Academic Collaboration in Germany

KLAUS VON STOSCH

In Germany, Islamic theology is more and more included in the academic programs of public universities. The author tries to show how this development challenges Christian theology and how it reshapes the Muslim community in the country. Moreover, this development opens up new possibilities for Christian-Muslim relations – including some new forms of comparative theology.

Eight years ago German universities started to hire Muslim professors to teach Islamic theology. Today there are eight universities in Germany, funded by the German government, which run programs of Islamic theology. In Germany there is no strict separation between state and religion, but a cooperation where the state tries to support religions as long as they act in accordance with the constitution. This enables the government to fund not only Christian theology – as in the past –, but also Islamic and Jewish theology as is the case now.

This new development is in itself a great sign of hope for Muslim-Christian relations in Germany. It changes the situation of dialogue radically. It becomes possible now to have well trained theologians on both sides who use common methods and share common academic values. Hence, both faith communities are enabled now to attain a new level of mutual understanding. Of course, we need patience and there are also a lot of challenges involved in the establishment of Islamic theology in Germany. But it is an enormous opportunity and gives a lot of hope. Let us focus on this dimension in the article and let us talk of the new horizons which are opened up through this new situation of academic research in German theology.

I New Horizons in Exegetical and Historical Work

Islamic theology has always engaged in exegetical and historical work. There is the enormous tradition of *tafsīr* in Islam, and there is also the important tradition of *asbāb an-nuzūl* which tries to identify the reason for the occurrence of certain verses of the Qur'an. Thus, the modern way of doing exegesis can build on a long and powerful tradition within Islam. However, a systematic application of the methods of historical critique has not been practiced yet within Islam. There are several of movements which try first steps in this direction such as for example the Ankara school.[1] But until now a thorough reading of the Qur'an in the light of modern historical research is not part of Islamic theology.

In Germany it is the Corpus Coranicum project in Berlin which has started to read the Qur'an as text of late antiquity and to apply modern methods of philology and historical critique to the understanding of the text.[2] As this research is led by Angelika Neuwirth, it has been done so far in a spirit of appreciation of Islam and its rich intellectual heritage. It can be considered as one of the most important Western movements against the new revisionist tendencies in Western research on Islam. The charisma of Angelika Neuwirth and her great achievements within Arabic and Islamic Studies are a main reason why there is some confidence in historical work on Islam in the Muslim scientific community in Germany. Her project has also close and good connections to research centres in Muslim countries.

One of her students, Zishan Ghaffar, can serve as a great example to illustrate the possibilities for Muslim-Christian relations which can rise from this new development in the academy. Ghaffar studied philosophy, Islamic studies and Protestant theology in Kiel and then received his PhD from one of the new centres of Islamic theology in Germany – in close cooperation with Angelika Neuwirth. Hence he can be seen as one of the first fruits of the new German programs to fund Islamic theology, showcasing which kind of research becomes possible through such funding and cooperation.

His PhD has been published in 2018 with the title *The historical Muhammad in Islamic theology. On methods and criteria of the research of the life of Muhammad.*[3] The thesis has the ambitious goal of comparing Western research on Muhammad with Western research on Jesus and it

shows that the methodological innovations of the third quest which have been so successful in Western research on Jesus have not been applied fully to the research on Muhammad. Thus, as Ghaffar shows convincingly, it is the deficiency in Western research that is the reason for the purely revisionist tendencies in some Western schools of research. Hence, if some revisionists argue that Muhammad has probably never lived – an idea which was famously defended by the first Muslim professor of Islamic theology in Münster, Muhammad Sven Kalisch – Ghaffar's response is that these kinds of results are only possible because these scholars (such as Kalisch or the school of Saarbrücken) are simply not up to date in their methods of research. Hence, for Ghaffar, the antidote against the Western and modern critique of Islam is not a Muslim withdrawal from modern methods of research, but a more accurate way of using these methods. Ghaffar invites Muslims to do their job simply more accurately than their Western colleagues and to beat them with their own weapons: scrutiny, scholarship and historical criticism.

This more apologetic motive of Ghaffar does not mean that he is apologetic against Judaism and Christianity. He learned from Angelika Neuwirth that the Qur'an can only be understood together with its intertextual relations. And these relations force Muslims not only to read the Bible, but also to learn Syriac and to read the church fathers and rabbinic intertexts. Hence Ghaffar's research is highly dependent on a close cooperation with Christian and Jewish theologians. When one of my PhD students asked Ghaffar whether he thinks that a Muslim comparative theology is possible, he simply responded that this is the only way to do Islamic theology. If it is not comparative, it is not able to understand the Qur'an. At the same time, he is self-confident enough to challenge not only Western research but also Christian theology with the results of his research.

Even more exciting than his thesis is Ghaffar's second book that has just been published with the title *The Qur'an in its historical context. Eschatological and Apocalyptical motives in the middle-Meccan Surahs*.[4] It makes Ghaffar visible as a mature scholar who reads the Qur'an together with the intertexts from Christianity and Judaism in the light of late antique history. Similar to Western scholars such as Sidney Shoemaker[5] he is aware of the apocalyptical and messianic motives of the

Qur'an. In meticulous philological work he identifies the Christian and Jewish interlocutors of the Qur'an and – pace Shoemaker – shows how the Qur'an criticizes any kind of apocalyptical discourse because it was used by the theology of the Byzantine Empire of his time. This makes the Qur'an visible as an anti-apocalytical, anti-messianic and anti-imperial text which tries to set theology free from political demands. Of course, this kind of analysis cannot simply be repeated for the Medinan time. But it is already outstanding to show this kind of tendency for the Meccan period of the Qur'an and it is literally speaking ground-breaking research on the Qur'an.

Especially in our time, where some politicians in the West try to develop Christian apocalyptic messages again, it can be instructive not only for Muslims to see how the Qur'an reacts to this kind of political agenda. In sum, the Qur'an reacts with powerful theological arguments – entirely peaceful and without any violence. If this kind of analysis becomes more widespread among our Muslim colleagues, it will be a very helpful sign of hope against modern prophets announcing the clash of civilizations and the decline of the Christian West.

II New Horizons in Systematic and Philosophical Work

The situation of Christian theology in Germany is a very special one. Protestant and Catholic theology have both been profoundly influenced by enlightenment thinking and German idealism. In some sense, not Aquinas or Luther but Kant and Hegel are the most influential German church fathers. This is challenging for the churches in Germany, but at the same time helpful and productive for the participation of Christianity in intellectual life in the country. Both Protestants and Catholics have created a special German form of free will theism which shapes public debates, and which has influenced religious communities as well. To be sure, there are some more conservative colleagues who do not think that this development has been particularly helpful. And there are also some postmodern and post-liberal theologians who would like to change the style of German theology. But still the heritage of transcendental criticism and free will theology is very influential within German Christianity.

For Islamic systematic theology, this challenge can become very productive and promises to provoke a lot of new forms of thinking among

Muslims. We can see how scholars likes Ahmad Milad Karimi try to use Hegel and Heidegger to reconstruct *kalām* in a very productive and highly original way.[6] And scholars like Mouhanad Khorchide become influential with their ideas of using free will theology to renew Islam as the religion of mercy.[7] It is true that this development has received considerable criticism. But even a scholar as Muna Tatari who defends the centrality of justice as decisive category of Islam against too much Christianizing talk of mercy, establishes her ideas within the framework of transcendental philosophy and with the help of insights of Kant.[8] Hence there is already an ongoing debate on the use of free will philosophy within the Muslim academic community, and the question is not so much whether it can be accepted, but in which way it is to be used. This helps Muslims in Germany to participate productively in the intellectual development of the country, and it makes sense that one of the most important public intellectuals in Germany nowadays is a Muslim: Navid Kermani – a very influential thinker in politics, literature and theology.[9]

However, there are also important tendencies which are critical of too much systematic innovation within Islam. Some scholars prefer going back to their medieval sources and developing some Aristotelian or Neo-Platonic types of *kalām*. But the interesting point is that all scholars try to find coalitions with Christians and Jews in their way of doing theology. Although there was some suspicion of theology as a Christian project in the beginning, today most Muslim intellectuals welcome the development of systematic Islamic theology and they understand it as a form of thinking which helps Muslims to interface as equals within society and with Christian theologians.

For Christian theology this development is challenging and fruitful at the same time. When Karimi develops a Hegelian theology without Trinitarian framework or when Kermani uses Jewish writers and philosophers to reshape the Muslim role in German society, this creates new ideas and needs for rethinking Christianity and its role for our society. Thus, the new power of Islamic theology in Germany challenges also Christians to become more confident in their own theological role. And it enables a new form of comparative theology.

III New Horizons through Comparative, Dialogical and Interactive Theology

The development of Islamic theology in Germany is a sign of hope not only for Western societies, but also for Muslim-Christian relations. It also enables a new form of comparative theology which is very much performed as collaborative, dialogical and interactive theology. Islamic theologies are always developed in close relation to Christian theologies. Sometimes the Christian theologians do not really know what to do with those new colleagues, especially because most of them have never tried to be responsive to Islam in their academic work. But more and more younger theologians are developing interest in comparative work. Usually comparative theology needs considerable expertise in at least two religions. Today in Germany the close cooperation between Christians, Muslims and Jews at the new theological centres in the German academia make it possible to develop comparative theology as a collaborative project. Up to now only the university of Paderborn follows this way programmatically. But more and more other universities are becoming aware of the rich possibilities of research which can shape German theology. As theology is organized in different confessional faculties and institutes in Germany, this development does not simply lead to interreligious theology, but to co-operations, dialogue and interactions. I would like to summarize all these kinds of theologies under the umbrella category of comparative theology. And it is a sign of hope that many younger scholars from many nations use the German academic context to contribute to this emerging field of research.

Let me conclude with an example from one of my Iranian PhD students who develops his own Shiite theology in this kind of collaborative, dialogical and interactive atmosphere. He is part of my current research project on Mary in the Qur'an which brings together scholars from different religions and confessions for a better understanding of Mary in the Muslim tradition. After our last meeting which was very much an intertextual reading of some parts of Surah Maryam with some verses from Syriac church fathers, he said: "Well, when reading the Qur'an in the light of those Christian debates and when listening to all those Christians responding to these verses, I get the feeling that this part of the Qur'an is not for me – at least not for me alone." He understood that God's word is

not a word for a certain tribe or nation and that we can never own it. We have to learn how it challenges all of us. And in cooperation beyond the borders of our religions and denominations we can become responsive in our different theologies also to those prophetic voices which we have ignored so far. For me this is a great sign of hope for all of us.

Notes

1. Felix Körner, *Revisionist Koran Hermeneutics in Contemporary Turkish University Theology*, Würzburg: Ergon, 2005.
2. Angelika Neuwirth, *Der Koran als Text der Spätantike. Ein europäischer Zugang*, Berlin: Verlag der Weltreligionen, 2010.
3. Zishan Ghaffar, *Der historische Muhammad in der islamischen Theologie. Zur Kriterienfrage in der Leben-Muhammad-Forschung*, Paderborn: Ferdinand Schöningh/ Brill Deutschland 2018.
4. Zishan Ghaffar, *Der Koran in seinem religions- und weltgeschichtlichen Kontext. Eschatologie und Apokalyptik in den mittelmekkanischen Suren*, Paderborn: Ferdinand Schöningh/ Brill Deutschland 2020.
5. Sidney Shoemaker, *The Apocalypse of Empire. Imperial Eschatology in Late Antiquity and Early Islam*, Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2018.
6. Milad Karimi, *Hingabe. Grundfragen der systematisch-islamischen Theologie*, Freiburg-Berlin-Wien 22015.
7. Mouhanad Khorchide, *Islam ist Barmherzigkeit. Konturen einer modernen Religion*, Freiburg-Basel-Wien: Herder 22016.
8. Muna Tatari, *Gott und Mensch im Spannungsverhältnis von Gerechtigkeit und Barmherzigkeit. Versuch einer islamisch begründeten Positionsbestimmung*, Münster: Waxmann 2016.
9. Michael Hofmann/ Klaus von Stosch/ Swen Schulte Eickholt, *Navid Kermani*, Würzburg: Königshausen & Neumann, 2019.