

Interreligious prayer between Christians and Muslims

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Introduction

In this paper I will carry out a three stage investigation into whether Christians and Muslims might pray together. First, I will distinguish the different ways in which the term 'pray together' might be understood. I will focus on what I call interreligious, not multireligious prayer, where interreligious prayer is a praying together with words, heart and mind. I argue that in the early literature on the matter there is a danger of conflating the two different types. In the second section, I will show that some Catholic communities, following the initiatives of Pope John Paul II, have reached a consensus that interreligious prayer is problematic while multireligious prayer is not. In the third section, I will inspect an essay by Joseph Ratzinger where he discusses the conditions for interreligious prayer, believing that they could almost never exist, except perhaps for Christians and Jews. Finally, I will use the first condition specified by Ratzinger to examine the possible grounds for interreligious prayer between Christians and Muslims to examine the most basic theological question at stake: do Christians and Muslims believe in the same God. Here I employ the help of a prophetic Anglican Bishop, Kenneth Cragg, who supports interreligious prayer. I come to a tentative conclusion that interreligious prayer would be very difficult to justify, but cannot be ruled out of court.

Section one: Defining the terms and avoiding confusion

It is important to clarify some conceptual terms so that we can get to the heart of the question to be explored: can Christians and Muslims pray together? Conceptual clarity can easily suffocate the complexity of the human realities and actual practices do not, thankfully, respect conceptual spaces. But it will be helpful to propose a distinction between two basic

forms of prayer when Muslims and Christians come together. I use the term ‘multireligious prayer’ (MRP) to indicate the meeting of Muslims and Christians who will pray together, but each using their own prayers, and each explicitly not joining in with the others’ prayers. MRP can happen in a structurally organised and public fashion or in a private spontaneous or pre-planned manner. Within MRP, there are further distinctions, such as serial MRP (when each person takes a turn at praying, while the others listen and possibly silently participate in whatever manner they choose), or simultaneous MRP (when each religion is allocated a different space in one building, where they pray for the same cause or concern, for example, world peace – while those from the other religion are also praying for world peace simultaneously). I use the term ‘interreligious prayer’ (IRP) to indicate Muslims and Christians praying together, using each others’ prayers or hybrid versions of each others’ prayers. This can happen in a structurally organised and public fashion or privately as with MRP.

I exclude from this discussion cultic liturgical prayer, understood as prayer that is defining of the *cultus*, such as the Eucharist. These cultic acts are often central for the self-definition and most sacred practices of a religion. Presently, trinitarian Christians of different denominations are not yet able to share the Eucharist, let alone share it with non-Christians. Some cultic liturgies do have people from other religions participating, such as in a mixed marriage between a Catholic and Muslim in a Catholic Church, or a mixed congregation at an Anglican funeral. However, these liturgical forms do not constitute IPR or MRP as defined above.

There may be some analogy between the distinction between cultic prayer (Eucharist) and private prayer (praying with a friend who is ill) and the Muslim distinction between *salat* (ritual prayer) and *du’a* (invocation). In what follows I am not speaking about cultic prayer and *salat*, but other forms of ad hoc prayer gatherings.

I am primarily investigating IRP between Muslims and Christians, for the theological case for MRP is reasonably strong, although not without pragmatic problems. Anglicans and Roman Catholics in England have accepted MRP, with varying degrees of qualification. Anglicans have tentatively affirmed IRP, while Catholics presently think it out of the question.¹ In Germany and the USA, a similar pattern can be found.² Further, two working parties on this issue from the Office on Inter-Religious Relations of the World Council of Churches and the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue concluded there was a case for MRP and thus a case for IRP.³ As with the Anglican document in England, there was an assumption that if one justifies MRP, IRP is thereby justified. But this, I believe, is a simple category mistake. Inclusivist arguments are often offered to justify MRP of the form: Islam can be interpreted, from the Christian point of view, as related to the triune God, even if Muslims explicitly reject this claim. Thus when Muslims pray, they pray to the one God to whom Christians pray. Therefore MRP is justified. Therefore IRP is also justified. But such an argument will not work for IRP involves two features that are not present or required in MRP; and precisely these two features stop us moving from MRP to IRP without further justification. The first

¹ Interfaith Consultative Group, *Multi-Faith Worship? Questions and Suggestions from the Inter-Faith Consultative Group*, (London: Church House), 1992; Catholic Bishops' Conference of England and Wales, *Meeting Friend in God and Stranger*, (London: Catholic Truth Society), 2010. The former was contested. See for example Archbishop Carey's concerns in the Synod debate: <http://www.glcarey.co.uk/Speeches/1992/MultiFaith.html> (all web texts accessed April 2011); see also T. H. F. Kuin, *'Defender of Faith': is there an Anglican Theology of Religious Pluralism? The Church of England and Other Faiths*, 1966–1996, PhD thesis, University of Bristol, 2011, 89-130, on the history of this debate in the thirty year period of her study.

² The German Bishops *Guidelines for multi-religious celebrations of Christians, Jews and Muslims* (2003) encourage MRP, but rejects IRP. In the USA, President Obama had MRP for the prayer service related to his inauguration. Muslims, Hindus, Jews and of course Christians, prayed and read from their scriptures during the service (2009). See:

<http://www.usnews.com/news/obama/articles/2009/01/21/for-president-obama-a-somber-inclusive-inaugural-prayer-service>

³ See *Pro Dialogo* Bulletin, 98, 1998, 2, for the full text of the Bose meeting and the concluding statement of the Bangalore meeting of 1994. The Anglican document, *Muti-Faith Worship* also conflates the arguments .

feature is co-intentionality. Intentionality signifies the meaning and purpose behind say Jane praying a particular prayer, the Our Father. In MRP there is no necessity for co-intentionality for one is respectfully listening to Jane and praying in one's own manner. In IRP, for it to be other than MRP, one must share the intentionality; there must be a co-intentionality. Both Jane and Mustafa must believe that using the 'Our Father', as understood currently by both communities, satisfactorily becomes the words by which they both might pray to the triune God and 'Allah' respectively.. In the literature reviewed, the argument for MRP amounts to one or more of four claims: (i) that God is present in the world religions; (ii) that this is the same God as Christians know the in the trinity, even if that Muslim does not agree with this; (iii) thus Christians may pray with people from world religions; (iv) praying together serves common needs and binds people together. Co-intentionality is not required for MRP.

The same category mistake can be found in the Islam in Europe Committee Study Paper: *Christians and Muslims: Praying Together. Reflections and Texts*, (2003). It registers objections from Evangelicals and the Lausanne movement: these critics argue that Muslims pray to a human perception of God and there is no distinction drawn between God's grace in creation and God's grace in salvation in many of the documents justifying MRP and IRP. The Study Paper counters such objections by responding: 'the possibility of praying together does not depend on theoretical agreement about a common perception of God. God's reality goes far beyond our human understanding.' (7) ⁴ While it is right that God's reality goes beyond human understanding, the justification for IRP and even MRP can hardly be based on adducing a common reality that is beyond human understanding, for such a reality could not constitute co-intentionality as normally understood, for the only predicates are that it is

⁴ This committee was founded in 1987 by the Conference of European Churches and the Council of European Bishops' Conferences. The current document can be found on the internet: www.ccec-kek.org/pdf/prayingtogetherE.pdf

beyond human understanding, which does not allow us to conclude that it is the same reality that is being predicated by both. It may well be that it is, but that which is within human understanding seems to suggest otherwise and while that is not determinative of the matter, if arguments are going to convince communities, they have to be robust.⁵

One more qualification before addressing the question. I am approaching IRP as a Roman Catholic theologian and will limit myself to appropriate literature, although in a fuller study it would be wise to look at the vast documentation from different churches, nationally and internationally. This exercise is not meant un-ecumenically, but recognises the varying constraints upon different ecclesial communities. Second, our attitude to IRP will partially depend upon our situation: in war torn Palestine, in Washington at high level meetings between Muslim and Christian intellectuals, living in a monastic community in the Algerian mountains amongst Muslims, or being a middle class Christian Asian in Bristol committed to interreligious dialogue. One can only begin to articulate principles that might ‘normally’ cover most situations, but, delightfully, life never behaves and novel situations constantly emerge. In due course, there may be a need for the universal magisterium of the Catholic Church to pronounce on this issue if serious disputes develop between Catholic theologians and communities.

Second section: MRP – some clarifications in Catholic approaches

It would be fair to say that the official Catholic Church was catapulted into MRP by the actions of Pope John Paul II in calling the Assisi prayer meetings, first in 1986 and then again at other occasions and the practice has been taken over and slightly modified by his successor, Pope Benedict XVI. The first meeting, which included a number of important

⁵ See Steven T. Katz, ‘Language, Epistemology, and Mysticism’ in ed. Katz, *Mysticism and Philosophical Analysis*, Oxford University Press, 1978, 22-74 for his powerful critique against such arguments.

Muslim leaders, caused deep controversy amongst Catholics. This controversy meant that John Paul II provided a theological commentary on the matter, which was delivered as a Christmas address to the Curia in December 1986.⁶ He gave two basic reasons for calling the Assisi meeting and a clear definition of what it was (MRP), and what it was not (IRP). The two reasons given were: (i) the event was unitive of religious life; the importance of a witness by the world religions that they are committed to peace in a world torn by war and strife, and this witness was aptly provided in their coming together in prayer; and (ii) the event signified the workings of the Holy Spirit; that the Holy Spirit is present in these prayers, for 'every authentic prayer is called forth by the Holy Spirit, who is mysteriously present in the heart of every person. This too was seen at Assisi: the unity that comes from the fact that every man and woman is capable of praying, that is, of submitting oneself totally to God and of recognising oneself to be poor in front of him.'⁷ This argument was repeated four years later in the encyclical *Redemptoris Missio*, 29, where it was given a broader context. And here, he helpfully elaborates: (iii) all people are created in God's image which means there is a fundamental unity between all peoples; (iv) in so much as God's presence is acknowledged in differing and manifold ways as preparing the adherents of world religions, at their best, for their fulfilment in Christ and the Catholic Church, then Catholics should attentively and respectfully listen to this Spirit in any 'authentic prayer' that might take place in MRP; (v) this basic theological argument is then supplemented by the addendum: in so much as the human spirit seeks for peace and prays for peace, as only God brings a peace beyond understanding (the world's own resources), then such prayers are 'authentic'. One might have a variant on the addendum: peace, could be replaced by justice, love, consolation

⁶ See *Pro Dialogo Bulletin*, 64, 1987, for the full text.

⁷ *Ibid.* p. 60.

of those who suffer, strength in times of hardship – as all these virtues stem from the grace of the true God. I take point (iv) to imply that with this teaching John Paul II is not moving beyond seeing the Spirit in terms of prevenient grace or in some way actually sanctifying structures within other religions *de iure* as *Dominus Iesus* clearly rejected this type of theological view.

It should be underlined that MRP is substantiated by a Christian theological evaluation of the significance of the non-Christian religion which would not require any assent from the other religion to establish the validity of the argument. In so much as there is no mingling of the cultus, there is no question about the integrity of Christian prayer and no justification from the argument so far to move to IRP.

This ‘magisterial’ argument is the plank for advocating MRP in the Catholic Bishops of England and Wales teaching document, *Meeting God in Friend and Stranger*, 2010 (pp.57-65; hereafter CBEW). This document was not specifically directed towards Christians and Muslims, but it is helpful in moving us further along in understanding what is at stake. MRP is applauded, and clearly distinguished from IRP, building on the Assisi principle: “‘We don’t come to pray together, but we come together to pray’”. As each religion prays, thus expressing its own faith, the others do not join in: they respect and silently give encouragement to those who are praying, and are in quiet solidarity with them on the basis of their own belief, and of the inner prayer that flows from it.’ (59) Finally, the chain that collapsed together MRP and IRP has been severed and there is a clear Catholic case for MRP, but not as yet for IRP.

The bishops urge Catholics to be wholeheartedly involved in MRP: ‘Catholics should thus feel confident, and be encouraged to ‘come together to pray’ with those of other religions’ (59). Why such encouragement? Because it serves the unity of all people and their unity with

God and it is thus part of the mission of the Church and an ‘expression of love for our neighbour, and of respect for the integrity of the religions involved, and shows attentiveness to the universal presence of the Holy Spirit.’ (59) All this is held without denying the importance of mission, the truth of the Catholic faith, and the *praeparatio* status of the world religions (meaning that all religions at their best are a preparation for the fullness of truth found in Christ and his Church).

What of IRP? According to the Catholic Bishops it is not possible: ‘There is an old Latin saying, *lex orandi, lex credendi* (our prayer is an expression and ratification of our belief). For that reason we cannot literally pray together, because prayer is an expression of faith, and we do not share one faith.’ (58) ⁸ The document does not differentiate between cultic/public IRP or *ad hoc* private IRP, and the way the point is presented it would seem to just be excluding cultic IRP as I have in this paper. Admittedly, this public – private distinction is artificial for the *Catholic Catechism* recognises all prayer to be the prayer of the Church, but it is still an important distinction. ⁹ Surely there is a helpful distinction to be drawn between a public IRP event open to all and advertised in the press, and two brothers from different religions praying together (IRP) as one dies of cancer in a hospital ward? Nevertheless, for the CBEW there is a clear distinction between IRP and MRP and a closed gate to IRP. Some years earlier the German Catholic Bishops also criticised IRP, not on cultic grounds, but because there is ‘a danger of monopolizing the other’ and covering up ‘existing differences.’ ¹⁰ The German Bishops did not want to engage in an action where they affirmed that a

⁸ Interestingly the German Catholic bishops give different reasons but do not indicate the cultic problem.

⁹ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, (London: Geoffrey Chapman), 1994, para. 2767.

¹⁰ *Leitlinien für das Gebet bei Treffen von Christen, Juden und Muslimen. Eine Handreichung der deutschen Bischöfe*, Arbeitshilfe 170, ed. German Bishops’ Conference, Bonn 2003, 20; available as a download from the German Bishops site:

Muslim's prayer must be true (according to Christians) and thus avoid the difficult questions regarding whether the two religions pray and worship the 'same God'. They clearly realise that IRP requires co-intentionality. If this is the case, is the door thus closed to IRP in Catholic theology?

Section three: IRP – a possible step forward?

Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger throws some interesting light on the closed door.¹¹ His text has no formal authority as he was not writing in his official capacity (Prefect for the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith). Ratzinger, an objector to Assisi 1986, writing in 1992, discusses MRP and IRP. He declined the invitation to be present at Assisi 1986 – an MRP event. Of Assisi 1986, he says critically there were 'undeniable dangers' and it was easily open to being 'misinterpreted by many people.' (107) Further: 'Those who meet also know that their understandings of the divine, and hence their way of turning to him, are so varied that shared prayer would be a fiction, far from the truth.' (106) Positively, Ratzinger says, Assisi expressed what these groups had in common: 'an acute concern for the needs of the world and its lack of peace; they share a longing for help from above against the powers of evil, that peace and justice might enter into the world.' (106) Notice his stress on the anthropological and unitive, rather than the divine reality and the theological reasons given by John Paul II. There is no mention of the Holy Spirit - and none of God.

[http://www.dbk.de/nc/veroeffentlichungen/?tx_igmedienkatalog_pi1\[show\]=8](http://www.dbk.de/nc/veroeffentlichungen/?tx_igmedienkatalog_pi1[show]=8)

¹¹ Joseph Ratzinger, *Truth and Tolerance. Christian Belief and World Religions*, (San Francisco: Ignatius Press), tran. Henry Taylor [2003], 2004. There is also an interesting Catholic approach by Christian Troll, 'Common Prayer of Christians and Muslims?', *Stimmen der Zeit*, 6, 2008, 363 – 76, available in translation on the web:

<http://www.con-spiration.de/texte/english/2008/troll-e.html>

Ratzinger concludes that MRP, while permissible, must fulfil two basic conditions: first, it ‘can only exist as a sign in unusual situations, in which, as it were, a common cry for help rises up, stirring the hearts of men, to stir also the heart of God.’ (107) As Pope in 2011, Ratzinger/Benedict changed the character of the Assisi meeting to emphasise the social working together between the religions and the non-religions so that there could be no ‘danger’ of the meeting underwriting the view that all the religions present were ways to the same God. Ratzinger’s position is in interesting contrast to the CBEW document which positively encourages Catholics to be involved in MRP. Is this a difference of prudential judgement, rather than not working from the same principles? I think this is likely, except that Ratzinger is more acutely aware of the long term signification that is likely in MRP than are the Catholic Bishops: indifference and syncretism. This leads us to Ratzinger’s second condition for MRP: MRP ‘almost inevitably leads to false interpretations, to indifference as to the content of what is believed or not believed, and thus to the dissolution of real faith. ... That is why [MRP needs] a careful explanation, of what happens here and what does not happen’ (107). Ratzinger has deep reservations about the dangers involved in MRP.

However, and this is very interesting and quite surprising, unlike CBEW, Ratzinger does not rule out IRP and actually considers three conditions under which it could in principle happen, although he believes IRP is most unlikely, if not nearly impossible (108). However, it is worth specifying these three conditions as they take us to the heart of the problem of IRP.

The first condition relates to the ‘object’ of prayer: the true God. One might say this implies co-intentionality in both parties, although Ratzinger does not mention this point, but I shall be taking it for granted. The German bishops realised that if there is none, IRP can turn into monopolizing of the ‘Other’, i.e. one party X is confident that the other party Y are praying to X’s God. This was specifically a danger in meetings of Muslims and Christians. IRP,

Ratzinger argues, would require that both partners had the same object of prayer: ‘We can pray with each other only if we are agreed who or what God is and if there is therefore *basic agreement* as to what praying is: a process of dialogue in which I talk to a God who is able to hear and take notice.’ (108, my emphasis) Strangely, Ratzinger does not specify a trinitarian God, and the context might suggest he is speaking about Judaism, although it could in principle be applied to a form of theism that accepted Judaism which is what Muslims believe the Qur’an does. Ratzinger writes regarding Israel’s God: ‘As in the case of Abraham and Melchizedek, of Job, of Jonah, it must be clear that we are talking with a God above all gods, with the Creator of the heaven and the earth – with my Creator. ... The First Commandment is true, particularly in any possible interreligious prayer.’ (108) Using this criterion, might Ratzinger be open to IRP? Clearly in relation to Jews this seems to be possible (prescinding from the question of whether contemporary Jews believe as did Jews before the time of Christ). I want to see if this point can be extended to Muslims.

Fourteen years later as Pope, Ratzinger/Benedict would pause in the Blue Mosque in Turkey (2006), standing alongside an imam in silent prayer. Days later back at the Vatican, Benedict said it was ‘a gesture initially unforeseen,’ but one which turned out to be ‘truly significant.’ In Jerusalem in 2009, Benedict prayed at the Temple Mount/Wailing Wall and said afterwards that faith demands love of God and love of neighbour: "it is to this that Jews, Christians and Muslims are called to bear witness in order to honour with acts that God to whom they pray with their lips. And it is exactly this that I carried in my heart, in my prayers, as I visited in Jerusalem the Western or Wailing Wall and the Dome of the Rock, symbolic places respectively of Judaism and of Islam." ¹² Here, the common theism of Judaism and Christianity is extended to Islam. Neither gesture by Benedict amounts to IRP, but the first is

¹² For both quotes see, Jan 2011: <http://www.catholicnews.com/data/stories/cns/1100061.htm>

a form of MRP. The informal commentary Benedict provided on the Jerusalem event suggests the possibility that the object of worship for Muslims is the same: ‘that God to whom they pray’, and thus could fulfil one condition of IRP. Ratzinger is clear that non-theistic traditions cannot pray to a personal God (106). But in the case of Islam, my sole concern, are we reaching an opening in the forest?

An important text related to this question that does have dogmatic authority is *Lumen Gentium* 16, propounded at Vatican II, which tactfully says of Muslims: ‘they profess to hold the faith of Abraham’ (*qui fidem Abrahae se tenere profitentes*); which is the reporting of a self-description by Muslims, with no Catholic assent or judgement. It is clear that there are serious differences between the two religions. But the sentence continues with a remarkable phrase: ‘and along with us they worship the one merciful God who will judge humanity on the last day’ (*nobiscum Deum adorant unicum, misericordem, homines die novissimo iudicaturum*).¹³ What we find here is that despite serious differences of belief (including the Catholic’s Church’s claim to be the true Church, founded on the incarnation, source of salvation to the world), nevertheless, it is simultaneously affirmed that Muslims worship the one merciful God who is judge, and Catholics worship that God too. This is a phenomenological statement with a normative theological judgement underpinning it.

This breakthrough is reiterated in *Nostra Aetate* 2, which has no dogmatic status but is nevertheless important in identifying what the Church has ‘in common’ (1) (*mutuum*

¹³ Norman Tanner, *Decrees of the Ecumenical Councils. Volume Two. Trent to Vatican II*, (London & Washington: Sheed & Ward & Georgetown University Press), 1990 – both English and Latin text. Troll’s argument is based on this common agreement (367), and while fully acknowledging differences, he finally gestures towards the ‘spiritual’: ‘The mystery invites us: not to eliminate the intellect but to exceed what the mind can achieve with its own forces.’ (368) But the intellect then apparently formulates this excess towards IRP in a way that suggests the excess is a point where arguments cannot be given and some other factor is important. Love of the other cannot be minimised, but love per se of another does not necessarily overcome the objections.

consortium) with others. This does not call into question deep differences between the religions, nor the claim of the Catholic Church about God's definitive activity in Christ and the Church and that other religions are *praeparatio evangelica* at best. The claim about Muslims seeks to identify true features (that a Muslim would assent to) and affirm them from a Catholic perspective: 'The Church also looks upon Muslims with respect. They worship the one God living and subsistent, merciful and almighty, creator of heaven and earth, who has spoken to humanity and to whose decrees, even the hidden ones, they seek to submit themselves whole-heartedly, just as Abraham, to whom the Islamic faith readily relates itself, submitted to God.' There is no concession to Islam's claim to belong to *this* same covenant tradition via Abraham and Ishmael, although Abraham's unquestioning faith and concern to do God's will is a model held in common. Nevertheless, these further predicates help identify the one true God that is shared. Are these shared beliefs in the one God (living and subsistent and so on) sufficient for a basic agreement on the God that is prayed to?

Before turning to this question, what of Ratzinger's two other stipulations regarding IRP? Ratzinger's second stipulation is that apart from the shared doctrine of God, 'there must also be fundamental agreement ... about what is worth praying about and what might be the content of prayer.' (108) The Lord's prayer is 'the measure' (108). Anything that was in conformity with the Lord's Prayer would in principle be worth 'praying about' in IRP. Presumably the supplications for peace and justice, two characteristics of the kingdom, and forgiveness and the strength to resist evil, would all qualify. While this needs much unpacking, we can see ways in which this condition might be met in conjunction with the first stipulation. Kenneth Cragg provides examples of Muslim and Christian prayers that are

united in these concerns.¹⁴ The third stipulation is that any event of IRP ‘must be so arranged that the relativist misinterpretation of faith and prayer can find no foothold in it.’ (109) This is finally a pragmatic requirement. For instance, participants could wear t-shirts (‘we are not relativists; X is the true religion’), or they could publish a press-release stipulating this claim clearly. This requirement is not insurmountable, but calls for tact and prudence.

So let us return finally to the central problem for IRP: do Christians worship the same God as Muslims? This is the fundamental question isolated in Ratzinger’s reflections that take us to the heart of the matter. If the answer is yes, then IRP might well be possible.

Section four: Do Christians and Muslims believe in the ‘same God’?

How can we speak of the ‘same God’ in relation to Islam, knowing there are profound differences in the two communities conceptualisation of God? To help further inspect this possibility, I will turn to a very important non-Catholic theologian who addresses this matter head on. The Anglican Bishop Kenneth Cragg is a scholar of Islam with rich experience of the Arab Muslim world. The Jesuit Islamicist, Christian Troll, is similar in instinct to Cragg, although Troll concludes, as Ratzinger does about MRP, that IRP should ‘remain exceptional.’ (374)¹⁵ Cragg’s affirms IRP and recognises the difficult task of justification which is what makes his work central to my Catholic concern.

In answer to the question, do Muslims and Christians worship the same God, Cragg’s answer is : ‘Yes! And No!’ (18) He argues that we cannot really claim any differences if there is no underlying commonality, based on an analogy between subject and predicate. ‘But such

¹⁴ Kenneth Cragg, *Alive to God. Muslim and Christian Prayer Compiled with an Introductory Essay*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press), 1970, 108-56.

¹⁵ See note above regarding Troll. Subsequent references to Cragg *Alive*.

inconsistencies of predicate are only significant as *differences* if the theme is acknowledged as identical. With the unity of the subject we cannot change, correct, or even employ, the diverse terms or affirm that some of them are inconsistent.’ (17) From the Catholic point of view, the statements of Vatican II could be read in this manner. .From the point of view of the Lausanne criticisms, Cragg assumes there is a same subject, whereas critics would call this into question and say the Muslim ‘god’ is a human image, and its predicates bear resemblance to the Christian God, but the issue is precisely of different subjects. Indeed, those Catholics who think Vatican II is heretical on this point about Islam would agree with the Lausanne critics, but I discount this view for I am accepting the authority of the Vatican Council. ¹⁶

Why does Cragg accept IRP despite recognising serious differences of predicates, even if there is a common underlying subject, God? He gives the following reasons. First, in nations where there are many religions in shared schools, hospitals, and workplaces, are there ‘needs and occasions calling for inter-religious action and, therefore, for inter-religious prayer...?’ (13). One might credibly respond to this that MRP satisfies what is being sought. Second, Cragg argues that while risky, the deepest impulse to prayer calls us to consider this possibility. This seems to be the type of argument used by John Paul II in affirming that the Spirit moves every genuine prayer and clearly Christians would feel the impulse to join with the Spirit if it is the same Spirit. But in John Paul II it underwrote MRP, not IRP. Third, at every turn, Cragg accepts those who will say no to IRP with integrity. Their refusal must be honoured. This is generous, but perhaps fails to take the question of scandal seriously enough. Until the Church everywhere accepts IRP, it might be argued that it should not occur

¹⁶ See Catholic critics, for example, Johannes Dörmann, *John Paul II's Theological Journey to the Prayer Meeting of Religions in Assis. Part I: From the Second Vatican Council to the Papal Elections*, (Kansas City, Angelus Press), 1994, 21-43.

anywhere. But it could also be argued that until IRP is explored in practice and theorised rigorously, the natural inertia and antipathy to IRP should be set aside to allow possibly prophetic individuals and communities to ‘experiment’, while always avoiding syncretism and indifference.¹⁷ Fourth, Cragg asks about MRP (my term): ‘Is it not more safe and prudent to bring our presence into the others’ prayers, with sympathy and silence, rather than venture into the difficult world of somehow ‘neutralized’ language and form?’ (35) He responds that for those who seek to pray to God together, such responses will finally be the ‘participation ... of “passengers” being “conveyed”, at worst merely physically present for the sake of a unity they do not seek, at best spiritually inarticulate in a unity they do not find. And prayer is never physically achieved and never spiritually dormant.’ (36) The argument from the experience of a longing for IRP by those involved in Muslim-Christian engagement would seem decisive for Cragg. This type of point is repeated in much of the literature. It should be considered seriously, but it should also be balanced by the accountability that the individual and groups have to the universal Church. Finding the balance is vital but difficult. But let me return to the question of the forms of similarity and dissimilarity, for Cragg both help us in seeing the case for possible IRP, under very strict conditions. Are the factors for agreeing with IRP finally ecclesial (as with Cragg’s reasons above) rather than rigorously doctrinal, or can the resolution of the tension between similarities and dissimilarities be resolved internal to the doctrinal question itself? The latter is surely required if we can advance the case of IRP.

¹⁷ The Benedictine monk, Pierre-François de Béthune, is a case in point. As Secretary General of Dialogue Interreligieux Monastique, he argued that what grounds IRP is orthopraxis: one can ‘become really obsessed with the purity of doctrine and simultaneously quite blind about orthopraxis.’ (*Pro Dialogo Bulletin*, 64, 1987, 162); and again: ‘If one emphasizes the conceptual contents of prayers *communicatio* is impossible. But if one pays more attention to experience and *praxis*, the communion of prayers imposes itself.’ While I take that as a warning against the focus I am adopting, it is not possible for orthopraxis and experience to bypass doctrine. But de Béthune is right that doctrine should not necessarily be the sole engine of the ship. However, his arguments in fact support MRP, not IRP, although he moves between these two without distinguishing.

There are a number of levels to the question: is the God to whom Muslims and Christians pray the same God? I indicate three levels present in this question: (a) the narrative accounts of this God's actions; (b) the philosophical-theological reflective process upon this God's characteristics, partially based upon these narrative accounts; and (c) the philosophical reflective process not based upon this God's characteristics in the narrative accounts (a form of natural theology perhaps). Many would want to stress a fourth level, the God beyond all these three levels, beyond human understanding, but I have already indicated that agreement on that level alone is not sufficient to answer the question positively or negatively, and the problem of securing agreement on that level for philosophical reasons. It would seem that Vatican II's teaching would indicate the first two levels can deliver a 'yes'. Vatican I would allow us to explore the question on the third level in its teaching that belief in the existence of God can be attained through the use of human reason alone (not unassisted by grace).¹⁸ But Vatican II moves us up the levels, so I will attend only to the first two levels in what follows.

On the narrative level the Qur'an actually provides grounds for seeing that there is the same God operative in Christianity and Islam. Of course, Christians do not recognise this narrative as authoritative or true in all its parts. The Christian narrative account might accept some of the Muslim narrative at a chronological level up to the time of Abraham, and then only an attenuated version of the Muslim narrative. With Abraham, we come to points of deep similarity (a model for faith) and deep dissimilarity (that with Ishmael he builds the ka'ba in Mecca and is the founder of Islam).¹⁹ Muslims perhaps go further than Jews in accepting

¹⁸ See Vatican I, Canons of Chapter II, number 1 (Denzinger: 3026).

¹⁹ See Christian W. Troll, *Dialogue and Difference. Clarity in Christian-Muslim Relations*, (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis), 2009 trans. David Marshall [2008], 97-108, 145-47. Some are more optimistic about these differences: see eds. George B. Grose & Benjamin J. Hubbard, *A Jew. Christian and Muslim in Dialogue*, (Notre Dame, Ind.: Cross Cultural Publications), 1994, 1-44, and Norman Solomon, Richard Harries, Tim Winter, *Abraham's Children. Jews, Christians and Muslims in Conversation*, (London: T & T Clark), 2005.

Jesus as a great prophet who was born of the virgin Mary, but as with Jews, for Muslims' Jesus' divinity is unacceptable.²⁰ Where there is a shared narrative regarding Adam, Noah, Abraham, Moses and Jesus there are also differences at every point of that narrative, for in Christianity there is a progressive relationship entailing different covenants, whereas in Islam it is the same primal revelation given to Adam that is being invoked by this series of prophets, of whom Muhammad is the greatest and the last.²¹ Do these partially shared histories of God's creating of the world and speaking to his people express a 'shared' spiritual heritage and narrative history? Yes and no; but, tentatively, I would argue that the no has a final weight simply because on the narrative level the whole story must be told to make sense of the parts. And the whole story, when told, is finally a different story, even if it uses the same narrative materials. In one, the cross and resurrection interpret the world, both before and after Jesus; and in the other, the Qur'an and Muhammad interpret the world, both before and after these events. Both renderings can positively account for the elements of the other and even positively absorb elements of the other narrative, but finally, not on the terms of the original narrative. Hence, this rendering can deliver a positive reading of the other tradition, but not in its own terms, and thus cannot substantiate IRP. It amounts to a type of inclusivism and can certainly help in MRP.

The narrative approach can interestingly go in different directions. For example, George Lindbeck, the narrative theologian and founding father of post-liberalism, emphasises difference, because for him the bible is the primary narrative and interprets all other narratives. In his view, the bible reads the world and thus everything is located within

²⁰ See Neal Robinson, *Representation of Jesus in the Quran and the Classical Muslim Commentaries*, (London: Macmillan, Palgrave), 1990.

²¹ See Daniel A. Madigan, 'Revelation and Inspiration' in Jane Dammen McAuliffe (ed.), *Encyclopaedia of the Qur'an* vol. 4 (Leiden: Brill), 2004, 437-448.

Christological and ecclesiological contexts. Alternatively, ‘scriptural reasoning’ groups, founded in Lindbeck’s and Frei’s narrative theologies, have instead tended to affirm that which might be held in common, but without denying difference.²² The latter may be in danger of lapsing from post-liberalism.

But this problem of commonality/difference runs deep, and is already present in the Christian-Jewish context, where despite sharing the same scripture (‘Old Testament’ and ‘Hebrew Bible’ respectively), Christians read the Old Testament as inspired only in so much as it points to Christ: typologically, allegorically, and morally. Thus the story is read, as it were, from a different ‘conclusion’. Besides sharing the same text, one might honestly ask whether Jews and Christians share the same narrative, for it is like reading a dramatic story with two incompatible endings. Imagine Hamlet where the prince marries Ophelia and she does not drown! Would it really be ‘Hamlet’? Interestingly, this has not meant that Christians claim they have a different God from Jews, despite the Christian narrative developing a trinitarian twist with the founding of the Church as the beginning of a new paragraph in the story. And Christians makes this claim despite the fact that post second-temple Jews have not accepted the Christian trinitarian account of God. If this level of dissonance is allowed in the Jewish-Christian encounter viz. ‘God’, then surely there is some analogical similarity regarding the differences with Islam that might act as a trope for a possible similarity? The fact of the *sui generis* relationship with Judaism may question this analogical trope, or rather, strong arguments are needed before the analogical trope could actually be employed.²³

²² See Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine: Religion and theology in a postliberal age*, (London: SPCK), 1984; and eds. David F. Ford & C. C. Pecknold, *The Promise of Scriptural Reasoning*, (Oxford: Willey-Blackwell), 2006.

²³ Adam Sparks, *One of a Kind. The Relationship between Old and New Covenants as the Hermeneutical Key for Christian Theology of Religions*, (Oregon: Pickwick Publications), 2010 – does well to warn against analogy. The analogical trope must also face an unforeseen difficulty to be found in the *Catechism*. While not

However, to my relief, the Vatican II passages do not rest the claim of commonality on the narrative account, at least in so much as the Qur'an and Muhammad are not mentioned in either of the two Vatican documents. This may well indicate from the Catholic side, that to accept that God is worshipped by Muslims would not require accepting the authority of the Qur'an and Muhammad, for that would enter into self-contradiction. Thus, the problem cannot be resolved at the narrative level. It would seem that for Vatican II the commonality is based on predicates of God that can be found in the philosophical-theological traditions that draw upon the Quran and Muhammad for their basics, but can be specified without asserting the wholesale truth of these narrative histories. A creator God who is just and who rewards the good and punishes evil is what is being identified. This may well be related to the tradition in Acts that 'any one who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him' (Acts 10.35). This does not mean, in the context of Acts, that they should not convert to Christ, but that their hearts are turned towards God whom they know in a limited manner. The crucial question then becomes: can this 'limited manner' be all that is required to cover co-intentionality?

The *shahada*, the Islamic confession of faith, runs as follows: 'I bear witness that there is no God but Allah, and I bear witness that Muhammad is Allah's messenger'. This statement makes two sets of claims: first about the oneness of God, which is a metaphysical statement; and second, about Muhammad which is a historical statement.). Can the first clause be true, without the second clause being true? Is the first part logically dependent on the second part?

The first part bears analogy to the first paragraph of the creed although 'Father' is an

explicitly discussing Islam in para. 58, it says of past covenants: 'The covenant with Noah remains in force during the times of the Gentiles, until the universal proclamation of the Gospel.' There is a curious irony here, for in so much as IRP could be founded on this covenant, the reality of IRP would seem to dissolve the covenant upon which it is founded, for it would assume that our partner in IRP has understood the gospel in so much as they pray with us (in the specific sense that it the gospel is now known through the co-intentionality required by IRP).

understandably problematic term for Muslims. But the similarities here are significant. Even so, at level two (Christian belief that God is trinitarian and that God has become incarnate in Jesus Christ) there are a range of deep dissimilarities. While Muslims reject these two claims (incarnation and trinity), we have a serious problem. Admittedly, there are strong arguments that in Qur'anic terms these two claims have never been properly encountered by Muslims, let alone rejected.²⁴ But at the historical ecclesial level, this difference remains an obstacle. Might there be a case here for arguing that on the basis of the unity of the one God, the first section of the traditional dogmatic schema, there might be unity between Christianity and Islam, as there is between Judaism and Christianity, while the differences only becomes fully clear in the second part of the dogmatic schema, the triune God?²⁵ I personally think this is a promising avenue. Then the question from the Christian side would be: could the metaphysical doctrine of God held in Islam 'open up' towards recognising the reality of the trinity, just as traditional Jewish monotheism 'opened up' towards the trinitarian reality? David Burrell and others show that this path is both promising and precarious.²⁶

Conclusion:

Do Christians and Muslim worship the same God? I have shown that this is difficult to affirm or deny in a straight forward manner. Each religion gives a yes/no type answer to this

²⁴ See my separate discussion of Volf in my other Champion Hall essay.

²⁵ See Ludwig Ott, *Fundamentals of Catholic Dogma*, (Cork: Mercier Press) 1955, trans. Patrick Lynch [1952] for the classical model here.

²⁶ See for example: ed. David Burrell et al., *Creation and the God of Abraham*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), 2010; and David Burrell, *Faith and freedom : an interfaith perspective*, (Malden, MA: Blackwell), 2004.

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question and I have only looked at the dynamic from the side of Christians. Each religion can give a 'yes' 'inclusively', on its own terms, which justifies MRP, but that strategy will not suffice for IRP. If the commonality is affirmed by a Christian, with an expectation of a Muslim saying, 'yes, I can agree with both your self-description and your description of my God (in Islam)', then co-intentionality might just be possible and the door is open to tentatively justify IRP. Given the current state of discussion on this matter, a theological conclusion is difficult, but circumstances require practical decision. Hence, this then becomes a matter for ecclesial decision based on the experience of those Christians who feel that IRP is a deep calling and that their practices will not lead to syncretism, indifference, or dulling the missionary zeal that is inherent to the faith, nor infringe the cultic communal aspect of prayer. Whether, as Ratzinger predicts, such occasions will be extremely rare, if they occur at all, or more frequent, and meeting with greater communal assent, remains to be seen.