasp of another faith too.

Delineating the question

Theology is the attempt to speak about God, hopefully with ever-deeper clarity of insight and expression, but all our speech and writing is limited by the language, conceptual framework, time and context in which we live. All our theology is the best attempt that we can make to speak about something that lies utterly beyond our comprehension. God is thus ineffable, “in light inaccessible hid from our eyes” as the hymn-writer might put it, or transcategorical, to use a philosophical term: human beings do not possess the categories of knowledge or expression to stretch into ‘the world of God’. It is as though we are trying to explain a colour to someone born blind, who has never seen anything and thus cannot possess the category ‘colour’. All that we can do is to try to give the merest insight into a colour by the use of a category that the person does have, such as sound. Try to imagine a colour like scarlet and then think of a sound that would convey something of it to a person born blind: that is our problem when we attempt to speak about God. We have to use human language and categories because that is all that we have, but we are trying to speak about the divine category of ‘colour’ using the human category of ‘sound’.

We can now refine our definition of theology: it is the attempt to speak about God as clearly as possible using human language and categories to speak about divine categories, knowing that our best attempts are doomed to be confined by our human, earthly limits. Theology is seeking to develop a code of speech that avoids as many errors as possible, whilst striving to speak about that which lies beyond our grasp. No wonder that both Christian and Muslim theological traditions highlight the utility of the *apophatic* style of argument, which proceeds by negatives, explaining ‘what God is not’ in the hope of delineating ever more tightly a conceptual space in which the unknowable God might be ‘located’. Such a theology operates like drawing ever more precise tangents to circumscribe a space that can only be understood by those lines that pass it by and fail to penetrate it.

This is a real challenge for believers because it means that all the most cherished expressions of our faith are also limited by our language and categories of knowledge. When we say, for example, ‘God is one’, we know that, in human categories, we are speaking of the uniqueness, otherness and indivisibility of God who, in no sense, is ‘many’, but we cannot conceive of what ‘oneness’ might be like in the divine categories of God. Armed with an awareness of this limitation, we can now proceed to the conceptual frameworks that we build in which to speak about the two religions of Christianity and Islam.

Two Muslim paradigms: first, that of *islam*/Islam

A paradigm is a model or framework in which concepts are brought into a relationship so as to build and support a system of knowledge and the expression thereof. The Muslim paradigm is founded on an understanding that God is the only eternally existing being and that everything that exists, other than God, is created by God. God's faculty of communication, the effective cause of all created things and the guidance given to them, is expressed by the term 'the Word/Speech of God' (*kalam allah*). This faculty is not divine but it cannot be separated from God. God is speaking the *kalam allah*, which can be distinguished but not separated from God. We have here a good example of the transcategorical nature of our knowledge of God; to talk of 'God speaking the Word of God' has some analogous meaning in our finite, human categories of knowledge but we cannot conceive of what this means from the infinite perspective of God.

Throughout all times, this Word of God has been sent to the world in various ways,⁸ but most notably to guide human beings through the prophets in the form of revelation. The first revelation was sent to Prophet Adam, to be followed by an unknown number of prophets,⁹ culminating in the final revelation, which was sent to Prophet Muhammad.¹⁰ Some of these prophets received a Book or scripture, which conveyed the Word of God, according to divine decree, in the language that the receiving prophet understood; the last of these scriptures was the Qur'an.¹¹ It is essential to note the consistency here expressed: one God, one humankind; God is the God of all humankind and not the God of any group amongst them. This leads on to one human project; to worship, obey, serve and love God, which necessarily means that the essence of the guidance sent by God to humankind must be consistent and thus the same, although particularities may differ. To exemplify this: Jews and Muslims are given the same essential rules about slaughtering animals to eat (an approved animal, recognition that its life belongs to God, and quick and 'painless' slaughter whilst shedding its blood) whilst the particularities can be different (Judaism approves only animals that chew the cud and have cloven hoofs, while Islam forbids only the pig and animals that eat other animals).

Human beings, in Muslim understanding, are capable of living the kind of life commanded by God; a life guided by the revealed Word of God and exemplified by the life of the sinless prophet to whom it was sent. There is no fundamental flaw in human nature; no doctrine of Original Sin. As Plato held, human beings can be educated to goodness and live a good life. We have no need of a saviour to do something for us that we cannot do for ourselves. Human life is to be lived in obedience to the divine commandments and observation of the divine prohibitions as exemplified throughout human history by the revelations that were sent and the prophetic examples that were

⁸ See Q. 16:67 and also Q. 41:12; 99:4

⁹ In one Hadith, Prophet Muhammad mentions the number of 124,000 prophets.

¹⁰ The Qur'an mentions twenty-five prophets by name, including Jesus and twenty other biblical figures.

¹¹ Five scriptures are mentioned by name in the Qur'an, being those sent to Abraham, Moses, David, Jesus and Muhammad.

shaped by them. We can refer to this way of life (*din*) in the generic sense as *islam*, the final, universal, rendition of which is contained in the Qur'an sent to, and exemplified by, Prophet Muhammad and thus the generic is made particular in Islam for all times thereafter.

Two Muslim paradigms: second, that of the *din* of Jesus

As is clear from the first of our Muslim paradigms, there is consistency in revelation, prophetic nature and character, way of life (*din*), and the human condition and project throughout all humankind in all ages. Jesus and his *din* fit into this consistent pattern. The Qur'an and Islamic scholarship make clear that Jesus is a creature of God, who could have been destroyed by God had God so willed;¹² he is a servant of God,¹³ a prophet sent exclusively to the Children of Israel,¹⁴ the recipient of a scripture sent by God called the *Injil*,¹⁵ who taught the worship of God alone,¹⁶ who was not crucified to death, buried or resurrected to eternal life,¹⁷ but “taken up to God” to return again at God’s command in the End Times to complete his earthly mission,¹⁸ at the end of which, he will die his one and only death, be buried alongside Muhammad in Madina, where he will await the General Resurrection with all other human beings.

Islam could never accept that there was anything defective in Prophet Jesus, the *Injil* with which he was sent, or the *din* that he established on earth, which was followed by at least some of his immediate circle of disciples. The principle of consistency means that, had Jesus been alive at the time of Muhammad and the Qur'an, he would have recognised the authenticity of the message and become a follower of Muhammad and his *din*. Given that several key elements of mainstream Christianity as it has developed are called into severe question, at least, by the Qur'an and Islamic scholarship: viz., doctrines of Trinity (a suspicion of polytheism), Incarnation (this breaches the absolute transcendence of God), Salvation (everyone must earn their own place in heaven) and human beings ultimately partaking of the divine nature (*theosis*),¹⁹ then these must be the results of Christians misunderstanding or deviating from the pure message of Jesus. Again, the principle of consistency means that Muslims, basing their knowledge on Qur'an and Muhammad, must know best what it was that Jesus taught.

It can now be seen clearly that a Muslim, working within an Islamic paradigm of Prophet Jesus and the *din* that he brought, has a certain understanding of that presumed ‘pure Christianity’ but cannot, on this basis, come to any real understanding of Christianity as it is understood and practised by contemporary Christians. To see the

¹² Q. 5:17. For a full summary of the Prophet Jesus according to the Qur'an see: <https://www.chrishewer.org/>, UI Course, Part Four, Section 7.

¹³ Q. 4:172

¹⁴ Q. 3:49

¹⁵ Q. 3:48

¹⁶ Q. 5:117

¹⁷ Q. 4: 157-159

¹⁸ Q. 43:61-68

¹⁹ Q. 4:171; 5:73; 112:3; 19:34-36

magnitude of the problem, we need to look at a Christian paradigm of Christianity and thus explore some of the differences.

A Christian paradigm of Christianity

Christian theology, like all theology, must struggle to find codes of speech to speak about that which the human being in this life cannot possibly fully know or understand. This struggle begins immediately after the death, resurrection to eternal life and ascension of Jesus, although there are traces of disciples working at it even during the lifetime of Jesus. It is worked out, not just based on the life of Jesus, but on the totality of his life and teaching seen through the lens of two extraordinary experiences: that of the post-resurrection appearances of Jesus and of the unleashing of the power of God in the lives of the believers on the Day of Pentecost. To understand even the development of the New Testament it is necessary to take all these elements into consideration. The four gospels, for example, are not eye-witness *reportage* of the life and teaching of Jesus, but divinely-inspired, theological, edited, writings, written in a language that Jesus did not speak, addressed to different audiences, based on elements of Jesus' teaching passed on orally and in earlier written collections. Each gospel has its own theological shape devised, in the main, by principal authors, who very likely did not know the Palestinian Jesus personally, and who were writing from forty to seventy years after his death. Further, the authentic letters of Paul, which comprise the earliest writings in the New Testament and are so foundational in developing Christian theology, were written by a man who never met the Palestinian Jesus either. This connotes a totally different understanding of scripture to the 'sent down' (*tanzil*) nature of the Qur'an. This Christian scripture is compiled under the guidance of the Spirit of God dwelling in the hearts of the transmitters, authors and editors. It is written 'with the eyes of faith' by believers who have experienced the power of the Holy Spirit and belong to a community founded on encounters with the resurrected Christ. It is thus belief seeking to express itself theologically in writing. The ultimate decision about which writings were included in the New Testament was made by the Christian community, under the guidance of the Spirit of God, during the first three centuries after Jesus.

In centre position in the Christian paradigm stands the Incarnation; here is the revelation of God uniquely written 'in flesh language' in the human Jesus of Nazareth. He is, in his person, the Word of God, which is 'spoken' in his human nature. He is not the bearer of a revelation or the conveyor of a scripture; he *is* the revelation in his humanity, in every word, deed, feeling and passion. The centrality of this can be seen in that it gives Christians an understanding of an ever-expanding revelation, in the sense that the more that we grow over the centuries in knowledge about what it is to be human, the deeper the insights that we have into the revelation of God in Christ Jesus. It also follows that a principal means of unpacking the meaning of the message is to weigh it in the human heart, under the guidance of divine inspiration mediated through conscience. Christian faith and theology are based on more than just the biblical scripture; this has been explored and its meaning refined through two thousand years of

tradition within the Christian community, through the use of human reason and, critically, the experience of the ‘warmed heart’ of the believer, the dwelling-place of divine inspiration, in conscience directly before God. These are sometimes called the four ‘sources’ of Christian theology: scripture, tradition, reason and experience, and the weight given to each of them varies between different Christian traditions.

Christian theology had to grapple with various issues in the early centuries after the time of Jesus. By all accounts, Jesus and his immediate group of disciples continued to worship according to Jewish practice. Christian scholars speak of ‘the parting of the ways’ with Judaism during the first century. In this there were ‘push factors’, Jews saying, in effect, if you believe that, or cease to practise that, then you are no longer part of this community, and ‘pull factors’, followers of Jesus saying, in effect, we have been liberated by Jesus from, and thus no longer identify with, central aspects of Jewish belief and practice; examples from the earliest period would be the Jewish dietary laws²⁰ and the practice of male circumcision.²¹ The first uniquely Christian creed was to say “Jesus is Lord”; Lord, *Kurios* in Greek, is the term used to translate *Adonai* in Hebrew, which in Jewish usage is spoken when the Hebrew term for God is read. No Jew can say “Jesus is God” or identify Jesus with God, which makes this creed uniquely Christian and thus it marks a signal step in the parting of the ways.

The development of a code of speech for speaking about Jesus and God developed greatly once Christian faith was embraced by those trained in Greek philosophy. To the Greek mind, a saying such as “Jesus is Lord” was imprecise; did it mean that heaven was empty when Jesus was on earth, or that God died on the cross and remained in the tomb for three days? It could also lead to talk of two gods: God and Jesus, which would be utterly unacceptable and abhorrent to Jewish or Christian faith and theology. A code of speech had to be developed that preserved the absolute oneness of God and yet allowed room to speak of Jesus in the same breath. In this process, Greek philosophical concepts were employed.

To speak of the absolute oneness of God, the Greek term *ousia* or substance was used. There is one, unique, eternal and indivisible substance in God. To speak of differentiation in relation to God proved much more difficult. At first, the term for the mask that was held in front of the face of an actor in Greek theatre was used, *prosopon*, so there was one God or one actor, who took on different characters, as though speaking through three masks (three *prosopa*). It was this term, translated into Latin as *personae*, meaning again actors in the theatre, that gave us the misleading English term ‘persons’. This usage was rejected by the theologians because an actor can only play one character at a time.

Instead the Greek term *hypostasis* (plural: *hypostases*) was employed, which can best be translated as ‘mode of being’. One adult woman (one *ousia*) can have at the same

²⁰ Acts of the Apostles 10:9-16

²¹ Acts of the Apostles 15:1-29; 1 Corinthians 7:17-20

time three differentiated modes of being (three *hypostases*): those of daughter, wife and mother. The three modes can exist simultaneously in the one adult woman but the model, if applied to God, has a weakness in that the ‘daughter’ takes on the additional modes of ‘wife’ and ‘mother’ as she grows older, which is clearly inapplicable to God. Another helpful example without this weakness is that of water, which can exist in the three modes of solid, liquid and gas. We are familiar with liquid water becoming solid as ice and with liquid water boiling to give off steam, which is the ‘gas mode’ of vapour condensing as it reaches the colder air. The less frequently observed wonder is that all three can exist at the same time given the right combination of pressure and temperature; what the scientists call the ‘triple point’. Christian theologians thus formulated the code of speech to speak of God as one substance (*ousia*) with three eternal, real, enduring modes of being (*hypostases*), which they termed: Father, Son/Word and Holy Spirit.

What God had done, through the unique revelation of the Word incarnate in Jesus, was to reveal what it is to be fully human. The theologians strove to speak about this by referring to Jesus as “all that it is to be God and all that it is to be human”. He thus reveals that the ultimate destiny of the human being is to be like Jesus, who is spoken of as the first-born of many brothers and sisters.²² Through his unique life-giving/whole-making revelation, which is the meaning of salvation, he reveals what God had always intended: what could be said of Jesus by nature, could be said of human beings ‘made whole’ by adoption. The model of salvation is seen in the total self-offering of Jesus through his obedience unto death on the cross. This was the culmination of his salvific life: through his death and resurrection he overcame death and opened the way for men and women to enter into the fulness of their true relationship with God. This is the process of deification or *theosis* in which, in a way that we still struggle to explain, human beings are taken into the divine fellowship through their ‘coming to wholeness’ in Christ.

The need for a paradigm shift

There is not the scope here to explore fully either the Muslim paradigms or the Christian paradigm of Christianity,²³ but enough has been said to show how radically different they are. Muslims have the additional difficulty that the Qur'an, coming after the time of Jesus, contains material about him and his *din* in a way that the Christian scriptures do not with regard to the Muslim sources, as they pre-date the Qur'an and Islam. Muslims who deny the explicit teaching of the Qur'an put themselves outside the fold of Islam, so there can be no question in this process of mutual understanding to ask Muslims to accept that the Qur'anic paradigm of Christianity is wrong. In the same way, Christianity, as Christians understand it, ceases to exist if there is no Incarnation, death and resurrection to eternal life of Jesus, and no understanding of the triune nature of God. Our quest for mutual understanding cannot demand a denial of the essence of

²² Romans 8:29

²³ Further reference can be made to the Sunni and Shi'a paradigms to be found on my website under ‘Written Resources’ – Articles.

the faith of either party. Questions of ultimate truth must be left 'in the hands of God' to be made clear on the Day of Judgement.²⁴

There can be no real understanding of 'the other' if we impose our paradigm of religion on them. Genuine understanding requires that we allow others to define themselves, even if we do not and cannot agree. This requires a certain suspension of judgement and an entering into the paradigm of the other faith to see their world-view through their eyes. A *din*, or way of life, is not just a set of intellectual propositions that we can seek to understand, it involves a disposition of the heart so that the believers mould the whole of life to the world-view of their faith; this requires that the one who would understand the other's religion enters into an empathetic understanding, involving both intellect and the affective domain or intuition. A further step is required when speaking of faiths in a relationship with the transcendent God, namely a spiritual understanding. The Spirit of God at work in every human heart should in some way resonate at truth expressed in the *din* of the other. There is a 'testing of the spirit' at work in seeking deeper spiritual understanding. In this process 'wisdom' (*hikma*) plays an important role both as the crucible in which spiritual truths are tested and as the guide to seeking 'that of God' at work in 'the other'. We need to work towards that degree of 'certainty' that means that I *know* within myself the God-oriented identity of 'the other' to such an extent that to deny it would entail a denial of the Spirit of God in my own heart. Christian-Muslim understanding then needs an empathetic shift into the paradigm of the other, embracing body, mind, heart and spirit.

Some exemplification

One example that can be worked through is the totally different genres involved in the two scriptures: the Qur'an and the New Testament. In the Muslim paradigm, the Qur'an is the literal, verbal revelation of the *kalam allah* sent down (*tanzil*) in Arabic to the Prophet Muhammad and conveyed by him to the world. In the Christian paradigm, the New Testament comprises the divinely-inspired theological writings of many authors and editors over a period of decades, to attempt to express, in a particular language, to various audiences, the faith of the believing community, as expressed, in part, by elements of the teaching and life of Jesus that had circulated in and shaped the faith of that community. No Christian would treat the New Testament as 'just another ancient text'; it has a unique and supreme place in the Christian tradition, but it is not a literal, verbally revealed scripture sent down to Jesus or the later authors. The Christian tradition does not know the *Injil* and has no place in its system for a revelation being given to Jesus of which he is not the author; Jesus is the Word of God incarnate.

To apply the hermeneutical tools of Islam to the New Testament is to ignore the paradigm of Christianity and force a Muslim paradigm onto it; the same also applies in reverse, if one seeks to apply Christian hermeneutical tools to the Qur'an. In both cases, no mutual understanding takes place but only polemical 'point scoring', which is

²⁴ Q. 5:48 and 1 Corinthians 13:12

mutually destructive. There have been Muslim scholars who have attempted to identify the *Injil* in the direct speech of Jesus contained in the four gospels of the New Testament, which makes no sense within a Christian paradigm. There is a weakness in that the gospels were written in a language that Jesus did not speak and with no *isnad* to substantiate the chain of transmission. Other Muslim scholars have proposed that there was an original *Injil* which has been lost, but this still does not fit within a Christian paradigm.²⁵ In a similar way, there have been Christian scholars, who, not being able to accept an understanding of the revelation of the Qur'an as in the Muslim paradigm, have proposed that it was compiled and edited by Muhammad himself, or even that it was a composition of a significantly later date; both suggestions make no sense at all within the Muslim paradigm.

Within a Muslim paradigm, one is required to find in the Qur'an, and extrapolate from it, all the central teachings of Islam. It is the source *par excellence* and it would be unthinkable that essential doctrines could not be drawn from it. Within this paradigm, then, one would expect to find recorded in the gospels of the New Testament explicit teaching of Jesus about his own status, the triune nature of God and other essential doctrines. The Qur'an lays down the challenge that Christians have taken their priests as Lords beside God.²⁶ Within the Muslim paradigm, this charge is confirmed by the fact that the explicit theological statements of these key doctrines are only defined in the centuries of the Early Church by Ecumenical Councils of bishops and cannot be found in their polished theological formulations on the lips of Jesus in the gospels. Indeed, the early centuries of Christianity were marked by substantial theological arguments and varying positions on these key doctrines. Within a Christian paradigm, of course, the Christian community collectively, the Church, is the body to decide, under divine inspiration duly discerned, which writings should be included in the New Testament and how the faith of the community is to be formulated theologically.

Conclusion

Enough has been said in these brief examples to demonstrate just how different the Muslim and Christian paradigms are, including the substantial differences between the Muslim and the Christian paradigms of Christianity. A Muslim cannot be expected to deny the teaching of the Qur'an on Christianity. Similarly, if Christians were to accept the Muslim paradigm of Christianity, they would need to accept that the Christian Church deviated from the revelation given to, and the teaching of, Jesus from the earliest times, as is suggested by those Muslims who claim that St Paul was the one who distorted the original teaching of Jesus and 'invented' Trinitarian Christianity as it later developed. If we remain fixed within our own paradigm of the other, then there is no mutual understanding but only the mutual repudiation that has characterised many encounters between the two faiths. Those who want to move forward to a deeper mutual

²⁵ Some have even speculated that this might have re-emerged in the 'Gospel of Barnabas', which scholarly analysis has demonstrated to be a medieval composition, probably originally written in 16th century Italian.

²⁶ Q. 9:30

understanding need to be prepared to switch from one paradigm to the other to see the other's faith in their terms. Once one begins with the premise that Christians and Muslims are both worshipping the one and only God, then it follows that, in both faiths, hearts must be open to seek to understand the working of God in the other faith so as to be attuned to hear the Spirit of God call out in the hearts of all believers.