

“We believe in one God”

Lecture at the Iqbal Academy Scandinavia the 14th of November 2010

First of all I would like to thank Dr. Sabir and the Iqbal Academy for the opportunity to participate at this seminar. I do look forward to fruitful discussions.

The topic of this seminar is “Kinship in Thought between Islam and the West”. Being a theologian I couldn’t help to choose just the topic, which really expresses a kinship between Islam and the West, our common confession of and belief in the one holy God, the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, blessed be his name. Here exists really a fellowship between Muslims, Christians and Jews.

But we have also to realize that there are quite a lot of disagreements between us about this common confession, creating troubles for our coexistence as a peaceful one. These disagreements are both on the level of philosophy of religion and on a theological level.

To take possibly the most fundamental disagreement between Muslims and Christians first as an example to show how important it is to stick to our agreement on our belief in the oneness of God. We Christians believe in the one God as the triune God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. You Muslims emphasize your belief in the one God as a radical oneness. And then the misunderstanding very often will arise that Christians believe in three Gods, because our emphasis on the oneness of God isn’t respected. The conclusion then will be that Christians and Muslims believe in different Gods, and so the peculiar situation will arise that we together endanger the oneness of God, because it seems that there exists a free choice of gods among religions, and a competition between them about which one is best.

It is my contention that the relation to God – that means to the same and one God – is constitutional for every human being whether he knows about it or not. The experience of transcendence is in every human mind but addressed differently. Also the animist has this experience in his addressing this experience to a tree or a mountain. First in the monotheistic religions this experience does find its right address, but mostly in connection with a revelation. That is the case in Judaism, Christianity and Islam.

On the level of philosophy of religion I now want to argue that every religion based on a revelation must have a triune understanding of God. My intention is to clarify the background for a better understanding of the Christian belief in the one God as triune.

God’s decision to reveal himself or his will to mankind implies that God will differ himself, make a distinction between God as he is in himself and the message, he wants to reveal. Therefore Christians made the distinction between the Father and the Son, because God’s revelation was experienced in Jesus from Nazareth. He spoke

with an authority from God not similar to anybody else, and convinced people that he was filled with the Spirit of God. They experienced Jesus as the incarnated word from God which must have been from the beginning in God.

A similar distinction in God I think Muslims must do, the distinction again between God as he is in himself and the message, he wants to reveal. You Muslims make the distinction between God and the Koran, dictated to Mohamed the prophet, who has received the message from God enlightened by the Spirit of God. Insofar I also see a triune structure in the Islamic understanding of the revelation of God.

Another kinship I see in the troubles Christians had and have in the understanding of Jesus in his relation to God and man, and the troubles Muslims have in the understanding of the Koran in its relation to God and man. Very interesting are the Christological discussions during the first centuries of the history of Christianity about the so called doctrine of the two natures of Christ, his godly nature and his human nature, ending up in dogmatic definition of the doctrine at the synod of Chalcedon, that the two natures in Christ have not to be mixed or divided, but to be inseparably hold together. Evidently this didn't solve the problem, but sharpened it, and every new generation of Christian theologians has to handle with it in their context. On the one hand it is important to safeguard the identity of Jesus with God the Father because of the authenticity of the revelation; on the other hand it is important to safeguard the true humanity of Jesus because of the authenticity of his incarnation as true man. But some theologians would be afraid of emphasizing the humanity of Christ too much in order not to hurt the divinity of God, other theologians would be afraid of emphasizing the divinity of Christ too much in order not to hurt his true humanity.

I was quite surprised, when I learned that similar discussions has been and is carried on about the status of the Koran. Is it a divine book – the golden Koran – existing from eternity with God, which became manifested in time as the earthly Koran, dictated to Mohamed, the prophet. I assume that related problems stand behind these discussions, as we learned about them in the debates on the person of Jesus: On the one hand the identity of the Koran with the will of God and insofar its authenticity as God's revelation, on the other hand the earthliness of the Koran, written by man. And here an especially Islamic interest makes its effect: To safeguard God's divinity from every connection from every touch of earthliness.

Here exists really a tension between Christian and Islamic understanding of God. A Muslim will underline the holiness and sublimity of God, his unlimited omnipotence and superiority. We Christians do also believe in the holiness and sublimity, omnipotence and superiority of God, but naturally our understanding of this is influenced by the belief in the incarnation of God in Christ and his death on the cross, which necessarily implies another understanding of omnipotence, sublimity and holiness of God. For a Muslim it seems to be a blasphemy to talk about a change in

God, that God can be influenced by earthly events and even die on a cross. What Christians underline in their belief in God is also his humanness.

This is a really tension between us, but therefore it is so important that we really stick to our common obligation to our belief in the oneness of God, for only so the tension may become fruitful. We have in our dialogs to remind each other both of the holiness and sublimity and of the humanness of God. Also in Islam as far I can see there is a strong feeling of what I must call humanness of God. Every Sura in the Koran begins with the words "In the name of Allah, All Merciful, Most Merciful." You do not feel mercy without having been touched by the person, you show mercy. A lot of the names Muslims name God with are of the same kind. God shows empathy with mankind. In his omnipotence God neither in Islam is untouchable. To remember this is the Christian challenge to Muslims.

The Islamic challenge to Christians is not to forget the holiness and sublimity of God. The history of modern Christian theology shows a danger, I admit, that the emphasize on the incarnation of God in Jesus may lead to, that God so to say is totally transformed into man. This is the so called 'God-is-dead-theology'. Here is the transcendence of God and his holiness and sublimity to be emphasized against such tendencies, and Islam may here be a good reminder.

Christians as well as Muslims are warned by their holy scriptures not to make images of God. This commandment is important. It hinders us to make idols not only of God, but also of man. There is a very close connection between our images of God and of our images of man. But we cannot help making images of both God and man. Using our language, when we preach and interpret our holy scriptures, we will always use the language of our time in our context, so the way we speak about God and man, will shift in agreement with our time, influenced by the situations, we are in. To be aware of this contextuality is a duty and keeps a religion alive.

Both in Christianity and in Islam this close connection between images of God and images of man is founded on their holy scriptures. In the first chapter of the Bible we read: "Then God said, 'Let us make man in our image and likeness to rule the fish in the sea, the birds of heaven, the cattle, all wild animals on earth, and all reptiles that crawl upon the earth.' So God created man in his own image; in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them" (Gen. 1,26ff.).

And in the second Sura, 'The Cow' we read: "When your Lord said to the angels, 'I am putting a khalif on the earth,' they said, 'Why put on it one who will cause corruption on it and shed blood when we glorify You with praise and proclaim Your purity?' He said, 'I know what you do not know.' He taught Adam the names of all things." Some verses later we read that God commanded Adam to tell the angels their names, and then "We (God) said to the angels, 'Prostrate to Adam!' and they

prostrated, with the exception of Iblis” (Sura 2,29f,32f). That means that Adam, the man, stands on a higher level as the angels.

There are quite a lot of similarities between these two narratives about the creation of man. They agree on the special position of man, different from the position of any creature else. The Bible expresses this with the word ‘image’. The Koran does it with the word ‘khalif’. In the Danish translation this word is translated with the word ‘follower’. We have discussed this word ‘khalif’ in a study-group at the Islamic-Christian Study Centre, and some would prefer the translation ‘representative’. Anyhow the word expresses a special position of man close to God, having an obligation on behalf of God, just as Adam in the narrative of the Bible.

No doubt that man is powerful. The history of mankind demonstrates this, and especially the last century has demonstrated this powerfulness of man as both good and bad, constructive and destructive. Our holy scriptures derive this powerfulness of man from God and bind mankind to take care of creation in responsibility to God. And we find in our holy scriptures a lot of different descriptions of the powerfulness of God, some of them in contradiction with each other. We find images of God as a fighter, crushing his enemies, as a lord of war, as a judge, righteous, but hard-hearted, and on the other hand we find images of God as merciful, as a judge, who forgives, as a lover, holding patiently on to his beloved. We find the well known tension between God’s righteousness and God’s love, God’s omnipotence and God’s empathy, and as interpreters and readers of the holy scriptures we often are forced to take sides. Because of the close connection between the image of God and the image of man the image of God very often has been used to legitimate human conduct as being in agreement with his godlikeness. Remember for example the many wars fought in the name of God with God on all sides.

In our time this critique especially has been raised in connection with the big ecological problems, the world of to day has to handle. The critique against the Jewish-Christian tradition is, that according to the narrative about the creation of man in Genesis God told man to rule the earth and subject all creatures. This part as a godlike ruler man has played without empathy with nature, looking at it as material for own sovereign use. The critics point at the strict division in Christian tradition between God as creator and creation, and similar to this a division between man created in the image of God – now seen as a ruler – and the other creatures.

A similar critique is possible to the Islamic tradition, where man is looked at according to the second Sura as representative of God as the creator, and because of the same strict division between God as the creator and creation in the narrative of the Koran a similar division can also in the Islamic tradition be made between man as a ruler and nature as subjected to man.

This example shows the necessity of interpretation, because it is possible to interpret the narrative of Genesis in a quite other way, as it has been done in the referred example. And so interpreters do today. They underline God's empathy with his creation, caring it with order, which is quite visibly possible, reading the narrative. And I think the same would be possible as interpretation of the second Sura. But these examples show how easily man is tempted to interpret God in his own image, especially his omnipotence.

And this shows quite clearly an obvious kinship between Islam and the Christian West, which is to take the hermeneutical problems in general in earnest. Both religions are founded on messages delivered to us in scriptures, written at specific times of history, contextualized with those times. We live in other times and other contexts, but have to be faithful to the message, delivered in our holy scriptures. That means that we are forced in our interpretation to make a distinction between the spirit of our holy scriptures and the letters and to interpret the texts according to the spirit of the message and the text. That sometimes means to interpret a text against the letters of the text in order to be faithful to the message.

Our religions are living religions, our faiths are living faiths. The spirit keeps you alive, the letter is killing you, wrote St. Paul. I think we all know about that by experience. In a time where fundamentalism is coming up all over the world it needs courage to answer the hermeneutical challenge, but let us answer the challenge in confidence in the spirit of our religions.

Thank you.