

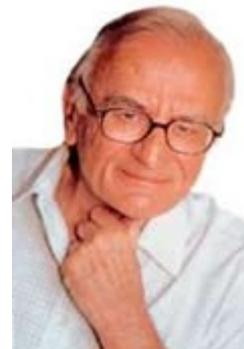
For a Theology of Difference. Identity, otherness, dialogue

Dominican Roman Days

July 2001

Claude Geffré, OP

It is a very difficult venture to speak about the Christian minorities living within an Islamic majority when one has come to have a clearer understanding of the diversity and the complexity of the situations. In accordance with what has been asked of me, I would like to attempt to present an outline of what a theology of difference could be. The fundamental intuition that guides me is this: it is necessary to go the very heart of the difference of the "Other" to discover, with new eyes, one's own difference. This is why I have chosen the subtitle: Identity, otherness, dialogue. I can more clearly discover my own identity by recognizing the otherness of other people, and this is how the conditions of a real dialogue are founded. In fact, the important question is to know how is it possible to remain faithful to oneself, without making concessions, while promoting the chances of the dialogue? Between a dialogue of the deaf and a complaisant dialogue that would be nothing other than a lie, a third way is possible. But although this is an ideal that has never been reached, I would like to adopt, for my own reflection, the title Michel de Certeau thought well to use for one of his books: *L'Étranger ou l'union dans la différence*.



The plan of my presentation will be simple. Firstly, I will begin by calling to mind the strangeness or the enigma of Islam, the only world religion that has appeared after Christianity. Our task will be to elucidate its strangeness, despite its pretence of completing both Judaism and Christianity. In doing this, we will see the distinctive difficulties of the Islamic-Christian dialogue in comparison to the general conditions and criteria of the dialogue with other religions. Secondly, I will insist on the theological bases that allow us to define Christianity as a religion of otherness. 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. One can therefore continue to affirm the unique character of Christian identity without making Christianity into a totalitarian religion. Thirdly, and finally, we will reflect upon what the presence of the Church in a Muslim country could be and how the different forms of dialogue could be, in their particular way, forms of the mission in a hostile environment.

1. The enigma of Islam

The appearance of Islam as a great monotheistic religion seven centuries after the coming of Christ continuously remains an enigma for the Christian conscience. This religion pretends that it closes this revelation concerning the oneness of God that began with the religion of Israel and which attained its accomplishment with Christianity. Certain historians of religion indicate that a fourth form of monotheism is properly unthinkable. In any case, it is true that since the 7th century, no other great religion has appeared. Although it is possible to cite new religions, these are either connected to other "biblical" religions (this is the case of Sikhism and Bahá'ism) or new forms of syncretism that adopt many elements from oriental religions such as Hinduism and Buddhism. The same must be said of the numerous sects or even of religions that consider themselves more or less Christian.

And within the Interfaith Dialogue, officially recommended by the Church since Vatican II, Islam conserves a special status. It is not possible to assimilate it to other great world religions, reluctant to designate the absolute as a personal God. Indeed, Islam pretends to be the monotheistic religion par excellence. But, on the other hand, it would be illusory to want to assimilate the Islamic-Christian dialogue with the Judeo-Christian dialogue. Judaism will always have the benefit of a privileged status in the eyes of the Church since it inaugurated the history of salvation accomplished in Christ. Even if Islam does not pretend to bring a new revelation, but to restore the Revelation that Moses and Christ have already witnessed to, it is probably abusive and even erroneous to speak of Islam as a biblical religion. Moreover, the way in which Islam gathers certain elements pertaining to the message of the New Testament is so strange that most theologians refuse to consider it to be a Christian heresy, despite the fact that this was a widespread theological opinion in the past. This would already be misunderstanding the otherness of Islam.

In order to underline this Muslim difference, I will first insist on the strangeness of the Koran as a divine revelation and on the misunderstanding Islam has of the fundamental dogmas of Christianity. But at the same time, given certain points of convergence, we can talk about a rivalry between these two twin-brothers: Islam and Christianity. This rivalry is reinforced by the historical conflict between two civilisations. We can thus conclude on the particular difficulty of the Islamic-Christian dialogue.

The strangeness of the Koran

For someone who is familiar with the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament, reading the Koran is always a disconcerting experience. This is so not only because of its poetic form and the coexistence of highly spiritual teachings and extremely prosaic legislative or moral prescriptions. This disconcertion is, above all, caused by the massive borrowing of elements from the books of the Old and the New Testaments, elements that are taken out of their context and placed in a surprising order. One wonders why certain biblical figures have been chosen while other have been left aside and for what reason there are almost no references to the prophetic books. And if the Koran gives an eminent place to Jesus, who is born of the Virgin Mary by the power of the Holy Spirit, one is surprised that nothing is said about the Sermon on the Mount and about certain events in his life, especially his death on the cross (which happened only in appearance) and his resurrection.

It is impossible to understand these purely material references to biblical literature, without repositioning the originality of the biblical revelation in its difference from the Koranic revelation. According to the biblical conception, the relationship of the Revelation to history is essential. The God of Israel is the God of history even before being the God of the cosmos. One could almost say that God writes a history rather than a book. The word of the prophets, as an interpretative expression, is secondary to the events of a sacred history in which is God the agent. At the height of the Revelation, i.e., of the self-communication that God gives to humankind immersed in this history, Jesus Christ is, without separation, a historical event and a verbal event.

Now, considering the Koranic revelation, it is necessary to say that the Word of God revealed in the Koran is in no way related to history. This revelation consists essentially of the miracle of God's word-by-word dictation of the Koran, through the Archangel Gabriel, to Mohammed the Prophet. There is a kind of de-historisation of the sacred history narrated in the Bible, because the prophetic message of God's oneness is identical from one prophet to another and has its origin in the nature of humankind itself as a creature submitted to God. In fact, there is no other covenant than the primordial pact that coincides with the creation of Adam. Thus, every human being is potentially a Muslim. Mohammed is the "seal of prophecy" because he communicates, in its entire purity, the initial message transmitted by Abraham, Moses and Jesus - who were prophets before him - but that was corrupted by the Jews and the Christians. Consequently, here is no progression in the Revelation, which would be in relationship to successive covenants, as in the case of the Bible. "The Koran was not invented by anyone else than God. It is the confirmation of what existed previously" (X, 37). But, in fact, Islam not only pretends to confirm a Revelation already accorded by God: it replaces and it becomes the criteria of selection applied to the foregoing Scriptures. The best of what Jews and Christians possess is their part of Islam or of the submission of which they are the unconscious bearers. This is why it would be illusory to want to establish a symmetry between the way the New Covenant in Jesus Christ completes the Torah and the prophets and the way Islam accomplishes the two monotheistic religions, i.e., Judaism and Christianity.

The same personage, Abraham, who is par excellence the figure of the knight of faith, is present in the three monotheistic religions, but he has a different significance in the Bible and in the Koran. For Islam, the faith of Abraham consists in the fact that he recognised the grandeur of God the Creator while contemplating the star-studded heavens. He only ritualises, in a particular way, the faith of the primitive Adam who discovered the oneness of God inscribed in the depth of his condition as a creature. For the Jewish tradition, as for the Christian tradition, Abraham is firstly the Father of the faithful, because he put faith in an extraordinary promise, despite the drastic test of the sacrifice of his only son. He is therefore turned toward the future and he is the guide of a people peregrinating in search of another homeland, in the heart of this same history.

Nevertheless it remains true that Jews, Christians and Muslims are legitimately designated as sons of Abraham, whom they recognise as the Father of all those who believe in the One God. Even if the Christians do not claim to be Abraham's physical offspring, through Isaac or through Ishmael, they are indeed the heirs of the promise. One becomes a son of Abraham by believing in Jesus. "And simply by being Christ's, you are the progeny of Abraham, the heirs named in the promise" (Ga 3:29). One may therefore speak of a religious experience common to the three religions that are rooted in the faith of Abraham, regardless of the different modes of this faith. In any case, this was the intimate conviction expressed by John Paul II in his speech at the stadium in Casablanca on August 19, 1985: "Abraham is, for us, a model of faith in God, of submission to his will and of confidence in his goodness."

The strange misunderstanding of true Christianity

The radical monotheism of Islam rejects both the affirmation of the mystery of the Trinity and the affirmation of the Incarnation that are at the heart of the Christian message with its novelty in regard to the Revelation of the Old Covenant. The negation of Jesus' divine Sonship is only the result of an antitrinitarian monotheism: the affirmation of the triune God is in contradiction with the oneness of God and the affirmation of the dogma of the Incarnation is opposed to God's absolute transcendence. This fundamental misunderstanding always fills Christians with painful astonishment. One is tempted to ask oneself if this is a circumstantial rejection resulting from misunderstandings related to historical circumstances or if this is an irremediable fundamental rejection. In any case, throughout centuries, in both traditions it was thought that there was an insurmountable difficulty as well as a disagreement

closed to negotiation. Even today, in the age of Interfaith Dialogue, at a time when the adoration of the One God is a common heritage of Christians and Muslims alike, it is the very nature of monotheism that makes us strangers for one another. Of course, we can repeat with the Pope, in his speech in Casablanca: "We believe in the same God, the One God, the living God, who created the worlds and carries the creatures to their perfection". But in fact, in keeping with the Revelations that have been confided to us, we stand on two very different conceptions of God.

It would be illusory to think that Islam only rejects a caricature of the Christian doctrine of the Trinity, a caricature whose vestiges can be found in the Koran (5, 116), and according to which the Trinity would be made up of these three persons, i.e., God, the Virgin Mary and Jesus. It is very difficult to get a Muslim to understand that the name "Father" is God's personal name. What, for us, always evokes a principle, a spiritual and eternal generation in the embrace of God himself, shall always be understood by Islam as a carnal generation. This is why Islam absolutely refuses to recognise Jesus' divine Sonship even while confessing his sanctity (according to tradition, he is "the seal of sanctity"), given that he is not inscribed in the succession of the generations and proceeds directly from the Holy Spirit. This, the affirmation of the existence of three persons in God, compromises the absolute simplicity of God and leads directly to the sin par excellence, that of an associationism: "Indeed, those who say: "God is truly the third of three," are impious. There is no other God than the One God" (5,73). God's oneness is not only external to the senses, where there are no other gods; it is internal: it is the oneness of one indivisible and indissociable God. This is what the word samad means (112, 2). Whatever the Arab translation of the word "person" may be, confessing one God in three persons necessarily leads to tritheism.

We have already seen that the notion of a Covenant of God with the history of humankind is foreign to Islam. Talking about a Covenant that leads to the One God's Incarnation in the humanity of a man, Jesus of Nazareth is totally absurd. This would be assaulting the authentic transcendence of God and it would mean going against the principal of non-contradiction: a transcendent God can never incarnate himself by assuming a human body. The Koran actually does recognise the miracle of the virginal birth of Jesus. But Jesus continues to be an ordinary creature; his direct creation, outside of human generation, is finally comparable to the creation of the primitive Adam. God really is the Totally Other and Islam has such a sharpened sense of his transcendence that it is utterly repelled by any notion of mediation. The Koran itself is the unique mediation and the idea of a mediator, who is simultaneously man and God, is completely absurd. Even the prophet is not a mediator, and it is known that Islam ignores the notions of the clergy, the Church and the sacraments.

I wanted to strongly insist on the Muslim difference, because if an authentic dialogue is possible, this can only be with the respect due to our differences and not on the basis of alleged points of convergence. A Christian reading of the Koran – analogous to the proposed Christian reading of the Old Testament books – is impossible. But, as I will say further on, it is precisely by its difference that the message of the Koran summons the Christian faith. Islam has the mysterious role of a warning in the sense of the quest for God who is always greater. Indeed, how is it possible to not recognise that our formulations concerning the Trinity are often verbal, or at least insufficient, since they risk compromising the oneness of God and leading to a kind of tritheism? Likewise, there is a way of understanding Jesus' divinity that can mar the absolute transcendence of God and sometimes produce a form of bitheism.

This historical enigma of Islam is reinforced, despite these fundamental divergences, by the fact that it has certain of its aspects, that really do make it resemble Christianity in the circle of the world-wide concert of the world religions. Judging by a conflictive history of over 13 centuries, it is possible to talk about a mimetic rivalry. The entire question would then be to know if indeed the time has not come to convert this rivalry into mutual emulation.

A mimetic rivalry

If Christianity and Islam are compared to the other world religions, it is possible to say that they both have the same eschatological ambition: they both have a vision of a definite accomplishment. For Christians, Christ is God's definite "Yes" to humankind, accomplishing all the prophecies and all the promises of the Old Covenant. Islam has the same pretence of completing all previous religions. Even if the Koran attributes a privileged place to Jesus as a prophet, Mohammed is the prophet who is "the seal of prophecy", the prophet of the Ultimate, who confirms and completes the previous prophecies of Abraham, of Moses and of Jesus. His prophecy has the characteristic of a recapitulation in regard to the prophecy of Jesus and, thus, in regard to the same Jesus' pretence of his identity with God.

It must be added that the two religions compete, for centuries now, in their claim of universality. Unlike Judaism and many other religions that are tied to a land to an ethnical group and to a particular culture, Christianity and Islam are missionary from the outset. And indeed, albeit their places of birth, they have crossed all the ethnical, cultural and political borders and spread across all the continents. For a long time now, Islam, with close to one billion followers, has gone beyond the Arab world. African Islam, and above all Asiatic Islam, has manifested growing vitality. The two religions justify their missionary zeal and their desire for conquest insofar as they both claim to be the sole bearers of a definitive salvation for humankind. And if Islam has shown a certain tolerance for peoples of Scripture, i.e. for the members of the other two religions, this is so because these men and these women of good will are already Muslims who ignore themselves.

Finally, both religions have the pretence of having the absolute truth concerning God, humankind and the world, since they are based on a Scripture that is the Word of God. This is where one needs to search for the profound source of the conflicting relations between Christianity and Islam and of their spontaneous intolerance towards other religions. For centuries, the Muslims, like the Christians, created dogmas and laws founded on the Revelation as an absolute, truth without any reference to history. It is not surprising then if, on the basis of this absolute truth, each community elaborated theological and legislative structures that have turned into systems that exclude each other. Each religion claims to have living tradition founded on the undisputed postulate that the texts laid down in the official corpus are the faithful reproductions of initial enunciations of the Revelation. Thus, from the very outset, the Christians refused to recognise Islam's first dogma, i.e. the Koran, as being the Word of God revealed to humankind through Mohammed, the messenger of God. And conversely, the Muslims have not ceased, on the basis of the same Koran, to accuse the Christians and the Jews of their falsification the Scriptures.

The conflict of two Imaginaires

The old historical dispute opposing Islam and Christianity therefore has structural and doctrinal causes that are tied to identical pretences. But it is not only a question of a theological confrontation of two contending religions. This is also the rivalry between two empires and two civilisations. Just as Christianity, at its origin, gave birth to a Christendom, with all possible confusions of the political and religious domains, the success of the preaching of Mohammed the prophet very quickly led to the construction of a new empire that conquered the Mediterranean region between the 7th and the 12th centuries, with capitals as prestigious as Damascus, Baghdad and Cordoba. And regardless of the difference between the historical situations, which are notably dependent on the fact that Islam no longer coincides with the Arabic Muslim civilisation, the confrontation of the two religions today still sustains the rivalry opposing two models of civilisation, the world of Islam on the one hand and, on the other, the West. And inside each religion, the faithful project on the others their collective imagination fed by stereotyped representations, by prejudices that are not criticised, by frustrations and ancestral fears. The horrible war in the Balkans revived the ancient fear of a Christendom that, until the victory of Lépante, had been living under the threat of Islam with the mentality of a besieged city. And because of the periodic resurgence of the perverse ideology of Islamism, certain people are tempted to think, especially since the collapse of the Soviet empire, that the border between the free world and a totalitarian world is the border between the West and the world of Islam.

Conversely, the collective imagination of the Muslim masses often continues to identify Christianity with a western imperialist and materialist model. A simplifying discourse would be inclined to make us believe that Christianity is the dominating religion of rich countries of the first world, while Islam would be the religion par excellence of oppressed populations in the third world. We know that the reality is much more complex, especially when the Gulf States and the economic success of certain Muslim countries in the South-east Asia are evoked. But at the same time, it remains true that Christianity must question itself about its direct or indirect responsibility in the construction of a world order under the sign of market laws that confine millions of men and women in a network of economic constraints established by the West.

The difficulty of the Islamic-Christian dialogue

At the end of this rapid overview of Islam within its own difference, it appears that, even in the age of Interfaith Dialogue, the dialogue with Islam remains particularly difficult. This is so not only because of the contradictions in the area of theology or because of the rival missionary ambitions. The cause is also, from the historical point of view, the cultural distance engendered by two religious ideologies that both have the ambition of fashioning in a totalitarian way the lives of individuals, families and society.

On the basis of my own experience, I would like to indicate another difficulty in the dialogue between Christians and Muslims. The equality of the partners is known to be one of the conditions of any true dialogue. Now, it is a fact that Muslims often have the feeling that this preliminary condition does not exist. This is not only due to an inferiority complex perhaps stemming from a disparity of centuries in comparison to a modernity to which Christianity has been able to adapt without repudiating itself. This is so because the dialogue seems to be lopsided from the outset. Indeed, at the same moment the Muslims recognise Jesus as a very great prophet and are ready to accept his message as the Word of God, at least for what concerns the adoration of the One God, they notice that Christians are not prepared to recognise the authenticity of the prophecy of Mohammed. But in fact, how can Mohammed be recognised as a messenger from God given that, calling Jesus' divine Sonship idolatry, he condemns it and professes an antitrinitarian monotheism?

II. For Christianity as a religion of otherness

We have now taken conscience of Islam's difference in relationship to both Judaism and Christianity. We are faced with a kind of otherness that is even stranger because we finally find, in the order of what is most familiar to us: the adoration of the One Living God, everything that separates us in our conception of the face of God. How can we remain faithful to our Christian identity and, at the same time, show that we are open to others with respect for their

otherness? Since Vatican II, and for the first after many centuries, the Church recommends that we have an attitude of respect, of esteem and even friendship towards Islam, this great non-Christian religion. This is not easy for a member of a Christian minority living in the midst of a society completely formed by an Islamic majority that is often intolerant. How is it possible to claim the right to be a citizen like the others while affirming one's Christian identity at a time when Islam still finds it very difficult to recognise the right to religious liberty? As Christians and as men and women religious, it is our vocation to be a presence of the Church and to witness to the love of Christ. But in dialogue, our attitude towards others, and precisely Muslims, is not only based on a spirit of tolerance or even on the love for our brother who is a stranger. This attitude has theological motives. It is rooted in the very distinctiveness of Christianity as a religion of otherness. I invite to begin by a reflection on the paradox of the Interfaith Dialogue itself.

The paradox of the Interfaith Dialogue

As in any dialogue, the first condition is the respect of others with their difference. In order to meet this requirement, I need to show interest for the convictions of others, and this is even more necessary when they are strangers to me, by their culture or by their religion. In the case of Islam, I need to leave my spontaneous prejudices behind and avoid reducing to something already familiar to me what I may consider as having some similitude with my own religious universe. Even if in a past, tied to the colonial adventure, the mission of the Church often coincided with a lack of respect towards foreign cultures, this period is fortunately over. We are instead invited to remember that the recognition due to aliens belongs to the roots of the Judeo-Christian tradition. This was already inscribed in the Book of the Covenant: "You shall not exploit or oppress aliens, for you yourselves were once aliens in Egypt" (Ex. 22:20). And when Paul, the Jew who became a Christian, refused to subject the pagans to the rite of circumcision, he shows this respect for others with their difference. In the same manner, many of Jesus' parables manifest this respect for strangers in their strangeness. It would be good to reflect on the distance between a dialogue that cultivates the sense of difference and a dialogue that tends toward assimilation. There is an old principle that goes back to Greek philosophy, i.e. to the philosophy of identity, according to Parmenides, which believes that only "the like is able to recognise the like". This notion has too often dominated our theology and commanded a certain strategy at the time of the colonial conquest. It should be replaced by another principle that has its origin in the biblical tradition: the unlike recognises others in their otherness.

The second condition of a real dialogue is a certain kind of equality between the partners. We have seen that this is the principal difficulty in the Interfaith Dialogue, particularly with Islam. There is necessarily a tension between the deontology of dialogue and the conviction that I belong to the true religion that brings the ultimate revelation concerning the mystery of God. But it would be illusory to think that, in order to favour the dialogue, I must put my faith aside and suspend it temporarily. The paradox of the Interfaith Dialogue resides precisely in the conciliation of the absolute engagement implied by all religious processes with an attitude of openness toward the convictions of others. And I expect my dialogue partner to have the same respect for me, despite of the fact that he also is convinced to have the truth of his own religion. The faithfulness to my identity and the truth that I claim as mine does not engender a feeling of superiority if I discover that the truth, that is for me the object of my total adhesion, does not necessarily exclude or include all other truths. My truth is relative, even if this is only so because of the historical particularity of its origin.

In any case, the Interfaith Dialogue, as it is practised in the Church, shows that it is possible to continue dialoguing even for people who adhere to different truths. This is possible with this twin-brother, who is also a rival: Islam. The dialogue is perhaps a long patience, a geological patience – as someone put it –, but it does not necessarily lead, as is often thought, in relativism and scepticism. It leads rather to a rediscovery of my own truth and to the quest for truth that is higher and more comprehensive than the partial truth to which each one witnesses. Finally, real tolerance – unlike what is generally thought – is always based on strong convictions.

However, one difficulty remains, which comes from the uniqueness of Christianity itself. I have been able to speak about a certain relativity of religious truth tied to the fact that it has its roots in a historical particularity. As to Christian truth, it is entirely relative to this historical particularity that is the event of Jesus Christ, which coincides with the entrance of the Absolute itself, i.e. God, into history. This is a pretence that is rejected notably by the Muslim interlocutor. The difficult task of modern theology of religions is precisely to reinterpret the oneness of Christ's mediation on the horizon of a seemingly insurmountable religious pluralism.

A theology of religious pluralism

This theology of religions, which it is better to designate as a theology of religious pluralism, firmly maintains the singular oneness of Christianity as the witness of a definitive revelation concerning God; but, at the same time, it has a positive opinion of the other religions that can each bear seeds of truth and goodness. Fr. Schillebeeckx and Fr. Jacques Dupuis have not hesitated to speak of a new theological paradigm. The question we should ask ourselves is whether our historical experience of religious pluralism has not in fact led us to recognise a religious pluralism as a rule, which seemingly corresponds to a mysterious will of God. This audacious perspective has aroused resistance because it seems to relativize the history of salvation that begins with Abraham and attains its accomplishment in

Jesus Christ, the only mediator between God and humankind. But we know very well that the entire history of humankind, since its origin, is a history of salvation. Thus, religious pluralism is not only the result of the guilty blindness of men and it does not represent a temporary epoch that shall be progressively overcome thanks to the success of the Churches mission. It is perhaps the expression of the will of the same God who needs the diversity of cultures and religions in order to better manifest the treasures of the fullness of truth that coincides with his unfathomable mystery.

In any case, this theological postulate is coherent with the most traditional teaching concerning the universal will of the salvation of God. It explicates the most original intuitions of Vatican II and revives the very ancient doctrine of the Church Fathers concerning the presence of the seeds of the Word throughout human history. Moreover, it invites us to not leap to the identification of the universality of Christ with the universality of Christianity. All Christian theology must continue to affirm that Jesus Christ is the conclusive and final Revelation of God; nevertheless theology can no longer pretend, as it has in the past, that Christianity, as a historical religion, has the exclusive monopoly on the truth of God and on the relationship of humans with God. In other religions, worthy of the name, there have been and there are authentic religious experiences that have not been manifested nor put into practice inside Christianity because of its historical particularity.

However, especially in the dialogue with Islam, the Christian pretence concerning the oneness of Jesus, the Son of God, who is not a mediator among others but the coming of the Absolute into history, remains a formidable obstacle. But rather than making compromises, as some theologians do, with the scandal of the Incarnation, it needs to be shown that the logic of the Incarnation itself leads us, on the one hand, to avoid absolutising the historical particularity of Jesus of Nazareth. On the other hand, it simultaneously induces one to prove that Christianity is not an imperialist religion.

The scandal of the Incarnation

The originality of the Christian religion always sends us back to a christological paradox, i.e. the presence of God in the flesh of a particular man, what a theologian like Paul Tillich would depict as the union between the absolutely concrete and the absolutely universal. Even if it is not biblical, the language of the Incarnation is not purely mythical. As Saint Paul indicates: "In him, in bodily form, lives divinity in all its fullness" (Col 2:9). And whatever may be the ulterior implications of christology concerning the identity of the substance of Jesus and God (the *homousios*), the Gospel attests to us that Jesus is conscious that the fullness of the eschatological Kingdom has come in him. We therefore confess that the fullness of God resides in Jesus of Nazareth. But we must take seriously the historical contingency of Jesus' humanity. In other words, we cannot identify the historical element and Jesus' contingency with the Christlike and divine element. We must maintain the tension between the identification of God in Jesus and the personal identification of God. We are indeed always sent back to God who is greater and escapes all attempts to identify him. The very paradox of the Incarnation, as a relative manifestation of the unconditional Absolute of God, helps us to understand that the oneness of Jesus Christ does not exclude other manifestations of God in history. It is also the best way to desabsolutise Christianity as the religion of the Incarnation and to show that, far from exercising a kind of imperialism in its relationship to other religions, it defines itself as an essentially dialogal religion.

Here we are touching the ultimate foundation of our attitude of dialogue and openness to others in their true difference. Unlike its imperialist reputation, if we can characterise Christianity as a dialogal religion, this is not in the name of any moral obligation constituted of tolerance and respect for others. This is in virtue of its own principals of limitation, as the religion of the Incarnation. For our human and imperfect manner of knowing, Jesus is not yet the adequate translation of God. Therefore, the Christian identification of God in Jesus does not exclude the other religious experiences that identify the Ultimate Reality of the universe differently.

The kenosis of Christ

However in order to exorcise all the totalitarian venom contained in the Christian pretence to oneness, it is necessary to go further. The christological paradox of the Incarnation attains its full meaning only in the light of a theology of the cross. One then understands that the best way to stress the Christian difference among the world religions is to define it as the religion of otherness.

The cross of Jesus has universal value. It shall always be the symbol of a universality tied to the sacrifice of a particularity. It is the kenosis of Christ, in his equality with God, which permitted his resurrection. Jesus dies to his Jewish particularity in order to be born again, through the resurrection, as a figure of concrete universality. The Risen Christ liberates the person of Jesus from a particularity that would have made him the property of a particular group. In the light of the mystery of the cross, we better understand that Christianity, far from being a closed entity, defines itself in terms of relationship, dialogue and even *manque* (J. Lacan). Thus it is permitted to define it as a religion of otherness.

In the sphere of religious experience, it is necessary to say that the deepest Christian experience of this is always an experience of otherness. It is firstly and radically an experience of that origin always deficient: God himself. But it is

also an experience of the otherness of the person who becomes my neighbour. The Christian identity belongs to the order of becoming and of consenting to others in their difference. This is a paschal existence that, in opposition to all forms of imperialism in the order of knowing and of practice, must witness to what it is absent.

In the order of knowing, the most unconditional faith carries in itself its principle of self-limitation since it does not comprehend the totality of God's mystery. And in the order of practice, we know very well that the Christian practice cannot be listed among simple human practices. Christianity does not replace the ethical norms, the cultural values, or the significant practices of humankind. Rather it is in the order of a displacement and of a rupture instauratrice (Michel de Certeau; i.e., a rupture constituting an establishment) that comes to be in the order of a simple human context that already has its own consistency. The Christian experience does not substitute itself for other authentic human experiences, religious or other, but it gives them a new meaning. It is already possible to imagine the consequences of this, when one reflects on the requirements of an Inculturation of Christianity in the cultures that are the most foreign to it. The Gospel has universal value and it can become the good of every man. But I would be tempted to say that a Christianity that, in the presence of different cultures and religions, would not witness to what it is deficient could not encounter the otherness of these cultures and of these religions, and would be unfaithful to its universal vocation.

We are therefore invited to rethink the articulation between Christian truth and the plurality of truths inherent to other religions or cultures. The practice of otherness is, for Christianity, a natural requirement, even if this is so only because it confesses the otherness of a God who is always greater. As Christians, and by the very virtue of our identity, we are led to recognise the other person in his difference and the limit he imposes on us. In other words, the Christian identity is not defined in terms of a perfect acquisition but in terms of becoming, of transit, of consenting to others and of service. This is the true meaning of a paschal existence.

A non-totalitarian accomplishment

We have already recalled that in the text of *Nostrae aetate*, n. 5, the teaching of Vatican II discerns "a ray of that truth which enlightens all men" not only in the hearts of men of good will but in the religious traditions themselves. We know that these seeds of truth reach their accomplishment in Christ, but without losing their originality. Therefore, when one reflects on the relationship of other religions to Christianity, understanding their positive values as something implicitly Christian is insufficient. They can witness to something irreducible dependent on the Holy Spirit who blows where he will. It is necessary to go beyond the problem of the promise and of the accomplishment, and to show that the values of truth, goodness and even holiness are not only reasons to hope or implicitly Christian values. One should be able to verify this not only for religions that preceded the coming of Christ but also in the case of this post-Christian religion: Islam. The task would be to reinterpret the unquestionable doctrine of the accomplishment in a non-totalitarian sense, and to do this in the light of the Christian theology of Judaism, which tends to be imperative in the wake of Vatican II.

Most theologians are prepared to recognise in Judaism, as the religion chosen by God, an irreducible dimension that cannot be integrated in the Church in the sphere of continuing history. Even if it is only by analogy, one can discern, in the relationship between the Church and Judaism, a sort of paradigm regarding the present relationship between Christianity and the other religions. This is also true for the relationship of Christianity to Islam. Just as the Church neither integrates nor replaces Israel, it neither integrates nor replaces the part of authentic religious truth that another religious tradition may be conveying. As a historical religion, Christianity cannot have the ambition of totalising all the truths strewn all throughout the religious history of humanity. If it seemed to me that I could talk about religious pluralism *de jure*, this implies that there is more truth of the religious order in the diversified concrete reality of the religions than in Christianity alone. And it is clear that if I refuse to abandon "christianocentrism" in favour of a vague theocentrism; nevertheless, I distance myself from a certain type of christianocentrism. Christ's coming coincided with the fullness of the Revelation and, as we have seen, it is at the origin of an insurmountable difference with Islam. But it is question here of a fullness that is qualitative and not quantitative. The Revelation as an event of the Word of God in Jesus Christ is definitive and impassable, but as a fixing of truth, it is necessarily historical and therefore limited. Thus it is not forbidden to consider other religions and other sacred Scriptures as "rays of truth," incomplete but precious, which witness, in their own way, to the unfathomable mystery of God. The Koran itself, despite its omissions, its errors and although it disputes the Christian Revelation, can paradoxically manifest a certain wealth concerning the meaning of God's grandeur and the adoration that humans owe to him. That part of the Koran that does not contradict the biblical Revelation relating to the oneness of God; it can be an authentic prophecy that summons simultaneously Judaism and Christianity.

Finally, because we always see what is relative in comparison to what is absolute, we lack the words capable of expressing what could be a relative Christian truth, i.e., in the sense of being relational, or in other words relative to the part truth that the other religious traditions can mysteriously be conveying. Rosenzweig made the following affirmation: it the essence of truth "to be shared."

III. The presence of the Church and respect for others in their difference

This reflection on Christianity as a religion of otherness has not been futile for founding our attitude of respect for others in their difference. This respect is not only a moral obligation in the name of tolerance. It is precisely the law of our Christian being that, far from constituting a closed and self-assured entity, needs the truth of others in order to deepen its own particularity. Not only is humanity plural, but many roads lead to God. It is necessary for us to come to know our differences so that our witness to the truth does not become idolatry.

But it is not possible for us to evoke the presence of Christian minorities in the region of Islam without questioning ourselves about our faithfulness to the permanent mission of the Church in the world. Of course, as lay-people, priests, men and women religious, notwithstanding our limited numbers and resources, we have the conviction and the pride of ensuring the presence of the universal Church. Who would doubt, for example, that the little Church in Algeria is the sacrament of the universal Church? And the same thing could be said of the Churches in Pakistan and in Indonesia, despite the reduction of their specifically religious space. But how can one not be wearied by the inflation of the discourse on the respect for others and the benefits of dialogue while Christians' rights to freedom of worship and to freedom of expression are not respected, while their disinterested service of the poor is suspected of hiding missionary intentions, and while the desire of a Muslim to become Christian exposes him to social death – if not worse?

I feel very destitute when it comes to telling you what your daily practice might be as Dominican men and women in the field immersed in very different and very difficult contexts. I would only like to convince you that you are wholly fulfilling the mission of the Church even though the forms of the mission may disconcert those who remain imprisoned by particular traditional schemas of missionary activity. I will begin by evoking the evolution of the conception of the mission in the age of religious pluralism. Then I will again come back to dialogue itself, to the affirmation that it is an intrinsic part of the mission. This dialogue may already be a dialogue of salvation, whatever the concrete forms of the service of the Gospel may be.

The mission as a witness to the Kingdom of God that is coming

It is possible, both inside the Catholic Church and in the Ecumenical Council of Churches, to characterise the ongoing evolution as “a movement from the missions to the mission.” In comparison to the “age of the missions,” which largely coincided with the colonial expansion, the missionary vocation of the Church today is less polarised by the conversion of others (Christians or non-Christians) than by the witness to the Kingdom of God that is constantly coming in the course of history, in the hearts of men and women of good will, and well beyond God's People.

In his encyclical *Redemptoris missio* (January 1991), pope John Paul II returns to the vocabulary of the mission, preferring it to that of evangelisation, and insists on the geographic character of the mission. Certain people have interpreted this as a setback in comparison to the great encyclical of Paul VI, *Evangelii nuntiandi*. But I think that the Pope is above all anxious to show that the new proposals of the Second Vatican Council - concerning the right to religious liberty and the attitude of respect toward other religious traditions - do not in any way diminish the urgency of the Churches mission. *Redemptoris missio* does not question the new understanding of the reason of the mission we have gained in the light of the positive challenge from non-Christian religions.

The nature and the reason of the Churches mission must be understood on the basis of its trinitarian and christological foundation. The Church is missionary by nature and reattaching its missionary vocation to the “ordering of the mission” given by Jesus (Mt 28, 18) does not suffice. As the Constitution on the Church so beautifully formulated it: The Church is essentially “the sacrament of salvation for the nations.” The mission that has been confided to the Church is not just one of many tasks. It is her *raison d'être*. In the past, there was often talk about the end and the goal of the mission, as if it were strictly a means serving the supernatural end that is the eternal salvation of souls. Such a vision could not be dissociated from a very supernatural vision of salvation. The Churches proper missionary task would then seem to be a spiritual task tied to this supernatural end. If at times the Church takes on profane tasks in the world, this can be true only been in so far as these are provisional tasks of substitution...

Today there is general agreement to define the mission of the Church as her essential function or, in better terms, as the expression of her nature. One might say that it is not the Church who defines the mission. It is rather the mission that determines the face of the Church so that she may be an eschatological sign of the Kingdom of God. And instead of clamping onto the distinction between the purely human and the supernatural, it is necessary to consider the Church as a People peregrinating toward the Kingdom that is coming. Thus, the Churches aim is not only salvation, in the sense of liberation from sin and death, but everything that contributes to anticipating the Kingdom of God in humankind. Thus it becomes difficult to make an abstract distinction between the tasks, which would be specifically missionary because of their conformity to the Churches supernatural vocation, and those tasks, said to be secondary and substitutions depending on contingent local situations.

In concrete terms, this means that, when the mission is not polarised on the personal conversion of others - at any price (as if peoples' salvation depended exclusively on the change of religion)-, she keeps her full meaning as a

manifestation of the love of God and, in the words of Fr. Chenu, is the "incarnation of the Gospel in time." This is notably the case in the Muslim countries where witnessing to Jesus Christ in public is very difficult. In fact, the silent presence of contemplative religious, the practice of the Beatitudes, the closeness to the poorest, the defence of the dignity and the rights of all persons, the dialogue with members of the dominating religion, ensure the Churches mission as a sacrament of the Kingdom that is coming. Could there be a more moving witness to the love of God and to the power of the Gospel than the passion and the death of the monks of Tibhirine? Just two months before being assassinated, one of the monks wrote: "We can exist as men only if we accept to become the face of Love as it is manifested in Christ who, being righteous, wanted to suffer the fate of the unrighteous" (V.S. n. 721, p. 876). And our brother Pierre Claverie was ready to offer up his life because he was unwilling to not denounce a situation of unsupportable violence. In the footsteps of Jesus, he exercised the ministry of reconciliation of the Church: "The Church accomplishes her vocation and her mission when she is present to the ruptures that crucify humanity in its flesh and in its unity" (V.S. n. 721, p. 824).

The dialogue as a dialogue of salvation

The Church therefore fully accomplishes her mission when she works with others at the construction of the Kingdom of God, in the aim of justice, peace, reconciliation and the fraternity of all peoples. She is not only the sacrament of the Kingdom that is coming, she is also, as the last Council teaches us, "the sacrament, i.e., the sign and the means of unity of the whole human race" (Lumen gentium, n. 1). But it needs to be added that the dialogue with the brothers who are strangers, precisely the Muslims, is itself an integral part of the Churches mission. It is not only preliminary to the mission because this dialogue is already, in its own way, a dialogue of salvation. This clearly comes out in the encyclical *Redemptoris missio* and in the document *Dialogue and Proclamation*, which followed it (May 19, 1991). "The Interfaith Dialogue is part of the evangelising mission of the Church ... It is not opposed to the mission *ad gentes*; on the contrary, it is specially tied to this mission and is a form of its expression" (n. 55). And in *Dialogue and Proclamation*, we read the following statement: "In the conscience of the Church, the mission appears to be unitary but also complex and articulated: the presence, the witness, the engagement in the service of people, the liturgical life, the dialogue, the annunciation, the catechesis" (n. 13).

Far from being a substitute when the conditions of an explicit annunciation are not met, the dialogue with the Muslims is already a dialogue of salvation when each person, faithful to his own truth, tries to celebrate a truth that goes not only beyond the limits but also beyond the incompatibilities of each religious tradition. This can in reality be an encounter of members of the Kingdom that is coming, where each person gives and receives. My interlocutor must be listened to as a person who may perhaps already have a response to God's call and is mysteriously participating in the Kingdom of God.

In the course of this presentation, I have often said that we cannot get to know our own identity without taking time to get to know the truth of others in their difference. It even seemed to me that I could say that one of the characteristics of authentic Christianity is the witness to a certain *manque* in comparison with all that it is not. This fully proves itself in a sincere dialogue between two persons of good will who have an absolute engagement to different truths. One might object by quoting the well-known saying: "Truth is one, error is multiple." But this statement does not get to the bottom of things; because, even if it is true that "truth is one," it is always humanly possessed in a fragmentary way. Pierre Claverie was perfectly aware of this in his dialogue with the Algerians: "One does not possess the truth, and I need the truth of others. This is my experience today, with thousands of Algerians, through the sharing of existence and the questions that we are all asking ourselves" (Le Monde, August 4-5, 1996). With getting caught up in relativism, I can continue to witness to the truth that makes me live and, at the same time, show respect and esteem for the truths the members of a different religious tradition live by.

The mission, like the Incarnation of the Gospel in the course of time, is not obsessed by the conversion of others understood as changing religions. But if the Interfaith Dialogue is already a dialogue of salvation, this is so because it can represent a moment of a reciprocal conversion. It is in an encounter without any apriorism, that I can discover that I do not verify, neither intellectually nor in my own life, the truth I pretend to witness to. Thus, despite the divergences in doctrine difficult to overcome, the Islamic-Christian dialogue can bring each of the partners to celebrate a higher and more comprehensive truth that goes beyond the partialness of each particular truth. One of the first results of the witness to the truth is therefore a certain conversion of the witness himself. He is not in the situation of someone who brings something to someone who has nothing. Within the unique plan of God, we are all God's children under the hidden influence of the Word, Creator and Redeemer. The witness of the Gospel of Christ is also someone who receives and who can rediscover his own identity with new eyes, when he is summoned by the seeds of truth that other religions witness to. On the contrary, proselytism is based on the desire to force others, at any cost, to embrace my own conviction, and that without taking into account their difference and their own vocation.

The diverse forms of dialogue

We still need to evoke the diverse forms that the dialogue between Christians and Muslims may take on. I will be brief since there's not much time. And, in any case, you are in a better position to talk about this than I am. But allow

me to propose a kind of typology of dialogue.

The dialogue of life

In many places throughout the world official meetings assemble Christians and Muslims, meetings at which experts discuss, with assurance, about our points of divergence and convergence. These discussions often leave us unsatisfied because nothing, in fact, replaces the dialogue of life on the day-to-day basis, where men and women of different beliefs, with a spirit of openness and conviviality, in the street, at work, at school or in universities, try to share their pain and their joy and discover their solidarity in situations of social conflict, unemployment, poverty, illness, and old age. I willingly listen to Pierre Claverie, who knew much too well the limits of the Interfaith Dialogue. "Learning to live together, and to go out beyond oneself: this allows those, who share intense experiences, to give the weight of flesh, the weight of their experience, to the words they use (...) One notices in living with people that the words don't have the same meaning because they are not carried by the same spiritual experience (...) In order that the words may express the same things, it is necessary to live together, to share an experience, the experience of human life with birth, living, suffering, love and death. Giving words the weight of flesh, for me, that's dialogue."

Solidarity in the fight for justice and peace

It is encouraging to see that, in many places throughout the world, there is true collaboration and even a kind of complicity between Muslim and Christian minorities trying to go beyond their historical quarrel and working together for the promotion of civil and international peace. The quest for peace necessarily implies respecting human rights, including the right to religious liberty, the promotion of women; respecting the rights of children exploited as labourers; protecting natural resources; fighting against all forms of discrimination against foreigners. In the face of the repeated violations of human rights, the sons of Abraham have a historical vocation that consists in reminding the world that the radical foundation of human rights is not only the dignity of each human being but the creation of man in the image of God, the common heritage of the three monotheistic religions. At the same time, and drawing on our own spiritual resources, we share the responsibility for recalling that the construction of a more human and more democratic society cannot be based only on the strict exercise of justice in the name of human rights. Given the rise of diverse forms of intolerance, nationalism, racism and fanaticism, it is necessary to call for recourse to forgiveness, to welcoming of strangers, as well as to the Muslim duty of hospitality and to the Christian spirit of the Beatitudes.

Exchange on the spiritual level

It does happen that Christians and Muslims meet to share their spiritual treasures and exchange on their own ways of attaining inner silence and the experience of the living God. We have said that Muslims and Christians diverge on fundamental points in what they believe. But on the spiritual level, they can discover secret points of convergence. The exchange can lead to the silent dialogue of prayer in which each person, faithful to his own religious tradition, feels that he is mysteriously in communion with the others. This is not common prayer, but those present are assembled in prayer to the God they believe in. In line with this, the encounter in Assisi, in October 1986, was the first historical expression of what we could call planetary ecumenism. After the event in Assisi, the pope did not hesitate to declare: "All authentic prayer finds itself under the influence of the Holy Spirit." In face of the modern religious indifference and the growing seduction of the great eastern religions, Christians and Muslims have a common spiritual vocation to adore a personal God.

Dialogue on the doctrinal level

This is obviously the most difficult dialogue and often the most disappointing. As I have already said, here we often end up by noting our disagreements since we understand that certain divergences cannot be negotiated. But we do not have the right, as sons and daughters of Saint Dominic, to abandon this form of dialogue. Let me simply recall the fact that such a dialogue can help us to discern more clearly the originality of the message we convey and stimulate us in the quest of a God beyond God, i.e., beyond our insufficient representations in which we imprison ourselves. I want to quote Pierre Claverie one more time. In his article "Humanité plurielle", published in *Le Monde*, he said: "I am a believer, I believe that there is a God, but I don't have the pretence of possessing that God, neither by Jesus who revealed him to me, nor by the dogmas of my faith. One cannot possess God." Confronted by Islam's intransigent monotheism, who could babble on in an irresponsible way about the trinitarian life of the Christian God and about Jesus' divine Sonship? But on the other hand, it is possible that our Muslim partner, who suffers with anguish from the silence of God the Creator and the Almighty and who is confronting the violence of history, will have a sense of the paternal face of the crucified God. All true dialogue leads us to a state beyond dialogue, that is, to a mysterious mutual fecundity of the systems of beliefs that are confronting one another. This is the moment to say that the long historical rivalry between Christianity and Islam ought to transmute itself into reciprocal emulation.

The conclusion of this final section is clear enough. Dialogue – in all its form – ensures the presence of the Church as a witness to the love of God and to the power of the Gospel. It is a matter of the living Gospel. Nevertheless, it remains true that evangelisation cannot be reduced to dialogue. Even in Islamic countries, we reminisce being able to clearly witness to Jesus Christ. At first, one can give a witness by living the Kingdom of God as a Kingdom of

justice and peace, without yet mentioning Jesus Christ. But later on, one can show how Jesus himself inaugurates the Kingdom through his entire life and his teaching. Finally, if our communities are mirror the Gospel, it should be possible to make people discover the mystery of the Church as a place where God comes to meet men and women, and where the quest for the true face of God finds its accomplishment.

Translation : Sr. Pascale-Dominique, OP
Monastère des Dominicaines, Lourdes, FRANCE

Bibliographical guidelines

I am only indicating a few works that I have used to prepare this presentation.

M. DE CERTEAU, *L'Étranger ou l'union dans la différence*, Paris, Desclée de Br., 1991.

J. DORÉ, (Dir.), *Sur l'identité chrétienne*, Paris, Desclée de Br., 1990.

P. CLAVERIE et les Evêques du Maghreb, *Le livre de la foi*, Paris, Ed. du Cerf, 1996.

Frère Pierre Claverie Evêque d'Oran, *La Vie Spirituelle*, n° 721, octobre 1997.

Cl. GEFFRÉ (Dir.), *Michel de Certeau ou la différence chrétienne*, (Cogitatio fidei, 165), Paris, Ed. du Cerf, 1991.

Cl. GEFFRÉ, " La mission comme dialogue de salut ", *Lumière et Vie* , 205 (1992) 33-46.

– " La portée théologique du dialogue islamo-chrétien ", *Islamochristiana*
18 (1992) 33-46.

– " Pour un christianisme mondial ", *Rech. de Sc Rel.* 86 (1998) 52-75.

– "The One God of Islam and Trinitarian Monotheism", *Concilium*, 2001, 1, p. 85-93.