# THE DIALOGUE OF ISLAM AND THE WORLD FAITHS

## *The Role of Speculative Philosophy*

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### 1. Is Everyone Right in a Religious Quarrel?

Once upon a time, a believer thought: "Every religious controversy is due to someone's – someone else's – ignorance." No longer, sadly. Given our knowledge of rival religions today, we recognise that the differences here are genuine, irreducible, and indeed violently expressed. Each religion, especially Islam and Christianity, has rigidly maintained that its tradition alone has a de jure claim to unique truth and validity. Both the New Testament and the Qur'an claim to provide their respective adherents with the definitive and comprehensive truth about man, nature, and divinity.

Why should anyone today deny the orthodox Muslim claim that Islam alone can provide the whole truth about life? Why should anyone deny the traditional claim that the Qur'an is a unique repository of all theological truth? Muslims are often offended by these questions, even if they are raised by fellow Muslims, let alone by those omnipresent villains, the Orientalists. But Muslims are keen to mock the parallel Christian claim about exclusivity: if there is a God who loves all his creatures, it is racist of him to restrict salvation and guidance mainly to a group of prosperous industrial communities in the Western world. Ironically, Muslims are here offering a specifically Christian reason for rejecting the Christian claim. If a Muslim argues that "*Extra ecclesiam nulla salus*" makes a mockery of God's allegedly universal love for mankind, he must also similarly concede that Allah's saving grace is meted out in a remarkably limited, if not gratuitous and arbitrary fashion. Two can play at this game: Muslims and Christians can accuse each other of the same failings. Narrow-mindedness at least is always ecumenical in scope.

In a religious quarrel, everybody seems to be right – a little like talking to a group of confused and excited witnesses at a traffic accident, who see entirely different things, but are all confident that they saw it as it really happened. It is clear that the truths of religions are not merely different, but mutually exclusive and competitive. Everyone appeals to an absolute authority in a context where appeals to merely human courts of appeal are dismissed as sinfully presumptu-

*P. Koslowski (ed.),Philosophy Bridging the World Religions,* 21-37.

ous. We shall, therefore, need an impartial witness, an arbiter of taste and detachment. Could philosophy perhaps play that role?

Arguments from authority, whether religious or secular, have never been conclusive, and we now live in an age that is sceptical and suspicious of the God of revealed religion and are, therefore, angry at those who short-circuit critical thought by appeals to scripture. The author of that old revivalist song "It was good enough for Moses, It's good enough for me" would find no acceptance among philosophers. The mind must, the advocates of reason tell us, submit primarily to the authority of the reasonable, and only derivatively, if at all, to the authority of the revealed. If in the past, Allah knew best, today it is the enlightened rationalist who knows best.

In this paper, I shall explore a few issues that arise in modern Islam's confrontation with the world of other faiths and ideologies, all matters properly to be deferred to the philosophical agenda. But sadly, there is no extant philosophical tradition in contemporary Islam. I examine later the possibility of reviving the philosophical tradition of Islam and critically, but briefly, examine the confrontation between Al-Ghazzali and Ibn Rushd (Averroes). I conclude that neither thinker is a suitable guide for those hoping to inaugurate an Islamic Enlightenment.

Two preliminary remarks. Firstly, I offer no facile solutions to these admittedly complex and wholly neglected worries, nor do I deny that the details of the solutions that I do offer here may legitimately be seen as mistaken or implausible. One occupational privilege, rarely noted, of working in modern academic philosophy is that one's mistakes are of little consequence, since no one of influence is likely to be misled by them.

Secondly, the Islamic Enlightenment will not happen simply by a Muslim decision to mimic European history. It will be established as the by-product of a major new heretical movement within Islam guided by Muslims who are recognisably Muslim. In the European case, let us not forget that preceding the Enlightenment was the Reformation, a crucial movement that established new Protestant organisations in Christendom. The Reformation permitted free inquiry into the Bible and implied the legitimacy of individual choice and limited respect for private agnosticism. If that is granted, secularism and all its works may follow. But the Enlightenment had an ambiguous potential: it could also be seen as a force that purified religion, rather than dethroning it completely.

## 2. Islam and the Sceptical Temper

"The Germans – once they were called the nation of thinkers: do they still think at all?" Friedrich Nietzsche's acid comment on his compatriots in his iconoclastic *Twilight of the Idols* also applies with some justice to the Muslim communi-

ties of the modern world. After developing a great rational philosophical tradition, Muslims have lapsed into an intellectual lethargy that has already lasted half a millennium. Modern Muslims are, as a group of people, embarrassingly unreflective: it is as though Allah had done all the thinking for his devotees. Perhaps, reflection and curiosity are simply by-products of political power. If so, the hope is that an empowered Islam will re-establish the philosophical tradition of Islam. But, already in our fifteenth century, few Muslims intelligently recognise the contemporary threat of secularity and the need to examine other faiths without parody of the insistently ubiquitous desire to prove the superiority of Islam.

Owing to an absence of sceptical and liberal influences, itself traceable to the lack of an extant philosophical tradition, no Muslim has ever ventured to develop a critical Qur'anic scholarship responsive to modern canons of critical history. More generally, virtually all Muslim writers prefer to pretend that the modern world poses a threat solely to the Judaeo-Christian traditions. Islam, it is thought, is, by the grace of God, gloriously exempt. In fact, of course, nothing could be further from the truth.

It is the task of philosophy to puncture this misguided triumphalism. But, immediately, we have a problem. There is no philosophical tradition in modern Sunni Islam. And as for the extant Shia tradition of reflection on themes mystical and devotional, it is not in the style of the Muslim rationalist tradition. Instead, it is often merely mystical in the sense that its writers exploit the liberty to use exalted phrases of unclear meaning and adopt a very relaxed attitude towards the laws of logic. As a result, all Islamic thought continues to flow without impediment along the deep-cut grooves of custom and tradition.

Magic and secular poetry are arts vigorously and repeatedly condemned by the author of the Qur'an (Q: 2:102; 26:224-6). Would academic philosophy of religion have escaped condemnation if the sacred volume had been revealed in a different age or culture such as Socrates' Athens? Certainly, according to the religious authorities of Islam. Ever since the first currents of Hellenic philosophy overwhelmed the simple literalism of the Quaranic creed, Islamic orthodoxy has continually condemned the unsettling power of philosophy to plague its labours. Philosophy, we are told, creates at worst unnecessary doubts and hesitations, and at best mere conjecture and confusion; scripture, by contrast, it is claimed, offers assurances for Paradise. This orthodox view prevalent among devout Muslims, as among religiously inclined Jews and Christians, is as simple as it is familiar: there is neither the time nor the need for philosophy in a world awaiting divine nemesis and blessed with the benefits of divine tuition. Doesn't the Book of Allah contain sufficient guidance and education for the faithful student?

The Devil is not alone in being able to quote the scriptures for his own use: believers can do it too. Although the Qur'an has no occasion to outlaw analyti-

cal philosophy, it does contain verses which, given a playful ingenuity coupled with the liberty to overlook an occasional clause, can certainly be interpreted to possess an anti-intellectual potential. In the Qur'an's longest (and most inaptly named) surah, an incident is related, the details of which could easily be recruited for orthodox service. The incident, suggestive though it is of the wider possibilities of the human potential for perversity, itself involves a simple clash between Moses and his people over the sacrifice of a yellow heifer. Notoriously, the Israelites fabricate an unusually large number of objections and questions before eventually sacrificing the cow – and even then doing so with reluctance. The Qur'an relates this affair in surprisingly great detail, giving us, in doing so, a picture of the laboured and contrived nature of their hesitations (Q: 2:67-72).

It does not require too much extrapolation or ingenuity, as scriptural exegesis goes, to see the relevance of this incident to the wider problem of the impiety of rational interrogation of religious imperatives. Men are doubters whose arrogant self-will makes them resist surrender to the will of God. They pretend to have sincere reservations, arguing that they wish to probe religious demands before agreeing to submission – all in the larger interests of intellectual integrity. But, the believer will argue, human beings deliberately introduce unnecessary complications and induce perverse doubts in order to seek release from duties they secretly acknowledge as binding. Philosophy, with its questioning bent, itself nourished on specious reasoning, is, it will be concluded, a monument to the mortal tendency to sinful perversity. Predictably, it is the discipline in which the Devil has always had his greatest following.

Nor is this suspicion of philosophy restricted to Muslims. Many Christians have also seen philosophy as a temptation. In his *Paradise Regained*, Milton has Greek philosophy as one of the temptations offered by Satan to Christ during his sojourn in the desert. The suggestion fails to find a direct warrant in the New Testament (cf. Luke 4:1-13; Matt. 1:11) though Christian enemies of philosophy would cite the anti-philosophical passages of St. Paul in Colossians 2:8 and I Corinthians 1:20-5.

## 3. Is Philosophy a Worthy Discipline?

Islamic orthodoxy has generally been content to condemn philosophy as futile. An unspeculative practical piety, largely unperturbed by metaphysical and theological puzzles over issues such as free will and transcendence, rightly saw philosophy as merely irrelevant. Fortunately, therefore, Muslim orthodoxy has not, a few shameful episodes apart, actively opposed philosophy as heretical. The early and medieval Muslim thinkers actually succeeded, despite some occasional and mild persecution, to produce a relatively autonomous philosophical tradition, free from religious domination, although, as in Christian Europe, they had

to conceal their real intentions. It is not in vain that Descartes, writing in a much later age, fearing Catholic persecution and mindful of Galilei's sufferings, was fond of the slogan "*Bene vixit ben qui latuit*" ("He lives well who lives well-hidden").

The attempt to seek co-existence for the rational Hellenic elements and the faithful Islamic ones began as early as the ninth (third Muslim) century with Yaqub al-Kindi and continued in the next century with the Neoplatonist Abu Nasr al-Farabi and Ibn Sina (Avicenna). Moreover, the theologian al-Ashari – named Islam's Aquinas – showed his Muslim contemporaries how Greek philosophy could be recruited in the service of dogmatic orthodoxy. Paralleling these developments, conservative religious thinkers tried to show the impiety of excessive confidence in the process of philosophical reason.

One major clash between orthodoxy and the thinkers looms large and provides an instructive example of the everlasting skirmish between faith and reason. We know on the authority of the traditionalist Abu Da'ud as Sijistani that Muhammad promised his followers that in every century Allah would raise someone to revive the Islamic faith. Abu Hamid al-Ghazzali is often seen as the reformer or renewer for the sixth Muslim (twelfth Christian) century. This privilege is conferred on him because we wrote three thoughtful works of scholarly piety: The anti-philosophical *The Incoherence of the Philosophers*, the pro-religious *Revival of the Religious Sciences*, and the devotional *Deliverer from Error*. Many among the religious intelligentsia (*ulema*) have thought that the great reformer, aided no doubt by supernatural wisdom, successfully refuted all the philosophers who preceded him and, accordingly to some religious believers, more generously, all the additional philosophers who succeeded him.

## 4. Is Averroes our Modern Guide?

This judgement would have stood unchallenged had it not been for the appearance of a book, towards the end of the twelfth century, with the title *The Incoherence of the Incoherence*. Its author was Ibn Rushd (1126-1198 CE), better known in the West as Averroes, a philosopher destined to disturb not only Islamic but also medieval Christian orthodoxy. With Averroes on the field, the religious inning was over. But the death of Averroes at the close of the twelfth century marked the beginning of the end of the golden age of Islamic philosophy. Heaven had heard the prayers of the orthodox.

This uniquely rational Muslim philosopher was lucky enough to be born in Muslim Spain, within whose lenient orthodoxy he worked as a judge and writer. He died in Morocco. At once European, Arab, Muslim, and African, Ibn Rushd was a cultural bridge-builder. He is a uniquely exciting symbol, native to Islam, of the enlightened approach to religion. In his work we see the Graeco-Arab

roots of modern Western thought and this gives us hope for inter-faith and inter-civilisational work and dialogue. Devout Muslims have refused to make amends even retrospectively for ignoring "the Muslim Aristotle." Western scholars have rightly begun to honour a thinker who had little honour in his native locale.

Averroes was commissioned by a liberal caliph to interpret Aristotle. He wrote 38 commentaries of varying size and depth, commenting intelligently on all of Aristotle's works apart from his *Politics*, for which he substituted Plato's *Republic*. The "long" commentaries concede the least to official Islamic orthodoxy. Averroes did not have the privilege of classical Greek: he relied on superb translations into Arabic, made by Christian Arabs, sometimes via Syriac.

I believe that Averroes' project of creating a rational society should be completed by modern Muslims, his intelligent successors. Sadly, it has to be conceded that Averroes often presents religious opinions in such a refined manner that only philosophically sophisticated believers would be able to comprehend them. In rescuing Averroes as a symbol for the rational approach to Islam, I wish to safeguard against the accusation that great thinkers, like dead prophets, are puppets in the hands of posterity. The question concerning Averroes' real opinions is unanswerable. He may even have intended it this way for, like some philosophers in Christian Europe, both today and in the past, he needed to conceal his real views. We have already noted Descartes's fondness for the motto "*Bene vixit bene qui latuit.*" In any event, the question of Averroes' real opinions is part of an endless and pointless debate that amuses experts.

Averroes recognises only philosophy and the holy law, *shariah*. He rejects theology but argues, surprisingly, that the pursuit of Greek philosophy is not merely permitted but commanded by the *shariah* – but only for those of sufficient ability. The *shariah* is the "milk sister" of philosophy. We must eliminate theology, a meddlesome relative who creates needless problems, including the false opposition between faith and reason.

Averroes is, of course, mistaken in claiming that the conflict between faith and critical reason is spurious. In fact, in many cases, as I argue below, it is irresolvable. Moreover, the fact that Averroes uses the Qur'an to justify the necessity of philosophy shows that scripture is plastic to our wishes. In fact, Averroes creates a heretical theology, while pontificating that religion can do without theology.

Averroes saw revealed religion as merely a popular form of philosophy, a metaphysics for the masses. For him, religious truth is an allegorical form of philosophical truth; the Qur'an and Aristotle are compatible and complementary. But, he insists, philosophy has a degree above other valid routes to knowledge. For the philosopher, there are no mysteries in the world: all is intelligible through organised reflection.

This is hardly a religious view of the world. Sadly, Averroes stood for the absolute sovereignty of reason; his inspiration was Aristotle, not the Qur'an. He

uses the sacred book to justify alien philosophical convictions found naturally in Greek thought. For believers, such as Averroes' predecessor al-Ghazzali, the most resolute enemy of Greek philosophy, the Qur'an is directly the source of every significant true belief. Moreover, believers are religiously obliged to deny the objectivity of secular ethics and causation and the eternity of the world: all radically depends on God's direct volition. For Averroes, however, the meaning and causation of events lies in this world and only contingently, if at all, in the transcendent. Perhaps Greek philosophy is genuinely subversive of all revealed religion, including Judaism and Christianity. The faithful are entitled to believe that philosophy is the discipline in which the Devil has always had his greatest following.

Averroes arrogantly claimed that the inner meaning of the Qur'an was hidden from the masses; only philosophers had access to these esoteric significances. Ironically, Averroes was dismissive of the claims of Muslim mystics who claimed the same privilege. Moreover, he was guilty of epistemological apartheid: the genesis of an idea in the varied faculties of reason, faith, intuition, and experience is thought to privilege or debase it, without regard for its intrinsic merit. For Averroes, in effect, faith merely seeks truth, revelation finds a part of it, only philosophy fully possesses it. This is hardly a religiously acceptable epistemology.

## 5. The Role of Critical Reason

What, then, is the correct role for independent reason, the true office of reason in theology? The Qur'an implies an optimistic assessment of the potential of human intellect. Men and women are constantly invited to think and ponder in order that they may believe. But, at the end of the chapter, faith has decisive priority over reason, faith defines the offices, power, and limits of reason in matters theological. The predominant view among Muslim theologians today, as in the past, is the view called "fideism" in Christian thought: an intellect unenlightened by God's grace cannot judge faith while an intellect enlightened by God's grace can only judge favourably. Fideism, then, is the theological doctrine according to which faith does not stand in need of rational justification; faith is the arbiter of reason and its pretensions. While Islam has not produced any extreme versions of fideism – there is no Søren Kierkegaard or Karl Barth in Muslim culture – the fideist outlook is discernible in the work of al-Ghazzali.

Fideism in Muslim religious thought is in its impulse, though not always in its ultimate character, essentially identical with fideism in Christian circles. The only significant difference here is due to the fact that Muslims reject the view that the human reasoning faculty has been irreparably damaged by the Fall of man. In orthodox Islam, therefore, one cannot find any extreme version of fide-

ism – of the kind popular among evangelical Christians and Lutherans who celebrate paradox and congratulate themselves on the amount of irrationality in their religious beliefs. The Muslim view is similar to the Catholic view of St. Augustine, which later, through St. Thomas Aquinas, dominated Christian thought in the Middle Ages.

The primacy of faith is as much a feature of orthodox Islamic thought as of orthodox Christian thought. The Qur'an often invites us to ponder the signs of Allah in nature, society, and the self. But the reality of Allah himself is fully accessible only to faith – a faith that is itself a gift of grace. And it is, philosophically, a problematic endowment. Is it the case that the content of Muslim faith is intrinsically rational but merely appears irrational to those uninfluenced by grace? Is the content of faith irrational – only this feature is welcome to the believer influenced by grace, unwelcome to the rejector. Such paradoxes of faith, familiar to Christians, also rise in Islam, though Muslims are reluctant to concede this truth. At any rate, faith is, even if its content is rational, an undeserved gift of supernatural grace. After all, Allah is in the first instance the subject of faith and loving obedience, not of rational inquiry or purely discursive thought. Unaided human reason, then, is inferior to the gift of faith. Indeed, reason is useful only in so far as it finds a use in the larger service of faith.

Ever since Muslims first encountered Greek philosophy, it has always been difficult to ease the necessary tension between the rational Hellenic element and the dogmatic Islamic one in the total religious synthesis. There has always been a friction between the demands of a rational thought that cannot even in principle tolerate a curtailment in its autonomy by some supernatural authority, on the one hand, and the demands of a dogmatic orthodoxy that confidently sees itself as terminatively authoritative, on the other. We see this clearly in Averroes' reluctance to limit the powers of critical reason in the battle with Greek philosophy, a battle in which he was, perhaps unwittingly, on the Greek side. For the believer, however, as we saw with al-Ghazzali, the decisive theologian who signed the death warrant for philosophy in the Muslim Orient, faith is an undeserved gift of divine grace, to be accepted on the authority of no less an authority than Allah himself: *credere Deum Deo.*

In the following, a solution to the problem that gave rise to this conflict between the thinkers and the theologians of Islam will be proposed. It is a solution based on an insight that escaped both these two learned sheikhs, al-Ghazzali and Ign Rushd. It must be admitted at the beginning that there is a justified disquiet about combining a faithful commitment to Islamic convictions with an endorsement of free inquiry about their epistemological status. Averroes was wrong to deny the authenticity of this conflict. Now, the best way to effect an admittedly temporary truce between faith and reason is to draw a distinction between the philosophy of religion, on the one hand, and theology proper, on the other. I believe that the philosophy of religion is in effect the rational examination of

theological claims, without deference to the authority of any revealed dictum; theology, however, openly relies on the authority of revelation. The philosophy of revelation treats all types of religion and religious faith and experience as its domain, not presupposing the privileged position of any type, but aiming at discovering what religious truths, if any, are implied by the psychology, sociology, and history of religion. Theology, by contrast, starts with the faith of some particular religion, the Christian or Muslim, for example, and expounds and defends that faith, while accepting the central tenets of the religion in question as revealed and authoritative.

If we accept the legitimacy of this distinction, then the believing philosopher of religion will, in his philosophical capacity, seek exemption from the normal veto on any independent assessment of his faith in relation to other faiths and to secularism. The theologian, however, will work and think securely within the orbit of his faith. Institutionally, the faithful philosopher of religion may conscientiously teach the usual university syllabus, while the theologian would appropriately teach in a seminary or *madrassah* set up by the religious authorities.

The Qur'an does not outlaw free inquiry. But it would be dishonest to read into its verses any celebration of free inquiry in the modern sense of the term. There are no specifically Islamic reasons for encouraging a Muslim to undertake any unduly critical study of his basic religious convictions, any more than there are specifically Christian or Jewish reasons for such a stance. The truth is that the scriptures of these three faiths are aristocratic in their tone and conviction. Neither the Qur'an nor the Torah nor the New Testament are particularly charitable about other faiths. Orthodox Muslims, like orthodox Jews and orthodox Christians, see no great value in free inquiry in matters theological. After all, what is the point of free inquiry if one already has the truth?

Philosophy has always been and remains a dirty word in the Islamic seminary (*madrassah*). At one time it was said, against the Greek influence on Islam, that *man tamantaga tazandaga* – he who does logic disbelieves – logic being in this aphorism the symbol of the Greek respect for critical reason.

What are the basic presuppositions of a philosophy of Islam? What would be the minimal assumptions of any potentially objective study of Islam – a study in an analytical critical idiom. There are at least three fundamental assumptions, each controversial, which any philosophy of religion, including a philosophy of the Muslim religion, must necessarily make.

Firstly, one needs to assume that religious belief is not sui generis: it can legitimately be subsumed under a subsection of belief in general in the same way as historical or political or moral belief. Secondly, it must be assumed that even if religious belief is indeed a special gift of grace, it is at another level simultaneously a purely human conviction, whose content is subject to ordinary appraisal or scrutiny. Thus even if it is true that authentic revelation is the only source of true religious ideas, the thinker may still reasonably assess the truth

and plausibility of revealed claims once they have appeared in the world. And thirdly, one must assume that the actual existence of God is not a necessary condition of the very possibility of entertaining belief in God or belief that there is a God. Some religious believers have mistakenly thought that the very fact that men actually believe in God implies that the human mind is an arena for the direct causal activities of God, Gabriel, or the Holy Spirit.

These are all controversial assumptions. They are not, however, unjustifiable or implausible and I shall take their truth for granted here. Certainly, we cannot get our project off the ground unless we are prepared to accept, if only provisionally, the truth of these assumptions.

A religious believer may rightly argue that, in making these assumptions, I have begged the question against an important theological position – the position called Islamic orthodoxy. This cannot be denied. But if the philosopher cannot juggle all the balls in the air, neither can the religious believer. No method, whether religious or philosophical, is fully presuppositionless. The least controversial method is the one nourished by the minimum number of controversial assumptions. But questions are bound to the begged. Perhaps the trick is merely to beg them persuasively.

In disputes of this kind, it is customary for both parties to contend that the burden of proof is on the opponent. While these arguments from location of onus are not compelling, they do, if successfully made, indicate a direction of inquiry. In this secular age, it may fairly be said that the burden of proof (or at least of plausibility) is on the believer's shoulders: he must, in the face of secular reservation, justify his faith using the language of reason.

## 6. The Qur'an and Religious Pluralism

Let us assume that Muslims will revive the philosophical sciences in due course. What are the implications of such a development for inter-faith work? It is possible nowadays to understand various faiths in a comprehensively cross-cultural way: there has been spectacular growth recently in our knowledge of rival faiths and ideologies. But there is currently a stalemate among the various faiths. And the Christian-Muslim deadlock is an especially intractable one that is likely to endure perhaps forever. In the end, we may all do well to heed the Qur'an's advice: instead of being rivals in the negative and harmful mode, Muslims and Christians should cultivate rivalry in good works (Q: 2:148; 5:48).

The study of the epistemology of religious dogma reminds us that many characteristically modern theological puzzles are generated by the fact that the world is metaphysically neutral: it sustains Jewish, Christian, Muslim, and indeed secular explanations more or less equally well. Moreover, the doctrinal elements in any one given faith cannot reasonably maintain a universality of

normative claim upon modern human allegiance. The presence of authentic religious commitment outside one's own tradition of faith is undeniable, even if religiously disconcerting. Indeed, enlightened opinion among theists is now unanimous that scripture contains irresolvable puzzles with respect to the existence of plural pieties.

I shall now identify some of the theological difficulties that a philosophically sophisticated Muslim would experience. I begin by noting the existence of moral excellence among the adherents of non-Islamic faiths. Only prejudice could motivate a denial of the existence of instances of conspicuous virtue among Jews, Christians, and members of various non-theistic faiths. And if we examine traditional Christian piety, it is impossible to believe that Christians, such as St. Paul, intentionally wish to dishonour Allah (God) when they proclaim in all sincerity: "Christ is our Lord." That there should be such a virile dissident piety outside Islam is religiously unsettling to Muslims. But it is there. Again, to turn to Judaism, one cannot fail to be impressed by its many men and women of proverbial piety, whose lives have had a deep influence upon the human pursuit of holiness, an influence absurdly out of proportion to their relatively small number. And, finally, when we cast a glance at the non-theistic Eastern religions, we have a different metaphysic, yet a similarly ardent wish to seek moral excellence. Thus, though the Eastern sages entertained a cyclical (rather than linear) view of history and saw their destiny as being caught in the wheel of rebirth awaiting final emancipation, their lives displayed all of the moral virtues associated with the theistic faiths.

Can Islam in principle accommodate these concessions, irresistible as they surely are today? Well, there are some religious resources within the Muslim scripture that do apparently facilitate to some extent the resolution of some pluralist difficulties. Although Islam as a specific, historical religion begins in seventh-century Arabia, the Qur'an traces the origins of the Islamic tradition back to Adam. The religion of Islam, the faith that centrally advocates submission (*Islam*) to the will of God, begins, in Qur'anic perspective, at the very beginning of history, receives a formulation with Abraham, is repeatedly enunciated by a long line of Hebrew (Israelite) Patriarchs and lesser Jewish figures, and culminates, in one of its branches, with the appearance of Jesus the Messiah in first century Palestine. In parallel with this, Arabian figures arise in various 'Gentile' communities – a process that culminates, through the reopening of the Ishmaelite lineage, in Muhammad the Apostle of God in seventh-century Arabia. This conquest of the past is a characteristic and favourite motif of the Qur'an: the faith of Muhammad is merely a restoration of the pristine faith of Abraham and Adam.

If we lay aside the important reservation that the Qur'anic conception of the origins of Islam may offend against certain criteria of critical and historical objectivity, it would appear that at least all the theistic faiths, possibly all religions

of whatever complexion, come within the orbit of "Islam." But, of course, this is not Islam – the historical faith embraced by members of Muhammad's community in Mecca and Medina. And it is this realisation that lies at the root of one's dissatisfaction with the orthodox claim about Islam's radical comprehensiveness and inclusiveness. For the notion that Islam is the primordial faith of mankind is not in effect an historical-empirical claim; rather, it is a normative religious judgement about the allegedly monotheistic tendency of human nature. The Qur'anic axiom of man's inherently theistic proclivity, the view that all human beings are naturally inclined to be Muslim, is here parading as an empirical claim. Certainly, anyone who believes that Islam is the only faith that God has ordained since history began is bound to be a Muslim. For such a claim is fundamentally religious, indeed Islamic; it is not in the first instance empirical or historical, though it may enjoy some independent historical and factual support.

If we are to develop the Muslim response to other faiths, we must begin by examining the Qur'an's own sentiments about Islam. "The religion (*deen*) with God," says Chapter 3, v. 19, "is Islam. When Allah wishes to favour a man, he "expands his breast to (contain) Islam" (Q: 6:125; 39:22). With the complete establishment of Islam, God has completed his favour on mankind, announces Chapter 5, v. 3, a verse that is generally held to complete the revelation of the Qur'anic corpus. Predictably, anyone who seeks a faith other than Islam will not find acceptance in the eyes of God: such a choice would entail a radical loss (Q: 3:85).

Of course, the Qur'an uses the term "Islam" in a very broad sense. Islam is the religion of all the prophets who preceded Muhammad (Q: 3:84), whatever their respective communities may have done with the revelations received. Nonetheless, many traditions are outside the orbit of Islam – a fact that will certainly plague the labours of those contemporary Muslims advocating an authentic religious pluralism. It can be defensibly asserted, however, that if Islam is true, all the various theistic faiths, particularly Judaism and Christianity, are at least partly true, reflecting as they do irregular and imperfect forms of Allah's varied grace.

Though the Qur'an declares Islam to be the only faith-style fully acceptable to God, it nowhere restricts salvation, or rather religious success, to Muslims in the narrower sense of those who endorse Muhammad's claim to prophethood. The only conditions of obtaining God's forgiveness are belief in the unity of God and his judgement coupled with the intention to perform good deeds (Q: 2:62). If this indeed be so, the Muslim Paradise would be a kind of commonwealth of pious souls all accepting the ultimate sovereignty of God. These relatively liberal Qur'anic sentiments have not stopped Muslims from effectively restricting entry into Paradise to other Muslims, indeed even to members of their own sect. Of course, Allah reserves the right to "do whatever he pleases," forgive whom he wills – a right utterly central to the divine nature as depicted in

the Qur'an. Such a caveat introduces the possibility of universal salvation, albeit at the risk of trivialising the clash between faith and rejection.

Whatever the correct Islamic stance toward other faiths may turn out to be, the case against complete religious exclusivism need no longer detain us in this liberal age. The pluralist view seems to be the one most likely to gain, implicitly at any rate, widespread acceptance in the coming years in advanced industrial cultures. According to this view, a certain kind of exclusivism, with all its isolationist implications, is to be shunned, and to be shunned for religious reasons. Every established faith is properly to be seen as merely one among several authentic but partial and culturally relative approaches to the knowledge and experience of the divine. After all, would a merciful God indeed restrict guidance and salvation to only a portion of the human race? Such an appealing and charitable opinion is no doubt open to devastating criticism: its amiable tolerance overlooks the claim of logic that P and not-P cannot both be true at the same time. Yet it is based on the plausible observation that no religious belief system, unless it had an element of truth in it, could give convincing sense and direction to the lives of countless human beings for many centuries. And the view that God has not restricted his guidance and salvation to the followers of only one religion and to only one part of humanity seeks, moreover, to establish the attractive conclusion that large sections of our species somehow find salvation and religious fulfilment in different, creatively-variable ways under a unique, all-encompassing divine sovereignty.

## 7. The Self-Image of Faith

It is a characteristic feature of the self-understanding of any orthodoxy, whether religious or secular, that it views its own constitutive views as uniquely and fully true, while regarding alien convictions as being wholly or partly false. Since about the nineteenth century, however, claiming truth for one's own belief-system to the exclusion of all others has become unacceptable. In recent years, a new orthodoxy has emerged, according to which there is no such thing as absolute truth. Truth, it is said, is relative to culture, era, and language.

The rise of such pluralism, with its implied threat of cultural and historical relativism, has eroded the absolute authority of any given religious scripture. Pluralism is rooted in the nineteenth-century European development of historical perspective, particularly among English, French, Dutch, and German thinkers. And the twentieth century witnessed a spectacular and unprecedented growth in our knowledge of other faiths and ideologies. Many now believe that different visions are brought to prominence by a fortunate combination of social causes linked with some charismatic individual will fired with enthusiasm for reform or revolution – and fully matched with the hour of its appearance on the

stage of history. Observers are impressed by the apparently fortuitous manner in which history patronises various causes. Certainly, individuals such as Moses, Marx, and Muhammad have turned the world – or rather their little world and hence our larger world – upside down; but they, like the rest of us, have remained prisoners in a historical process that is sovereignly indifferent to human ambition.

The self-image of every ideology as uniquely authoritative is created retrospectively. And that is to be expected. After all, no great world religion or ideology, no matter how established and influential it eventually became, was impressive in its origins. World religions are merely cults that have succeeded. And success alters perspectives. People are interested even in one's failures after one has succeeded. Marx was at first an obscure intellectual scribbler; and yet at the height of its power a third of the world's people lived under what was termed Marxist government. And despite the official, dramatic, and universal collapse of communism, virtually our entire so-called "academic elite" in universities throughout the world earns its living by pretending to believe in Marx's doctrines of the class struggle. That a first-century Palestinian rabbi with unusual views and a seventh-century Arab merchant should together continue to influence the deepest hopes and wishes of almost half of the human race is remarkable. In fact, it is astonishing once we recognise that greatness, whether in people or circumstances, is the last of our noble illusions. And was it not philosophy, pursued long and well, with worthy opponents, that taught us this vital truth, the one truth that teaches humility, noughts the proud private and public self – and sets us free?

## 8. Islam and Other Faiths: A Philosophical Approach

What about ecumene? A notable feature of recent religious debate in Western society has been the avoidance of pejorative language in describing the convictions of those outside the orbit of orthodoxy. Castigation of dissidents as "heretics" is now much rarer in most Christian circles, particularly liberal scholarly ones. The use of epithets such as "infidel" in descriptions of non-orthodoxy, has declined noticeably in published theological literature in the last few decades. Moreover, many Christian writers, usually Protestants, but also increasing numbers of Catholics after Vatican II, now disown the insularity of Latin Christianity and of the more recently fashionable Barthian neo-orthodoxy. (After Vatican II, isn't every Catholic secretly a Protestant?) Naturally, I restrict my remarks here to intellectual rather than popular culture. In the latter, the recent rise of evangelical Christianity, especially in North America, has tended to emphasise an isolationist attitude that discerns exclusive privileges in being a "true" Christian.

This new politeness among Christian thinkers is the result, at least in part, of the decline of religious enthusiasm, coupled with the rise of the secular disciplines such as the philosophy of religion and the comparative study of religion. Liberal and sceptical influences of various kinds, associated chiefly with militant humanism and its political counterparts, have together helped to curb the excesses of an older Christian fanaticism. This has, in turn, paved the way for a more self-critical and balanced self-assessment, along with a more impartial assessment of other faiths, particularly of those related religious rivals, Judaism and Islam.

Virtually all Muslim theologians, however, still remain largely indifferent to the kind of intellectual refinement that has so radically altered the provincial attitudes of some Christian writers towards other traditionally rival faiths. As a result, Muslim thinkers resolutely refuse to treat, even for purely academic purposes, religious rivals as autonomous and authentic alternatives to Islam. Jews and particularly Christians are thus often prematurely dispossessed of their faithful heritage: Islam alone, it is said repeatedly, without argument, truly contains authentic Judaism and Christianity. This attitude, rightly, offends all Jews and Christians, even those select few who actually have enormous sympathy with Muslims and Islam.

Bearing in this mind these general trends and prejudices, let me now clear the ground for a philosophical exchange among Islam and its modern rivals. I summarise my proposals in three brief methodological comments. Firstly, neither the range nor the content of ecumene should be determined a priori. Perhaps we can reasonably hope for a community of belief among Jews, Christians, and Muslims, but not among the monotheists and their polytheist detractors. Or perhaps, as I am inclined to believe, the picture is much bleaker: even the possibility of a unified theology of the Western faiths is a futurist fantasy.

There are of course different kinds of ecumene among faiths: a given faith may attain doctrinal (metaphysical) ecumene with another related religion, but fail to attain any moral or political unity of sentiment. Thus, for example, Islam may occasionally and temporarily have a partial unity of political obligation with Marxism, while retaining a religious association with the Judaeo-Christian tradition. Christianity may, to take another example, seek moral ecumene with a faith such as Buddhism, while rejecting any doctrinal association. There is also a further worry here about the ranking of the various ecumenes. Is doctrinal ecumene more fundamental than political ecumene? Arguably, ecumene should be in the area of doctrinal conviction, since ethics and politics are derivative from and parasitic upon doctrinal similarities. Could there be a single overarching affiliation? Or should there be many? If the latter, will these affiliations be inspired by religious conviction or merely reflect changing and pragmatic political need?

Secondly, someone could argue that the range of ecumene is, once we take seriously a particular scripture, zero: the very notion of ecumene is a disguised form of compromise, one of the subtle ways of destroying genuine faith. The theological position with which such an isolationist view may naturally be associated is Christian or Muslim orthodoxy. I have actually overheard an old Christian man in a church saying to a liberal Christian who gave a public lecture there: "The modern theory that you should always treat the religious convictions of other people with profound respect is a piece of rubbish that would have shocked our Lord Jesus Christ. Mutual tolerance of religious views is the product not of faith, but of doubt." This eloquently expressed objection to ecumene is religious, not philosophical. It is of great and enduring importance to countless ordinary Christians and, in a suitable modified form, to millions of Jews and Muslims.

Thirdly, someone could, unrealistically, suggest that the range of ecumene is broad enough to encompass a global theology. This is an unlikely possibility. In effecting a harmonisation of various religions, we might effectively jettison all recognisably religious content. The result may well be a philosophical, purely humanistic, alternative to the admittedly insular religiosity associated with each of the established religious traditions. There is, of course, no reason a priori for entertaining the assumption that the least common denominator among all religious faiths is itself a religious faith. Perhaps the only common thing here is our common humanity. Though we belong to many faiths, we are all still one humanity. And yet, paradoxically, what is in common need not unite. (Should humanists be included in such an ecumene?) So syncretistic a view is likely to be, even at best, only superficially religious.

## 9. After Death: Final Reflections on Ecumene

There is a religious postscript to this philosophical discussion. According to Islamic orthodoxy, immediately after death the soul undergoes preliminary interrogation by the angels. The catechism involves standard and simple questions: Who is your Lord? What is your religion? The answers come easily to the lips of the pious believer. Those who have rejected the faith are quickly found out variously on account of their hesitation, confusion, silence, or else the incoherence or falsity of their responses. Those who pass the doctrinal part of the test are then subjected to a further test about their deeds and actions. Few indeed pass this part of the examination. The sinner, according to some authorities, then requests the Prophet Muhammad to intercede on his behalf. The appeal is presented to Allah; the final decision rests entirely within the divine prerogative and is, naturally, never subject to dispute.

This orthodox doctrine best serves to illustrate the temperamental gulf between the innocence of traditional attitudes and the sheer complexity of choice in our pluralist ethos. The faithful Muslim who has worked hard all his life in the hope of attaining Paradise finds that his battle is not yet won: accordingly, he is here being given the final details. The relevant answers are as defined, direct, and clear as the questions. There is no room for unclarity, confusion, or hesitation. The pious man has already done his homework; he has nothing to worry about. He thinks: "Let everyone worship God in their own way but I shall worship him in his way. And death shall reveal unto the others the error of their ways."

But what is the way of God? It is difficult to know. Even within faiths, opinions abound; and all faiths now exist, co-exist, in conscious proximity to alien convictions. Thus, Islam is no longer the only faith option for Muslims settled in the West. It is one of the choices for modern man. It is a live option for anyone who reads the Qur'an.

Today, a thoughtful man need no longer live and die in the traditional faith of his forefathers. Conversion need no longer occur by chance contact with alien belief; it can happen through life-long research, undertaken in a spirit of organised interest in other faiths. Even mass conversions are, in principle, possible: large numbers of people could come to recognise that their allegiance to a particular religious ideal was largely an accident of birth and geography. Perhaps, soon, some white nation will convert en masse to Islam. Or is that merely one of the many fantasies of the Muslim apologetic imagination?

In fact most people's actual choice of religion, if we can call it a choice at all, is governed largely by the presuppositions and tendencies of their particular cultures. It is unsurprising that many contemporary Swedes and Germans are Lutherans; it is equally unremarkable that most modern Saudis and Egyptians are Sunnis. Some people may, of course, after due consideration, decide that they are members of a particular religious community (as opposed to another) by chance rather than choice. If so, conversion is the natural step. Yet there is much harm in conversion. Every religion is concerned to create community among us quarrelsome human beings by supplying a more or less uniform self-image. To the extent that conversion usually deracinates a person from the community of his birth and initial allegiance, it creates much confusion and disruption and is, therefore, perhaps to be discouraged. (Think here of the angels questioning a philosophically sophisticated convert: he would probably be sent to Hell for answering ever angelic question with another human question.) It does, however, take the courage of a Socrates to reject what one takes to be the ultimate truth merely for the benefits of the unexamined life.

# PHILOSOPHY BRIDGING THE WORLD RELIGIONS

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