

# Inspiring Thinking

## Why Christian Theology should be Interested in Islam

[German Version](#)

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*There are important reasons for Christian theology to deal with Islam. They have something to do with striving for insight and with the belief that Christianity and Islam have to say each other something. Relevant issues are the conception of God, the God-man relationship and the formation of religious identity.*

The attitude of the Christian theology to Islam varies usually between arrogance, concern and compassion. The arrogance comes from the in the West widespread impression that Christianity has learnt, at least in its liberal part, the lessons of the Enlightenment and modernity, while Islam and Muslim theology are experienced as backward. It seems that Muslims are unable to become receptive to the values of emancipatory and liberal thought, and want to refuse to accept the progress at least on the intellectual level.

It is precisely this attitude of refusal about which many Christian theologians are worried. Is Islam really able to become receptive to the values of our liberal democratic constitutional order? This is the anxious question that is asked time and again not only in whispers. However, this question also becomes repeatedly an aggressive criticism, and the attempt to make one's name at the expense of Islam. But in Christian theology you often find also the effort to help the Muslims catch up with the developments that Christianity has successfully completed in recent centuries.

If you are interested in Islam out of pity, you are not geared to knowledge but to theological development aid. If you handle the issue of 'threat of Islam' for fear of Muslim fundamentalists, this is not done out of love, but out of selfishness. Finally, if you're arrogantly looking down on Islam, apologetics coming from this attitude will at least subliminally only be aimed at showing the superiority of one's own religion.

### **Rationality of the Muslim Conception of God?**

However, there are other and more important reasons for Christian theology to deal with Islam. They have something to do with striving for insight and are formulated out of the belief

that Christianity and Islam have to say each other something. Relevant issues are the conception of God, the God-man relationship and the formation of religious identity.

In the following I will first strengthen some popular Muslim criticisms of Christianity with the methods of a thinking trained on the Enlightenment, and then I will indicate why this criticism is of interest for the present discussion of Christian theology. It is naturally out of question that the Christian theology must be interested in dealing with Islam, even independently of its own striving for insight. But by showing in what way Muslim thinking can enrich and challenge the Christian theology, a small corrective is given to the prevailing style of the current discussion. The Münster expert in Islamic studies Muhammad Sven Kalisch was recently asked why he actually converted to Islam.

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One of the first mentioned reasons surprised. Kalisch said that the rationality of the Muslim conception of God has always been fascinating him. While the Christian theology formulated a doctrine of the Trinity, at that time incomprehensible for him, the Muslim conception of God won him over by its simplicity. "There is no god but God" - reads the fundamental Muslim creed. From the Muslim point of view this one God is so much a mystery and so transcendent, and so you should not approach him via such risky speculations as Christian theology offers them.

Christian theology usually responds to such objections with figures of thought of a Trinitarian theology trained in Schelling, Fichte and Hegel, and looks down on the speculatively hardly convincing Muslim conception of God. The magic word of the Trinitarian monotheism as a concrete monotheism goes the rounds, and often can be heard that a rational conception of God was not possible without the conception of the Trinity. For it there are good reasons, which are convincing. How else than through a Trinitarian conception of God can you make God comprehensible in His revealed existence? How else am I able to think that He imparts Himself, but - in doing so - continues to be a mystery, in which the mystery and the promise are communicated as unity by a separate instance in God? How else can I assert that relationally structured perfections such as love or compassion are the essential properties of God? This list of questions and arguments could be extended almost indefinitely.

However, as a Christian theologian you are to admit that Trinitarian theological approaches widely differ and in important areas also oppose each other, and thus cause repeatedly the Christian theology endlessly to debate. At this point in Christian theology, too, there is often a desire to let God be God and simply no longer to ponder on His essence.

The Muslim insistence that we are allowed to bother our head about everything except for God's essence, and the Muslims insistence on God's total transcendence and mysteriousness have against this background, indeed, a certain charm for modern and enlightened people; that should not be denied. The current strengthening of the negative theology shows that this charm is indeed also seen in the guild of Christian theology. The dilemma of many priests who want to give a reasonably acceptable sermon on Trinity Sunday shows that on the parish level little arrives from the sophisticated figures of thought of the Trinitarian theology that is taught at universities.

Should not we at this point take therefore a step toward Islam and cease speculating endlessly about the Trinity? Is not the Muslim conception of God more rational and more attractive - and can it not definitely help us Christians to face the challenges of the Enlightenment?

It seems to me that caution is necessary here, in so far as some evidence is suggesting that a crucial point of difference between Islam and Christianity is hidden behind the seemingly unnecessary controversy over the Trinity, a point that is also existentially highly significant. The Christian scholar of Islam Felix Körner puts that difference in this way that he holds on to the following confession of Christian faith, of which he says that it distinguishes Christianity from Islam, "God risked his divinity in history" (*Kirche im Angesicht des Islam. Theologie des interreligiösen Zeugnisses*, Stuttgart 2008, 346 [*Church in the Face of Islam. Theology of Interreligious Witness*]). Just because I assume as a Christian that God puts his divinity at risk in history, I cannot avoid the doctrine of Trinity; and I cannot assert that God is transcendent to the extent wanted by the Muslim theology.

## Can You Fulfil Your Destiny?

The theologically exciting thing about Körner's distinction is that it requires a quite special, very demanding theology; even important Christian theologians refuse to give their consent to it. Anyway, Körner's proposal met recently with so much opposition that it probably still needs more discussion before one can speak of a distinguishing mark of Christianity. In this kind of discussions one should perhaps from the start seek the direct dialogue with Muslims, in order thus to see more clearly one's own positions. When it is about the question of God's essence, about the question of whether we are allowed to ponder on this essence and how it manifests itself in history, and whether we should at all speak of God's self-revelation, there is certainly a lot of fuel for the Christian theology, where the Muslim thinking can assume a valuable corrective function.

A second crucial, distinctive mark of Christian identity reads according to Körner as follows:

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"Man has a destiny to which he cannot do justice by virtue of his own efforts" (346). Körner here obviously thinks of the doctrine of original sin. Apart from Trinity and Christology it is the most often enquired theologumenon of Christian theology in the Muslim-Christian dialogue.

Here, too, it is about a figure of thought that seems suspicious not only to Muslims but also to the thinkers of the Enlightenment; and on the parish level it is rarely understood. There is certainly no shortage of extremely lucid trains of thought in Christian theology, in order to make the doctrine of original sin clear. One refers then time and again to the experience of fragility in our freedom. With regard to my freedom, I experience myself as enmeshed in structural relations of guilt. The purchase of the (unfairly traded) bananas from the supermarket is probably the clearest example that Karl Rahner gives at all in his 'Foundations

of Christian Faith'. I see that I am doing evil despite my good will, and that all my good deeds have negative side effects.

Freedom is obviously a very ambivalent affair, and it is awfully hard to be the one who you want to be. If you are reasonably honest with yourself, you will realize that you are not conform to your own claims or to the voice that invites you to follow a certain path. All this can be condensed into the insight explicated by Körner: You will never fulfil your destiny.

Muslims, too, are able to accept this observation. From the Christian anthropology they can gain here quite a lot of analytical insights, which have until now been too little determined in the Muslim theology. But at the same time they will insist that the ambivalence and questionableness of freedom are not necessarily given and that they have especially nothing to do with God but result ever anew out of the freedom of man.

In the Christian theology, too, it is the task of the story of the Fall that God is made exempt from the responsibility for the ambivalence of human freedom and its structurally clinging to guilt. Though it can theologically be doubted with good reasons that it succeeds in doing this. The doctrine of the origin of the original sin may indeed be described as construction site of the current systematic theology, which wins in explosiveness by the rational alternative of Islam.

Why is our freedom so contradictory, as the Christian theology likes to draw it? And can not we believe freedom and we are capable of doing more than we are ready theologically to concede? Or in other words: How can Paul's enthusiasm for the fact that we have the gift of the Spirit in such earthen vessels be strengthened, without entangling it in Augustine's disenchantment with pleasure?

On the field relationship between God and the world, which is opened by the query to God about the Fall, there are still a few other topics of conversation where Islam challenges Christian theology. For Islam's insistence on the fact that God, regardless of his transcendence, is closer to me than my jugular vein (Surah 50.16), and that for that reason not any mediator between God and man is needed, hits once more a sensitive spot of the Christian, especially of the Catholic theology. It corresponds very well to the modern desire to defend one's own faith and to seek direct contact with God.

The idea that a mediator places himself between God and man is also suspicious for many Christians. Here you can still defend Christ's role as mediator and redeemer by pointing to the fact that nothing is placed between God and man, but that God himself in the form of a servant takes sides with me; the Church as mediator of salvation, however, is a tricky issue. Can I really say the Church or even the Church hierarchy has the function to communicate salvation?

Körner emphasizes here very offensively, "God wants to give his own holiness through creatures to creatures" (334), and defends then along this line the Catholic Marian piety. His witness is very authentic and convincing, even almost touching. Whether he will win many friends in contemporary Christian theology by such formulations, is another question - namely a question where it would be worthwhile for Christian theologians to remain in contact with Muslims.

Do I need other people so that I can enter into relationship with God? Do I need their holiness? Can I and am I allowed to believe by relying on their holiness and their testimony?

Is not it so that I as a thinker who is trained by the Enlightenment am allowed to base my faith only on things for which I can assume liability? But do not I need others and their kindness in order to be able to believe in the God of love? And then, what role does the church play in this context? These questions could be continued and should be pondered on more accurately, if one wants to stand Muslim criticism. Anyway, it is striking how appealing the Muslim relinquishment of a "representative of God on earth" is especially for theologically trained minds.

A pastor for a Christian-Jewish-Muslim youth camp once told me that it was extremely difficult for the Christian young people in the common conversation to make clear in what their identity as Christians consists. While it is easy for Muslim and Jewish youth to fasten their identity to the observance of certain rules, it is difficult for Christians to live their identity.

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What is more, the stylization of the Muslim identity is very attractive, because it follows noticeably aesthetic laws and thus complies with a basic need of postmodernism. At least you can not only ethically understand the Sharia but interpret the fulfillment of its commandments as aesthetically stylized response to God's beauty, which becomes perceptible in the recitation of the Quran. For the inimitability of the Qur'an is then made clear most convincingly by the Muslim apologists when they emphasize the beauty of its recitation.

And that Muslims even today are not allowed to eat pork and have to observe such strange habits in fasting, we can better understand when we seek not an ethical sense in them but see them as the loving human response to God's mercy. By observing the commandments of Sharia Muslims create room for God in their life, they respond to His beauty by their love and choose an aesthetic stylization as a form of expression, in order to show their own love - in this way at least a Muslim who was a friend of me once explained to me the meaning of Sharia law.

This aesthetically stylized expression is capable to constitute and stabilize in a catchy way religious identity, and not a few Christians miss these forms of expression. Of course, many Christians, too, keep to fasting. But everybody does it in a different way. A popular topic of conversation before the Christian Lenten season is to ask yourself about the way of fasting. The first (man) refrains from watching TV, the second (woman) from alcohol, the third from smoking, the fourth from meat and the fifth heeds all four possibilities. Some people make even a therapeutic fasting in a group. But nobody can say that all Christians do something together. If you have ever experienced Ramadan in a Muslim country, you know that Christianity is missing something here - and you can become envious. The beauty of the Quran recitation is also so impressive that the Christian liturgy cannot keep up.

Here it is not the task of Christian theology to announce the chase or to attack the lax Christians, who (kindly) have to take their religion seriously again and obey the commandments of the Church. There is also no reason to return to the Latin liturgy in order to encompass God's word again with more transcendence and mysteriousness.

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For the here mentioned difference is no cause for inferiority complexes but has its reason in the different forms in which revelation is given in Islam and Christianity.

While Islam is based on the power of the Koran's recitation, Christianity refers to the powerlessness of the Cross. While Islam is celebrating the beauty of God, Christianity confronts us with His ugliness and self-imposed humiliation. A revelation figure [*Offenbarungsgestalt*] that is grounded in the weakness of the Cross is incompatible with the forceful stylization of a group identity; it calls into the personal discipleship.

### **A Modern Muslim Theology will Embarrass by its Liberality**

Here now opens again a wide field of reflection for Christian theology. How can and should this invitation to imitate this God in the form of a slave inspire us to develop aesthetic and ethical elements of a social identity? For Christians naturally need also a group identity and they want to be distinguishable. We are therefore not allowed to play the powerful aesthetic off against the powerlessness of the Cross, but have dialectically to think both together. When attempting to think the two poles together, which have to be taken into consideration, it seems to me that there is still a lot of innovation potential in view of the shape of the Church and her Commandments.

Just when one thinks about the shape of the contemporary church and her dogmas, a last attraction of Islam becomes clear, which has here to be mentioned. Muslims can accept to a much larger extent than Christians the polyphony of interpretations of their normative sources. Precisely because identity in Islam is celebrated quite aesthetically, on the dogmatic level considerably less regulations are needed and in theology there is a lot more freedom.

Unfortunately, this is very little used in the present, but it is already foreseeable that a modern Muslim theology will embarrass Christianity to some extent by its great liberality in dogmatics. On the other hand, in view of the crude theses of Wahhabi theologians one wishes often more dogmatic regulation in Islam. This, too, seems to me to be an interesting field of work for the Muslim-Christian dialogue. How much dogmatic and ethical regulation does a religion need, and how much centralization does make sense? Here, too, Christianity can learn from Islam but has in turn also to offer something. It is no easy task especially for the Catholic theology to link a theology of kenosis with legitimizing the great power of papacy. Perhaps here, too, new ways must be sought.

In view of such issues the dialogue with Islam and the queries of Islam will lead to exciting debates of the current Christian theology, where many things are still unclear. If we succeed in establishing an academically high-class liberal Muslim theology at German universities, Christian theologians will notice that their business becomes more demanding. For at crucial points Muslims rely on different basic intuitions; and they can at least respond equally well to the question of enlightenment and modernity as Christians.

On the basis of this conversation, it will be very exciting to see where theology is able to let go of unnecessary ballast, and where denominational and religious identity is nevertheless

more deeply linked with dogmas than I was at first aware of it, with dogmas that for the time being appeared alien to me. Perhaps it will turn out at some points that the crucial difference is not between the religions but within them. In order to see this more clearly, it needs a lot of joint efforts of Muslim and Christian theology.

For what reasons should Christian theology be interested in Islam? For the simple reason that it can thus learn quite a lot about itself and about the world, about its strengths and weaknesses, about its own identity, and about the patterns of plausibility hidden in one's own thinking, about others and their ways of thinking - and maybe even about God.

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