Islam and Christianity - Is a Clash of Civilisations Inevitable?

Transcript

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There is no God but God - that is the foundational statement of Islam. There is only one supreme being, on which everything else depends wholly for its existence. God is supreme in creative power, in knowledge and wisdom, but above all in goodness. No other object can be worshipped, given total devotion, for from God all things come and to God all things return.

There is nothing in this affirmation with which Christians would disagree. Jesus said, 'The Lord our God, the Lord is one' (Mark 12, 29). That, we might think, should settle the issue. Unfortunately it has not done so. For Christians affirm that Jesus is the Son of God, and Muslims affirm that God has no Son, indeed that it is blasphemous to say he has. Christians say that God is three - Father, Son and Spirit - and the Qur'an asserts that we should not say God is three (Qur’an 5, 76). Muslims regard Jesus as a Prophet, but no more, and seem to deny that he was put to death on the cross (4, 157) - a fact that is at the very heart of Christian faith.

So huge differences appear between Islam and Christianity, and this, has, most regrettably, led to Christians saying that Muslims willfully reject the revelation of God in Jesus, and so deprive themselves of the possibility of salvation. It has led to Muslims saying that Christians have perverted the teaching of Jesus and the Prophets into a religion that verges on the blasphemous, in worshipping Jesus, a human being, as well as the infinite and eternal God. There is material here for argument and hostility.

But there is no real reason here for hostility. Islam and Christianity certainly differ about their views of how God relates to the created world. Muslims wish to stress the utter difference of the Creator from everything created. This leads them to deny the possibility of asserting strict unity between any finite thing and the Infinite being of God. The idea of Incarnation, which in turn leads to the drawing of distinctions within the divine being between that of God which remains utterly distinct from creation ('the Father') and that of God which may be identified with part of creation ('the Son'), is therefore rejected in principle.

Muslims are not alone in finding the idea of Incarnation unacceptable. There are many philosophers who think that the idea is even self-contradictory, for how can the perfect, infinite and changeless God be identical with a finite being who is born, suffers and dies? So Christians should not really find it surprising that there is room for a faith in God which is unable to accept the orthodox Christian doctrine of a divine incarnation. To many it seems simpler and clearer to say that God alone is infinite, and the being of God cannot be mixed with or united to any finite and limited being at all. In other words, Islam is not a willful rejection of God’s revelation in Jesus. It is rather a witness to the unity and infinity of God which finds the idea of incarnation developed in the Christian churches between the fourth and eighth centuries difficult or potentially misleading.

2. On the other hand, the idea of incarnation is more subtle than many popular presentations of it suggest, and it is not so far from Muslim beliefs as one might think. There are many ways of thinking of the one true God in Islam, and the Qur’an itself does not set out a systematic doctrine of the divine nature. There is in fact a major stream of reflective thought in Islam that interprets the statement with which I began this talk ('there is no God but God') as saying 'There is nothing but God'.

One motivation for this is the much-loved Qur’anic verse, 'Everything perishes except the face of God' (28, 88), a verse that is the subject of a profound meditation by the medieval Muslim scholar al-Gazzali. This reflection begins from the wholly orthodox position that God alone is fully real, and that the whole created universe is the direct expression of the being and will of God. Al-Gazzali says: 'There is nothing in existence save Allah alone' (The Niche for Lights, 1, 6) so whatever reality there is in the created universe is actually a finite expression, reflection or image of the infinite being of God. The fact that different words have to be used to convey this thought shows that we are struggling to express a relationship - the relation of ‘creator to creature’ - that is almost impossible for human language to express adequately.

Muslims would certainly wish to deny that the universe is a reality completely independent of God. They would certainly affirm that the universe is a direct expression of the will of God. God is intimately present to every part of creation, ‘nearer that the vein of the neck’, and God should not be thought of as ‘outside’ of or as excluded from the universe.

Nevertheless, some parts of the universe express the nature of God more clearly or fully than others. The Qur’an, for example, is a verbal expression of the will of God in a way that no other book or finite object is. It would not be absurd to see the Qur’an as the verbal expression, in Arabic, of the eternal Wisdom of God. Moreover, the words of the Qur’an were recited by Muhammad, and to that extent he was the channel or medium of God’s eternal Wisdom in one finite place and time. We might say that the Qur’an reveals the universal will of God for the whole creation, but it does so in one particular language, and in one particular culture. The Qur’an is the pattern for discerning the will of God in all creation, and the finite expression of the will of God in
human language.

Some Muslims go further and speak of the Prophet as one in whose life the Qur’an or Wisdom of God is embodied. They would deny that this is a doctrine of the ‘incarnation’ of God’s Wisdom in a human person. Yet the life of the Prophet is in practice often taken as the life of one who was wholly imbued with the Wisdom of God, a human pattern of Sharia, God’s true law. In the Sufi tradition, it is even possible to speak of humans as becoming expressions of God’s will, as they live directly in the conscious experience of the immanent reality of God, the only truly Real. This is not, after all, utterly at odds with many Christian views of the embodiment of God’s eternal Wisdom in the person of Jesus, or with talk of a certain sort of intimate union between finite human persons and the infinity of God.

It is important to see what I am trying to do here. I am not trying to say that Islam and Christianity are really the same. That would be ridiculous. They are different. But I am suggesting that the differences are more like differences of emphasis and attachment to different key metaphors, than they are like straightforward contradictions. So when Christians say, as John’s Gospel does, that Jesus is the ‘Word of God’, one way to interpret this is to say that the person of Jesus is a finite expression of the will of God, which reveals God’s will for the whole creation, and expresses God’s will in a particular personal life. And when Muslims say, as some do, that the Qur’an is the finite expression in a particular human language of the eternal will of God, they could well say that the Qur’an is the ‘Word of God’, a normative finite manifestation in time of the eternal wisdom of God - which, since God is utterly simple, is identical with the being of God.

In other words, for Islam there is after all no absolute gulf between the infinite God and the finite creation. There is difference, but insofar as the creation depends wholly on the divine it manifests what God is, and there is on earth one particular finite object - the Qur’an - that reveals the true nature of that manifestation. For Christians, Jesus is a finite person who reveals the true nature of God. Christians express this by calling Jesus ‘Son of God’. But orthodox Christian theology is quite clear that calling Jesus ‘Son’ is logically equivalent to calling him the ‘Word’ or ‘Wisdom’ of God.

So when the Qur’an asserts that God has no son, Christians should wholly agree that God does not literally bring into being another separate person, so that there will henceforth be two gods. Christians do not worship God and Jesus as two separate beings. Christians worship only God, but they worship God as disclosed in and through the person of Jesus, the normative manifestation of the divine being.

There can be, and there are, disputes about whether we should worship God, the infinite being, as manifested in a finite form. Christians themselves disputed about this for centuries, when considering whether icons should be revered. That issue was settled, for Orthodox Christianity, by the decision of the seventh Ecumenical Council, the second Council of Nicea, in 787 CE. But many Christians would still refuse to revere icons as manifestations of the divine. With this refusal virtually all Muslims would heartily agree. But most Christians accept that, while worship can be given to God alone, some finite things - and especially the person of Jesus - can be such perfect expressions of God that God can be worshipped in and through them.

This is a difference about forms of appropriate worship. But much religious misunderstanding could be avoided if we clearly see that both disputants wish to worship only God. The difference is about how God is normatively manifested in the world (in the person of Jesus or the words of the Qur’an), and about what sorts of finite objects can be appropriate mediators of the divine being and will, and in what way.

The devout recitation of the Qur’an, especially in public, has for many Muslims a beauty and spiritual power that is overwhelming. So the Qur’an is not just a book to be studied or read in private. It is in itself a public recital of the words of God. In that respect, it is like what Christians would call a sacrament, a public and audible event that carries intrinsic spiritual power. To recite it is to share in the revealed thoughts of God. Since the Qur’an is traditionally said to be eternal, it is a sharing in the divine being, so far as that is possible for humans. It is not just a text that merely gives information about God and the Day of Judgment.

I do not think it is too fanciful to say that, as Christians receive the life of Christ, the eternal Word of God, in eating consecrated bread and wine, so Muslims internalise and feed upon the Qur’an, the eternal Word of God, in reciting the Chapters of the Book. In a very important sense, therefore, the Qur’an is a human sharing in the divine being, a disclosure of the mind of God that is meant to shape human minds on the divine pattern.

If we look at things in this way, we will not eliminate the differences between Islam and Christianity. But we will overcome the temptation to think that these two religions are willfully contradicting one another, and that one of them is consciously turning away from God’s clear revelation while the other has completely grasped the final truth about God. We will see that Muslims misunderstand Christianity if they think Christians worship three Gods, or worship Jesus as someone other than God. And Christians misunderstand Islam if they think it is simply a rejection of the Christian gospel. These are different ways of thinking of how the one God is related to the created universe. Mutual respect and toleration between these faiths is not only possible, it is an obligation of all who hold that religion should not be a matter of compulsion, that all are free to follow their consciences, and that the most important thing in life is worship of the one creator God of mercy and compassion.

3. What I have said so far may seem rather intellectual and theological. I do not apologise for that, because I think there is much work to be done between Muslim and Christian theologians to produce greater mutual
understanding, and that this will defuse much of the hostility that has existed in the past between Christianity and Islam. Nevertheless, there is a lot of political history that is important in understanding the present relationship of these two great faiths. One major cause of hostility is the presentation of very biased accounts of past history. On the Christian side, Islam has been seen as the sworn enemy of Christian Europe. On the Muslim side, Christianity has been seen as the source of the Crusades against Islam. There is a pressing need to understand the past in a more nuanced and less biased way.

It is important to understand that both Christianity and Islam have been religions of empire. Christianity began as a Jewish Messianic sect, and became in its first generation a Gentile faith, a religion mainly of slaves and the poor, opposed to the highly politicised polytheism of the Roman Empire. A crucial event in Christian history was the establishment of Christianity as the state religion of the Roman Empire, in 395 CE. From that point on the fortunes of Christianity were tied to the fortunes of the Empire.

This was always a paradoxical relationship, and Jesus’ recorded teaching in the Sermon on the Mount (the Gospel of Matthew, chapters 5 - 7) of not resisting evil stands in stark contrast to the imperial conquests and military power of Rome. One cannot distinguish a ‘pure Christianity’ that is quite separate from the Christianity of the Imperial courts of Rome. But one can point out that Christian faith is both compromised and modified by its adoption as the faith of a militaristic Empire.

And of course the Roman Empire fell - the Eastern ('Byzantine') Empire finally vanished with the fall of Constantinople to the Turks in 1453. The first Crusade, in 1095, was called not to attack Islam, but in response to a call for help from the besieged Byzantine Emperor. The Crusades, however, descended into expeditions of massacre and pillage, and the fate of Byzantium was sealed. The Western Roman Empire disappeared much earlier - the conventional date is 476 CE, when Odoacer, King of the German tribes, deposed the last Western Emperor.

Christianity changed in very different political contexts. For the first few hundred years it was a religious movement on the periphery of political life, a form of counter-culture in opposition to power and militarism. Then it became an imperial faith, virtually ruled in the East by the Emperor, and in the West leaving the Bishop of Rome as a religious echo of the Western Emperors, sometimes with imperial aspirations, but often in fact locked in complex political negotiations with different European nation-states, and being eventually forced to cede virtually all political power.

A further phase opened up with the colonisation of Latin America by Catholic states, of North America and Australia by Protestant Britain, and of other parts of the world by a number of European states, some Catholic and some Protestant. The end of colonialism left a large number of diverse forms of Christianity, with very different relations to the ruling political powers, covering the globe.

Perhaps the most significant aspect of European history was the eighteenth century Enlightenment. This very complex and diverse movement has, as one of its root motivations, the subjection of all human authorities and traditions to the scrutiny of critical reason. So the American and French revolutions appeal to what is self-evident to reason, or to the allegedly rational principles of liberty, equality and fraternity, to set aside old aristocratic or monarchical systems of government, and replace them with democratic and egalitarian institutions. In science, old authorities like that of Aristotle are replaced by an insistence on observation and experiment. And in religion, the Bible and church are subjected to historical and philosophical criticism in a new and radical way.

Religion in Europe could never be the same again after the Enlightenment. Some Christians and Jews, especially outside Europe, retreated to a citadel of traditional faith, cutting themselves off from general European culture in an affirmation of ancient wisdom as superior to modern knowledge, which rendered them self-consciously reactionary. Many Europeans gave up commitment to organised religion altogether. But most thoughtful Christians and Jews adopted a more critical and tentative view of religious belief, together with a greater stress on human fulfilment rather than obedience to a divinely given law as the goal of the moral life. Modern Christianity and Judaism cannot be understood unless this remarkable transition from deference to ancient tradition to an assumption that new knowledge is probably better than the old is perceived. It leaves ancient religious traditions with major problems, and they have devised various ways, none of them notably successful, for dealing with them.

4. From a Muslim point of view, history looks rather different. From the first, the Prophet played a political role as leader of his people, and he quickly united the Arab tribes into a unitary military force that was able to conquer the South and East Mediterranean with amazing speed. This conquest is usually seen by Muslims as a civilising and liberating movement that overwhelmed and pacified marauding barbarian tribes, and liberated the oppressed peoples of the Byzantine Empire from their largely hated rulers. I do not think it is too far from the mark to say that Muslim apologists see the early rapid expansion of Islam in a very similar way to that in which British apologists see the rapid expansion of the British Empire in Victorian times.

If early Islam was a colonising movement, it was a very successful one. Conquered peoples, like the Berbers of Morocco, quickly converted to Islam, and absorbed it fully into their culture, so that it was rarely seen as an alien and troubling influence. Expansive military powers like the Mongols and the Ottoman Turks, who could have been major threats to Islamic culture, also converted to Islam, and established thriving, sophisticated, and culturally rich Empires that flourished while Europe was still in the 'Dark Ages'.
From the Muslim viewpoint, Islam seemed destined to conquer the world. The Byzantine Empire, weakened by conflict with Persia and often hated by its subject peoples, was seen as decadent and corrupt. Western Europe was a land of savage barbarians. Christianity, East and West, was the puppet religion of a dying and morally bankrupt Empire, or the half-digested and dimly understood mythology of continually warring tribes. Islam could bring harmony and culture to such a world, as it had done to the warring tribes of Arabia.

But then the world changed. Muslim armies were driven out of Spain and turned back from Vienna. And, like all Empires, the Islamic world began to fragment internally. The alliance of religion with Empire, as in the case of Christianity, had compromised and modified the religion. The three great Muslim empires, the Ottoman, Persian and the Mughal Empire in India, became involved in religious and political strife, between Shia and Sunni Islam and between different imperial contenders for domination. And from the fourteenth century on, Europe began to emerge as a new vital world civilisation. As vast areas of the world were colonized by European (allegedly Christian) nations, Islam unaccountably began to stagnate culturally and politically. The growth of modern science and technology in Europe after the seventeenth century led to the European colonisation of the world, and in particular to the colonisation of the Islamic nations. Muslims did not participate in this scientific advance, even though some of them had been at the forefront of early medieval science. Part of the reason for this is that the Enlightenment was often seen by Muslims as an abandonment of traditional family and social values and an ideology that at once legitimised and disguised the freedom of the powerful European nations to subordinate the people of the developing world to the technological power of the West.

The decline of Islamic power is epitomised by the abolition of the Ottoman dynasty and the abolition of the Caliphate in 1924. At the nadir of Muslim political fortunes, however, European colonialism too began to collapse. As Muslim countries freed themselves from colonial control, they were left with a sense of resentment that still smoulders. Traditional Muslim rulers are seen by some as the tools of Western imperialism. The creation of the secular state of Israel in 1948 - largely, it should be remembered, by atheistic or non-religious Jews - was widely seen by Muslims as a continuation of Western colonisation, and subsequent interventions in Afghanistan and Iraq can easily be interpreted as attacks by the West on the self-determination of Muslim nations.

Christianity and Islam must be seen, not just as abstract systems of belief, but as complex cultural forces that have long and varied histories. In those histories they have encountered each other as competitors or rivals many times. The present phase of such encounters is seen by some as, on the one hand, a continuation of the Western powers’ persistent attempts to control the world’s resources and subordinate them to the West’s own interests. On the other hand, the Islamic world consists of a set of very different political powers, united largely by opposition to Western attempts at unilateral economic control, angered by the injustice of a world in which Western nations control most of the world’s resources, and frustrated by their inability to contribute to economic progress, except as clients of Western interests.

In such an encounter, ‘Islam’ becomes a symbol for ancient and treasured values that the West has turned away from, for tradition as opposed to a modernity that dehumanises and subjects everything to power and wealth, and for obedience to divine and truly universal justice as opposed to doing anything that the majority of a particular country happens to want. A ‘Muslim world’ is constructed, a fantasy Empire that has the strength to oppose the economic Empire of America and the West. But the reality is that there are many nation states that are Muslim in a wide diversity of ways, from Shia Iran to Wahhabi Saudi Arabia and largely secular Turkey. There is in reality no Muslim world, just as there is no Christian world.

England, for example, is officially one of the most Christian countries in the world, with a Church established by law. Yet it is in practice one of the most secular countries in the world, with only a tiny minority of the population actively attending churches. The United States, on the other hand, is officially secular, yet seems to be one of the most Christian countries in the world, if church membership is the test. The complexity of the facts defeats easy generalisation, and a so-called Muslim world that contains Ismaelis, Wahhabis, Shi’a and Ahmadiyya Muslims, along with Islamic Jihadists and Sufis, is hardly one monolithic community or religion.

The lesson of history is that both Christianity and Islam have taken a wide variety of forms, and have had varying sorts of relationship with political rulers. It is sometimes said, for example, that Islam is an essentially political faith, whereas Christianity distinguishes religion from politics. But if you want a clear example of religious rule in Christian history, you only have to turn to Oliver Cromwell in Britain and Jean Calvin in Geneva or to the claim by Pope Boniface VIII, made in 1302, that all temporal rulers were subject to and should be appointed and deposed at will by the Bishop of Rome. Whereas in Islam the Caliph was deprived of political power by Muslim politicians in 945 CE. There is little justification here for seeing Islam as inherently more political than Christianity.

A firmer grasp of history might put an end to many of the generalisations that delude us about the diversity of human cultures, and help us to see that Christianity and Islam are not two internally united religious systems that stand opposed to one another. There are many forms of Christianity, from Quakers and Mennonites to Copts and Pentecostalists, and there are as many forms of Islam. Disputes between traditionalists and social reformers, between dictatorships and democracies, between nations competing for power and influence, are not primarily disputes between Islam and Christianity. They are disputes that divide every nation of Europe and of the world, of any religious faith or none.

The relations of religion to dominant cultures and political power are complex, varied, and constantly changing. To see things more accurately we need to cease thinking of Christianity and Islam as monolithic blocks,
competing for market share, rather like Pepsi and Coca Cola. There is no Christian culture or civilisation. The
traditional Catholicism of southern Europe is quite different from the Protestant fundamentalism of the southern
United States of America, and both have little in common with the Orthodox Church of Greece.

There are, of course, some basic Christian beliefs - in the existence of God, God’s self-revelation in Jesus, the
liberation of humans from evil by the self-sacrifice of Jesus, and the resurrection of Jesus from death to eternal
life. But these beliefs can take a myriad social form, and they are just one element in a constantly changing and
dynamic set of social processes and interactions.

It is the same with Islam. Anyone who speaks of one united global Islam is living in a dream-world, or - more
dangerously - seeking to impose their own personal vision of Islam on everyone. Islam is in one sense a religion
of unity - the unity of God and the umma, the household or fellowship of the faithful. But as the Aqa Khan is keen
to stress, the existence of diversity is a positive good. The Qur’an says, ‘If God had so willed he would have
made you a single people, but...strive as in a race in all virtues. The goal of you all is to God’ (5, 51). All are united
in having God as their goal, and in being called to jihad, to striving with all one’s person and possessions in the
way of God. But there are many paths to God, and we must follow that which God has ordained for us.

So the positive vision of Islam is of a rich diversity-in-unity, a diversity both within Islam and in the wider worlds
of global religious faith. ‘God is our Lord and your Lord; for us our deeds, and for you your deeds. There is no
contention between us and you. God will bring us together, and to him is our final goal’ (42, 15).

There are Muslims, and there are Christians too, who wish to impose their own religious interpretation on
everyone, and who can find Scriptural texts they can quote to support their view, usually out of context and in
opposition to the main scholarly traditions of the faith. But I think that must be seen as a human failing, both in
knowledge of the tradition and in ordinary human charity. If we see diversity and change as essential and divinely
willed aspects of both Christianity and Islam, we may escape the trap of thinking that there is some sort of
permanent clash of these two faiths built into them from the start.

The situation in contemporary Europe is the result of centuries of warfare. Part of that warfare has been
between Islamic and Christian Empires, or Empires that partly defined themselves in religious terms. But most of
it has been between ostensibly Christian nation-states, culminating in the two World Wars that between them
killed more people than all other wars in history combined. Nevertheless, ancient fears and prejudices endure,
and the intense hostility of European states to each other has been sublimated into a general European hostility
to Islam, even though such a perception is only of the ghost of the extinct Ottoman Empire.

The European colonisation of the world was primarily commercial, not religious. I do not think anyone could
honestly say that the British East India Company was a Christian mission. The legacy of colonial policy is the
immigration, largely invited, of members of colonised nations into Europe. Since such immigrants generally
guard Christianity as the religion of the colonisers, they preserve their own identity by an assertion of Islamic
faith. And since they often find themselves at the lower end of the social scale, and speak non-European
languages, Islam sometimes seems to be an alien, ethnic and less sophisticated religion than Christianity.

But these are all misperceptions, illusions of dead Empires. The image of a ‘Christian Europe’, threatened by
invading Muslim hordes, is an illusion. If the European Union now seems peaceful, it is a peace between ancient
enemies, embracing a wide variety of cultures. Christianity as such has not proved to be a uniting force, and the
idea, still nostalgically propagated by some, of a united Christian Europe is, like the idea of a united Muslim world,
a fantasy.

The reality is that the European Union has moved from a society in which each state supported just one form of
religion and banned all others, to a society in which there is freedom of the individual to choose and practice their
own belief. It has moved from forms of absolute monarchy to parliamentary systems in which open criticism and
opposition has an established place. It has moved from societies of religiously based public law to societies in
which the crucial ethical question is how to obtain human flourishing, combining so far as is possible individual
happiness with social justice.

This is a move to a secular society - not an anti-religious society, but one in which no form of religion is imposed
by law, in which criticism of religion is regarded as a legitimate human freedom, and in which human rights are
defended even against religiously motivated threats to them.

There are forms of Christianity that regret this move. In the Syllabus of Errors, promulgated in 1864 by Pope
Pius IX, the opinion is expressed that the Catholic Church should be the only religion allowed by states, to the
exclusion of all others. The Church of England at an earlier time had taken a similar view, except of course that it
was Roman Catholics who were to be excluded. But in the 1960s the second Vatican Council reversed this
opinion, and held that ‘the human person has a right to religious freedom’ (Declaration on Religious Liberty).

Things change, and in fact it is easy to find in Christian tradition strong defences of freedom of belief and of
informed criticism of allegedly authoritative religious pronouncements (the Protestant Reformation depended on such defences). It is also easy to find in Christian morality a strong basis for the assertion of human rights (guaranteed by the will of God for the flourishing of each created personal life), and for criticisms of religious views that threaten such rights (as Jesus criticised religious legalists of his day).

Can Islam find in its own traditions defences of religious freedom, informed criticism, and a concern for human flourishing? The answer is a very definite ‘yes’. The Qur’an is clear: ‘Let there be no compulsion in religion’ (2, 256), and ‘Dispute not with the People of the Book...but say, ‘We believe in the revelation which has come down to us and in that which came down to you; our God and your God is one, and it is to him we bow’ (29, 46). It is undoubtedly the case that in many Muslim countries there is no religious freedom to practice faiths other than Islam, and the penalty for apostasy is death. But so it has been at times in Christianity. There is Qur’anic warrant for a more liberal view, and such a view becomes almost inevitable when Muslims find themselves as minorities in Europe and in many countries of the world.

As for criticism, Muslims would say that there are already traditions of historical and legal criticism that seek to distinguish reliable and less reliable hadith, traditions of the Prophet. The philosophical tradition was very strong in the early Islamic centuries, and many variant interpretations of the Qur’an exist, which depend on seeing the original context of its recitation. The Qur’an says, ‘When we substitute one revelation for another - and God knows best what he reveals (in stages), they say, ‘You are but a forger’, but most of them understand not’ (16, 101). There are different stages in which the Qur’an was rectified, and scholarly judgment is needed to discern what these were, and the way in which some texts may properly abrogate others. There is a proper place for argument and diversity of interpretation in Islam. That has been accepted from the earliest years. In this sense, informed critical enquiry is important for Islam - though in practice it is sometimes confused with sceptical mockery of tradition, and then condemned.

As for human flourishing, every chapter of the Qur’an begins with an evocation of God the merciful and compassionate, and there is no place in Islam for the application of religious law without mercy and compassion. What mercy requires will depend very much on particular circumstances, but it should be noted that, for instance, when the Qur’an rules that the hands of thieves should be cut off, it adds ‘But if the thief repents after his crime and amend his conduct, God turns to him in forgiveness’ (5, 41 and 42). Moreover, ‘If any one remits the retaliation by way of charity, it is an act of atonement for himself’ (5, 48).

The People of the Book ‘have been commanded no more than this: to worship God, offering him sincere devotion, being true, to establish regular prayer and to practice regular charity: and that is the religion right and straight’ (18, 5). The practice of charity, of concern for others and especially for the poor, is central to Islam, which was responsible for founding the first hospitals for the sick. Just as much as Christianity, Islam has a very high view of the dignity of human personhood. Even the angels were commanded to bow before human beings, and God is concerned that humans should find true happiness and well-being. Human rights, after all, are simply what are due to persons because of the duties that all others owe to them. So if humans have duties to be compassionate, then humans also have rights to compassionate treatment, by God’s will.

There are those who wish to impose a rigorous interpretation of Sharia law on society, forbidding alcohol, the mixing of sexes, music and dancing, and enjoining harsh punishments for crimes. There have been Christians who have taken similar attitudes. Nevertheless the liberal attitude that the law exists primarily to prevent harm to others, and should allow maximum individual freedom, is also religiously based on the insight that true worship cannot be compelled and that human freedom is a condition of responsible moral choice.

Europe has been established as a broadly liberal society only after the eighteenth century revolutions that overthrew old absolutist political systems, and after the costly twentieth century defeat of the dictatorships of Fascism and Communism. The Christian religion did not initiate or lead this radical change, but it has found internal resources in doctrines of the justice and mercy of God, and the dignity of humanity as made in the image of God, to accept and internalise it.

So it is with Islam. Islam is committed to seeking universal principles of justice, and to seeing humans as the vicegerents, the stewards, of God on this planet. In the modern world, it lives in a situation of pluralism, of many diverse ideologies and many societies in most of which it will be a minority faith. It lives in a scientific age, when critical enquiry has been established as the best way to discover truth. And it lives in an age when the happiness and welfare of all human persons has become a widely accepted criterion for moral judgment. These factors will affect Islam, as did its association with Empires and with colonising powers. In Europe, it can be expected to take on new forms that may provide a historical context for new development, as Muslims strive for justice, tolerance, charity, and a devotion to God, the supreme objective Good.

6. The question that has underlain this lecture is whether Islam and Christianity are doomed to a destructive clash of cultures in Europe. I have examined the main theological differences between the faiths, and found there no reason for hatred, misrepresentation or hostility. I have looked at the history of conflicting Muslim and Christian Empires, and concluded that the age of such conflicts is over, and that it is misleading to associate the faiths too closely with imperial and national power struggles. In particular, it is misleading to see Islam as invading Europe in a new cultural war. The lines of cultural struggle lie elsewhere, within the religions and within European societies in general.
There is no clash of civilisations between Christianity and Islam, because both faiths take on, and have historically taken on, the form of the civilisations in which they exist. In the process, they modify those civilisations to a greater or less extent, and one way in which they do so is by introducing belief in objective moral obligation and purpose into human affairs. Diversity and change are intrinsic to religious faith, but faith adds an orientation to transcendent goodness that is its enduring contribution to human culture.

Acceptance of freedom of belief, the right of informed and open criticism, and an insistence that moral rules must subserve universal human welfare, are moral advances that have been made in the modern world through struggle, and that must not be relinquished. Both Christianity and Islam can internalise such values, and find resources in their own traditions for promoting them. Working apart and without reference to these values, the faiths will both become more marginalised and culturally isolated. Working together, they can become major forces for social harmony and altruistic action. Modern Europe offers a social context, not for a clash of civilisations, but for a new integration of religious faith and moral action, in which Islam and Christianity can both be revitalised in a context which can enable them to escape from old antipathies and forge new mature, creative and humanising forms of faith for the modern world. Such a course requires patience and courage, but it is a positive and real possibility for the Europe of the future, and one that is well worth striving for.

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