

The turn to the Other: Reflections on contemporary Middle Eastern theological contributions to Christian–Muslim dialogue

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Abstract

This article responds to Middle Eastern Christian positions concerning the Other, which have been dominant in most Christian–Muslim relations in the past, through the centuries, and is still prevailing in the Middle East through several Christian voices. As these positions, directly or indirectly, endeavor to appropriate the tradition of the Other and make it fit within the boundaries of one's own theological heritage, the present article suggests the need for a genuine turn to the Other, in order to make the true perception and the understanding of the tradition of the Other possible. Hence, a method of rejuvenation is proposed, which implies first a critical consideration of one's own tradition and then a genuine turn to the Other, making the meeting and the reading of the holy texts together possible with the Other in terms clarified through the post-critical method of scriptural reasoning.

Keywords

theology of religions, Christian theology, the Other, interreligious dialogue, the Middle East

In their attempt to find common theological grounds between Christianity and Islam, it has been common for Christian theologians in the Middle East to set Islam somewhere within the general prospect of the Christian heritage,

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emphasizing the shared features between the two religions.¹ The theological positions of two Lebanese authors, Michel Hayek and Youakim Moubarac, are exemplary attempts, which through appreciating the religion of the Other—that is Islam—and even perceiving some revelatory elements with deep affinity with their own tradition, nevertheless conclude the necessity of the final salvific role of Jesus Christ, discerning the tradition of the Other as within the scope of Christianity and Christ as present in the religion of the Other.² In a nutshell it is possible to say that Michel Hayek, in his attempt to make place for Islam within Christianity, has perceived Ismail as the father of Islam and viewed Islam as a religion which has not entered the biblical history associated with Abraham, rather it is viewed as a universal religion, or a primitive religion, associated mainly with the universal covenants with Adam and Noah.³ Youakim Moubarac has viewed Islam as part of the Abrahamic covenant, and consequently has considered Muslims as among the people of God, who believe in the God of Abraham, and even who are associated with the people of the Bible. Hence, Islam is conceived as belonging to the same Abrahamic family, employing the image of a tree of salvation of which Islam is a branch.⁴ Fadi Daou, a contemporary Lebanese Maronite priest, follows a similar path in a work, which he co-authored with Nayla Tabbara—originally published in French—*L'hospitalité divine: L'autre dans le dialogue des théologies chrétienne et musulmane*.⁵ Daou maintains that there is an inner relationship that binds every human being to God, since God dwells in the heart of the human subject. Christians interpret this divine–human relation in Christian terms; yet, they cannot deny the reality of other ways of expressing this unity. The spiritual experience is universal, it belongs to all, whether

1. This has been the approach of most theological attempts for dialogue in the Middle East, especially in the past few decades, though exceptions need to be considered. The position of the Greek Orthodox Metropolitan George Khodr, a pioneer in promoting Christian–Muslim dialogue, would not correspond to this approach. Also the position of the Lebanese thinker Mouchir Aoun, who has lately adopted a pluralist position in regards to questions of interreligious dialogue, would have to be considered an exception.
2. On Youakim Moubarac's understanding of Islam see Youakim Moubarac, *L'Islam* (Paris: Castermann, 1962); *La Pensée Chrétienne et L'Islam, des origines jusqu'à la prise de Constantinople* (Paris: Sorbonne, 1969); *Les Musulmans: consultation islamo-chrétienne* (Paris: Beauchesne, 1971); *La Pensée Chrétienne et l'Islam* (Beirut: Université libanaise, 1986). On Michel Hayek's position see Michel Hayek, *Le mystère d'Ismaël* (Paris: Mame, 1964); Michel Hayek, *Al-masīh fī al-'islām [Christ in Islam]* (Beirut: Catholic Press, 1961).
3. Michel Hayek, *Le mystère d'Ismaël*, 194–97, 224, 231–41, 247. See also Michel Hayek, *Al-masīh fī al-'islām [Christ in Islam]*.
4. Youakim Moubarac, *Abraham dans le Coran: l'histoire d'Abraham dans le Coran et la naissance de l'Islam; étude critique des textes coraniques suivie d'un essai sur la représentation qu'ils donnent de la religion et de l'histoire* (Paris: Librairie philosophique J. Vrin, 1958), 71, 100. See also Youakim Moubarac, *La pensée Chrétienne et l'Islam: dans les temps modernes et à l'époque contemporaine* (Beirut: Université Libanaise, 1979).
5. Fadi Daou and Nayla Tabbara (translated to Arabic by Adel Theodor Khoury), *Al-rahābah al-ilāhiyyah: lāhūt al-ākhar fīl masīhiyyah wal-islām [Divine Hospitality: The Theology of the Other in Christianity and Islam]* (Beirut: Al-maktabah al-būlusiyah, 2011).

Christians or non-Christians. Thus, according to Daou, salvation is not restricted to a particular group; rather it is possible for all. However, and somehow contradicting his own claim about the universality of religious experience, he concludes that Christ is the source of all grace, regardless whether the person is aware of this source or not. Daou refers to the claims of Hayek and Moubarac, concerning Christian-Muslim dialogue, and to some extent he adopts their positions being more in favor of Moubarac's argument, maintaining the revelatory nature of the Qur'an and the prophetic mission of Muhammad.⁶ However, and not in disagreement with the two earlier authors, Daou explains that "the Christian cannot justify the place of Islam within the history of salvation unless in the light of the mystery of Jesus Christ, the universal Savior and the fulfillment of divine revelation to humanity."⁷ In most of these Middle Eastern attempts, including Daou's, the biblical notion of covenant is employed to support the argument concerning the common ground between Christianity and Islam.⁸ God's covenant is maintained to be universal, bringing about the notion of one holy history, which unfolds itself through the different covenants with Adam, Noah, and Abraham. Nevertheless, the covenant through Christ is viewed as the archetype which is to replace all other types of covenants of the Old Testament.

Briefly reviewing the contemporary Middle Eastern theological positions and attempts for dialogue with Islam, the inadequacy of these positions for a contemporary theological stand comes to the fore. Several factors or inconsistencies within these positions contribute to such a view. An example is the typological hermeneutics employed in relation to the use of the covenant concept, mentioned above, according to which all other covenants are to serve and correspond to the nature and the purpose of one primordial covenant. Such typological hermeneutics does not do justice to the scriptural texts, since through it the Old Testament is interpreted to mean something other than what it had originally meant in its initial context. Instead of trying to discover the events of the past in their own contexts, events are seen as serving some later occurrences and as pre-figuring the events of the New Testament. Second, having the covenant with Christ as an archetype and trying to set other covenants in a way that they do not contradict but rather correspond to this primordial covenant, somehow different covenantal types or categories come to be created rather than discovered in themselves, viewing the archetype as the original model of covenant, after which all other covenants are patterned, and the "one holy history" is shaped. Thus, it is possible to say that the typological method, as it is employed within theology of religions, is an artificial framework. It distorts the reality of both religions involved in dialogue as it induces the person to appropriate the religion of the Other and to conform one's own heritage in order to correspond to the expectations of the other religion. Another disadvantage of the typological hermeneutics and covenant theology is

6. *Ibid.*, 99.

7. *Ibid.*, 104.

8. Daou devotes a whole chapter to the notion of covenant. *Ibid.*, 65–121.

that they have no place for religions in which the notion of covenant is absent. What about the followers of religions other than Judaism, Christianity, and Islam? Where does a Buddhist or a Hindu fit within the covenant approach?

Further, in most theological attempts for dialogue, which take up similar claims, assumptions, and premises as the ones held by Fadi Daou, one encounters a kind of a discrepancy, or inconsistency, between a genuine regard of the Other and the dominance of one's own tradition with its claims of absolutism and superiority, which has been conveyed as self-evident. Hence, one's own faith-claims and tradition, including the holy books and the declarations of the different councils, hinder one's genuine consideration of the Other. It is possible to maintain that though the tradition itself might be considered as fertile ground for further creativeness and the unfolding of truth, whenever tradition becomes master, it presents itself as if it is the original source and the primordial truth. It conceals the truth it carries and hinders one's retrieval of it. Thus, tradition has to be made transparent in order that the concealments might be dissolved and truth might be unveiled. Before the search for the Other comes the search for one's own self, one's own beliefs, principles, and dogmas, far from the obscurities, disguises, and superficial manner in which things have been interpreted by and conveyed through the centuries. This is the reason that, before approaching the Other, one has to rethink one's own claims. One has to take pains for searching for Truth, trying to understand and to reinterpret what has been so far said.

The discrepancy I am referring to appears in the subtitle of Daou's work: *The Theology of the Other in Christianity and Islam*. How could one speak about the Other in Christianity, namely, within the conventional borders of Christianity? Christianity is about Christianity. It is about Christ, God, and all the different Christian teachings and symbols Christians have inherited through the centuries. There is no theology of the Other without the turn, and any other way of searching for the Other within one's own conventional knowledge and claims of faith is a contradiction and an inconsistency in itself. This inconsistency is more evident whenever Christians employ the typological method to claim that Islam, which is a later religion, belongs to the Christian tradition. Hence, it is not possible to know the Other without first making a turn to the other side. But what is that other side? What about the turn? Where does it take us? What about Christ, the Bible, the Church, the councils, the teachings of the holy fathers? What about all that one has known and has felt secure about within its borders? Where does the turn take us and how should one proceed?

In order to make such a turn possible, I contend that the typological method and the covenant theology, used in interreligious dialogue, should be altered by a methodology of rejuvenation with two moves. First, this entails a move toward the original self, which attempts a theological understanding and transformation of one's own faith-tradition, repudiating all claims of absoluteness and superiority. This implies the application of historical exegetical tools to one's holy texts, so that they can speak for themselves and thus the discovery of their truth is made possible. The historical critical process, whenever employed, brings the truth of any religious

claim to light and eliminates obscurities and unfounded beliefs. Hence, exegetical methods are to be adopted in Christianity, in reading the Old and the New Testaments, but also in Islam for a truer understanding of the Qur'an and the holy texts. Only after the first move is the second made possible, namely an unrestrained acknowledgement of the Other. Hence, moving beyond the modern notion of the critical approach, and, for the purpose of rebuilding and reconstructing one's own claims in relation to the Other, a genuine turn to the Other is needed. For this purpose the post-critical method of "scriptural reasoning" makes a good contribution. The method of scriptural reasoning arose at the close of the twentieth century emphasizing the need for communal dialogue and moving beyond the history of interfaith conflicts. It has a hermeneutical orientation, even though it presumes that most of the historical-exegetical work and theological reflection has been done previously, and hence, one comes with one's "internal libraries," namely all the textual studies, and philosophical and theological deliberations.⁹ Having all the scholarly work in the background, scriptural reasoning is capable of perceiving the Scriptures as sources of reconciliation rather than of disagreement and hostility. Scriptural reasoning does not require any metaphysical speculative consensus for claims of truth.¹⁰ Such consensus or groundings have been misused throughout history in support of exclusive claims and positions concerning all others. Scriptural reasoning is helpful particularly as one considers the interfaith dialogue as an inescapable demand in our contemporary pluralistic world and a compelling need. Through scriptural reasoning, followers of different religious traditions—Christians, Muslims, and Jews—come to read their holy books together in a context of friendship, honesty, and hospitality, hence making theological and philosophical reasoning and argumentation and also a better understanding of one's own tradition possible, while endeavoring toward a genuine encounter with the Other. In such a context no one claims "to know or possess the final meaning of the text under study."¹¹ Thus, the second move is about a genuine turn to the Other. And the word "turn" comes here since the human being, in regular circumstances, is not trained to see the Other—hence the need to turn to the other side in order to meet the Other. This is true since the Others do exist. They are not in need of any justification for their existence, rather through the turn one makes the perception of them is possible for oneself, so that one allows that they show themselves as they truly are. Jesus himself made the turn to meet the Canaanite woman. He made a big turn to find the Samaritan woman and talk to her. The turn, however, might be toward nothing that one knows. It might displace

9. Rebekah Ann Eklund, "The Goods of Reading: Theological Interpretation and Scriptural Reasoning," *The Journal of Scriptural Reasoning* 9:1 (2010) (<http://jsr.shanti.virginia.edu/vol-9-no-1-december-2010-the-fruits-of-scriptural-reasoning/the-goods-of-reading-theological-interpretation-and-scriptural-reasoning/>)

10. Catherine Comile (ed.), *The Wiley-Blackwell Companion to Inter-Religious Dialogue* (Oxford: John Wiley & Sons, 2013), 70–74.

11. Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *Democratizing Biblical Studies: Towards an Emancipatory Educational Space* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2009), 146.

the person, tear out one's convictions, destroy all the guarantees one has built in life. It might depose the person from an office without even promising a substitute. It might dethrone him/her from the powers he/she has enjoyed and leave him/or powerless. The turn might even seem to be irrational in an age of computation, deliberation, and reckoning. But whenever one makes the turn, one would be able to discover not only the Other, but also one's own self. The turn to the Other has consequences not only on one's position concerning the followers of other religions, but also in relation to one's very inner being.

Through making the turn, Christians do not risk the truth, since the truth is not at one's disposal. Through making the turn, one does not also endanger the reality of Christ since Christ is in the being of Christians, who are themselves a "letter of Christ" (II Cor. 3:2). Rather through the turn one comports oneself toward the genuine possibilities of one's existence in order that one might truly meet the Other. It is possible of course to refer to the universal, all-inclusive messages or missions that are bound to some prophetic figures such as Adam, Noah, or Abraham. But it is to be admitted that these are exemplary paradigms of the one true covenant—if the term "covenant" had to be maintained, God has made with humanity a covenant which is most genuinely faithful to the reality of God and human reality. It is the one "written. not on tablets of stone but on tablets of human hearts" (2 Cor 3:3). Thus, there is no need to specify a direction toward which one turns for prayer. One needs to turn neither to the south, nor to the south-east, since the worship of God is "in spirit and truth" (John 4:23). Unfortunately, this "covenant" has been obliterated and has not been attended to throughout the history of our religious traditions.

Whenever one makes the turn toward the Other one can see the Other and the Other's tradition as valuable as one's own. Then, one is neither asked to compare the two traditions, nor to try to fit the tradition of the Other within the borders of one's own. As maintained earlier, there is no theology of the Other without the turn. It is also possible to say that no word, discourse, or dialogue with the Other is possible without the turn. Only the turn to the Other allows a complete manifestation of the reality of the Other and lets the Other be seen by pointing out its reality and taking it out of its hiddenness. No synthesis is possible here between the Other and myself, and any attempt to merge the two stories will result in covering up the reality of either of them. Rather, I am supposed to address the Other in his or her otherness. Hence, a genuine turn to the Other entails a genuine consideration of the Other, regardless of who the Other is and regardless of all religious categorical restrictions. It entails the willingness to encounter the Other and listen to him or her, and also the readiness even for self-correction as the consequence of that encounter. The basis of such a turn is nothing other than the perception of divine grace given to every human being from the very beginning. This is the same divine image, according to which the human being is given inner freedom and hence is free to accept God's gift of Godself in complete surrender, freedom, and love, and also is free to hope that God at the end may be "all in all." The genuine turn to the Other implies that human beings are too weak to limit

the divine power and that they fall short of divine mystery and truth in a way that any claim of complete comprehension and grasp of God and God's work is not conceivable. A genuine turn to the Other breaks down the prison walls of one's selfishness so that one can make a place for the Other, regardless of all the different religions and ethnicities. The "Other" in this sense is the symbol for divine presence in one's life. It is the very recognition of God, seeing God in the face of the "Other." Thus, and I close with this, a word or a discourse, or dialogue with the Other, is made possible through one's encountering and one's relatedness with the Other as the Other. Hence, dialogue assumes the signification of the relationship between the "I" and the "Other."

Author biography

Sylvie Avakian studied theology at the Near East School of Theology in Beirut and graduated with a Masters in Divinity in 2007. In 2011 she completed her doctoral degree in the field of systematic theology at Heidelberg University. The title of her doctoral dissertation is "The Other in Karl Rahner's Transcendental Theology and George Khodr's Spiritual Theology within the Near Eastern Context." Presently she is a lecturer in systematic theology at the Near East School of Theology in Beirut. Within the field of systematic theology she is primarily interested in philosophical theology, patristic theology, philosophy of religion, interreligious dialogue, and ecumenism.