

Discussion of

Divine Hospitality: The Theology of the Other in Christianity and Islam

Sylvie Avakian *

In the time that is given to me I shall first refer to some of the arguments presented by Fr. Fadi Daou in three chapters of the book that he coauthored with Nayla Tabbara: *Divine Hospitality: The Theology of the Other in Christianity and Islam*. A few observations on those particular chapters will follow, then I will close with a general critical remark concerning the present work.

Under the title “Christ and the Others: Unity in Diversity” Daou maintains that all people partake in the mystery of Christ. There is an inner relationship that binds every human being to God, since God dwells in the heart of the human subject. However, it is through Christ that the human being is united with God. Christians interpret this divine-human relation in Christian terms, but they cannot deny the reality of other ways of expressing this unity. Spiritual experience is universal, maintains Daou; it belongs to all, be they Christians or non-Christians. In this sense rituals and specific religious claims or affirmations have relative value, or secondary place, compared to the deep meaning of an inner religious experience. Thus, according to Daou, salvation is not restricted to a particular group; rather it is possible for all, while Christ is the source of all grace, regardless of one’s consciousness of this source. Referring to the document on “Joy and Hope 22:2” (Vatican II) the author quotes: “For by His incarnation the Son of God has united Himself in some fashion with every man.” The author concludes the chapter with two critical questions, which are left open: 1. Does this approach toward

* Sylvie Avakian, PD, Dr. Theol., 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. In 2018 she completed her post-doctoral dissertation (Habilitation) at the University of Tübingen. She has been a lecturer in Systematic Theology at the Near East School of Theology in Beirut between 2011- 2015. Currently, she is a lecturer at the University of Tübingen.

world religions reveal Christianity's desire to encompass, or cover, the reality of the Other and to perceive the faith of the Other within the framework of Christian norms? (p. 40). 2. Assuming that all human beings are united with God through Christ, regardless of whether they are aware of this union or not, doesn't this create the enthusiasm in Christians for evangelization in order that others might also become aware of the source of union?

In the following chapter the author moves to the biblical notion of the covenant. God's covenant is universal, and there is one holy history, he explains, which unfolds itself through the different covenants with Adam, Noah and Abraham. Nevertheless, the notion of the covenant does not eliminate the other forms and ways through which divine grace is revealed in the world since all people are the people of God and God is the God of all. Here the author refers to Michel Hayek's approach, who, considering Ismail as the Father of Islam views Islam as a universal religion, associated mainly to the covenants with Adam and Noah. Furthermore, referring to Youakim Moubarak (1924-1995), the author contends that Moubarak includes Islam within the Abrahamic covenant and consequently views Muslims as among the people who believe in the God of Abraham, considering them as the people of the Bible. Daou opts for Moubarak's approach, aligning himself with the notion that Islam belongs to the same Abrahamic family, bringing the image of a tree of salvation of which Islam is a branch. Furthermore, Daou asks, "Is it then possible ... to acknowledge a revelatory nature of the Qur'an and the prophetic mission of Muhammad?" (p. 99) At a later stage, Daou writes that "Christianity can admit the occurrence of revelation in the Qur'an and the prophetic dimension in Muhammad's call." However, he maintains that "the Christian cannot justify the place of Islam within the history of salvation except in the light of the Mystery of Jesus Christ, the universal Savior and the fulfiller of divine revelation to humanity." (p. 104)

Finally, under the title "The Church and the other Religions: Toward an Inclusive Solidarity", the author concludes that the mediating role of Christ may be revealed through three chan-

nels: The Holy Spirit, the Church and the particular means for sanctification, which belong to the different religious traditions. Furthermore, the author maintains that truth as such should be conceived as a horizon, while all religions need to be aware of their limitations and that they are unable to claim the ownership of truth.

Throughout the three chapters Daou turns for support from church councils, mainly the Second Vatican Council, but he also resorts to different theologians as he develops his ideas. The biblical ground of Daou's presentation is also remarkable. Daou founds his theological reflections on biblical texts, and biblical narratives occupy a large space of his work. The author's argumentations and the notions behind them are not unfamiliar to those who are involved in Christian-Muslim dialogue. In his own way the author summarizes the most important arguments in the domain of dialogue, attempting, nevertheless, a genuine regard of the Other. This attempt by the author to accept the Other and to make a place for the Other is a courageous endeavor, which is based on the essential principle of the necessity of the Other. Rarely do we find such openness toward the Other among church clerics. In this sense the work is a step forward to meet the Other, especially in relation to Christian-Muslim dialogue in the Arab East.

A reference here should be made to the typological hermeneutics that the author uses, particularly when he tackles the issue of the biblical Covenant. Thus, the Covenant through Christ is viewed as the archetype which is to replace all other types of covenants of the Old Testament. This approach of 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 truly meant in its original context. In a sense, those types or categories come to be created rather than discovered, viewing the archetype as the original model of Covenant, after which all other covenants are patterned, and the "one holy history" is shaped. Instead of trying to discover the events of the past in their own contexts, events are seen as serving some

later happenings and as pre-figuring the events of the New Testament. As an alternative for the typological method, which I would not hesitate to perceive as an artificial framework the results of which are not convincing for the contemporary reader, historical exegetical methods are needed. Through the exegetical process the reader allows the text to speak for itself and thus the discovery of its truth is made possible. Hence, historical critical methods are to be employed in reading the Old Testament, the New Testament and all our holy books. It is my own conviction that historical-critical methods, whenever applied, can serve best the dialogue among different religious traditions. There is another disadvantage of the typological hermeneutics and covenant theology in general, adopted in this work, namely: where is the place of the followers of religions other than Judaism, Christianity and Islam. Where does a Buddhist or a Hindu fit within the covenant approach?

I move to a final critical remark, which addresses not only this part of the present book, but generally all theological attempts for dialogue which take up similar claims, assumptions and premises as the ones considered by Daou. In most attempts of a theological dialogue with the Other one encounters a kind of a discrepancy, a restraint, an inconsistency between a genuine regard of the Other and the dominance of tradition with its claims of absolutism and superiority which has been transmitted throughout generations as self-evident. And one has then the impression that 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. Though tradition itself might be considered as a fertile ground for further creativeness and the unfolding of truth as such, however, whenever tradition becomes master, it presents itself as if it is the original source and the primordial truth. It conceals the truth which it carries and hinders one's retrieval of it. Thus, tradition must be made transparent in order that the concealments might be dissolved, and truth might be unveiled.

Fr. Daou makes several references to such discrepancies,

calling them “contradictions”, “obscurities” or “conflicts” (40-42, 100, 180, 194, and 201). The discrepancy I am referring to appears, nevertheless, in the title of this work: *The Theology of the Other in Christianity and Islam*. How could one speak about the Other in Christianity? For a theology of the Other a turn to the Other is necessary, that is a turn in the direction of the Other outside the premises of one’s own claims of faith. In this sense, one must come out of oneself to meet the Other. And in fact, only then one comes to understand oneself truly to the extent that the Other becomes a demand and a necessity for knowing the self. There is no theology of the Other without the turn, and any other way of trying to search for the Other within one’s own faith-inheritance is a contradiction and an inconsistency. 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, the need to turn to the other side in order to meet the Other. Christ himself made the turn to meet the Canaanite woman. He made a big turn to find the Samaritan woman and talk to her (as also referred to by Daou). The turn, however, might be toward nothing that one knows. It might displace the person, tear out his/her convictions, destroy all the guarantees one has built in life. It might depose the person from an office without promising a substitute. It might dethrone him/her from the powers he/she enjoyed and leave him/her powerless. The turn might even seem to be irrational in an age of computation, deliberation and reckoning.

It is possible of course to refer to the universal, all-inclusive messages or missions that are bound with 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 I must use the term ‘covenant’, God has made with us, a covenant which is most genuinely faithful to the reality of God and the 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 we turn for prayer since we worship God “in spirit and truth” (John 4:23), as Daou also maintains in

the first chapter of the book. Unfortunately, this 'covenant' has become quite forgotten and has not been attended to throughout the history of our religious traditions.

Whenever we make the turn toward the Other we can see the Other and the Other's tradition as valuable as one's own. Then, I am neither asked to compare the two traditions, nor to try to fit the tradition of the Other within the borders of mine. 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 for a synthesis will result in covering up the reality of either sides. Instead, I am supposed to address the Other in his/her otherness. Thus, and I want to conclude with this, a word or a discourse, or dialogue if you wish, with the Other is made possible through my relatedness and my encountering the Other as the Other. Hence, discourse, or dialogue, assumes the signification of the relationship between the 'I' and the 'Other'.