

NOSTRA AETATE AND THE QUESTIONS IT CHOSE TO LEAVE OPEN

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The transformation in the Church's life wrought by the change of attitude expressed in the declaration *Nostra Aetate* could scarcely have been imagined before the Council. Indeed, it was not clear until the last minute that the Council would be able to reach consensus on a document of this kind.¹ Augustin Cardinal Bea in presenting the text of the document to the Council Fathers said, "Unless I am mistaken, this is the first time in the Church's history that a Council has in such a solemn manner enunciated principles with regard to [other religions]."² Gregory Baum, who attended the Council as a *peritus* and was much involved in the drafting of the text maintains that chapter four of *Nostra Aetate*, that concerned with the Church's relationship with the Jewish People, represented the most radical change in the ordinary magisterium of the Catholic Church to emerge from the Council.³ Although there had not been such a mass of negative teaching and catechesis on the subject of religions other than Judaism, it is surely true that the earlier chapters which deal with them, though less ample, are no less radical.

That change was a long time in the preparation, and may be an even longer time in the implementation. The document's insights into other religions, and its definitions of the Church's attitude to believers of those traditions have been repeatedly reaffirmed in the post-Conciliar period, and

¹ For a compact account of the activity that surrounded the development and approval of the text, see A. MELLONI, «*Nostra Aetate* e la scoperta del sacramento dell'alterità» in N.J. HOFFMANN et al. (eds.), *Chiesa ed Ebraismo Oggi: persorsi fatti questioni aperte*, Roma, 2005, 153–181. Melloni draws on the documentation of J. M. OESTERREICHER, *The New encounter between Christians and Jews*, New York, 1986, as well as that of E.J. FISHER (ed.), *Visions of the other: Jewish and Christian theologians assess the dialogue*, New York, 1994, and the analysis of G. MICCOLI, «La libertà religiosa e le relazioni con gli ebrei» in G. ALBERIGO et al. (eds.), *Storia del concilio Vaticano II*, Bologna, 1995–2001.

² *Acta Synodalia Sacrosancti Concilii Oecumenici Vaticani II*, Roma, 1970–77, vol. III, part viii, 650.

³ G. BAUM, «The Social Context of American Catholic Theology» in *Proceedings of the Catholic Theological Society of America* 41 (1986) 87. I am indebted to John Pawlikowski for this reference.

especially in the last year with respect to relations with Muslims.⁴ Furthermore, reflection on the issues on which the document did not expatiate has continued among theologians and in magisterial pronouncements.

The Church was in some senses ready for a substantial official rethinking of its attitudes to other believers. The horror of the Nazi attempts to exterminate the Jewish people during the Second World War had left many with a strong sense that the traditional teaching had played a role in fomenting the anti-Jewish sentiment that made the Shoah politically and practically feasible. Not only that negative experience, but also an accumulation of positive relations with other religious believers and a more profound study of their traditions had contributed to the growing sense that the way forward lay in a more explicit teaching of respect, which would in its turn make possible greater collaboration towards the common good.

If it is true that the Church was in some ways ready for a change, there remains a sense in which we are not yet fully ready for such a radical move. Indeed, since the time of the Council's optimistic call to «forget the past» (NA 3), real progress in mutual understanding has been fitful and hard won. Greatest progress has been made, perhaps, in the field of Jewish-Christian relations. Yet even there it seems still to remain the concern of too few. It is not only because of the conflictual past that the task has been difficult, but also on account of many other factors, not least the political ones, that have changed the world in the years since the Council made its declaration.

In this article I would like to address some of the challenges that *Nostra Aetate* still holds out to the Church, not only because many of its affirmations are still to be fully appropriated, but also because it seems intentionally to have remained silent on some issues, leaving their elaboration for a time when the thinking of theologians and the Magisterium on those matters would have matured. Although I will focus largely on relations with Muslims, some of the issues are common to all our interreligious relations.

One of the major issues on which the Council chose not to pronounce was the question of in what way or to what extent other religions might be considered as ways of salvation *per se*. By and large it avoided speaking of religions and preferred to speak of believers. Even though in chapter two on the major traditions of Asia Hinduism and Buddhism are both mentioned by

⁴ Pope Benedict XVI speaking to a group of Muslim leaders in Cologne in August 2005 reiterated *Nostra Aetate's* position as the *Magna Carta* of dialogue, making it clear that the document cannot be dismissed as of no doctrinal weight. («Discorso ai Rappresentanti di alcune comunità musulmane» in *Osservatore Romano*, 22–23 August, 2005, 5). On 16 September 2006, the Secretary of State in clarifying the Pope's controversial speech at the University of Regensburg quoted *Nostra Aetate 2* at length in order to define the attitude of the Holy Father to Muslims.

name and other religions are referred to generically, chapters three and four are noteworthy for the way they address the question of relations with Muslims and Jews without making assertions either about Islam or Judaism. Whether or not this difference in treatment was deliberate we can only speculate.⁵ However, it does bring to light an important point. The kind of assessment one makes of a tradition like Buddhism or Hinduism – traditions that emerged and that developed their characteristic forms almost entirely in geographical and intellectual isolation from Christianity – will necessarily be of quite a different order from the assessment made of the other traditions that contest the same religious ‘space’ as us, that appeal to the same history and that offer alternative readings of the same sacred texts and events. A positive statement about Jainism, for example, does not have major implications for Christian theology. However, any positive evaluation of Islam or Judaism as religions has important repercussions for Christianity, because both these religions explicitly dispute the Christian understanding of Jesus of Nazareth and what God was effecting in him.

The Council thus avoids discussion of the issues of Muhammad, the Qur’ân, the Sharî’a, etc., in favour of a recognition of the positive elements in the life of the Muslim believer. It also avoids any mention of the characteristics of Rabbinic Judaism, focussing exclusively on aspects of the biblical People of God, and leaving unanswered the question of the ongoing covenantal life of the Jews. Forty years later we are still grappling with such questions.

It has been suggested that *Nostra Aetate*’s silence on the question of other religions as salvific ways or structures *per se* should be interpreted as a negative answer to that question.⁶ Gavin D’Costa, addressing the issue in an important article, claims that the silence is not to be understood as leaving the question open, but that it should be interpreted rather as implicitly closing the discussion. He suggests that the fact that there is neither a ‘yes’ nor a ‘no’ is not to be taken as an indication that we must reflect further on the question (as Rahner⁷ and others presumed in their work). Rather, he claims, the

⁵ In the text proper there is only one use of the term ‘Islam’. Chapter 3, speaks of «Abraham, with whom the faith of Islam takes pleasure in linking itself». The rather curious phrasing of the English translation might suggest a certain reserve in admitting the validity of the Muslim claim to a genuine link with Patriarch. The wording of a similar passage in *Lumen Gentium* 16, might be taken to reflect a similar reticence: Muslims are spoken of there as «professing to hold the faith of Abraham».

⁶ See, for example, G. D’COSTA, «Vatican II and the status of other religions as salvific structures» in L. BERGIN (ed.), *Faith, Word and Culture*, Dublin, 2004, 9-24, and «*Nostra aetate*: telling God’s story in Asia” in Leo Kenis and M Lamberigts (eds.), *Vatican II and Its Heritage*, Leuven, 1999.

⁷ In his essay «On the Importance of the Non-Christian Religions for Salvation» in

question was not answered because it is itself ill-conceived.

Questions and answers

There are indeed problems with the question posed in this way. However, it is one we cannot evade for it is addressed to us by the very presence of the religious ‘other’ in our midst, and that person has a right to expect an answer from us. We are, as Levinas would say, *responsible*, in the literal sense of the word: we must respond. And attempts to respond have continued, not only among theologians but also in documents of the Magisterium, even after the rather ambiguous – perhaps we should say judicious – silence of Vatican II.⁸

The right to an answer is, of course, not necessarily the right to a positive answer, as many seem to feel. We owe the believers of other traditions a generous hearing and an honest response, rather than merely a polite one that glosses over difficulties and profound differences. Many theologues of religious pluralism are exemplary in their generosity of spirit; however, in the end they pay little attention to the actual reality with which they are seeking to deal. Generosity includes taking the others seriously as they are in their difference, not reducing them to mere reflections of ourselves. We are not all proclaiming the same thing, and not all religions are proposing the same objective or offering the same end.⁹

One of the difficulties involved in our talk about religions and salvation is that it tends to presume that salvation is a universal and univocal term. Yet if we attend carefully to what other religious traditions are saying, it is clear that there is a variety of religious ends on offer. Even those traditions that

Theological Investigations, vol. XVIII, 288-295, Rahner asserts (290) that the essential problem had been «left open» by *Nostra Aetate*. His other essays of relevance to the matter are: vol. V: «History of the World and Salvation History», 97-114; vol. V: «Christianity and the non-Christian Religions», 115-134; vol. XII: «Anonymous Christianity and the Missionary Task of the Church», 161-78; vol. XIV: «Observations on the Problem of the Anonymous Christian», 280-294; vol. XVI: «The One Christ and the Universality of Salvation», 199-224; vol. XVII: «Jesus Christ in the Non-Christian Religions», 39-50.

⁸ See, in addition to D’Costa, M. RUOKANEN, *The Catholic Doctrine of Non-Christian Religions according to the Second Vatican Council*, Leiden, 1992; A. COZZI, «Le religioni nel magistero postconciliare: problemi ermeneutici» in *Teologia* 28 (2002) 267-309; J.L. FREDERICKS, «The Catholic Church and the other religious paths: rejecting nothing that is true and holy» in *Theological Studies* 64/2 (June 2003) 225–254; A. MAZUR, *L’insegnamento di Giovanni Paolo II sulle altre religioni*, Roma, 2004.

⁹ Important work on the question of the multiplicity of religions ends has been done by S.M. HEIM in his two books *Salvations: truth and difference in religion*, Maryknoll, 1995 and *The Depth of the Riches: a trinitarian theology of religious ends*, Grand Rapids, 2001.

propose some form of liberative practice understand differently what it is we need to be liberated from – ignorance, perhaps, or sin, or suffering. These are not simply different words for the same thing. We do not have a situation where there is one single salvation and we have to decide which (one or several) among the various religious paths will lead us there. It is quite conceivable that Buddhist practice is a perfectly adequate way of reaching a state of *nirvana* – that it delivers what it promises. But it does not pretend to deliver what the Christian community would see as salvation. Nirvana is not just heaven with an exotic name.¹⁰

In the Christian understanding, being saved means being incorporated into the divine life through the person of the fully divine, fully human one. This incorporation takes place by the gracious initiative of God, who invites a free human response. Wherever we can discern this response taking place, we are witnessing salvation – even outside the visible confines of the Church. Since none of the other major traditions is based on such a concept of salvation, it would make little sense for a Christian to say that there are other ways as good as (or perhaps even better than) Christianity to arrive at the salvation we believe God is offering. Other traditions understand differently what is possible, what is promised, what is on offer. They are not simply commensurable.

Because of this, the response we propose cannot be a generic answer that takes no account of the variety of religious others who face and question us. This is, perhaps, one of the main difficulties we currently face in the so-called «theology of religions». Many are trying to find a single theology that will cover adequately all the religions. We can recall here the clarification the then Cardinal Ratzinger made after Jewish criticism of *Dominus Jesus*. The document had left many with the impression that the Church had a one-size-fits-all approach to other religions, and it had to be underlined that there is a particular relationship between Christianity and Judaism that is nothing like the relationship with any other religion.¹¹

Though Judaism clearly occupies a special place, each relationship between Christianity and another religion is particular. A Christian theology of

¹⁰ The difference in religious ends on offer seems to me to explain something about the phenomenon of ‘conversion’ – let us call it that for want of a better term – to Buddhism in the West. It does not seem to me that people think they have found there a more effective way of «getting to heaven» and so have chosen it over the Christian way. Rather they are convinced that enlightenment and *nirvana* are more convincing and attractive religious ends than «being saved» or «not going to hell» or «getting to heaven».

¹¹ «It is evident that the dialogue we Christians have with the Jews is on a different level from that with the other religions. The faith witnessed in the Hebrew Bible, the Old Testament for Christians, is for us not another religion, but rather the foundation of our faith» (*Osservatore Romano*, 29 December 2000, 1).

Islam will be rather different from a Christian theology of Hinduism. Islam emerged after the Christian and Jewish traditions and, at least partly, as a critique of them. The texts sacred to Hindus and Buddhists, on the other hand, emerged long before, or at least in isolation from, those Western traditions. A single theology of religions will simply not suffice. Our response to the other must be a response to the real other. The plurality of the others calls for a plurality of responses.

John Paul II made no secret about the fact that his experience of the religiously other has influenced his view of the question.¹² In *Redemptoris Missio* (28-29) he went beyond the positions of *Nostra Aetate*, *Gaudium et Spes* and *Lumen Gentium* in explicitly affirming the active role of the Holy Spirit in human hearts and the history of peoples; and not only in individuals but in the social and structural elements of cultures and religions. This recognition was a very significant step toward grappling with the issue, and it gave rise to an even further step.

In its 1997 document entitled «Christianity and the World Religions» the International Theological Commission affirmed that «the presence of the Holy Spirit in the religions being explicitly recognized [an apparent reference to the advances Pope John Paul had made in this area], it is not possible to exclude that they may *as such* exercise a certain salvific function, that is, despite their ambiguity, they help men achieve their ultimate end». The Commission does not ignore the Council’s teaching about the ambiguities and errors that appear in other religious traditions when they are compared to what Christians hold as true. Yet it takes as its starting point the undeniable, observable action of the Holy Spirit in the religions and therefore concludes that they can indeed have a salvific function in spite of any ambiguities they may contain. Indeed, as D’Costa himself puts it, «these religions have structures which mediate the truth».¹³

¹² See his often-quoted speech to the Roman Curia, 22 December, 1986, published in *Osservatore Romano*, 5 January, 1987.

¹³ G. D’COSTA, «Vatican II», 21. It is important to note on the question of «errors», «ambiguities» or «deficiencies» that almost all religions use such terminology. *Dominus Iesus* spoke rather bluntly of the deficiencies of other religions, and other ecclesial communities. Although the language was deemed rather impolite, the point was well made. Muslims, for example, by and large think Christians are in an objectively deficient position because we lack the original Gospel text they believe was given to Jesus, and because our monotheism seems to be severely compromised by Trinitarian faith. Many Christian churches would think that the fact that the Roman Catholic Church does not ordain women or that it has a hierarchical structure are deficiencies. Not all differences are necessarily deficiencies, but if we place a high value on something and consider it essential, then we will naturally identify its lack as a deficiency.

Can structures save us?

When it comes to the question of the salvific value of other religious systems in themselves, I am left with a question and a comment. The question is, what does it mean exactly to speak, as many have since the Council, of a religion as a “salvific structure *per se*”? Is it not our Christian faith that we are saved by the gracious action of God in Jesus Christ – not by a structure? This, surely, was the basis of Paul’s objection to the Law. The structures, however good, that any religion develops in expressing its response to God cannot be absolutized. God alone is absolute. Even when we speak of aspects of the Church as being «of divine institution», we still recognize that these divine elements have also been shaped by human culture and history.

Religious structures are the more or less adequate human response to the initiative of God in reaching out to us. The structures themselves do not save us; God does. Thus the Church is always called upon to purify its structures, so as to make sure that they are genuinely responding to the action of God and the demands of love, rather than expressing merely human drives and interests. Constant discernment is required if we are to avoid attributing to God what is human, and dismissing as merely human what in fact comes from God. If it is true, as D’Costa claims, that the question about religions as salvific structures is ill-conceived, then perhaps it is ill-conceived, at least to some extent, in all cases – Christianity included.

There is a tendency to speak of the «means of salvation» as though they were things we use – tools for getting the job done. The Church, we say, possesses the fullness of the means of salvation – it sounds rather proprietorial the way some people say it – but what exactly do we mean by that? If we believe salvation is the work of God in Christ, then these ‘means’ must be God’s instruments, not ours. God uses, for example, the sacraments – these great celebrations and re-presentations of the Christ event – to draw us more deeply into the reality of that event. How better to draw us into Christ’s life than to bury us with him in Baptism in the hope of resurrection, and to nourish us with him in Eucharist; to assure us of the forgiveness he offered sinners, to touch and heal us as he did, to embody a faithful and fruitful love that mirrors and reveals God’s love? Instead of saying that *we* make use of the sacraments, it seems more correct to say that God does.

Perhaps, then, the question about means and structures, on which *Nostra Aetate* did not offer an explicit opinion, needs to be rephrased. Instead of asking «Is this religion a structure or vehicle or way of salvation?» should we not rather ask «Are there elements in this religion that God appears to be using to save people?» Thus, there is no single, *a priori* answer to the question of how salvific other religions are. We can only make an *a posteriori* judgement, based on an observation of the fruits of the Spirit and the distinguishing

marks of the Kingdom in the followers of that particular religion. Such an *a posteriori* judgement cannot or need not be made about the whole religion, but rather about the individual elements.¹⁴ This may explain *Nostra Aetate*’s tendency to list positive elements while avoiding general assessments, especially in the case of the two traditions that are nearest us.

Muhammad and the Christian

The question of Muhammad is without doubt the most troubled, and except in polemics the most often avoided, issue in Muslim-Christian relations.¹⁵ In the groundbreaking documents of the Council one finds no mention of the Prophet of Islam or the scripture attributed to his ministry. *Nostra Aetate* in its positive comments on Muslim religiosity gives no sense at all that this faith has a founder and a history. And since time of the Council that hesitancy about responding could hardly be said to have diminished.

It is not possible simply to give a response to Muhammad in himself, since anyone not belonging to the generation of his Companions has to rely on the witness of the believing community to know something of him. Whether believer or not, one can only respond to the *image* of the Prophet proposed by the community for whom half the creed is «*Muhammad rasûl Allâb*» – Muhammad is God’s messenger. We do not have any other sources on which to rely – or at least nothing that could claim more authority, objectivity, or historical proximity. Even polemical works directed against Muhammad are not based on first-hand experience of him, or on independent historical sources. They are, rather, responses to the image of Muhammad proposed by the Muslim community.

So in order to respond, one has to ask «which Muhammad» or which *image* of Muhammad are we talking about? Very often one responds to the image of the Prophet offered by the standard biography of Ibn Ishâq, composed from traditional materials about a hundred years after Muhammad’s death. The *Sîra*, as it is called, is an extraordinarily detailed

¹⁴ Thus, *Dominus Iesus* 8 prefers to comment *a posteriori* on certain elements in the scriptures of other traditions, rather than to make a global judgement on them: «Certainly, it must be recognized that there are some elements in these texts which may be *de facto* instruments by which countless people throughout the centuries have been and still are able today to nourish and maintain their life-relationship with God.»

¹⁵ My own thinking on this question has been much influenced by K. CRAGG, especially his work *Muhammad and the Christian: a question of response*, Maryknoll, 1984. I have treated this at more length in «Jesus and Muhammad: the sufficiency of prophecy» in Michael Igrave (ed.), *Bearing the Word: prophecy in biblical and qur’anic perspective*. London, 2005, 90–99.

account not only of the career of the Prophet but also of the history of his family and tribe, indeed of the history of prophecy itself. We have only an edited version of it dating from the ninth century, and citations from it in other works.¹⁶ In one way or another all biographies of Muhammad are based upon it.¹⁷

One of the things that most strikes the Christian reader of the *Sīra* is the concentration on Muhammad's military campaigns, his strategy of creating a power base from which to consolidate the new religion, along with the inexorable expansion of his authority and military dominance. Muhammad in this respect was no Jesus. However, this element of the *Sīra* (called *maghāzī* literature) is not unlike the military material we are familiar with from the Old Testament – God dictates goals and strategy, and grants victory to the believers as long they act according to the divine will.

An early recorded response to the question of Muhammad is that of the Nestorian Patriarch Timothy I in his eighth-century dialogue with the third 'Abbasid Caliph, al-Mahdī (d. 785).¹⁸ I doubt that in the twelve centuries since that conversation (much elaborated in subsequent literary versions) we

¹⁶ IBN HISHĀM, 'ABD AL-MALIK, *Kitāb sīrat rasūl Allāh*, (ed., F. WÜSTENFELD) Göttingen, 1858–60 (English translation by A. GUILLAUME, *The Life of Muhammad*, London, 1955).

¹⁷ There is substantial discussion among historians about the extent to which this biography of Muhammad and, indeed, the entire historiography of the origins of Islam is reliable, or whether it reflects a later religious re-reading of what was essentially a more secular career. This matter lies beyond the scope of this article, but it is important to realize that these questions may have a profound effect on our way of seeing Muhammad and the relations between his community and others in the early period, and thus in the present. See, for example, H. BERG (ed.), «Islamic origins reconsidered: John Wansbrough and the study of early Islam», special issue of *Method and Theory in the Study of Religion* (Berlin, 1997); F.E. PETERS, «The Quest of the historical Muhammad», *International Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 23 (1991), 291–315, and idem, *Muhammad and the origins of Islam*, New York, 1994, 257–268.

¹⁸ There are different versions of the text: both in Syriac and Arabic. The Syriac text and its English translation were published by A. MINGANA, «The Apology of Timothy the Patriarch before the Caliph Mahdī» in the *Bulletin of the John Rylands Library* 12 (1928) 137–298, and also reprinted in *Woodbrooke Studies*, vol. II, Cambridge, 1928, 1–162. There are two extant published Arabic versions of this dialogue: a shorter and a longer version. The short report is edited and translated into French by R. Caspar with the title «Les versions arabes du dialogue entre le catholique Timothée I et le calife al-Mahdī (II/VIII siècle) "Mohammed a suivi la voie des prophètes"» in *Islamochristiana* 3 (1977) 107–175. The long version was first published by L. Cheikho, «La discussion religieuse entre le calife al-Mahdī et Timothée le catholique» in *Al-Madbrīq* 21 (1921) 359–374, 408–418. The same text is also edited and translated into French by H. Putman in *L'Église et l'Islam sous Timothée I (780–823)*, Beirut, 1986, 7–57, 213–277. See L. DEMIRI, «Muslim-Christian Dialogue in the Eighth Century: the Nestorian Patriarch Timothy I and the 'Abbasid Caliph al-Mahdī», unpublished licentiate thesis, Faculty of Missiology, P.U.G., 2004.

have progressed much beyond the Patriarch's response. He chooses his words carefully: «It is clear», he says, «that Muhammad walked in the path of the prophets». He mentions Muhammad's preaching of monotheism, his strictures against idolatry and polytheism, his institution of authentic worship, and his ethical teaching and leadership, all as evidence that Muhammad «walked in the path of the prophets». Citing particularly the example of Moses, who slew the Israelites who had worshipped the Golden Calf (Ex 32:26–27), Timothy praises Muhammad's willingness to commit himself to the cause of God not only in word but also in action, with force of arms, and he takes that as one of the proofs of Muhammad's having «walked in the path of the prophets».¹⁹ He cites only this one example, but he could have chosen any number of such instances of divinely sanctioned violence from the career of Moses or other biblical prophets – sometimes the slaughter is the punishment for unbelief, but in other cases it is merely because the victims stand between the people of Israel and the land of the promise.

Timothy was hardly scandalized by the power exercised by Muhammad in the service of God's message and of the community that formed around it. He interprets the success of the Muslims against the Persian and Byzantine empires as the just punishment of God for the idolatry of the former and the heresy of the latter – remember we are dealing with a Nestorian patriarch. Prophecy, according to the Old Testament model to which he appeals, is expected to use all means at its disposal in the service of truth. The sovereignty of God has always somehow to be translated into this-worldly terms, and no one is surprised if that sovereignty seems to command combat or even slaughter. This is not an exclusively Islamic or Jewish attitude and it has a prominent place in the history of the Christian churches as well, even if not in the life of Jesus or the early period of his community. Timothy has the insight and honesty to recognize that the question of religion and power is one that faces us all. He does not pretend that Christians have traditionally resolved it differently from Muslims or Jews. A conviction about the ultimate truth which hesitates to assert that truth and to put it into practice is to this way of thinking no conviction at all.

Two things should be noted about Timothy's response. The first is what might seem a certain evasiveness in his formulation. After saying that Muhammad had done everything the other prophets did, why not just say that he too was a prophet? A major reason for this, though Timothy may have had others, is that to say «Muhammad is a prophet» is in effect to pronounce the

¹⁹ Timothy also rather cannily points out that Muhammad preached about God, His Word and His Spirit. This too qualifies him as prophetic in Timothy's eyes, though his trinitarian understanding of that formulation would not be accepted by the Islamic tradition.

second part of the *shahāda*, the Muslim profession of faith. Since Christians already profess belief in one God, affirming the prophethood of Muhammad could be said to complete the process of declaring oneself a Muslim. The Christian cannot share the fullness of Muslim faith that this man is the bearer of the ultimate divine Word to humanity, and further that he is the definitive interpreter of that Word, the model for a human life lived in faithful response to the Word and will of God. But having said that, we are not reduced to silence. We still have a duty to respond.

Muslims often complain that Christians will not reciprocate their acknowledgement of Jesus as a prophet by recognizing the prophethood of Muhammad. Yet such a recognition would not constitute a real act of reciprocity, for Muslims acknowledge about Jesus only what the Qur'ān says of him, not what Christians say of him. True reciprocation would involve Muslim acceptance of Christian faith about Jesus in return for a Christian acknowledgement of Muslims' faith in Muhammad. Timothy goes probably as far as a Christian can go, and certainly much further than most Christians are prepared to go, in the estimation of Muhammad.

The second thing about Timothy's response is its fundamentally positive approach. We may think it rather politic, given that he was answering a caliph in whose hands rested his own fate and that of his community. However, as Bishop Kenneth Cragg pointed out about twenty years ago, our response to the question of Muhammad is not simply a matter of revisiting past doctrinal conflicts. It is a question of working actively to develop understandings that might take us towards a more creative future.²⁰ Timothy's positive response to the Caliph opened a way forward in the eighth century. However, that path by and large was not and still is not taken.

Timothy's response showed us what a Christian response should be: collaborative rather than competitive, seeking out and welcoming the undoubted resonances in the diverse Muslim images of Muhammad, and the familiar echoes in the Qur'ān of a revelation already heard. These resonances are often dismissed as indications of dependence, borrowing or imitation. However, it is also possible to see in them a confirmation of our shared attentiveness to the God who continually seeks to address us «in many and varied ways». Before there is any prophecy or scripture, there is the divine Word, which in both our traditions is considered pre-eternal.

This is crucial. Behind a Muslim's question about Muhammad lies, I believe, another more personal, perhaps more urgent, question: «Do you take me seriously as someone attentive to the Word of God?» «Do you respect me as someone listening sincerely for what God has to say and ready to act on it?» For many Muslims in the final analysis the Christian's response to the

²⁰ K. CRAGG, *Muhammad and the Christian*.

question of Muhammad does not matter. They do not feel the need for Christian approval of their faith in Muhammad as God's messenger. And they do not want a grudging response, so conditioned and circumscribed that it becomes virtually meaningless. The question about attentiveness to the Word of God, on the other hand, seems to me to matter enormously, because it is a question about the *bona fides* of the other.

Can Christians take Muhammad seriously as someone who listened for the Word of God? I think we can – the Muhammad we know through Muslim proclamation of him is, for the reasons the Patriarch Timothy outlined, a serious listener for the Word. As the first Companions heard from him the word that he had heard, so the Muslim community listens together with him for the Word – listening not just *to* the Qur'ān but *through* the Qur'ān, opening themselves to the infinite power of God's word to signify anew in each historical situation. Our way forward, perhaps our only way forward, is on the basis of our recognition of one another as sincere listeners for the Word.

Having said all this about Timothy's response to the classical *Sīra* image of Muhammad, it has to be noted that, when Muslims speak of the Prophet, one finds that it is rare that they speak simply of the Prophet as presented in the *Sīra*. The portraits they propose either concentrate on one or other aspect of that *Sīra* image, or are developed from the variety of sayings and actions attributed to the Prophet. Sometimes they go well beyond either *Sīra* or *Sunna*, straying even beyond the consensus of orthodoxy in their speculations. The image of Muhammad any particular Muslim has in mind when affirming that he is *rasūl Allāh* will draw on many sources and reflect various ideals, not all of them compatible.

Drawing on the literary, theological and philosophical traditions of Islam, we can put together a long list: Muhammad the fiery prophet defending the rights of the poor and denouncing the godless arrogance of the powerful. The religious and social reformer, patient and constant under persecution and rejection. Muhammad the faithful monotheist when virtually all about him were idolaters. Muhammad the charismatic preacher who listened intently for the Word of God, who preached what he heard and practised to perfection what he preached. Muhammad the sometimes harsh, sometimes merciful, ever astute statesmen and military commander. The bearer of definitive truth that relativizes and corrects all other beliefs. The founder of an Arab tribal confederation that within a short space of time dominated half the known world. Muhammad the affectionate father, the gentle and witty husband, who could laugh at the intrigues and jealousies of his household. The worker of signs and wonders who split the moon, to whom trees bowed, and whose touch healed and brought forth abundance. Muhammad the wise judge and model of perfection, to be followed in the minutest details of behaviour. Muhammad the rationalist reformer and proponent of a modern civilization

avant le mot. The consummate philosopher who nonetheless clothed truth in the garb of religion in order to accommodate himself to the masses. Muhammad, the beautiful, the tenderly beloved of God and the mystic's bridegroom. Muhammad, the primordial light through which everything is created. Muhammad who penetrated the highest heaven and was admitted to the very presence of God. Muhammad, sent by God «as a mercy for the ages», the sole intercessor before God whose prayer will be heard.²¹

Ultimately the Christian hesitancy about responding positively to images of Muhammad has been the sense that any response is always at least an implied comparison with Jesus. This is a confusion of categories. Though in Islamic tradition Jesus may be thought of as being in the same category as Muhammad, the Christian does not see things in this way. Jesus for the Christian is not just a different style of prophet, or a better class of prophet. For Christians Jesus is not the bearer of the Word of God in the way Muhammad is for Muslims. Rather he *is* that Word, the embodiment of that Word – the 'incarnation' we say, the enfleshment of the Word. As in Muslim understanding God chose «clear Arabic language» to communicate the Word in the Qur'ân, so in the Christian understanding God chose what we might call body-language – the language of embodied human living, and dying – to express the Word in Jesus.

Muslim faith does not claim that Muhammad is the Word, but rather that he is the human channel through whom the Word entered the world – an Arab prophet to give voice to the Word of God addressed to the Arabs in their own language. In this respect he is a parallel to Mary in the Christian scheme of things – the human person whose cooperation was needed to give flesh to the Word. As Seyyed Hossein Nasr pointed out, just as the Christian doctrine of Mary's virginity expresses the conviction that what comes from her is from God, so the doctrine of Muhammad's illiteracy plays a similar role in the Muslim understanding of revelation.²²

By his words and example Muhammad is understood to be the definitive interpreter of the Word. His preaching creates a new community and leads it out of persecution, establishing a new identity and a new polity. He gives political expression to the truth of faith. As interpreter he is like

²¹ For a treatment of the understanding of Muhammad in the Muslim tradition, see Anne Marie SCHIMMEL, *And Muhammad is his messenger: the veneration of the prophet in Islamic piety*, Chapel Hill, 1985; Ali S. ASANI – Kamal ABDEL-MALEK, *Celebrating Muhammad: images of the prophet in popular Muslim poetry*, Columbia, 1995.

²² SEYYED HOSSEIN NASR, *Ideals and Realities of Islam*, London, 1966; ²1979, 43-44. I have dealt with this question at more length in «Mary and Muhammad: Bearers of the Word» in *The Australasian Catholic Record* 80 (2003) 417-427, and also in «Gottes Botschaft an die Welt: Christen und Muslime, Jesus und der Koran» in *Communio* 32/1 (2003) 100-12.

Paul; as liberator and legislator he is a Moses figure – without parallel in the Christian tradition; as political and military leader his role resembles that of Constantine.

Christian responses to Muslim images of Muhammad tend to confound these categories and presume that Muhammad is being proposed as a replacement saviour. Yet that is not what Muslims generally believe of him. Similarly, Muslim responses to Christian faith in Jesus often miss the parallel with their faith in the Qur'ân. For Muslims the Qur'ân comes as a Word not to be interrogated and analyzed but to be received, believed and obeyed. It speaks for itself and, even though it must be listened to in diverse situations and thus interpreted, it *must* be listened to since it claims to be a divine word. Muslims would not consider that they have raised an otherwise human message to the level of the divine. And so they do not sense themselves free to reduce the status of the Qur'ân to one word among many. No more do most Christians understand themselves entitled to reduce the status of Jesus, whom Christian faith experiences as the divine Word. He is believed in neither as one word among many, nor as one prophet among many. Our dialogue, therefore, is not a process of negotiating claims until we reach a common denominator. Rather its purpose is to learn precisely from our differences where the uniqueness of each lies.²³

Is the Qur'ân's preaching, then, superfluous for a Christian? On the contrary it is invaluable, since it contains a salutary critique of certain expressions of Christian faith and behaviour. Its refusal of what it understands as some key points of Christian faith offers us the opportunity to re-examine and refine a proclamation that in the Qur'ân's day had failed to convey a clear sense of its monotheistic nature; that had failed to express the central significance of the cross; that had perhaps forgotten that its theological language of fatherhood, motherhood and sonship was not simply literal. In a sense it could be said that Christian theology can benefit from the Qur'ân's critique in order to come to a fuller understanding of its own faith.

In this sense the Qur'ân belongs, for a Christian, not simply to the category of scripture, but rather in the same category as other texts which, although they have a form and style similar to the canonical texts, do not find a place in the canon because they do not fully reflect the faith of the believing community. The Qur'ân offers an alternative reading of the abrahamic, monotheist, prophetic, messianic tradition as enunciated and developed over centuries in biblical and post-biblical text and practice. Its reading of that tradition is sometimes in sympathy with what for Christians and Jews is scriptural witness; yet at other times quite critical of it. So there is no

²³ From the question of Muhammad comes the further question of the role and sufficiency of prophecy in salvation. See MADIGAN, «Jesus and Muhammad», 96–99.

straightforward way to a mutual recognition of scriptures between Christians and Muslims. Each community will recognize familiar characteristics in the texts sacred to the other; yet each tradition also feels bound to reject certain elements of the other's text because they seem entirely foreign to what each believes to be God's definitive message.

The questions raised by the Qur'anic critique have received answers and prompted refinements in Christian theological writing, but principally in the Eastern Christian tradition. For obvious historical and geographical reasons Western theology did not have a strong sense of a Muslim interlocutor, and so addressed other audiences, refining its thought and its theological language in conversation with classical philosophy, enlightenment rationalism and humanist scepticism. With *Nostra Aetate's* opening up of the question of other religions, however, Western theology has a task and an opportunity before of it – to explore how the grace of God is working for the salvation of those who «along with us adore the one and merciful God» (*Lumen Gentium* 16; cf. also NA 3). With this phrase the Council settled authoritatively a question which nonetheless is still raised with some frequency: whether Christians and Muslims are indeed worshipping the same God. The fact that we proclaim different things about this God does not mean that there is more than one. Rather it means that our dialogue with one another and our proclamations to each another have a point beyond either of us, in the God whose name is «I am».

SUMMARY

In *Nostra Aetate* the Council chose not to deal exhaustively with the questions raised by the plurality of religions, but rather left some questions open for further reflection. The question of whether other religions have a salvific role, if so, what it might be, also raises the question of how salvation is to be understood. Related to this in the case of Islam is the question of a Christian view of its prophet and scripture.

Nel documento *Nostra Aetate* il Concilio ha deciso di non trattare in modo esaustivo tutte le questioni che sorgono dall'incontro delle religioni, rimandando invece alcune ad una riflessione a lungo termine. La questione di un eventuale ruolo salvifico per le religioni, provoca una riflessione sul concetto di salvezza attraverso le varie tradizioni. Collegato con questo nel caso dell'Islam è la questione di una posizione cristiana sul suo profeta e la sua scrittura.