

CHRISTOLOGICAL ISSUES: STUMBLING BLOCK OR MEETING POINT FOR MUSLIM-CHRISTIAN DIALOGUE?

Ossom Batsa

Abstract: The major issue that appears to create difficulty in the Muslim and Christian dialogue is the way both faiths look at Jesus. Stressing the divinity of Jesus over and above other aspects of the identity of Jesus, Christians widen the gap between them and their Muslim brethren. Can there be no other way to talk about Jesus that would bring them together?

1. Introduction

Although Christian-Muslim relations have been promoted over the decades in the Christian Churches, especially after Vatican II, *Nostra Aetate*, n. 3¹, there is still more work to be done in the area of Christology. In this past few years, because of certain Fundamentalist currents in Islam, which resulted in conflicts between Muslims and Christians in some countries, the discussion of a peaceful relation between Muslims and Christians has become a world affair. Besides the question of peaceful co-existence, Muslim-Christian encounter raises Christological problems when the issue of religion is brought to the table.

This article is an attempt to delineate some of these issues, provide critical discussions and evaluation. We shall divide our discussion into three parts. The first part will present in a synthetic form tenets of the two Faiths and show how their chronological relationship may throw some light on the core issue. The second part will discuss some of the Christological issues or challenges that Islam poses to Christianity. The third part will draw on the conclusions of part two, and offer some suggestions on how the encounter of the two Faiths should lead to self-evaluation on the part of both, in the search for a common ground in an authentic dialogue.

2. An Overview of Christianity and Islam

A panoramic view of what the two religions are and what they believe in will provide an essential background for a meaningful discussion of the Christological issues in Christian-Muslim dialogue. We shall begin by first presenting Christianity and then Islam, for the simple reason that Christianity predates Islam. This chronological order, it is believed, will throw some light on the relationship between the two faith claims with respect to their founders and how both have links with the Old Testament.

2.1 Christianity

The word "Christian" was neither used by Jesus Christ to refer to his disciples nor by the apostles to refer to themselves. All the three references (Acts 11,26; 26,28; 1 Pet 4,16) in the New Testament are cases of outsiders (mostly pagans) designating the followers or partisans of the Jesus movement.² By the early second century, the name "Christian" was already beginning to be accepted by the followers of Jesus, who initially referred to themselves as "brethren", "disciples", or

¹ In the declaration of the document cited, very little appears to be said with regard to Christological issues in Christianity's encounter with non-Christian religions. On the other hand, the document stresses and calls for a peaceful and fraternal living among all peoples.

² M.L. Peel, 'Christian', in *Mercer Dictionary of the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1998), p.142.

"the saints". Eventually the word "Christian" came to identify all followers of the new religion who look up to Jesus Christ as their founder.

Though not exactly correct, theologically, the Christian religion can be said to have been founded by Jesus Christ.³ This new religion, Christianity, has deep roots in Judaism, which awaited the coming of God's promised Messiah. Jesus' coming was interpreted by sacred authors of the New Testament writings, and not their Jewish contemporaries, as a fulfilment of that promise.

Furthermore, some of the New Testament writers affirm Jesus' pre-existence and divine nature (cf. John 1,1-18) and interpret the mystery of the incarnation as "Immanuel", which means "God with us" (cf. Matt 1,23). Jesus entered into human history to save fallen humanity from "original Sin" which had corrupted human nature (cf. Gen 3,1-21). Being son and therefore divine, Jesus is believed to be the Word of God. He did not only speak the Word of God but he is the Word himself. Jesus taught humanity in word and deed all that needs to be known about human relations with God to obtain salvation. Jesus is thus considered the final revelation of the Father (cf. Apo 1,8; 21,6; 22,13; see also Col 1,15-20; Eph 3,10).

The Fathers at Vatican II Council, making reference to Heb 1,1-2, write: "He sent his Son, the eternal Word who enlightens all men, to dwell among men and to tell them about the inner life of God... As a result, he himself - to see whom is to see the Father (cf. John 14,9) - completed and perfected Revelation and confirmed it with divine guarantees"(Vatican II, *Dei Verbum*, n. 4).

Jesus achieved salvation on behalf of incapable humanity, principally, through his incarnation, passion, death on the cross, and resurrection (cf. 1 Cor 2,1-4), which in effect demonstrates God's love for humanity and creation at large. In the New Testament, Jesus is referred to with many titles, some of which are the Word, Son of God and Prophet. Of prime importance for us is Jesus as the Word of God, whose person lives on in the Church.

The Church, the Christian community, sees itself as a sacrament of Jesus the "Word incarnated in the world". In other words, Jesus the Word of God lives on in the Church and continues to operate through her to prepare all peoples for the end time, the *Parousia*. This becomes real in as much as the Assembly announces the *evangelium christi*.⁴

This brief panoramic view of Christianity shows that the key Christological issues include: the mystery of the incarnation; the paschal mystery (the redemptive work of Christ) and Jesus as the ultimate revelation of God.

2.2 Islam

Islam⁵ is the religion founded by the Prophet Mohammed in Arabia in the 7th century CE.⁶ Its adherents call themselves Muslims, from the Arabic word *muslimūn*, which means "those who have surrendered to God and are therefore whole".⁷ Muslims are supposed to live a committed life through confession of faith (*shahada*), prayer (*salat*), fasting (*sawn*), giving the poor-tax (*zakat*), and pilgrimage to Mecca (*hajj*) as taught by the prophet Mohammed.⁸ These tenets of Islamic faith are referred to as the five pillars of Islam.

The prophet Mohammed received "recitations" (in Arabic *Qur'ān*) from *Allāh* (God) through the angel Gabriel and the spirits. He further claimed that the *Qur'ān* was God's final revelation to humanity (cf. Surah 2. 136). Consequently, Mohammed regarded himself as the last of a series of prophets sent by God to restore order into religion and make God known to all people. Mohammed,

³ C. Teklak, 'La dottrina, 'extra ecclesiam nulla salus' e il suo significato per il dialogo interreligioso', *Antonianum*, 76 (2001), p.648.

⁴ U. Schoen, 'A Christian Theology in a Muslim Context: The Spiritual Pilgrimage of Jean Faure', *Theology Review*, 1 (1978), p. 32.

⁵ The root *s/m* in Arabic means 'to be in peace or to be an integral whole'.

⁶ Cf. F. Rahman, 'Islam', *The Encyclopaedia of Religion*, vol 1 (New York: Mcmillan, 1987), p. 303.

⁷ J. Kritzack, 'Islam', *The New Catholic Encyclopaedia*, vol.7, (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1967), p. 676.

⁸ G. Nehls - E. Water, *The Church in Africa Encounters the Challenge of Islam* (Accra, 2003), p. 2; See also R. M. N. Weep, 'The World Religions: Islam', *CSSR* 34 (2005), p. 32.

however, did not claim any divinity for himself. He saw himself only as a messenger and prophet of God.

For *Muslims* the *Qur'ān* is the Word of God and thus a Holy Book. It contains all that God has revealed to humankind through his messenger the Prophet Mohammed. This revelations centre around the following themes:⁹

- what God has made known about himself (cf. Surah 2: 255-257; Surah 24: 35-42; Surah 35: 38-39);
- about humankind in general (Surah 96: 1-19; Surah 2: 1-25; Surah 67: 1-6);
- about the Prophets such as Abraham (Surah 19: 41-50), Moses (Surah 28: 19-41), Jesus (Surah 3: 45-48; Surah 5: 78), Mohammed (Surah 50: 1-16);
- his commands -what is lawful and what is forbidden- (Surah 2: 172-180; Surah 2: 216);
- what God rewards and punishes (Surah 82: 1-21; Surah 69: 13-37).

The key faith statement of Islam is found in the first verse of the first book of the *Qur'ān*: "There is no God but God, and Mohammed is his messenger". This "creed" formulates and summarises the whole of Islamic belief. It is in fact used as a formula for the profession of faith in Islam.¹⁰ Evidently, this formula says nothing about Jesus, but it is clear from other parts of the *Qur'ān* that for the Muslims Jesus does not seem to have any salvific function in the way Christians understand it. Besides, the *Qur'ān* only mentions Jesus Christ sporadically. Christology in the *Qur'ān* is less developed, and it leans much more towards "prophetology".

Though Mohammed accepted revelation in the Jewish and Christian Scriptures, these religions, according to him, had been adulterated and needed to be purified. All revelation in Judaism and Christianity that was contrary to his ideas, the Prophet Mohammed held invalid (Surah 5: 75, 76 and 78).¹¹

The preceding discussions show that although both the Christian Scriptures (the Gospels) and the *Qur'ān* know Jesus, they represent him and interpret him differently. Disagreement on the person of Jesus is what we refer to as Christological problems or issues.

3. Christological Issues

The main issue here is how Jesus is perceived by Christianity and by Islam.¹² Both Christianity and Islam agree that Jesus was a prophet, but they disagree on many crucial and essential facts that define Christianity. Some of these disagreements present themselves as Christological issues or problems when Christianity enters into a serious faith dialogue with Islam. The issues we shall consider here include the following: the divine origin of Jesus (the incarnation); the Paschal mystery (the redemptive death of Jesus on the Cross); the role of Jesus at the end of time; and Jesus as the final revelation of God in Christianity.

3.1 Divine Origin of Jesus / Incarnation

The first Christological problem is the divine origin of Jesus Christ. For Muslims, Jesus was a prophet like any other prophet and had no divine origin in the sense understood in Christianity.¹³ *Muslims* maintain that Jesus was born of the virgin Mary, but later received the vocation of a prophet and messenger (Surah 3: 38-48). This Muslim affirmation with regard to the origin of Jesus is, however, not all the truth that Christians hold about Jesus. For Christians, Jesus is, apart from being a prophet, the Son of God.

⁹ J. A. Williams, *The World of Islam* (Texas: University of Texas Press, 1995), pp. 7-13.

¹⁰ M. Mutahhari, *Religion and the World* (Tehran, 1982), p. 39.

¹¹ Kritzeck, *The New Catholic Encyclopaedia*, p. 677.

¹² Cf. Schoen, *Theology Review*, p. 32.

¹³ Cf. Kritzeck, *The New Catholic Encyclopaedia*, p. 678.

Though Jesus himself did not claim the title prophet in the Gospels, he was looked upon as a prophet by his audience, whom he amazed with his insight and knowledge.¹⁴ But the prophetic character of Jesus is different from the other prophets who spoke the Word of God "put in their mouth" by God to the people. Jesus, on the other hand, is the Word himself, who made the Word known through his own speech and deed.

Jesus is Son of God because he was begotten by God. However, Jesus eternally was with God. The Gospels are very clear and emphatic on this. In his prologue, the evangelist John shows that Jesus eternally lived with God before his incarnation. In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God and the Word became flesh (John 1,1). The Christian community has come to accept these truths the evangelists present about Jesus as true and an integral part of her faith in God.

Contemporary Christology reflecting on the Gospels affirms a dual nature of Jesus Christ: his human nature and divine nature. Jesus the Son of God existed with God from the beginning and therefore is divine; but he was born as man and therefore human. In Jesus one nature cannot be without the other. But are these arguments intelligible enough for a Muslim partner in the conversation?

3.2 *The Efficacy of the Paschal Mystery*

The two important hinges of Christianity are the incarnation and the paschal mystery. The Paschal mystery (passion-death and resurrection of Jesus) and its effect are inseparably related to the notion of original sin (cf. Gen 3,1-21).

The fall of the human race in Genesis, defined as original sin, has, according to Christianity, corrupted human nature. The corruption has rendered humankind powerless and effortless. There is the need for an external assistance as humanity by itself alone is incapable of reacquiring the lost state of grace, though God's revelation is present. Christianity looking back on the history of Israel notes how the people of Israel, though they had the Torah, God's revelation through Moses to them, still went astray after other pagan deities and consequently did not live up to the Torah.

For this reason God in his own mercy and initiative decided to write his Laws in the hearts of the people (Jer 31,31-34). Writing the Torah in the heart of the people may mean the Word taking total possession of them. And this is the Christian reading of the incarnation of Jesus. Jesus takes on or assumes human nature to raise it to its dignity. In other words, Jesus the Word became man to save humankind, to ratify the lost relationship with God. This mission of Jesus is fundamental to the paschal mystery. The incarnated Word of God has ever since been present among men as the means of salvation for all in the Christian understanding.

There is no idea of original sin and the corruption of human nature in Islam. Consequently, there is no need for a redeemer from original sin. Rejecting original sin, Islam *de facto* rejects the redemptive role of Jesus Christ. In effect, the whole foundation of Christianity is brought into question. However, Islam asserts the need for salvation by God.

3.3 *The role of Jesus at the Parousia*

Related to the Paschal mystery is Jesus' role at the *parousia*. Christians generally believe that Jesus continues to intercede for us and will be seated with God on the judgement throne at the end of time. But it is to be noted that the Gospels are not even unanimous on the role of Jesus in the future Kingdom of God.¹⁵ Often Christian writings have emphasised one book or the other, but that is not all to the picture. Though Muslims believe in salvation, no future role is ascribed to either Jesus or the Prophet Mohammed.

3.4 *Jesus of as final revelation God*

¹⁴ G. Ossom-Batsa, *The Institution of the Eucharist in Mark: A Study of the Function of Mark 14,22-25 in the Gospel Narrative*, (Bern: Peter Lang, 2001), p. 222, footnote 159.

¹⁵ Ossom-Batsa, *The Institution of the Eucharist*, p. 156.

As indicated above, Christianity has its roots in the Old Testament Scriptures. In view of this, it sees itself as a fulfilment of the prophets in the Jewish Scriptures. The New Testament writers directly or indirectly note that Jesus is the ultimate revelation of God (cf. Heb 1,1-3). But Jesus himself never said he was the last word of God. There is a difference between what others say about Jesus or the derivations they make about him and what he says about himself or what God says about him. Islam, on the other hand, holds that the final revelation of God has come through the Prophet Mohammed, thereby looking beyond Jesus. The following section will offer some suggestions for a way forward in the face of all these Christological issues.

4. *Is there a Way to Address the Christological Issues in the Christian-Muslim Dialogue?*

The Christological issues raised above present a great challenge to not only a meaningful and sincere dialogue between Christians and Muslims but also the relationship of Christianity to any other religion that denies the divine nature of Christ (the incarnation) and the paschal mystery.¹⁶ Nevertheless, in my view, Christian-Muslim dialogue is not only possible, but must continue as an imperative from both sides.¹⁷ The dialogue is possible because there is a fundamental point that seems to unite both faiths: the Word of God. And the dialogue must continue because that is the only way to clarify misgivings and misunderstandings.¹⁸ Below are some suggestions on how such a dialogue should proceed in spite of Christological and theological differences.¹⁹

4.1 *Mutual Knowledge of Each Other*

Christians must know what they believe, but must also know what Muslims believe, the values in their belief, and if possible to try to understand why Muslims believe what they believe.²⁰ Muslims must do likewise with regard to Christianity. A deeper knowledge will clear out doubts, sharpen our understanding of the similarities and differences. Such a knowledge will be the basis for a fruitful and sincere dialogue.

4.2 *Both must accept their differences*

There is very often the danger to see difference as division and therefore incompatibility. These may not necessarily be so since difference sometimes may lead to enrichment, and, in fact, serve as a sort of challenge for self-criticism. When differences are accepted not as error but as diversity in living then there can be room for a fruitful dialogue in friendship. Such a dialogue requires "an open mind, a willingness to listen and learn, an honest attempt to be free of prejudice and prejudgements".²¹

4.3 *Exclusion of polemical language*

Christians do not speak to themselves only but to other people of different faiths, for example, Muslims. It is therefore incumbent on Christians to express what they believe in such a way that it may be meaningful and inoffensive to the partner in the communication. We can think of expressions such as "Jesus Christ is the only Saviour of the World", and "I am proud to be a Christian". Though both statements express truth from the side of the speaker, they sound polemical and, in fact, offensive to the non-Christian listener; in our case, the Muslim. Such statements could be avoided when Christians become aware of and accept their dialogue partners. This view,

¹⁶ See M. Dhavamony, *Christian Theology of Religions: A Systematic Reflection on the Christian Understanding of World Religions*. Studies in Intercultural History of Christianity, vol. 108 (Bern: Peter Lang, 2001), p.202-203 for some general guidelines on inter-religious dialogue.

¹⁷ Cf. Tekla, *Antonianum*, 613-649; see also P. Knitter, 'La Teologia Cattolica dell religione a una crocevia', *Concilium* 22 (1986), pp. 129-137.

¹⁸ The Department for Study of Religions in the University of Ghana, which has Islamic and Christian options, can be a fertile ground for such a mutual journey.

¹⁹ Schoen, *Theology Review*, pp. 32-33.

²⁰ Nehls & Water, *The Church in Africa*, pp. 19-20.

²¹ Dhavamony, *Christian Theology of Religions*, p. 203.

however, poses a challenge to evangelism and conversion understood in a narrow sense as winning members for the congregation. On the other hand, when evangelism and conversion are understood in broader terms, not as proselytising but witnessing to the love of God so that humanity may be truly reconciled with God and attain their true identity, then the dialogue becomes a sharing that enriches both sides.

4.4 *The Word of God: God's revelation to humanity*

The "Word of God incarnated" can be a starting point for a Christian theology that may be able to dialogue with *Muslims*. Both *Muslims* and Christians accept that God has communicated with humanity in history; for *Muslims* the *Qur'ān* is "the Word of God" which was received through Mohammed; for Christians *Jesus* is "the Word of God" made flesh (John 1,14).

Though it is not a perfect analogy, Jesus "the incarnated Word" may be equated to the "*Qur'ān*". Christians know that though Jesus died, he resurrected. Besides, the fact of the incarnation endures forever. The "Word of God" is still present among us, no longer in a human form but his voice resounds in the world and calls humankind to faith in God.²² In this perspective, the *Qur'ān* finds its place in Christian thought as God's progressive communication of himself in history.

J. Ellul, in his recent article,²³ has shown how Islamic spirituality has in the course of the centuries made conscious efforts to internalise the Word of God in the *Qur'an* through *sufism* (mysticism). He further notes "... with Andalusian *sufism*, as expressed by Ibn al- 'Arabi, the human being reaches out towards his ultimate end and the image of God in his creation, as a vice-regent in his dignity, and as God's mirror in sustaining the cosmos".²⁴ Ellul's article provides support to the view that a reflection on the Word of God could be a fertile ground for an encounter of the two faiths.

4.5 *The Word of God saves*

The fact of the incarnation of the "Word of God" can be further developed to show that "the Word" saves all peoples. What humanity is incapable of doing all alone was accomplished by God Himself in the incarnation. Emphasising the presence of the incarnate Word of God in human life may draw both *Muslims* and Christians into a fruitful dialogue. In this framework of the incarnate Word of God, the *Qur'ān* has its rightful place. The *Qur'ān* continues to be the Word of God addressed to the *Muslims*. Thus *Muslims* and Christians can share what God is telling each of them in order to grow together.

5. *Conclusion*

At the end of this brief study the following conclusions may be drawn about the dialogue between *Muslims* and Christianity with particular reference to Christological issues:

- that a fruitful dialogue can take place only when both sides know what the partner in the conversation believes;
- for Christians there is the challenge to rethink a new way of presenting Jesus to the other person in such a way that a full picture and not a partial picture becomes transparent. This implies a new approach of the Church in its mission *ad gentes*;
- the Word of God may be an opening and a meeting point for a dialogue between the two faiths. The Word of God is given to Christians, *Muslims*, and all people. There is the need for a revised theology of the Word of God, a theology that will make the Word of God present to, and have influence on the lives of all people.

²² Cf. B. Forte, 'La Parola di Dio nella Sacra Scrittura e nei libri sacri delle altre religioni', in *Interpretazione della Bibbia nella Chiesa: Atti del simposio promosso dalla congregazione per la dottrina della fede*, Roma Città del Vaticano, 1999, pp. 106-120.

²³ J. Ellul, 'God and Time: Islamic Philosophy and Mysticism', *Angelicum*, 78 (2001), pp. 651-668.

²⁴ Ellul, *Angelicum*, p. 668.

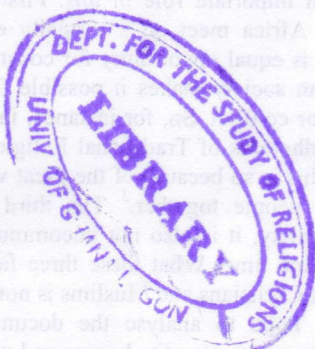
We can affirm that there is more that unites than divides Christians and Muslims when we reflect critically on the power of the Word of God. Emphasising Jesus as the Word of God can be a challenge for the different Christian denominations in their search together for a new way of proclaiming Jesus to a world that continues to change!

CHRISTIAN ENGAGEMENT WITH MUSLIMS IN GHANA: A STUDY OF THE
CHRISTIAN COUNCIL OF GHANA AND GHANA CATHOLIC BISHOPS' CONFERENCE

A. R. Yeboah

Abstract: Islam and Christianity are both missionary religions which often create tension between the two cultures. However, in Ghana, there has been constructive engagement between these two great religions due to the exceptional religious tolerance in the country. This article shows how the Christian Council of Ghana and the Ghana Catholic Bishops' Conference have been found in their inter-faith relations. Though they both have different purposes and approaches to dialogue, they both contributed constructively to inter-faith relations in Ghana, with the basic objective of the need for peaceful coexistence between adherents of the two faiths. The current global state of religious intolerance makes this dialogue more pertinent.

The reality of sub-Saharan Africa as a good platform for the constructive engagement of Christians and Muslims - and Ghana is no exception - has long been recognized by scholars. These factors may play an important role in the inter-faith dialogue for the first time as Christianity and Islam in Africa meet on an equal footing for the first time as missionary religions. There is equal footing for the first time as pluralistic nature of African societies exist together without major religious divisions. Muslims, Christians and other religions are living together and sharing their dreams and aspirations. The African place on family is the family ties that bind. The African factor is the reality of religions in Ghanaian society. In Ghanaian society, there are factors indicating that in Ghana the constructive engagement of Christians and Muslims is not only a possibility but even reality. In what follows, the document of Ghanaian Protestants and Catholics to show how they are constructively engaged with Muslims and in so doing paint a far picture of the current Christian-Muslim relations in Ghana. It is in no way a critique of their engagement, but simply a documentation. The focus is on two Christian institutions: the Christian Council of Ghana (CCG), a Protestant institution, and its engagement with Muslims through the Project for Christian-Muslim Relations in Africa (PRCORMA) and the Ghana Catholic Bishops' Conference (GCB), which is engaged with Muslims through the work of the Association of Episcopal Conferences of Anglophone West Africa--later-Religious



the Association of Episcopal Conferences of Anglophone West Africa--later-Religious Catholics to show how they are constructively engaged with Muslims and in so doing paint a far picture of the current Christian-Muslim relations in Ghana. It is in no way a critique of their engagement, but simply a documentation. The focus is on two Christian institutions: the Christian Council of Ghana (CCG), a Protestant institution, and its engagement with Muslims through the Project for Christian-Muslim Relations in Africa (PRCORMA) and the Ghana Catholic Bishops' Conference (GCB), which is engaged with Muslims through the work of the Association of Episcopal Conferences of Anglophone West Africa--later-Religious