

The Land of Unlikeness: The Risk and Promise of Muslim-Christian Dialogue

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I read recently about a 16th c visionary Dominican, for whom I felt some sympathy. ‘Among reformed sectaries in the West, often ignored by historians, there were, writes Kenneth Cragg, ‘intriguing ventures into the puzzle of competing faiths. In central Europe and the Balkans... thinkers such as Jacob Paleologus... took their revolt against clerical rule into overtures of mind toward Islam, moved by the providential problem of its domain in Europe but also probing into its potentially mutual ground with Christianity... Paleologus returned to Europe to pursue his vision of “an inter-faith church of spiritual Semites” in which he conceived of Jews, Gentile Christians, and Turks as “three branches of the people of God,” insofar as they conformed to “the inner world.” He saw the first as being such by race, the second by faith, and the third by their monotheism, their occupancy of Christian lands, and their acknowledgement of “the prophet’s office of Christ.” These were, indeed, radical ideas in the context of that time – ideas for which Paleologus, as a discredited Dominican, paid with his life, suffering execution in Rome in 1585.’¹

Perhaps he was born too soon. Based on some recent official comments, he just might have received a more sympathetic hearing in Rome in 2007. Cardinal Paul Poupard, the President of the Pontifical Council for Culture and the Council for Interreligious Dialogue, speaking at the World Summit of Representatives of the Great Religions, in Moscow, 3–5 July of last year, said this: ‘...Religions are open houses which can teach and practice dialogue, respect for the difference and the dignity of the whole person, the love of the truth, awareness of belonging to the one great family of peoples wanted by God and called to live under his watch in shared love.’² This was, of course, pre-Regensburg.

¹ *The Arab Christian, A History in the Middle East*, (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1991) p. 131.

² www.evangelizatio.org/portale/adgentes/pcpc_en040706

The Fact of Pluralism

Much has happened to change people's perceptions and attitudes: instant, worldwide communication, immigration from East and South into West and North; the clash of values in France between headscarf-wearing Muslim students and a government committed to the idea of a secularist *laïcité*; the western European press, in defense of free speech, reprinting the offensive Danish cartoons of the Prophet, Muhammad; the murder of the Dutch film-maker, Theo van Gogh, by a Muslim enraged by his 'blasphemous' film with passages from the Qur'an printed on women's naked backs. There has been such a great shift that a city like Amsterdam now has a population that is almost half non-Dutch. And even 30 years ago, there were more Muslims in Great Britain than there were Methodists. There are 40 mosques in Blackburn, the constituency of the leader of the House of Commons. Churches are being turned into mosques and temples – and there are seven Muslims in the House of Lords. Islam is the fastest-growing religion in Europe: estimates of the Muslim population in the 27 nations of the European Union range from 15–20 million, and this number is projected to double by 2025. Those who were once called the 'others' are not only at the doorstep, but, in many cases, have become part of the family.

Many people today, like Paleologus in the 16th c, struggle with the challenge of these 'open houses' of pluralism. This paper reflects some of the literature, with which you might be more familiar than I. I am not a theologian. I am a magpie: when I see something shiny I pick it up and bring it to the nest. But I hope these shiny things might illumine our way.

I should also confess, at the outset, that while a lot of what I say comes from reading the literature, it is grounded rather more in the years I spent in Pakistan. My debt to Pakistan is immense, a debt to the small but vibrant Christian community, discriminated against and victimized, but all the more faithful for that. I am grateful to my Muslim friends: men – and especially women, from whom I learned to see another face of God. I am convinced that had I not lived there for so many years, I would, today, have absolutely nothing to say. I was asked, last year, by a sister how long I had been in Pakistan and when I answered, '40 years.' She said, 'Were you *born* there?' I said, 'No. *Reborn*.'

In paying tribute to the late Jacques Dupuis, the editors of *Concilium* spoke of him as following the path of missionaries who set out from the West for the continents of the East and South. Like Bartolomé de las Casas, 'many of them experienced the physical shock of the difference and of what Jon Sobrino has called the *epistemological break*, not so much as a theoretical approach and work programme but rather as a result of an *aporia* – scandal and madness

– and of a respectful apophatism toward divine transcendence in the experience of God with others, received as grace by means of others.’ The editors call on the continents of Asia, Africa and Latin America as witnesses ‘to this transformation of innumerable missionaries into spokespersons for a new theological *locus*, strengthened in their suffering by this conviction that revelation and salvation are truly grace because they break the logic of religion, make us understand and stammer that “what is within is there outside; the height is there below, the blessing is together with the cursed, the judgment on the world is first pronounced by the littlest ones.”’³

Why we are talking about this at all lies in the very fact of pluralism. In Asia, the home of all the world religions, Christians form less than three percent of the population. That’s surely enough to start rethinking what mission is all about! Some writers have tried to understand the great mass of people, who are not Christian, by using the paradigm of ‘exclusion’ (salvation is confined to Christianity), ‘inclusion’ (salvation occurs throughout the world but is always the work of Christ), or even ‘pluriformity,’ (the great world faiths are different and independently authentic contexts of salvation/liberation).⁴

There are problems with this threefold classification. The most obvious is that it tries to fit everything into the univocal Christian concept of ‘salvation.’ It has, accordingly, been much criticized as being too much *a priori*, dealing only with what can be said theologically about the fact of religious pluralism, but not dealing *a posteriori* with actual religious communities.

The real problem is one of perspective. Like the traveler who comes upon a river, sees a man lazing under a tree on the other side, shouts over to him and says, ‘How can I get across to the other side?’ The man looks up, and replies, ‘You *are* across the other side!’ An exclusivist position, on which the debate concentrates, judges everything from its side of the river. It implies that salvation depends either on the primacy of *belief* in the Incarnation, or *experience* of Jesus as Saviour. Ian Markham would stress rather the importance of *actions* (having difficulty with an emphasis on beliefs as elitist, as culturally conditioned, and thinks that most people find beliefs less important than actions). The alternative he proposes is *action* or ‘orthopraxis over orthodoxy,’ and he defines salvation as ‘a turn from self-centeredness to other-centeredness. The realization of love and compassion in your life is the act of being saved; it is the

³ Luiz Carlos Susin, ‘Introduction: Emergence and Urgency of the New Pluralist Paradigm,’ *Concilium*, 2007/1, pp. 11–12.

⁴ Cf Gavin D’Costa, *Theology and Religious Pluralism* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1986); Alan Race, *Christians and Religious Pluralism* (London: SCM Press, 1983); and Paul Knitter, *No Other Name, A Critical Survey of Christian Attitudes Toward the World Religions* (Quezon City: Claretian Publications, 1985).

cultivation of a loving attitude expressed in actions. It is a disposition of openness to others.’⁵ And a readiness for the unexpected – unlike the advice a mother gave to her daughter on learning to drive: ‘Never go anywhere for the first time!’

This scrapping of the paradigm seems to me something necessary and good, if only to recover analogy and nuance in conversation with the unknown. And the ‘disposition of openness to others’ is essential. Not only to understand ‘others,’ but to realize that without them we will never come to an understanding of who we are – or who God is. What made Jesus so ‘unique’ was this unqualified acceptance of others, and it is this that brought him to an awareness of who he was and what he was called to do.

‘The Land of Unlikeness’

We are becoming more aware of the ‘other,’ from all points of view. Taking difference seriously is being thrust upon us. The existence of the ‘other’ can no longer be peripheral to our faith; it is, instead, part of it. Making sense out of this is the task of theologians. This ‘plural condition’ as a mark of our time, difference and diversity, ‘pluralism’ as an interpretative concept: is all this ‘a historical novelty or simply a fact of life that has always been there, but of which we now have a new understanding fraught with consequences? The argument [of this issue of *Concilium*] is that pluralism is a paradigm imposed in place of the uniqueness, universalism, and “absolutism” or traditional thought, of metaphysics, and – even more so – of a western outlook.’⁶ Pluralism accepts the deeper reality of life in all its aspects, and this requires ‘a new awakening, based on otherness and plurality, instead of on subjectivity and an identity with claims to exclusive universality and absolute uniqueness. It also requires a bold acceptance of the epistemological change, with all this implies, which is taking place, irrevocably, in our time.’⁷

Having spent a lifetime trying to understand it, Danish physicist Niels Bohr found that ‘the opposite of one profound truth may well be another profound truth.’ And I remember being enchanted on reading that the poet, Robert Lowell, when stuck for rhyme or meter, discovered he could achieve just the effect he wanted by simply adding the word, ‘not.’ There is something inviting but disconcerting about this theological journey on the frontiers.

⁵ ‘Creating Options: Shattering the Exclusivist, Inclusivist and Pluralist Paradigm,’ *New Blackfriars*, January 1993, pp 33–41, passim..

⁶ Luiz Carlos Susin, op cit, p. 7–8.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 8.

'*He is the Way,*' writes the poet, Auden, '*Follow Him/through the Land of Unlikeness;/You will see rare beasts/and have unique adventures.*'⁸ We are challenged, as Christians, to a new self-understanding posed by life in the 'Land of Unlikeness.' One county in the 'Land of Unlikeness' is that of interreligious dialogue, which, as David Tracy observed some years ago, is 'a crucial issue which will transform all Christian theology in the long run. . . We are fast approaching the day when it will not be possible to attempt a Christian systematic theology except in serious conversation with the other great ways.'⁹

What should characterize this dialogue most of all, as Karl Rahner wrote, is the awareness that 'the divinely intended dream [of salvation] for the individual meets him *within the concrete religion of his actual existential milieu and historical contingency, according to God's will and forbearance (which so intermingle that they are no longer clearly separable).*'¹⁰

When the philosopher, Jacques Derrida, died three years ago, one who knew him well wrote that in 'the last decade of his life he became preoccupied with religion and that it is in this area that his contribution might well be most significant for our time. He understood that religion is impossible without uncertainty. God can never be known or adequately represented by imperfect human beings. . . Yet we live in an age when major conflicts are shaped by people who claim to know, for certain, that God is on their side. Derrida reminded us that religion does not always give clear meaning, purpose, and certainty by providing secure foundations. To the contrary, the great religious traditions are profoundly disturbing because they call certainty and security into question. Belief not tempered by doubt poses a moral danger. Fortunately, he also taught us that the alternative to blind belief is not simply unbelief but a different kind of belief – one that embraces uncertainty and enables us to respect others whom we do not understand.'¹¹

The Qur'an itself addresses this question: '... to every one of you have we appointed a different law and way of life. And if God had so willed, He could surely have made you all one single community: but [He willed it otherwise] in order to test you' (5.48). St Paul is less gentle with the Corinthians: 'Do you really think that you are the source of the word of God? Or that you are the only people to whom it has come?' (1 Cor 14.36) In a recent talk in Rome, the

⁸ WH Auden, *Christmas Oratorio: For the time Being*, cited by Tom Breidenthal in 'A Table in the Wilderness,' web.princeton.edu/sites/chapel, 5 March 2006.

⁹ *Dialogue with the Other* (Louvain: Louvain Theological and Pastoral Monographs 1; Peeters Press, 1990) p. xi.

¹⁰ Quoted by Eugene Hillman, 'Evangelization in a Wider Context,' *Journal of Ecumenical Studies*, Vol 12, 1975, p. 6.

¹¹ Mark C Taylor, 'What Derrida Really Meant,' *New York Times*, 14 October 2004.

American Jesuit, Michael Buckley, addressed the same point. For Aquinas, Buckley said, the idea of ‘a religion’ would have made no sense. Aquinas regarded religion not as a set of beliefs and practices, but as a moral virtue, ‘by which one gives God what is due to God, and lives in appropriate relation to God.’¹² The point seems to be that this virtue of religion is universal, even if people and cultures have different ways of cultivating it and, as a moral virtue, is all about relating to God and to one another.

It is a point made by Fergus Kerr, in his homily for Epiphany 2007: ‘[Matthew’s] Magi do not seem to have become Christian; they return to where they came from. . . the visit of the Magi surely anticipates, symbolically, the possibility of mutual interest and exchange among the world’s religious traditions: opening the treasures of their wisdom even if going home another way.’¹³

In a complex world, then, wisdom is in knowing what we don’t know so that we can keep the future open. Or, as Emily Dickinson, the 19th c recluse – who was once described as ‘roam[ing] this world as if it were interstellar space’ – once wrote, ‘We both believe and disbelieve a hundred times an hour, which keeps believing *nimble*.’

Keeping Belief Nimble

‘Keeping belief nimble’ is also a good hermeneutic in a world filled with complex particulars. Rahner once said that we must act our way into new ways of thinking, and not think our way into new ways of acting. Many theologians today believe that, instead of starting from a preset theological paradigm, it is better to build a theology of dialogue on the basis of an actual interreligious encounter, thus acting our way into a new way of thinking. They speak of ‘theologies in conversation’ (Michael Barnes), or ‘theology in dialogue’ (Jacques Dupuis), or ‘interpenetration’ (R Panikkar).

One thing is certain: an open, dialogical attitude can be developed only through an actual experience of dialogue. This is something implicit in official documents of the Catholic Church. These do not discuss at length the theological status of non-Christian religions, but give just some practical guidelines on how to enter into dialogue on the levels of daily life, work, thought and spirituality.¹⁴

Entering into dialogue is a true adventure from which one emerges with a new way of seeing. We have the example of a 13th c English

¹² John Allen, ‘The Word from Rome,’ 18 March 2005, www.nationalcatholicreporter.org/word

¹³ torch.op.org/preaching/sermon/15, 6 January 2007.

¹⁴ Cf Giuseppe Scattolin MCCJ, ‘Spirituality in Interreligious Dialogue: Challenge and Promise,’ www.sedos.org

Dominican, David of Ashby, who spent 15 years at the Persian court of the Il Khan, Hulegu, the son of Genghis Khan. He was also translator for the Mongol ambassadors at the Fourteenth Ecumenical Council at Lyons in 1274, sent by Abaka, the son of Hulegu.¹⁵ Dialogue is indeed a 'unique adventure' where participants, like David of Ashby before them, are changed by the experience and become bridges (translators) between worlds.

A study published in June 2006 by the Washington-based Pew Global Attitudes Project found that 'a great divide' separates the worldviews of Muslims and westerners, but it also suggests that European Muslims, who held the most tolerant views, could be a bridge between the two groups.¹⁶

It is the experience of living among others that makes this so and that suggests possibilities for the future. I was at a meeting once where a French Dominican simplified 'mission' by saying, 'We need to be fully here, and fully somewhere else.'

Translators need, first of all, to get 'across the river,' to learn a new language: a new way of speaking about God, about Jesus, about the Church and her mission. I can't believe, eg, that David of Ashby's view on any of these, after 15 or 20 years among the Mongols, remained the same, unchanged, from the first day he arrived in Persia! We do not know – but if he did not change, then he was a pretty poor translator.

One whose view has evolved, after years of study and conversations, is the French Dominican, Claude Geffré. After a consideration of the 'enigma' of Islam, he insists that 'it is precisely the challenge of religious pluralism that invites us to return to the heart of the Christian paradox as the religion of the *Incarnation* and the religion of *the kenosis of God.*' Christianity he describes as 'a religion of otherness.'¹⁷ The task is to go to the heart of the difference of the 'other' to discover, with new eyes, one's own difference.

A recent novel describes the importance for the two central characters to 'leave home not in order for them to see the world, or not only for that, but in order for them to see themselves more clearly, out of the context of home,' and the woman 'survives because she quickly learns to break the rules, to ignore the customs, to forge alliances with people with whom she has no officially sanctioned relationship.'¹⁸ It was, for example, Einstein's lack of deference to

¹⁵ James Chambers, *The Devil's Horsemen: The Mongol Invasion of Europe* (Edison NJ: Castle Books, 2003), pp 159–160.

¹⁶ Published 23 June 2006 by the Inter Press Service, www.commondreams.org/cgi-bin/print.cgi?file=/headlines06/0623-04.htm

¹⁷ 'The Theological Foundations of Dialogue,' *Focus*, Vol 22, No 1, 2002, pp. 15–40.

¹⁸ Thomas Jones, 'Only the crazy make it,' review of *The Pesthouse* by Jim Crace, in *London Review of Books*, 8 March 2007, p. 40.

authority that left him jobless in academia but allowed him to do thought-experiments and encouraged him to be skeptical about conventional wisdom: ‘Long live impudence,’ he proclaimed as a young man. ‘It’s my guardian angel in the world.’¹⁹ And the novelist, E.M. Forster, writes of music as ‘offer[ing] in its final expression a type of beauty which fiction might achieve in its own way. That is the idea the novelist must cling to. Not completion. Not rounding off but opening out...’²⁰

Christianity as ‘a religion of otherness’ means that it is always ‘impudent,’ always ‘opening out,’ and always ‘other-centered,’ taking its identity and its mission from others. That it is founded on the paradox of the ‘Incarnation’ means that it has to take the reality of difference seriously. And ‘the kenosis of God’ suggests a methodology for doing this.

Because we are talking about a methodology for our own ‘emptying’ too. The emergence of a new identity can be both liberating and painful. There is considerable discomfort in responding to the truth of *many* possibilities, instead of subscribing to *one* all-encompassing truth. But this is the familiar exodus from the slavery of Egypt, through the desert, looking back in longing for the ‘leeks and onions and flesh-pots of Egypt,’ into a land of promise and into freedom.

The Dutch lay Dominican theologian, Erik Borgman, reminds us of what is involved in this journey of many possibilities: ‘...Openness to what other religious traditions have to say is inherent to a religion which does not propagate a strict identity but rather wants to lure people towards “the venture of non-identity.” It invites men and women, like Jesus, to become the “icon of the invisible God” (Col 1.15), not by accepting its preaching and the proclamation of him as the ultimate and complete truth, but by reflecting him in their own history and bringing it together with those from elsewhere who do the same thing... Before it can be a theology of God’s presence, Christian theology is a theology of the lack of God. It is precisely in the pain of this lack that God’s presence and nearness is revealed.’²¹

The poet or novelist is often described by his willingness to take the familiar and make it strange. This – I believe – is even truer of the theologian, whose task is, at all costs, to defend the mystery against familiarity, its worst enemy. The over-familiar, for St Thomas, does not produce faith, but only boredom.²²

¹⁹ Walter Isaacson, ‘Einstein: a genius for rebellion,’ *latimes.com/news/opinion*, 8 April 2007.

²⁰ *Aspects of the Novel*, (London: Penguin, 2000), pp. 149–150.

²¹ ‘Conclusion: The Self-Emptying Nearness of the Liberating God: Contours of a Christian Theology of Other Forms of Faith,’ *Concilium*, 2003, Number 4, p. 129.

²² Josef Pieper, *The Silence of St Thomas*, (South Bend, IN: St Augustine’s Press, 1999), p. 24.

'The Kingdom of Anxiety'

'He is the Truth', writes Auden, 'Seek him in the Kingdom of Anxiety. / You will come to a great city/that has expected you for years.'²³

To follow Jesus into the 'Kingdom of Anxiety' means turning our backs on every false boundary that separates us from God, and from other people. It means 'stripping ourselves so completely of every defense against God's truth and God's judgment that we end up being completely open to God. . . It means relocating ourselves in an abode that is completely open to the stranger, [that] always provides us with glimpses of the vast open space. . . that surrounds us on every side.'²⁴

Being completely open, engaging with all the 'complex particulars' is essential for the acknowledgment and acceptance of difference. Indeed, it is fear of complexity that leads 'true believers' to barricade themselves against any other truth breaking in from the world that surrounds them on every side. 'Somehow or other,' writes Archbishop Rowan Williams, 'we all have to undergo a fairly fundamental conversion from seeing revealed truths as a possession to be guarded to seeing it as a place to inhabit; not our bit of territory that needs protection, but the whole world renewed. We shall not proclaim Christ effectively if we are constantly revisiting what makes us anxious rather than what makes us grateful.'²⁵

Timothy Radcliffe, in a recent article on the Eucharist, quotes Nicholas Boyle. What he says is appropriate here: 'When the Church finds what is unholy, then it must say, "For this too Christ died. . ."' In such moments the Church too must die, must swallow its pride, give up the boundary which it thought defined its existence, and discover a new and large vocation. And that new vocation will itself be defined by a new boundary, which in time the Church will also have to transcend.'²⁶

It is from living in a different culture for over half my life – although my age now has something to do with it – that I find myself a little less 'anxious' and better equipped to deal with particulars and inconsistencies, and am more content living within the mystery of incompleteness. I think there is a time in our life when we realize God is not who he used to be. Meister Eckhart's distinction between the Godhead and God 'opens the door to the distinction between the Real and its plurality of manifestations,' writes John Hick, who is also fond of Nicholas of Cusa (1401–64), with his affirmation that

²³ Auden, op. cit.

²⁴ Breidenthal, loc. cit

²⁵ *The Christian Priest Today*, lecture on the occasion of the 150th anniversary of Ripon College, Cuddesdon, 28 May 2004, www.archbishopofcanterbury.org.

²⁶ N Boyle, *Sacred and Secular Scriptures: A Catholic Approach to Literature*, London 2004, p. 105, quoted in 'The Eucharist: Inclusion or Exclusion?' *New Blackfriars*, Vol 88, No 1014, March 2007. p. 163.

‘there is only one religion in the variety of rites.’²⁷ Cusa’s definition of God as the *coincidentia oppositorum* is meant to indicate that God is at once infinitely great and infinitely small, the maximum and the minimum, the centre and the circumference of the world, everywhere and nowhere, neither One nor Three, but Triune.

There was a rather bizarre moment during the 1995 general chapter of the Dominicans when there was heated debate on whether or not we can really know the God whom we preach. Unfortunately I was moderator of the session and lost control of it! Most threatened by the possibility that we might not know the God we were talking about were a young Spanish missionary in Taiwan and an old Hungarian, who had spent years in a factory under the Communists.

Muslims and Christians might get along better if each remembered the God neither one knows. For the Muslim, God is transcendent and above comprehension: ‘No vision can grasp him, but his grasp is over all vision. He is above all comprehension, yet is acquainted with all things’ (Qur’an 6.103). The Qur’an does not reveal God, but God’s will or law for all creation. This is similar to Aquinas’s teaching that God is incomprehensible to us precisely because he is creator of all that is and outside the order of all beings. We can know something about God from his effects, but all we can safely affirm is what God is not: prout in se est, neque paganus neque catholicus cognoscit (ST I, Q 13, a 10, ad 5). Thomas’s great work was written for beginners, but he ‘did not wish to withhold this basic thought of ‘negative’ theology even from the beginner. And in the *Quaestiones Disputatae* [it] is even said: ‘Hoc est ultimum cognitionis humanae de Deo; quod sciat se Deum nescire, this is the ultimate in human knowledge of God: to know that we do not know him.’²⁸

This is why Rowan Williams can say that ‘the worst thing people of faith can do is live as if we could never be surprised by God.’

Foundational is the passage in Exodus, when Moses asks Yahweh to show him his glory. Yahweh said ‘I will make all my glory pass before you. . . but my face you shall not see.’ He then places Moses in a cleft of the rock to shield him with his hand until he has passed. Then Yahweh says, ‘I shall take my hand away and you will see my back; but my face will not be seen’ (33.18–23). Faith is not about seeing; it is about following. And all we ever see is God’s back.

We can only affirm what God is not, for we are, as Aquinas wrote, ‘joined to God as to the unknown’ (ST I, Q 12, a 13, ad 1). And the 2nd c Justin Martyr declared that, ‘No one can give a name to God, who is too great for words, if anyone dares to say that it is possible

²⁷ *The Fifth Dimension*, (Oxford: One World, 2004), p 95.

²⁸ Josef Pieper, op. cit, p 37.

to do so, that person must be suffering from an incurable madness.' All we will ever see is God's back.

The poet, R.S. Thomas, marveled at this elusiveness: '*Such a fast God: leaving just as we arrive.*'

Yet even when Muslim and Christian confess their inability to know God, both profess very often to know exactly what God wants. Remembering the mystery is a good corrective to bad behaviour – as one very wise Muslim scholar reminded TV listeners after 9/11: 'If you limit God, you create God.' There are today signs pointing to a disturbing new climate of intolerance. 'What happens,' asks the columnist, James Carroll, 'when religious zeal is joined to absolute certitude? What happens when power is invoked to reinforce preaching? What happens when those who disagree with prevailing answers to life's great questions are, for that very reason, defined as lesser beings. Is doubt part and parcel of rational inquiry, or not? Is ambiguity essential to human knowing, or not? If the ground on which one stands while thinking, and the time within which one pursues a thought to its conclusion are both in flux, as suggested by the insights of Albert Einstein, why is "relativity" to be taken as wicked?'²⁹

So much depends on how one handles complexity. There is a story about a young disciple who came to the wise elder and asked him, 'Can you help me find enlightenment?' The wise man replied, 'Of course. You just give me all your certainties, and I will give you back confusion.'

But this 'confusion' is the moment of conversion, in Tillich's sense of 'an opening of the eyes,' of 'a revelation experience.' Coming to a new self-awareness, midst the confusion, is to change – but it is always others who open our eyes and reveal to us who we are. Part of this self-awareness is the realization that if Muslims, and others, can reveal to us our true selves, then we must commit ourselves not just to dialogue as something we do, but to dialogue as a way of living. This is an insight into our very way of being in this religiously pluralist world and it somehow enters into the definition of who we are as Christians. This seeking 'in the Kingdom of Anxiety,' will bring us, as Auden says, 'to a great city that has expected you for years.' We emerge with a new and truer identity.

Beyond Christ

The encounter with believers who are not Christian offers a possibility, not just of seeing ourselves in a new way, but of seeing our faith

²⁹ *Boston Globe*, 17 May 2005, www.commondreams.org

in a new way. It gives new meaning to the Letter to the Hebrews' description of him as 'the pioneer,' way out in front of us, and on whom we are to 'keep [our] eyes fixed' (12.2), and to Paul's saying that Jesus is in us as mystery and hope and promise of completion (*Col 1.27*). Jesus is alive in our world, is being completed in our world, is coming-to-be in our world. This is echoed in some Sufi traditions, where Jesus is referred to as 'the traveler,' or 'the one on the path.'

This all suggests life and movement – and a journey, not toward certainty, but deeper into faith and mystery and hope of completion. 'Paul Tillich had a remarkable insight into this when he pointed to *the way of depth* as the essential condition for moving beyond a limited feature of Christianity: this is not a way that leads to abandoning religious tradition itself but a deepening of it through prayer, thought, and action. . . [I]n the depths of every living religion there is a point where the religion itself loses its importance and the horizon toward which it is moving produces a breaking of its particularity, raising it to a spiritual freedom that makes possible a new view of the presence of the divine in all expressions of the ultimate meaning of human life.'³⁰

We are to follow the Christ who is not behind us but in front of us. We are behind the surprising Christ who is making us ready for the new ways of God.

It is the others we meet on our journey who invite us to move from an understanding of the Church's mission as 'a program for action' to 'a waiting on God.' It is an invitation to share in God's great adventure and God's loving embrace of the world. This new awareness of who we are compels us to cooperate with other believers so that God's purposes may be revealed.

History helps us here. In the 13th c there was created 'by Christian, Muslim, and Jewish forces the near-miracle of a tolerant humanism on the basis of current traditions at the court of Emperor Frederick II in [the Kingdom of] Sicily.'³¹ Frederick was extremely well-educated, endlessly curious, spoke many languages, including Arabic, was a half-hearted but very successful crusader, always at odds with papal claims in Italy, and was known to his contemporaries as *stupor mundi*, 'the wonder of the world.' His Kingdom of Sicily included Naples and Count Landulf of Aquino was one of his most loyal vassals. I have often wondered if growing up in this multi-cultural society in Frederick's University of Naples somehow influenced Aquinas's own remarkable openness to other traditions.

³⁰ Quoted by Faustino Teixeira, 'Religious Pluralism as a New Paradigm for Religions,' *Concilium*, 2007/1, p 27.

³¹ Paul Tillich, *Christianity and the Encounter of the World Religions* (NY: Columbia University Press, 1964) p 40.

Entertaining Elephants

In Pakistan, almost every farmer will speak of ‘my wife, my village, my land, my children, my buffalo – and my enemy,’ to describe who he is. The one who is different, and often dangerous, is part of his identity. This can, of course, take over, and result in a paranoid society. But the truth is that the other *does* enter into our self-definition, and *does* determine how we act. The other comes to us in different guises: guest, friend, stranger, sometimes enemy (and all linked etymologically!). Each meeting is important because in each is – in the thought of the philosopher, Emmanuel Levinas – the ethical challenge to embrace responsibility and, ‘by being for others, to be oneself.’³²

This carries with it risk, daring and surprise. Ancient Persian wisdom advises: ‘Do not welcome elephant trainers into your tent unless you are prepared to entertain elephants!’

The scriptural criterion for good action, according to the Books of the Law and the message of the Prophets was always dependent on how the orphan, the widow and the stranger were treated. Thus, in Deuteronomy: ‘The Lord your God. . . is not partial. He executes justice for the fatherless and the widow, and loves the sojourner, giving him food and clothing. Love the stranger, therefore, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt’ (10.17–19). Leviticus is even more specific: ‘When a stranger sojourns with you in the land, you shall do him no wrong. The stranger who sojourns with you shall be to you as the native among you, and you shall love him as yourself; for you were strangers in the land of Egypt’ (19.33–34). And Exodus gives as the reason for not oppressing the stranger, this: ‘You know the heart of the stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt’ (23.9).

Just as the appeal in the Book of Exodus (about knowing the heart of the stranger) is to a shared human experience as providing common ground for relationship, so is Paul’s vision of strangers becoming community rooted in the experience of what God did in Jesus: ‘In Christ, God was *making friends with the world*. . . and entrust[ed] to us the task of *making friends*’ (2 Cor 5.19). This is why he entreats the Romans to ‘practice hospitality’ (12.13). But to be ‘hospitable,’ to welcome them as guests, strangers have to be looked at as ‘like us’ in needs, experiences and expectations. ‘It was not sufficient that

³² For Emmanuel Levinas, ‘being in relationship’ is much more basic than simply ‘being.’ Levinas is fond of quoting the novice, Aloysha Karamazov, in Dostoevsky’s novel: ‘We are all responsible for everyone else – but I am more responsible than all the others.’ This is a thought that can, as one commentator said, ‘make us tremble,’ for we are then endlessly obligated to the other, responsible for the other, and the *good* (in the form of fraternity and discourse) takes precedence over the *true*. To be oneself is to be for others. Cf ‘Introduction,’ *The Levinas Reader*, ed by Sean Hand (Oxford UK & Cambridge USA: Blackwell, 1996), passim.

strangers be vulnerable; hosts had to identify with their experiences of vulnerability and suffering before they welcomed them.’³³ Perhaps linked to this obligation to hospitality is the awareness of our own culpability as part of a social system that produces strangers, displaced and vulnerable.³⁴

The Promise of Dialogue

One commentator on the horrific events of September 2001 saw them as a failure of imagination: had the terrorists been able to imagine themselves as passengers on those planes, they would never have done as they did. It is useful to think about what causes a failure of imagination. Timothy Radcliffe, in an address at Yale University in 1996, saw the university as a place ‘where one learned to talk to strangers.’ He quotes the poet William Blake to expose what he believes to be one of the blocks to communication: ‘May God keep us / from single vision. . .’

Singleness of vision leads to delusion, with, as we see from Iraq, bloody consequences. There is a huge difference between imagination and delusion. There is a story from Central Asia about Mullah Nasiruddin, whom a friend came across one night in the middle of the road, under a bright shining moon. Mullah was on his hands and knees. The friend asked, ‘Mullah, what are you doing?’ ‘I’m looking for my key,’ said Mullah. ‘I’ll help you,’ said the friend, and he too got down on his hands and knees and began looking through the dust. After an hour searching, the friend said, ‘Mullah, where did you lose it?’ ‘Over there, by the door,’ said Nasiruddin. ‘Then, why don’t you look over there?’ said the friend. ‘Don’t be stupid,’ said Mullah (or you can substitute George W Bush), ‘there’s more light here!’

The moral, of course, is that ideal conditions are never there in the search for keys or anything else. Maybe a laboratory, with controlled experiments, might yield results that could be trusted, but life is much messier and less predictable. And attempts to impose order result in totalitarian violence and the obliteration of individual differences by ethnic cleansing. To break the cycle of violence and vengeance, the scriptural remedy is uncompromisingly clear: ‘Love your enemies’ (*Mt 5.43*), ‘Extend hospitality to strangers’ (*Rom 12.13*).

³³ Christine D Pohl, *Making Room, Recovering Hospitality as a Christian Tradition* (Grand Rapids MI & Cambridge UK: William B Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1999) p 97.

³⁴ Cf Walter Brueggemann, ‘Welcoming the Stranger,’ *Interpretation and Obedience* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991) pp 290–310.

'The World of the Flesh'

The prophet Isaiah (58.6–8) says we are all 'kin,' of one flesh and blood, and perhaps never more than now. While listening drowsily to the BBC one night, I discovered that it can be statistically established that any one of us, at any given time, is only 'six lengths away' from any other person: the pope, the president of the US, the queen of England, a peasant in Thailand – because we all know someone who knows someone who knows someone else. Human networking is fascinating but it only makes what is happening now all the more painful and difficult to understand. We have to search for meaning together, for without acknowledging our kinship with those who are different, we will remain with but half an answer.

We are presented today with a disturbing reality. Otherness, the simple fact of being different in some way – Muslim or migrant – has come to be defined as in and of itself evil. Miroslav Volf is a native Croatian, who, in his 'theological exploration of identity, otherness, and reconciliation,'³⁵ writes from his own experience of teaching in Croatia during the war. He contends that if the healing word of the Gospel is to be heard today, theology must find ways of speaking that address the hatred of the other. He proposes the idea of *embrace* as a theological response to the problem of *exclusion*. Increasingly we see that exclusion has become the primary sin, skewing our perceptions of reality and causing us to react out of fear and anger to all those who are not within our ever-narrowing circle.

Auden reminds us just how big our circle must be: '*He is the Life. / Love Him in the World of the Flesh; / And at your marriage all its occasions shall dance for joy.*'

In light of this, Christians must learn that salvation comes, not only as we are reconciled to God, and not only as we 'learn to live with one another,' but as we take the dangerous and costly step of opening ourselves to the other – in Volf's words – 'of enfolding him or her in the same embrace with which we have been enfolded by God.' And dancing for joy.

This is not easy, but, as St John Chrysostom reminds us, it is necessary: 'It might be possible,' he writes, 'for a person to love without risking danger – but this is not the case with us!'

Not the case with us, not the case for the 13th c Sufi mystic and poet, Jalaluddin Rumi, who also speaks to the risk involved:

I am a man who is not afraid of love; I am a moth who is not afraid of burning!

³⁵ *Exclusion and Embrace* (Nashville; Abingdon Press, 1996).

Jesus calls us ‘friends,’ tells us to ‘befriend’ and ‘love one another,’ (*Jn 15.14–17*) in a risky and dangerous embrace which mirrors his own.

Only then can Cardinal Poupard’s speaking of religions as ‘open houses’ that ‘can teach and practice dialogue’ become a description of reality.

When there is ‘respect for the difference and dignity of the whole person, the love of the truth,’ and ‘the awareness of belonging to the one great family of peoples wanted by God and called to live under his watch in shared love’ – only then can the dream become reality.

He is the Way.
Follow Him
through the Land of Unlikeness;
You will see rare beasts,
and have unique adventures.

He is the Truth.
Seek Him
in the Kingdom of Anxiety.

You will come to a great city
that has expected you for years.

He is the Life.
Love Him in the World of the Flesh;
And at your marriage
all its occasions
shall dance for joy.

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