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# The Basics of Interreligious Dialogue in Metropolitan George Khodr's Theology. Judaism and Islam from the Perspective of an Oriental Christian<sup>1</sup>

## Abstract

In this article, I will present the basics of interreligious dialogue in the thought and theology of the Lebanese Metropolitan George Khodr. I will do this through six major themes that often appear in Khodr's writings, the first five of which are theological

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while the last one addresses socio-political issues about the context and thought of Metropolitan Khodr.

The first five themes are presented here in form of comparison with and contrast to some Western position on each theme, mainly taken from the so-called 'Classical Theism.' This way of presenting the themes has the advantage of being faithful to George Khodr's method of writing, as he usually defines Orthodox theology, and his thought, in contrast to some western, namely some Catholic and Protestant, theological argumentations. This would shed further light on the particular themes as they come into sharp contrast with their western alternatives.

After presenting the theological foundations for interreligious dialogue in Khodr's thought, I will turn to his position concerning Judaism and Islam, maintaining that the six criteria, referred to previously, apply by the same token on Khodr's position about Jews and Muslims. Throughout the article, I will be arguing that Orthodox theology, presented in this paper through the thought of Metropolitan Khodr within the Near Eastern context, carries within itself the seeds for profound interreligious dialogue that reaches beyond the formalities of institutionalized affairs of contemporary attempts for dialogue in the region.

### Keywords

Interreligious Dialogue, Metropolitan George Khodr, Judaism and Islam, Orthodox Christianity

## 1 Introduction

George Khodr, borne in 1923, is one of the most influential contemporary Christian theologians in the Middle East.<sup>2</sup> He is the Greek Orthodox Metropolitan of Mount Lebanon and a spiritual leader, who has been playing a transformative role within Orthodox Christianity in both Lebanon and Syria during the last decades. It is Khodr's spiritual theology that made a renewal within Orthodox Church possible and gave a special ecumenical and dialogical character to his thought that is open to and receptive of the Other.

The notion of divine Mystery and the unknowability of God, the pneumatological paradigm, the importance of human response to divine love and grace, through which the divine image would be actualized, Khodr's anthropological and universalist position, according to which, it is the whole of humanity that together form the divine image, his insistence on 'secularization',

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<sup>2</sup> George Khodr first studied Law at the Jesuit University of St. Joseph in Beirut. He completed his theological studies at the *Institut de Théologie Orthodoxe Saint-Serge* in Paris. In Paris Khodr was introduced to Russian Orthodox theology through the works and thought of several Russian Orthodox émigrés, such as Nikolai Berdyaev, Alexander Schmemmann and Vladimir Lossky. This Russian influence would accompany Khodr's thought throughout his ministry and writings. Khodr was ordained to priesthood in 1954 and was consecrated as bishop in 1970. He taught at the Lebanese University in Beirut and at the Theological Institute St. John of Damascus in Balamand-Lebanon. Though Khodr is not a systematic theologian, in the academic-professional sense of the word, however, he has been writing weekly theological articles in the daily Lebanese newspaper "*Annahār*" for about fifty years, most of which contribute to Christian theology and spirituality through particularly an ecumenical and interreligious-dialogical perspective. His writings, sermons and lectures have been collected and published by *An-Nahar* and *An-Nur* Lebanese publishing-houses. Some of those books are: *And if I Recounted the Paths of Childhood*, *The New Antioch*, *Sunday's Word*, *Hope in Wartime*, *Sunday's Standpoints*, *The Movement as an Enlightenment and a Calling*, *The Spirit and the Bride*.

all these elements together contribute for a Christian theology that has a genuine potential to meet the Other, not only for the sake of meeting or accepting the Other, but for the sake of a genuine maturity in Christian faith, and for knowing the self.

In this article I limit myself to some major themes in Khodr's thought - such as the divine image, the role of the Holy Spirit, the theology of the Word, apophatic theology and the final consummation - that are directly related to his interreligious dialogue and his position concerning other religions. At a later stage I will consider those writings of Khodr, where he directly addresses the dialogue with the Muslims and the Jews.

## 2 The Image of God

In contrast to the Augustinian notion of original sin, and John Calvin's teaching that by the fall "the whole human race was delivered to the curse",<sup>3</sup> has been "deprived of freedom of choice and bound over to miserable servitude",<sup>4</sup> having a corrupt nature, Khodr considers the notion of the image of God in relation to human reality as of primary importance for Christian faith. "The human being bears the image of God" and "God is similar to the human being," says Khodr.<sup>5</sup> The biblical phrase

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<sup>3</sup> John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, (Tr. F. L. Battles), (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960), Book II, Ch. 1, p. 241.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, Ch. II, p. 255.

<sup>5</sup> George Khodr, "*Al-ru'yah al-'urthūdhūksiyyah lil-lāh wal-'insān*" ["The Orthodox View of God and the Human Being"], (Beirut: Manshūrāt al-nūr, 1982), pp. 7-8. See further: Norman Russell, *The Doctrine of Deification in the Greek Patristic Tradition*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), p. 85; Paul Evdokimov, *L'Orthodoxie*, (Bibliothèque théologique. Neuchâtel: Delachaux et Niestlé, 1959), p. 80. The notion of 'divine image' has been emphasized by the early Greek Fathers of the Church as the potential given to the human subject for attaining

in Gen. 1:26, which tells the story of creation of the human being according “to the image and likeness of God”, implies that the ultimate nature of the human subject is defined by his/her relation and correspondence to God. Thus, the essential reality of the human being is attained through participation in God’s life, or *being* in God. God bestows upon the human being, from the beginning, some of what God in Godself *is*. Furthermore, the divine image, according to which every human being is made, implies freedom, which is usually referred to as the image of God in humanity. Thus, the human and the divine are never in opposition, and in this sense, God is not an obstacle on the path of human freedom, instead it is in God and through God that one can find one’s true self and be free of all that is not genuinely human.<sup>6</sup> Through the image of God every human being is given a dynamic principle that enables one to attain one’s original image and by this one is given the very possibility of deification, or the final union with God.

In this sense, sin implies an unnatural condition, a deprivation of freedom, and the reduction of the human being to what is less than his/her original glory, through separation from God. This, however, carries the positive impetus and the longing for becoming something more than what the person already is. However, in both cases of turning to or against God, God’s im-

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participation in God. See on this: Gregory of Nyssa, ‘On the Making of Man’ XVI: 11; XXII: 4, 5 in P. Schaff & H. Wace (eds.), *A Select Library of Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church*, Vol. 5. (New York: The Christian Literature Company, 1893), pp. 405-410. See further: Vladimir Lossky, *Orthodox Theology: An Introduction*, (New York: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1978), pp. 72-73.

<sup>6</sup> See George Khodr, *Law ḥakaytu masra al-ṭufūlah* [If I Recount the Paths of Childhood], (Beirut: Dār an-nahār, 1979), pp. 24-25. It is interesting to note that in Orthodox theology there is no such a sinful human nature inherited from Adam. Adam’s sin is viewed rather as personal choice, not a collective sin.

age and grace continues to accompany humanity. Thus, though the image of God might be distorted or blurred by sin, it is never entirely vanished or faded away.<sup>7</sup> Through such an interpretation of sin, human beings are not viewed primarily as sinners, who by birth have inherited a sinful nature from Adam. Preferably, such interpretation maintains that God has created the human being free, and sin is the result of the free choice of the human subject. Thus, human beings are of infinite value and are perceived as those who carry within themselves a direction to follow and an inner sense of the divine, which guide them on the way to God's likeness.<sup>8</sup>

### 3 The Holy Spirit and the Divine Economy

In contrast to the western concept of the *filioque* ("and from the Son")<sup>9</sup> Khodr claims that the role of the Holy Spirit in the world is not subordinated to that of the Son. The teachings, death, and resurrection of Christ have uninterrupted efficacy in the lives of the believers through the Spirit.<sup>10</sup>

Khodr maintains that Eastern theology, from the beginning, reserved an equal value and prominence to the role of the Holy

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<sup>7</sup> Idem, *Al-ru'yah al-'urthūdhūksiyah lil-lāh wal-'insān* [The Orthodox View of God and the Human Being], pp. 21-23.

<sup>8</sup> Idem, "*Al-teknolojya wal-'adālah al-ijtimā'iyah*" ["Technology and Social Justice"] in G. Khodr, G. Ḥaddād, H. Duwayhī, A. Maqdisī, *Al-kanīсах fil-'ālam* [The Church in the World], (Beirut: Manshūrāt al-nūr, 1973), pp. 129-130; George Khodr, "*Al-'ajā'eb wal-Kalimah*" ["The Miracles and the Word"], *An-nahār*, 02.10.2004.

<sup>9</sup> '*Filioque*' has been added to the Latin text of the Nicene Creed at the Third Council of Toledo (589) and it was a continuous factor for the East-West disagreement.

<sup>10</sup> George Khodr, "*Al-rūḥ al-quds*" ("The Holy Spirit"), *An-nahār*, 14.06.2003.

Spirit and the Son, regarding both as eternal, tracing their origin only to God the Father. On the other hand Western theology with its addition of the *filioque*, in explaining the procession of the Holy Spirit and with its stress on the one divine essence, neglected the role of the Holy Spirit and most of the times substituted it with the role of the Church. The relation between the Son and the Spirit is not that of origin, but an eternal relationship of two divine persons, claims Khodr. The Son is eternally begotten, and the Holy Spirit eternally proceeds from the Father. Hence, the economy of the Spirit makes the presence of Christ and the attainment of authentic spiritual lives possible for all human beings, regardless of one's religious affiliations. Furthermore, Khodr maintains that it is not possible to confine the work of the Spirit within the walls of the historical church, instead the notion of economy<sup>11</sup> οἰκονομία is itself part of divine Mystery.<sup>12</sup> Thus, Christians cannot claim to have an exclusive ownership of truth, and it is possible to discern the work of the Spirit even when the Son is not explicitly claimed.

“The spiritual life we live is one thing if Christ's truth is confined within the bounds of the historical Church; and it is quite a different thing if it is unrestricted and scattered throughout the world. (...) Moreover, if obedience to the Master means following Him wherever we find traces of His presence, we have an obligation to investigate the authentic spiritual life of non-Christians. (...) The strikingly

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<sup>11</sup> The notion of economy (*oikonomia*) refers to God's work and providence in relation to the world and describes God's redemptive act in contrast to the notion of *theologia* as referring to the inner being of God. This distinction is comparable to the essence-energies distinction, which is referred back to Palamas (1296-1359) in Eastern theology, while Western tradition mostly emphasizes the unity of divine being and economy.

<sup>12</sup> Jutta Sperber, *Christians and Muslims: The Dialogue Activities of the World Council of Churches and their Theological Foundation* (Berlin & New York: Walter de Gruyter, 2000), p. 218.

evangelical quality of many non-Christians obliges us... to develop an ecclesiology and a missiology in which the Holy Spirit necessarily occupies a supreme place".<sup>13</sup>

This replaces the statement "salvation only through Jesus Christ" with the statement "salvation through Christ and the Spirit", and by this Khodr does not deny the possibility of divine revelations after Christ. I argue here that Khodr's pneumatological paradigm can serve as a point of departure for theology of religions, which can offer broader horizons for dialogue and acceptance of other religious traditions. According to this paradigm, the Spirit is perceived as being everywhere present and active, while both the Son and the Spirit work reciprocally reflecting the Trinitarian nature of divine reality.

#### **4 The Theology of the Word**

In contrast to the notion of the Word as special revelation from God (Calvin), which might make the real knowledge of Godself by the elect possible, and might provide those whom God has "regarded as worthy" and "those whom he pleased to gather more closely and intimately to himself"<sup>14</sup> with the privilege of salvation, Khodr's theology of the Word addresses all human kind as all human beings carry within themselves the seeds of the Word.

Khodr aligns himself with most Orthodox theologians who discern in the whole creation the dispersion of divine words, through which union between creation and its reason is made possible. Thus, natural existence in the world can only attain its

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<sup>13</sup> George Khodr, "Christianity in a Pluralistic World: The Economy of the Holy Spirit" *The Ecumenical Review*, vol. 23, (1971), p. 118.

<sup>14</sup> John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, Book 1, Ch. VI, p. 70.

meaning through the personal hypostatic union with its rational intrinsic principle.<sup>15</sup> In this sense, the Word is present in every existing thing, and it is in accordance to the Word that everything is created. Furthermore, it is through the union with the Word that every human being becomes a divine word while human words become no longer conceivable.<sup>16</sup>

Nevertheless, there is one uncreated Word of God, the *Logos*, from whom all other 'words' or divine manifestations in various religious traditions derive. The divine Word takes a body in which all biblical words and all created beings participate through their own 'words' or 'reasons,' so that they become signs and symbols of the presence of the divine Word. This is the cosmic nature of the incarnated Word of God, and it is in the person Jesus Christ that *Logos* has attained complete self-actualization and in whom the one divine *Logos* has taken human life.<sup>17</sup>

Based on the notion of divine Word it is possible to conceive actualizations of the divine *Logos* other than in and through the historical life of Jesus Christ,<sup>18</sup> though Khodr would contend that Jesus Christ is the highest form of the divine words since in him humanity and divinity were fully actualized and united. By this Khodr brings the whole human-divine reality to a union expressed through the notion of the word. Thus, words for

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<sup>15</sup> The term "*hypostasis*" in Patristic theology referred to the personal dimension of existence, unlike the impersonal substance (*ousia*) or nature (*physis*).

<sup>16</sup> George Khodr, "*Al-nūr wa 'anta*" ("The Light and You"), *An-nahār*, 10.05.2008. The English translation is accessible online: [http://www.georgeskhodr.org/en/articles\\_year\\_detail.html?year=2008&type\\_id=4&articleID=694](http://www.georgeskhodr.org/en/articles_year_detail.html?year=2008&type_id=4&articleID=694)

<sup>17</sup> Idem, "Christianity in a Pluralistic World", p. 126.

<sup>18</sup> Idem, "*Al-masīḥīyyah wal-'arab*" ("Christianity and the Arabs") in *Flasṭīn al-musta'ādah* (The Restored Palestine), (Beirut: Manshūrāt al-nūr, 1969), p. 114.

Khodr are not random designations; rather they participate in the creative energy of God's primary Word. Words are, then, sacramental and reflect the first sacrament of God's self-communication to human beings, while human beings are called to be the book of God or the words of God.<sup>19</sup>

## 5 Apophatic Theology

In contrast to Classical Theism, which had adopted Aristotelian principles and foundations and applied them within theology, making room for God within metaphysical speculative systems and thus resulting in obscuring the notion of Mystery that is essential for any perception of the divine, Eastern theology, though similarly adopting the Aristotelian heritage, had interpreted it in apophatic terms which indicate the divine Mystery. Khodr presents the apophatic theology, which implies that it is by negating all that is sensible and rational that one can come closer to God.<sup>20</sup> God is 'not' what one describes God to be; this is why all one's conceptual claims and understanding are unable to transcend oneself and arrive at God. This is the work of the Spirit, through which the human being can be united with God in ways that exceed all rationality and surpass all understanding.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Idem, "*Al-kitāb dzālika al-majhūl*" ("The Neglected Book"), 09.01.1966 in George Khodr, *Ḥadīth al-'aḥad: al-'insān fī maṣ'irihī wa akhlāqihī* (Sunday's Word: Man in his Destiny and Morals), vol. 3, (Beirut: Manshūrāt al-nūr, 1986), pp. 291-292.

<sup>20</sup> The word 'apophatic' comes from a Late Latin root, originally Greek: *apophanai* 'to say no'.

<sup>21</sup> George Khodr, "*Al-ru'yah al-'urthūdhūksiyah lil-lāh wal-'insān*" ("The Orthodox View of God and the Human Being"), p. 9. Khodr describes the apophatic aspect of the human spiritual inclination toward God and, yet, without minimizing the role of science, reason, philosophy

Alongside the apophatic way of theologizing, there is also the cataphatic or affirmative way, through which the Christian speaks of the glory and the goodness of God, however, this remains metaphoric and symbolic, since human articulations of divine characteristics are not the final claims of theology.<sup>22</sup> Thus, personal encounter with God is the way for any perception of divine Mystery, and that is possible through contemplative prayer and reflection on divine being. Such an encounter is best described in mystical terms, as it was maintained since the ultimate knowledge of God does not belong to the realm of scientific, rational argumentations, but to the realm of the heart and the spirit.<sup>23</sup> Thus theology, in its Orthodox sense, has spiritual and personal nature rather than rational or purely metaphysical. Khodr states it explicitly that “the way of theologizing is the way of deification”;<sup>24</sup> since it is only through inner union with God that one comes to know who God is.

## 6 The Final Consummation

In contrast to the western teaching on predestination and the double predestination based on which, Khodr defends the teaching on the final consummation of everything by God. The

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and historical studies. Though scientific-historical methods are helpful means but they are never exhaustive ones for the knowledge of God.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., pp. 12-13.

<sup>23</sup> It is important here to see the different conceptions of mysticism in both Eastern Orthodox and Western Latin traditions. Western theology conceives mysticism as “subjective, individual and necessarily esoteric knowledge, which, by definition, cannot be communicated to all”. See the preface of John Meyendorff at the beginning of *The Life of Moses*, by Gregory of Nyssa, ed. Malherbe A. J., (USA: Paulist Press, 1978), pp. xii-xiii.

<sup>24</sup> George Khodr, “*Al-ru’yah al-urthūdhūksiyah lil-lāh wal-’insān*” (“The Orthodox View of God and the Human Being”), pp. 10-12.

whole history of human spiritual strives is the history of a return to the divine origin so that at the end all humanity will rise from every state of sin and death to eternal glory.<sup>25</sup> God can dispel all ugliness and remove all wickedness from human beings and create them anew so that everyone is given a share in the heavenly beauty.<sup>26</sup>

Thus, Khodr claims that salvation is universal and not only limited to those who explicitly confess their faith. God, who created the whole cosmos pouring out God's self into it, will finally, through *theosis* (deification), unite everything to Godself. Reviewing the historical development of the Christian position toward the 'Other', Khodr says that from the very beginning there were two different approaches by the Christian apologetics concerning soteriology. The first was universalist, which claimed the possibility of salvation for all humanity, while the second stressed the dualistic understanding of soteriology, which implies that some will attain salvation while others will be punished by eternal damnation.

Khodr finds the reason for finalizing the hostile approach toward non-Christians, at the expense of the first positive, universal approach of Justin Martyr, Clement of Alexandria and Origen, in the act of 'crystallization' of the dogmatic, doctrinal body of Christian faith in the early centuries opposing the heresies.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> G. Khodr, G. Ḥaddād, H. Duwayhī, A. Maqdisī, *Al-kanīṣah fīl-‘ālam* (The Church in the World), pp. 129-131.

<sup>26</sup> George Khodr, "*Al-faṣḥu aḡḡan wa aḡḡan*" ("Easter Again and Again"), *An-nahār*, 05.05.2007. The English translation is accessible online: [http://www.georgeskhodr.org/en/articles\\_year\\_detail.html?year=2007&type\\_id=4&articleID=857](http://www.georgeskhodr.org/en/articles_year_detail.html?year=2007&type_id=4&articleID=857); see also: George Khodr, "*Al-daynūnah*" ("The Judgment"), *An-nahār*, 06.12.2008.

<sup>27</sup> See a similar account of the two different streams of theology in the early Church in Paul Knitter's *No Other Name? A Critical Survey of Christian Attitudes toward the World Religions*, (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1985), 121. For a presentation of the dualistic view of salvation in the

Similar historical reasons were behind the development of the negative, exclusivist approach of the Christian Medieval Church concerning non-Christians, which served the formation of such theology, implementing an institutional church which serves as a western socio-political unity that rules out all “heresies” of other religions.<sup>28</sup>

An essential element of this unity, what Khodr calls ‘spiritual imperialism’, was the notion of ‘salvation history’, which results in Jesus Christ being the culmination of all human history and the Church, the only context in which truth is to be found, echoing the claim of Cyprian *extra Ecclesiam nulla salus*. Khodr writes:

“Contemporary theology must go beyond the notion of ‘salvation history’ to rediscover the meaning of the *oikonomia*. (...) The very notion of economy is a notion of mystery. (...) ‘Mystery’ (...) points to the freedom of God who in God’s work of providence and redemption is not tied down to any event”.<sup>29</sup>

Through Christianity, the whole world is called to transcendence and transfiguration. The Church is not separated from the world; instead it “is the sign of God’s love to all people”, in a way it is the sign of a “cosmic covenant” between God and all creation. All great religions are “training schools of Divine mercy” as all humanity is proceeding toward the restoration of everything in “Christ who sleeps in the night of the religions”.<sup>30</sup> Moreover, here is the importance of the all-inclusive notion of *oikonomia* (οἰκονομία), according to which God’s economy be-

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early period see: J. N. D. Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines* (London: A & C Black, 1958), Ch. VII, pp. 163-188.

<sup>28</sup> George Khodr, “Christianity in a Pluralistic World: The Economy of the Holy Spirit”, p. 121.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid, p. 123.

<sup>30</sup> George Khodr, “Christianity in a Pluralistic World: The Economy of the Holy Spirit”, p. 128.

ginning from creation embraces all nations and religions through the Spirit so that finally God might be 'all in all' (1 Corinthians 15: 28).

## 7 A Call for Secularization

Beside the five theological themes presented above, there is an essential element in George Khodr's thought which contributes positively to interreligious dialogue, namely his position concerning the necessity of the secularization process. In regards of the Lebanese sectarian political system, Khodr claims that only within a secularized state Christianity might have the potential of an actual existence and coexistence with other religions.

Khodr rejects the notion of a religious state maintaining the falsification of the very notion of 'religious states'. The term 'religious', explains Khodr, has personal-individual significance, indicating that which is deeply related to mind and heart, while a 'state' indicates a legal structure with no sensible existence, and it is impossible that it might or might not have religion.<sup>31</sup>

"From the doctrinal perspective, there is no theoretical confrontation between the church, which exists in the heart of God and is moving toward eternal life, and the state which governs the human times or is governed by the human times. These are two realities which are not related. (...)

Whenever church leadership strives to convene its children upon that which is different than the Gospel, the doctrine, and the inner purification, this would mean that it has forgotten the unique nature of Christianity, which soars above the transient. The church exists in time, and by

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<sup>31</sup> Idem, "*Ṭawā'f wa madzāheb wa 'ilmāniyyah*" ("Denominations, Ideologies and Secularism"), *Annahār*, 11.02.2012.

this, it is the expansion of Christ's presence in it. However, it is not of this world."<sup>32</sup>

Thus, Khodr distinguishes the political affairs of a country from questions of faith and dialogue, which belong to the free choice of one's heart and mind.<sup>33</sup> Furthermore, Khodr perceives the danger in the wrong image of God that one would shape according to one's dispositions and likeness that is according to one's political belonging and affiliation, rather than contemplating the divine Mystery and longing toward the true image of the divine. In this sense, he explains that God is not an ally of a sect or a denomination against another, as some claim. He says: "The Lord does not favor a group (against another) and makes no interference in war or peace."<sup>34</sup> Thus, the secularization that Khodr defends is about a 'civil rule' deprived from all religious inclinations, since for him "national thought is founded upon one's ability to overcome the sectarian affiliation"<sup>35</sup> and move toward affiliation to a national state. Only through such more extensive affiliation, different religions can practice their own beliefs while respecting the otherness of the Others.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> Idem, "*Al-kanīṣah wal-dawlah*" ("The Church and the State"), *Annanhār*, 28.03.2009. The English translation is accessible online: [http://www.georgeskhodr.org/en/articles\\_year\\_detail.html?year=2009&type\\_id=4&articleID=656](http://www.georgeskhodr.org/en/articles_year_detail.html?year=2009&type_id=4&articleID=656)

<sup>33</sup> Idem, "*Milal wa nahl*" ("Sects and Bees"), *Annahār*, 01.01.2010.

<sup>34</sup> Idem, "*Tasyīs allāh*" ("The Politicization of God"), *Annanhār*, 03.02.2007. The English translation is accessible online: [http://www.georgeskhodr.org/en/articles\\_year\\_detail.html?year=2007&type\\_id=4&articleID=846](http://www.georgeskhodr.org/en/articles_year_detail.html?year=2007&type_id=4&articleID=846)

<sup>35</sup> Idem, "*Hal min tajāwuz lilṭā'ifīyyah*" ("Is Surpassing Sectarianism Possible?"), *Annanhār*, 27.11.2009. The English translation is accessible online: [http://www.georgeskhodr.org/en/articles\\_year\\_detail.html?year=2009&type\\_id=4&articleID=621](http://www.georgeskhodr.org/en/articles_year_detail.html?year=2009&type_id=4&articleID=621)

<sup>36</sup> For further reading see: Sylvie Avakian, *The 'Other' in Karl Rahner's Transcendental Theology and George Khodr's Spiritual Theology Within*

## 8 Some Remarks

In the light of a critical evaluation of the mentioned themes I maintain that the notion of the image of God, given to every human being, the notion of the Word disseminated partly in all human beings, the conception of universal consummation that might bring all and everything back to God, the Creator, all this open up new horizons, full of potential for interreligious dialogue.

Khodr's endeavor to safeguard the uniqueness of Christian faith, while opening up the self for the Other, is a unique and an honest attempt. Khodr's theology is at the same time a critique of classical Western theology, which could perceive God, the self, and the Other only through pure speculative frameworks, dogmatic theories and metaphysical constructions, which have covered and hindered the simplicity and the authenticity of Christian faith. Furthermore, and beside its contribution to interreligious dialogue, Khodr's apophatic theology and the pneumatological paradigm serve as responses to the modern critiques of theological language, as they leave more space for God and questions of faith, without limiting them to one's theological enterprise.

Though some of the concepts used by Khodr, such as the 'cosmic Christ' and the *Logos*, have been criticized by Western so-called 'pluralist' theologians, who perceive them as the creation of human imagination, maintaining the need to concentrate rather on the historicity of Jesus Christ, his faithfulness and obedience to God, nevertheless, Khodr succeeds to avoid the shortcomings of these notions, concentrating rather on the existential worldly reality of the human subject.

Another element that would deserve a short reflection is the notion of the ‘*logos*’ which itself is not a helpful term. *Logos*, or the seminal *logoi* (λογοι σπερματικοί), has a heavy historical background both in Greek philosophy and Christian theology. Stoicism meant by *logos* “a finer matter immanent in the material universe”,<sup>37</sup> while Athanasius, the defender of Nicene theology, taught that the pre-existent divine *Logos* coming down has united with the mere flesh of Jesus, animating and moving it, while simultaneously being present everywhere else in the universe.<sup>38</sup>

Thus, the term has a history of misconceptions mixed with mythological language. However, I would also maintain that Khodr succeeds in making a creative reinterpretation of the notion of the ‘word’. In his articles he makes very few direct references to the historical perception of *Logos*,<sup>39</sup> resorting mainly to the rich potentials which the meaning of the term ‘word’ (*al-kalima*) carries, emphasizing the human reality, obedience, humility and love of Jesus, and maintaining, nevertheless, that in all religious traditions such values are present.

## 9 Khodr’s Position Concerning Muslims

Khodr regards the mystical tradition of both Christianity and Islam (the Sufi tradition) as the common ground between both religions, based on which the search for God and the strive for human-divine union correspond in both religions. In the same

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<sup>37</sup> J. N. D. Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines*, p. 18.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 285.

<sup>39</sup> See the following articles: George Khodr, “*Ajdād al-masīh*” (“The Ancestors of Christ”), *An-nahār*, 13.12.2003 and also George Khodr, “*Al-ṭawāṣol*” (“Communication”), *An-nahār*, 07.11.2009.

vein Orthodox apophatic theology is comparable to the apophaticism (*al-tanzīh*) in Islam:

“If one looks to the life and words of Al-Ḥallāj, and also others, one can notice that in reality they are baptized without water and that they even belong to the Church unknowingly. Moreover, this is the work of God. God saves whoever He wants. However, when we say that God saves whoever He wants, this does not justify the equality of religions. Non-Christians might be superior to Christians”.<sup>40</sup>

Khodr maintains that the Word, the *Logos*, is the common reality that brings Christianity and other religions, particularly Islam together, though incarnation in a human nature has advantage over incarnation in a book since the human nature is the proper setting for divine revelation. Through indicating a latent incarnation of God in the *Qur’ān* and some divine manifestations in Islam,<sup>41</sup> Khodr considers the theological dialogue between Christians and Muslims, specially having the Middle Eastern context in mind, as indispensable. It is in the ‘mutual response’ to one another that each side grows and matures toward a fuller knowledge of the divine reality and the divine words:

“In the common night of our common expectation, we have come to realize that there is no single God’s Word which can be known and advocated, but the words delivered are

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<sup>40</sup> George Khodr, (Interviewed him: Samīr Farḥāt) *Hadzā al-‘ālam lā yakfī* (*This World is not Enough*), (Beirut: Dār an-nahār, 2006), pp. 161-162.

<sup>41</sup> Idem, “La Communication du message en terre d’islam” *Etudes Théologiques et Religieuses*, 3ème trimestre (1989), p. 376. Here Khodr in a way regards both the *Qur’ān* and Jesus Christ as the means through which/whom God addresses both Muslims and Christians. See also: George Massūḥ, “*Al-muṭrān George Khodr wal-ḥiwār al-‘islāmī al-masīḥī*” (“Metropolitan George Khodr and the Muslim-Christian Dialogue”), <http://www.ortmtilb.org.lb/Massuh/MgrGeorges.htm>.

clarified for us in our human situation of being turned to one another".<sup>42</sup>

This is then what both Christians and Muslims are called to: "a relation of mutual response" in which and through which each side of the 'community' receives the divine words, which are best revealed and 'clarified' only in the 'human situation of being turned to one another'. Thus, the 'turn' to the 'Other' is essential even for one's reception of the divine.

Nevertheless, Khodr insists on the need to study one's religion, the religion of the 'Other' and also the Holy books historically and critically.<sup>43</sup> There is serious lack of scholarly historical studies in both traditions, maintains Khodr. The Eastern world is undergoing the crisis of facing modernity. This is true for both Eastern Christians and Muslims, although the crisis is more serious within the Islamic world since a Muslim is subject to Islamic Law, which affects every aspect of human life.

Khodr exhorts Muslims to study the *Qur'ān* scientifically since all religious means are partly human and partly divine. Words are components of human language, culture, and history.<sup>44</sup> God speaks to human beings through words that are mostly human; hence they are segments of human life and reality.

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<sup>42</sup> Idem, "I Have Called You Friends", *The Muslim World* 71, nos. 3-4, (1981), p. 164.

<sup>43</sup> Idem, "*Hal min ḥiwār 'islāmī-masīḥī*" ("Is There any Christian-Muslim Dialogue"), *An-nahār*, 11.01.1992.

<sup>44</sup> Idem, "*Muwājahat al-madzāheb*" (Confronting the Faiths), 09.09.1262, in G. Khodr, *Ḥadīth al-'aḥad: al-lāh wal-qurbā*, (Sunday's Word: God and Kinship), vol.1, (Beirut: Manshūrāt al-nūr, 1985), pp. 57-58.

## 10 Khodr's Position Concerning Jews

In his position concerning the Jews, Khodr distinguishes between the stance of Orthodox-religious Jews and Zionist tendencies or, more precisely, between Judaism and Zionism.<sup>45</sup> Dialogue with Jews is conceivable whenever the political ambitions of Israel are not involved in it. Thus Khodr rejects "Zionism as philosophy, attitude, and expansion in the Arab lands", believing that it is originally a western colonialist phenomenon and "a hybrid body in the East." Accordingly, there is no way for any normalization with Israel, since "it was born in sin".<sup>46</sup>

Khodr continues: "We want that the Jews be saved and purified from hatred. We hope that they return to the faith of their prophets so that they might truly be saved."<sup>47</sup> In another article Khodr differentiates again between the Jews and the state of Israel: "I want that we safeguard the Jews, but reject the state of Israel."<sup>48</sup> He finds in Zionism the same notion of annihilating the 'Other' as Nazism practiced toward the Jews. He asks: how a nation that suffered banishment and exclusion throughout its history can do the same with its neighbors?

"I tried to understand the philosophical or the Jurist justification of the statement that Jerusalem is the eternal capital of the Israelite nation and I could find nothing except the spirit of exclusion of others and that seemed to me to be the application of what the West practiced toward the Jews".<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> See: George Khodr, *Al-quds* (Jerusalem), (Beirut: Ta'awuniyyat al-nūr al-'urthūdhūkiyyah, 2003), pp. 150-151.

<sup>46</sup> Idem, "*Waḥdatanā al-marjūwwah*" ("Our Expected Union"), *An-nahār*, 24.02.2007.

<sup>47</sup> Idem, "*Ghazza*" ("Gaza"), *An-nahār*, 03.01.2009.

<sup>48</sup> Idem, "*Mādzā ba'da Ghazza*" ("What after Gaza"), *An-nahār*, 24.01.2009.

<sup>49</sup> Idem, *Al-quds* (Jerusalem), p. 115.

Khodr calls for an “Arab repudiation of the Zionist entity”, holding repudiation as the norm for facing Israel politically and intellectually.<sup>50</sup> Thus, it is possible to identify two main elements in Khodr’s position concerning Judaism, namely his setting the Jews apart from Zionism, viewing them as belonging to the mystical body of Christ, and on the other hand his sharp rejection of Zionism which even allows for the military resistance of it.<sup>51</sup> Such resistance is a response to injustice wherever and however it is practiced toward any human existence. Criticizing violence that was practiced against the Palestinians, Khodr writes:

“For me, the question of violence invalidates any legitimacy, since it is not admissible to kill a person. God is God of life, and He does not commission anyone to kill (...) the main disagreement today is between those who allow the shedding of blood and those who do not. There is no dialogue possible between the two. We are here facing a collision between two alternatives (...) that represent different worldviews concerning the divine attributes”.<sup>52</sup>

Thus, justice is a prerequisite for love and consequently for a true dialogue. The inviolability of every person and a whole nation is not to be subject to political bargaining and interests. Sacrifices cannot only be imposed on some, outweighed by an-

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<sup>50</sup> Idem, “*Mādzā ba’da Ghazza*” (“What after Gaza”), *An-nahār*, 24.01.2009.

<sup>51</sup> See George Khodr, “*Al-muqāwamah wa Lubnān al-ātī*” (“The Resistance and the Future Lebanon”), *An-nahār*, 18.02.2006. Also: “*Laqa’āt wa ru’ā ba’d al-ḥarb*” (“Projections and Visions after the War”), *An-nahār*, 19.08.2006.

<sup>52</sup> Idem, “*Al-’alāqāt al-’islāmiyyah al-masīḥiyyah: Qirā’ah fī al-rāhen wal-mustaqbal*” (“Christian Muslim Relations : A Reading in the Present and the Future”) in Faḍl Allāh, M. Ḥ. (ed.), *Al-’alāqāt al-’islāmiyyah al-masīḥiyyah: qirā’āt marja’iyyah fīl-tārīkh wal-ḥāḍer wal-mustaqbal* (*Christian-Muslim Relations: Referential Readings for the Past, Present and Future*), (Beirut: Markaz al-dirāsāt al-’istrātijīyyah wal-buḥūth wal-tawthīq, 1994), p. 207.

other sum of advantages enjoyed by others. Justice denies the loss of freedom and human dignity. Indeed Khodr emphasizes loving the enemy as an essential Christian value, but for a whole nation to suffer injustice is not admissible for him.<sup>53</sup>

Khodr makes a further reference to the theological element behind Zionism. He claims that the Holocaust affected significantly European Christians, who felt responsible for what Nazism did. European Christians did not need to take on this responsibility, claims Khodr. The Holocaust, he continues, affected Christian theology, and resulted in reconsidering the Jews as the people of God, the people of the Covenant and of the Promised Land. In a way, there was a rehabilitation of the Jewish cause and Jewish theology in the West, not only of the theology of the Old Testament but also of the current Jewish theology. This assumes a new reading of the Christian theological heritage and Khodr perceives this as a new interpretation of 'spiritual imperialism' of the West.<sup>54</sup>

Furthermore, Khodr desires to see Palestine as a secular state where all different religions can meet based on equal human rights so that the value of any human being is no longer based on religious categories. Such secularism, maintains Khodr, will not ignore religion or disregard the faith of its people, instead it will have to preserve the meeting of the three religions regardless of their sectarian deviations.<sup>55</sup>

I would close this article with the words of Metropolitan Khodr: "I cannot accept this international injustice against the Palestinian people. My dream is that the three religions live together

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<sup>53</sup> See George Khodr, *Al-quds (Jerusalem)*, p. 29.

<sup>54</sup> Idem, *Hadzā al-‘ālam lā yakfī (This World is not Enough)*, pp. 124-125, 130-131. Khodr makes a reference to Karl Barth who reclaimed Jews as the elect people of God in his commentary on Romans (p. 124).

<sup>55</sup> Idem, *Hadzā al-‘ālam lā yakfī (This World is not Enough)*, pp. 34-36, 76.

with love. Moreover, this is possible, whenever the (great) countries find a solution to Jerusalem.”<sup>56</sup> Thus, the dream of George Khodr is that Christians, Muslims, and Jews live together in Jerusalem, a dream, however, too heavenly and sublime for the people of the earth to imagine.

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<sup>56</sup> Joanna Azar, “George Khodr: The ‘Poet’ Bishop” in: *Al-akhbār*, 13.07.2012 - <http://www.al-akhbar.com/node/165926>