

MUSLIM-CHRISTIAN DIALOGUE

- Topic: Does the Muslim Notion of God as One (Tawhid) Contradict the Christian Doctrine of the Trinity?
- Conveners: Richard Penaskovic, Auburn University
Zeki Saritoprak, John Carroll University
- Moderator: Amir Hussain, Loyola Marymount University
- Panelists: Dan Madigan, Georgetown University
Zeki Saritoprak, John Carroll University
Richard Penaskovic, Auburn University

Daniel Madigan notes that Muslims and Christians face analogous theological challenges when they reflect on the One God's dealings with the world. In speaking about the Trinity metaphors are unavoidable. Mark, for example, hangs his Gospel on the three "hooks" of baptism, transfiguration, and the crucifixion. John's Gospel has a more structured way of understanding this more-than-a-metaphor than does Mark. "Son" functions as an even more significant symbol than for Mark because John links it from the outset with the notion of God's Word. If things happen when God speaks, then this speech or word must be something and not simply a cipher. Madigan noted that the *memra* or "the word" (that aspect of God in relation to humanity, going out to us in creation, revelation, and salvation) was thought of as a reality *in se*, although not a reality apart from God. Muslim theologians have also reflected on the relationship between God and God's speech. Muslim theologians developed a formula which has affinities to John's understanding in John 1:1. God's speech (*kalam Allah*) is an essential attribute of God, neither identical with God, nor other than God. Also, Muslims have had to grapple with the matter of the concrete expression of the Word in history, viz., the relationship between God's eternal word and the particular words of the scripture defined as God's word.

Zeki Saritoprak defines *tawhid* as the act of believing and affirming God's oneness and uniqueness. *Tawhid*, one of the essential elements of Islam, functions as a multi-dimensional concept involving three aspects: There is only one God, God is essentially one and not a composite, and God is unique, totally transcendent, and beyond comprehension. From a Muslim perspective Jesus was God's apostle and messenger, since it did not befit the majesty of Allah that He should take upon himself a son. For Said Nursi, *tawhid* should be experienced or felt. Such a spiritual experience of *tawhid* should have a social application. To believe in the unity of God requires the union of hearts and harmony in social life. Finally, our understanding of *tawhid* should increase on a daily, if not hourly, basis. Prophets and pious individuals know *tawhid* better than their communities.

Amir Hussain noted that he reads Mark's Gospel in a literary way and while he sees the power of God working through Jesus, he disagreed with Madigan in regard to the divinity of Jesus in Mark. In regard to the Spirit, Hussain pointed out that Wilfrid Cantwell Smith said that the Christian understanding of Spirit finds its Arabic counterpart in the term, *al-Hadi* (the Guide) rather than in the term, *rua*.

Although Muslims believe in the absolute oneness of God, they hold that God has ninety-nine names. God, though not triune, has a relationship to his qualities and attributes. Finally, Hussain noted through a comparison with the Lindisfarne Gospels that Islam is not hostile to Christianity. Rather, they have similar roots.

Richard Penaskovic opined that dialogue between Muslims and Christians occurs not only in the academy but must involve the people in a dialogue of the heart. Orobator in his book, *Theology Brewed in an African Pot* notes that the Yoruba of Nigeria use the term, *Obirin (woman) meta (three)* to designate a woman with three sides. This image of an African woman offers us a unique way of understanding the Trinity. Like *Obirin meta* God is unbreakable stone, when we need God to be strong for us, the river that never ceases to flow, when we need God's blessings, and the great nursing Mother, when we need God's great love.

It was noted in the discussion that Christianity is an Oriental faith, not a Western religion. In regard to the term, *Obirin meta* one must distinguish between a differentiated unity in God and an undifferentiated unity in God says Aquinas. Fifty verses of the Qur'an speak of trusting in God. From a Muslim perspective we know God by our actions. The confession of faith in the Trinity is not a speculative matter for Christians but ties into the obedience of faith. The performative aspect has priority because the sacred language of Christianity is the flesh, that is the "language" God has chosen to reveal the divine nature is in the "body language" of the Incarnation. The session ended with a discussion of next year's theme.

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