

CHRISTIAN READINGS OF THE ISLAMIC TRADITION

Topic: Christian Readings of the Islamic Tradition
 Convener: Pim Valkenberg, Loyola College in Maryland
 Moderator: Richard Penaskovic, Auburn University
 Presenters: Dan Madigan, Georgetown University
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 Respondent: James Fredericks, Loyola Marymount University

In his presentation on *Yahya bin Zakariya, John the Baptist: The End and Ends of Prophecy*, Dan Madigan used texts about Yahya/John to discuss the different manners in which the idea of prophethood functions in Christianity and Islam. According to the Qur'an God sends prophets in order to remind human-kind of God's guidance, although some human beings choose to remain in ignorance. In Christianity, the human refusal to accept God's message is seen as a problem on a deeper level. As Paul in the New Testament interprets the story of original sin in Genesis 3, humans have the tendency to view their Creator as their rival who will not grant them to live their lives freely. Faced with such rebellion, God would seem to have the right to reduce humans to the nothingness from which they took their existence. In this analysis of the human situation a warning prophet seems to be insufficient, and that explains the difference between the Baptist and Christ in the New Testament. While John represents the broad tradition of a prophet as someone who warns on behalf of God, Jesus does not seem to care much about human sinfulness, He represents a radically different way of God's exercising sovereignty: a sovereignty of love, embodied in the ethic of the Sermon on the Mount. While the normative texts of the Christian and the Islamic tradition seem to suggest a substantial contrast, there is more similarity in the broader traditions. On the one hand, Christianity often forgets its basic proclamation of God's love and develops into a religion in which the obligations needed to deserve God's love occupy center stage. On the other hand, in the Islamic tradition Muhammad developed into a much more complex figure, and many Sufi poets developed the idea of mutual love between God and creatures.

Pim Valkenberg gave an analysis of the term "People of the Book" in both the Qur'an and in a hermeneutics of interreligious reading. If one follows contemporary suggestions to translate the term *ahl al-kitāb* in the Qur'an as "Family of the Scripture", it becomes clear that this term is mainly used to signify common points between Jews and Christians on the one hand, and Muslims on the other. But on closer inspection, the "convergence strategy" represented by this notion in the Qur'an seems to be part of a larger "divergence approach" in which the differences between the religious traditions are highlighted. Almost all texts about the "Family of the Scripture" in the Qur'an appeal to the common Scriptures in order to mark the identity of Islam as the faithful preservation of God's Word. But if it is true that a superficial similarity (such as "book" or "prophet") may be used to show a deeper difference, then it is often possible to

show a deeper analogy as well. Valkenberg showed how the document “A Common Word between Us and You”, issued by 138 Muslim scholars and religious leaders in response to Pope Benedict’s Regensburg address tries to do exactly this. Extended interreligious dialogue may lead to new theological interpretations that go beyond superficial similarities and apologetic exchanges. While the superficial similarities may be good starting points in dialogues between believers, the apologetic and polemical approaches that abound in the history of encounters between Christianity and Islam have the advantage of guiding the dialogue towards a deeper and more theological level. Ultimately, a longer history of familiarity with the two traditions will show theological analogies between them, such as the analogy between the first *surah* of the Qur’an and the Lord’s Prayer. Such analogies can only be discovered by paying attention to the liturgical function of the sources of the texts to be read in a process of comparative theology.

In his response, Jim Fredericks noticed that a religious “rhetoric of similarity” such as “Family of the Scriptures” or Christian inclusivism may often become a mechanism of control. In such cases, highlighting differences might help, unless the differences are established hierarchically. So the question for theologians is: how do we prevent the theological establishment of difference from domesticating differences? In the case of Christian-Muslim relations, the Pauline contribution to the New Testament is often seen as the source of the problem by Muslims. Islam seems to take us back to a pre-Pauline form of Christianity, so how should we react as Christians? In answer to the question whether Christians could accept the claim of the Qur’an to bring a new revelation, it is important to remark that the New Testament does not claim to be a revelation. In the Christian tradition, it is the community of believers that decides on the Scriptures as being revelatory or not. Similarly, the Qur’an could be seen not as revelation but as response to revelation. These may also be important guidelines for Muslims and Christians when dealing with new revelatory claims.

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