

## Hope for Muslim-Christian Relations?

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Why the despair, where is the hope, and what is the faith that underwrites it?...

Some of the despair stems from the history of religions, not least in the western world, [and from] the perception of a certain obscurantism or even bigotry in the harshness of an establishment that is absolute.... Surely we need a concept of authority, which is deferential to the integrity of the 'lay' hearer. [But] all too often, in the absolutes of religion, this ideal seems far to seek, as if out of reach by dogmatic pundits. Therefore, religions stand under legitimate condemnation. Why should they often prove to be enmity-creating entities? Why are faiths often conflict-instigating in their identities? ... This phenomenon of religions being essentially enmity breeders, the one with the other, dismays the hopeful mind....

If the despair comes from this encounter with allegedly incompatible religions, where is the hope? I want to say that the hope is rooted in both Scriptures, provided we have the wealth of mind and the warmth of heart to identify it for what it is. This world of humankind, alike in the Qur'an and in the Bible, is understood as a *khilāfa*, a dominion. Let's call it the 'caliphate' of humankind, which we possess as the privilege of being technological, of being managerial, of interrogating nature in order to discipline and—in the best sense of the word—to exploit nature for our own purposes. ... It is a 'dominion' inviting our occupancy in all good faith and it works every way. Everyone has 'somewhat to offer', human procreation is the way it continues, and procreation is within our competence. ....

In Surah 7:172, the haunting question is: "Am I not your Lord?" understood in the context of the whole of humanity as if simultaneously present in a single contemporary audience. All "the progeny of the sons of Adam" from *al-aza*/to *al-abad*, through the whole stretch of time, are so addressed. For us now, in a generation that can be linked up by radio as a single audience, how much more far-reaching and urgent is that question now: *A lastu bi rabbikum?*"Am I not your Lord?" comes to all. This is divine omnipotence awaiting our consent. ....

The wonder about this *khilāfa* is evident

in its 'neutrality' about religions. You do not have to be a Muslim to be pregnant. You do not have to be a Christian to experience fatherhood. You do not have to be a Jew to be a chemist or a Sikh to fly a plane. What should we understand from this sheer neutrality of the sciences, which do not intervene to frustrate our usings? ... I want to say to you that this is common ground, not by an effort of condescension which we find it hard to make or by some sort of compromise because we mean to bring respect and seek truth. Nor is it by some kind of patronage for the sake of good relations. It is a genuine invitation into mutual honesty, not only about the witness of our Scriptures but by all the witnesses of the experience we know....

In what follows what I want to say, as the heart of this point, is that [the] divine stake *in us* has to be understood as shared *with us*. But not, however, shared for our two faiths in the same terms. All the emphasis on the 'caliphate' of humankind leads directly on to prophethood. Because we have creation, creaturehood, deputyship, we therefore need prophethood. There would be no point in sending prophets to puppets, manipulated on strings. The whole phenomenon of the prophet, of the sequence of prophets, is that in this enormous dignity, we need guidance. We needed reminder, we needed *dhikr*, as that which keeps the dignity always in mind, messengers alerting us to the dignity and risk in our 'trust'.

For we need to be always held in awareness of what is at stake with us. It is in those terms broadly that the Qur'an understands that the power that took the risk in us shares it *with us* to the extent of our 'education' in it ... 'what is prohibited and what is enjoined', yielding the five areas of Muslim ethics. .... Christian understanding, however, if I have it rightly, is that this divine sharing *in* the risks that have been taken, sharing *with us* means, "the word made flesh", the need of grace and 'God in Christ'. It means a love that comes and cares and suffers. And this is where the mutuality begins to diverge . . .

Perhaps we can never reconcile the disparity. But what we can do together is to command, honour, and appreciate that which invites our cognizance in law

ethically, as not outside conscience (because conscience is part of the 'caliphate'). The institutions that regularise our 'caliphate' can only operate truly within the unity of God in himself. As we saw, the neutrality of the creation is through One who 'sends his rain on the just and the unjust'. Be ye therefore as inclusive. If He has 'let people be', and reliably so, then He does not manipulate and certainly does not tyrannise over them. Were He to do so, He would cease to be 'a faithful Creator', and would be One who subtracted the caliphate. . . .

So can there be a case for a concept of statehood of the civil political world, the business of government, which is equally ready to be neutral, consistent with common good and law and order about the religious conduct and conviction of the population? It is a concept that we are reaching towards in parts of the West and it need not be discontinuous with a cultural maximal share of the legacies of history on the part of a particular religion. Would Islam ever be able to reach this concept of an organ of government, properly authoritative but ready to concede a diversity of religious belief in human acceptance of the caliphate? It is a theme to consider, especially where there are emphases of religion which wish to dominate and dictate the patterns not only of legislation but of society and human rights and the role of the sexes....

Can we not see how the divine is ever neutral? This measure of neutrality is a condition of honest faith. . . .

[Christian faith in the incarnation is] not a God compromised but God in His authenticity, eternity in one eternal sign of saving passion incarnate in the meaning of the cross. So we are still left with what we need to command but, for either of us, this faith in these differing measures as we see them is at one about the stake that is in us as being also shared with us by the One who took that strange gamble. It is this faith which sustains this hope in the face of that despair, and with God be the rest.

