

Contemporary Problems of Christian Theology in Islamic Thought

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Theology begins with the question of God. This is true for all the major theistic theological traditions: Jewish, Christian and Muslim. Typically, the theologian assumes that his readers believe in the faith he intends to systematize, defend, and elaborate. He assumes that they know who God is, and believe in Him. His task is to rationalize this faith, first by demonstrating .God's existence

In modern Christian theology, however, one finds much hesitation and doubt about whether this first theological task is at all appropriate. The particular arguments presented by Maimonides, Aquinas and Ibn Sina have come under philosophical attack, and more fundamentally, the methods of demonstration employed by them have been attacked. Since the Reformation, there has been much doubt about the relevance of Greek logic and metaphysics to the project of elaborating the Christian faith.

Similar doubts have become widespread in the Muslim world. Even among the Shi'ah, who has continued to nurture a philosophical or theosophical tradition, there are many who consider this tradition of thought inappropriate as a ground of doctrine. This sort of opposition to philosophy has a long history among the Shi'ah, and has been mounted by some urafa, muhaddithin, akhbaryym, and most recently by the maktab-e-tafkik. Muslim detractors of philosophy, however, have not offered very much as an alternative to the philosophical groundwork for faith, but have tended to assume an innate acceptance of its basic elements.

Likewise, there is a veritable ocean of narrations attributed to the Prophet (S) and Imams ('a) extolling the intellectual virtues of wisdom, knowledge and reason. For example, it is reported that the Prophet (S.A.W.) said, "The virtue of knowledge is more beloved to Allah than the virtue of worship." (Bihar al-Anwar, vol. I, p. 167).

As with the Qur'an, the narrations both encourage the use of the intellect and pose problems for philosophical reflection. Muslim sages have made use of philosophical terms for the rational investigation of religion, and they have used terms drawn from the religious sources to articulate their philosophical reflections' They have been inspired by the Qur'an and ahadith to develop various philosophical ideas, and they have used philosophical ideas drawn from a variety of sources as aids to the understanding of scripture.

In the context of this sacred value placed on knowledge and the intellect, there remains plenty of room for discussion about what kinds of knowledge and wisdom are to be valued, what the intellect is and what are its functions. Muslim critics of philosophy may argue that philosophy has been used inappropriately to interpret scripture, or that it is sorely limited and must be supplemented by imagination to provide any understanding of religious topics, or that its demonstrations serve only as allusions to the divine.

These sorts of points arise from within Islamic culture where they have been and continue to be debated. The Western critiques of natural theology have an entirely different flavor. Islamic culture has not produced a concept of man like that of Christian faith as the latter is taken to stand independent any sort of theological anti-realism of the sort debated in Western circles. Islamic thought has not given rise to the atheism and agnosticism that have emerged from Christian culture and whose religious significance continues to be discussed by Christian theologians and philosophers.

For these and many other reasons, Western theological concerns arrive on the shores of the world of Islam as an invasion. The Muslim response often seems as pointless as that of a person who argues with the newscasters on television. Despite all the talk about interfaith dialogue, the dynamics of the ways in which the world of Islam confronts the West force Muslim intellectuals to consider Western ideas very seriously, even if the engagement is accompanied by anxiety and apprehension, while Western thinkers are generally quite content to ignore what goes on in the intellectual third world.

Islamic theological reflection is shunted off as a specialty item for connoisseurs of esoteric. Dialogue is thus stifled, not because of ill will per se, but because there is no demand and no pressing need for Westerners to listen to Muslims, while Muslims cannot avoid listening to the Western discussions with which the entire world seems to reverberate.

One reaction this situation has provoked among some Muslims is a retreat into tradition. The glories of the past are recounted and redoubled with a firm intention to abandon the Satanic modern world in favor of a puritanical return to the pristine Islam of days gone by. This reaction is resisted by Muslims who would prove that Islam is perfectly well suited to serve as an ideology for the development of modern societies. There can be no escape from the repetitive counterpoint of these attitudes in social religious thinking at least until the impact of Western thought in the Islamic world is sufficiently understood, accepted for what it is, and met by constructive critique and synthesis in harmony with the evolution of contemporary Islamic theology.

The heart and soul of the Muslim world is thoroughly imbued with religion. If Muslims are not

to lose heart and lose their souls, the task of rational reflection on religion must be taken up again with full awareness of all the currents of thought that wash across the contemporary world of Islam.

The West must be understood not only as cultural invader, but as itself tormented by the twists of modern and postmodern thought that have led it to the verge of nihilism in more than one guise. In order for Muslims to orient themselves in the contemporary world, religion must be seen not as something to be merely defended, but as offering a way forward with valuable guidance for all of humanity. We cannot ourselves be saved unless we can invite the entire world to salvation, and before we can offer anything inviting, we need to understand the differences in our cultural and intellectual climates as well as the common problems they face. The invitation to salvation extended by Muslims need not take the form of offering a choice between death and Islam; what I mean by this is that we should not take the attitude that for the Muslim invitation to salvation to be successful it must result in formal conversion to the religion of Islam as ordained by Allah, subhanah wa ta'ala, through His final Prophet (S.A.W.). The Qur'an itself tells us to address the People of the Book in an effort to come to a common word upon which we can agree.

3 The common word to which we invite the People of the Book must itself be understood as a means of salvation, at least in the sense that it offers a way out of the wretchedness faced by those who would deny it. In order for us to be saved, we must be able to understand from what it we are wishing to be saved, and how religion may save us from it. From an eschatological point of view, salvation means escape from the fire of hell, but the power of this image should not cause us to neglect the worldly failings which culminate in hell and are presaged in the ugliness and cruelty the world too often manifests.

Despite all its secularism, the Western world is the inheritor of Christendom. Its values are rooted in references to divinity. The United States, for example, was built on foundations laid by those who had attempted to convene theocracies in the new colonies. So, the loss of certainty about God, let alone the idea of the death of God, threatens to undermine the humanity of Western man, unless some foundation for human values can be found to replace the theological structures many would be happy to see left in ruins.

This is reason enough for some Christians to seek to preserve their faith in God. But while it may provide sufficient motivation for the attempt, it cannot by itself provide answers to the intellectual doubts that pervade contemporary Western culture.

In addition to the doubts about God raised by philosophers primarily in criticisms of the proofs for His existence, the doubts raised by social critics have had a greater influence on the

secularization of Western culture. While Voltaire (1694-1778) accepted that the concept of God was needed to maintain social order in his remark that if God did not exist it would be necessary to create Him, the Russian anarchist Mikhail Bakunin (1814-1876) exclaimed that if God did exist it would be necessary to destroy Him, because so much oppression had been carried out in His Name.

If Voltaire's remark suggests that God may be little more than a convenient fiction, Bakunin suggests that the fiction may be quite inconvenient. The Marxist critique of religion has also been accepted by many who are skeptical of other aspects of Marxist doctrine. Today some feminists object to the concept of God as a prop for patriarchy, and homosexuals complain that prejudice against them is maintained by reference to God. In general, such thinkers quite correctly realize that an orientation toward God serves as a constraint on the satisfaction of various human desires, and is incompatible with what many consider to be of utmost value.

Western thought is caught between two competing claims to moral allegiance. On the one hand, there is the transcendent God Who demands absolute obedience as the ultimate authority. On the other hand, there is a secular ethos based on the values of human freedom and self-determination. Western religious liberals attempt an awkward compromise that would coerce the divine will to conform to humanistic values. Moral direction is derived from the human, and then the transcendent God is called in and would be forced into complicity. He is allowed to stand above the world, but not to interfere with human judgments about what is right and wrong. Deist theology is at least honest about this.

In Muslim culture, on the other hand, reference to God does not occur in the context of the doubts and secular values that plague the West, or at least not to the same extent. The major form in which secular values come into conflict with Islam is in the form of nationalism. Muslim intellectuals often see themselves as Arabs or Iranians or Indonesians or whatever, and only then as Muslims.

Sometimes Islam is only accepted as an expression of national culture. They seek direction in life in terms of the historical development of their people or nation, and relegate religion to the private sphere of personal spirituality and ceremonies, on the model of what they perceive to be the role of religion in technologically advanced societies. The conflict is between religious and secular ideology which usually is discussed in terms of the scope of religion, but there is little of the direct confrontation with God common in the West. There is no death of God theology among Muslims.

Muslim modernists may advance harsh criticisms of Islam as it has been understood within their traditions, but they are not willing to extend the criticism to God Himself. Because of this,

Western angst about God has not taken root in the world of Islam, al-hamdu li-Allah, and questions about how to justify belief in God, which have figured so prominently in recent Western philosophy of religion, appear curiously irrelevant to the primary theological concerns of Muslims.

Nevertheless, Muslim theology must begin to consider seriously the problems of Western philosophy of religion if Islam is to be presented as a way of salvation for all people, including those of the West. We can no longer rest content with the traditional proofs because the standards of reason to which they appeal are no longer universally accepted.

This does not mean that traditional Islamic theology and philosophy can or should be simply swept aside; rather the issues of theology require a more fundamentally critical treatment than they are usually given. We need to begin by considering how the basic concepts of theology, concepts of God, man and the world, are treated in Islam and in Christian culture, and how rational reflection on these concepts and their different treatments in the Islamic and Christian traditions can help us to clear a path to theological understanding.

This means that our standards of rationality themselves must be subject to critical review and evaluation. The root of the most profound doubts about religious reason lie in the success of the empirical sciences and technology as they have developed in the West. When it is observed that the standards of reasoning employed in the sciences differ markedly from those used by theologians, it is natural to wonder if the former cannot suffice for all human purposes. The vindication of theological reasoning requires an explanation of how the progress of the natural sciences can be justified in its own terms. Theology can no longer afford to ignore the philosophy of science.

Religion declares that God is the creator of the natural world. So, the methods that have been successfully used to unlock the secrets of the natural world must be understood as revealing the workings of His creation, at least on some level. What is needed, as Seyyed Hossein Nasr puts it, is a sacred science.

4 Until a way is found to elaborate an understanding of the natural sciences as sacred, as governed by standards of reason which are a branch of the more encompassing methods of rational reflection that apply to theology and philosophy as well as to mathematics, physics, medicine and cognitive science, theology will remain susceptible to the charge that its concerns are peripheral, or may be safely dismissed. Furthermore, since theology must draw upon the imagination as well as reason, it must show how its imaginative work can enlighten and deepen the dry findings of empirical research and applied mathematics.

The elaboration of the sciences as sacred does not require an uncritical acceptance of all that

has been accomplished by secular science; to the contrary, it is through critical appraisal that the call for sacred science is to be vindicated. The program, however, must aim at integration rather than isolation and protection, for the strategy of isolating and protecting religion from critical confrontation with other areas of human knowledge has been largely responsible for the marginalization of religion in Western societies.

Traditional formulations of theology, whether Jewish, Christian, Muslim or Hindu, have not limited themselves to discussions of divinity; they have included cosmology as well. The theological affirmation of sacred cosmology must be regained in the encounter with modern science for theology to remain sound, for classical theological cosmologies have always freely made use of the current sciences of their times without entering into the details of astronomical data.

Often, more than the basic outlines of religious cosmologies formulated under the assumption of a geocentric universe can be revised to accord with post-Copernican theories, because religious cosmologies are mostly concerned with the world as the creation and sign of God, regardless of its physical shape. Nevertheless, the physical shape of the cosmos assumed in the past was taken to have a symbolic value in harmony with the religious point of view, and this has not yet been recovered.

The legacy of theology is no less one of anthropology than cosmology. If the modern natural sciences have posed a challenge to theology's concern with cosmology, the modern human sciences threaten its anthropology. Indeed, anti-religious sentiments are much more prevalent among psychologists and sociologists than among physical scientists.

5 Islam portrays man as a theomorphic being who due to negligence has fallen astray from his divine aim, and who has accepted a covenant with God by means of which he may obtain divine guidance to his own felicity through the reminders sent by God with His prophets ('a). This religious anthropology is not merely descriptive; it has practical implications for how we are to live, how we are to orient ourselves, how we may truly serve God. Morals and politics thus become as central to theology as its more theoretical claims about human and divine nature.

Here religion must confront the social critics mentioned earlier. If they have raised doubts about God on the basis of secular human values, the theologian must find a way to introduce religious values. In Islam this introduction has two dimensions with infinite ramifications: the exterior and the interior, *zahir* and *batin*, whose first division is that of *shari'ah* and *tariqah*. *Shari'ah* is the exterior way, which includes Islamic law. The law itself is infused with values, for it tells us how we are to conduct ourselves in worship and in our dealings with others.

It points toward an ideal of human flourishing in religious community under divine covenant in which the individual aspires to the complete submission of his or her own self in conformity with the law. Attention to the detail of the law is not a cold legalism by which the right to salvation is purchased, but a reflection of the pious heart seeking the completeness of submission to God. This means that the law itself is not to be understood as a mere canon of regulations, but as infused with value as the outward realization of the inner quest for the divine.

The inner quest itself is called *tariqah*, which, like *shari'ah* also means way or path. The verbal synonymy of these two terms indicates the inseparability of the inner and outward aspects of religion. It is logically impossible to walk down one without treading upon the other, for both are merely different names or aspects of divine guidance. The inner quest cannot take shape except within the framework of the outward precepts of religion; and the divine law becomes an empty formalism unless its observance is the outward expression of *taqwa*, the God-wariness described by Him, the Exalted, as the best provision for spiritual wayfaring:

And make provision, and verily the best provision is *taqwa* (2:197)

The inner way or *tariqah* is a quest with various stages along which one must pass, and the arrival at each station requires acquisition of a specific virtue. Here the world appears as the ground to be covered, the battle field for the greatest *jihad*, the struggle against the self. Man is understood not as a static essence, but as in a dynamic condition of transformation, or, in the terminology of *Sadr al-Muta'allihin*, substantial motion, whose human culmination is the perfected human being, *insan-e kamil*, the polished mirror of God, for whom the world itself is also transformed so that God is seen in all things.

The second division of exterior/interior involves the recognition that *shari'ah* and *tariqah* themselves each have exterior and interior aspects. For *shari'ah* there is the external form of the law and the inward submission to it. The inward submission to the law is perfected through *tariqah*, whose outward expression takes the form of the spiritual instructions given by the guide to the aspirant and whose inward form is the spiritual wayfaring itself, the passing through stations and states and the acquisition of virtue.

So, we find that Islam, like Judaism and Christianity, teaches of God and man and the world. Its theology includes cosmology and anthropology. The anthropological aspect has both theoretical and practical dimensions, and the practical has both exterior and interior through each of which, especially the latter, the concepts of God, the world and humanity are informed and deepened.

It is through this circle of ever deepening insight that Islam presents its own perspective on the

most fundamental questions posed by man in every age. The questions are answered by drawing the questioner into a whirlpool of rational reflection, insight, value and practice. On the social level, the drawing in gives unity to the Muslim community, symbolized by the circumambulation of the Ka'bah during hajj. This is where the individual as well as the community focus themselves. So too, theological work must begin with its orientation toward God, circle about the related concepts of humanity and the world, and end, finally, with reference to Him, glory be to Him!

Theology presents itself in two modes. First, theology is doctrinal. It elaborates and systematizes creedal statements. Secondly, theology is suggestive. It recommends the acceptance of its creedal statements. We could put this another way by contrasting descriptive theology with prescriptive or normative theology. Descriptive or doctrinal theology is comparatively straightforward. Here we are busy with the attempt to understand the teachings of a religion, or the teachings of various interpreters of the religion, its theologians, exegetes and Gnostics.

Normative theology is more difficult, because the standards of assessment immediately come into question. Traditionally the normative weight of theological reflection has been sought in the force of logical necessity. One must accept the claims of the theologian or suffer the eternal pain of contradiction. Whoever fails to accept the results of theological reasoning is threatened with the loss of his humanity, for humanity is defined in terms of the reason upon which the theologian rests his case.

This sort of approach seems offensively authoritarian to modern sensibilities, although why this should be so is seldom considered. Mathematicians and philosophers often present their results as the dictates of more or less pure reason, and no offense is taken, not even by the most liberal of Christians. So why should anyone be insulted or offended when the same sorts of methods are applied to religion?

The answer to this question will be found when it is understood that the standards of reasoning employed by traditional theology have become subject of dispute. The sorts of arguments and the methods of reasoning about theological topics whose validity has been considered obvious in the Islamic traditions of theological reflection often fail to persuade those nurtured in modern Western culture. Insistence on the obviousness or self evidence of our own standards of reasoning provides no remedy to this impasse.

Our theological writings must offer those who do not share our views a way in, and we will not be able to provide such a port of entry until we become familiar with the intellectual geography of the points of embarkation of those whom we would have enter into conversation with us. If

there is no common ground of sufficient breadth for meaningful discussion to take place, such ground will have to be constructed. Our language and the ways in which we use it to express our rational reflections will have to be expanded to the point that we are able to explain the views we oppose and why we oppose them, and at the same time are able to recast the claims of our own traditions of Islamic thought in forms accessible and attractive to others. If we are to accomplish this task of constructing a normative Islamic theology through which the world may be invited to salvation, even though the world is largely intoxicated with modern or postmodern secular Western culture, a good place for us to begin work is by looking at the problems of Christian theology. Christian theology has been attempting to respond to modern currents of Western thought for a long time. We should be willing to learn from its successes and failures. At the same time, many of the problems of Christian theology are familiar to Muslims.

How are we to explain divine knowledge, evil, the creation of the world out of nothing, life after death, and most of the other facets of our creed? For most of the topics to be found in Islamic theology, discussions may be found among Christian philosophers and theologians. These common problems provide a point of contact.

But in order to build upon these common issues to the point that Muslim theologians can address the concerns of those immersed in secular culture, the aim in reading what modern Christians have to say about the traditional problems of theology must be to try to see why the traditional arguments from their own tradition have come to seem inadequate, and what steps they deem appropriate to remedy these inadequacies.

It is of no use to come to the problems of Christian theology with the smug confidence that they can all be solved by means of the resources of the Islamic of kalam, falsafah and irfan. Likewise, there is no guarantee that the nation in possession of the most valuable natural resources will be able to effectively use those resources in order to pursue its own political and economic objectives. We must learn how to use our natural and intellectual resources effectively in the contexts of the contemporary economic, political and intellectual environments, and if we are to do this as Muslims, efficiency is to be measured in units of accord and submission to the divine will. Neither economic power nor intellectual strength has any value for the Muslim unless he is able to place them at His service.

Once we come to understand what is novel in modern Christian treatments of traditional problems of theology, and why these novel elements have been adopted, our own Islamic theology will be enriched, even if only to the extent of incorporating a sufficient amount of new vocabulary to refute the modern ideas we find unacceptable. This is a risky business, and its

risks need to be faced conscientiously. If we are to be successful at it, we must remain critical
at every stage of the process.

No doubt there will be some unfortunate souls who, in the attempt to understand modern Christian thought about contemporary theological issues, will be swept away in the currents of thought that dominate the West. The worst way to learn is through repetition of the mistakes of others. Our learning of modern Western approaches to theological issues must be one whereby we become conversant with the language of modern religious concerns to the extent that we
are able to express our own ideas in the new language.

It is of no use to repeat the expressions of the language of modern Christian theology with an Islamic accent. The language must be mastered, and fluency in the language of modern Christian theology requires an effort no less than that needed to master a new language. The
stage at which learning occurs through the repetition of stock phrases has long since past.

In creative writing, the phrase finding one's voice is used for the process of learning to master the techniques of writing to the point that one is able to develop one's own style and themes. Muslim theologians now have to find their own voices to express their concerns and views. It is not enough even to master the language of modern thought to the point of professional proficiency. The pen must be wielded with a flourish and beauty. However, as Muslims we have no desire to join the cacophonous choir of so many modern writers who seek their own voices for the sake of glorying in their own individualities. Our aim is to use our newly found voices to echo the refrains of the eternal divine message, so that the attention of our listeners turns from
our voices to the message it carries.

So, the first step is to find common problems. This is easy. Next, we are to read contemporary Christian responses to these problems in order to gain fluency in the language of modern religious thought in the Western world. This is difficult. After that (or simultaneously), we can try to begin to understand the new topics and problems and approaches to them to be found among contemporary Christian thinkers: environmental ethics, the social gospel, feminism, various topics of pastoral theology, process theology, reformed epistemology, anti-realist
theology, and much more.

No matter how difficult this is, it is absolutely necessary for Muslims to begin exploring these issues. We need to begin the task of trying to formulate answers to the questions our children will soon be asking. In order for those answers to have the degree of sophistication necessary to satisfy young inquisitive minds, the urgency of these questions in modern culture must be properly appreciated, the language in which these questions are framed must be one in which we are fluent, and we must be sufficiently well grounded in our own traditions so that we are

able to utilize that fluency to articulate answers to the new questions grounded in the glorious Qur'an and the teachings of the Ahl al-Bayt ('a), and we take refuge in Him, the Exalted, to preserve us from error.

Notes:

1. For a small sampling, see (2:219), (2:242), (2:266) (3:191), (6:98), (7:176), (7:179), (9:81), (9:122), (10:24), (12:2) (13:3), (16:11), (30:8), (39:42), (59:21).
2. See Seyyed Hossein Nasr, "The Qur'an and Hadith as source and inspiration of Islamic philosophy," in History of Islamic Philosophy (2 vols.), Seyyed Hossein Nasr and Oliver Leaman eds., (London: Routledge) pp. 27-39.
3. (3:63).
- 4- Seyyed Hossein Nasr, The Need for a Sacred Science (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1993).
- .5. See David M. Wulff, Psychology of Religion (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1991), 204f