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Is the Koran Revealed? Is Muhammad a Prophet? A Christian point of view

By Samir Khalil Samir, S.J.

I. INTRODUCTION

A. Preliminary Remarks

1. A fundamental question.

Muslims ask us always about two sets of issues: those regarding Christianity (monotheism and Trinity, Incarnation and divinity of Christ, crucifixion of Christ) and those regarding Islam (is Muhammad a prophet? Is the Koran revealed?). This presentation concerns only the second set of questions, which is fundamental for them since it constitutes half their profession of faith (La Sahada). In other words, is Islam a Revealed Religion (din munzal, din samawi)? Is it a salvation path or can the Muslim be saved in spite of Islam?

2. The need to answer those questions.

It is not easy to answer those questions and, harder yet, to give the Muslims acceptable answers (I am not saying answers that please them). However, it seems to me that it is necessary to give answers without evading the problem even if it means trying to explain those answers to the Muslims later.

This effort is all the more necessary since the Catholic theology is in a gray area regarding this issue and a wide range of diverse and sometimes contradictory opinions are given and they are arousing astonishment and even scandal for many of the faithful. So this is a theological paper prepared by a Christian (an Arab living in a Muslim society) for Christians. The text being brief and the subject very delicate, the written form cannot reflect all subtleties but these will be tackled more thoroughly orally. I appeal to your kind attention.

3. Double imperative: Truth and Sympathy.

A long experience of dialogue with Muslims has convinced me that any ambiguity in speech or in thought is noxious. Moreover, I am convinced that, even although we can make concessions regarding the “living together”, we cannot make concessions with regard to dogma. Thus, an imperative of *absolute truth*: I refuse to

say only what the other is able to understand, I have to say also what the other doesn't like to hear, while striving to say it in the most acceptable way possible. At the same time, there is an imperative of *total sympathy* for what the Muslim lives and for what he believes in; learn to explore the beauty in him.

4. Particular situation of Islam.

Islam, the last major world religion is a monotheist religion and cannot be treated like Buddhism and Hinduism, which are not. It cannot be tackled like Judaism, which is our source and has an undeniably revealed yet incomplete Scripture. Moreover, Islam comes six centuries after Christianity, acknowledges in principle the two religions as revealed but pretends that it rectifies and completes them. So, Islam is theologically placed with respect to the Judo-Christian Revelation: Muhammad is the "Seal of prophecy" and the Koran is the Ultimate Testament given by God to humanity.

B. Some Theological Positions

5. Two classical positions.

Some (like, for instance, John Damascene, at the beginning of the 8th century), impressed by the resemblance to some Christian heresies, thought that Islam is but the latest of these heresies. Others saw in Islam the work of Satan, allowed by God because of the Christians' sins; Muhammad being thus one of the false prophets announced by the Christ.

6. Two new positions.

More recently, some, based on the opinions of some Fathers of the second and third centuries with respect to the Greek world (Justin, Clement of Alexandria or Irene) sought to see in Islam a preparation for the Gospel (the Seeds of the Word) and which, while being chronologically posterior to the Gospel, is logically anterior to it.

Others (Claude Geffré¹, Robert Caspar and the GRIC, Kenneth Cragg and W. Montgomery Watt) go even further: the Koran, according to them, is "a word of God" to man, different from our Scripture, or even a partial and incomplete revelation. Hebrew's text 1,1-2 on prophets which causes difficulty will be understood in a broad sense.

II. OVERVIEW OF ISLAM

¹ See, for example, Claude GEFFRE, Le Coran, une parole da Dieu différente, in: Lumiere et Vie 32 (1983) , p. 28-29. Text in Dupuis, p. 226.

A. Muhammad and the Koran

7. Who is Muhammad?

Muhammad is convinced that he is the bearer of a message from God. More than that, he is convinced that he is the last prophet and the “seal of prophets” (*hatam al-nabiyyin*), he is the one with whom God’s revelation to mankind is achieved and reaches its perfection. He is also persuaded that Jesus has announced him and acknowledged him and that after him there will be (cannot be) no more prophets. To me, he seems like an outstanding social reformer and a politician of great talent. He is at the same time a man in love with God, whom he adores and to whom he prays; a sincere and convinced man who uses all means available in order to establish “God’s Kingdom on earth”, Islam. “He followed at many points the path of the prophets”, said the Catholicos Timothy I to Kaliph al-Mahdi in 781.

8. What is his message?

His message repeats the main themes of the Old Testament:

- a) Adoration of a unique God to whom we submit ourselves voluntarily and fully, without compromise with paganism, which should be eradicated by any possible means including war.
- b) A moral behavior based on the submission (often formal) to the revealed Law and on the respect of familial and tribal structures.
- c) A social behavior based on strict justice (*Lex Talionis* , *qasas*), compassion towards the weak and the mutual support within the *ummah*, which shall be protected even if that means the elimination of troublemakers (*hadd al-riddah*).

9. The Koran and the Bible.

This message is presented as inserted in the biblical lineage of prophets from Abraham to Jesus. It doesn’t pretend that it brings something new but it only wants to be a reminder of the revelation made by God to Adam since the creation of the world, a revelation which was distorted subsequently and of the innate religion in Man (Adam), Islam. However, the differences are notable between the two texts. The Muslim tradition has specified that Muhammad is not only a prophet (*Nabi*) but also a Messenger (*Rasul*), thus creating a revealed-Law, that abolished all those, which came before it.

10. With respect the Old Testament.

With regards to the Old Testament, it pretends that it corrects and completes it, recognizing among others that Jesus is the Messiah born of a virgin and attributes to him remarkable titles (such as Messiah, Word, Spirit,...), which however, do not have the same meaning as in the Gospel.

With respect to Christians, the Koran is shocked by their assertions, which are, from its perspective, contrary to the biblical message: Trinity, divinity of Christ, crucifixion of Christ, etc. It will then “rectify” them or deny them.

B. Problem: Ambiguity of Islam

11. The person of Muhammad.

On examining the person of Muhammad, we find an ambiguity in him: On the one hand, some noble features, attitudes and teachings which remind us of those of prophets of the Old Testament; on the other hand, some personal attitudes and positions not in the least in conformity with those of the prophets of the Old Testament and less to those of the apostles of Christ. For example, his passion driven attitude towards women (for instance, when he assumed some privileges in order to assuage his passion for Zayd’s wife, cf. Koran 33 : 36-38) and in the raids and wars or even his treachery with regard to some of his opponents (on all this, consult for example the Kindī Apology)

12. The Koran.

When we examine the Koran, we also find an ambiguity in it: on the one hand, some pages which remind us of the most beautiful pages of the Bible; on the other hand, some moral and dogmatic teachings which are contrary, even in contradiction with those of the New Testament. Moreover, the core conception of the Koran as “coming down” from heaven, as being divine literally makes the dialogue more difficult.

13. Muslims

When we examine the Muslims with whom we live, we notice the same ambiguity:

- a) On one hand, many reach an authentic experience with God, an attitude of adoration and of continuous submission to his will, an abandon of oneself to Him; at the same time, they reach a relation to their fellow men marked by justice and forgiveness, “wishing for his brother what he wishes for himself” in order to “imitate God’s qualities” (Hadīṭ); and all this through their faithfulness to the Koran and to the Prophet’s Sunnah and because of their meditation. The ritual prayer (Salat) five times a day and the invocations (du’a’) as well as fasting (sawm) and charity (Zakat and sadaqa) open their hearts to God.
- b) On the other hand, many others, also inspired by the same meditation of the Koran, consider that God is inaccessible and doesn’t seek to reveal himself

to man and that he is the “qahhar” who crushes and for whom we are slaves. The Christian idea of the divination of man, which is the core meaning of salvation, is outrageous for them. The cult can easily turn into formalism. The relation to others, on the basis of the Koran can easily turn to fanaticism and violence to defend “God’s rights”.

III. THEOLOGICAL REFLECTIONS

A. Preliminaries

14. A true malaise.

It is this ambiguity, this mixture of contrary even contradictory elements (concerning the person of Muhammad, the teaching of the Koran and Muslims’ attitude) which creates the problem. Because it is not a question of the ambiguity inherent to everything that is human, but of the ambiguity of what is supposedly coming from God (the Koran or the Prophet).

15. A very difficult dialogue.

This problem is growing (making the agreement between Christians and Muslims almost impossible) due to: (a) Muhammad proclaims himself the “seal of prophets” and the Tradition makes him the “Rasul” par excellence; (b) The Koran is presented as the ultimate revelation of God to mankind bringing with it the perfection of the knowledge of God; (c) Muslims consider themselves as the only authentic faithful (mu’minun), and all the others are not.

16. However, on these three points, Christians have almost the same discourse: John the Baptist is the last prophet, Christ is the ultimate Revelation of God to mankind and Christians are the authentic believers.

B. Can Muhammad be considered a prophet, in the Christian meaning of the word?

17. Muhammad, a sincere man of God.

For me, he is a sincere man who had had an authentic experience of God in his solitude in the Hira grotto. He comes out with a conviction of the absolute greatness of God the unique and of the necessity of revealing him. He inculcates in his followers the meaning of the absolute transcendence and of the infinite clemency of God to whom the creatures owe everything. This way, the faithful’s heart can open up to God and to his spirit. “In this, he walked the prophets’ path,» said Timothy I. However, many have walked and still walk the prophets’ path. Thanks be to God!

18. Not a prophet.

Can we infer that he is a prophet sent by God to Arabs (or even to all peoples)? I don't think so. For, in the Christian perspective, a prophet is someone who not only receives a message from God for humanity, but also paves the way for Christ and for the message of the Gospel. Muhammad and the Koran, in many essential points, move away from the Christ and the Gospel and declares the latter superseded by the Koran.

19. A spiritual guide for many people.

If the word "prophet" means someone who, through his teaching and his life, helps men to live in justice and to give a central place in their life to God, then I would gladly say that Muhammad is a prophet in spite of the reservations that I have on some aspects of his teaching and of his life. But if that is the case, then many other people would deserve to be called prophets. However, saying this, I do not satisfy the Muslims for whom Muhammad is the prophet who recapitulates everything.

20. No "half prophet".

Cardinal Charles Journet², based on a text of Saint Thomas, recognizes that Muhammad could have benefited from a "partial prophetic light" shedding light on some truths (such as the monotheism of transcendent God) but not on others (which remained concealed or denied). I am a little bit reticent to admit this vision because it will make him a kind of "half prophet". Can God send a messenger who will announce a part of the Revelation and deny the other?

21. Sent by God? Or does God allow his action?

Finally, the most important question which I ask myself is the following: Was Muhammad chosen by God to be sent to the Arabs, and through them, to the whole world? I don't think so. In philosophy, we would say that he was an "instrumental cause", but not a "final cause". I would rather say, along with Louis Massignon, that "Muhammad is enlightened on some points but not on others"³. I would avoid using the word "prophet" too heavily loaded with ambiguity, to say that God has allowed him to announce to the Arabs something of the biblical Revelation, a task which fell upon Christians without doubt too negligent.

C. Islam is at the same time a road and an obstacle, but not a path of salvation

22. A way and an obstacle

² Cf. GRIC, *Ces Ecritures qui nous questionnent*, Paris: Centurion 1987, p. 111; c.r. de Jomier, p. 695.

³ Cited in GRIC, p. 111, note 18.

In brief, the Koran (like Muhammad's figure) is at the same time a way leading to God, leading men to a partial knowledge of God, and an obstacle towards the knowledge of God the Father revealed in Jesus Christ and of his son, Jesus, precisely because it pretends that it says the last word about God and Jesus Christ. Since the Koran doesn't lead man to discover the true face of Christ, it cannot be considered as revealed. Furthermore, from a sociological point of view, we can't find anything in it that cannot be deduced from the cultural environment of Arabia in the 7th century.

23. The Muslim can save himself, through Christ.

It goes without saying that this theological attitude does not mean at all the negation of salvation possible for any Muslim living sincerely his Muslim faith. This is what is asserted in the Vatican Council II, provided that this salvation happens in Christ and by him. Some would want Islam to be the road and the way to salvation for Muslims; I do not think that this can be asserted and not one pontifical or council document suggests it. This attitude does not mean the absence of dialogue and coexistence will be more authentic if they are less ambiguous.

IV. PASTORAL AND SPIRITUAL THOUGHTS

A. Delicacy and Authenticity

24. Delicacy

Can we transmit to a Muslim such point of view? Aren't we offending him? It goes without saying that I should use much delicacy, even sympathy and love. I must also recognize with joy everything that is beautiful and true in the Koran (like in any book and in any belief). Personally, I find that it is possible to say this in an acceptable manner. For three motives:

25. Respect

- a) First of all, my respect and my esteem for the other don't come from whether or not he is a believer, but from the fact that he is a human being and thus made in God's image. It is important to try to explain that to Muslims. His being a believer brings him nearer to me but does not necessarily increase my respect for him.

26. Fidelity to my faith.

- b) Second, if I acknowledge (in any way) that Muhammad is a prophet, then (whether I like it or not) I become a Muslim. In fact, the very core of the Islamic Šahādah is precisely this: to recognize that God is unique

and that Muhammad is a prophet.

27. Truth at all costs

- c) Finally, dialogue is based on the truth, which sets us free and not on complacent discourse. I have a duty towards myself to be coherent with my religion and I can't recognize Muhammad as the seal of prophets and the Koran as the Ultimate Testament.

Moreover, Muslims cannot recognize that Christ is the Verb of God, in the Christian meaning of the word, i.e. uncreated and pre-existent Verb, otherwise he would become a Christian or a hypocrite (*munāfiq*). Furthermore, I cannot put between parentheses my faith in Christ, who is the only one capable of saving mankind and the only one who reveals the Father.

B. Triple pastoral attitude: discernment, truth and love

28. Discernment:

For us, Christians, a triple pastoral attitude is requested. First of all, discernment:

- a) Discern in the Koran the part of light from the part of shadow, in the light of the evangelical Revelation of Jesus Christ.
- b) Help Christians make this discernment so as not to fall in an anti-Muslim fanaticism (frequent in the East) or in a pro-Muslim naivete (frequent in the West).
- c) Help Muslims (with an infinite discretion) decant their faith, in order to discover its partial, incomplete or erroneous parts; and finally to open up to the Gospel, which they think, they know through the Koran while they ignore it. Give rise to the desire for a more demanding spirituality and to know the Christ of the Gospel and not only the Christ of the Koran.

29. Truth.

After that there must be truth. Avoid any ambiguity. Be aware that some words, identical in the New Testament and the Koran (such as Word, Spirit, Messiah, Servant, Prophet, etc.) don't mean the same thing at all.

30. Love.

Finally and especially, love in Christ. God wants that all men be saved and

that they discover the Father. He entrusted us with that mission. How are we to live it? *Caritas Christi urget nos!*